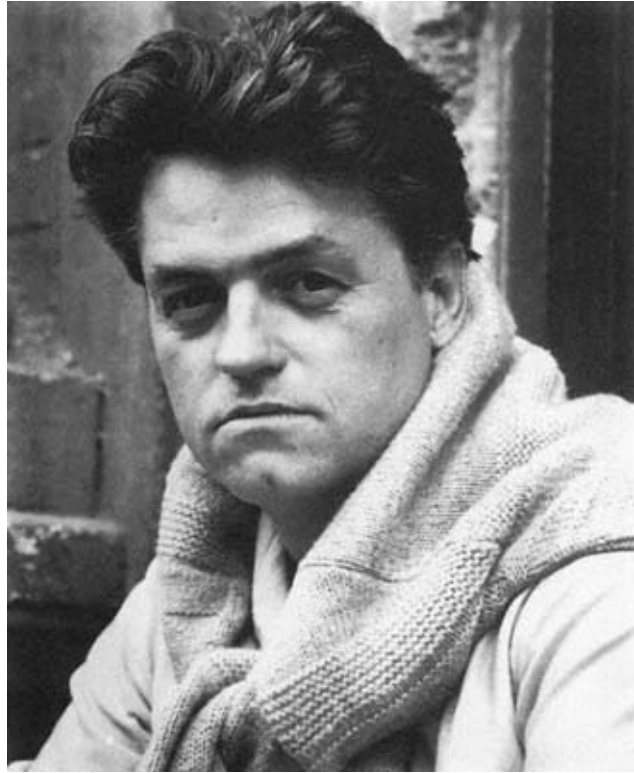


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# What Goes Around Comes Around



The Films of Jonathan Demme

Michael Bliss & Christina Banks

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*For Billy Gravening, in loving memory*

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## Acknowledgments

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## Introduction

Jonathan Demme is unique among American film directors. A graduate of what might be called the Roger Corman School of Filmmaking,<sup>1</sup> Demme quickly managed to outgrow his exploitation film background and establish himself as a director whose concern for humanistic issues and sensitivity to the newest, upbeat strains in contemporary musical along with a concurrent fascination with darker subjects mark him as an impressive cinematic force. Known almost from the beginning of his career as a director whose politics were decidedly left of center, Demme made it clear even in his earliest films that his sympathies were with the poor and disadvantaged, that he was concerned with people of color and Third World countries<sup>2</sup> (a quality that emerges most pronouncedly in his documentaries *Haiti: Dreams of Democracy* [1987] and *Cousin Bobby* [1991]), and that he was interested in the manner in which strong female characters interact with various kinds of men in an attempt to create equitable, sustained relationships.

Born in 1944 in suburban Rockville Centre on Long Island and raised there and in Miami, Demme remembers developing a love of movies at an early age. "I don't know what it is, about the family structure or what, that makes a kid get so hooked on movies. When I was twelve or thirteen I'd go alone on the bus or train to see movies all over Long Island. I'd cut out ads I had stacks of movie ads." While attracted to the usual fare of Hollywood movies, Demme also liked the art films he went to with his parents.

Demme attended the University of Florida at Gainesville; his long-time intention of becoming a veterinarian defeated by his inability to do well in science classes, Demme quit school. As he remembers: "I started writing movie reviews for the college paper, and, as you know, when you start seeing movies free there's no going back. After I dropped out, I started reviewing for a local suburban weekly."<sup>4</sup> At this

point, Demme's father, Robert Demme, who was the head publicist for Miami Beach's Fountainbleau hotel, introduced his son to producer Joseph E. Levine, whose houseboat was docked near the hotel. Levine, who was impressed with Demme's collection of advertising clips from, and reviews of, some of Levine's film releases (particularly *Zulu*), offered Demme a job as a press agent at Avco Embassy in New York. Next, Demme worked in London for a company producing commercials and as a rock correspondent for *Fusion*. He also made a short, called *Good Morning, Steve*. "A story so simple you barely noticed it: just a way of making a movie."<sup>5</sup> Eventually Demme was hired as publicist for *Von Richthofen and Brown*, a Roger Corman film being shot in Ireland.

Demme and his friend Joe Viola were then recruited by Corman to make B-movies. Demme remembers:

After I did the publicity, Corman said, "Why don't you write a biker movie for my new company?" (He was just starting up New World Pictures.) Joe Viola and I worked on it and arranged to drop off the script at the London Hilton. As we were walking away, Roger called us back; he said, "Joe, you've directed commercials; why don't you direct the movie for me? And Jonathan, you've produced commercials; why don't you produce the movie?" That became *Angels Hard as They Come* [1971].<sup>6</sup>

Demme's first Corman films, formulaic and crude, were chiefly distinguished by the profuse amount of ambition and energy Demme brought to them. A significant amount of usable film had to be shot in a relatively short amount of time; Corman's directors learned to work fast and work economically.

One of the lessons that Demme says he learned from Corman was to always have something in the frame to which the eye could be attracted—some bit of information, some object or landscape.<sup>7</sup> It was during this period that Demme also realized how important it was to have a film that constantly kept moving, with no dead spots. Demme has remained true to this credo; the result is that most of his films play extremely well. At the studio preview of *The Silence of the Lambs*, the film seemed to move very quickly. And yet, weeks later, Demme and editor Craig McKay eliminated two of the film's scenes because they felt that they weren't sufficiently advancing the action.<sup>8</sup>

In interviews, Demme stresses the collaborative nature of film-making and declines to take full credit for his films. According to writer Roy Blount, Jr., Demme "doesn't like being focused on, because

a movie involves many people working together." <sup>9</sup> Indeed, Demme is quick to bring up the contributions of those who work with him, evidence of a pronounced tendency away from egocentrism.

For the first Corman films that he directed, Demme wrote his own scripts. Demme says that he's not very good at writing,<sup>10</sup> although it may be that he's too hard on himself in this respect. The script for prison-based film like *Caged Heat* manages to entertain us and still make significant points about the imbalance of power between men and women, the way that justice is skewed in favor of the rich, and the fact that American prisons seem to exemplify forms of political and sexual bias that occur elsewhere in the society.

Including a political aspect in his films for Corman was not as risky a quality for Demme as it might at first have seemed. Corman was perfectly willing to let his directors put "messages" into their films as long as those messages didn't conflict with the films' guiding principle: to keep the action going and the flesh showing. For Demme, though, his films' political dimension began to assume increasingly greater significance. Even in *Angels Hard as They Come*, one can see Demme incorporating into the film left-wing politics and a concern with nonwhite characters, thereby hinting at an orientation toward racial inclusiveness that will become one of the director's hallmark qualities. *The Hot Box* (1972, produced by Demme and cowritten with Joe Viola) inserts a burgeoning political awareness of Latin American repression and nationalist movements on the part of the film's American nurses (who have been kidnapped by revolutionaries) into what was, for the most part, an exploitation movie, while *Black Mama, White Mama* (1972), which was coscripted by Demme, demonstrates the director's inclusive sexual attitudes by remaking *The Defiant Ones* with women in the central roles. By the time of his first solo directorial venture for Corman, *Caged Heat* (1974), Demme was exploring the manner in which traditional paternalistic attitudes translate into social and economic oppression. In his second Corman feature, *Crazy Mama* (1975), Demme makes his analysis more probing: not just content to dramatize the effects of oppression, Demme searches for its causes. *Crazy Mama*, which depicts the misadventures of a family who've lost their farm, investigates and parodies American capitalism, which supports the kind of policies in evidence in *The Hot Box* and *Caged Heat*.

This critique on a political level, which reemerges in 1980's *Melvin and Howard*, seems for a time to be sidetracked in Demme's first independent film, *Citizens Band* (1977), a film centered on white, small-town America, which demonstrates another side of

Demme's personality: his concern with interpersonal relationships as microcosmic representations of national imbalances. Thus, the inability of *Citizens Band's* characters to directly relate to one another may be read on a national level as one of the causes of the manipulative, unfeeling politics of the nation as a whole. As with *Crazy Mama*, Demme uses a national phenomenon (in this case the CB radio fad) to comment on the more extreme results of American individualism.

Demme's development in intellectual concerns is attended by a development in the director's control of the cinematic form. Indeed, right through to *Married to the Mob* (1988), we can trace in Demme's films a striking progress in technique, which may explain why *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) in some ways seems like such an enigma, a technically accomplished production that is nonetheless atavistic from a moral and political point of view. At times, the film panders to the audience's desire for thrills and revenge (a consequence that to some extent results from the lurid subject matter), something that Demme has never done before and, judging by *Philadelphia* (1993), one hopes will never do again.

With the exception of *Silence of the Lambs*, which is concerned with a particularly American aberration, serial killers, and with regard to which Demme says that he was trying to deal with many dark aspects of our culture <sup>11</sup> (an area he had begun to explore in 1986's *Something Wild* and went on to examine in *Philadelphia*), Demme's films continue his stress on investigating the psychology underlying what it means to be an American, with attendant good-natured glances at the oddities of our society. Aside from the unsuccessful Hitchcock homage *Last Embrace* (1979), in which, despite a confused attempt to look at American Judaism, Demme's concern with culture seems to mysteriously disappear, Demme repeatedly tries to provide an answer to the question of what we can do to improve ourselves as individuals and as a nation.

Demme is just as genuine in his concern for the careers of emerging directors, many of whose interests mirror the kind of upbeat attitude that he brings to his own films. When Demme refused the offer to direct *Miami Blues* (he says he didn't want to follow one gangster film *Married to the Mob* with another),<sup>12</sup> he produced the film instead, turning over direction to George Armitage, with whom he had worked during his Corman period (Armitage and his family appear as bit players toward the end of *Caged Heat*). Demme also invested in *True Love*, a first film by Nancy Savoca, who worked as an assistant production auditor on *Something Wild* and *Married to the Mob*, and acted as executive producer of Savoca's *Household Saints*. In these

actions, Demme shows that he believes in passing on his good fortune, thereby demonstrating the continuity between intention and practice toward which so many of his films' characters strive.

One of the indications of the pleasure that Demme takes in making movies is the fact that he has built up a large number of people, both actors and production staff, with whom he enjoys working and who go out of their way to work with him. While casting scripts, Demme invites character actors such as Charles Napier and Tracey Walter to pick out roles they'd like. Cinematographer Tak Fujimoto has been with Demme on most of his films since *Caged Heat*, and in the last few years production designer Kristi Zea, producers Kenneth Utt and Edward Saxon (both of whom have been drafted for small roles), and editor Craig McKay have worked with Demme on almost every film.

It is said of George Cukor that he was a "woman's director," in that Cukor had a facility for giving direction to actresses. Like Cukor, Demme elicits excellent performances from actresses (Melanie Griffith and Michelle Pfeiffer's best work has been for Demme). According to Demme, "Ever since my days working with Roger Corman, and perhaps before that, I've been a sucker for a women's picture. A film with a woman protagonist at the forefront. A woman in jeopardy. A woman on a mission. These are themes that have tremendous appeal to me as a moviegoer and also as a director."

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Demme may be said to be a female-oriented director in that his concerns seem to mirror those traditionally associated with women. Often, Demme is interested more in interpersonal relations than in action, in feelings rather than deeds, attitudes complemented by the director's focus on issues of sexual equality and justice.

Demme also distinguishes himself in his use of music. From his very first work, Demme incorporates contemporary music into his films to set moods and bolster his films' themes. However, since 1986, much of Demme's film music has been by progressive artists such as Laurie Anderson, Q Lazzarus, Chris Isaak, The Feelies, and David Byrne, with the result that the music never seems dated.

Noteworthy as well is Demme's reliance on reggae, a heavily liberationist and up-beat music, as witnessed by the Ziggy Marley piece "Time Bums" in *Married to the Mob* and Jimmy Cliff's "You Don't Have To Cry" (a song that in Demme-like fashion links political exploitation and emotional depression) in *Something Wild*, a film that not only features reggae singer "Sister" Carol East in a dramatic role (she also appears in *Married*) but which ends its vocal music selections with "Sister" Carol's rendition of "Wild Thing."

Much of the effect of Demme's films derives from their feelings. Despite his occasionally dealing with violent material, Demme is nonetheless what could be immediately described as a gentle filmmaker. His affection for people shows through in the selection of the oddball characters with which he usually populates his films (the only evidence of this quality in *Silence of the Lambs* is the brief use of actor Paul Lazar as the somewhat comical Pilcher; no such characters appear in *Philadelphia*, although Joe Miller's repeated acts of self-promotion create a bit of humor). With the exception of the director-repudiated *Last Embrace*, the studio release version of *Swing Shift*, and *Silence of the Lambs*, the last of which was meant to be quite serious, you never see a Demme film without emerging from it feeling that it was created by someone who loves life and all of its funny occurrences, and who has a tender spot for all of the sweet things that can happen between people.

Demme's films often focus on an essentially moral young man. Despite his impracticality, *Melvin and Howard*'s Melvin Dummar is a genuinely nice person, as are *Citizens Band*'s Spider and *Something Wild*'s Charlie Driggs. These men not only care passionately about doing the right thing but also agonize about how to find the best way to get along with their women.

The female protagonists in Demme's films act as the films' thematic centers, providing impetus for events, admirably asserting themselves in the face of sometimes intimidating odds, as does Angela in *Married to the Mob*. Demme's women are strong individuals who want love and commitment and are willing to facilitate the changes in their men (in whom they recognize a potential for honesty and compassion) that are necessary to create a positive and life-affirming relationship. *Citizens Band*'s Pam and *Something Wild*'s Audrey may for a while indulge in activities that don't seem to work toward the achievement of this goal, but the truth is that what these women are doing is protecting themselves from disappointment via the way that they mask their identities through assumed, tough personae (indeed, the assumption of masks, and their divestiture as a necessary prerequisite to enlightenment, is one of Demme's main themes). At the same time as they act under assumed guises, these women make it clear that they are seeking satisfaction of their need for some form of rewarding human contact.

As one might expect, the tendency of Demme's film women to tap into a life-affirming spirit is attended by some of their films' most up-beat music, which strikingly contrasts with the music that is thematically linked with the men in these films. Thus, the music associated

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with *Married to the Mob*'s Tony and Mike is grim compared with most of the music associated with Angela. Even the themes that David Byrne wrote especially for the characters demonstrate this quality: Tony's theme is dark and ominous, appropriate since he connotes death; Angela's theme, in which an organ's light strains predominate, is airy and hopeful.

If not female-inspired, the vital beat of Demme's film music is at the very least so strongly associated with life over death that you can't help but feel good when you're exposed to it (the exceptions are the music for *Last Embrace*, *Silence of the Lambs*, and *Philadelphia*, which is appropriately grim). When you combine these good feelings with the ones that Demme creates through his stories, the result is a series of films affirming life and love, a rarity in contemporary American filmmaking. Demme reinvents the loveliness of screwball comedy but without its manic aspect, combines this quality with Capra's political populism and faith in people's essential goodness and Kubrick and Scorsese's mastery of form (but without these latter directors' prominent morbid characters), and blends all of these qualities with a Third World mix of pop, reggae, and left-of-center politics that makes Demme our most vibrant and enjoyable filmmaker.

Demme's films attest to the belief that a successful romantic relationship is a microcosmic representation of humanistic democratic principles. The people in these relationships have different needs and, often, quite different backgrounds, but they manage to work out their difficulties and create a positive mode of interaction. Charlie and Audrey in *Something Wild* are a case in point. Charlie represents straight white male Western society; Audrey, at least at the film's beginning, evidences an affinity for the darker side of existence as well as more exotic cultures. Essentially, though, each character wants the same things: love and compassion. Often, Demme places the members of his couples at opposite ends of the legal spectrum, as he does with Harry and Ellie in *Last Embrace* (both of whom are nonetheless intimately involved in murder), and Mike and Angela in *Married to the Mob*. Regardless of his characters' backgrounds, though, what we see in Demme's films is a classic sexual and political dialectic at work, a wedding of two opposite realms that yields a satisfying synthesis. What Demme seems to be telling us is that entrenched cultural attitudes are rapidly dying, that the male principle requires the chastening effects of the life-affirmation traditionally associated with women, and that these two realms must reconcile in order for society to profitably continue. In *Philadelphia*, the paradigm reaches new sophistication. Although Demme is dealing with a unique kind of rela-

relationship for him, a homosexual one, he still stresses the need for love and commitment between Andy and Miguel, thereby demonstrating that his humanistic attitude is blind not only to differences in color or ethnic background (a carryover from *Black Mama, White Mama*) but is also equitably applied regardless of the character's sexual orientation.

Above all, what many of the characters in Demme's films strive for is a common language among people, a notion that in *Citizens Band* is expanded to include the need for self-knowledge as a prelude to an entire town's realization that it must communicate on both an individual and group level. In *Melvin and Howard*, Demme shows us the need for communication from the film's very beginning in the meeting between Melvin and a man claiming to be Howard Hughes; moreover, the film makes it clear that what is being investigated is the patchwork nature of American society itself. Indeed, no other filmmaker working today is as concerned with the idiosyncratic aspects of American culture as is Jonathan Demme. Demme takes pleasure in street singers, in a man who plays music with spoons, in a motorcyclist who takes his dog along with him for rides, in good-hearted, ambulance-chasing lawyers who aren't too ashamed to pursue a potential client who is on crutches all of them people who express American individualism at its unselfconscious best.

Although Demme's interests seem to emerge naturally from the material he chooses, his primary cinematic goal is to enjoy the filmmaking process and produce a movie that will challenge and please the audience. Demme's open-mindedness and comprehensive appreciation of life may help explain his willingness to include dark aspects in his predominantly light vision.

One way of focusing on this dark quality in the director's work is to draw attention to a novel that Demme wanted to make into a film but for which an acceptable script was never completed: Don DeLillo's *Libra*, which Demme planned to put into production after completing *Married to the Mob*. *Libra* is the story of Lee Harvey Oswald, with specific reference to Oswald's involvement in the assassination of John E Kennedy. While one can see in the project the characteristic Demme concern with politics, it seems likely that it was the convoluted psychology of *Libra*'s Oswald that most fascinated the director; a comparable interest is apparent in productions such as *Something Wild*, *Married to the Mob*, and *Silence of the Lambs*, all of which feature psychopathic characters.

In *Libra*, DeLillo focuses on what he elsewhere referred to as "the dark center of the assassination,"<sup>1</sup> by which he seems to mean not



just the mystery surrounding the conflicting explanations for the events in Dallas on November 22, 1963, but also the motivations of Oswald himself. DeLillo investigates and dramatizes the psychologies of men like Oswald, possible right-wing conspirator David Ferrie and in an anticipation of the structure of *Silence of the Lambs*, which pits the supposedly reasonable government world against the shadow existence of Jame Gumbfictional CIA agent Win Everett, who is involved more than a bit tangentially in the activities of the various men who converge on Dallas.

Describing Oswald in an interview, DeLillo might just as well be providing a capsule description of many of the fringe element characters in Demme's films, from *Caged Heat's* Pandora to *Crazy Mama's* Melba, from the crazed gunman in *Melvin and Howard* to *Something Wild's* Ray, *Silence of the Lambs's* Jame Gumb, and, to an extent, *Philadelphia's* Andy Beckett.

I think I have an idea of what it's like to be an outsider in this society. Oswald was clearly an outsider, although he fought against his exclusion. I had a very haunting sense of what kind of life he led and what kind of person he was. I experienced it when I saw the places where he lived in New Orleans and Dallas and in Fort Worth. I had a very clear sense of a man living on the margins of society. 15

When DeLillo goes on to refer to Oswald's "life in small rooms," which he conceives of as "the antithesis of the life that America seems to promise its citizens: the life of consumer fulfillment,"<sup>16</sup> he inadvertently provides an accurate description of Demme's concern with people who seem to feel that they can be redeemed through conspicuous consumption (a trait most prevalent in the gross acquisitiveness of *Married to the Mob's* gang members, but which is also true of Melvin Dummar), and of the sense of alienation that so many of the disappointed characters in Demme's films (Gumb most prominently) seem to evince.

Demme has always demonstrated an interest in the marginalized aspects of American culture, but he has never drawn a direct correlation between consumerism and violence. Nonetheless, DeLillo's hypothesis about the linkage between these two realms provides one way of understanding why the violent characters in films like *Something Wild* and *Married to the Mob* act the way that they do.

In a letter to his brother that is used as the headnote to *Libra*, Lee Oswald expressed the need for some form of belonging. "Happiness is

not based on oneself, it does not consist of a small home, of taking and getting. Happiness is taking part in the struggle, where there is no borderline between one's personal world, and the world in general." <sup>17</sup> Yet Oswald, like Gumb (who initially worked through the system in this case, the medical establishment in trying to achieve his ends), ultimately resorted to premeditated violence in an attempt to get what he wanted. However, it is important to note that in Demme's work, violence doesn't usually inhere in the films' central characters. These individuals—Jacqueline in *Caged Heat*, Melvin Dummar, Audrey and Charlie, Angela, *Silence of the Lambs*'s Clarice—come in contact with violence but are not themselves violent people, although, like Charlie and Clarice, they may ultimately resort to violence in order to subdue it.

The notion of an essentially nonviolent individual defeating a violent counterpart brings up the theme of the doppelgänger, a notion prevalent in Demme's work in doubles such as Jacqueline and Pandora, Mike and Tony, and Clarice and Lecter.<sup>18</sup> As we might expect, doubles in Demme's films sometimes occur not only as externally realized others but also as representatives of a certain character's alternate state of mind (for example, *Something Wild*'s Ray as Charlie's dark side). We can even see these opposing tendencies in a film as superficially placid as *Citizens Band*, in which the entire town of Unity is operating in a dualistic mode: people seem to be one thing in person but manifest different personalities when they are on the radio.

One can see a strong affinity between this type of characterization and the work of Alfred Hitchcock, for whom Demme has repeatedly expressed admiration. The tracking point-of-view shots in *Married to the Mob*, the god's eye and point-of-view shots in *Something Wild* and *Silence of the Lambs*, and Demme's appearance in his own films (as "extras," he and his wife play tourists in both *Married to the Mob* and *Silence of the Lambs*)—all of these examples are further evidence of the Hitchcock influence.

The dualistic conception of character represents more than Demme's use of conflict as a dramatic device; what we also see expressed here is the director's belief that opposing tendencies inform the nature of the universe. Even the characters themselves feel the need for a kind of balance, hence the emphasis in Demme's work on the ideas and feelings associated with the individual discovering himself or herself through the group. Alternatively, as in *Who Am I This Time?*, characters find their identities by putting on the mask of another, fictional identity, a notion that looks forward not only to Au-

drey's changes of identity in *Something Wild* but also Gumb's assumption of the female persona when he dances in his basement.<sup>19</sup>

Like Jame Gumb, many of the dangerous characters in Demme's films seem to be defined through their violence. There seems to be a vacuum at the center of these characters, and we're suspicious when they're not violent (as we are of Ray when he's pretending to be nice). At the same time, though these lonely and alienated people exhibit paradoxical tendencies because, again as with Oswald, who preferred that the "veil between him and other people ... remain intact,"<sup>20</sup> they appear to enjoy being the way they are. Like Oswald and the most prominent outsider in Demme's work, Ray, many of Demme's outlaw characters don't seem to have any identity outside of brutality.

Over time, Demme has begun to question the limits of screen violence.

I think it's important to show that violence is truly awful. The struggle I have, which I don't think is present in [*Silence of the Lambs*] but is in *Married to the Mob*, is that even with my aversion to violence, the cineaste in me can't, for example, resist having Dean Stockwell come tumbling out of his car using a two-gun style to decimate guys in a scene that I hope looks like it's out of some Raoul Walsh movie from the forties. I also understand that in a sheer pleasure movie like *Married to the Mob*, it's important to entertain the audience. There I'm trying to walk a tightrope between making it exciting and not making it fun. I think I failed there; I fell into fun.... I'm not pleased with that, although I still enjoy those scenes. I'm very schizo on the subject.<sup>21</sup>

Simultaneous with the tendency toward violence, though, are the forces in Demme's films that seem to be strongly based on the principles of comedy. According to Northrop Frye, at the beginnings of comic stories is an anticomic society that is rigid and opposed to the comic urge toward freedom, and which works against the achievement of an ending that results in what Frye labels an anastrophe, a turning up as opposed to a turning down in other words, a movement toward hope instead of despair.<sup>22</sup> This anastrophe, which sometimes involves the celebration of a public rite (often a sacred marriage), is characterized by a social cohesion that Frye posits as the very hallmark of comedy. "The theme of the comic is the integration of society, which usually takes the form of incorporating a central character into it,"<sup>23</sup> an idea that is vital to Demme's notion of the necessity for community, regardless of whether community is achieved on a purely

individual level (as in the final relationship between *Something Wild*'s Charlie and Audrey), or on the larger level of an entire town (the cohesion that occurs at the end of *Citizens Band*). Deliverance from a negative society into some form of communal bonding also fits this schema, which can be recognized in the form of the escape from prison in *Caged Heat*, the marriage that ends *Citizens Band*, the reorientation of the marriage of Kay and Jack in Demme's cut of *Swing Shift*, what looks like the imminent wedding of Mike and Angela in *Married to the Mob*, the celebratory ritualistic conferring of FBI status on *Silence of the Lambs*'s Clarice Starling in what essentially amounts to her sacred marriage to the bureau (an act that takes place after she has quelled the antisocial force represented by Gumb), and the triumph of *Philadelphia*'s Andy, who with regard to some of straight society is alienated and socially displaced.

Frye notes that the anticomic theme may also be expressed "by mood instead of (or along with) an element in the structure. Some of the comedies begin in a mood of deep melancholy,"<sup>24</sup> a situation that we can recognize in the social chaos in *Caged Heat*; Lulu's disruptive, almost irrational actions at the beginning of *Something Wild*; Angela's despair in *Married to the Mob*, *Philadelphia*'s depiction of Andy's depression after failing to secure a lawyer; as well as the chaotic, antisocial events in *Crazy Mama* and *Fighting Mad*. This sense of melancholy or despair is one over which most of Demme's characters triumph, a quality that makes *Crazy Mama*'s resolution all the more depressing, since in it we witness a capitulation to some of capitalism's more sordid demands.

According to Frye, the anticomic society "represents social reality, the obstacles to our desires that we recognize in the world around us."<sup>25</sup> In Demme's work, this society assumes the form of *Caged Heat*'s prison (which reflects the outside world's repressions); the capitalist structures in *Crazy Mama*, *Fighting Mad*, and *Melvin and Howard*; the mirror image CB radio society in *Citizens Band*; the dark, subversive otherworld of *Last Embrace*'s secret agency; the absurdist, comically dark world of the gang in *Married to the Mob*; the alienated milieu of Lecter and Gumb in *Silence of the Lambs*; and the apparently intolerant law firm in *Philadelphia*. In all of these cases, we are presented with a central figure, conceived of as a force of enlightenment (who may nevertheless, like Clarice and Andy, not be without their own darkness), who moves the film toward a satisfying resolution.

Frye notes that "the action of comedy is intensely Freudian in shape: the erotic pleasure principle explodes underneath the social anxieties sitting on top of it and blows them sky-high. But in comedy

we see a victory of the pleasure principle that Freud warns us not to look for in ordinary life."<sup>26</sup> This observation highlights the satisfying endings of the most successful Demme films. Nevertheless, before this resolution is reached, a situation of conflict must first ensue, which often takes the form of an identity crisis. Frye likens this "period of confusion and sexual license"<sup>27</sup> (a phrase that immediately calls to mind the dissembling and dalliance of Charlie and Audrey early in *Something Wild*) to the "wood of no names that Alice passed through on her journey from pawn to queen,"<sup>28</sup> an interesting comparison that calls to mind the wood in which all of the major characters of *Citizens Band* wander looking for Floyd, who ultimately comes to represent the misplaced identity of the town of Unity, which, despite its name, has lost its sense of the communal.<sup>29</sup>

For some characters in Demme's films, though, there is no deliverance from contrariety and conflict. These characters (as with most characters at the beginning of a comedy) are similar to those whom Frye describes as "tyrannized over by some trait ... that makes [the character] repeat a certain line of conduct mechanically"<sup>30</sup> a description reminiscent of the loops of obsessive behavior in which Ray, Gumb, and the extended family in *Crazy Mama* find themselves, and from which they often are not capable of being delivered outside of the character's death.

Demme's work unites two essential literary techniques: the use of the alienated character or situation as a motivator of action, and the use of violence that is resolved in comic fashion. The director not only incorporates both of these strains into virtually all of his films, but also allows for the kinds of fictive conclusions involving renewal and hope that exemplify the true mythos of comedy.

Demme's films repeatedly exemplify a statement that occurs in both *Something Wild* and *Married to the Mob*: "what goes around comes around."<sup>31</sup> Characters' actions determine what subsequently happens to them, if not in a causal then certainly in a karmic way. There is a structural analogue to this belief; it can be referred to as the Demme ellipsis. Many of Demme's films, for example *Crazy Mama* (which starts in, and returns to, Jerusalem, Arkansas) and *Melvin and Howard* (which begins and ends with Melvin's drive in the desert), finish where they began. In *Something Wild*, this structure is used to its greatest effect. Not only does the film begin and end at the cafe; what we also see is horror being found at the periphery of Charlie and Audrey's journey and being brought back home to the suburbs. The repeated invocation of this pattern hints at an interaction between what happens in the physical and moral realms, suggesting that for

Demme the universe is in balance, and that individuals who upset that balance will eventually be equitably dealt with. The hope for the rest of us is that if we act in a moral wayif, in the words of *Married to the Mob's* Angela, we "live a good life, a life we can be proud of"we will somehow be rewarded. In the face of the often chaotic actions that Demme's films depict, this innocent, trusting belief in justice characterizes the films as paradigms of faith on which we can base our lives.

1

## Canned Heat

Demme's first directorial effort, *Caged Heat* (1974),<sup>1</sup> has to be approached with a number of facts in mind. We should recall that at the time of the film's production, Demme was working for Roger Corman, and that the assignments that Corman was giving to writers and directors like Demme were meant to be turned into films that very likely would play as part of a low-rental double feature package (the film itself cost only \$180,000). Moreover, many of these films were intended for exhibition at drive-ins. Consequently, the films had to be fast moving, full of action, and redolent with a fair amount of either sexual suggestiveness or outright nudity. As director Jonathan Kaplan, who also worked for Corman, observed in a statement that could serve as a comment on many Demme/Corman films,

There was a male sexual fantasy to be exploited, comedic subplot, action/violence, and a slightly-to-the-left-of-center subplot. Those were the four elements that were required in the nurses' pictures. And then frontal nudity from the waist up and total nudity from behind and no pubic hair and get the title of the picture somewhere into the film and go to work. And that was essentially it.<sup>2</sup>

In their apprentice films for Corman, *Angels Hard as They Come* (which Demme says is very loosely based on *Rashomon*) and *The Hot Box*, cowriter Joe Viola and Demme gave the audience what it wanted. In *Angels*, the use of motorcycle gangs who for the teenage and drive-in audience were associated with fast action, excessive use of drugs, and exaggerated sexual appetites proved to be a successful draw.<sup>3</sup> In *The Hot Box*, the nurses repeatedly either bathe in the nude or remove their blouses, all the time discussing left-wing politics and the rights of the proletariat. Especially in this film, Viola and Demme tried to stretch the boundaries of the exploitation genre by using a

plot involving social consciousness and political sensitivity, concerns that have stayed with Demme to this day.

*Caged Heat* was the first film in which Demme was on his own, doing both the writing and directing. Demme's self-admitted difficulty in writing dialogue<sup>4</sup> might have been a drawback in a more demanding format, but here, in a somewhat formulaic women's prison picture, Demme is aided by the fact that the genre brings with it so many ideas concerning oppression and sexual exploitation that he has a firm base on which to structure his film. Previous women's prison films such as *Caged* had already made audiences familiar with the type of film in which women, placed in disadvantageous circumstances (mostly through the machinations of men, many of whom had framed them), banded together against repressive prison forces. Indeed, *Caged* featured as a central character an innocent young woman very similar to *Caged Heat's* Jacqueline Wilson (Erica Gavin). Like Eleanor Parker's Marie Wilson in *Caged*, *Caged Heat's* Wilson is involved with a man found guilty of a crime in which the woman was only an accessory. Also like Marie, Jacqueline Wilson matures fairly quickly in prison in order to survive. The difference between the two films, though, is instructive. In *Caged*, the central character's education in crime as a means of survival is depicted as a sign of the failure of the penal system to prevent criminal indoctrination. In *Caged Heat*, Wilson's education in criminal behavior occurs along with her discovery that women are an oppressed class imprisoned by biased sexual attitudes.

What we have in the prison world of *Caged Heat* is nothing less than a microcosmic representation of the prejudices of the society on the outside. The irony in the film is that given the inmates' responsibility toward one another (this despite their occasional protests to the contrary), these women are actually superior to the members of the larger society who, it is implied, are for the most part ruthless and amoral. In rebelling against the prison system, then, *Caged Heat's* inmates, who come to represent all women, rise above the corruptions of the male-dominated society that has had the audacity to judge them.

The prison situation is a desperate one in which death is always on the periphery of events. *Caged Heat's* pre-title sequence shows us an undercover policeman approaching a house where a drug bust is about to take place. Three people quickly run out of the house before the policeman can enter it. The first one, played by Peter Fonda, gets away; the second is shot. Jacqueline Wilson, who in slowing down to help her wounded friend demonstrates her concern for others (a quality to which Demme will repeatedly draw attention in the film), is apprehended. Judged guilty of being an accessory to the "bodily assault



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