

THE GENERAL [1998]

by

H. Arthur Taussig, Ph.D.

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In 1980's Dublin, Martin Cahill (Brendan Gleeson) is a gangster and a thug, but a paradox even to those who know him. He's a family man who has an open affair with his sister-in-law. He supports populist causes while stealing from small businesses. He also has a reputation for nailing people to a pool table to make them talk. From childhood, he is dogged by Inspector Ned Kenny (John Voight) who, despite escalating harassment, can never get the goods on Cahill. The film follows his life through three major and brilliant crimes – a major jewel robbery, the cover-up of incest by one of his gang members, and the theft of a major art collection. He is at last assassinated by the IRA for the last crime for selling rare paintings to the Ulster Volunteer Force so they can buy arms to fight the IRA. (Rated R)

John Boorman's directorial motto might well be, "Been there, done that." The breadth of his oeuvre is astonishing. Consider: *Point Blank* [1968], *Hell in the Pacific* [1970], *Leo the Last* [1973], *Deliverance* [1973], *Zardoz* [1977], *Excalibur* [1985], *Emerald Forest* [1987], *Hope and Glory* [1990]. This without comment on the quality of the films, some of which are undoubtedly masterpieces, while all are stunning in one way or another.

And now comes *The General*, a black-and-white biopic that stands several genres – and the psychological ideas behind them – on their heads. Every scene is so exquisitely photographed and choreographed that one is reminded of Akira Kurosawa's greatest films, except Boorman's vision is far more modernist than Kurosawa's classicism. The crime elements of the plot are so intricate I am reminded of the best caper films like *Rififi* [1955] or *The Lavender Hill Mob* [1951] with their combination of crime, humor, and humanity.

But cinematographic artistry or plot complexity (or even terrific acting) are not all there is to *The General*. And its social comment is only superficial. As Cahill attacks society, so Boorman attacks genre conventions and psychological assumptions.

To get to the core of *The General*, the first thing we must dismiss is reality. Yes, Cahill was a real historical figure, but, apparently, nothing like the man in the film. The real Cahill was at the center of the crime scene during the '80s and early '90s. He ran Dublin's narcotics trade, something the film vehemently denies. (A different reality does, however, exist: Boorman's house was once supposedly robbed by Cahill's gang.) For a film, a far greater reality upon which to draw than news headlines is collective "reality" of other films. *The General* is a combination of a biography and a gangster film.

These genre are combined in the gangster personality film. These are often named after the principle (or his or her pseudonym) – *Gotti* [1996], *Bonny and Clyde* [1997], *Box Car Bertha* [1972], *Scarface* [1983], etc. Some of these figures are charismatic, loving, family-oriented intelligent schemers such as in *The Godfather* [1972]. At the other pole are vicious, unthinking, self-destructive thugs, as in *GoodFellas* [1990].

The General's Cahill doesn't really fit into either of these categories (something that probably made him perfect for Boorman's penchant for portraying eclectic outsiders). He doesn't drink or smoke. He's a family man – but only up to a point, as he's having an open affair with his sister-in-law. A man of the people – but only up to a point again for he freely robs penny arcades with a delight equal to knocking over jewelry stores or art museums. He protests the tearing down of his neighborhood and the dispersing of the working-class residents. He protests, that is, until he cows the officials into giving him a nicer apartment than anyone else got out of the move. Unlike his American counterparts, Cahill doesn't leave his path strewn with corpses; his crimes are the material infringements of robbery and theft. In sum, Cahill is a paradox. And the film makes little attempt to resolve any of his – or its – loose strings or rough edges.

Boorman lionizes Cahill much more than he explains him. He becomes a likable scoundrel. We revel with him when he is at his best – stealing toys to give his own children, defeating everyone's best efforts to protect jewels and paintings – and we just as readily forgive him when he is at his worst – nailing a man to a pool table with apparently no feelings about the man's suffering. But this type of manipulation of the audience is something Boorman does very well – we've often been finessed into cheering for less than admirable characters, as in *Zardoz* and *Point Blank*, for instance.

What Boorman does for the gangster genre, he does with equal relish to the archetypal relationship between the criminal and the detective. Most good detective films place the criminal and the detective in an inextricable embrace where each one has the power to bring out the best (or the worst) in the other. The easiest pairing of this sort is Jean Valjean and Javert in Dumas' *Les Misérables*, but there are many others. Typically, one ascends and the other descends. Whether it is the criminal or the cop that raises or falls depends on the story. While *The General* interlocks the criminal and the cop, it doesn't place them on the expected cosmic teeter totter. Rather, they are locked together like psychic Siamese twins. Where one goes, so must the other. So, Cahill's fate is identical to that of Kenny, the policeman. This is a tragedy – a fall from the grace of naive criminality and humanity to the perdition of reality where humanity is at best corrupt and at worst dead. The cop and the criminal are on a parallel arc. Both descend. In this way, *The General* is not only a double tragedy – one for the criminal and one for the cop – but also a condemnation of the very basis of our assumptions about justice and humanity.

Of course, this type of mythic criticism must be placed within a mythic context. *The General*'s mythic proportions are made clear in its highly symbolic structure. Like many fairy tales, it depends on three incidents. *The Three Little Pigs*, *The Three Bears*, *The Three Sons*, Cinderella's three visits to the ball, and so many other "threes" in myths

and fairy tales give this number a dramatic potency that has come down to us even in screenplay mechanics – the “three act structure,” which, mercifully, *The General* doesn’t follow. However, we do follow Cahill through three crimes – a jewel and gold heist, an art robbery, and the cover-up of an incident of incest.

These three crimes form an arc, a coherent parallel to the rise and fall of this paradoxical character. He begins as a working-class bloke, out simply to do the best he can for himself and his family within his self-limited means. What he come up with – always using working class ideas like replacing light bulbs so as not to arouse suspicion – is a brilliant scheme to rob a jewelry factory considered impregnable. At this point in his career, he’s a lower-class slob out for the money.

Soon, however, he recognizes the (so-to-speak) art of crime. He takes pride in his work; he sees it as creative. Thus, it seems perfectly logical for him to steal Renaissance art works. While his cronies don’t get it, he stares admiringly at the Vermeer that turns out to be his favorite. Boorman even uses some camera tricks to show us how much Cahill resembles a figure in the painting. At this point, Cahill has reached his zenith and he has nowhere to go but downhill.

His fall is certified when he decides to take the law into his own hands, and, worse still, it is a law to protect what he values most – family. He protects one of his gang from a charge of sexual assault of his teenage daughter. Rather than let him go to court to face the consequences, and perhaps reveal what he knows of Cahill and his crimes, Cahill manufactures an escape for the man by shooting him in the leg and messing up his apartment. It is hoped this will get him a postponement until Cahill has had time to intimidate the witnesses (as he as before). The arc of these crimes reflects Cahill’s psychic change over the course of the film.

Boorman signals Cahill’s death to us in several clever symbols. Police have been harassing him for months with a constant watching parade of uniforms in front of his house. Cahill can tolerate this, as well as being called names. What bothers him is when they kill his beloved pigeons in front of his young son. In addition to the emotional assault on what he loves most – his family – the symbolism of killing that which flies free in the air (in sharp contrast to the grounded, overweight, slug-like Cahill) can only be a foreshadow of death.

It is almost in passing that Boorman touches on other topics (often so quickly that we’re not sure he’s even made a statement). The combination of Cahill’s black heart and warm family man image combines into a strange figure when we see him creeping around a house late at night, stealing toys to bestow on his own daughter – a reversed, black Santa Claus.

The same for both symbolism and humor. The film beings with a layer of very dark clouds hanging threateningly over the city of Dublin. Storm, gloom, and death. At the other end of the spectrum is the occasional humor: a “Do not touch” sign next to paintings being stolen.

Boorman seems fascinated with mythology and mythic figures. In *The General* he celebrates not only a paradoxical man of mythic proportions, but also the sadness of the decay of the myth of personal integrity – now relegated to the criminal element. Cahill is a teddy bear of a slob anti-hero, but one who strives to remain human in his own unique way in an environment that almost totally precludes humanity.

The General. Written, Directed and Produced by John Boorman. Screenplay by John Boorman from the novel by Paul Williams. Cinematography by Seamus Deasy. Music by Richie Buckley. Distributed by Sony Pictures Classics, 1998.