



MORRICONE

The Untouchables

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

Perhaps the most remarkable moment in Morricone's collaboration with Brian De Palma is the panpipe air accompanying the death plunge of a Vietnamese woman in *Casualties of War* (1989). But this rousing account of the pursuit of Al Capone (Robert De Niro) by Eliot Ness (Kevin Costner) is more representative of Morricone's oeuvre after his whistleable contributions to crime classics like *The Sicilian Clan* (1969) and Sergio Leone's *Once upon a Time in America* (1984).

The scene is 1930s Chicago for De Palma's big-screen reworking of the cult ABC TV series (1959-63). But Morricone's score knows no boundaries, as it uses western and *giallo* motifs in a Prohibition setting. Moreover, it employs instrument combinations that no one else would even contemplate on items like 'The Strength of the Righteous'. In isolation, each cue is exemplary. Taken together, they are extraordinary. Yet, Morricone had to settle for a Grammy and a BAFTA, as the Oscar eluded him again.

David Parkinson, bfi.org.uk

Critics contend that he indulges in showy mannerisms to conceal a lack of content, but Brian De Palma feels that stylistic novelty is of value for its own sake. 'It's like that Orson Welles thing,' he says. 'What a toy train set you've got. You've got all these things you can do. Do you really want to go to work every day and shoot two-shots of people talking to each other? Is that directing? I could take a script out and photograph it and I can be called a director: the story's all there, they walk in the door, they sit down, then they get in the car and there's a car chase. But to me, that's not directing, it's being asleep at the switch. When you can put that camera anywhere and you can make it do anything, it's like you can put anything on that canvas. Well, why not think about it a bit?

'I don't think it should be so showy that it takes away from what's going on,' he adds. 'But you shouldn't have that awful scene that happens in every thriller where you bring the audience up to speed. Should we sit them in an office and have them drink coffee, and have her talk for five minutes? How do you make that interesting? So you figure out some way. Most stuff is just xeroxed and shown over again, and that's when it becomes very boring. Anything inventive and new is something you can't pigeonhole but you have to take that risk.'

Not that everything De Palma does is inventive or new – he's notorious for borrowing not just motifs but whole movies from other directors, most often from Hitchcock. *Sisters* (1972) reworks *Psycho* and *Rear Window*; *Obsession* (1975) takes its lead from *Vertigo* with apologies to *Rebecca*; *Psycho* is reprised in *Dressed to Kill* (1980); *Rear Window* makes a return in *Body Double* (1984). In *Raising Cain*, De Palma's allusions seem more playful and self-conscious: he refers not to the original film, but to his own previous allusion to it (a killer in drag refers back to *Dressed to Kill*'s allusion to *Psycho*; an endangered baby carriage to *The Untouchables*' allusion to *Potemkin*). Is De Palma attempting a cinematic intertextuality, a post-modernist

deconstruction of film language? Or was he just lazily plagiarising techniques that work for cheap thrills and perhaps a pretension to cinema literacy? For De Palma, neither applies – imitation of other filmmakers is a practical inevitability.

‘These are tired perceptions – that because somebody’s wearing a wig it’s *Psycho*, or *Dressed to Kill*,’ he says. ‘Hitchcock made 50 movies and explored every kind of visual grammar of suspense and action. So somewhere, if you’re working with this type of visual storytelling, you’re going to be using material Hitchcock has used before. You have somebody walking down a corridor, or going up a flight of stairs – he’s used that shot somewhere before. It’s almost impossible not to fall into his grammar, which is, of course, the best.

‘But Hitchcock only made *Psycho* once,’ De Palma concludes. ‘His career ranges over a whole bunch of other obsessions. I’ve spent a long time making movies about doubles and twins and psychological characters that are driven by good and evil.’ It’s this obsession which suggests that something deeper lurks beneath De Palma’s seeming superficiality. Even in those films most obviously conforming to the requirements of a genre – *The Untouchables* (1987) or the overwrought *Scarface* (1983) – this motif gives a meaning beyond the obvious. In *The Untouchables*, Kevin Costner’s Elliot Ness is a whitebread family man lost in the jungle of prohibition Chicago. In order to protect his bourgeois values against the demonic Al Capone, he must get in touch with his darker qualities and learn ‘the Chicago way’ of violence and treachery, in which he is tutored by the ethnic intermediary Malone (Sean Connery) – an Irishman apparently being midway between a WASP and an Italian. It’s male bonding of an intense order – Malone virtually replaces Ness’ wife – and in the end the triumphant Fed can say: ‘I have violated every law I have sworn to uphold; I have become what I beheld; and I believe I have done right.’

Peter Keough, *Sight and Sound*, December 1992

Both *The Untouchables* and *Scarface* are largely allegories about power, about America, as if De Palma had swapped the self-reflecting games of his ‘Hitchcock’ films for a different kind of self-reflection. (Not that he can leave Hitchcock alone: as witness the camera’s subjective stalking of Malone, or the quaintly reminiscent process shot of Nitti falling to his death.) Self-reflection again becomes a kind of self-reflexivity, as if De Palma were incapable of conceiving his allegory outside the context of genre, and so imagines America here as a kind of ur-genre, not just a gangster movie but a Western as well – and a Morricone-scored, occasionally Leone-styled Western at that. The result has a certain grandiloquence if little thematic interest – likewise the religious motifs and décor associated with Malone.

An extreme low-angle shot of Ness (echoing those of Capone), framed against the stained-glass dome of the courthouse at the moment when he realises who killed Malone, casts him as the child of both men. Children throughout are particularly associated with Ness, as the innocent and outsider who must be inducted into this violent game, the business of America, by his two opposed mentors. Again, it’s a motif that is orchestrated without taking on much complexity: certainly little change is registered in Kevin Costner’s bland, affable performance (one that lacks the intriguingly tense, battered-down quality of Robert Stack). If one supposes that Nitti’s death was staged

in order to justify his Hitchcockian ‘fall’, then this might be another motif simply looking for its self-justifying set-piece. Which duly arrives in the ambush at the railway station, a pastiche of *Battleship Potemkin*’s Odessa steps sequence, when Ness is confronted by a careering baby carriage on the one hand and scampering hoods on the other. The sheer ponderous elaboration of the sequence has a grandeur irrespective of its thematic point (Ness must try to save the baby even while shooting it out with the hoods). It is more operatic than the Pagliacci scene, and like De Palma’s Hitchcock lore, invokes Eisenstein without resembling him in any significant way.

Richard Combs, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, September 1987

The Untouchables

Director: Brian De Palma
Production Company: Paramount Pictures Corporation
Producer: Art Linson
Associate Producer/Unit Production Manager: Ray Hartwick
Production Co-ordinator: Shari Leibowitz
Location Manager: Eric Schwab
Production Assistants: Cyd Adams, Dan Stillman, Matthew Snyder, Jim Vatis
Research Assistants: Eve Cauley, Joan R. Johnson
Assistant Directors: Joe Napolitano, James Skotchdopole, Richard Patrick, Glen Trotiner
Casting: Lynn Stalmaster & Associates, Mali Finn, Cheryl Collins, Ellen Moses
Screenplay: David Mamet
Based on the books by: Oscar Fraley, Eliot Ness, Paul Robsky
Director of Photography: Stephen H. Burum
Camera Operators: Douglas Ryan, Frank Miller
Chapman Crane Operator: Kendall A. Reed
Optical Effects: EFX Unlimited, János Pilenyi, Associates & Ferren
Special Effects Foremen: Albert Delgado, Allen Hall
Special Effects: Charles E. Stewart
Editors: Jerry Greenberg, Bill Pankow
Associate Editor: Ray Hubley
Visual Consultant: Patrizia Von Brandenstein
Art Director: William A. Elliott
Set Designers: E.C. Chen, Steven P. Sardanis, Gil Clayton, Nicholas Laborczy
Set Decorator: Hal Gausman
Set Dresser: Kim S. Hobbs
Costume Designer: Marilyn Vance-Straker
Women’s Costume Supervisor: Winnie Brown
Men’s Costume Supervisor: Dan Lester
Women’s Costumers: Cheryl Weber, Tom Dickason
Wardrobe: Giorgio Armani
Make-Up Artist: Michael Hancock
Main And End Title Design: R/Greenberg Associates
Music Composed/Conducted/Orchestrated by: Ennio Morricone
Music Supervisor: Emile Charlap
Music Editor: Thomas Drescher
Music Recording Consultant: Mike Farrow
Sound Recording: Jim Tanenbaum
Sound Re-Recording: Dick J. Vorisek, Ken S. Polk, Trans/Audio
Supervising Sound Editor: Dan Sable
Sound Editors: Jack Fitzstephens, Abe Nejad, Michael Steinfeld, Sanford Rackow, Kevin Lee
Sound Editing: Hastings Editorial
ADR Editor: Harriet Fidlow Winn
Foley Supervision: Foley Artists
Foley Supervisor: Elisha Birnbaum
Stunt Co-ordinator: Gary Hymes
Technical Adviser: Douglas Kraner
Dolby Consultant: Mike DiCosimo

Cast

Kevin Costner (*Eliot Ness*)
Sean Connery (*Jim Malone*)
Charles Martin Smith (*Oscar Wallace*)
Andy Garcia (*George Stone*)
Robert De Niro (*Al Capone*)
Richard Bradford (*Mike*)
Jack Kehoe (*Payne*)
Brad Sullivan (*George*)
Billy Drago (*Frank Nitti*)
Patricia Clarkson (*Ness’ wife*)
Vito D’Ambrosio (*bowtie driver*)
Steven Goldstein (*Scoop*)
Peter Aylward (*Lieutenant Anderson*)
Don Harvey (*Preseuski*)
Robert Swan (*Mountie captain*)
John J. Walsh (*bartender*)
Del Close (*alderman*)
Colleen Bade (*Mrs Blackmer*)
Greg Noonan (*rangemaster*)
Sean Grennan (*cop cousin*)
Larry Viverito Sr. (*Italian waiter*)
Kevin Michael Doyle (*Williamson*)
Mike Bacarella (*overcoat hood*)
Michael P. Byrne (*Ness’ clerk*)
Kaitlin Montgomery (*Ness’ daughter*)
Aditra Kohl (*Blackmer girl*)
Charles Keller Whatson, Larry Brandenburg, Chelcie Ross, Tim Gamble (*reporters*)
Sam Smiley, Pat Billingsley (*bailiffs*)
John Bracci (*fat man*)
Jennifer Anglin (*woman in elevator*)
Eddie Minasian (*butler*)
Tony Mockus Sr (*judge*)
Will Zahrn (*defence attorney*)
Louis Lanciloti (*barber*)
Vince Viverito, Valentino Cimo, Joe Greco, Clem Caserta, Bob Martana, Joseph Scianablo, George S. Spataro (*bodyguards*)
Melody Rae (*Union Station woman*)
Robert Miranda (*gunned head*)
James Guthrie (*Pagliacci*)
Basil Reale (*hotel clerk*)

USA 1987
119 mins

Promotional partner



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