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An outlaw hero and American excess

Heidi Schlumpf | Aug. 7, 2009

Johnny Depp stars as legendary Depression-era outlaw John Dillinger in the movie "Public Enemies." (CNS/Universal Studios)

Let?s face it: Johnny Depp is hot.

That Depp portrays John Dillinger in the new summer movie ?Public Enemies? only makes the famed Depression-era outlaw more attractive. But even the real Dillinger -- who was decidedly less handsome -- had Depp-level fame and plenty of fans among the masses of his day.

It?s hard to imagine a hardened criminal who killed at least a dozen innocent people being idolized by everyday hard-working folks. But the economic misery of the Depression made folk heroes of desperados who got what they wanted, even if they had to do it at gunpoint.

In the movie, the empty, hopeless face of a farmwoman who had harbored the Dillinger gang and begged them to take her with them reveals the utter desperation of the hungry millions who faced a bleak future thanks to the excesses of the banking system that had robbed them of their life?s savings and homes. They saw Dillinger as sticking it to the ?haves? who had stolen so much from the ?have-nots.?

Sound familiar?

More than a few contemporary commentators have compared the big business excesses that led to the Great Depression to today?s big business excesses that have left us with this global economic crisis. Billion-dollar bailouts, million-dollar bonuses, even six-figure salaries are stratospheric, almost incomprehensible sums to Joe Schmoe who is living on $500 a week of unemployment compensation.

I suspect Joe and his buddies would probably idolize someone who managed to make off with a few bags of cash from the likes of Bernard Madoff or AIG, just as guys from the 1930s breadlines applauded Dillinger for relieving banks of the contents of their safes.

?Public Enemies? director Michael Mann definitely sees Dillinger as a populist icon. ?He was a charismatic outlaw hero who spoke to people in the depths of the Depression,? Mann told the *Los Angeles Times*. ?He

assaulted the institution that made their lives miserable -- the bank -- and he outsmarted the institution -- the government -- that couldn?t fix the problems brought about by the Depression.?

Though the movie, based on Bryan Burrough?s nonfiction book of the same title, doesn?t overdo the Robin Hood angle, one scene -- reportedly based on a real statement made by Dillinger -- paints the criminals as friends of the little guy. During one of the gang?s bank robberies, a farmer pulls some bills from his own pocket. When Dillinger asks him if it?s his money, the man nervously nods yes. Dillinger responds: ?We?re not here for your money, we?re here for the bank?s.?

Though born and raised in the modest American heartland, Dillinger lived the high life at the height of his criminal career. ?I like baseball, movies, good clothes, fast cars, whiskey and you,? he says in the movie, wooing love interest Billie Frechette, a hatcheck girl with outsider status because she is part Native American. When she asks Dillinger what he wants, he replies, ?Everything. Right now.?

Dillinger was only mimicking the lifestyles of his time?s rich and famous, much the way too many modern-day Americans aspire to Madoff-type comfort. As alluring as it may be to own four homes and a yacht (as Madoff did), deep down most of us know that it?s immoral for some people to have so much, when so many have so little.

Nowhere is material excess more evident, ironically, than in Hollywood. Most movies cost tens, if not hundreds, of millions to produce (?Public Enemies? reportedly cost $100 million), and stars? salaries aren?t the only hit to the bottom line. My sister and brother-in-law got a firsthand peek at moviemaking excess when they served as extras during the Chicago filming of ?Public Enemies.?

They were among 1,786 extras in Illinois (it also was filmed on location in Wisconsin and Indiana). Though they were only paid minimum wage (obviously they weren?t doing it for the money), they cost plenty in terms of hair, makeup and costuming time. Every costume was authentic, right down to my sister?s 1930s earrings. And her hair and makeup took hours. Not only didn?t her earrings, hair or makeup appear onscreen, none of her did. Couldn?t have reproduction earrings sufficed? Save the real antiques for the leading lady?

It was fun to see flashes of my brother-in-law several times throughout the movie, but did he really have to be wearing a sleeveless undershirt under his suit -- just in case at some point he removed his jacket and a non-period short-sleeved T-shirt showed through his dress shirt? While I understand that such details make a movie believable (and apparently are Mann?s signature), they add to astronomical movie budgets -- and to the price of a ticket for the average moviegoer.

In his recent encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* (?Charity in Truth?), Pope Benedict XVI calls for a global economy rooted in justice and the common good, addressing specifically the rise of global inequality. ?While the poor of the world continue knocking on the doors of the rich,? he writes, ?the world of affluence runs the risk of no longer hearing those knocks, on account of a conscience that can no longer distinguish what is human.?

Excessive affluence -- whether by Wall Street or Hollywood -- can be both fascinating and nauseating. While Johnny Depp?s $4,000 tip to a waiter after the Chicago premiere of ?Public Enemies? made one workingman better off, his lavish life, including multiple homes plus a 45-acre island he owns in the Caribbean where he moors his 150-foot yacht, is just another example of the excessive disparity between real everyday Joes and those who play them in movies.

That?s not so hot.

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