

Tough Guys in Film and Life

by Michael Curtis



Tough guys in films are strong, determined, heroic, charming, coolly confident in the face of danger, even when they are dealing with difficult or violent situations. Their victories are inevitable. In Hollywood, a number of actors have made careers, or started their careers, by portraying toughness. Some are legitimately tough in real life, war veterans, real life heroes, martial arts masters: Mickey Rourke, Mark Wahlberg, Sean Bean. But most are tough only on screen.

Sylvester Stallone does not resemble Rambo or even Rocky Balboa, Marlon Brando who became Vito Corleone is not a Mafia chief, and Humphrey Bogart was neither Philip Marlowe nor Rick in *Casablanca*.

Imaginary tough guys on the screen are not limited to the U.S. France has had its share, including Jean Gabin, Alain Delon, and Jean-Paul Belmondo. On September 6, 2021, the French pseudo- tough guy, the third of the cool rebels of French cinema, Jean-Paul Belmondo, born in 1933, died in Paris aged 88. After a short career as a boxer, Belmondo became an actor, at first in early performances comparable to and intentionally imitative of Bogart. He was universally admired. "France," said President Emmanuel Macron "has lost a national treasure."

With a broken, boxer's nose, craggy battered features, chain smoker, roguish smile, and cynical character, Belmondo was characterized by virility, physicality, energy, gifted at acrobatics, not traditional good looks. He was not the familiar handsome leading movie star, but from his role in the film *Breathless* which he made at age 26, he was identified and imitated by Frenchmen as alienated, cool, amoral,

unsentimental, aloof from social concerns. He was the face of the change in French cinema style of film making , the New Wave.

Breathless is an important movie in the film canon. Directed by Jean-Luc Godard, it was the first film to pay tribute to Bogie who died on January 14, 1957, exemplified by Belmondo who adopted some of the gestures and mannerisms of Bogie in the films that made him famous. Belmondo, as a small-time criminal is a would-be tough guy, practices facial expressions in mirrors, wears a fedora, chain smokes, is always cool. The U.S. film critic Andrew Sarris in an article in 1966 noted the Bogart-Belmondo connection: "The surface arrogance of both Bogart and Belmondo conceals a tough-guy gallantry underneath."

Breathless is also important as a crucial film in the new French style of film making, the New Wave that emerged in the late 1950s. and lasted for less than a decade. Film became the outcome of literature, critical analysis leading to real change. The new movement was created by a group of film critics who wrote articles in the seminal journal *Cahiers du Cinema*. They argued for the rejection of traditional filmmaking, and the introduction of experimentation, techniques and approaches, visual style and narrative, cool detachment, that are now standard devices for film makers. The New Wave , associated with Francois Truffaut, Eric Rohmer, Claude Chabrol as well as Godard, was an experimental personal style in characters and tone, above all, it gave directors full control of their work. The style is notable for jump cuts, instead of continuity editing, continuous movement or dialogue without matching them, for discontinuous editing , long tracking shots, references to other films, rapid changes of scene, non-linear dialogue, and a narrative ambiguity which has no clear answers.

The New Wave directors worked without big studios or large budgets but they had full creative control, and the imprint

of their identity can be seen in their films, in a way similar to that of the mode of Orson Welles and Alfred Hitchcock . The directors often shot on location with hand held cameras, using natural lighting, improvising rather than using completed narratives, and expressing ideas current at the time, such as existentialism.

Simply put, *Breathless* was a film without a clear organized plot, without large studio costs, and with the director as an artist, in control of vision. This was unlike the Hollywood system at the time whose films were easy to follow narratives produced by the large studios that controlled most of the creative process. The new French style, different from Hollywood, was exemplified by the character played by Belmondo, a tough guy protagonist, physically unattractive, not heroic, and likely to meet an ambiguous fate.

By coincidence, another seemingly tough guy, died in the same week as Belmondo. This was Michael K. Williams 54, star of a number of TV series, including *The Wire*, and *Boardwalk Empire* and *When they see us* , who was found dead in his apartment in Brooklyn on September 6, 2021 of a suspected heroin overdose. Williams, like Belmondo, illustrates confusion of character and personality in a number of ways. Apparently Williams based his most popular character of Omar Little, the gangster, in *The Wire*, on real life characters in East Flatbush , Brooklyn, and echoed the struggles in life of himself and his family. In a mixture of fact and fiction, Williams brought his own personal life experiences into his roles to give the characters more nuance. But, though this was sometimes misunderstood, Omar's swagger did not resemble Williams, the actor who never forgot his roots in Brooklyn.

Nevertheless, some admirers took the character for the real man.

It was Williams' performance of Omar Little, black, gay, gangster, who acts above the law according to his own strict moral code that made him notable. Three things are

significant, one is that the character, sensitive and vulnerable, was part of himself but he was never Omar. The second was that some fans saw him as some kind of real gangster. It is more appropriate to see Williams as a tough guy but not a hero, in his character role and in real life.

Perhaps what is most important in Williams' performance is his courage in portraying black activity and homosexuality, challenging stereotypes. Personally gay and a loner, he brought sophistication to the role of black homosexuality, portraying the nuance of black sexuality. He also, in spite of his own demons, symbolized the fight against substance abuse as well as the fight against black criminal organizations. He was a tough guy , but neither a hero nor a knight.

Paradoxically there is a knight but not a hero or a tough guy in a new entertainment, a film *The Green Knight*, an adaptation of the 14th century fantasy chivalric adventure based on the legend connected to stories about the Court of King Arthur. The film is nothing like Camelot. It is the tale of Sir Gawain, an insignificant individual, nephew to the king, embarking on a quest to confront the eponymous Green Knight , half man, half tree, in a game which is likely to lead to death. Gawain is eager to prove himself and volunteers to play the game. He cuts off the head of the Green Knight who a moment later takes his cut head off the floor and gallops away. This is a strange film. David Lowery, the director, implies its power as a legend with a scene in which it has become a puppet show for children.

The film is not historically accurate but pure fantasy, challenging expectations of medieval fantasy narratives about heroic knights who undertake quests with their sword and shields, and rejects the traditional view of such adventure, chivalry and heroism. There is no tough guy that knows the way and can find a clear solution. Gawain is no tough guy, he

is unfocused and mediocre, searching for greatness, meaning and identity. The quest is a search for self discovery but not for true understanding. At the end, he submits to the fate of losing his head rather than emerging victorious from his final meeting with the Green Knight. At stake is the chivalric code that maintaining honor is more important than continuing to live or one's legacy.

The film raises questions: Is it wrong to want greatness? Why search for greatness when goodness is enough? The journey is like a dream, strange, dangerous, emotional before Gawain meets his ultimate fate. The journey is more nightmare than story. Gawain never prevails despite a talking fox who tries to enlighten him about the danger in pursuing his quest. Thieves rob him and leave him tied up and helpless. He restores the head of a young woman who has been decapitated, an ultimate irony in that he can restore her head but lose his own.

The ending is ambiguous.

There may be different interpretations of whatever is meant by the film, but Gawain can be seen as a complex non-hero who ultimately accepts his fate, so different from the heroes played by Belmondo and Bogie, but perhaps more akin to Williams in his role as Omar Little.