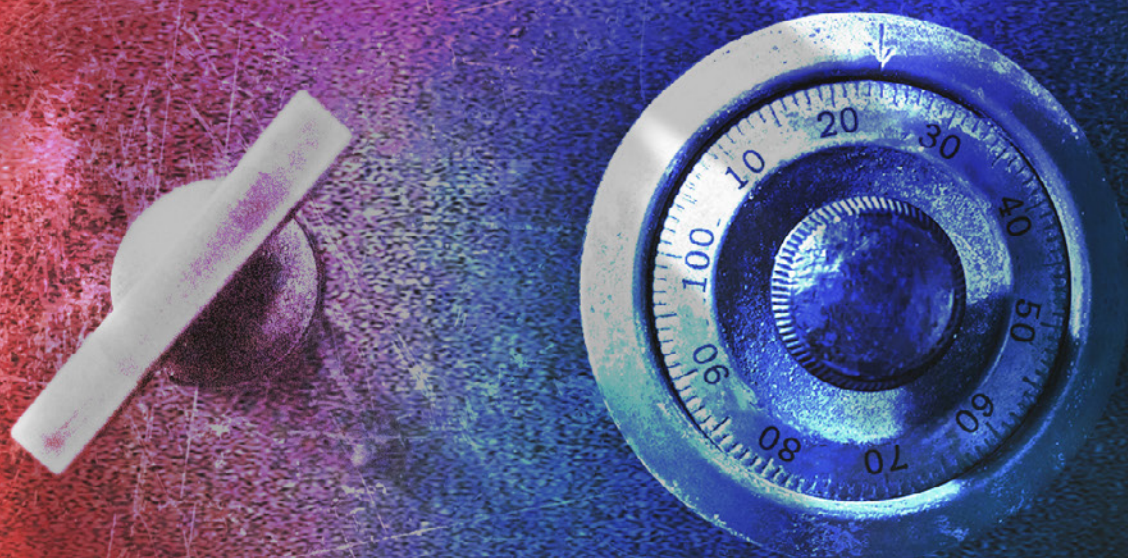


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girls, on film

THE HEIST ISSUE



RAISING ARIZONA | HOW TO BEAT THE HIGH COST OF LIVING | THIEF
HOUSE OF GAMES | SHORT CIRCUIT 2 | SUBWAY | JOHNNY HANDSOME | CRACKERS



THE HEIST ISSUE

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Let's get cracking!

Welcome to issue #24 of *Girls, on Film*, the zine (pronounced zeen) that is hopelessly devoted to 80s movies! Each issue features eight movies released between 1980 and 1989 that relate to a specific theme. Past themes include music, sports, food, role-reversals, road trips, high school and college, robots, romance, creature features, animated films, adaptations, and films based on true stories.

We cover it all: popular and obscure titles, and everything in between. Our essays are a mix of review and commentary, history, and personal connections.

It's no secret that we're breaking out the heist movies for this issue, the kind with expert safecrackers, utterly broke housewives, bumbling thieves, a deformed gangster, infertile newlyweds, disillusioned romantics, deceptive marks, and Number Five, still alive.

The Prime Suspects

HOW TO BEAT THE HIGH COST OF LIVING.

Three women are fed up with the cost of infla-

tion, so they decide to rob the local mall.

THIEF. James Caan is a safecracker nearing retirement in Michael Mann's stylish debut.

CRACKERS. A group of bumbling burglars try to rob a pawn shop, and this movie was terrible.

JOHNNY HANDSOME. A deformed gangster gets a new face and a chance at revenge.

SUBWAY. A disillusioned romantic casually blows up a wealthy man's safe and hides out from cops and henchmen in the Paris Metro.

RAISING ARIZONA: A career criminal and a police officer fall in love, get married, and steal a baby.

HOUSE OF GAMES: In David Mamet's directorial debut, a celebrity shrink befriends a con man, but not all is as it seems.

SHORT CIRCUIT 2: When a delightful robot naively helps heist major bling, no one can stay angry for long!

BEHIND THE ZINES

Humble Beginnings

Girls, on Film was founded in 2017 when long-time friends, Stephanie McDevitt and Janene Scelza were looking to collaborate on an creative project. Janene worked on zines for many years, and she and Stephanie love 80s movies.

Grab a Copy of the Zine

The zine is published quarterly. All digital issues are available, for free, on our website at girlsonfilmzine.com. Full-color prints can be purchased at zine festival and related events, in select bookstores, and also on our website.

Guest Submissions

We also invite guest writers. If you're hopelessly devoted to 80s movies and love to write about them, we'd love to hear from you! Send a brief bio and some writing samples to info@girlsonfilmzine.com.

Social Media

Connect with us on social media? Find us on Instagram at [@girlson80sfilms](https://www.instagram.com/girlson80sfilms).

About The Girls (and Honorary Girls)

STEPHANIE MCDEVITT (CO-FOUNDER/CO-EDITOR). Stephanie's one big disappointment in life is that she wasn't old enough to fully appreciate popular clothing styles in the 1980s, as she was mostly attired in paisley sweatsuits. A full-time editor and occasional freelancer, Stephanie looks nostalgically back on 80s films such as *Ernest Goes to Camp*, *Adventures in Babysitting*, and *Can't Buy Me*

Love and wishes she could pull off the hairdos of Cindy Mancini and her friends.

JANENE SCELZA (CO-FOUNDER/CO-EDITOR).

Janene has made loads of zines over the years. She spent her teen years combing musty video stores and public libraries for all the 80s movies she could find. Janene's got plenty of favorites from the decade, but it's stylish indie films like *Desperately Seeking Susan*, *Repo Man*, and *The Terminator* that she loves best.

DR. RHONDA BAUGHMAN (CONTRIBUTING WRITER).

Rhonda, a teacher and freelance writer, raised adolescent hell in the 80s and the horror films of that era were her BFFs! She loves all of 80s pop culture, but nothing spoke to her quite like *Sorority Babes in the Slimeball Bowl-O-Rama*, *Nightmare Sisters*, and *Reform School Girls*. She had a pink laminated Video Time Video rental card at 9 years old and she never looked back. Or forward, really; she still loves her VHS and sweet, sweet VCR. And let it be known: the scrunchie never died for Rhonda: she STILL wears one proudly!

MATT SCELZA (CONTRIBUTING WRITER).

Matt loves to dissect and analyze everything. He co-writes essays for the zine with his sister, Janene. He has also logged a lot of hours at the same video stores and public library film collections with Janene in search of odd and unusual titles. However, he's got too many favorites to name.

TOM SCELZA (GUEST WRITER).

Why not write about a movie you love instead of just jawboning about it? After years of mulling over those "small" movies that came out during the '80s, I was invited to give it my all on movies I have loved forever. Movies should have more substance than car chases.



Suck the Moneyball: How to Beat the High Cost of Living

Released: July 11, 1980 | Written by: Robert Kaufman
Directed by: Robert Scheerer | Essay by: Stephanie McDevitt

How to Beat the High Cost of Living has Jane Curtin in her first leading movie role. It pairs her with her eventual *Kate & Allie* co-star Susan St. James and adds in a very young Jessica Lange. With appearances from Fred Willard, Dabney Coleman, and Garrett Morris, you'd think this was a laugh riot, but I'm here to tell you that it's not. It's not even close.

The movie is about three women who are struggling financially and are fed up with the high rates of inflation. Jane (Susan St. James) is a divorced mother of two who doesn't get enough child support from her ex-husband, and she just found out she's pregnant with her boyfriend's baby. Elaine's (Jane Curtin)

husband just left her for a younger woman and took all of their money, leaving her with a stack of unpaid bills. Louise's (Jessica Lange) husband is trying to avoid paying taxes on the profit-less antique shop she runs, so he's suing her into bankruptcy. While the ladies talk about inflation as part of their money woes, it's obvious that their problems stem from all the asshole men in their lives.

Anyway, the local mall is having a cash give away, and to advertise the contest, they have constructed a giant snow globe in which they dumped the money that's up for grabs (the original title for this movie was *Moneyball* [1], so I will refer to this snowglobe as "moneyball"



Bankruptcy lawsuits don't
make good foreplay.

going forward). When Elaine sees it, she starts to form a plan to steal the money. Jane and Louise agree to the heist, and they figure out that if they can get underneath the moneyball, they can drill into it from the bottom and suck the cash out with a vacuum.

On the day of the heist, all three ladies run into trouble: Jane gets a flat, Elaine's garage door won't open because her power has been turned off, and Louise's husband insists on having a talk about their relationship right as she's trying to walk out the door. They all eventually make it to the mall, and the operation continues to go off the rails. The women eventually manage to get into the moneyball, but will they make it away with all of the cash?

I really like the premise of this movie, and it is relatable today. However, it's just not that good. The pacing is really slow, and it feels like an extended sitcom episode. The stakes are high for all three women, but, because the movie is so slow, the urgency that you would expect in their situations doesn't exist.

Also, the fact that their financial well being is completely wrapped up in their husbands stinks, but we have to put this movie in its historical context. Robert Kaufman originally wrote this script in the early 70s, and filming started in 1979. Women weren't allowed to have credit cards in their own name until the Equal Credit Opportunity Act passed in 1974 [2]. Furthermore, women were not able to secure a business loan without a male relative as a co-signer until 1988 when The Women's Business Ownership Act (WBOA) came into law [3]. So, Jane,



He went to Julliard for this.

Louise, and Elaine didn't have many options in terms of separating their finances from their husbands.

Given all of the circumstances, I really wish we could have seen some desperation from these characters. I think the movie would have been funnier if it was a zany, desperate attempt to steal this money, but it wasn't. It was so boring. Elaine is the only character that gets close to losing it. While Louise and Jane are attempting to steal the money, Elaine needs to distract the crowds of people in the mall. She jumps on a stage adjacent to the moneyball and starts talking about the financial strains of inflation, and as she talks she starts taking off her clothes.

When the scene started, I thought we were going to get some crazy antics from Jane Curtin. However, all she does is strip, and once she gets down to her bra and underwear, she flashes the crowd and we get a close-up shot of bare breasts (tell me that men wrote and directed this movie without telling me that men wrote and directed this movie). It was a disappointing scene and totally unnecessary nudity. Furthermore, she offers sexual favors (in pretty subtle, veiled ways) to try to get out of some of her debts. She is rejected every time she does it, but even so, it's not that funny.

Another scene that really bothered me was when Jane is talking with her boyfriend, Robert (Fred Willard), about his job situation and her pregnancy. Robert had previously said he will never get a promotion at work unless his boss retires. But, his boss won't retire until Robert



Realizing your bad career choices.

can buy him out of the business for \$25K. Jane asks him to remind her how much money he needs, and he says he needs \$250, implying that he wants her to get an abortion. Now, Jane agrees to the robbery so she can give Robert the money, and after that scene I couldn't figure out why she would still want to be with him. She never mentioned ending her pregnancy, so I can only assume she had planned on keeping the baby. I wish she had also kept the money for herself.

Lange, Curtin, and St. James did what they could with the script, but they didn't have much to work with. According to the American Film Institute (AFI) Catalog, they were not the first casting choices. Originally Carol Burnett and Glenda Jackson were set to star. Burnett dropped out, and then Jackson was going to make this movie with Jane Fonda and Shirley MacLaine. When 20th Century Fox acquired the rights to the movie, they wanted Ali MacGraw, Goldie Hawn, and Barbara Streisand to star. At one point, even Ann Margret was considered for this movie [4]. When funding at Fox fell through, American International Pictures picked up the movie and tried to get Margot Kidder, Dyan Cannon, Sally Field, and Diane Keaton, but they turned it down [5].

Once the studio finally had a cast, the movie was filmed in Eugene, OR. Originally they had planned on filming in Salem, OR. However, one major plot point involves the women escaping from the mall in a canoe, so they needed a filming location that was close to a river. So, they set production in Eugene because they could film scenes in the Valley River Center



Dollar, dollar bills, y'all!

mall, which is on the banks of the Willamette River [6]. And, that mall is still open today. So, if you're super into this movie, you can go see where the moneyball scenes were filmed.

One of my favorite stories from the filming of this movie comes from Bill Royce of the Boca Raton News. Royce reported that, while Curtin was filming an outdoor scene, some fiftyish year old man drove by, stuck his head out the window, and yelled "Jane, you ignorant slut!" [7]. For our younger readers, Jane Curtin was an original cast member on *Saturday Night Live*. She was anchor of Weekend Update in the second season, and she would do a bit with Dan Aykroyd in which he always called her an ignorant slut and she would call him a pompous ass. According to Royce, the cast and crew (including Curtin) thought the drive-by insult was very funny.

How to Beat the High Cost of Living made a profit, bringing in \$7.5 million on a \$4.8 million budget [8], so it wasn't a total bomb. However, the reviews were not good. Vincent Canby of *The New York Times* called it, "a feeble house-fly of a comedy" [9] and TV Guide called it a "poorly plotted film" [10]. I have to agree, but I also have to admit that I really wanted this movie to be good. I think, of all the films we write about, a remake of *How to Beat The High Cost of Living* could work really well today. In our strange and expensive post-pandemic existence, a movie about three women who go to extremes to provide for their families would be totally relatable. But, I doubt this movie is on anyone's radar, so a much improved remake is probably a pipe dream



You Happy? Thief

Released: March 27, 1981 | Written and directed by: Michael Mann
Essay by: Janene Scelza and Matt Scelza

At some point, in preparation for our Heist Issue, we considered discussing *The Pope of Greenwich Village*, which is about twoltalian cousins who rob a mob boss. It's basically *Mean Streets* cranked up to a sitcom level. (At least we got some laughs from Eric Roberts' over-acting). Unsurprisingly, most critics panned the movie, but the generous ones called it an "interesting character study." Sorry babes, no.

You want heists and character studies? Rob a shrink. Kidding (also, that's another movie). We highly recommend Michael Mann's neo-noir thriller, *Thief*, currently streaming on Tubi. (So is *Pope* and *Mean Streets*, for that matter). James Caan stars as Frank, a master safe cracker nearing retirement. Of course, exiting the crime biz is never easy in these kind of movies. Our hero's fate isn't dictated so much by skill as it is some sort of moral code.

Frank is very good at what he does. He keeps a low profile, lives by a code, and is, of course, a stylish guy. By all accounts, he is gangster-movie-cool, so we root for him. But, there's a hell of a lot more to Frank, and a to *Thief*, than whether he can crack one last safe full of diamonds.

One of the more unique things about *Thief* is the attention to detail. It's a movie about safe crackers, but not that *Mission Impossible* TV safe cracking bullshit, where you can crack a combination safe with a stethoscope and excellent hearing. Michael Mann is a famously meticulous director who is big on authenticity in his films. For *Thief*, Caan spent weeks in firearms training and learned how to use the heavy duty tools thieves would need to bust into well-secured vaults [1]. We even see what might go into planning that kind of a heist, like



Confessions over coffee.

reading voltage meters to detect phone lines and building custom tools.

The film opens to one heist already in progress. Frank and his men, including Jim Belushi (in his film debut), hit safes in jewelry stores twice. In these scenes, they move in well-practiced coordination like it's a factory assembly line. Sparks fly and sweat drips as they toil for what is supposed to be hours. Tangerine Dream punctuates the energy with pulsating, almost deafening synths. (Their score was nominated for Worst Movie Score at the Razzies...what the hell, awards committee?! [2]).

Not only does all this give it an air of authenticity, but it appears industrial, like a factory setting. Momentarily, Frank and his men look like blue collar Everymen rather than diamond thieves. And like the Everyman, the middle-age Frank is facing an existential crisis. He's going to be giving this stuff up soon, and reflecting back on his life, he wonders what to make of the future.

Sure, Frank comes off as gangster-movie-cool, but what does being cool get you? He quietly exists in the fringes, as Mann's characters tend to do, and this one is in a Hopper-esque Chicago. Frank's mentor and best pal, played by Willie Nelson with big Bambi eyes (or something more problematic), is behind bars with a terminal illness. Frank's wife left him after she catches him fooling around with other women.

Staring down middle age, he realizes that time is quickly running out to turn things around. There's a great scene with Caan and the classi-



Avoiding eye contact.

cally elegant Tuesday Weld, as his love interest, Jessie, where they are sitting in a diner, chatting...confessing really, because we don't get the impression that they know each other all that well. Franks shares his story. He is a long time ward of the state, first in foster care and then doing time in state prison. The movie's title suddenly takes on a double meaning: Frank may be a thief, but something was also stolen from him: time.

What happens to guys who are on the inside for 10, 20 years, maybe longer? (*Thief* was inspired by Mann's previous work on *The Jericho Mile*, about a long-term prisoner who takes up running) [3]. "The one thing I know about the people in prison who are really smart and have strong egos is that they ask themselves the most important, fundamental questions in life with an urgency that people living outside of prisons don't," Mann said [4].

Frank tells Jessie that, to survive, he had to pretend that time didn't exist, and that he couldn't give a fuck whether he lived or died. A few beats later, he hands her a collage made of old photographs and magazine clippings, something he always carries around. It's a sketch of his ideal future, and he's asking her to fill the role of wife and mother. "Look," he tells her with all his macho swagger. "I have run out of time. I have lost it, all. And so I can't work fast enough to catch up and I can't run fast enough to catch up, and the only thing that catches me up is doing my magic act."

Kudos for Michael Mann for at least giving some depth to the one substantial female character



A Kodak moment.

in the movie. Most gangster genre babes are usually resigned to standing by their men and keeping their mouths shut. (In *Pope* they even have the pleasure of sitting by their men as they stuff their faces with heaping bowls of calamari while being told not to complain about anything). Jessie knows what she might be getting into. She was married to a drug dealer and living the high life until it crashed and burned pretty hard. Does she want to give up this ordinary but perfectly predictable life now?

Also, is the white picket fence future that Frank envisions even what he really wants, or is he checking off boxes of what should be? Frank's #2, played by Jim Belushi asks him "you happy?" when Frank tells him that he's out after the next job.

That next job is working for a sly son-of-a-bitch named Lou (Robert Prosky, also in his feature film debut). Frank comes into Lou's orbit when Frank's fence, Gags (Hal Frank) gets tossed out of a window for skimming off the top. The assassination goes down during a drop, so Frank never gets paid for his diamonds. His search for the responsible party turns up Lou.

Lou is a big shot who controls most of the fences in the city. He's been asking Gags to set up a meeting with Frank, who refused, so this was his way of making it happen. Frank doesn't know Lou, but Lou knows Frank, the quality of his work, and that he and his men work alone. Of course, highly-skilled independents is poor etiquette in Lou's world. So, Lou asks Frank to come work for him, offering big scores and protection. Frank is skeptical at first, wondering



Papa Lou is unhappy with you.

why he'd even need Lou or anyone else, given the money he's made so far. Except one or two more jobs, guaranteed, is exactly what he is looking for. So, he makes a deal with the devil, to be paid in cash, and they hit the road for sunny Palm Springs.

Meanwhile, Lou offers to help Frank out when he and Jessie are turned down at the adoption agency because Frank was in prison. Things are looking up, until they aren't and you don't just get to walk away from a guy looking for absolute power. Pandora's box blows wide open. Working with Lou gets Frank on the radar of crooked cops who follow his every move and bug his house. They even haul him into the station trying to pressure him for a kick back.

Naturally, the Big Exit doesn't go as planned for Frank, because Lou is never the type of guy who's going to play fair. He has Frank pegged. "You one of those burned-out demolished wackos in the joint? You're scary, because you don't give a fuck." But, Lou really overestimates himself in that scenario. We don't want to give it all away, and Michael Mann even left a little to the imagination, too.

Thief was totally unexpected. It wasn't one we saw prior to working on this issue, but we've watched it plenty of times since. It wasn't a huge commercial hit when it was released to theaters in early 1981, but critics praised the film and 40+ years later, Michael Mann's directorial debut is widely regarded as his best film. For the fans: check out Sven Mikulec's excellent retrospective and Broey Deschanel's video on neo noir in the context of *Thief* and *Drive* (2011).



A Mistake in Every Way: Crackers

Released: February 17, 1984 | Written by: Jeffrey Fiskin
Directed by: Louis Malle | Essay by: Stephanie McDevitt

Well, there is no point in beating around the bush. *Crackers* sucks. It has a great cast (Donald Sutherland, Sean Penn, Wallace Shawn, Christine Baranski, etc.), but they can't save it. It's not funny. It's just a bad movie.

Crackers is the story of a bunch of guys trying to rob the safe at Joe Garvey's (Jack Warden) San Francisco pawn shop. It all starts one day when unemployed Weslake (Donald Sutherland) and his friend Turtle (Wallace Shawn) are hanging at Garvey's shop. As Garvey and Weslake focus on their game of checkers, in comes Ramon (Trinidad Silva) and Dillard (Sean Penn), who want to buy back the guitar Dillard previously had to sell to Garvey.

Dillard tries to give Garvey \$25 for his guitar, which is what he sold it for originally. Garvey explains that he's selling it for \$150. Dillard is pissed, but Garvey has to make a profit, right?

Garvey offers Dillard a deal. If Dillard installs an alarm system in his store, they can talk about the guitar. Ramon convinces Dillard that he needs to install the system. As they leave the store, Ramon explains that when they do the work, they can make a model of the key, which they can later use to rob the place.

Unfortunately for Ramon, Boardwalk (Larry Riley), a neighborhood pimp, overhears his plan. Boardwalk, who knows that Weslake some-



Donald Sutherland looks so bored.

times works security for the pawn shop, tells Weslake about Ramon's plan to rob the shop. Weslake realizes that with the new alarm system he could be out of the only job he has. So, instead of reporting the robbery plan to Garvey, he decides to take over and pulls Turtle, Dillard, Ramon, and Boardwalk in on his scheme. But, Weslake doesn't just want to take things from the shop. He wants to get into Garvey's safe and take all of his money.

Weslake decides to rob the store on the day Garvey goes to visit his 90-year-old mother. What follows is Weslake trying to get these guys to cooperate with his plan, all of the guys screwing up, and Garvey walking in on the guys right as they're about to blow open the safe. I have to say, all of it was boring and very unfunny.

Crackers is a remake of the 1958 Italian film *Big Deal on Madonna Street*, which was a big hit in Italy. It won a bunch of awards and even scored an Oscar nomination for Best Foreign Language Film. According to Wikipedia, it's regarded as one of the masterpieces of Italian film [1]. Well, *Crackers* was not a successful remake, and it certainly did not win any awards. Aside from lacking humor, this movie had so many issues, I'm not sure where to start.

I think my biggest problem was that there are several story lines that go nowhere and don't relate to the heist. For example, we see an immigration bust early in the movie, and then Ramon talks about being in the US illegally. We eventually meet his sister, Maria (Tasia Valenza) as she's trying to go to the market. But, Ramon



Christina Baranski was wasted in this movie.

forces her to go back home for fear she'll also get picked up by the immigration police. This storyline goes nowhere. From what I can tell, it serves as a reason for Ramon to try to marry off his sister to a creepy older guy so she can stay in the US (gross).

Then we have Maxine the meter maid (Christine Baranski). She's in a sexual relationship with Weslake, in which they role play and discuss having other sexual escapades. Ok, cool, but why? Maxine pops up a few times and has other sexual partners but none of it plays into the heist. It felt like they added Maxine's scenes just to be able to talk about sex and show Christine Baranski in various states of undress. And if that's all they wanted, why not do that through Broadway, who is a literal pimp.

Broadway comes on the scene when he tries to sell a baby stroller to Garvey in the beginning of the movie. After they decide on the price, it turns out that Broadway has a baby son who is actually in that stroller. He proceeds to carry his son around for the rest of the movie. He loves his kid, but again, he's a pimp who's sleeping in his car, calling women bitches, and trying to rob a pawn shop. Also, we don't know who the baby's mother is and given the fact that he's a pimp, I'm not sure I want to know the story of how that baby came to be.

Finally, what is the deal with Turtle? He is a homeless man who is constantly trying to find something to eat (he even eats a cat food sandwich at one point). He has very few lines, and while it's never stated that he's mental-



These bumbling criminals are not funny.

ly impaired, it sure seems like the filmmaker was leaning that way. In addition to just being a sad character who makes me sad, Wallace Shawn is totally wasted in this role. Shawn is super funny in most everything he does. Why cast him in a role where he doesn't have lines? Inconceivable!

All of those issues aside, the whole scheme to get into the pawn shop didn't make any sense. Dillard and Ramon had made a wax copy of the key that they could have used to make an actual copy of the key. That could have been the solution right there. They just make the key, walk right in, and steal what they want. Instead, Weslake confiscates the fake key and comes up with this ridiculous plan to break into the apartment above the shop. Obviously, they had to go through with the stupid plan because there would be no movie. But then why give Dillard the fake key to begin with?

In conclusion, I hated this movie. And, it looks like I'm not the only one. It was a total flop at the box office, making only \$129,268 on a \$12 million budget [2]. The reviews were great. Well, great in that they were fun for me to read, but probably not great for those involved with the movie.

Vincent Canby of *The New York Times* said that *Crackers* "simply proves that with the right material an intelligent director of demonstrated style and a cast of thoroughly accomplished comic actors can make as painfully witless a comedy as any knucklehead on the block" [3]. Canby liked Baranski's and Valenza's performances, but then he said, "In every other way,



This movie is as boring as watching a game of checkers.

the movie is a mistake" [4]. Sick burn.

In another review for *Not Coming to a Theater Near You*, Lindsay Peters says, "*Crackers* is an overflowing, underdone footnote in the history of the comedic heist film" [5]. She goes on to say, "The writer behind *Crackers* should have taken advice from Marcello Mastroianni in *Big Deal on Madonna Street*: 'stealing is a serious profession. It takes serious people, not people like you.' The best farcical heist movies recognize this...*Crackers*, in contrast, expects too little of its audience in terms of humor and too much in terms of the limited screen time given to the heist itself" [6].

Crackers is not the only remake of *Big Deal on Madonna Street*. Bob Fosse created a Broadway version of the movie called *Big Deal*, which opened in 1986. It was set in 1930s Chicago and it got five Tony nominations [7]. In 2002 another movie remake came out called *Welcome to Collinwood*. This movie starred William H. Macy, and it might not have been that great, but it got a better reception than *Crackers* [8].

Anyway, that's everything I have to say about this movie. It's not the worst movie I've written about for this zine (I think that honor goes to *Johnny Be Good* (Issue #2)), but maybe don't waste your time with it. I wish I hadn't.



Avoid the Histrionics: Johnny Handsome

Released: September 29, 1989 | Written by: Ken Friedman
Directed by: Walter Hill | Essay by: Dr. Rhonda Baughman

"You can tell it's not gonna have a happy ending when the main guy's all bumpy." Although the seasoned witch, Tara Maclay, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* [1], could foreshadow a lot on the show, her words rang loud and true for a little noir-adjacent \$20 million film produced in 1989—director Walter Hill's *Johnny Handsome*. No happy endings await any character in this film, even the innocents. A disfigured hood, John Sedley, plans the perfect heist, only to watch his best friend die, and two sociopaths make off with all the loot. When the two baddies can't kill Sedley on scene, they pay to have him killed in prison. But Sedley has other plans.

The Warriors (1979) would introduce me to Hill's directorial style, and now after rewatch-

ing *Handsome*, I'll need to see the rest of the canon. For *Handsome*, Hill skillfully and finally brought to life the original 1972 novel [2] that had been opted for film at least half a dozen times, maybe more. Hill had ignored previous inquiries at adapting the novel into film and for good reasons. He needed to first find the actor who shared his vision [3] in such a way that if they couldn't have a total hit, then they would have a piece of art [4].

Hill says, "First, I figured that Hollywood is based on melodrama anyway and, second, I thought up a way to present the story in a way that resisted histrionics. More importantly, I found an actor who could play Johnny and not make it risible. Someone who understood



Mr. Handsome.

the pitfalls of the thing. The main thing is that motion pictures have conditioned us to expect psychological realism. This is a drama in a different category. It's about moral choices ... I knew I was on very thin ice. If you let any histrionics in, it will fall apart. You have to trust the drama of the whole rather than an individual scene. And that's antithetical to most actors. They want to know, 'Where's my big moment? When do I get to cry and scream?' Mickey understood that." [5]

Actor Mickey Rourke understands a lot of things, I bet [6], including the type of range and restraint needed to inhabit a role like that of crook, con, and vengeance-seeker John Sedley (aka John Mitchell). Rourke understood Hill's ideas and the level of commitment needed to make Sedley dangerous, yet likable. He knew how to make us root for him even knowing all the odds were stacked against him, creating details for credibility like the speech impediment while disfigured and downplaying his natural physical attractiveness until necessary.

Rourke turns an ordinary heist and revenge film into performance art. I believe Rourke's performance from beginning to end: from the moment we're introduced to Sedley, hideously deformed and marred from a gene abnormality yet artfully planning a robbery alongside his only friend (Scott Wilson), through his time in prison under the care of a doctor (Forest Whitaker) who wants to give him a new face and a new chance at the straight life. I believe Rourke's stoicism in the face of detective Lt. Drones (Morgan Freeman) who confidently declares Sedley might have others duped,



Unrecognizable, even to himself.

but not him [7]. Drones knows who Johnny is and where he is going, which is why the end of *Johnny Handsome* stings—because Drones is an arrogant prick who is also right. No one is delivered at the film's denouement, no one achieves redemption in any way. As the viewer, I am made aware repeatedly, literally told what is to come, but I just don't want to believe it.

That's a pattern of mine: I spent much of 1997 frequenting local video stores, now long gone like Roadrunner Video and VideoTime Video [8], which carried more difficult-to-find films of Mickey Rourke [9] at the time [10], looking to find any botched performance on Rourke's part. But even in some of the turkeys, Rourke delivers. For this essay, I felt it also necessary to comb the Internet to refresh my memory and see if I missed anything. I had a nice time though stumbling across pieces I had read years before, and eventually unearthing new (to me) treasures such as some interesting, older blogs [11] until I finally gave in and read the original novel for *Handsome*.

Godey's novel was a fast read for me, the prose just how I prefer my noir—sparse and minimalist, making me wonder now how Hill's vision could have played out since he originally wanted to shoot in black and white. All of the other elements are there: femme fatale and vicious crime, moody, gloomy, shadowy shots and settings, and of course, fatalism. From page 179: "The bank robbery was only a way station; there was more to come later. Thievery is God's message to him." To noir characters, a life of crime is like fate, pre-ordained and inescapable. From page 188: "The smell of cordite was heavy



Eyes as crazy as Judge Doom.

in the air." In noir, there must be guns.

For me, the novel's only stumbling blocks concerned its unwieldy division, structured into three sections, and a heavy focus on plot alone, while the film is more leveled, in chronological order and able to bring to life otherwise forgettable hoods on the page. Ellen Barkin almost steals the entire show. She's a beautiful beast on screen, and her career performances are almost as flawless as Rourke's. Lance Henriksen's performance would have been breathtaking, too, but he's given too little to do.

Hill's film is visceral and works well because the heist gone hellishly haywire kicks us in the teeth right from the outset and it's some nasty business; there's nothing smooth, suave, or silly about it [12]—two brutal sociopaths who have no redeeming qualities are in for the blood as much as they're in for the score. Once Johnny is caught, he refuses to turn in those who turned on him. Here's where the film slows down a bit, telling us it's not an action film at all, but a tragedy as we get to know John Sedley, both in and out of prison.

Once we see Johnny seeing, for the first time, his new face in the mirror, with tears in his eyes, for just a moment, there's a glimmer of hope that Johnny will embrace his new face and his shot at a new life, complete with new name. Rourke understood Hill's desire of no "histrionics" and walks the tightrope of hero and villain, impeccably, with emotions quietly simmering under the surface, leading more astute viewers to wonder just how much of Rourke's performance was performance and how



You know how this will end, don'tcha?

much was Rourke himself, how much merging of reality and illusion?

Speaking of art and real life merging, as with my other essay for this issue, there's an elephant in the room that needs addressed, and this elephant is tired and doesn't really give a damn anymore. Once upon a time Mickey Rourke was so physically beautiful that sometimes his face could distract from his overall performance; Rourke was also a boxer, and after some injuries in the ring, the flawless physical beauty now gone, he underwent multiple reconstructive surgeries and some additional corrective plastic surgeries, rendering him almost unrecognizable. His face is still distracting from his performances but in the opposite direction. The media was (and still is) just as mean as some of the characters in Hill's films, commenting on Rourke's physical appearance, pointing out he had become *Johnny Handsome*, but in reverse [13].

Lifelong fans of Rourke were validated after the turn of the century. Playing Marv in *Sin City* (2005), Randy Robinson in *The Wrestler* (2008), and Nate Poole in *Passion Play* (2010) proved he still had the presence, charisma, and acting chops to carry major roles into the new decade. I think Rourke's career speaks for itself and he has nothing left to prove. That's the lesson, too, that *Handsome's* John Sedley failed to understand, as well—even though he didn't have to prove nothin' to no one, he made the decision: setting out to settle an impossible score, leaving us to wonder if the end he found wasn't the end he sought all along [14].



POLICE & THIEVES: SUBWAY

Released: November 6, 1985 | Written by: Luc Besson, Pierre Jolivet, Alain Le Henry, Marc Perrier, and Sophie Schmit
Directed by: Luc Besson | Essay by: Janene and Matt Scelza

We couldn't believe our eyes. Luc Besson's 1985 French caper comedy, *Subway*, survived into the modern era, and there it was, in all its undubbed glory, on Tubi! To be fair, we didn't realize how popular this movie was in its native France. *Subway* was the third most popular French film in 1985 behind *Trois Hommes et un Couffin* (the original *Three Men and a Baby*) and *Les Spécialistes* (also about safecrackers). Anyways, it's yet another little gem we were able to revisit thanks to Tubi. (Never change, pretty please!). The streaming service is proving to be like the modern version of good old video stores of the past (no, not Blockbuster), in terms of the breadth of its collection, al-

though the inventory, of course, has a much shorter shelf-life.

Speaking of good old video stores, *Subway* takes us back. Not to the mid-80s so much because we were mere tykes for much of the decade. No, this one takes us back to the late 90s and early 2000s and the many Friday nights we spent browsing the shelves at Edgewater Video in Orlando (Winter Park, more specifically).

Edgewater Video was like the cool kid of video stores where the movie nerd college kids worked. The hefty movie collection was orga-



Free bird.

nized into siloed interests labeled with handwritten signs by specific actors and directors, staff picks, subgenres, region, and more. It was here that we discovered modern foreign language films (part of a seeming Golden Age of Indie, or at least one of them).

Previously, we only had access to very dated and sometimes very dull (ugh...*I Am Cuba!*) movies at the public library. Meanwhile, cool kid Edgewater Video was like, *Pssst!! Hey kids. Get a load of this!* We were introduced to Guy Ritchie's crime follies, Audrey Tatou's adorable whimsy, EDM-inspired fare like *Run Lola Run*, wacky fantasies like *City of the Lost Children* (also on Tubi), and much more. We struck gold: those movies were gorgeous and fun and best of all, totally different. Plus, can you believe you could rent them for like, a buck a piece? And for a full seven days, too! Excuse us while we weep a bit.

Subway pre-dated all of those movies by a good 15 years or so, but Luc Besson's third feature, a sort of vaporwave caper comedy, was no strange bedfellow to the bunch. The box art certainly fit the aesthetic: Christopher Lambert in a bleached punky 'do and tux illuminated by a bar of blue neon light like a Jedi or something. (Rumor has it that Sting was originally considered for the part of Fred, but he was (maybe thankfully) too busy to commit).

Aesthetic is key for *Subway* because this was *cinéma du look*, a style described as "more of a feast for the eyes than food for the soul. It was inspired by TV commercials, music videos and fashion photography, as well as Francis Ford



Inspired by Lichtenstein?

Coppola's *One From the Heart* and *Rumble Fish* [1]. It was a lot different than the French New Wave's dialogue-heavy, low budget films [2].

The "look," coined by French film critic Raphaël Bassan and typified by not only Besson's films, but also those by Jean-Jacques Beineix and Leos Carax, shared a common thread: disaffected, romantic youth [3]. Where *Thief* (discussed earlier in this issue) opened with precision and intensity as a 40-something safecracker and his henchmen toiled for hours to bust into a safe to steal some diamonds, *Subway* begins with an irreverent homage to *The French Connection* as Lambert's character, Fred, is chased through the streets of Paris by a car full of trenchcoat gangsters. He is totally unphased about the whole thing, even when the gangsters hit his car. Fred is too preoccupied with the search for a cassette tape, which he eventually finds. However, his small victory is comically short-lived as the tape craps out in the player and Fred finally crashes into the subway entrance.

Fred flees into the subway, a fugitive of both Team Trenchcoat Gangsters and a bumbling police force. The Paris Metro provides the setting for much of the rest of the film, which lends to some of those really fun, stylish sequences that typified the Look, especially the chase sequences.

The police's motives are obvious, but the gangsters pursue Fred for some papers he stole from a safe that he blew up seemingly for kicks at a wealthy man's (Constantin Alexandrov) birthday party. (Fred finds a safe in the subway



MTV potential.

that he takes pleasure in blowing up, also). It's too gauche to care about anything but love.

The wealthy man's fashionista wife, Héléna (Isabelle Adjani), is sent on a fool's errand to collect the papers in exchange for a hefty ransom. The content of the papers don't matter, save a picture of Héléna that Fred hangs on to because it's cute. But, the ransom doesn't really matter, either, because Héléna arrives with less, a hell of a lot less, and Fred only seems to feign hurt feelings. He only keeps up the character to keep Héléna near, and it goes on like this for a while.

Meanwhile, Fred explores the depths of the subway and befriends its inhabitants. These are not dirty subway rats, but more hip, disillusioned young Parisians. We know few beyond the surface — a muscular giant who twice breaks Fred out of his handcuffs, mute Besson-movie-regular Jean Reno as a drummer, an alcoholic florist, and other stylish Lost Boys.

The most outgoing of them is a young petty thief on rollerskates who, somehow, constantly evades the police (seems like "dude on skates" is a no-brainer APB). He propositions Fred to help him steal something, but Fred isn't the least bit interested and he lets the guy really know it because he's a lover, not a fighter! Unless it means fighting some weenie subway skater who steals purses.

Of course, the problem with style over substance is that...well, there isn't much substance. The middle of the film just kind of meanders, sometimes confusingly, between



My baby's baby shot me down.

bumbling cops occasionally chasing Fred and the skater thief who, apparently, has evaded capture for months. Héléna hangs around and shares a few romantic moments with Fred. Could he be the better lover?

Fred, meanwhile, recruits the subway dwellers for a band. Arthur Simms gets a moving, full-length pop solo. At the end of the film, they regroup for a rouge stage show that has even the pearl clutching bourgeoisie excited for their Foreigner-esque stage performance. We suspect it was an attempt to score an MTV hit, and who knows? Maybe they succeeded. (Sidenote: another Besson regular, Eric Serra, composed a tasty soundtrack; tracks available on YouTube).

In a heavy-handed ending, the lovers reunite while the band repeats the chorus: "guns don't kill people / people kill people." Paying loose homage to Goddard's *Breathless* (1960), all the "romantic nonsense," we imagine the status quo calling it, was put to rest.

What a bizarre little film. It's one of those curiously strange movies that sticks with us long after that first viewing. It may be an especially strange picture for American audiences who see Luc Besson's name attached and expect something akin to his more recent hits like *The Fifth Element*...the 90s are recent!...*The Transporter*, *Taken*, etc. But, what was it that made this movie so madly popular in France? Are we too American to appreciate the nuance? Well, whatever it is, we're happy to see it resurface on a modern, and easily accessible(!) format. Assuming that's still the case when this issue goes to print, we recommend seeking it out.



It Ain't Ozzie and Harriet: Raising Arizona

Released: March 13, 1987 | Written by: Ethan Coen and Joel Coen
Directed by: Joel Coen | Essay by: Stephanie McDevitt

Raising Arizona is the second feature film from Joel and Ethan Coen (and the brothers' first appearance in *Girls, on Film*). This movie came out 3 three years after their debut feature thriller, *Blood Simple*. The Coen Brothers set out to make a completely different movie by making it funny, upbeat, and optimistic [1]. And they succeeded. Despite themes of loneliness, infertility, and criminal recidivism, *Raising Arizona* is delightful, and after the two other duds I wrote about for this issue, I am so happy to tell you about a great movie.

Raising Arizona tells the story of H.I. ("Hi") McDunnough (Nicolas Cage), a career criminal, and Ed (Holly Hunter)—short for Edwina—the

police officer who takes Hi's mugshot every time he's arrested. Hi and Ed fall in love, and Hi proposes, pledging to get on the straight and narrow. They move into a starter suburban home (a trailer in the desert) and get to work trying to start a family. Unfortunately, they soon learn that Ed can't have kids. They attempt to adopt a child, but with Hi's criminal record, the agencies reject them.

One day, they see a news story about a famous unfinished-furniture salesman, Nathan Arizona, whose wife had quintuplets with the help of IVF. Well, why should the Arizonas have so much when Hi and Ed have so little? According to a newspaper article, the Arizonas



Biology and the prejudices of others conspired to keep us childless.

had way too much on their plate. So, Hi and Ed set out to kidnap one of the Arizona babies to raise as their own. With four other babies, will they really miss this one?

This action all happens in about the first ten minutes of the movie before the opening credits. It is narrated by Hi and could have been a short film on its own. Its brilliance lies in the way that it not only gives back story and motivation for our main characters, but it also builds empathy for Hi and Ed. Yeah, Hi is a criminal who likes to rob convenience stores, but he's like a cartoon character. He has crazy hair (the Coen brothers compared his hair to Woody Woodpecker [2]), he locks himself out of his car during one robbery sequence, and he openly flirts with the cop who is taking his mug shot. He is funny, and their love story is somehow endearing, and even though they're about to kidnap a baby, I found myself squarely on their side.

Anyway, Hi kidnaps the baby ("I think I got the best one" he says), and things go off the rails after that. The night they get home with the baby, two of Hi's former cell mates, Gale (John Goodman) and Evelle Snoats (William Forsythe) break out of prison and show up on Hi and Ed's doorstep. Hi assures Ed that they're only going to stay for a day or two. Then, Hi's boss, Glen (Sam McMurray), his wife, Dot (Frances McDormand), and their gaggle of kids come for a cookout. Dot peppers Ed with parenting advice while her kids tear up Ed and Hi's house. Hi asks Glen how he finds excitement in his life while being tied down to a wife and kids. Glen suggests they swap wives, but Hi gets



Mighty fine cereal flakes Mrs. McDonough.

offended and breaks Glen's nose.

The next day, Gale and Evelle are getting ready to rob a bank. While they're trying to convince Hi to go with them, Glen comes by, with a big splint on his nose, to tell Hi that he knows that Hi and Ed kidnapped the Arizona baby. Gale and Evelle overhear this conversation, and, knowing that Nathan Arizona has offered a \$25K reward for the return of his kid, they tie Hi to a chair and take the baby to claim the reward.

Meanwhile, a bounty hunter named Leonard Smalls (Randall "Tex" Cobb) approaches Nathan Arizona and offers to find the baby for \$50k. Nathan says he's not willing to pay more than the \$25K in his original reward. Smalls says he's still going to find the baby, and tells Nathan that if he doesn't pay up, he will sell the baby on the black market. With everybody on the hunt for this baby, things get crazy, cars explode, and John Goodman does a lot of screaming.

The Cohen brothers started writing this script with the idea of Hi. Joel Cohen said, "We weren't much interested in the problem of sterility and about the wish to have a baby, but in the idea of a character who has this land of desire and who, at the same time, feels outside the law. This conflict enabled us to develop the story line, which is his aspiration for a stable family life, and at the same time his taste for unusual experiences" [3].

Nicolas Cage was perfect as Hi. I'm not a huge Cage fan, especially after learning how



My friends call him Lenny, only I ain't got no friends.

he treated Kathleen Turner during filming for *Peggy Sue Got Married* (see GOF issue 13). But he really nails his performance, and so does his hair. As Ethan Coen said, "The more difficulties his character got in, the bigger the wave in his hair got. There was a strange connection between the character and his hair" [4]. Apparently, Kevin Costner auditioned for this part three times [5]. I don't think he could have pulled it off the way Cage did.

Casting the part of Ed proved to be easier since the Coen brothers wrote the part for Holly Hunter. In fact, writing a part for Hunter was the original idea for *Arizona*. When discussing the early ideas for this movie, Ethan Coen said, "We didn't know what, but we wanted it to be something funny that had a very quick rhythm. We also wanted to use Holly Hunter, who has been a friend of ours for a long time. So it really wasn't the story that was the origin of the project, but Holly Hunter, her personality and, by extension, the character we had conceived for her to play" [6].

Hunter really shines in this role. I love watching Ed unravel as the desire to have a baby completely compromises her reputation as a police officer. When they go to take the baby, Hi originally comes back empty handed because the babies started crying and making noise. Ed pushes him to go back and get a baby, and watching Hunter sob over how much she loves that baby is one of the best parts of the movie. Her over-the-top crying is so ridiculous, but it works so well in the zany universe of *Arizona*.

Well, critics weren't fans of this zany



Now, y'all without sin can cast the first stone.

universe. Pauline Kael of *The New Yorker* said, "*Raising Arizona* is no big deal, but it has a rambunctious charm. The sunsets look marvelously ultra-vivid; the paint doesn't seem to be dry—it's like opening day at a miniature-golf course" [7]. Roger Ebert hated it and claimed it to be "all over the map" [8]. He said, "It cannot decide if it is about real people, or comic exaggerations. It moves so uneasily from one level of reality to another that finally we're just baffled" [9]. One of Ebert's biggest gripes was with the way the characters spoke. They all have nondescript, country accents, but that makes this movie funnier, especially when the dialogue is so funny (my picture captions are direct quotes from the movie).

Well, what do the critics really know? More recent reviews of this movie are all positive, and it currently sits at #37 of AFI's 100 Years...100 Laughs list the top 100 comedies in American cinema [10]. It also did well at the box office, making \$29 million on a \$5 million budget [11]. In 2000, Ethan Coen said *Raising Arizona* was "the last movie [we] made that made any significant amount of money" [12].

Speaking of money, it looks like someone was trying to raise money to make a documentary about the five babies that portrayed the *Arizona* quint. That project is called *Arizona Raised*, and the website to donate is still active. I'm not going to give them any money, but I will suggest that you watch *Raising Arizona*. It is by far the best movie I watched for this issue. It is delightful and funny, and I promise you won't regret it.



Aren't You a Caution? House of Games

Released: October 11, 1987 | Written by: David Mamet and Jonathan Katz | Directed by: David Mamet | Essay by: Tom Scelza

"Aren't you a caution?" Joe Mantegna, as Mike Mancuso, drops this line to Lindsay Crouse, who seems about as tough as one of the Lollipop Kids. Crouse is Dr. Margaret Ford, a celebrity shrink, something common in the 80s. She's is so odd, even her looks, and totally without warmth, but she also has an air of professional cool and caution.

Have you ever been taken? Someone you really don't know draws you in, and the next thing you know is you don't know, but what you had is gone. Lots of people fall for the "con," giving up something of value, thinking they are going to get something: an investment, a prize, even something mundane like a roof. The "confidence" is to make you believe if you

give up something, something good is going to happen. The con usually is fast. You forget to be rational, and before you know it, a thing of value (your money, your trust, a gold cigarette lighter) is blown away like a puff of smoke. You are left feeling foolish and angry at yourself for falling for the con. Afraid to admit it, but with caution you realize you are a victim, but too ashamed to forgive yourself.

In his perfect suit, the macho confidence man, and in her fitted pantsuit, the celebrity shrink, imply an interesting power couple as major players in *House of Games*. The 1987 thriller, directed by David Mamet, co-written with Joseph Katz, and inspired by Mamet's own experiences with con artists, may be a little con



Wanna see a trick?

job itself. The film opens with a series of brief, disconnected scenes that set the tone. First, a mysterious woman in a long red dress, who we are not sure is a fan or a stalker, approaches Dr. Ford to sign a copy of her book, *Driven*, a best seller about compulsive behavior. The good doctor signs it and blows her off.

Next, Dr. Ford visits a young female patient in a hospital following a traumatic assault. The good doctor is totally engrossed in a theoretical conversation about experience and analyzing the woman's dream like she's solving a puzzle.

Following that, Dr. Ford arrives late to a lunch date with her mentor/friend Dr. Maria Littauer (Lilia Skala) who suggests that the respected, but unfulfilled Dr. Ford take time to enjoy her success, maybe treat herself to a gold lighter. The good doctor smiles and blows her off, too.

Finally, Dr. Ford meets with a compulsive gambler who brandishes a gun. He fears for his life because a man named Mike has threatened to kill him if he doesn't settle his \$25,000 debt. He doesn't have much faith in Margaret's ability to help him out of the predicament. "You don't help me, you just talk! This whole thing is a con game," he tells her.

She seems to take this as a challenge and decides to confront Mike at a pool hall called the House of Games to demand that he forgive the debt. It's a pretty ballsy thing to do. But, Mike is a surprisingly congenial guy, given the circumstances. The debt is a lot less than what the client claims, and he's willing to forget about it if Dr. Ford does him a favor. He's got a poker



Well lookee what we have here.

game going in the back room, but there's a situation, because it always starts with a situation that isn't going quite as expected.

His opponent George (played by actual sleight-of-hand artist Ricky Jay) reveals his "tell," but then he gets self-conscious when he notices Mike watching. Mike asks Dr. Ford to pretend to be his girlfriend and sit with him at the table. Mike will leave the room just before he makes his bet and Dr. Ford will watch George to see if he does his tell. That way, Mike will know what kind of hand George has. She plays along and gets totally sucked in, even offering to write a check to help cover Mike's big blunder, realizing at the last minute that it's all a grift.

Dr. Ford is intrigued, and so are we. The jig is up, and Mike and his small group of grifting associates have a good laugh. They happily teach her some of the antique cons secrets and lingo. Dr. Ford will tell Mike later, "you took my trust," to which he replies that this is what he does for a living.

She returns another night and Mike shows her some thrills before asking her to help him with a pigeon drop, one of the oldest grifts in the book. One person in a group of strangers finds a large sum of money lying around or left behind. They agree to split the money. Someone offers to put up money as collateral (in this case \$80,000), but it's a bait and switch and they run off with the money.

The grift goes about as bad as it can. An undercover cop is accidentally killed and Dr. Ford, Mike, and their accomplice flee. Dr. Ford is



Cue up the Steve Miller Band.

enlisted to steal a cool red convertible for their getaway, but once they are a safe distance from the scene of the crime, they realize that they forgot to bring the satchel of money. Mike panics because it was mob money. Dr. Ford agrees to cover him. Mike tells her to stay away for a while and lay low before abandoning her on the side of the road like a total nobody.

Dr. Ford always seems cool and calm, always processing but never reacting the way you expect a person might in the situations she gets involved in: theft, murder, and so forth. "Who is the mark and who is the master of the game?" asked Kent Jones in his review. "What is the real thing and what is the carefully crafted facsimile? This is always the question in Mamet. The last word of fate, the final turn in the narrative, is a moment of supreme shame for the victim" [1]. Indeed, things never seemed quite right all along. Eventually, she pieces together a lot of bullshit. "Probe. Reveal. Conceal. Parry. Thrust." These are the words of her mentor.

Dr. Ford will get her revenge, though Mike will never show any shame. She is in the end an absolute horror story. Not only does she get away with murder, she will write another successful celebrity shrink book. As Dr. Littauer tells her, "When you have done something unforgivable, you must forgive yourself." She absolves herself through self-forgiveness, of sins both past and present. In the closing scene, Dr. Ford notices a woman at the adjoining table with a gold lighter. She watches the woman put the lighter back in her bag. Asking the woman a question to distract her, she bends over and boosts the gold lighter out of



Oh how the turntables have... turned.

the woman's bag. Within eyeshot, she lights her own cigarette, blowing off both smoke, and the audience, through her newfound freedom. *House of Games* was David Mamet's directorial debut effort. The writing is excellent; terse and to the point. (The film was adapted as a stage play in 2010). The shooting is no nonsense: no artsy shots, no lingering nonsense. It's like the kind of clarity Barbara Loden tried to get in *Wanda* (1970), but technically well done. The soundtrack is 60s type jazz coming in and out, harkening to indie films of years past.

Mamet and Crouse were married at the time. [2] It is the reverse of John Cassavetes' and Gena Rowlands, where her performances made up the inequities for his filmmaking skills. Here Crouse, normally warm, is awkward and opaque. She comes alive sympathetically only once, with the young woman patient whom Dr. Littauer refers to as "your murderess." Otherwise, she is the Ice Queen. Even after she sleeps with Mike, they remain physically separate. Mike twice introduces himself to her, and she never tells him her name. It is the sign of who she really is, she never even gives away her name.

Mantegna on the other hand is brittle and cutting, already fit to play Zasa for Coppola. As Mike, he is slick and scam, as he leads Dr. Ford down into the rabbit hole of grift. It has been said con men get more of a kick out of scamming the smarter marks. When asked how he took her in, his answer is, "She's an addict." While this predicts his success, it also predicts his own undoing. She is not only a superior mind, but fatally unpredictable as well.



The Right Kind of AI Fun: Short Circuit 2

Released: October 11, 1987

Written by: S.S. Wilson and Bent Maddock

Directed by: Kenneth Johnson | Essay by: Dr. Rhonda Baughman

Who doesn't love a good heist [1] film? Moreover, who doesn't love a good heist film with a cute robot leading the charge? Current heist culture is nowhere near as easy as films I love from the '80s (or '90s) had me believe, nor is AI as much fun as my beloved '80s movies had hinted. True, some of my most favorite AI were robots turned killers [2], but still, they were more intriguing than ChatGPT [3]. Before dropping out of *Short Circuit 2*, original director John Badham said, "...We were never worried about copying some other film by accident. We have no fear that anyone will recognize Johnny 5 from some other film—or anything else!" [4].

In the first *Circuit*, Johnny Five competed hard for audience attention against superstars Ally Sheedy and Steve Guttenberg; whereas in the sequel, it's Johnny Five overall who steals the show. How does Johnny Five surpass the human presence even after all these years? Teamwork possibly, like the sketch work of Eric Allard [5], the design of the legendary Syd Mead [6], as well as voice actor and puppeteer/animatronic performer Tim Blaney [7] that allows Johnny Five to remain (creeping up now on four decades) one of the most beloved and memorable robot creations committed to film, enough to bring us a sequel.



Let's make some toys, boys!

These new Johnny Five shenanigans arrived under the pretense of his friend (and co-creator) Ben Jahveri [8] (Fisher Stevens) needing Johnny's help to create more of his mini-robots [9] under a strict deadline, while Johnny wants to seek "input" in the Big Apple [10]. Ben is joined by love interest Sandy Banatoni (Cynthia Gibbs), while the film's remaining players fall under an assortment of friends who might be baddies and baddies who might become friends including: Fred Ritter (Michael McKean), Oscar Baldwin (Jack Weston), Saunders (Dee McCafferty) and Jones (David Hemblen) [11].

Essentially, Ben and Fred base their toy robot operations in an old warehouse, but thieves Saunders and Jones have already grown attached to the same spot, needing it to tunnel into a bank vault housing diamonds! Mischief of heightened proportions, think a *Scooby Doo* meets *Home Alone* mashup, is dispensed both in and outside the warehouse, including, but not limited to traps, break-ins, gang activity, kidnappings, polyphonic renditions, police presence, and faux friends—but an old-fashioned diamond heist remains the big plot point buried in the nutty mix.

As much as this girl covets a gem, she loves the heist behind the jewels more. However, my real interests lie in Johnny Five's childlike antics. That is to say, *Circuit 2's* overall execution is uneven at best and all over the place in terms of tone [12]; the slapstick cons gone awry and human relationships lagged for me. Only when Johnny Five was onscreen did my interest pique and I can list the four moments that saved the film for me, in descending order:



Johnny Five's introduction to NYC.

4. The absolutely bizarre street gang (and their slogan) introduction: "Los Locos kick your ass. Los Locos kick your face. Los Locos kick your balls into outer space." An awkward moment to be sure, and perhaps that was the point. Perhaps it was just goofy comedy to show the gang is not to be "too-feared" so Johnny Five can also prove himself an easy mark as he (unknowingly) helps steal car stereos. He's so excited to be spray-painted for his initiation into Los Locos that one can't help but think "Awww, this gang isn't too evil!" Well played.

3. Johnny's attempts to dress himself and blend in with humanity leads to his arrest mugshot and eventual housing in a stolen goods warehouse where he suffers an existential crisis (couple all of this with his self-aware "No disassemble!" plea in the first film and his cruel beat down in the second film's third act, and I feel vaguely traumatized [13]).

2. Johnny's heartbreak at realizing most people are trying to cash-in on him in some way, all coming to a head with his naiveté as being exploited to help execute the big diamond heist. He experiences and attempts to transmute some of that internal rage that many of us have held for the last two decades of modern life [14]. But before he can do that, Michael McKean must commit to patching, rigging, and slapdash repairing an ailing, beaten Johnny Five with Radio Shack parts and then ride him around town like a retro-futuristic Segway [15]. And to be honest, Michael McKean looks like he's having fun. (But really, who wouldn't?)



The classic 80s villain boat chase.

1. The iconic chase scene at the end, set to Bonnie Tyler's "Holding Out for a Hero" still makes me happy. I hear the song on the radio and Johnny Five is my memory's front and center. An industrial punked-out Johnny Five cruising along a waterway, trying to catch the bad guy stands out and wins as the film's reason to watch till the end [16].

Despite my unwavering love for those four moments, there's still an elephant in the room to be addressed [17]. No, not the Johnny Five "drinking game" [18] but rather a controversy the internet has covered already at length, so I won't rehash the rehashing, but yes, Aziz Ansari writes a powerful essay [19] about why Fisher Stevens' role is problematic (in a nutshell, Stevens is a white man portraying an Indian character). Stevens has indicated he regrets his role, even that it "haunts" him [20]. As we wander into the 4th decade of the movie itself, I appreciate the honest insight of both Stevens and Ansari. As a film critic and onlooker, it's an '80s film about a cute robot and "actors playing roles." Unfortunately, I never went much further in thought than that and perhaps that's something I should personally address, off the internet and in a private journal [21]. While the '80s did not exist in a vacuum, the era's cultural arena wasn't as widely criticized as it is today.

Moreover, people create personas on screen and on paper just as they do in real life, and sometimes "stereotyping" is used to make a point. I doubt this means the intent was malicious, or intentionally racist, but it might just mean that anyone creating the persona/character never gave the matter more thought



Stay golden, Number Five.

than "who do we know that could do this role?" Additionally, many of us have it drilled in our heads to "not see skin color" so we're unlearning that, too—to actively unlearn and then learn some new, more inclusive ways of thinking, both onscreen and off.

Unfortunately, another pachyderm remains: the fact that Johnny Five was originally created as a military weapon, so he could kill if he wanted to—but instead preferring to roll his way into our hearts and relentlessly seek "input" to understand and share his newfound soul. So, this robot creation "could" kill but has decided not to despite the repeated violations of his overall inquisitive and gentle nature. Yeah, I'm going to say there's some lessons of "do better" here as well, in heavy thoughts like ceasing war-mongering for profit, and the more accessible ideas of forgiveness, redirecting attention, and reframing thoughts that we could address [22].

Although adorably corny, and unlike my other essay for this heist issue, almost everyone in *Short Circuit 2* finds their happy ending. Even the bad guys are treated with more dignity than deserved. Most importantly, as the camera pans to Ben reciting the words to become a US Citizen, we see Johnny Five doing the same, in essence, recognized as the first robotic citizen. After years of a pandemic, I am all for the weirdly hopeful ending of reporters asking Johnny Five how he feels and he jubilantly jumps into the air, before the camera freeze frames, shouting, "I feel alive!" because this is the kind of AI fun future I was prepared for, and still look forward to, that I feel still could be ours, somewhere just beyond our own egos.

Endnotes

Suck the Moneyball: How to Beat the High Cost of Living

[1] "AFI Catalog of Feature Films The First 100 Years 1893-1993." (AFI Catalog) <https://tinyurl.com/2b79r3bk>

[2] "History of Women and Credit Cards: 1970s to Present." (Forbes Advisor, 2023) <https://tinyurl.com/4ywbthku>

[3] "Women's Business Ownership Act Changed History for Women Entrepreneurs." (Washington Retail Association, 2022) <https://tinyurl.com/3282hf95>.

[4] "AFI Catalog of Feature Films The First 100 Years 1893-1993." (AFI Catalog) <https://tinyurl.com/2b79r3bk>

[5] "How to Beat the High Cost of Living." (Wikipedia) <https://tinyurl.com/535zc4nv>

[6] Ibid.

[7] "Skatetown Premier a Real Bomb." (Boca Raton News., 1979) <https://tinyurl.com/4xhx2e6r>

[8] "How to Beat the High Cost of Living." (Wikipedia) <https://tinyurl.com/535zc4nv>

[9] "High Cost of Living." (The New York Times, 1980) <https://tinyurl.com/bdds57y7>

[10] TV Guide. <https://tinyurl.com/mr8fuv4v>

You Happy? Thief

[1] "'Thief' at 40: How Michael Mann's Cinema Debut Stole the World's Attention" (Cinephilia & Beyond, 2021) <https://tinyurl.com/ys64dr2u>

[2] "Breaking In: On the 40th Anniversary of Tangerine Dream's Thief Score" (RogerEbert.com, 2021) <https://tinyurl.com/4fnmarbd>

[3] "'Thief' at 40: How Michael Mann's Cinema Debut Stole the World's Attention" (Cinephilia & Beyond, 2021) <https://tinyurl.com/ys64dr2u>; and [VIDEO] "Why Neo-Noir is Important (Brooey Deschanel), <https://tinyurl.com/4wdnp2s3>

A Mistake in Every Way: Crackers

[1] "Big Deal on Madonna Street." (Wikipedia) <https://tinyurl.com/tpbw5635>

[2] "Crackers (1984 Film)" (Wikipedia) <https://tinyurl.com/23jvac48>

[3] "Film: Malle's Crackers With Donald Sutherland." (The New York Times, 1984) <https://tinyurl.com/yffpdz3r>

[4] Ibid.

[5] "Crackers." (Not Coming to a Theater Near You, 2010) <https://tinyurl.com/ywynryv4>

[6] Ibid.

[7] "Crackers (1984 Film)" (Wikipedia) <https://tinyurl.com/23jvac48>

[8] "Welcome to Collinwood" (Wikipedia) <https://tinyurl.com/ysuapmuw>

Avoid the Histrionics: Johnny Handsome

[1] Season 5, episode 14 "Crush"

[2] John Godey's The Three Worlds of Johnny Handsome

[3] Megastars like Richard Gere and Al Pacino had been attached at one point.

[4] "Johnny Handsome" (Wikipedia) <https://tinyurl.com/mwmbvcft>

[5] Ibid.

[6] I totally do not have plans to haunt LA hangouts Rourke's known to frequent so I can "accidentally" bump into him and offer him a drink to apologize for being such a klutz. I have no plans for this level of meet cute. That would be absurd.

[7] I'd have been one of those suckers that would have been duped --- rooting for the bad guy turned good about to turn bad again - just look at my dating history.

[8] Even a mom and pop video store in the Southgate Shopping Plaza in Canton South that saw a mystery of monumental synchronous proportions occur: my high school beau and I had our bikes stolen, but b/c of this - we saved his father's life. So, you see - there are many reasons people miss video stores- it's not all nostalgia.

[9] Fade to Black (1980); Diner (1982); Rumble Fish (1983); The Pope of Greenwich Village (1984); 9 ½ Weeks (1986); A Prayer for the Dying (1987); Barfly (1987); and Homeboy (1988)

[10] I would do the same for Billy Zane - scouring for films like Lake Consequence (1993); Head Above Water (1996); Orlando (1992); and Betrayal of the Dove (1993). He does not have as flawless of a performance history as Rourke (or Barkin or Henriksen); although some of his characters are just not as meticulously crafted and realized.

[11] <https://tinyurl.com/3f2tsfw2>

[12] No Point Break (1991) feels for example.

[13] I do need to be clear here, I still find Rourke incredibly attractive. I always will - it's his talent, not his face. This has no bearing on anything except to point out that I stopped listening to the meandering and mean gossip of the media years ago. Of course he's not perfect, no one is - but if the media is not yammering out about his face, they squawk about his quirks or his relationships that ended years ago. It's boring and predictable. What I would not give to have a chance to interview the man for real.

[14] <https://tinyurl.com/mrxuhzbz> Rourke's interview with Barbara Walters - if you can bypass the judgmental voiceover for ratings, and make it to a bit before the 26:00 mark, you can see assess for yourself how much of Rourke went into the choices of John Sedley.

Police and Thieves: Subway

[1] "What is Cinema Du Look? (Definition and Examples)" (Indie Film Hustle, 2021), <https://tinyurl.com/bddynz87>

[2] "Cinéma du Look" (Library of Congress) <https://tinyurl.com/yjnc5hhc>

[3] Ibid.

It Ain't Ozzie and Harriet: Raising Arizona

[1] "Raising Arizona." (Wikipedia) <https://tinyurl.com/y2d2kecb>

[2] "Interview with Joel and Ethan Coen." Translation by R. Barton Palmer. (Positif, 1987) <https://tinyurl.com/354j3ebr>

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] "10 Law-Abiding Facts About Raising Arizona." (Mental Floss, 2016) <https://tinyurl.com/5n78hyxn>

[6] "Interview with Joel and Ethan Coen." Translation by R. Barton Palmer. (Positif, 1987) <https://tinyurl.com/354j3ebr>

[7] "Manypeeplia Upsidownia." (The New Yorker, 1987) <https://tinyurl.com/36nfm2w>

[8] "Raising Arizona." (The Chicago Sun Times, 1987) <https://tinyurl.com/bdzhdhuh>

[9] Ibid.

[10] "Raising Arizona." (Wikipedia) <https://tinyurl.com/y2d2kecb>

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

Aren't You a Caution? House of Games

[1] "House of Games: On Your Mark" (Criterion, 2007)

<https://tinyurl.com/ybmtv8r8>

[2] David Mamet and Lindsay Crouse are the parents of Girls actress, Zosia Mamet.

The Right Kind of AI Fun: Short Circuit 2

[1] Even comedian Dane Cook knew this, as discussed on his Retaliation (2005) album.

[2] Chopping Mall (1986) and Deadly Friend (1986)

[3] Re: of the last 10-15 years of attempts , I loved the short Blinky (2012) <https://tinyurl.com/hn95me58>; moreover, I thought BayMax of Big Hero 6 (2014) and Chappie (2015) were notable entries, with an A+ reserved for tearjerker Robot and Frank (2012), but still NONE of the robots were as bewitching as Johnny Five.

[4] <https://tinyurl.com/4jntja39> BUT – we now know, courtesy of <https://tinyurl.com/urm77cda> – Johnny Five’s chassis was recycled for the robot in Wes Craven’s Deadly Friend (1986).

[5] <https://tinyurl.com/2nv8c3m8>

[6] <https://tinyurl.com/2mmrje6h>

[7] <https://tinyurl.com/36mj756e> and <https://tinyurl.com/yextk89f> AND -- with the Circuit era pre-CGI, get a load of the NUMEROUS crew within MULTIPLE departments needed to operate, maintain, and execute scenes and stunts: <https://tinyurl.com/54th7zzk>

[8] The last name appeared as “Jabituya” in the first film.

[9] In the opening sequence, a loveable mini-Number Five, is rolling through a mall: seeing this in real life could have EASILY revitalized the mall shopping experience for me.

[10] Sheedy was deemed too expensive to bring back on board and Guttenberg wouldn’t commit to the sequel without a script, although he’s mentioned in interviews he regrets not taking on the role once more.

[11] All are stars in their own right: McKean’s career is so long we need a flowchart and a PowerPoint presentation, but I first knew him as Lenny in

Laverne & Shirley (1976–1983); Weston is easily recognizable in voice alone as Max Kellerman in Dirty Dancing (1987); McCafferty has a number of fun, smaller roles, but I realized he was a “thug” in the Red Shoe Diaries TV series (1992–1993) and Hemblen is Section One co-founder ‘George’ in La Femme Nikita (Canadian series 1997–2001).

[12] And I really can’t tell if this was aimed at adults, children, everyone, no one, or did someone just count on the appeal of the robot effects to lure in viewers in any way to beat the box office?

[13] Reddit sub threads prove I am not the only one traumatized!

[14] I might be projecting a bit here.

[15] How does a Segway shaped like Johnny Five not even exist for purchase?

[16] His Tarzan yell and rope swing stunt was a goofy bonus.

[17] Same as my other essay for this issue – and my subconscious having a good game of “Gotcha!”

[18] Drink every time you can catch Johnny Five making pop culture reference. I’d be three shots in and ready to lie down before I could finish the movie, having only caught The Shining, Tarzan, The Duke, and Dr. Ruth. I know there’s a ton more.

[19] <https://tinyurl.com/bdct6tkb>

[20] <https://tinyurl.com/2x4mxu6c>

[21] Internet/social media cancel culture is exhausting and I find that even the most mundane of beliefs are sometimes easy fruit for the pickins’ controversy. This film is decades old and at least we can all agree that we should try to do better in DEI overall and at least avoid stereotypes.

[23] In my multiple decades on this planet, I have not yet seen a war-free era – and I find this both depressing and pathetic. Have we learned nothing from Johnny Five’s do better/be better suggestion?

girls, on film

THE HEIST ISSUE

girlsonfilmzine.com