

# Brattle Theatre Film Notes: *CAPE FEAR*

USA, 1962. Unrated. 105 min

Cast: Gregory Peck, Robert Mitchum, Polly Bergen, Lori Martin, Telly Safalas;

Writers: John D. MacDonald; Music:

Bernard Herrmann; Cinematographer:

Samuel Leavitt; Producer: Sy Bartlett;

Director: J. Lee Thompson

*Cape Fear* is usually regarded as a classic tale of good versus evil, and superficially that's an accurate assessment. Its villain, Max Cady (Mitchum), has just been released from prison when we meet him, his six-year rape sentence complete. Making his way through the streets of a small North Carolina town, he's the very picture of animal swagger and casual aggression. Before a word has even been spoken, we have learned all we'll need to know about him. In his cool predatory gaze at passing women, his nonchalant disregard for the solemnity of the county courthouse, and even in the way he rolls his cigar stub around his lips, we see his perversity, his venality - in a word, his evil.

Cady is on his way to see an old enemy, the film's hero, Sam Bowden (Peck). At first glance Bowden is a typical Peck protagonist: courageous, noble, and unfailingly committed to the right and the good (Peck would play his signature part, attorney Atticus Finch, a year later in *To Kill a Mockingbird*). It was Sam, the town's district attorney, who, after stumbling across Cady attacking a girl in a Baltimore parking lot, provided the damning eyewitness testimony at the trial. Now free, Cady has a score to settle with Bowden.

But almost immediately, the good guy/bad guy dynamic begins to be undercut in subtle ways. While in the typical revenge thriller the confrontation between the hero and the villain would be the third-act payoff, here the initial meeting takes place in the first few minutes. Cady, after watching Bowden work in the courtroom follows him to the parking lot where in broad daylight the two have a tense, kinetic reunion. Cady is not crazed or outwardly angry, unlike

countless other movie villains. In fact, he seems lazily smug, peering at Bowden with those famous half-lidded eyes and calmly chatting with him in a honeyed Southern drawl.

His plan, he tells Bowden bluntly, is to impart a lesson, to balance the scales between the two men, to extract some measure of compensation for the time he lost in prison. (Cady's implicit sense of almost Biblical justice is one of several themes Martin Scorsese would make explicit in his 1991 remake). Clearly more interested in toying with Bowden than killing him, at least initially, Cady sets about cagily turning the psychological screws, making it abundantly clear that his real intention is to rape Bowden's wife and young daughter (his desires are so effectively conveyed by Mitchum's brilliantly reptilian performance that it's surprising to realize the word rape, forbidden by the censors, is never used).



And Cady would be frightening enough with that in mind, but he is no ordinary movie psychopath. Cady is not an outsider, not purely a figure of social deviance. He is not Frank Miller, the bloodthirsty outlaw coming for Gary Cooper in *High Noon*, or Tommy Udo, the vengeful ex-con from *Kiss of Death*. Unlike those characters, whose disregard for the laws of civilized society defines them, Cady sees the advantages of learning the rules of the game, having spent his time in prison studying the law and arming himself against the only real weapon Bowden has at his disposal. And this is what makes the character so unsettling, and such a groundbreaking figure in movie villainy: his ability to straddle two worlds at once, planting one foot in his own realm of criminality, and the other

squarely in Bowden's dominion of social order.

But if Cady is a departure from the classic movie villain, Bowden, too, proves himself a poor successor to American cinema's long tradition of flawless heroism. Just as Cady has taught himself how to exploit the system for his own purposes, we quickly learn that Bowden casually abuses his position as a figure of authority. Shaken by the parking lot confrontation, Bowden consults with his friend Mark Dutton (Balsam), who also happens to be the chief of police. Showing the cozy arrogance that marks their relationship, Dutton assures Bowden that he'll have his boys pick up the ex-con on some charge or another: vagrancy, failure to register himself with local law enforcement, something. The implication is that men like Bowden and Dutton, the guardians of order and justice, easily deal with men like Cady. Though Cady

is an ex-convict who has served his time and broken no law, Dutton and Bowden are ready to roust him on whatever technicality they can concoct.

Cady, of course, is one step ahead of them, easily sidestepping the police, and quickly turning the legal tables. The fact that legality offers so little recourse to Cady's methods clearly leaves Bowden feeling exposed and helpless, stripped of the protection his status has so long afforded him. And it is the ease and readiness with which Bowden abandons the system that mark him as a man with less faith in civilized society than we were initially led to believe. Even in his ostensible triumph over Cady, Bowden finds himself defeated, lured into the muck of moral compromise, and touched by the sadism and thirst for vengeance that defined Cady. Far from the gloating triumph that usually accompanies the defeat of movie evil, the film's final shot is among the bleakest and most disheartening in memory.

- Written by Lawrence Fahey