

Police and thieves: Ridley Scott's American Gangster

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Directed by Ridley Scott, written by Steven Zaillian

American Gangster, the latest film from director Ridley Scott (*Alien*, *Blade Runner*, *Gladiator*), is a biography of notorious crime boss Frank Lucas (Denzel Washington). Lucas got his start as the trusted right-hand man of Bumpy Johnson (Clarence Williams III), the “Robin Hood of Harlem.”

When we first meet the pair in 1968, Bumpy takes Lucas into a discount store where he laments the lack of “pride of ownership,” “personal service” and the disappearance of the “middle man” in sales. Lucas admires Bumpy, but believes he’s old-fashioned. As the real Frank Lucas told Mark Jacobson, the author of “The Return of Superfly,” the article on which the film is partly based, “Bumpy believed in that share-the-wealth. I was a different sonofabitch. I wanted all the money for myself.”

Following Bumpy’s sudden death, Lucas sets out to build his own criminal empire. Seeking to undercut the traditional Mafia’s hold on the drug trade, he goes to Southeast Asia at the height of the Vietnam War in a successful attempt to acquire the purest heroin right from the source. Visiting poppy fields controlled by “Chiang Kai-shek’s defeated [anti-Communist Chinese Nationalist] army,” Lucas negotiates an exclusive deal. Using connections with figures in the military, Lucas will smuggle the drugs into the United States on military planes hidden in the coffins of military personnel killed in action. Soon he will have a monopoly on the drug trade in New York, selling a better product at a lower price than his competitors.

The gangsters in Scott’s film, unlike many others, are all business. Whether they are in the Mafia or Lucas’s “Country Boys” gang, they aren’t obsessed with family or honor, but money. A meeting between Lucas and Mafia boss Dominic Cattano (Armand Assante), for example, could just as easily have been a confab of two major corporate CEOs on a vacation retreat. While their servants release clay targets, the two men stand on the terrace of a large mansion and shoot with rifles perched on their leather-patched shoulders before getting down to business.

Indeed, the parallels Scott and screenwriter Steven Zaillian—best known for *Schindler’s List*—draw between the criminals and the world of big business throughout their film are unmistakable. When his rival Nicky Barnes (Cuba Gooding Jr.) begins selling low-quality heroin under the same name—Blue Magic—that Lucas has been using, Lucas confronts the dealer over this “trademark infringement.” The argument that follows is about quality control and the reputation—the guarantee—behind Lucas’s brand name which he can’t afford to have sullied. Brutality underpins it all.

Denzel Washington, for his part, turns in a fine performance as Frank Lucas. His Lucas attempts to project a veneer of sophistication and professionalism—even culture—but at bottom is an uneducated hustler and vindictive predator. He’s a thoroughgoing opportunist who doesn’t hesitate long before cooperating with police when they finally apprehend him. In the end he’s a pathetic and isolated man. It’s clear from Washington’s performance and the film’s overall attitude that this is not a figure to admire or about whom one should hold illusions, and this sets *American Gangster* apart from a good many organized crime stories in recent films and television shows.

Along with Frank Lucas’s story, there is another in the film, that of Richie Roberts (Russell Crowe), an honest police detective in an otherwise rotten organization. Such is the corruption in Roberts’s police department that he and his partner become outcasts when they turn in a million dollars in cash found in the trunk of a car. No one can afford to have a straight cop like that around, and when Roberts later in the film calls for back-up no one will come to his aid.

Roberts’s integrity eventually lands him in the leadership position of a narcotics task force that answers to federal authorities and works to bring down the drug trade in Harlem. With the addition of a few unlikely but trustworthy characters, Roberts begins an investigation that devastates the criminal underworld, a world that includes much of the police force.

American Gangster is particularly strong in its exposure of the ways corruption and official public relations get in the

way of Roberts's investigation. When the detective leaves a drug dealer with large numbers of traceable bills hoping to be led back to the latter's source, the money is instead confiscated by crooked Detective Trupo (Josh Brolin) in a shakedown and Roberts has to convince Trupo to return it to him.

In another scene, while recounting to his fellow team members his difficulties in getting cooperation from federal agencies, Roberts tells them, "I don't think they want this to stop. Judges, lawyers, cops, politicians. They stop bringing dope into this country, about a hundred thousand people are gonna be out of a job."

In his attempt to sort out the elaborate web of organized crime, Roberts will use large bulletin boards on which he places the pictures of known gangsters. This later provides the film with one of its most memorable and effective images as Roberts begins uncovering police corruption and uses the same bulletin boards, now, however, covered with pictures of crooked cops.

When Roberts and his cohorts finally discover Lucas's methods of concealing drugs in military coffins and go to search the contents of a military plane, Roberts is forced away from the scene. His superiors come down on him because of the public relations scandal it could cause; this would make the military look like it's in the drug business, he's told, and such a revelation would place the federal narcotics task force in serious jeopardy.

In spite of these obstacles, Roberts is ultimately able to catch up with Lucas, and the gangster who was once so powerful and so feared that he could shoot a man in the middle of a busy street with impunity, quickly begins to cooperate with Roberts in bringing down all the crooked cops who have taken money from him over the years.

While *American Gangster* avoids some important questions, it is nevertheless a fascinating look at the corruption of the NYPD's Special Investigations Unit in the 1970s and its complicity in the exploits of organized crime. According to the reporting of Mark Jacobson, "by 1977, 52 out of 70 officers who'd worked in the unit were either in jail or under indictment."

The aforementioned Trupo, apparently a composite of several real-life figures, perhaps best personifies the corrupt character of the department. We watch him as he goes to an evidence room and appropriates for himself large sums of money confiscated from drug dealers. Later he stops Lucas on the latter's wedding day and asks him if he has "paid his bills," i.e. offered a sufficient amount in bribes. If the gangsters charge "protection" fees from local storeowners, the police also have a way of extracting similar fees from the gangsters. Lucas is, in Trupo's words, "a cash cow."

However, while Scott's film is clear that both Lucas's

gang and the corrupt police are predatory figures, a plague on the citizens of Harlem, we don't learn a great deal about the Harlem on which these thuggish characters prey. There are hardly more than a few glimpses here and there.

One sequence in which Bumpy and Frank Lucas hand out free turkeys from the back of a truck during the holidays makes obvious there is no shortage of people desperate to receive the birds. But such features of life, if they are present at all, are shown almost in passing and largely remain in the background.

Similarly, we are told that thousands have died as a result of Lucas's drug business, but there is no insight offered as to why drug addiction was so prevalent at the time. There is no treatment, for example, of the extreme poverty, the dreadful housing situation in which rents were disproportionately high compared to other parts of the city and conditions far worse, the shameful quality of the schools, the essentially moribund state of the economy in the area with small businesses abandoned everywhere, and so on. Can a growth in crime and drug addiction possibly be understood without taking such things into consideration?

Without providing a proper context for the events in the film, *American Gangster* risks portraying Harlem as yet another one of those unsalvageable working-class hells so common in movies at present in which nearly everyone is either a gangster, a dirty cop, or a drug addict and in all cases thoroughly reprehensible.

One can't help but feel that even in some of the better films made today, probing historical and social questions is a matter largely left to costume design and set decoration and not a pressing concern of the writers and directors.

Whatever its limitations, however, *American Gangster* retains a certain amount of power in its forthright exposure of the relationship between police and organized crime and in the generally excellent performances of its cast.



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