



**BIG SCREEN CLASSICS**

# Thief

On paper, Michael Mann's feature debut *Thief* is nothing groundbreaking, fit to be consigned to that vague category of 'neo-noir'. Certainly the basic materials of the plot – the hood looking for a last big score before he goes straight – are older than *High Sierra* (1941).

*Thief's* protagonist Frank (James Caan, 41 years old here) spent his youth in Joliet Prison. He's only been back on the street for a few years but he's already acquired an ex-wife, alimony payments, a car dealership and a bar – all cover for his real money-making career, that of a professional safecracker. Despite his unconventional upbringing and lifestyle, Frank wants the 'regular-type life', to quote Mann's *Heat* (1995). Frank's vision of the future is a dream of middle-class normalcy that's literally right out of glossy magazines: he carries around a collage of wife, kids and a big suburban house that he put together back in prison. In a whirlwind courtship that's urgent, over-assertive and utterly sincere, Frank recruits a diner cashier, Jessie (Tuesday Weld), to be his wife. He is ludicrously to-the-point and matter-of-fact. As Caan points out, he doesn't use one contraction while playing Frank, who says what he means once, clearly, and to be understood.

Largely shot on the streets, alleys and industrial fringes of Mann's hometown Chicago, *Thief* is grounded in authenticity and first-hand knowhow – a solid relationship to the physical facts of the world that was then the hallmark of American action films. The dialogue is criminal argot and shop talk, the characters drawn from Chicagoland lore, police blotters and direct experience. Mann conceived of the character of Frank, a man who has spent his formative years as a ward of the state and comes out desperate to make up for lost time, when he was working with Folsom Prison inmates on an earlier project, the 1979 TV movie *The Jericho Mile*. Real-life Chicago Police Department detective sergeant Chuck Adamson plays one of the plainclothes cops trying to shake Frank down for a cut of his scores, alongside John Santucci, the professional burglar who acted as the film's 'technical adviser'. Santucci later appeared in the Mann-produced television shows *Miami Vice* and the Adamson-created *Crime Story* – although he returned to his first love after the acting gigs dried up. (Another Mann discovery, Dennis Farina, appears as a thug enforcer in *Thief*, though he was still on the force during filming.)

'You couldn't grow up on a farm and play this guy,' Mann says of casting Queens-raised Caan as Frank. 'You had to have grown up in the city.' Caan cribbed his Chicago accent from Mann and learnt how to handle a .45 from a CIA trainer, while Santucci and his crew taught him how to pick locks. The

centrepiece heist, which has Frank and his guys using a thermal lance to cut through a wholesale diamond dealer's safe, was filmed at Zoetrope Studios with a documentary-like scrutiny of process, using a real safe and real tools, exactly as it would have been done on-site by a crew. 'There were no props on the film,' Mann says. 'If you picked up a lock pull, that lock pull had been on scores. Alarm bypasses were alarm bypasses, they'd taken down scores. Half the guns we used had been used.'

*Thief* is 100 per cent legit – but that's only one aspect of the movie. The successful heist is followed immediately by Frank and Jessie cavorting in the Pacific surf as a fade-in of polyphonic synths, provided by the West Berlin-based electronic group Tangerine Dream, builds to a triumphal stride. The side-by-side proximity of these two scenes shows the two poles that, in an uneasy synthesis, make up Mann's style: a hard pragmatism and a rather florid romanticism.

*Thief* was Tangerine Dream's second movie score, their first having been for William Friedkin's 1977 *Sorcerer*, a film resplendent in apocalyptic masculinity. Like Mann, Friedkin is a native of Chicago, home of Hemingway, City of Broad Shoulders – and one of the main incubators of the conception of American machismo as it was popularly defined in the 20th century. In *Thief*, Mann buys into and perpetuates that Hemingway idea of self-possessed, grimly determined, can-do manhood, with its unbreakable personal codes and sullen pride, but he complicates it as he does so.

With his documentary impulse and emphasis on capturing process, Mann was in line with the American action film's traditional orientation towards realism, but he welded this to a presentational approach more usually associated with, say, Japanese cinema. In the blue-collar actioner, overt stylisation was regarded as suspect and sissified, something to be consigned to the musical comedy. But those walls had slowly been eroding: Scorsese's enquiries into male pathology, for example, were conducted under the influence of Minnelli and Michael Powell's razzle-dazzle. Along with Japanophile Paul Schrader's *American Gigolo*, released the previous year – and of course the launch of MTV, to which *Thief's* appearance was almost exactly contemporary – Mann's film exemplified a sea change in how style was accepted in American popular culture.

In *Thief*, Mann's style appears more or less fully formed – he gravitates to neon like a moth to a flame and revels in complex, multipart crane shots (through the sign in Frank's car dealership, alongside and in front of a Des Moines-bound bus on the freeway). The basic precepts of Mann's personal philosophy are also in place. 'I am self-employed,' Frank tells the deceptively grandfatherly syndicate boss Leo (Robert Prosky) who tries to hire him. 'I am doing fine. I don't deal with egos, I am Joe the boss of my own body. So what the fuck do I have to work for you for?' From here it is a very short hop to Mann's 1992 *Last of the Mohicans* and Daniel Day-Lewis's

Leatherstocking rebuffing a British recruiter's question: 'You call yourself a patriot, and loyal subject to the crown?' 'I don't call myself subject to much at all.' All of which is in line with the credo of self-reliance that can be found in much American action filmmaking, from the works of Howard Hawks to those of Mann's fellow Chicagoan Don Siegel, in whose *Charley Varrick* (1973) the protagonist bills himself as 'The Last of the Independents'. And if the bad press surrounding the release of Mann's most recent films – 2006's *Miami Vice* and 2009's *Public Enemies* – is to be taken as any indication, this isn't just posturing. Caan describes Mann, with his 18-hour shooting days, as a 'workaholic' and 'a loon', and the number of people pulling for the director to fail with each new project suggests that he's made his share of enemies. 'There's ways of doing things that round off the corners,' says Adamson's detective after laying into Frank in an interrogation room, sounding like nothing so much as a pleading producer.

Earlier I mentioned the 'uneasy synthesis' at the centre of Mann's style, between pragmatism and romanticism (which just happen to be the two major strains of Native American philosophy). This volatile mixture isn't a weakness but rather a natural outgrowth of Mann's subject matter, a tension reflected within the films. Time and again Mann deals with the incompatibility of balancing professional dedication and affairs of the heart. Attachments of any kind, as irresistible as they may be, are also a liability, something that can be used as leverage against you. At the close of *Thief*, we see Frank destroy every asset that he has, both emotional and financial. He is enacting the formula for survival that is memorably outlined in *Heat*: 'Don't let yourself get attached to anything you are not willing to walk out on in 30 seconds flat if you feel the heat around the corner.'

Mann shares this monastic prescription for survival with his contemporary Walter Hill, but where Hill maintains a cool, stoic surface marked by quiet ruefulness, Mann's films erupt with passion and pulsating longing. The final eruption in *Thief*, however, is purely retributive, a scorched-earth settling of scores that ends with the last of those crane-shot flourishes. It's the last word on a first film that announces clearly, and to be understood: 'I am not here to play around.'

**Nick Pinkerton, *Sight & Sound*, April 2014**

## THIEF

*Directed by:* Michael Mann  
©: United Artists Corporation  
*Production Companies:* Michael Mann Company, Caan Productions  
*Executive Producer:* Michael Mann  
*Produced by:* Jerry Bruckheimer, Ronnie Caan  
*Associate Producer:* Richard Brams  
*Production Accountant:* Art Schaeffer  
*Assistant Accountants:* Larry Hand, Florian Schereck  
*Michael Mann Company/Caan Productions Accountant:* Lillian Neidenberg  
*Production Co-ordinator:* Lisbeth Wynn-Owen  
*Production Manager:* Gene Levy  
*Location Managers:* Patrick Markey, Julie Chandler, Larry Rapaport, Michael Maschio  
*Production Assistants:* Larry Farber, Anita Weiss, Ruth Rutledge, Danae Walczak, Kellie Lattanzio  
*Assistant to Michael Mann:* Theresa Curtin  
*Secretaries to Michael Mann:* Kathy Landig, Christine Vertosick  
*Assistant to the Producers:* Patti Kailing Bosworth  
*Assistant to James Caan:* Barbara Licker-Cann  
*1st Assistant Directors:* Peter Bogart, Scott Maitland  
*2nd Assistant Director:* Richard N. Graves  
*Script Supervisor:* Sandy King  
*Casting:* Vic Ramos  
*Additional Casting by:* Stanzi Stokes  
*Extra Casting by:* Lisa Clarkson, Independent Casting  
*Screenstory & Screenplay by:* Michael Mann  
*Based on the book 'The Home Invaders' by:* Frank Hohimer  
*Director of Photography:* Donald Thorin  
*Additional Photography by:* Don Cahill  
*Camera Operators:* Craig Denault, Frank Miller  
*Camera Assistants:* James Blanford, Jack Gary, Michael Genne, Alan Disler  
*Key Grip:* Danny Jordan  
*2nd Grip:* Robin Knight  
*Gaffer:* Richard Hart  
*[Gaffer's] Best Boy:* Larry Whitehead  
*Special Photographer:* Gusmano Cesaretti  
*Still Photographer:* James Zenik  
*Special Effects:* Russel Hessey  
*Editor:* Dov Hoenig  
*Assistant Film Editors:* Richard Bernstein, John Stagnitta  
*Chicago Assistant Film Editor:* Carol Eastman  
*Production Designer:* Mel Bourne  
*Art Director:* Mary Dodson  
*Assistant Art Director:* Michael Molly  
*Set Decorator:* John Dwyer  
*Lead Person:* Bart Susman  
*Property Master:* Bill MacSems  
*Assistant Property:* Wendell Powell  
*Paint Foreman:* John Lattanzio  
*Construction Co-ordinator:* Joe Acord  
*Costume Supervisor:* Jodie Tillen  
*Costumers:* Paula Cain, Dennis Fill  
*Selected Wardrobe of James Caan by:* Giorgio Armani  
*Make-up Artist:* Frank Griffin  
*Hairstyles:* Edie Panda, Kathe Swanson  
*Titles by:* Arnold Goodwin  
*Titles/Opticals:* Pacific Title  
*Timer:* Aubrey Head  
*Music by:* Tangerine Dream  
*Additional Music by:* Craig Safan  
*Music Editor:* Robert Badami  
*Sound Mixer:* David Ronne  
*Boom Operator:* John Schuyler  
*Cableman:* Dan Gianneschi  
*Re-recording Mixers:* Robert Knudson, Don MacDougall, Robert Glass, Chris Jenkins  
*Neg Cutter:* Donah Bassett

*Sound Effects Supervisor:* Robert T. Rutledge  
*Sound Effects Processing:* Craig Harris  
*Sound Effects Editors:* Scott Heckers, Jerry Stanford, David B. Cohn, Larry Carow, Samuel C. Crutcher  
*Assistant Sound Effects Editors:* Joe Ippolito, George Anderson, Craig Jaeger, Duffy Rutledge  
*Looping Editor:* Paul Huntsman  
*Technical Consultants:* John Santucci, Chuck Adamson  
*Security:* Sam Cirone  
*Special Projects:* Gavin MacFadyen  
*Transportation Co-ordinators:* Ronnie Baker, Bo Falck  
*Transportation Co-captains:* Billy Martin, James Sharp  
*Chicago Craft Service:* Wilbur Hopp  
*LA Craft Service:* Joanne Rutledge  
*Stunt Co-ordinator:* Walter Scott  
*Stuntmen:* Norman Blankenship, H.P. Evetts  
*Hand Guns:* Hong Gun Works  
*Unit Publicist:* Robert Werden

## Cast

James Caan (*Frank*)  
Tuesday Weld (*Jessie*)  
Robert Prosky (*Leo*)  
James Belushi (*Barry*)  
Tom Signorelli (*Attaglia*)  
Willie Nelson (*Okla*)  
Dennis Farina (*Carl, Leo's people*)  
Nick Nickeas (*Nick, Leo's people*)  
W.R. (Bill) Brown (*Mitch, Leo's people*)  
Norm Tobin (*Guido, Leo's people*)  
John Santucci (*Urizzi, police*)  
Gavin MacFadyen (*Boreksco, police*)  
Chuck Adamson (*Ancell, police*)  
Sam Cirone (*Martello, police*)  
Spero Anast (*Bukowski, police*)  
Walter Scott (*D. Simpson, police*)  
Sam T. Louis (*large detective in suit*)  
William LaValley (*Joseph*)  
Lora Staley (*Paula*)  
Hal Frank (*Joe Gags*)  
Del Close, Bruce Young, John Kapelos (*mechanics*)  
Mike Genovese (*bartender at Green Mill*)  
Joan Lazzarini (*Attaglia's receptionist*)  
Beverly Somerman (*secretary with cup*)  
Enrico R. Cannataro (*salesman at L & A Plating*)  
Mary Louise Wade (*deli waitress 1*)  
Donna J. Fenton (*deli waitress 2*)  
Thomas Giblin, Willie Hayes, Conrad Mocariski, Benny Turner (*members of Mighty Joe Young Band*)  
William L. Peterson (*Katz & Jammer bartender*)  
Steve Randolph (*bouncer at Katz & Jammer*)  
Nancy Santucci (*waitress at Hojo's*)  
Nathan Davis (*Grossman*)  
Thomas O. Erhart Jr (*judge*)  
Fredric Stone (*Attorney Garner*)  
Robert J. Kuper (*bailiff*)  
Joene Hanhardt (*court recorder*)  
Marge Kotlisky (*Mrs Knowles*)  
J.J. Saunders (*doctor*)  
Susan McCormick (*nurse*)  
Karen Bercovici (*Ruthie*)  
Michael Paul Chan (*waiter at Chinese restaurant*)  
Tom Howard, Richard Karie (*jewellery salesman*)  
Oscar Di Lorenzo (*customer at Green Mill*)  
Patti Ross (*Marie*)  
Margot Charlior (*Rosa*)

USA 1981©

123 mins

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