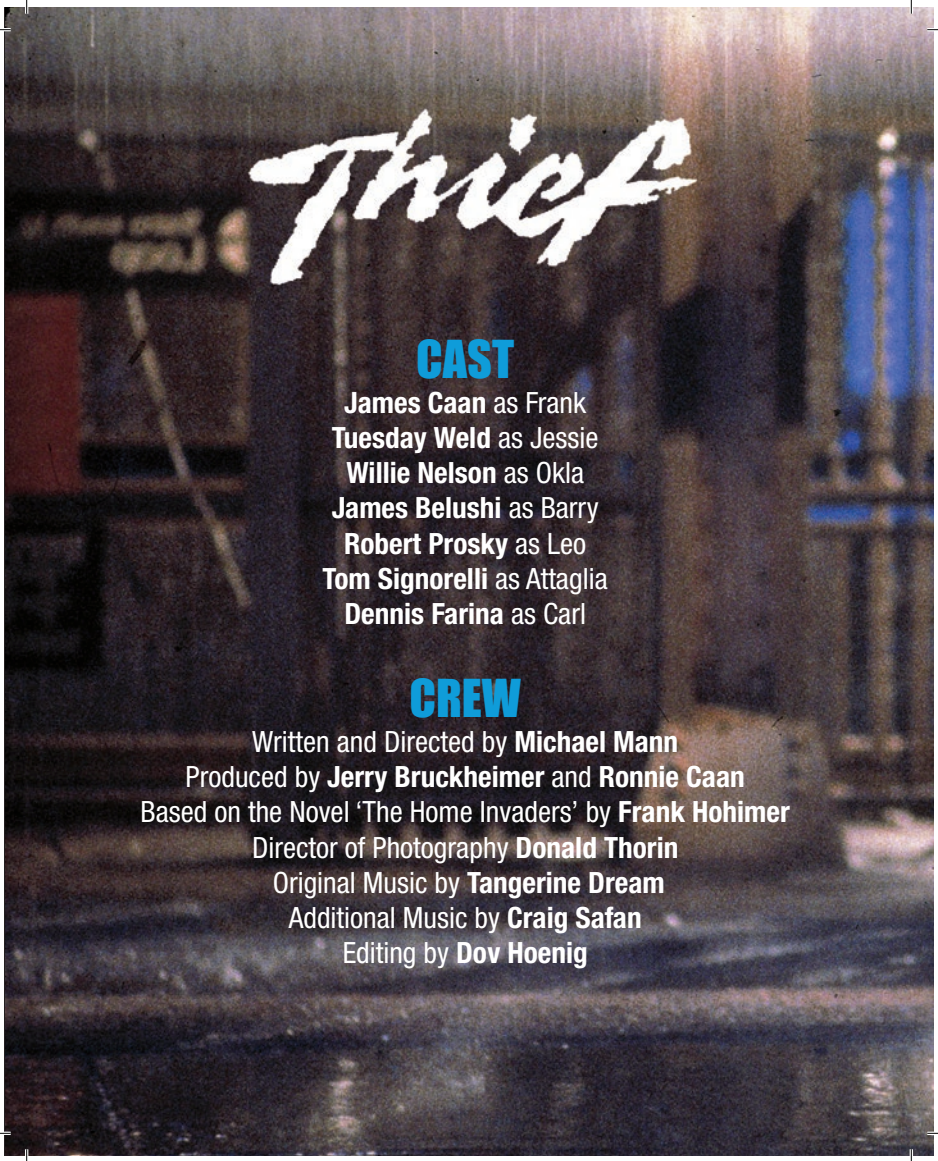
Thief

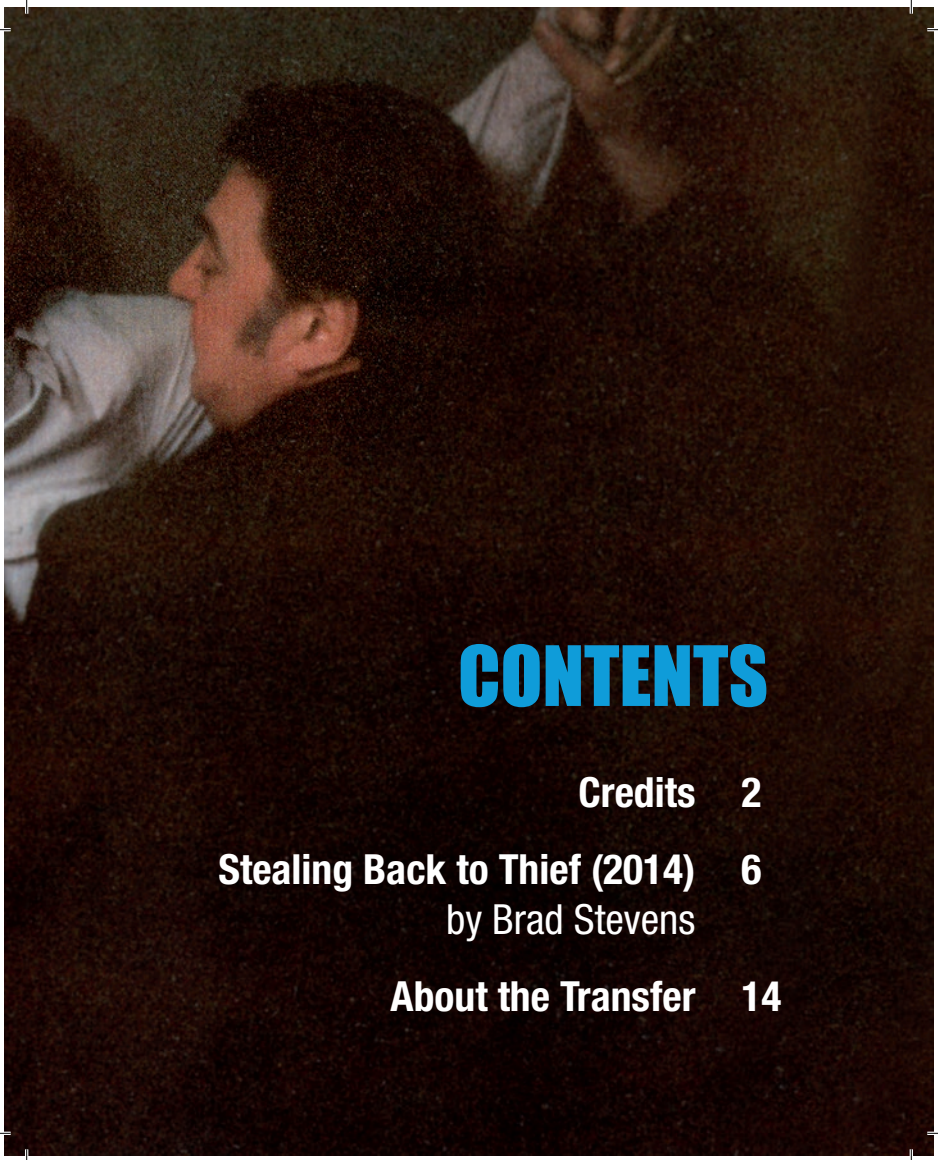


CAST

James Caan as Frank
Tuesday Weld as Jessie
Willie Nelson as Okla
James Belushi as Barry
Robert Prosky as Leo
Tom Signorelli as Attaglia
Dennis Farina as Carl

CREW

Written and Directed by **Michael Mann**
Produced by **Jerry Bruckheimer** and **Ronnie Caan**
Based on the Novel 'The Home Invaders' by **Frank Hohimer**
Director of Photography **Donald Thorin**
Original Music by **Tangerine Dream**
Additional Music by **Craig Safan**
Editing by **Dov Hoenig**



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STEALING BACK TO THIEF

by Brad Stevens

WARNING: the following essay contains significant plot spoilers.

The rapid cancellation of Michael Mann's last two television series – *Robbery Homicide Division* (2002-03) and *Luck* (2011-12) – considered alongside the popularity of his big-budget action movies – *Collateral* (2004) and *Public Enemies* (2009), for example – suggests a filmmaker who primarily attracts cinemagoers rather than small screen viewers. But in the 1980s, the situation was quite different. Mann's *Miami Vice*, which ran from 1984 to 1990, was among the most successful shows of its time, whereas his eighties feature films – *Thief* (1981), *The Keep* (1983) and *Manhunter* (1986) – all lost money.

By the time he came to make *Thief*, Mann had already directed a widely admired TV movie, *The Jericho Mile* (1979), which received some theatrical distribution in Europe. *The Jericho Mile* was about a prisoner who takes up distance running while serving a life sentence. This interest in criminal psychology would become one of the distinguishing features of Mann's oeuvre, and is certainly evident in his official cinematic debut.

Thief belongs to that curious moment – bracketed by those blockbuster sensations *Star Wars* (1977) and *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) – when, although major studios were still vaguely willing to finance films that challenged the status quo, the results tended to be problematic, fitting in awkwardly with a cinematic landscape dominated by fantasies aimed at children and childish adults. During the early to mid-70s, *The Godfather* (1972), *Taxi Driver* (1976) and *Nashville* (1975) exuded a confidence based on the assumption that there was a demand for films which subjected American values to substantial criticism. Such ambitious works as slipped through the cracks between 1977 and 1982 – *Heaven's Gate* (1980), *Cruising* (1980), *Raging Bull* (1980), *Prince of the City* (1981), *Blow Out* (1981), *Cutter's Way* (1981) – appear far more hesitant, as if their creators knew themselves to be addressing an audience which, for all intents and purposes, no longer existed. *Thief* is a case in point. Despite the film's tremendous stylistic assurance, it seems haunted by the fear that, in failing to reproduce the characteristics of those feel-good entertainments favoured by an American public shortly to elect Ronald Reagan, it was appealing solely to a handful of viewers who

felt marginalised by the dominant culture. Inevitably, *Thief* proved to be a commercial failure in a year when the box office was dominated by *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

Although officially an adaptation of *The Home Invaders*, Frank Hohimer's autobiographical account of his life as a burglar, published in 1975[1], *Thief* bears only a vague resemblance to its ostensible source. Hohimer's preference for robbing houses has little connection with the hi-tech safecracking activities of *Thief*'s protagonist, who specifically refuses to carry out 'home invasions', which explains why Mann decided not to use the book's title[2]. Indeed, Mann has claimed that his central character, despite sharing Frank Hohimer's first name (we never learn his surname), was actually based on John Santucci, a professional jewel thief. Santucci plays a small role in *Thief*, as does former police officer Dennis Farina, who once arrested him. Santucci and Farina (who both served as technical consultants on the film) later became Mann regulars, notably in the series *Crime Story* (1986-88).

During an interview broadcast on British television in 1983, Mann eloquently described his research technique: "You develop within yourself methods of how you penetrate into a world that doesn't want to know about you. They don't want to talk to you. They're not impressed that you come from Los Angeles, that you're from United Artists or Paramount Pictures Corporation. They could really care less. They have no reason to talk to you. They're very disciplined people, they lead very quiet lives on the surface. And you develop techniques to gain confidence, to gain access, and to penetrate into there and find out about it... *Thief* was the story of a man who was Frank, who lived that life, and appears in the movie. The man's name is John Santucci. And six or seven major thieves played acting roles in the picture. There's about another six or seven heavy duty detectives, who I had mostly playing thieves in the picture. All the techniques that are used in the picture, all the technology, it's all real. But that's the easy part. What's the hard part is to find out what a character like John Santucci – or Frank, played by Jimmy Caan – how he feels about his wife. That's more difficult. That's also more interesting. How he feels about his family. What would make him leave his family. 'Cause some of these guys would live with their family for fourteen years, then one day they're coming home, there's an unmarked car in front of their house, and they just keep going. And

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1 - 'Frank Hohimer' is actually a pseudonym for John Seybold. Frank Holman, a character in *Crime Story* played by Ted Levine, was reportedly based on him.

2 - *The Home Invaders* later became the title of a first season *Miami Vice* episode directed by Abel Ferrara, which also borrowed several details from Hohimer's book. The member of a 'torture gang' who uses his job parking cars outside a beauty parlour to obtain wealthy women's keys comes directly from Hohimer.

they'll never come back. And maybe the wife and kids'll hear from them in two years. I mean that's how cold some of these guys are."[3]

Mann's films have become notable for their surface perfection, every element rigorously controlled, each composition meticulously planned. Looking at *Thief* again, it is startling to be reminded that the director did not gradually achieve this mastery, but rather displayed it from the beginning of his career. Although Mann is clearly in love with images of the city (in this case his hometown, Chicago) at night, he is never guilty of mere pattern-making, his visuals always relating intimately to his thematic concerns. The pulsating lights on a hospital monitor seem as abstracted from the lives they measure as those neon signs Mann is irresistibly drawn to, and his characters are often framed against cityscapes which, in their chilly perfection, suggest that suppressing every recognisably human emotion is the only logical response to a society in which alienation has become the basic architectural principle. Like Walter Hill, Mann appears to have been heavily influenced by Jean-Pierre Melville, whose work was itself a peculiarly French variation on the standard tropes of the American crime film. But where Melville's *Le Samouraï* (1967) and *Le Cercle Rouge* (1970) observed their criminal protagonists from a contemplative distance, the primary function of *Thief*'s *mise-en-scène* – not just the imagery and editing, but also Tangerine Dream's pounding score – is to convey what it feels like to carry out a robbery. We are not simply shown Frank's experiences and perceptions; we are made to share them. When he becomes focused on the lock of a safe, Mann's camera swoops through it; when he relaxes at the end of a particularly difficult job, the music communicates his sense of triumph.

Although it is easy enough to see why Mann developed a reputation as a director more interested in visuals than performances, he often shows a remarkable sensitivity to the personas of his actors. Tuesday Weld regularly played women attempting to assert themselves against male-dominated backdrops, notably in Frank Perry's *Play It As It Lays* (1972) and Karel Reisz's *Who'll Stop the Rain* (aka *Dog Soldiers*, 1978). By bringing the full weight of those portrayals to bear on her character in *Thief*, Mann gives Weld's relatively minor role as Frank's girlfriend Jessie a depth and resonance it would not otherwise have had. At the film's centre, however, is James Caan, one of several American actors of his generation frequently cast as anti-establishment rebels whose lifestyles are determined by a temperamental ability to fit in with societal

3 - Michael Mann interviewed in *The Electric Theatre Show* (ITV, 1983). Compare Mann's comments here with the dialogue he wrote for Robert De Niro in *Heat* (1995): "Don't let yourself get attached to anything you are not willing to walk out on in thirty seconds flat if you feel the heat around the corner."

norms[4]. *Thief*'s key scene involves not the complex burglaries Frank commits, but rather his attempt to adopt a baby. When his application is rejected by the officious woman who interviews him during his visit to an adoption agency, Frank responds with a speech denouncing the process of dehumanisation this woman's behaviour implies. The clearest cinematic parallel here is with the classic moment from Bob Rafelson's *Five Easy Pieces* (1970) in which Jack Nicholson insults a waitress who refuses to take his order, but the scene actually bears a much closer resemblance to one in Karel Reisz's *The Gambler* (1974), whose protagonist, again played by Caan, attacks a bank teller refusing to let the Caan character's mother withdraw money because she does not have the correct identification. In all three cases, a harsh and unfeeling bureaucracy is represented either by women or, in *The Gambler*, an effeminate male (played by the young James Woods). These films are centrally concerned with traditional concepts of masculinity which have been rendered redundant by an increasingly feminised society, and thus can only be affirmed in opposition to that society. The life of crime appeals to Frank not for its financial rewards, but rather because it provides an appropriate stage for actions which, though they may well be meaningless, nonetheless involve the assertion of a brutal macho individuality (seen at its most ludicrous in the overdetermined male bodies of Stallone and Schwarzenegger) which can be perceived as rebellious simply because it has expunged every last trace of femininity. As Frank tells Leo (Robert Prosky), a Mafiosi attempting to convince him that he should work for the Mob[5], "I'm Joe-the-boss of my own body."

In this context, one of the film's most fascinating elements is the collage Frank has assembled from newspaper and magazine clippings, and which he claims contains all the elements of the life he hopes to eventually lead ("Nothing, nobody, can stop me making that happen."). When he reviewed *Thief* (under its rather bizarre UK release title *Violent Streets*) for the *Monthly Film Bulletin*, Richard Combs described this collage as "both the most sentimental and most abstract item in the film and somehow meaningless either way."[6] Yet the collage can easily be interpreted as neither sentimental nor abstract, functioning rather as a critical commentary on the

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4 - *Thief's* structure is strikingly similar to that of Norman Jewison's *Rollerball* (1975), in which Caan also played an individual whose skills were exploited by a corporate father figure claiming to have his best interests at heart.

5 - There is a (presumably intentional) echo here of Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather*, the film that established Caan as a star.

6 - *Monthly Film Bulletin* 569, June 1981, p. 122.

protagonist's assumptions, the product of Mann's sensibility rather than Frank's. It consists mainly of photographs depicting domestic contentment; a mother cradling a baby, various children, a suburban house with a car parked outside. Occupying a dominant position is a picture of Okla (Willie Nelson), Frank's prison mentor and a 'good' father figure structurally opposed to Leo's 'bad' father. The fact that many of these photographs are in black and white and seem to derive from the 1950s suggests the delusional nature of Frank's aspirations. In the *noir* world depicted by *Thief*, conventional domesticity can figure only as an antiquated illusion. At the edges of the collage are a pile of skulls and, even more disturbingly, a child whose features have been erased. The implication is that Frank's behaviour can be traced to a childhood trauma (also hinted at during the adoption agency scene), thus explaining his 'existential' decision to live totally in the present, the past forgotten, the future disposable. His rigid masculinity is essentially neurotic, and can fulfil itself only in death[7].

As a product of post-*Star Wars* Hollywood, *Thief* cannot conclude with Frank's demise. He is finally seen, wounded but very much alive, disappearing into the darkness after killing Leo and his henchmen. But, ironically, this apparently compromised ending is far more pessimistic than the one demanded by the film's narrative logic, in which Frank dies during the climactic shootout. When Frank walks away at the end, where on Earth can he be heading? Since he has already destroyed the car lot he owns, blown up his house, and decisively cut himself off from both Jessie and their child, there is nowhere left for him to go. John Wayne could still wander into the desert after completing his mission in *The Searchers* (1956), but in Michael Mann's America, there are no more frontiers left to tame, no desert for the hero to lose himself in. There is only the infernal city of film noir, stretching endlessly into the distance like a modern Inferno. Although it may have been motivated by a desire to pacify commercially-minded studio executives (the behind the camera equivalents of this film's Mafia hoods), *Thief*'s final shot is among the bleakest in U.S. cinema.

Brad Stevens is the author of* Monte Hellman: His Life and Films *(McFarland, 2003) and A*bel Ferrara: The Moral Vision *(FAB Press, 2004). His 'Bradlands' column appears regularly on Sight & Sound's website and his first two novels,* The Hunt *and its sequel* A Caution to Rattlesnakes*, were published in 2014 (Vamptasy).

7 - This is what links Mann's protagonists with those of Paul Schrader, though the concept of redemption, so crucial to Schrader's early work, is completely absent from Mann's.

ABOUT THE TRANSFER

Thief is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.85:1. This new HD master was produced by The Criterion Collection and delivered by MGM via Hollywood Classics.

The transfer was created in 4K resolution on a Northlight film scanner from the 35mm original camera negative. Director Michael Mann's original 35mm answer print was used as a colour reference, and Mann supervised and approved the entire transfer. The added Willie Dixon fisherman scene was sourced from a 35mm internegative made from a print. All picture restoration work was completed by The Criterion Collection.

The original stereo soundtrack was remastered to 5.1 surround at 24-bit from 35mm 4-track magnetic audio stems, and approved by Mann.

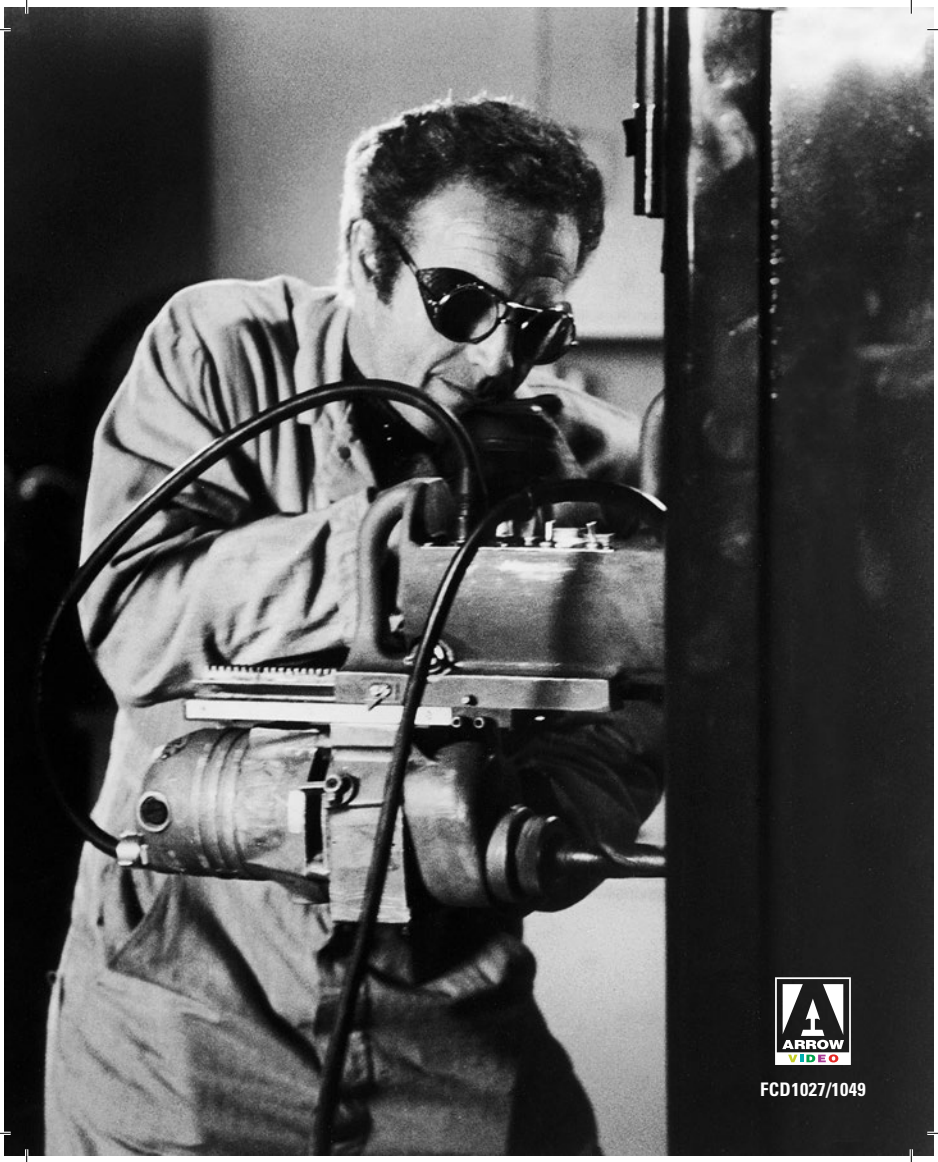
Transfer supervisors: Lee Kline/Criterion, Michael Mann
Colourist: Gregg Garvin/Modern VideoFilm, Burbank

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Discs and Booklet Produced by Anthony Nield
Executive Producer: Francesco Simeoni
Production Assistants: Louise Buckler, Liane Cunje
Technical Producer: James White
QC and Proofing: Michael Brooke, Anthony Nield
Authoring: David Mackenzie
Design: Jack Pemberton

SPECIAL THANKS

Barbara Alpert, Laure Audinot, James Caan, Chilmark Digital, Robert J. Emery, F.X. Feeney, Michael Felsher, Scott Grossman, INA, Alistair Leach, Elsa Lonne-Smith, MGM, Jennifer Rome, Brad Stevens, Melanie Tebb, Curtis Tsui, Twentieth Century Fox



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