HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Thunderbolt **1929**

Josef von Sternberg **(1894-1969)**

Contents

OVERVIEW

A year before he helmed Germany's first sound film, *The Blue Angel*, Josef von Sternberg directed his first talkie *Thunderbolt*, a progenitor of the gangster genre and one of the pioneers of synchronized sound technology, which had made its debut with 1927's *The Jazz Singer*.

Contributors. George Bancroft plays the criminal kingpin; *Thunderbolt* is the last of Bancroft's four films with von Sternberg—*The Docks of New York*, his other gangster films *Underworld* and *The Drag Net* (lost film). Fay Wray (*King Kong*, *The Most Dangerous Game*) stars as the flapper who refuses to be identified as the gangster's moll. She wants to exit the world of crime and call it quits with the larger-than-life title character.

The screenplay was written by Jules Furthman (*Only Angels Have Wings, Rio Bravo, The Big Sleep,* and *Nightmare Alley*; with von Sternberg, *Morocco, The Docks of New York* and several others). Von Sternberg-Furthman collaboration was an extensive and productive one; it is one of those "instances where the writer is so intrinsically in synch with the director's vision that their mutual contributions cannot be easily distinguished."[1] The dialogue was penned by Herman Mankiewicz (*Citizen Kane*).

Hans Dreier (*For Whom the Bells Toll, A Farewell to Arms, Double Indemnity, Sunset Boulevard*) designed the hip and multi-racial nightclub Black Cat with an all-African American staff and entertainers. Here, Jazz musician Curtis Mosby and his band perform and Theresa Harris sings, dressed and photographed as glamorously as any von Sternberg leading woman. Other key locations are the humble apartment of the bank clerk Bob Moran, with his mother's Singer sewing machine as the centerpiece, and the penitentiary's death row, whose cells' iron bars provide opportunities for gorgeous chiaroscuro photography (cinematographer was Henry W. Gerard). Compared to von Sternberg's previous films, *Thunderbolt* is relatively minimalistic and less spectacular in terms of set design and the number of extras.

Gangster Genre. *Thunderbolt* is not a sequel of von Sternberg's *Underworld*, but the two are essentially similar. Like Bull Weed in *Underworld*, Jim "Thunderbolt" Lang has a few cohorts, but he is always seen acting by himself; so it is not clear whether he is the boss of an organized crime syndicate. Still, both films are considered modern gangster films because the story is told from the vantage point of the criminals. They anticipate the early classics of the genre: *Little Caesar* (1931, Mervyn LeRoy), *The Public Enemy* (1931, William A. Wellman), *Scarface* (1932, Howard Hawks), and *Angels with Dirty Faces* (1938, Michael Curtiz); starring, respectively, Paul Muni, James Cagney, Edward G. Robinson, and Humphrey Bogart.

Sound and Realism. Von Sternberg is less interested in 1920s gangster milieu than the interaction of the lead characters. Like *Underworld* before it, *Thunderbolt* casts its spotlight on emotions and gestures, love and obsession, bonding and loyalty. The chief difference this time is the use of sound (alternate version of the film was simultaneously released for silent screenings; that copy is lost.)

Thunderbolt does not aspire to be realistic. The police station has a chair placed on a podium to conduct theatrical interrogations. Similarly, the peculiar cell block of the penitentiary, with its string quartet and a cappella singing inmates, is almost a continuation of the nightclub scene. The songs “Roll Jordan Roll”, “Rock a Bye Baby”, “Take Me Out to the Ball Game”, “Broken-Hearted” tend to be in tune with what is actually going on around Thunderbolt in the death row.

Thanks to sound, audiences could actually hear the star George Bancroft’s hearty laughter, which they could only watch in *The Docks of New York* and *Underworld*. There is more to experimentation with sound in *Thunderbolt* than showcasing the boisterous titular mobster. Von Sternberg embraced and incorporated the new technology with a certain perspective; he thought that “sound had to counterpoint or compensate the image, add to it—not subtract from it.”[2] Accordingly, speech and music are used sparingly to enrich the narrative. Examples are the squeaky doggy toy that Thunderbolt plays with in his cell—the annoying sound unnerves fellow inmate (and his object of hate) Bob Moran. In the nightclub scene, two minor characters’ conversation helps to clarify the origin of the gangster’s nickname. The person who makes the explanation is strangely obscured by a column—consequently his voice gets all the attention.

Some critics (such as Peter Baxter) consider the first part of the film to be more effective. From that perspective, the absurdity of some of the later scenes is distracting and decreases the tension. Perhaps this is the real strength of *Thunderbolt*: it tackles serious issues such as capital punishment, unemployment (with the Great Depression just around the corner), and race (when racial segregation was mandated by Jim Crow laws). The touch of quirky comedy and playful use of music encourage the spectator to engage these subjects today; it most likely served a similar purpose in 1929.

SYNOPSIS

Police close in on the evasive gangster Thunderbolt by way of his flapper girlfriend Ritzie, who is in love with a bank teller named Bob. She refuses to help the police, but also lets Thunderbolt know that she has decided to call it quits. Then, the criminal kingpin learns about her affair; when he goes after his rival, the police apprehend him. He is convicted and sentenced to death for previous crimes. At the penitentiary, Thunderbolt schemes to deliver a decisive blow to Bob by framing him for a bank robbery. His ruse works and Bob is arrested; subsequently placed in the death row in a neighboring cell. Bob marries Ritzie hours before his scheduled execution and his mother pleads with Thunderbolt—and he confesses that he framed the innocent man. His plan is to exact his own revenge by murdering Bob just before his own execution. When the moment comes, a grateful Bob shocks him by earnestly revealing that Ritzie had in fact left him for Thunderbolt—not the other way around—they were sweethearts before she met the gangster. His self-pride restored and suspicions dismissed, Thunderbolt hugs Bob and enters the death chamber with a hearty laugh.

CHARACTERS

Thunderbolt. Jim “Thunderbolt” Lang is a notorious mobster; he is extremely attached to his girlfriend Ritzie.
Ritzie. The flapper refuses to be identified as a gangster’s moll and wants to exit the world of crime for good—and end her relationship with Thunderbolt. Ritzie is played by Fay Wray (*King Kong*, *The Most Dangerous Game*).
Bob. The bank teller is Ritzie’s inamorato. He joins the ranks of the unemployed—in the year of the Wall Street Crash—when the police investigators decide to increase the pressure on her.
The Mother. Bob is very fond of his mother, who is affectionate and protective. She anticipates the mother from von Sternberg’s *An American Tragedy*—they both plead for the life of their sons.
The Warden. The nervous and irritable bureaucrat is both annoying and laughable; he provides some comic relief in the gloomy death row setting.
The Chaplain. The man of religion is dignified; he tries to be supportive of Thunderbolt, who politely tells him that he is not interested. The Chaplain assures him that he would be “sticking around,” just in case.
“Bad Al” Frieberg. A fellow convict and gangster in the death row, who is also known as the “Machine Gun Terror.” Frieberg causes a disturbance in the prison and only Thunderbolt’s intervention can end it. Fred Kohler had played a similar role as the gangster’s rival in *Underworld*.

Mr. Corwin. The grim-looking bank manager fires Bob—for no reason, following a prompt from the police who wanted to increase the pressure on Ritzie. George Irvin played other authority figures in von Sternberg's *An American Tragedy*, *The Docks of New York*, and *Dishonored.*

STORY

Love Triangle. Ritzie is the flapper girlfriend of the criminal kingpin Thunderbolt. Despite warrants for his arrest, the mobster is still at large. When the police question Ritzie about his whereabouts, she tells them nothing. Notwithstanding her loyalty, she wants to end her relationship with Thunderbolt. She and Bob—a bank teller who lives with his mother and has no connections to the underworld—love each other.

Raid. In tune with his a reputation for bravado; Thunderbolt takes Ritzie to the Black Cat nightclub. He acts his usual self, swaggering and brawling; not hesitating to make a scene. Ritzie has had enough; she tells him that she would like to call it quits, but he declines. He is suspicious that she may be having an affair and refuses to even consider any other possible motivations for her decision. He also hints at violently taking care of the matter if he ever found out she was cheating him. Suddenly, police raid the club—Thunderbolt manages to sneak out. Ritzie is indifferent to the exchange of gunfire outside the club; the gangster once again evades the police.

Runaway. The police know that Ritzie is seeing Bob; they decide to increase pressure on her via the bank teller and get him fired from his job. Back at home, his mother and Ritzie try to cheer him up. Meanwhile, Thunderbolt is searching for her; they have a tense phone conversation and she reiterates her stance. Then, one of Thunderbolt's associates locates the couple.

Arrest. Thunderbolt is tipped about the address and furiously dashes to apartment complex to settle scores with Ritzie's lover. A friendly stray dog follows him inside; his amusing interaction with the dog lingers on. The barks eventually alert the police, who arrive to arrest the runaway.

Death row. Thunderbolt is locked up in the death row. The warden is a wacky eccentric, who is keen to keep the prisoners alive until their execution time. One of the condemned causes a stir when he snatches a guard's pistol; Thunderbolt steps forward to knock him out and the crisis ends. Thanks to his contribution to order, he is granted the privilege to keep his dog in his cell.

Ruse. Trapped in his cell, Thunderbolt schemes to get his revenge from his rival by a cunning ruse. Bob is lured to his previous place of work by a phone call. Once Bob's unexpected presence is noted by the bank manager, Thunderbolt's men launch a heist. A bystander gets shot and the gangsters flee—right after leaving a firearm with Bob. The former bank teller is arrested and swiftly condemned to death.

Plead. Bob is brought to the death row and placed in the cell right across that of Thunderbolt. Not before long, he reckons who is responsible for his predicament, but he is helpless. Thunderbolt's next move is unclear; both men are scheduled to die within days. Bob's mother pleads with Thunderbolt to confess his scheme and acknowledge her son's innocence, but the mobster is unyielding.

Marriage. Ritzie visits the prison and the chaplain weds her to Bob. All of a sudden, Thunderbolt declares that it was indeed himself who framed Bob. His mother and wife are jubilant and thankful for the confession, which saves their beloved from death. Bob is spared the death sentence, but he is still not released; meanwhile, preparations for Thunderbolt's execution continue. A physician examines Thunderbolt and green lights the electrocution, while the warden is carefully letting in invited witnesses. The only people who know the gangster's real plan are his cohorts outside. They expect their boss to murder Bob, just as he is being taken to the death chamber.

Farewell. The time comes and Thunderbolt is released from his cell; he slowly bids adieu to those present. Finally, he stops by the cell of Bob, who is grateful for the confession that saved his life. Unbeknownst to him, it is now apparent that Thunderbolt was waiting for this moment to settle scores with his rival. Then, something unexpected happens; Bob earnestly discloses that he and Ritzie had been

sweethearts from a long time back—way before the mobster was in the picture. Bob explains that it was in fact himself who was jettisoned (possibly cheated); the revelation changes Thunderbolt's mindset. He gives him a hug and walks towards the death chamber, parting with his dog at the door and giving a last hearty laugh as he enters.

THEMES

SOCIETY

Race. The staff and entertainers of the Black Cat nightclub are African-Americans; it has a mixed-race clientele. When Thunderbolt and Ritzie enter, a lively troupe of dancers are on stage and several musicians are performing (Curtis Mosby's band); a little later, singer and actor Theresa Harris gets the spotlight—dressed glamorously, she sings "Daddy, won't you please come home" (Thunderbolt suggestively gazes at her). She and rest of the African-American entertainers are represented with respect. Among the other figures at the Black Cat are a stuttering waiter (Oscar Smith), a sassy and somewhat sullen hatcheck girl, and a friendly cigarette girl. Some of the members of the staff may be considered to be racial stereotypes. Then again, there are African-American customers in the hall (unlike the practice of the famous real-life Cotton Club in its early years). These two tuxedo-clad gentlemen are seen gossiping about Thunderbolt (though only one of them is mostly visible). The nightclub scene quickly becomes tense as Thunderbolt is annoyed by the haughty Caucasian woman sitting behind him and pulls a nasty joke on her. Things get serious when the woman's husband confronts Thunderbolt and brandishes his gun, but is subdued with a punch. At this point, a couple of customers can be seen preparing to come to the man's aid; they are stopped by others who stand by Thunderbolt—these are all Caucasian men, the conflict is generated by non-racial motivations.

Later, Thunderbolt gets locked up in the prison, where fellow inmates play African American gospel music and there is group of a cappella singers. It might be said that in both the club and the prison, African-American characters serve to entertain Thunderbolt and other Caucasians—on the flip side, they are presented with dignity and are basically positive figures. Overall, *Thunderbolt* opens up a dialogue window for inter-cultural communication.

Modern Bureaucracy. At the penitentiary, Thunderbolt is assigned a random number. He ignores it—he says he can only be number one. The penal system operates by downplaying the individuality of the detainee; Thunderbolt finds a witty way to hit back—he keeps addressing a particular guard with various names, just as arbitrary as the number that was assigned to him. After being called a bunch of times with common names, the man finally reveals that his name is Aloysius, which makes Thunderbolt laugh hard—just before he enters the execution chamber.

The warden is a bizarre character, both annoying and amusing with his focus on keeping the convicts alive until the execution time. He is genuinely worried when an inmate's health is jeopardized and it looks like he may not last long enough for the execution. Thunderbolt gets examined by a physician, who reports that his heart is "good to last a hundred years"—when he has only a few hours left to live.

Parallel. The warden and prison doctor anticipate their counterparts in Fritz Lang's *You Only Live Once*, which features a more serious and less eccentric warden, who is also concerned about making sure that convicts live long enough to last for the execution. In *You Only Live Once*, after Eddie slashes his wrist with a piece of metal, the prison hospital's personnel scramble to keep him alive and blood transfusion is rapidly performed. Lang highlights the efficient utilization of science to save a life—only to be able to execute him a few hours later. The doctor informs the warden that he won't need to postpone the execution, as the prisoner "is weak but he would be strong enough by then." Eddie's former cellmate—Bugsy, a nutty and comic character—mockingly remarks on the paradox as he serves Eddie his meal: "first they kill the chicken, Taylor eats the chicken, then they kill Taylor. If I wasn't crazy, I would worry about that."

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CRIME

Crime and Violence. Like Bull Weed in *Underworld*, Thunderbolt has a few cohorts, but he is always seen acting by himself. We never actually see him carry out a major crime; when he is prosecuted, it is for his previous warrants. Consequently, it is not clear whether he is the boss of an organized crime syndicate (as in later films of the gangster genre). He is more like the frontman of a small group of daring bank robbers.

Besides the gangster genre, *Thunderbolt* also predates the period sometimes dubbed the "Public Enemy Era" in the United States in the early 1930s. The term denoted notorious gangsters such as Dillinger and Al Capone; also fugitive criminals like Bonnie and Clyde. *Thunderbolt* has a minor character called "Machine Gun Terror," who recalls one of the era's most wanted criminals, "Machine Gun" Kelly. Thunderbolt mockingly calls him "squirt gun" before whacking him.

Thunderbolt's policemen are not as heavily armed as those in *Underworld*, but several carry machine guns. There is much less violence; the action is mostly confined to interiors, such as the nightclub and death row scenes. There is only one exchange of gunfire and that takes place off-screen—the camera shows Ritzie while the shooting takes place outside the nightclub.

Capital Punishment. The warden is an odd bureaucrat and provides some comic relief in the gloomy setting. He is annoying, but detail oriented—with the focus being that nothing should interfere with the scheduled killing. He gets the help of Thunderbolt to subdue an unruly inmate and later sips the liqueur (the convict's last wish, in this curious death row) to calm his nerves. His peculiarities and the charming music performed by the inmates somewhat overshadow the fact that here, executions are rapidly carried out, not excluding the band members—"I thought I had the quartet broken up, I no sooner get rid of one, they send me another," complains the warden. The death row scenes take up most of the second half of *Thunderbolt*; sugar-coated with some welcome respite from the hilarious interactions, they invite thinking about the nature and scale of capital punishment.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Thunderbolt (Open)

The boisterous and self-centered Thunderbolt is a character similar to "Bull" Weed in *Underworld*; there is less emphasis on mannerism and gestures due to this being a sound film. This may have a partially negative impact on the character—the pioneering sound film has George Bancroft speak really slowly, almost tediously.

Jealous and Possessive. Ritzie wants out, but Thunderbolt refuses to consider it. It appears that he is more concerned about being cheated than losing her. Right away, he suspects that 'another guy' is involved. Incidentally, his suspicion is not groundless, but he misses the point about Ritzie choosing another life.

Spiteful Trickster. When Thunderbolt finds out that Ritzie is seeing Bob Moran, he immediately seeks revenge. He is caught as he was lurking inside their building. If it was not for the stray dog, he apparently planned to get violent. Then, he gets convicted for other, unrelated crimes; even the death sentence does not deter him, he schemes to get Bob to the death row in order to murder him there. He lunges towards Bob once and is held back by the cell bars. His plan is to get at him moments before his own execution, once he is let out of his cell on the way to the death chamber.

Domineering. In the prison, "Machine Gun Terror," (the name evoking one of the most wanted criminals of the time, "Machine Gun" Kelly) is loud and aggressive. Thunderbolt mockingly calls him "squirt gun" and whacks him at the first opportunity. It may be the death row, but Thunderbolt is always the alpha male.

Fair and Affectionate. When Bob's mother pleads with Thunderbolt to acknowledge her son's innocence, Ritzie also begs him, acknowledging that he is "fair," in spite of his violence and criminality. Bob's affectionate side is underscored by his fondness for the stray dog, which remains in his cell until the end. Similar to Marlene Dietrich's black cat in *Dishonored*, the interaction with the dog provides some insight to the character; it shows that Thunderbolt is capable of compassion.

Ritzie (Agreeable)

Ritzie has had enough of the flamboyance of Thunderbolt, but is he going to let her leave his world? It looks like he considers that she is simply mercurial, whereas Ritzie wants to permanently transition to a regular life.

Decent and Ordinary. Ritzie says that she once found the swagger and lifestyle of Thunderbolt exciting, but now she simply wants to live like normal people. She is choosing the unexceptional one out of the two alternatives.

Parallels. The leading woman in *Underworld*, "Feathers" McCoy also wants to call it quits with "Bull" Weed, a character that is similar to Thunderbolt. Yet, Feathers obviously feels at home in the violent world of the mobster—she is by his side and composed when the police siege and wreak havoc on the apartment. Ritzie appears totally fed up and disinterested in the ways of the underworld.

"Decency" is an issue that comes in von Sternberg's other films. Modern women are confronted by prim conformists; sometimes marriage is conceived as a solution. In *The Docks of New York*, Mae thinks marriage might redeem her tarnished past, but Lou is skeptical. Not due to—as Mae believes—her checkered past, but because Lou views marriage itself as the problem; she points to her own marriage as the decisively corrupting influence on her own life. In *Shanghai Express*, Shanghai Lily and Hui Fei are self-confident, modern women, but they also view marriage as a way to elevate their social status. Hui Fei is on her way to Shanghai to get married—Chang's sexual attack, in a way, aims to spoil her transition to 'decency.' Madeline was previously "decent"—and she seems to be somewhat regretful of her transformation to Shanghai Lily.

Loyal and Trustable. The tension in *Thunderbolt* derives from a love triangle and Ritzie chooses Bob Moran; but she never betrays the criminal kingpin. The police approach her twice for tips, but she declines to cooperate.

Bob Moran (Agreeable)

The former bank clerk Bob Moran tells Thunderbolt that he and Ritzie were sweethearts long before the gangster became a part of her life. The larger-than-life Thunderbolt may get the spotlight, but the story is actually about Bob and Ritzie as two regular people who try to survive in difficult times—the Wall Street Crash of 1929 started in September; *Thunderbolt* was released just a few months before, in mid-June.

Unexceptional and Emblematic. There is hardly anything striking and negative about Bob Moran. He is honest, humble, and diligent—yet he gets fired for no reason (the police think it is a good idea so as to increase pressure on Ritzie.) At the end, Bob's innocence is established and he is saved from the death penalty, but he will soon be joining the ranks of scores of unemployed during the Great Depression.

Transparent and Loving. After getting fired, Bob tries to keep up his spirits at home and his mother does her best to console him. There is a lengthy scene when the two jovially joke and laugh in the bathroom as she attends to his hand wound (Bob has just punched Thunderbolt's associate and the mobster's arrival is imminent.) Mother and son try to appear optimistic to Ritzie, but can hardly conceal how disheartened they are. At the end, Bob's innocence is established and he is saved from the death penalty, but he will soon be joining the ranks of scores of unemployed. Bob Moran and his mother anticipate Clyde and Mrs. Griffiths in von Sternberg's *An American Tragedy*; which similarly culminates in a death sentence and the mother pleading for the life of her son.

Discussion questions

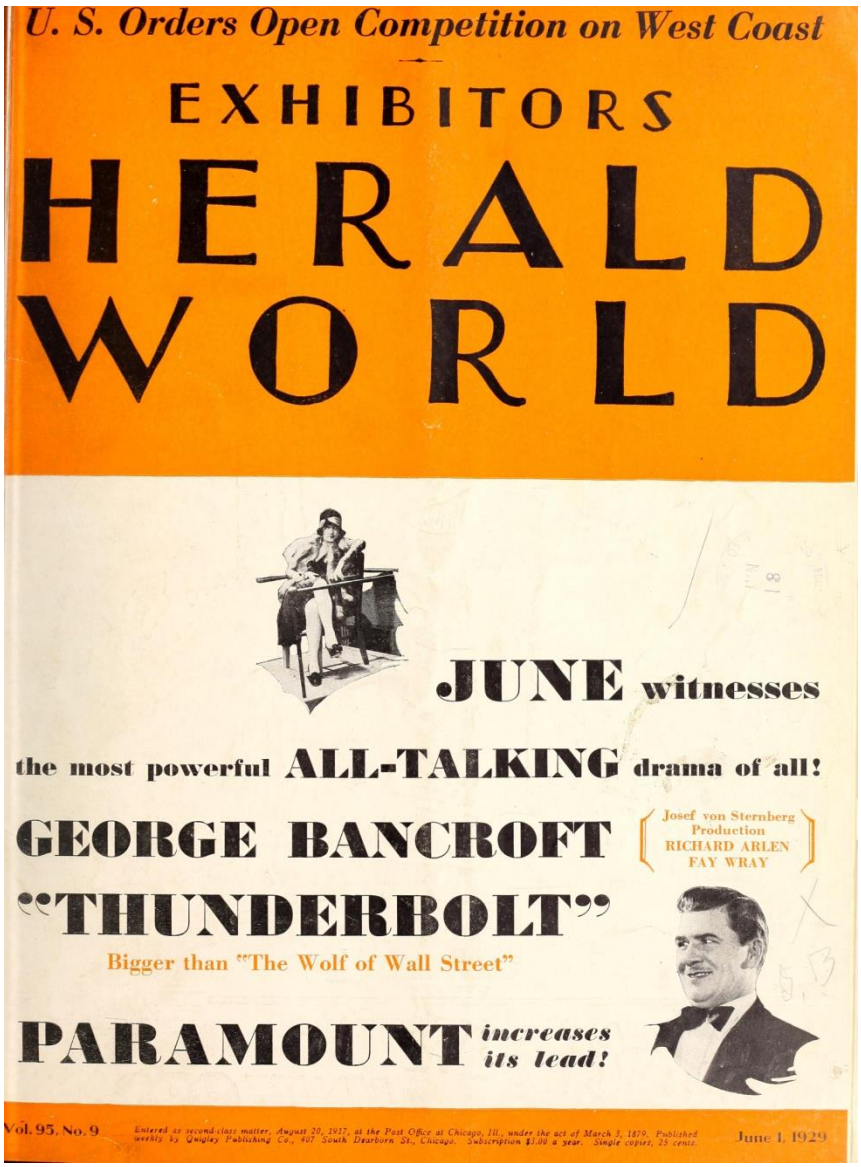
- The Cotton Club has been the subject of several films, notably *Taxi!* (1932) with James Cagney and Francis Ford Coppola's *The Cotton Club*. *Thunderbolt* also features a nightclub with African-American staff and entertainers. How would you compare the Black Cat with representations of the Cotton Club?

- Writing on *Underworld* in 1971, John Baxter comments that "after four decades of gangster movies, its histrionic and decorative style are unconvincing and the plot fatally episodic."[3] A similar observation could be made about *Thunderbolt* as well. Baxter had the knowledge of 1930s classics by Edward G. Robinson and James Cagney, as well as 1950s gangster films. On the other hand, Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* was released that very year and many definitive films of the genre were yet to be made (e.g. *Scarface* [1983] and *Goodfellas* [1990]). Now, after almost a century since the release of *Underworld* and *Thunderbolt*, the genre has flourished; our experience of films associated with gangsters, mafia, yakuzas, all sorts of mobsters—variations of organized crime and their representation—provide us with a vantage point to re-assess both films. How does it stand up in a comparison with contemporary classics of the genre? Do you share Baxter's observation?

- How would you compare Ritzie in *Thunderbolt* with Feathers in *Underworld*, or with other flapper characters from 1920s films?

- Consider comparing the chaplain in *Thunderbolt* with *You Only Live Once*'s (1937, Fritz Lang) Father Dolan—a popular figure at the prison and a humanist who thinks that "every man, at birth, is endowed with the nobility of a king; the stain of the world soon makes him forget even his own birthright."

- George Bancroft plays similar characters in the silent film *Underworld* and von Sternberg's other gangster film and his first with sound, *Thunderbolt*. What does sound add to the character and story? Does it take away anything?



Exhibitors Herald World, Quigley Publishing, 1929. Courtesy http://mediahistoryproject.org/ Media History Digital Library.


Ritzie is a flapper; despite her loyalty to Thunderbolt, she refuses to be identified as a gangster's moll.


A typical von Sternberg detail, a wheel-like piece is the centerpiece of the décor in the Black Cat Club, which represents Black entertainers with respect (the musicians in frame are Curtis Mosby's band) – Theresa Harris singing "Daddy, Won't You Please Come Home."


The police station and the prison do not pretend to be realistic settings: the police interrogate Ritzie as she sits on a chair placed on a podium, surrounded by detectives – "One way street": a peculiar death row with its incessant chatter and charming live music performed by the inmates.


Railings and iron bars present many opportunities for gorgeous chiaroscuro photography: well-armed police officers close in on Thunderbolt – Bob is placed in a cell to face the gangster who framed him.


The spectator is eavesdropping on two customers at the Black Cat as they gossip about Thunderbolt. Only one of them is properly in view—a signature von Sternberg shot that obscures the frame, here, it directs attention to the voice. The cat-shaped annoying squeaky doggy toy that Thunderbolt plays with in his cell increases the tension.


Bob's mom affectionately comforts Ritzie after he gets fired from the bank – the stray dog causes Thunderbolt's arrest; it accompanies the gangster during his imprisonment, underscoring his affectionate side.

[1] Silver, Charles. *Josef von Sternberg's The Docks of New York*
MOMA: Inside/Out.
https://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2010/05/11/josef-von-sternbergs-the-docks-of-new-york/. 2016. Acccessed April 2022.
[2] Von Sternberg, Josef. *Fun in a Chinese Laundry*. New York: Collier. 1965, 219.
[3] Baxter, John. *The Cinema of Josef von Sternberg*. London: A. Zwemmer. 1971, 42.