The gangster/crime film took root as long ago as Griffith's *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (1912) and then struggled in unfertilized soil through to the end of the twenties. It took a combination of the sound film, Capone's Chicago, Prohibition, and the mood of the depression to inaugurate the first distinct phase of the genre. It begins with *Little Caesar* (1930) and ends with *Scarface* (1932), and it is the source and example of all the phases that follow.

In general, the dynamics of gangster films of the thirties are simplistic, relying on the public's fascination with actual criminals and their exciting, if alarming, exploits, and in tune with the rhythms of an industry approaching high gear. The gangster's fizzy spirits, classy life-style, and amoral daring were something like an Alka-Seltzer for the headaches of the depression. In the ruined hopes of that period, the gangster's grand designs were part of a dialectic of the audience's fantasies and dreams and a rote Christian morality. Characters like Edward G. Robinson's Rico, James Cagney's Tom Powers, and Paul Muni's Tony Camonte succumb to a combination of hubris, social fate, and moral reckoning in plots resembling those of classical tragedy. The films they appear in establish a tradition of popular tragedy in film. Strong figures cursed by their nature, their environment, their heritage find their desires and goals overwhelmed by an immutable and often unpredictable concatenation of forces. The power they held over audiences is directly related to their show of strength within the disintegration of the depression. The depression created some desperate fanta-
sies—a film like Gregory La Cava's *Gabriel Over the White House* (1933), with its protofascist abandonment of democratic procedures, suggests just how desperate some of them were—and the gangster, as the self-made man who has, like us, no fear of pain and death, who behaves amorally and as though oblivious of his mortality until the world's weight crushes down on him, is one of them. If the films insist that one can't win, under that given it's how you lose that counts. In a maze of dead ends, the immensity of the gangster's will and the size of his passions give him heroic status. (This view of the gangster persists as late as *Bonnie and Clyde* [1967], with the important difference that he is placed in a dead, empty past, not a densely actualized near-present.)

As the genre evolves, and refines itself through time, it becomes increasingly self-conscious and sophisticated. Its beginnings, as we might expect, are innocent of later complexities. *Little Caesar, The Public Enemy,* and *Scarface* present their material with classic straightforwardness. Their wish is to record the reality of the gangster's world and his character, to convey, with nonmetaphoric immediacy, the particulars of his behavior. The interest is in what he might really be like, the ways in which he is an actual menace. He is a character who exists as the film reports him to exist. These are essentially traditional, mimetic works—imitative, illusionistic, persuasively real. Conflict is used literally and transparently. The camera's presence is hidden, its processes concealed. The "reality" of any shot dominates our awareness of the camera's movement or position. Even very noticeable rhetorical conceits like the machine-gunning away of calendar pages in *Scarface* are in the service of either supplying essential information or become part of the movement of a straight-ahead narrative. They are incorporated into an illusionistic mode. Ambivalence is well-defined, explicit. On the one hand there is society and its system of laws, on the other the tragic, often appealing, hero who breaks its laws, and by his actions activates both our need to hang onto moral and social laws and our wish to get outside them. What is seen is understood as real, permitting undeflected involvement and suspension of disbelief. We believe what we see and, for the moment, care. The issues are defined and definite. We feel the clash of two opposing
and distinctly delineated forces. We watch and listen to a story that contains the possibility of tragedy.

The films occupy time present; there are no flashbacks. The narrative sequence is undistorted. The story takes place over a period of time and unfolds sequentially. It is implicit that a straightforward unraveling is adequate, that the gangster’s story is appropriately told that way—a tale that has a beginning, middle, and end, rising and falling action, denouement, resolution. The gangster’s aggression and vitality are honored; the films imply that there is a purpose in his acting out his will. He is simple, innocent, and vital; the expression of these qualities is engaging. In combination and in excess, however, these qualities are dangerous to the status quo. They cause upheaval and must be quelled. It is the aim of the early gangster films to show the hero act and be stopped without attaching corresponding values to his actions or their violent termination, other than the applying of utterly conventional moral homilies. Grounded in literalness, physicality, and emotion, these films are not enlightened or enlightening. They are not interested in the implications of the world they so vividly create.

If the world is a real world, it is nonetheless not our world but the gangster’s. On those occasions, relatively few, when the gangster steps into a world more recognizably ours, he stamps it as his. Icons that represent us seem somewhat out of place and extraneous or blank and characterless. In one sense, the films are travelogues and documentaries. The people we see—tough guys and their women, tough cops—are stylized by speech, behavior, gesture, and expression to a point that sharply distinguishes them from us. Our identification is an external one. The gangster remains outside us. We can never be, or completely want to be, him. He is placed above us or below us. We are awed onlookers of the atypical intensity of both his life and death. He is a version of a human being, sufficiently deviant from the norm for us to observe him as separate and apart. His role is fixed.

The gangster’s character and identity are not only well defined, they are also magnified. The early films are primarily actors’ vehicles. Robinson, Cagney, Muni project a quality of being that dominates meaning. Their respective contexts serve as platforms they
use to assert their personalities. Their characters are larger than life, and their environments—typically fashioned for verisimilitude—heighten, amplify, and extend their presence. The films are controlled by the power of the actor’s performance. He determines our degree of involvement and detachment. What we feel toward the character is cued by the character’s candid revelations of his feelings, which the actor’s talent establishes between the lines of an often perfunctory script. Our attention is not directed to abstract, thematic levels but to the character’s experience. If, for example, there is a question about loyalty, it does not take thematic definition, as it usually does in later films of the genre. Our interest remains exclusively on the level of the character’s response to the situation. We are interested, in Little Caesar, in what Joe’s disloyalty means to Rico, how it affects his feelings. Its importance is grounded in the character; it is not an intellectual concern of the film.

The early gangster films remain fresh and vivid because we feel them not as pale and awkward instances of what the genre keeps on doing better and better but as a genuine achievement, something unique that the genre did not attempt again. They are direct, unreflective, naively representational—and as such, their excellence has not been surpassed. Scarface was the ultimate expression of the genre’s early phase. The gangster film, left with only the potential of its structure, one possibility of which had been exhausted, had to seek a new direction. Throughout the thirties it led a somewhat dormant and desultory life. The gangster became a domesticated creature, an industry pet, an anachronism (Little Giant [1933]); the films he appeared in lacked narrative bite, social thrust, and intensity of characterization. Major productions were few and far between, and they grew lyrical and romantic or portrayed the gangster as a victim of social conditions (Dead End [1937], Angels with Dirty Faces [1938], The Roaring Twenties [1939]). The gangster had become the stuff of legend more than fact. His qualities, partially mourned, were emblematic of a period put behind. Or he became an object of parody, humor, and sentimentality. Lloyd Bacon’s Brother Orchid (1940) is representative. All the genre’s serious matter is turned into a joke. Notwithstanding the vivacity
The flurry of early thirties gangster films laid down the bases for future developments. They established a milieu and an iconography. They posed an opposition between insider and outsider, society and its outcasts, and conventionalized that opposition. They dealt with crime as a social issue. They implied that in American society, intense life is only possible in the underworld and created characters whose function was to resonate that implication. The fate of those characters told us that the dreams they had were not possible, but it was something we had to learn, and live through, during the course of the films (subsequent gangster films incorporate it as absolute knowledge—they either shift the nature of the dream or predicate its impossibility).

The early phase of the genre was a process of discovery by doing. The films seem innocent of complex intentions and are locked into the immediacy of their contexts. Thematic implications, and the extension of material to larger contexts of understanding, are incidental and inadvertent. It was left to succeeding films to recognize the implications of matters the genre pointed to and that the early films dealt with concretely and nonconceptually. What was deliberate about the early films was the attempt to capture the flavor of the gangster's life. The critic who has sampled the whole range of the genre, and is instructed by its development, may of course discern and perceive the bases upon which successive stages of sophistication rest. Frank Hamer in Bonnie and Clyde is certainly not the same as Flaherty in Little Caesar, although their function in the narrative is quite similar. We feel them differently. They are embedded in the consciousness of their respective films. The critic cannot pretend to an innocence the genre itself unceremoniously sheds. Our experience of the genre's progress increases our ability to understand it at any given stage. We understand Flaherty better than the filmmakers of Little Caesar did. (We can speak of "themes" in Little Caesar and at the same time claim that it is innocent of them.) As

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pioneers, director Mervyn LeRoy and company were preoccupied with making certain things visible and establishing their germanness as points of focus in dealing with a world inhabited by specific types who engage in specific conflicts. It was the prerogative of the films that followed, and their audiences, to determine what was meaningful about it.

The whopping impact of Little Caesar in its day is somewhat difficult to account for by the evidence the film itself provides, especially from a distance of over forty years. However, in the economic strife and demoralized psychology of the depression, Rico’s personal initiative was highly compelling in a context of general paralysis. Life’s actual inhumanities and injustices made Rico’s end run around morality and law a logical, and not entirely unjustified, choice. His ability to take defiant action overwhelmed whatever else the film might have been trying to show. From our perspective, the film regains the balance it must have originally hoped to maintain, but contemporary reaction implies that the character broke loose from his aesthetic fetters and assumed somewhat troubling extra-artistic dimensions. The film did not have to explain who Rico was. The gangster is a creature born of the historical moment, the conditions of his world creating a special field of opportunity for an enterprising person of his kind. Capone, the first and greatest gangster—the man whose name is synonymous with “gangster”—was the model, and everyone knew it. Capone was a dangerous criminal, but he was a hero too, and this seems to have significantly colored how the film was received. Critics have pointed admonishingly at Little Caesar as glorifying the gangster, and while it is true that Edward G. Robinson’s memorable performance could possibly subvert the moralistic bias of the script and Mervyn LeRoy’s dry, precise direction, it seems less in the service of that goal today than it must have to its contemporaries. The public must have been ready to respond to Rico in a predetermined way that biased out contrary elements. (It must be remembered, too, that Prohibition created a nation of criminals—the films of the period suggest that whatever else Americans were doing, they were drink-
ing. It was easy to admire disproportionately those whose business it was to provide citizens with liquor, however debased in quality.)

Little Caesar was a phenomenal success and gave rise to a rash of imitations. The addition of sound gave the gangster film a true potency. Compared to many silent films, Little Caesar is visually staid, but the sounds of gunfire and slang, and especially Robinson's snarling delivery of his lines, are vivid compensations. The film was so timely and thrilling that LeRoy's attitude toward Rico must have gotten overlooked. Viewing the film now, it is possible to have a more reasonable relationship with it. Rico, as LeRoy and Robinson give him to us, is, in addition to his good (read: strong) qualities, vain, dumb, ugly, brutal, foolish, a bully, and basically insecure. It is a clinical and decidedly antiromantic portrait. Small in most respects, Rico is made an amusing spectacle through irony. We do not like him, and we are not (in the main) moved by him. Yet Robinson makes him so imposing, so important, so malignantly mesmerizing, that we cannot be indifferent to his fate. The world of the film belongs to Rico; we eavesdrop on it as fascinated spectators. The death of a man whose presence defines the world he lives in is always awesome. The classic pattern of the rise and fall of special individuals existed, of course, long before the gangster film, but for the American public, its transposition into the immediate historical present and the close connection between its "fictional" figure and his true-to-life counterpart within a new medium of astonishing and widespread impact made it once again a pattern by which to grip the human soul. This is not the least of Little Caesar's contributions.

It is also the major narrative convention of the early gangster film. Little Caesar focuses on a strong central figure who dominates the action and dwarfs the other characters. The plot is determined by this choice, and the criteria governing the selection of scenes obey the single-minded expediency of bringing a sharp attention and a rich cluster of ideas to bear upon the figure. This proved to be an influential pattern. Little Caesar provides a "poetics" of the gangster film. It is to the gangster film what Oedipus Rex, in Aristotle's analysis, is to Greek tragedy. Like tragic characters, Rico is presented as acting by choice; he creates his own destiny.

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The gangster genre supplied a need for a tragic character we didn’t have, a character whose top-dog status and plumage (however sweatily earned) carried correspondingly magnified (and undemocratic) drives, deeds, and feelings. Our mixed attitude toward Rico, who violates (indirectly) universal laws and (directly) social laws, reflects our ambivalence toward the man who thinks and acts big. The film is conceived on this level of ambivalence. America invents the gangster as tragic hero against the grain of its democratic ideals—rapidly souring in the socioeconomic conditions of the depression. Ethical matters related to success are diverted by the positive, ambitious actions of powerful men who, though powerful, die and thus express, fatalistically, an inversion of the American dream.1 *Little Caesar* pulls us both ways. Rico is a character we both admire and scorn, a hero and a fool, a character we need and a character we need to reject. From the beginning, then, the culture’s attitude toward the gangster seems split down the middle.

By the time *The Public Enemy* was made (1931) the gangster film was a thriving genre. The groundbreaking severities of *Little Caesar* had given way to an impetuous flair. Prodded by the public’s enthusiasm and its own momentum, the gangster film had become an exciting, and to some minds a disturbingly violent, fixture of existence. The succession of charismatic, antisocial heroes obviously fulfilled a public need. Film aggression took on new extremes not incompatible with entertainment.

The steady flow of gangster films not only kept a curious public informed about some unpalatable aspects of American life, it also, by insistent repetition, intensified the genre’s concerns and its subject matter. The gangster film was only a fictional mode, but unpleasantly exact about some rather touchy matters. It impinged closely on actualities. The problems it dealt with were neither historically remote nor fantastical. The gangster’s anarchic lawlessness and criminal success had its analogues in real life, and there was no reason to assume that the films’ balance between make-believe and fact could be indefinitely sustained. Add to this the moral backlash of a middle class worrying about young minds being warped, and the un-Americanism of so sordid a view of life,
and the disappearance of the gangster film by the end of 1932 comes as no surprise.

If Little Caesar can be said to have pioneered the gangster film, The Public Enemy is the classic representative of what it was like in its heyday. It works its conventions and icons with a deep-rooted authority. The stiff, stark quality of Little Caesar is gone. The plot is similar to Little Caesar’s, but the sequence of scenes has a different feel altogether, seems more organic and less pontifical. The sadistic charm of Cagney’s Tom Powers gives the film a high velocity and a seductive tone that the morality of the script cannot overtake. The Public Enemy is more fluid and less angular than Little Caesar, the edges of its thesis constantly blurred by the humanity of its characters. In its editing and staging, Little Caesar resembles a slide show about a rare species in foul bloom. LeRoy’s attitude keeps trying to make us detached and curious. His disengaged, objective approach produces a mechanistic continuity that, I find, makes us in part want to resist it. Little Caesar has the inexorability of a theorem. The repeating and contrasting of scenes take on the quality of a demonstration. The Public Enemy is no less organized a film, but its patterns seem more spontaneous and evolving, less predetermined than Little Caesar’s. Little Caesar is served up in oddly seasoned chunks; The Public Enemy is more like a stew to which this and that ingredient is added as the film progresses. Little Caesar is like an echo chamber; scenes are played off against each other with a pointed artifice (Rico’s defiance of Flaherty over the telephone is the pendant to his opening speech in the diner; Joe’s “intimate” scenes with Olga are versions of his later ones with Rico; Rico’s dismissal of San Vettori is echoed by his dismissal of Little Arnie Lorch; Joe called to Rico is like Rico called to the Big Boy; Tony’s Good Mother who sends him to church, is contrasted with Rico’s Terrible Mother, Ma Magdalena, who keeps him in a dark hell). In The Public Enemy the continuity is strictly progressive and building, each new scene incorporating what has preceded to make a new synthesis within a steady narrative current bolstered by an undercurrent of recollection. And where Little Caesar is content simply to shift locales and emphasize milieu by juxtaposition, The
Public Enemy is a loving re-creation of people and places, visually dense and richly atmospheric.

The difference, I believe, is that Wellman is closer to his world than LeRoy, more interested in a lifelike marshaling of detail, and more open-minded in attitude. LeRoy gives the impression of having made up his mind in advance about how to see and present his subject. Wellman appears to be more the accurate observer of first impressions, transcribing the feeling tone of his world as it passes by his camera. Wellman is not hostile, nor mocking, nor admiring. He seems, above all, to have a nonjudgmental curiosity. He presents, but he does not insist. The viewer thinks and feels in a region of possibility, and to a large extent is left to construct his own attitude and interpretation.
Contemporary audiences tend to indulge the scissors-and-paste primitivism of *Little Caesar*, its grinding obviousness. Many gangster films have come and gone and what might have seemed fresh and provocative in 1930 now seems antiquated. Edward G. Robinson's integrated performance of Rico nonetheless makes the film go. This assessment of *Little Caesar*, common enough I find, is not at all surprising. Films are things of the moment, and one's primary response to retrieved cultural ephemera is a diverted curiosity about their period markings. Robinson's grunting dominance does carry us through some technical creakiness and behavioral inaptitude. I think the film is not most profitably discussed, however, as a colliding series of adequacies and inadequacies as determined by the progress of time. It is a cannily constructed whole whose parts do not conflict but exist in firm, if somewhat stiff, aesthetic relation. Much referred to, and occasionally discussed, *Little Caesar* has never been looked at as a whole. At best, it has been seen as a reservoir of generic/iconographic motifs and situations. In part because it established the tradition, it has gotten somewhat lost in the cross fire of here's-where-it-all-started commentary. Its confident craftsmanship and alternation of tones, its blending of the tragic and comic-sardonic, its almost pedantic (but oddly satisfying) direction, its narrative austerity and gestural recalcitrance work together in impressive unity.

Unlike *The Public Enemy*, the film it is most often matched and associated with as a "classic," *Little Caesar* has no interest in ex-
Little Caesar. Knife in hand, Rico lets Joe (and us) know that he plans to "be somebody."

Exploring the causes of crime. Everything functions to reflect Rico's character. The audience, as is common, occupies a privileged position, understanding Rico the way he himself and others around him cannot. The terror, the grandeur, and the foolishness of his inflexibility are inextricably conjoined. His czar complex and his inferiority complex, his success and his failure, his iron will and his vulnerability keep Rico's characterization in a precarious balance. Any social emphasis is fleeting at best.

The "emotional" scenes in Little Caesar are not very effective. Whether the fault lies in the inadequacies of the script or in the way the performers detonate their dialogue, or both, the agonies of the young lovers (Joe and Olga) caught between obligations to the mob and the promise of a free future and Tony's religious conversion under his mother's guidance manage only to convey, often acutely, Rico's momentary absence. LeRoy's dispassionate approach simply kills these scenes, but it allows the audience to supply its own emotion into Rico's. The implicit, unobtrusive scorn lurking behind LeRoy's objectivity prevents any scene from being directorially overworked, and the rigid progression of incidents seems to obey a predetermined rhythm. Compared to the rich chiaroscuro and throbbing animalism of Scarface, Little Caesar appears drained of pictorial superfluity and human gestures of any but the bluntest and most obvious kind. Its stripped-to-the-bone minimalism gives Little Caesar an obduracy of pace and style that is unique. It is a film that doesn't budge. The bare, lineal narra-
tive—a model of tightness—the clarity of the characters’ relationships, the economy and simplicity with which atmosphere is evoked, the unstrenuous echoing, paralleling, and repeating of scenes and images—these may be seen as virtues by a critic kindly disposed. *Little Caesar* is not a classic simply because it is a prototype, but because it is so firm and so compact. The most restrained of gangster films, its Spartan efficiency is opportunely functional in defining and displaying its perversely animated central figure.

Following the brief martial fanfare over the credits, *Little Caesar* begins with what must be the quickest holdup in film history. (Events are not made much of; the stress is on revelation of character through key incidents.) In long shot, in the gloom of night, we see a gas station. Three shots are fired, and two figures scurry out to their car. The next scene shows us who they are—Rico and Joe. (Rico has committed, we infer, a cold-blooded murder, and although it is presented almost as an abstraction, it is an irrevocable, consequential act that separates Rico from the codes of society and makes him an outsider.) They order spaghetti and coffee in a diner. Rico has turned back the diner clock to give himself an alibi. Joe thinks Rico is real smart. Rico vociferously insists that he wants to “be somebody,” and that they should go East, where big opportunities for fame and fortune lie. Joe says that if he could make it as a dancer, he’d “quit.” Rico is incredulous. The scene establishes that although Rico dominates Joe, Joe has let him know from the
beginning that he is pursuing a different goal. Rico cannot take him seriously. It becomes apparent, later, that for Rico to admit to himself that Joe wants something that doesn’t involve him would be unendurable. Rico’s self-assurance is dependent on Joe’s allegiance. In retrospect, some envy also seems to color this conversation. Rico is psychologically forced to deny Joe’s choice because it is one closed to him.

We learn much about Rico through his friendship with Joe Mas-sara (Douglas Fairbanks, Jr.—in a sorry attempt at a dumb hood). Joe’s presence works against any facile explanation of criminality as being socially or environmentally induced. Joe comes from the same ethnic background and social class as Rico. He is faced with the same options and temptations, yet he chooses an alternate path. His larger function, however, is to act as Rico’s foil, providing, by contrast, an index of his cohort’s aberrations. Joe’s relationship to Rico is also integral to Rico’s downfall. By leaving Rico, Joe inflicts an ill-understood distress that finally nags Rico into inaugurating a disastrous series of actions.

When they hit the big city, Joe gets work as a dancer and falls in love with Olga (Glenda Farrell looks right but is wooden and squeaky), his dancing partner. Meanwhile Rico powers his way up the criminal ladder. He assures his boys of Joe’s loyalty, but Joe is obviously entranced with Olga and his own success. Rico chides him and finally threatens Joe into helping the gang rob the nightclub where he works. The robbery is enacted and Rico shoots the police commissioner. Joe vows to Olga to break free, despite the lack of precedent. On the strength of this heist, Rico takes over as boss of the gang. Maintaining his new position is a time-consuming job. There are banquets to attend, rivals to worry about, stoolies to bump off, the law to deal with. Joe is lost track of. Rico has to be reminded at the banquet that Joe has failed to appear to do him honor. Rico seems disturbed but defends Joe. Basking in his new success, Rico has not particularly felt Joe’s absence. After all, his whole world is paying him homage. He is the celebrity he always wanted to be, a man everybody fears and looks up to. He has also found a new admirer-confidant in Otero, a nervous, homely member
of the gang whose genuine devotion to Rico fills the gap left by Joe.

The homosexual nature of the Rico-Joe relationship has often been remarked, and I suppose it is true, although it is not explicit. The closeness of Rico to Joe is the closeness of an emotional tie based on needs only remotely erotic (although a tinge of abnormality is present in the usually ignored Rico-Otero relationship). That Rico "loves" Joe is beyond doubt. That Rico is ugly and charmless and wants to keep his "beautiful" friend to himself for private needs and public display is also beyond doubt. But Joe's crime, in Rico's eyes, is a betrayal of male solidarity and friendship. Joe's remaining outside his influence is also troubling to Rico as a sign of the limitations of his power. Rico has Otero's loyalty, but that does not suffice. He and Joe have been through things together, and his desire is partly governed by an emotional nostalgia. Rico's suffering gains the viewer's sympathy. To love and need and be ignored is a serious and painful condition.

None of this is given overt emphasis, but the film cannot be understood without pursuing the implications of the Rico-Joe relationship. When Rico discovers that it was Joe who telephoned to warn him of Little Arnie's attempt on his life, he says to Otero, "I didn't think he cared enough." The whole of what not having Joe means suddenly hits him hard. Now that he has made it to the top—the Big Boy has promised him total control of his territory—he sends for Joe, ostensibly to reward him for his loyalty but also to check on his reliability and feel out the state of the relationship. Rico offers him a share of the North Side, a generous offer of partnership he cannot imagine Joe refusing. When Joe reiterates his passion for dancing and refuses, Rico has a tantrum. With a lover's acuity, he fastens on Olga, his rival, as the cause of all the trouble; it is she, a woman, who has warped Joe's mind. (Fear, mistrust, and misunderstanding of women is a staple of the genre.) He promises to kill them both if Joe doesn't abandon her, gesticulating wildly with his phallic cigar and blistering with a hatred born of hurt. LeRoy's sudden close-ups of Rico's face convey a rage and pain and disgust new to the character. The scene is played out in Rico's recently acquired, ultraposh apartment. Rico possesses everything he ever
wanted—luxury, status, and power—everything but Joe. His hysterical attempt to regain Joe does not so much reflect on the monstrousness of his will but rather points to the irony of his ambition. He says to Joe, "I need you" (echoing Joe’s earlier appeal to Olga). He is referring to the business of running the territory, but his immoderate anger at Joe’s refusal reveals the true nature of his need (to us, not Rico, who does not understand his feelings). The scene is interrupted by a phone call from the Big Boy, who proposes a candidate to help Rico run things. Rico says no, assuring the Big Boy that his handpicked man, Joe Massara, is the best choice. When he returns from the phone, Joe is gone. This device makes clear the ascendency of emotion over reason in Rico. All Rico has to do is stop and think and it would be crystal clear that Joe is the worst choice possible, that he is not only not interested but is incompetent to fill that role and, in the eyes of most people, is not to be trusted. Yet Rico insists upon Joe. This is folly.

Rico cannot live with the fact that Joe prefers another to himself. He can’t just forget Joe and tend to his duties as King of the North Side. When Joe runs away, Rico goes to Olga’s apartment to make good his promise. By the time he and Otero get there Olga has already called the police. Rico busts in, fulminating. Joe stands tall against his gun. Rico, suddenly overwhelmed and paralyzed by emotions he cannot comprehend, does not shoot and backs off. Otero has no compunctions (he knows who his rival is), but Rico averts his aim. They both run. Otero is shot by cops. Rico escapes, but he is now alone and must go into hiding. Joe’s betrayal marks the beginning of the end. Olga and (implied) Joe finger Rico for the murder of Commissioner McClure. This series of events alters our involvement with Rico. First his suffering and then the humiliation he undergoes bring us closer to the character. Our pity also makes us his superior. All that Rico does have that we cannot does not add up in human importance to what it is possible for all, or most of us, to have—love, friends, supportive relationships.

One of the engaging aspects of many gangster figures is their appetite for life, their freedom in expressing their desires. The gangster enjoys the rewards of success: liquor, women, fancy
clothes, money to burn; his zest for action and his plunge into forbidden pleasures serve to put our own drab existences into perspective. But Rico is not engaging. He is just formidable. He doesn't enjoy life. He is not a happy man, except during those moments when his vanity is being catered to. He doesn't drink, and he forsakes the company of women. There is little to admire or envy. The nakedness of his power drive and his stubborn purity are forceful, to be sure, but not pleasurable, and offer little impetus for emulation. He leads a compulsive, joyless existence. Purity is a difficult quality to warm to; very few people have it. The pure man is unnatural, a freak, a pervert. He does not cooperate with life on a give-and-take basis. Purity is perhaps the most heroic of endeavors and the most foolish; it is the greatest assault on the way things are. Rico, who cannot yield, cracks, and that is how it should be. Purity nonetheless is, abstractly, something admirable, and its destruction involves a sense of loss. The pure man is also a relative of the clown. The comic aspects of Little Caesar follow naturally from these (apparent) contradictions.

Rico can be seen as the most ridiculous of a group of ridiculous people. His mechanical egotism is certainly presented in a comic light, as a quality that a man less naive and less stupid might control to his advantage, especially when it seems to endanger his very survival. Rico has no self-control or self-awareness. His pretensions are continually undercut by irony. He thinks he's a big shot; we know he isn't. A man who has to brag so much about his own importance must be insecure. The only person who takes Rico totally seriously is Otero, a runtish, admiring secretary/valet/gun who feeds Rico's self-delusion by his solicitous loyalty. Rico's awkwardness is also connected to the film's class fatalism. Rico's clumsiness, once on top, suggests he has no business being there, that it takes more than a gun to rule smoothly and convincingly. Rico's fate is an object lesson for upwardly mobile minorities, one supported by the facts. Rico could never aspire to the Big Boy's WASP invulnerability. He could never possess the respectable facade that taste and culture and (presumably) inherited wealth provide. The Big Boy is above the law; he not only never dies, he never gets caught. He is protected by his veneer and (implicitly) by powerful
friends who could always get him off the hook if the going got rough. Rico’s fate, as an upstart Italian, is to get riddled by an Irish cop’s bullets. Italian and Irish seem to have been designated to kill each other off. Their access to the upper echelons of power in legitimate businesses and professions is blocked. When Rico, heady with power, asserts that even the “Big Boy is through,” we know that his grasp of reality is feeble indeed. As the audience intimates its limits, the grotesquerie of Rico’s ambition becomes manifest.

Rico’s gang is shown as a bunch of comic puppets. Rico’s dominance thus becomes less of an achievement. LeRoy can’t take them seriously, but Rico does. Tall, bulky Sam Vettori is just a blockhead, but for Rico he is the figure he has to discredit and topple (poor Sam spends his time sitting at his desk and playing endless games of solitaire, badly). The swiftness of Rico’s rise is a tribute to his daring, but he can claim credit to little else. Episode after episode is arranged to keep the figure reduced, to remind us that Rico is nothing without his gun. Noisy, crude, and unrelaxed, Rico’s vigor among a band of robots is rather comic. His concentrated energy and self-discipline, and even his obvious guts, are given semiludicrous definition.

Even in the early portions of the film, where we cannot help admiring Rico’s pluck in cutting his way through the competition, his cockiness has a comic edge. LeRoy’s framing emphasizes Rico’s smallness within groups of standing figures. His acceptance of Vettori’s tag of “Little Caesar” indicates an oversized vanity. His trigger-happy solution to any and all difficulties suggests a comic pathology. As he rises in position, his vanity becomes more absurd. At the banquet, his lack of poise is apparent in his halting, empty acceptance speech. His guests clap on cue, not out of genuine regard. Rico insists on having his picture taken with Diamond Pete Montana and cannot fathom why Pete refuses. Who wouldn’t want his picture in the paper (a childish urge to be noticed)? He gets a gold watch on the occasion, but it turns out to be stolen. Having bought ten copies of the newspaper with his picture on the front page, and feeling like a million in his new, expensive coat, he struts openly and foolishly down the street. An easy target, he is
wounded by machine-gun fire from a passing milk van as he admires his watch. During the funeral procession for Tony (whom he has killed), he sits and fidgets in the car and complains, “Gee, we're moving slow.” The derby he adopts as appropriate to his new-won leadership rests uncomfortably on his head. There is a peculiar shot of him in bed, his back against the bedpost, looking like an overstuffed midget as he discourses to Otero (fawning at his feet) about a successful future. Anticipating an important meeting with the Big Boy, Rico dons a tux under Otero’s sartorial supervision. The shot has him standing on a table looking into a mirror. He wonders if he cuts the right figure. Otero, beaming assurance from below, tells him he looks grand. From that height he is easily convinced.

The most complex scene of Rico as a comic figure is the meeting with the Big Boy. Rico’s unease in the Big Boy’s affluent quarters points to both his vulgar virtues and his pathetic delusions. In the context of the proprieties of the Big Boy’s ostentatious life-style, Rico cuts a hapless figure, but one we can identify with. His behavior is, of course, keyed to his particular limitations, but they are limitations common to most of us. Rico is quite Chaplinesque in this scene, his naivety triumphing over the situation by its obliviousness to decorum. In this environment, his vulgarity is welcome. His fumbling with the butler, his misconception about the gold frame costing fifteen thousand dollars, his comical perching on the edge of an expensive chair are errors and discomforts we easily recognize. When he spits off the tip of his cigar and flicks ashes on the Big Boy’s rug, he speaks a language we can all understand.

But the scene cuts both ways. Rico’s timidity is not admirable. He is moronically sucked in by all the glitter. He receives the Big Boy’s flattery with ingratiating excess, unaware that he is being expertly manipulated. The Big Boy sits on his desk and looks down on Rico as he explains the logistics of the new regime. Made to appear unnaturally small, Rico becomes a disappointing yes-man. (The image recalls earlier ones in which Rico sits on top of a desk or lounges comfortably while delivering ultimatums to Sam Vettori and Little Arnie.) Not unexpectedly, the next scene shows us Rico
clumsily assuming the Big Boy's mannerisms, parroting his lan-
guage and his gestures in quarters modeled directly on his superior's.

Rico's dialogue is also frequently comic and characterized by
reductive ironies. The implications of his wooing of Joe go by
unrecognized. When he tells Otero, "The bigger they come, the
harder they fall," he fails to consider himself a possibility. When he
corners Sam and publicly humiliates him in front of his gang with,
"You can dish it out, but you're getting so that you can't take it," the
new-minted epigram is a sign of Rico's incisiveness. When he re-
peats it to Arnie Lorch, however, it suggests a mental stolidity and
loses all its force (on us, anyway; Arnie, who hasn't heard it before,
seems impressed). Yet Rico is capable of supreme gestures of con-
tempt. "Fine shots you are," he yells from the sidewalk where he
lies wounded by Arnie's machine gunners. His final defiance of Flah-
herty has a savage power that rescues the character from decline
and reinstates him in the viewer's eyes as a man of strength and
backbone. LeRoy seems to have arranged the film so that one dis-
tinct impression gives way to another. We are given pieces of Rico
that we have to force into a whole. The pieces, taken singly, are
varied, but they fit together. Rico is a whole whose parts are
brought under separate and often ruthless scrutiny. That he retains
an integrity and a coherence bespeaks how strongly he has been
conceived by Robinson and LeRoy.

The audience, then, is kept at a distance from Rico by com-
ments on his vanity (obsession with apparel, the reflex combing of
his hair), his lack of self-awareness, and his bungled personal rela-
tionships—all signs of internal malfunctioning. Rico's attempt to
bend reality to his will is also pitted against strong external forces
that affirm, by their inexorable nature, the outrageousness of his
assumptions. Rico tries to control and outwit time. For a while,
through planning and energy, he stays on top of time. He's always
where he has to be at just the right moment. But staying on top of
time, synchronizing opportunity and desire, is the best one can
ever hope for. One cannot do more. Time never slips, but humans
do. Rico's successes and failures are both connected to time. He
turns time back by adjusting the clock in the diner. He times the
holdup of The Bronze Peacock at exactly midnight, New Year's Eve,
when everyone will be distracted. He dashes from his dinner to kill Tony just as Tony is climbing the steps of Father McNeill’s church (emphasizing how swiftly and ferociously he can act). Once he reaches the top, however, when there is little left to achieve and the pace of life slackens in accordance with his kingly functions, his neurotic momentum overtakes the rational balance required of his position. His restlessness rushes things. He cannot sit still and clock along in a well-regulated fashion. He complains that the funeral cortege is moving too slow (from this point on, all Rico's haste can do is quicken his inevitable fall). He anticipates the Big Boy's demise far too quickly. Taken off guard admiring his gold watch, he is machine-gunned in the street. His prolonged rant at Flaherty over the phone gives the police enough time to trace his call. Time, which once appeared as an ally, ultimately fails Rico.

Rico's desire to stay one step ahead is a disruption of the natural process of time that time itself readjusts to redress the balance upset by Rico's precipitousness. It is another of the character's violations that can only be brought into line by his death. The cop Flaherty, in contrast, is seen as time's loyal subject. He stands for the law, another force Rico has to deal with, but he is a far weightier figure than his function as society's answer to criminals suggests. His portrait matches Rico's in severity. Flaherty plays a waiting game. Occasionally frustrated by some of Rico's minor triumphs, he knows, deep down, that he holds all the cards and that Rico is a sap. A rigid, fearless character, Flaherty's contempt and ridicule of Rico indicate he is an agent of forces stronger than Rico that will eventually triumph.

Flaherty is Rico's nemesis. Thin, haggard, his face a pallid mask, his vulturous presence (Rico calls him a "buzzard") is a constant reminder of the fate awaiting Rico. Flaherty literally haunts Rico, appearing with spooky precision at every turn of fortune Rico undergoes. Rico can't shake loose of him; he is the devil coming for his due. Flaherty's uncanny stillness and patience tell us that Rico's drive and hurry are so much useless energy. Flaherty never wastes a move, never rushes, merely appears and stands and seems to mock. His deathly figure intrudes upon Rico's highest moments—the robbery of The Bronze Peacock, the funeral for Tony,
the banquet—as if to remind Rico that he is there and will always be there, waiting for the right moment to close in or for Rico to play into his hands. His caustic gallows humor is in character.

The film does a good job of keeping Flaherty's specific and emblematic aspects in equilibrium. As a cop, he would prefer to put the cuffs on Rico so that the society he endangers (and Flaherty serves) can administer the proper punishment, this despite a personal grudge (“If I weren't on the force, I'd do the job cheap”). But the cuffs, and Rico's insistence against them, are used to suggest how determined Rico is to be free. For Flaherty to control and shame Rico would be a greater victory than to kill him. Rico is victorious in forcing his own death. His freedom and defiance are qualities that stay intact. If Flaherty wants him so badly, he can have his dead body, but nothing more, and that's what Rico gives him. One excellent moment that juxtaposes the personal and impersonal qualities of Flaherty occurs when he is standing in the street reading the society page entry devised by Rico's gang to announce Arnie Lorch's departure from town. Flaherty cracks a smile, showing us he's human. Then, instantly, his face hardens into its typical determined scowl.

The inevitability of what Flaherty represents creates sympathy for Rico. Flaherty's cold wisecracks at the end seem unnecessarily brutal. His calm satisfaction at trapping Rico makes us turn, with a mixture of awe and pity, toward the figure who emerges from the lowest squalor, deranged by drink and degradation, to take his last stand in the bleak, desolate city streets. The memorable long shot of Rico prowling aimlessly through the streets at night may make his smallness conspicuous, but the resolve of his gait tells all. Flaherty massacres him at long range through a billboard, with a machine gun. The shot is framed so that the audience, but not Flaherty, sees the choreography of Rico's fall. The vain jerk has a touch of nobility after all. “Little,” yes, but “Caesar” too. Flaherty as executioner is a mean, cheap figure in comparison, but knowing enough to wait it out, he prevails.

The city becomes another force, like time and the law, that doesn't “give” under the pressure of Rico's aggression. Rico comes to the city and makes it his home. His home becomes a prison, a
place of no exit. He rides high for a while but soon meets his doom in the dark, deserted streets of the city he once briefly ruled. The film also alludes to Rico's violation of the social order, which the order itself invites. The state of the society provides the temptation for men like Rico. His hardness is a product of his time, his callousness a response to life's demands. The conversation in the dinner implies the thwarting of legitimate channels of activity. Joe and Rico are a pair of desperate characters both trying to make a living and also wanting something special out of life. Joe hears some of Rico's big talk, but then asks, "What's that got to do with the price of eggs?" Rico's got it all figured out: "Shoot first and argue afterwards." He says, twice, that he wants to "be somebody." Robbing gas stations is beneath his dignity. His contempt for Joe's dancing is based on an ideal of personal accomplishment. (He forces Joe into the gang because he resents Joe's success as a dancer. Success achieved independently of his personal philosophy becomes a threat to his self-esteem.) Joe's eventual success does seem fantastic and unreal; it is certainly more difficult to accept than Rico's failure. The truth of experience is embodied in Rico's corpse. The world is cruel and harsh, and Rico, trying to get ahead the best way he knows how, is destroyed, victimized by two interconnected forces—the either/or choice offered by socioeconomic realities and his low, immigrant status.

Rico dismisses Joe's dream of "money" with contempt. For him it's a matter of pride. Ostensibly, Rico's career illustrates that "those who live by the sword perish by the sword," but it is also his ambition to rise from a lower to a higher level that is edifyingly halted. The taboos of the underworld microcosm are not startlingly different from those of the legitimate macrocosm. The acceptance of violence as the means to reconstitute vertical hierarchies is a naked version of more discreet uses of power practiced outside its boundaries. Rico's struggle for executive supremacy is not professional enough. He causes chaos in the underworld, which is running smoothly and peacefully until his arrival and is planning some strategy of coexistence even under McClure's incorruptible reign. Rico, advised to go steady and take it easy with his cannon, promptly shoots McClure. It is made clear that he doesn't have to;
he does it to get noticed. Shooting McClure is a rash, risky act, but it puts a feather in his cap and makes it evident that he means business. The result, however, is that everyone’s neck is on the line. Diamond Pete is too swiftly deposed. Rico’s fast takeover creates havoc, and he is too unstable to handle his new power well. Pressures from within and without eventually crush the unreasonably ambitious man. If hard times lead to vice, one should indulge in vices safer than ambition—especially if the form it takes is gangsterism. Dancing, a legitimate (if odd) route, pays off. And what of the others?—the film is mum. The exploitative, sanctioned businessman, the corrupt politician are lost to sight beneath the tragic expressive layers of the gangster.

The film’s visual scheme is built around depression extremes—seedy diner and vile flophouse at one end and the contemporary pleasure dome, The Bronze Peacock, at the other. (The Club Palermo occupies a neither-here-nor-there midpoint, a place where plans are laid that lead to either the flophouse or the haunts of the idle rich.) The screaming inanity at The Bronze Peacock, the profligate boozing and flamboyant wealth justify Rico’s holdup—he’s just redistributing the wealth. The denizens of the flophouse project the other great reality—poverty. Rico goes through both. He can’t legitimately attain the one, and he won’t settle for the other. Since there is nothing else, he must die.

*Little Caesar* is a visually exact and cohesive film. It uses the camera limitations of the early sound film to its advantage. In place of camera dazzle, we get camera aptness. Its lighting strategy is uncomplicated but sound. The two-thirds of the film devoted to Rico’s rise are brighter in mood and look than the last third, which takes place completely at night and is more ominously lit. The sobriety of its visual style, reflected in the prevalence of talky exchanges between characters photographed by a stationary camera, prohibits the meddlesome nuances that might endanger the stark, unadorned tale the film wants to tell. That sounds like a specious excuse for impoverished filmic imagination, and I’m not sure I can defend myself in any other way than running the film. Everything
LeRoy does seem right. Camera distance is astutely judged to correspond with purpose and import. Midrange, eye-level framing records a stylized unity of behavior, speech, and interior mise-en-scène. On those few occasions when something more is demanded, LeRoy's camera is up to the task. The excitement of the Bronze Peacock robbery is captured by a montage sequence of unexpectedly disordered rhythm. While the point of view is objective, the danger, daring, and precision of the execution (as suggested by the simultaneous-action dissolves) mirror Rico's subjectivity. Up to that point, the film's rhythms have been quite regular, have established a progression of evenly spaced and articulated scenes, and minus a few point-of-view shots, the camera has been objective. This visual intrusion is a device to break the tempo and suddenly to envelop the viewer with a feeling of Rico's recklessness. The overhead shot of the roulette wheel establishing Arnie Lorch's gambling house is perhaps mere window dressing, but it does reveal a concern for effective transitions.

When Rico is introduced to the gang, the camera dollies in, pans around, and dips and rises, without cutting, to pick out each individual character and also to describe how they are connected by membership in the gang. The camera lumbers rather gracelessly, but the technically awkward maneuver fits the occasion. The camera becomes Rico's eyes. Rico, as a new member, must take in the group as a whole and also each individual as he is introduced. The camera movement imitates Rico's struggle to size up the situation properly and take it in. LeRoy's control is evident also in his judicious use of close-ups. There aren't many, but when they come their impact justifies LeRoy's choice and his selectivity. The close-ups in the first half of the film are only of objects—clock, diamond stickpin, invitation card, newspaper column, all of which represent extensions of Rico's attitudes and feelings, their importance, and isolation through close-up, determined by Rico's perception of them. The characters in the first half of the film are never shown in close-up. Group and medium two-shots dominate, emphasizing Rico's influence and control over others. In the second half of the film the importance of objects is diminished (the decor getting progressively barren), and close-ups of people replace those of ob-
jects. Rico's problems are now internal, not external, and the camera must examine his face to reveal the nature of his strife.

The first confrontation with Joe, in which Rico comes to a boil, contains several close-ups of Rico, bringing us close to his frustration, letting us feel the force of his emotions. The most extraordinary series of close-ups occurs when Rico is about to shoot Joe at Olga's apartment. LeRoy has held his most expressive close-ups in reserve so that justice may be done to the dramatic potential of this encounter. Joe makes his choice: "Shoot, Rico, get it over with." Rico is taken aback by a man who does not fear his gun. Joe's close-up shows him staring Rico down. Rico advances, then slowly backs away, completely disturbed, the rug pulled out from under him. As Rico retreats, his face, in close-up, goes out of focus. The bewildered look on his face and the gradual loss of focus convey the dazed state of a man buffeted by feelings he doesn't understand. It is the film's most intense moment.

The credit sequence of a film like 20,000 Years in Sing Sing (1933) has more filmic flash than the whole of Little Caesar. By that time, the camera was free of the restrictions imposed on it by the early sound film. Little Caesar doesn't have a very big bag of tricks, but there's not a shot in it that betrays an insufficiency of means. It is to LeRoy's credit that the film never feels pinched but, on the contrary, is inventive, resourceful, and appropriate in its camera technique and visual style. The film establishes from the beginning its restrained approach, and the final shots, especially, have a solemn decorum that would have been ill matched to a more intemperate manner throughout. The shot of Rico falling—a slow-motion choreography done without camera manipulation—is held just the right amount of time for us to savor his imperial collapse, and the camera is back far enough to catch the complete roll of Rico's derby after it hits the ground. As we watch the hat roll far from Rico's bullet-riddled body, the symbolic and naturalistic qualities of the image fuse in ironic grandeur. LeRoy's reserve gives us a classical tableau of pointed linkage among person, object, and environment. To have cut into a close-up for emotional pull would have broken the impression of detached awe.
The concluding shots are complex without sacrificing directness of impact. A poetic conception of image and character discreetly heightens a climactic multiplicity of statement. The callous reality of the age and the dream of escaping it are evocatively synthesized.

Rico is the last to understand that he can die like any man. His farewell to the world—“Mother of mercy, is this the end of Rico?”—is singularly cruel in that his vanity continues to get the better of his understanding. It is not a conscious refusal to recognize his human limitation but a deep trait of character that allows his incomprehension to take precedence over the brute fact of his mortality. The line could be read with emphasis on “this” or “end,” and it would make a difference. Robinson’s stress on “Rico” suggests that the character is self-absorbed to the end, and his eyes are large with disbelief. Irony, pity, and sympathy converge.

The billboard Flaherty rips his bullets through advertises Joe and Olga’s dance act—“Tipsy, Topsy, Turvy,” a “laughing, singing, dancing success.” The image points to the disparity between the gritty fact of Rico lying dead and the extravagant display of Joe and Olga’s success. “Tipsy, Topsy, Turvy,” undoubtedly comments on the ups and downs of Rico’s fortunes, but the more generalized idea of life’s unpredictability is also there and must have registered on contemporary audiences.

The billboard dominates the screen in both size and light. It radiates a glittering fantasy, an immoderate wish fulfillment. Joe’s choice may conceivably lead to this, but the effect is that of a dream. Rico’s lifeless body lies behind, not visible, but we know it is there. The image holds a sense of the vacillating parameters of the audience’s imaginative life, a need for illusion fighting a basic disillusion. Reality is for an instant masked, but not convincingly. This was also the era of escapist musicals, to which the image alludes. Flaherty machine-guns the image, literally penetrating its facade. The attempt at a grim pulp poetry succeeds nicely.

The shot also works against a clear-cut moral point. Gerald Mast’s opinion that Little Caesar “glorifies amoral brutality” is too simplistic in the light of the feelings the ending provokes. The conclusion of Little Caesar reinforces the timely truth that in the world
outside the theater one either flew very high or very low, and most viewers were flying low indeed. When the opening musical refrain returns to close the film, it takes on the character of a funeral march, an exit music of aggression stilled. And what lies dead is not just the gangster but his dream.

**Credits:** *Little Caesar* (First National, 1930, 80 min.)  
**Producer:** Hal B. Wallis  
**Director:** Mervyn LeRoy  
**Screenplay:** Francis Edward Faragoh (from the novel *Little Caesar* by W. R. Burnett)  
**Photography:** Tony Gaudio  
**Editor:** Ray Curtiss  
**Art Director:** Anton Grot  
**Music:** Erno Rapee  
**Cast:** Edward G. Robinson (Rico), Douglas Fairbanks, Jr. (Joe Mas-sara), Thomas Jackson (Flaherty), Glenda Farrell (Olga), Stanley Fields (Sam Vettori), Sidney Blackmer (Big Boy), George E. Stone (Otero), Ralph Ince (Diamond Pete Montana), Maurice Black (Arnie Lorch), William Collier, Jr. (Tony).
"Little Caesar" is an articulation of Rico's dream to be on top. The dream motivates the character; it is explicitly announced as his ambition. "The Public Enemy," less than half a year later, already treats this dream implicitly, uses it as a given, implants it in the character without directly referring to it. "The Public Enemy" transfers the dream to a level of behavior. The audience is not absorbed by a determined overreacher whose dream of power and personal success takes the form of actions unmistakably expository of that dream. In the case of "The Public Enemy," it would be more accurate to say that the audience is absorbed by an embodied dream of vital behavior. The meaning and the outcome of both films are the same, but in "The Public Enemy" the gangster's goals are not so unrealistic and out of reach as they are in "Little Caesar." Tom Powers's aspirations are located in his desire and his ability to be a certain way, to exist in a lively manner. Exercising that desire freely and to the full violates the same social and moral codes as Rico's enormous ambition and entails the same consequences. The outward signs of his success are offhandedly represented, not pointedly observed, as in "Little Caesar." What matters, what is gripping, is Tom Powers's personal vitality in a context of inertia, stolidity, and hesitancy, and it can only have scope outside the boundaries of legitimate activity.

"The Public Enemy" introduced, in James Cagney, the most dynamic of screen gangsters. His portrayal of Tom Powers made him an instant star. His combination of childlike sensitivity, insolent
The Public Enemy.
A Bunch of two-bit punks listen to their venal mentor. One, Tom Powers, looks especially intent, and is headed for bigger things.

grace, and gleeful viciousness proved irresistible. Director William Wellman recollects how Cagney got the part:

I make a picture called "Public Enemy," and we hire a guy named Eddie Woods to play the lead. We get a relatively unknown guy named Jimmie Cagney who has a tough little way, and he is playing the second part. I didn't see the rushes for three days because I was working late and said, "Aw, to hell with them. I'll see them over the weekend." When I looked at the rushes, I said, "Keerist! Hasn't Zanuck seen them?" And he hadn't either, because he had been out of town. Now Zanuck was then working for Warner Bros., and he was doing half the pictures and Hal Wallis was doing the other half. I was working for Zanuck. I immediately got hold of him. I said, "Look, there is a horrible mistake. We have the wrong guy in here. Cagney should be the lead." Zanuck said, "Well, you know who Eddie Woods is, don't you?" And I said, "No, I don't. Who is he?" "He's engaged to marry Louella Parson's daughter." I said, "Well, for Christ's sake, are you going to let some newspaper woman run your business?" He said, "Change them." We changed them, and Cagney became a big star..."

It was a momentous choice. Wellman's instinct about Cagney was right. His runaway performance almost throws the film off-balance, but it is Wellman's choice to give him that much rein. (By the time Raoul Walsh made White Heat [1949], Cagney's identity was so established—even after a decade of nongangster parts—that Cody Jarrett's psychopathy seemed a condition appropriate to a figure we had known for a long time, something lurking finally made explicit.) Wellman, working with a talented unknown, wisely left him free to define as widely as possible his screen persona.
Wellman claims, in the same interview, that Zanuck let him do *The Public Enemy* because he promised to deliver "the most vicious picture ever made." One would expect *The Public Enemy*, therefore, to be tough and tawdry. In fact, it is elegant and mellow. Cagney's brutality is at times unnerving and repulsive, but Wellman allows us to understand it first and condemn it only later, if at all. Cagney's contribution, moreover, gives the film a verve not seriously compromised by the gross ironies of the final scene. The "crime-does-not-pay" lesson fades far sooner than Cagney's gaiety. Taken by itself, the script of *The Public Enemy* shows its hero to be a failure in all things, but Cagney's dancing shuffle of joy on a public street after "scoring" Jean Harlow is one of the enduring moments of happiness in the history of art. No one can ever claim to have been happier, nor has anyone ever deserved to be. Moralists had good cause to be alarmed.

*The Public Enemy* opens with a series of images reconstructing the pre-Prohibition period of 1909. The pans and dissolves that alternate with cutaways to stockyard, factory, brewery, and urban congestion evoke the living conditions of the lower classes and define the boundaries of their world of work, play, and relaxation. Wellman's street scenes have a documentary neutrality. The sidewalks, lined with bars, crawl with life. Exteriors and interiors are crowded with hard-drinking people. The noisy march of a Salvation Army band becomes part of the general din and then fades.
as the musicians exit from the frame. The old, the young, the sober, and the drunk mix together in the teeming street. The effect is Zola-esque, the vivid overlay of details creating a naturalistic clutter rich in statement. Here, indeed, is an environment in which crime can “breed.” Wellman doesn’t hurry his images; they come at a measured pace and casually construct a comprehensive sense of a time and place. (Nothing in Little Caesar resembles Wellman’s devotion to authenticity in the opening of The Public Enemy.) The pictorial beauty of this sequence and its period charm are rare in the genre. Much care has been taken by producer and director alike. The Public Enemy is a project Wellman is clearly interested in. His involvement shows in the acuteness of his mise-en-scène and in the presence of shots savored for their own sake, in addition to conveying meaning and information.

The opening of The Public Enemy deftly combines period flavor, narrative, and social awareness. Wellman is not being critical but exact. He coolly works in points as he describes. The brewery, an imposing structure, has a dominant influence on social life. Wellman pans along the path the beer takes from the bar (in pails dangling from a long plank) across the width of the street, while a Salvation Army band cuts across the street lengthwise, contrasting two extremes and establishing a direct link between drinking and community life. Prohibition will surely upset a society so dependent on booze. In the tavern, the overflow of froth down the sides of beer mugs evokes both a nostalgia for less restrictive days and an aura of excess. A modified use of Soviet intellectual montage makes an implicit analogy between human congestion and stockyards, and the blast of a factory whistle is a shorthand indication of proletarian milieu and routine.

Tom Powers, born in this environment, is its victim. As a child, he exercises opportunities for delinquency. Pampered by an indulgent mother and beaten by a harsh father, he quickly adopts a thorough disrespect for authority. After his father dies, the task of controlling him falls to his mother, who is not up to the job. His favored elder brother gobbles up legitimate priorities, leaving Tom to fend for himself in the urban jungle. His brother Mike (pulling virtue on top of rank) becomes, for Tom, a focus of contempt and a target
of implicitly envious hatred. (There is surely irony in Mike's saying to Tom, "I wish you'd try and stay home a little more"—this from a character who has just enlisted, who works days on a streetcar and spends evenings at school.) His brother lectures him and slugs him, but Tom doesn't hit back. He learns to take punishment, control himself, endure humiliation. When his father cracks the leather belt across his bare ass, he holds back cries and tears. His upbringing toughens him. The gangster's advantage over most men is, often enough, his contempt of pain and death. *The Public Enemy* explores, with a sociological awareness, where and how such hardness and invulnerability originate.

John Gabree writes, "Nowhere, not even in the scenes in *The Public Enemy* where Tom and Matt graduate from petty to grand larceny, is there any statement that social conditions breed crime." Actually, the film's logic seems based on just that assumption. Any clearer cause and effect relationship would amount to overt didacticism. Tom's brother succeeds in resisting the pull of crime partly by accident and partly by a strong will. He is not a pleasant character. Wellman suggests that his choice of night school and drudge work in place of the possible fast buck is conditioned by his place in the family; as the elder brother, he must, in the absence of the father, assume the role of the family's masthead of respectability. His anger at Tom is motivated by jealousy as well as moral principle. The film does not whitewash him. Tom accuses Mike of pinching nickels from the streetcar he operates, and when he returns from the war, his mental health impaired, Tom says, "Your hand ain't so clean. You killed and liked it. You didn't get them medals by holding hands with them Germans." Neither charge is denied or confirmed, but his brother's hysterical reaction to both charges implies at least a partial truth. Mike goes to war with an air of nobility, enlisting out of the blue. In effect, he is abandoning family for personal glory. Tom gets stuck with making do at home in a difficult period. Mike escapes to fight legitimate battles in a foreign land for abstract principles. Tom stays to fight less prestigious battles at home in the interests of economic survival. Both brothers want to achieve, and the world they live in shatters them both. Mike's psyche is damaged in the war and Tom dies young from bullets. The
mother suffers passively through it all. If, in *Little Caesar*, a relation is made between the gangster's activity and business, in *The Public Enemy*, the relation is between the gangster's activity and war. The relation, to some degree, undermines the surface distinctions between legitimacy and illegitimacy.

If social conditions do not force people into crime, the film implies that if you follow the natural drift of things you end up a crook. Conditions certainly do not favor virtue. The film is not a rabid tract; Tom's environment, class, and upbringing do not compel, but they hinder rather than help a calm, law-abiding existence. *The Public Enemy* is also concerned with the breakdown of the family, that archaically utilitarian, deeply emotional structure doomed to crumble in the advance of progress and industry and their broader, less personal units of loyalty. Tom moves from home to the Washington Arms Hotel; he chases a rich dame from Texas. Mike goes to war in Europe. A policeman's catalog of Tom's sins is capped by "he lies to his mother." A world on the go disrupts community and family life, breaks apart its traditional patterns. The society is in flux; one takes one's chances or vegetates and gets left behind. The film is morally conservative in charting the disaster of dislocated activity, but no acceptable alternatives exist. The old, lethargic ways are being pressured by quick social change. Mike's route at home is a slow crawl to anonymity. Maybe Tom could have become a cop and gone on the take, but making him a gangster was probably less disillusioning.

The film also indicates how entrenched and deadening a lower-middle-class environment can be and that Tom's move for easy money is inspired by a sense of the inhibiting structures he was born into. The unambitious stand still as they grow older and get nowhere. In the 1909 section, Tom and Matt, as kids, are seen entering a neighborhood "boys' club" run by Putty Nose, a period Fagin of low morals (he sings dirty songs to the kids) and even lower ethics. Tom and Matt cross through a tableau of school-age kids picturesquely arranged in a vaguely animated pursuit of various activities and nonactivities. The 1915 section opens with Tom and Matt cutting across essentially the same image with essentially the same cast of background characters engaged in young-adult and
more sodden versions of their former interests. The little fat kid who was sprawled vacantly in an armchair is now numbly gambling in a small-stake card game, and so forth. The impression is of an anonymous group of people whose station in life is fixed. In this context, we can see how Tom, like Rico, wants to “be somebody,” to bust out of this deprived, depressing limbo of aimless loafing. It beats school and a nickel-dime job, but to slouch around sulky and morose in the dead air of Putty Nose’s club is to make a poor settlement indeed. (It is preferable, though, to being “good.” Tom’s alternate education—lots of fieldwork—is better than a “straight” one. The ambience of Putty Nose’s club is not one of depravity but [relative] vitality.) The club is packed with surly ne’er-do-wells, too demoralized to work and too gutless to strike out for big things (the comic image of Matt, Tom, and three other fledgling thugs crunched awkwardly on Putty Nose’s bed—Tom’s feet don’t touch the ground—sums up the cheap, small-time flavor of this life). Cagney’s entrance announces him as a man to reckon with—the walk, the smart mouth, the tipped hat, the expressive body language. When Putty Nose gives him a gun, one can be sure he’ll know what to do with it. On his first job, Tom panics from inexperience, but not even Putty Nose’s treachery (he refuses to harbor him), his own failure, or the sight of his buddy’s corpse (shot in the act by a cop) dent his resolve to make plenty of dough the fast and easy way and lead a stylish life. It is still the best choice of any available.

Little Caesar was an unusually ascetic gangster hero. Tom Powers is the prototype of the high-living gangster, synonymous in the public mind with fast, fancy cars, easy money, loose women, boozing, swank nightclubs, and reckless, uninhibited activity. Wellman doesn’t soft-pedal Tom’s relish of these things. Tom knows how to live, and we admire him for that. We respond to his amoral enjoyment of a full array of life’s pleasures. We lose sight of the cost to others his living so high and free exacts. The gangster’s defects become virtues, the surface manifestations of his success obscuring his more important failings. Wellman doesn’t gloss, nor does he suppress Tom’s weaknesses. He lets Cagney’s momentum, though, sweep the viewer away. We are so caught up in Tom’s urge to live
that we do not take full advantage of several opportunities to back away from him. The values he carries are too attractive. Long after the film has made it clear that he’s a lost cause not worth backing, the shock of his mortality registers.

Matt, the more cautious, less intense character, acts as a foil (like Joe Massara in Little Caesar) to Tom, reminding us of his abnormalities. Tom feeds his self-esteem by bullying and lording it over Matt, however inoffensively. We laugh at Tom’s belittling remarks and lose sight of the insecurity that dictates his behavior. Tom’s contempt for Matt’s relationship with Mamie (shown as a satisfying combination of sexual lust and human feeling) is implicitly connected to his own irritating affair with Kitty. (Pushing the half grapefruit in her face elevated Cagney to a status of folk hero. The gesture, underneath its entertaining sadism, bespeaks a crude solution to sexual dissatisfactions.) Tom interprets Mamie’s influence over Matt as a sign of Matt’s weakness. Matt and Mamie’s dallying in bed causes Tom to order him to hurry up for the next job. Tom wrests Matt from his wedding celebration to help him finish off Putty Nose. Matt leaves, despite Mamie’s concern. Marriage would naturally sever the two men’s close relationship, and Tom’s insistence is his means of not losing hold on Matt. (Matt tells us that Tom “ain’t the marrying kind.” In gangster films, the hero rarely attains a well-regulated sexual life. It would blunt his other duties, compromise his existential independence, and make for a degree of social integration he was born, it seems, never to experience.)

The cold-blooded murder of Putty Nose is the first scene in which Tom’s brutality makes us question our identification with him. Tom’s cruel cat-and-mouse preliminary, with Putty Nose pleading for his life, is given a divided emphasis. Matt’s disturbance is the visual point of convergence of our own. The killing takes place off-screen, the camera observing Matt’s helpless, sickened reaction. The nastiness of Tom’s line of work, which Tom enjoys, provides a potential turning point in our attitude, one cued by the silent, dismayed figure of Matt. Tom reminds us that Putty Nose nurtured their career in crime, and when the heat was on abandoned them to fend for themselves. His death, then, is proper on grounds of vileness, and for the violation of both human and gangland codes. But
Tom’s motive is not primarily one of social, human, or professional justice. He has been egged on by Nails Nathan; the killing of Putty Nose would confirm Nails’s faith in his toughness. Besides, Putty Nose’s “bad” influence is twisted into a backhanded compliment: if it weren’t for Putty Nose, “We might have been ding-dings on a streetcar.” It boils down to a personal grudge carried to excessive lengths. Putty Nose’s punishment does not fit his crime, and Matt’s presence tells us so.

Tom’s relationships with women are complete failures. It is partly the women’s fault but mainly his. His love for his mother is genuine, but he gives her nothing but grief and some occasional guilt-money. As a child, he prefers the streets to home. As a youth, home is a place to drop in on once in a while. Finally, after a tiff with Mike, he moves to a hotel. Throughout, he is the lost child, denying his need for mother and experiencing difficulties with other women because of his divided, immature self. The three women he comes in contact with want to mother him and, secondarily, domesticate him. We are semigratified to see Tom resist, but the women’s protective gestures and verbal comforts (echoing his mother’s “my baby”) attest to the character’s sexual immaturity. The scenes with women define the pathetic aspects of his character. Matt warms to Mamie, but Tom tires of Kitty, giving her his opinion of a cozy domestic breakfast by administering a grapefruit facial. He wants something else without knowing what it is. He thinks he finds it in Gwen (Jean Harlow), but that turns out a bust.

The scenes with Harlow have a strange flavor all their own, as if Wellman doesn’t know quite what to do with her. Maybe it’s the dialogue (combined with Harlow’s unconvincing upper-class delivery) that’s responsible: “From Chicago?” “Not exactly. I came from Texas.” Wellman certainly doesn’t help his players through their lines. On the other hand, the stiffness of their scenes does convey a sense of Tom’s discomfort at being out of his element, and being dominated to boot.

Gwen is given to us as a woman who exists to move from one sexual conquest to another and who looks like she was born for no other purpose but to wear expensive clothes and move with a statu-
esque imperturbability. She breathes "class" (the double entendre of her staying at The Congress Hotel is apt). Tom wants her but is confused about how to get her. She is mysterious and, if attainable, not by any route known to him. Her cool eroticism baffles his lower-class flamboyance. He seems destined never to have her. Ironically, just as he decides out of frustration to leave her, she makes her pitch. As they are about to cross class lines, effect a merger of proletarian vitality and sensuous culture, Matt intrudes to announce Nails Nathan's death (his head kicked in by his horse). Since Gwen represents Tom's social aspirations, it is a significant interruption. Tom leaves to shoot Nails's horse (a symbol of the aristocracy of wealth—alogous to Gwen—who kills the imposter Nails) and begin his descent to the gutter from which he came. Gwen, robbed of her pleasure, deliberately, and without losing poise, shatters a glass in the fireplace. Each figure adheres to his or her social destiny.

Gwen's seduction of Tom, however unsuccessful, rests on her ability to mother him. "You're not running away from me," she says and, holding him to her breast, calls him "my bashful boy." Responding to this need, Tom becomes sexually manageable. The third of Tom's women, Jane, again mothers him as a setup to intercourse, and succeeds, but without his knowledge or help. Upon the scattering of Nails's mob, Paddy has told his boys to lie low. He has taken away their money and their guns and has left them in the charge of an aging whore who feeds them food and drinks and provides them bedding in her apartment. All the boys but Tom adapt well to this enforced retirement. He gets restless and drinks himself silly. Jane loosens his clothes and puts him to bed in solicitous, motherly tones ("Be a good boy and sit down." "Let me help you." "I'll take your shoes off, too." "Just a goodnight kiss for a fine boy."). Tom resists verbally but allows himself to be kissed and handled, his basic need for a real mother making the best of a substitute one. At breakfast, Jane alludes to their night together; in his groggy state, she has managed to seduce him. Feeling betrayed and violated, he gets furious and slaps her. Disgusted and full of hate (he believed, after all, that he was merely being tucked into bed), he storms out of the apartment in defiance of Paddy's orders,
fleeing the deceitful presence of woman and rushing to whatever fate awaits him. Matt, the sexually normal, follows him to the streets and gets gunned down.

From here on to the end, the character becomes a figure of death. He stands in heavy rain, his face a revenger’s mask, and single-handedly walks into Schemer Burns’s headquarters and wipes out most of his men (the revenge motif is not present in Little Caesar). It is difficult to decide what meaning to ascribe to this action. Tom is a man whose world has fallen apart. His brother hates him, his mother cannot claim him, his best friend, sticking by him, has been murdered, his “love” has proven unattainable. The gesture may therefore be suicidal. He cannot hope to survive as one against so many. Part of the gangster’s “lesson,” though, is to understand that he is mortal, and Tom may well believe himself invincible. Wellman has him slop down a gutter’s edge toward the audience, clutching his wounds, the low angle rhetorically magniloquent. The tragic rain pours down ceaselessly. Tom, falling, utters his epitaph: “I ain’t so tough.” These words are not addressed to himself, or to us, but to the cosmos; it is a tragic utterance worthy to reverberate in the vastness of space and time. The water, glittering in the light of the streetlamp, is a kind of baptism streaking a truth across his brightly lit face, a point of revelation surrounded by his otherwise rigid, black, impenetrable frame.

The film could end here, the moral lesson completed, a measure of self-understanding achieved. We get, instead, a double coda, anticlimactic and sobering. The film does not want to end on so heroic a note. Tom survives to be bandaged up on a hospital bed, barely able to move. The driving force behind the film is harnessed. The reunion with his family brings to completion the sentimental motif of the lost child. Tom wants to come home, to make peace with his brother. He is penitent about the grief he has caused and seems on the verge of a virtuous regeneration. The sentimentality, however, is turned around by Cagney’s sublimely individualistic gesture of giving a soft fist tap to his mother’s lowered, tearful head. This stubborn self-assertion makes the whole of his previous self come alive and blots out any hope (fear?) that the

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character has undergone a change. Wellman attempts to dispel the glory of his moment of high humor by later dumping Tom’s trussed-up carcass through the doorway of his home. It is a shocking image, suggesting the true end of criminals like Tom—the crowning indignity—but the dull thud of his drop has a brutal, chordal finality, and his mummified appearance the ghastly grandiloquence of myth.

The “heavy” conclusion, with its thick ironies (the song “I’m Forever Blowing Bubbles” plays throughout; shots of Ma humming happily upstairs as she prepares Tom’s bed are intercut with Tom’s delivery; the slow, steady tread of Mike’s feet [from ground level] walking toward the interior of the house, presumably to burst Ma’s bubble of expectation; the parody of a homecoming; the record that keeps revolving—its stuck needle making a sound like a heartbeat), is a justifiable attempt to bring the film to a more somber point. Much of The Public Enemy is lighthearted, and its humor helps to increase our involvement with the characters (unlike Little Caesar, where the humor typically works against the characters). The humor, as Wellman directs it, seems to issue naturally from the vitality of the characters’ response to life. Wellman, as an authentic recorder, must capture that facet as well. In Little Caesar scenes are tagged as ridiculous; the humor is “arranged.” In The Public Enemy humor crops up unexpectedly; it is a quality that Cagney, especially, seems to carry with him and can at a given moment exercise. His spontaneous comic invention in the first nightclub scene, his high-spirited cruise down city avenues in his new convertible, the robbery of the gun, and the wonderful moment in the hospital are “good times” Wellman captures with a breezy insouciance.

The Public Enemy is intelligently organized, its slice-of-life approach shored up by methodical layers of meaning in continuity. Dress is carefully matched to rises in status, and the characters’ very movements seem to respond to their change in attire (speech idioms, however, remain unchanged and are played off against alterations of dress). The musical score is integrated with the characters’ materialist advance. At Putty Nose’s, a lone honky-tonk
piano crashes away; at the nightclub where Tom and Matt pick up Mamie and Kitty, a brass-dominated orchestra plays “Toot Toot Tootsie”; in the more elegant nightspot where Matt and Mamie’s wedding celebration takes place, the entrance of the nattily attired guests is accompanied by a smoother, more genteel orchestra, string-dominated. The grayish tones of Dev Jennings’s photography imply a neutrality of outlook, and it is only toward the end, when a sense of mounting drama permits it, that the images become more expressive and sinister—a shot of a moving car taken from underneath, Cagney at a curtain-blackened window peering through a narrow, illuminated slit, the low angle of his stumbling in the rain, a pair of unattended machine guns in a window with the curtains gently blowing in the breeze. In the absence of a Flaherty figure, with its built-in social morality, there are few one-to-one confrontations. Group scenes are the norm, and personal inclinations assume morally ambiguous values in context; for example, the scene with Lehman, the brewery owner, which establishes a direct connection between business and crime and in which Lehman’s cringing hypocrisy is seen to be a worse evil than Nails Nathan’s exploding of it. The gangster film’s most dangerous probe was that the system was corrupt all the way to the top. The presence of Lehman and the scarcity of police hint at that condition.

I will close with a brief discussion of three scenes that are at the heart of Wellman’s achievement in The Public Enemy and that help make the film, to me, a unique example of its genre.

1. Prohibition eve. People are seen frantically stocking up on liquor. Some are drunk already, and guzzling. They stagger around singly, in pairs, in groups. They converge on and away from the liquor store from all sides of the frame, on foot, in cars, wheeling baby carriages full of booze. A flower truck stops, opens its rear doors wide, dumps all the flowers in the street, and loads up with liquor. A bottle falls out of a car window, smashing onto the sidewalk; a woman gets out to inspect the damage. Liquor runs down the gutters; people crisscross each other, slightly dazed and crazed. The sequence tells us all we need to know about the folly of Prohibition, but Wellman eschews the moralist’s scorn and the
satirist's guffaw. His tolerant view embraces more complex possibilities. It is a funny sequence. The people may be going nuts, but Wellman implies they have a right to. They are silly and excessive, but not enough to scorn. The brevity of the sequence (55 seconds) reinforces its comedy; everything is rushed, one outlandish shot is juxtaposed rapidly with another. But the rapidity also suggests something dangerously obsessional. There is a sense of menace—the blind staggering, the smashed bottle, the violence of movement, some incongruous, bizarre imagery. Wellman implicitly connects the noisy madness of this moment to the coming gangland violence Prohibition in fact spawned. A more priggish and pretentious mind, a coarser and more assertive directorial style, would have not been able to maintain the delicate balance of this sequence.

2. The welcome home dinner for Mike. Here a simple but effective comic device modifies our reception of the scene's serious tensions. Mike, his mind somewhat damaged by the war, has come home with his purity of outlook even more pronounced. Tom and Matt, without giving it a second thought, have contributed a huge keg of beer for the occasion. The keg is placed on the dinner table, its large bulk controlling the visual field for viewer and characters alike. The serious emotional conflicts that ensue are hazed by absurdity. Wellman gets a lot of mileage out of this inert, gross, ridiculous object. Mike's violent breakdown is, in part, brought about by having to deal with the keg's inescapable presence. The comedy of the characters' having to talk to each other through and around the keg, however, puts Mike's anger into perspective (and even Ma's having a beer). The keg stands for moral and family divisions, but its obstreperous thereness lets Wellman direct for complexity of tone. With the characters blocked from each other by the symbol of their moral-ethical differences, their conflicting points of view are both reduced in importance and fanned to extremes by the looming keg, which parodies the surface decorum of this family reunion. When the emotions reach their peak, Wellman frames first Mike and then Tom without the keg in view. The keg, of course, does nothing. It is there, like the director is there, detached but guiding the outcome. When we first see it, it is certainly noticeable but not note-
worthy. As the scene goes on, its presence becomes funny; a while later, it becomes less funny. When the conflict erupts at last to serious consequences, Mike hurls the keg into a corner. It has done its (and Wellman’s) job.

3. The potato chip scene. Paddy’s bar. Paddy discourses to Tom and Matt about the financial rewards of going into the liquor business. Wellman’s entry is deceptively casual, as if the camera just dropped in to observe a typical but unimportant moment in the characters’ lives. Matt and Tom lean, their figures framed in full, against the counter, Paddy on the other side. Tom, facing toward the camera, is chewing food and having some coffee. Paddy is snacking on potato chips. From this wordless temps mort opening, Wellman moves, with a quickened tempo, to the grotesque close-up of Paddy shoving handfuls of chips into his mouth, scraps falling down his chin. The image conveys his gluttonous greed, but again, the context prohibits a severely critical attitude. The chips, unobtrusively part of the scene, suddenly emerge as a comic prop. Wellman narrows his focus to isolate them; issues and feelings within the scene are linked to how the chips are used. The seriousness of the issues, however, are undercut by the comic inappropriateness of the means used to articulate them. Tom and Matt’s passivity—Tom calmly goes on eating without a word—suggests, as well, how they are subject to the powerful forces working through Paddy, who is not their cause but their agent (Paddy’s eating as the comedy of mechanical motion).

Wellman’s direction of these scenes has a contoured precision, a readiness and confidence, and an alertness for discreet intensification of “realistic” frameworks that transforms the potentially bland into the vivid. The sensibility governing these scenes is unique in the genre. The Public Enemy is perhaps the most “balanced” film in the genre, mixing equally horror and hilarity, gruesomeness and gaiety. Wellman shows himself a director who is relaxed but never lazy, his reflexes primed to catch the provocatively ambiguous gesture, action, and expression on the wing.
Credits: *The Public Enemy* (Warner Bros., 1931, 83 min.)

**Producer:** Darryl F. Zanuck  
**Director:** William A. Wellman  
**Screenplay:** Harvey Thew (from a story by Kubec Glasmon and John Bright)  
**Photography:** Dev Jennings  
**Editor:** Edward M. McDermott  
**Art Director:** Max Parker  
**Music:** Vitaphone Orchestra, conducted by David Mendoza  
**Cast:** James Cagney (Tom Powers), Edward Woods (Matt Doyle), Jean Harlow (Gwen Allen), Joan Blondell (Mamie), Mae Clarke (Kitty), Beryl Mercer (Mrs. Powers), Donald Cook (Mike Powers), Leslie Fenton (Nails Nathan), Robert Emmett O'Connor (Paddy Ryan), Murray Kinnell (Putty Nose).