THREE BAD MEN

BRAND | COOK | DURYEA

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I once saw the French mime Marcel Marceau on stage doing his "David and Goliath" routine. David running after Goliath with his slingshot, disappearing behind a dressing screen, emerging as Goliath: a big, knuckle-dragging muscleman, mad as hell, pounding the stage floor. He disappears behind the wall and comes out as David: thin, small, lithe, smart, grinning, and dancing while he's running.

Now imagine a nondescript, second-fiddle bad guy, without whom film noir couldn't exist, disappearing behind the wall, emerging as Neville Brand: a brutish, brainless oaf, dangerous and dumb. He disappears, and Elisha Cook emerges: he whom the good fairies had forgotten at birth when it comes to looks and brains, only half a man by the standards of the mean streets he inhabits. He walks behind the wall, and out comes Dan Duryea: a slender, smart, sarcastic dandy, bent on getting what's due him.

The mime's "progression" in our scenario might seem like a Darwinian variant on Frankenstein's monster, an attempt via "mad scientific trial-and-error" to create the most viable, efficient villain. The history of film noir is both more compressed and more mutable than such a construct allows for, however—especially when we realize that these three bad men existed in that shadow world in tandem. How they differ and how they overlap is thus equally important.

Their wickedness is something universal, taken for granted—a constant within the human sphere. They are ontological; they just *are*. And there is a curious existential power, a kind of completeness that these Three Bad Men embody together, which society can tolerate only on-screen. We never see these three together in a single noir. On the other hand, John Ford, operating just a couple of decades earlier, could still combine such types in his *3 Bad Men* (1926) because they were not, in fact, actual embodiments of evil (they were "good" bad men, whereas our three are bad indeed, and irredeemably so). There are no grinning "death's head" characters to be found in Ford's film, as is the case with Neville Brand's Chester in *D.O.A.* (1950)--the pictorial embodiment of pure malevolence. (One function of noir, then, might be seen as capturing evil in its most tangible dimension so that the audience can look at such danger as if we were watching feline predators pacing up and down their cages in the zoo. Evil is thus locked into these characters and cannot escape into real life).

Our three bad men are each a specific manifestation of evil, but they do share some traits. They depend on a boss. Cook is nothing without somebody using (mostly abusing) him and pushing him around. As for Brand, he is dependent but realizes his value as an instrument of violent deployment, although he doesn't have the intelligence to come up with a scheme himself. Duryea is more independent, even an operator on his own, but is easily impressed by "bigger" gangsters.

Let's examine—in tandem—the traits and impulses that define them, separate them…and trap them in a world (film noir) where entrapment is all.

Brutality

Neville Brand has a broad chest, thick neck, powerful arms like a steel hammer. His brutal stupidity is emphasized by an exaggerated overbite. In *D.O.A.* (1950), his Chester, a psychopathic killer barely controlled by his boss, the gangster Majak (Luther Adler), is a *tour de force* of animal menace. Fortunately for him, unfortunately for others, Chester has found a job with Majak in which he can give

Neville Brand incites a *Riot in Cell Block 11* (1954)

free rein to his violent, sociopathic impulses. He punches out his fellow gunman in the film, just so he can get at his victim. Brand's subsequent incarnations of this character are no less brutal, they are merely less operatically frenzied.

The man stomped upon

Elisha Cook Jr.: hapless, the one who is the most misused, demeaned. Cook is nearly a character out of Dostoevsky's fictional world, a man eternally stomped upon, humiliated by people and events, by his bosses, by his friends, by his wife. Cook is undignified; he grovels before his superiors, the eternal underling under everybody's foot. He is a stubborn, deceitful cuss but one who can never succeed. The camera frequently catches his wide-eyed look of surprise as he is slapped around, insulted, maimed, and even stabbed and shot—quintessentially, perhaps, in *Born to Kill* (1947), where he's killed by the friend whose murderous impulses he is trying to hold at bay. Cook is the original fall guy, a man to be kicked around.

The semi-independent contractor

Dan Duryea is smart, witty, a hoodlum of a higher rank who usually operates semi-autonomously. No one will ever get the better of him and his cynicism. The audience believes that perhaps his sarcasm is hiding a better, more sensitive man. Even his slim, wiry build underscores his ironic, jocular manner, his very way of existence, which so easily can turn deadly serious and violent. One can sense that he has just enough soul to imagine a different kind of life, particularly in *Scarlet Street* (1945), *Too Late for Tears* (1949), even in *Criss Cross* (1949) and, more poignant yet, in *The Burglar* (1957): the sense that he could have been somebody better.

Personality swamped by pure impulse

With Neville Brand, there is no backstory, no history about him. No tale, no anything. He's just there as he is. Menacing, unnerving, deadly, a man without fear. Tightly wound, barely controlled.

Brand could squeeze up his face into a sneer, utter a snarl and look vicious as nobody else could, repeating: "Real cute, ain't you, Bigelow. Just *real* cute," while slamming his gun violently into Edmond O'Brien's gut in *D.O.A.* His physical actions previewed the grace with which Lee Marvin would move when committing violent acts—in fact, Brand is totally akin to Marvin in this respect, only "uglier" and meaner-looking, an earlier personification of the deliberative sadism that Marvin would come to embody (One must note that Marvin exuded more charm than Brand ever did. If Brand was a tiger in his violent movements, Marvin was a smaller cat, more lithe: perhaps a panther).

This publicity shot captures the smooth-talking, dapper Dan Duryea of so many noirs

Elisha Cook Jr. eyes Ella Raines' shapely legs in the classic noir *Phantom Lady*

A *schlemiel* in search of an identity

Elisha Cook Jr. was nearly always in secondary roles leading memorably and virtually down one single path: his destruction. He is the quintessential noir *schlemiel*, never honest, never upright (particularly when he makes claims to that effect: he is always living outside the law or very willing to break it). He is invariably waylaid, humiliated, receiving blow after blow to his self-esteem; to watch him is to watch a man who asks to be hurt. Cook acted in minor but very important character roles in many noir classics such as *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *Phantom Lady* (1944), *Born to Kill* (1947), *The Killing* (1956), and *Plunder Road* (1957).

It's clear that, of the three types of bad men, Cook's characters have the most problematic relationship with identity. He's the closest to the murky, faceless sidemen who proliferate in noir, but his self-consciousness, his anxiety, and his profound doubt about his own adequacy make him stick out like a sore thumb.

Shape-shifter

Dan Duryea plays Heidt in Fritz Lang's *The Woman in the Window* (1944), a murdered millionaire's bodyguard who blackmails Joan Bennett and Edward G. Robinson in their platonic liaison in the film. The wise-cracking and snide manner that Duryea always employed for this type of no-goodnik is displayed in its full flower here. Duryea was to seamlessly embody such smiling, intelligent, scheming arch-louses thereafter, creating slight oscillations in the mode—an outright villain with enough of a touch of humanity that you have some sympathy for him. He's sadistic but only to the degree of getting what he wants and making sure his threat is taken seriously.

He is the cynical, sardonic, slender man, usually with a double-breasted suit; in many of his roles, he seems primarily engaged in pushing ladies around. Often we sense, however, that he doesn't get any actual pleasure from the violence he inflicts, that it's only a means to an end. At the end of Fritz Lang's *Scarlet Street* (1945), when he's falsely accused of murdering his girlfriend Kitty March (Joan Bennett) and is led screaming to the electric chair—suddenly the antithesis of the slick, amoral hoodlum he's been throughout the film—one genuinely has sympathy for him. Strangely likeable, his sneering crooks are just a touch vulnerable, a paradox he repeats in both *Too Late for Tears* and *Criss Cross*. We see this paradox create a full reversal in *The Burglar*, where his jewel thief is the hero and the predatory cop is the villain.

The need for violence

Brand's killers have a tunnel vision in terms of their purpose and seem to have no other existence than that of a killer, and want nothing else even when they are "murdering for money." But, then again, with the characters that Brand plays, they might do it for nothing, only for the pleasure of it.

In *The Turning Point* (1952), his character is single-minded, even at the risk of his life, by climbing up into the rafters above the boxing ring so he can take aim with his rifle at his victim, the cynical but still likeable star reporter Jerry McKibben (William Holden), who sits in the stands watching the fight. Brand, playing a killer named Red from Detroit hired specifically for this job, is (unlike Chester) careful not to kill innocent bystanders, waiting for his shot at McKibben, frustrated every time someone in the audience stands up. Here he goes berserk only *after* firing his gun.

The man who wants to break loose—and die

In Robert Siodmak's *Phantom Lady* (1944), Cook is Cliff the drummer boy, playing in the music hall as Ella Raines is tracking down the perjuring witnesses in her quest to save her boss' neck. His famous half-intoxicated drumming in both the theater and later in the jam session ends up just like things usually concluded for him: in his own death.

By what means Cliff has gotten so high we never learn; it could be the prospect of sex with Ms. Raines; it might be drugs—possibly both. We get an abundant sense of some very sleazy habits from just a few brief shots of Cook in action as he makes eyes at the ladies in the front rows, hitting the cymbals and tom-toms, trying to make eye contact with them, smiling salaciously. His fascination with and desire to participate in a sordid, seedy underworld is his displaced variation of the death-wish.

A brutish Neville Brand looks for a gut reaction from Edmond O'Brien in *D.O.A.*

The wise guy who wallows in his comeuppance

However indelible Duryea is, the more we see of him, the less he's able to sustain his oily, snake-like charm. His characters are meant to lose their edge, to squander their advantage, to outsmart themselves. As he ages, he finds a new way to disappear into a more mundane world: with *Chicago Calling* (1952) he begins to take on the personality of a professional sufferer, essentially taking the end-point in his earlier roles (the point where the wise-guy gets his comeuppance) and extending it across the entire performance. Rarely sustainable across the full length of a motion picture, these roles were more and more frequently found in work for television, where the compressed story length made such a character arc more plausible.

Biographical ironies

In real life, Brand was a war hero. While Duryea went to Cornell and had extensive stage training, Brand was an autodidact who found his way into acting after WWII in army training films. The Ivy Leaguer loved to garden; the barrel-chested Brand was a compulsive reader, owning a library of more than 30,000 books.

Cook was something of a recluse, not nearly as needy as his diminutive characters often were on-screen. He had a more detached, cynical attitude about Hollywood than the other two, and preferred to stay away from it as much as possible. For much of the forties, he lived alone in the Sierra Nevada, where he clearly favored fishing to acting. "When he was wanted in Hollywood," John Huston recalled, "they sent word up to his mountain cabin by courier. He would come down, do a picture, and then withdraw again to his retreat."

Duryea was a mild-mannered family man who had concocted his persona out of the need to transcend his physical on-screen image. He willingly divulged the details of his deception to Hedda Hopper, thus creating a niche for himself that managed to remain intact for three decades.

Revenge and self-destruction

Perhaps the most revealing connection point between the three bad men is located in their varying engagement with revenge as a method of self-destruction.

For Brand, it comes in *Cry Terror* (1959), where his character, Steve, for once has something of a backstory—a pill-popping rapist/murderer who managed not to get killed during his prior exercise of indiscriminate aggression and is now an ex-con with two imprisoning urges: rage and pain. The revenge he plots, the terror and trauma that he inflicts on Inger Stevens, is displaced retribution for the collective burden of his memories: instead of the fixed gaze of desire that we see in Chester a decade earlier in *D.O.A.*, we witness in Steve a numb, dead-eyed, mumbling capitulation to impulses he no longer enjoys, knowing underneath it all that whatever debasement he is about to inflict is really directed at himself.

For Cook, his revenge comes in *The Killing* (1956), where he is, for once, allowed to go out guns a-blazing, taking down the man who cuckolded him (Vince Edwards) and has been tipped off by his faithless wife (Marie Windsor) about the racetrack heist that his gang (led by Sterling Hayden) has just pulled off. George Peatty at first seems to be another standard role for Cook, one of wheedling weakness and sexual inadequacy, but director Stanley Kubrick and screenwriter Jim Thompson (a man who knew all about suicidal revenge schemes) add a perversely satisfying twist in George's triumphant, nihilistic revenge—even allowing him the dignity to die in his own living room.

For Duryea, Slim Dundee finally drops his tough-guy sneer and allows his rage to overcome his pain as he, too, rushes toward a death that he'd already lived with like the tired crease of a suit worn too long. The final scene in *Criss Cross* is a classic of repressed cathartic emotion: as the police cars, sirens whining, rush closer and closer, Dundee turns from Steve (Burt Lancaster) and Anna (Yvonne DeCarlo), frozen forever in the pathos of their Pietà position. His gun still smoking, Slim's eyes glisten with a good 20 meanings as he stares out into the darkness, knowing that the evil he's just claimed is irreversible.

Revenge is sweet, but only if one is able to remain alive after exacting it. For these three bad men, it's not death that is swallowed up in victory, but the other way around. ■