

The Museum of Modern Art

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DON SIEGEL
May 3 - June 6, 1996
Roy and Niuta Titus Theater 1

A comprehensive retrospective of films by Don Siegel (1912-1991), an American master of the genre film, opens Friday, May 3 at The Museum of Modern Art. The most extensive program of Siegel's work ever assembled, **DON SIEGEL** features thirty-four of the director's thirty-six feature films, as well as seldom-seen shorts and television episodes, all marked by an unpretentious intelligence and singularity of vision.

The series opens with Siegel's acclaimed prison dramas, *Riot in Cell Block 11* (1954), which features Neville Brand in his acting debut, and *Escape from Alcatraz* (1979), which stars Clint Eastwood. It closes on Thursday, June 6 with rare screenings of *Flaming Star* (1960), with Elvis Presley in his finest screen role, and the 1957 classic *Baby Face Nelson*. Not seen in theaters for more than two decades, this revelation film features a chilling performance by Mickey Rooney as the brutal Prohibition-era gangster.

Few American directors in the postwar era have worked with the same assurance and economy as Siegel. He learned his craft in the 1930s and early 1940s as the creator and head of the montage department at Warner Bros. Montages for such films as *The Roaring Twenties* (1939), *They Drive by Night* (1940), *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (1942), and *Casablanca* (1942) demonstrated his gift for conveying the passage of time, changes in character, and shifts in tone simply and concisely.

By the late 1940s Siegel had become a director of low-budget feature films, neglected by critics at home but hailed as an auteur by *Cahiers du Cinéma* critics Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut. The versatile, no-nonsense Siegel could direct any action genre, from the gangster film

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(*The Killers*, 1964, and *Baby Face Nelson*) and film noir (*Private Hell 36*, 1954, and *The Lineup*, 1958) to the war film (*Hell Is for Heroes*, 1962) and the Western (*Duel at Silver Creek*, 1952, and *Flaming Star*).

His early *Riot in Cell Block 11* is a tough, unsentimental prison drama cited by Robert Bresson as an influence on *A Man Escaped* (1956), while *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) has become a much-imitated science fiction classic, praised as American cinema's most compelling parable about Cold War hysteria. The trademark Siegel protagonist -- a beleaguered, fiercely independent outsider -- appears often in these and other films.

Violence permeates Siegel's work, either held tenuously at bay or unleashed with a vengeance. The anti-heroes of his *policiers* are cops who, sensing that the traditional codes of justice have been violated or have become outmoded, are tempted to become vigilantes and renegades. Siegel cast Charles Bronson, Michael Caine, Steve McQueen, Robert Mitchum, Burt Reynolds, John Wayne, Richard Widmark, and, most notably, Clint Eastwood (who appeared in five Siegel films, including *The Beguiled*, 1971, *Escape from Alcatraz*, and *Dirty Harry*, 1971) to play his brooding and morally complex protagonists.

Siegel's often controversial innovations and subversions of many stylistic and thematic conventions resonate today in the films of Eastwood and Quentin Tarantino, James Cameron and Kathryn Bigelow, and in the sophisticated characterization and terse storytelling of such television shows as *Homicide* and *NYPD Blue*.

DON SIEGEL was organized by Joshua Siegel, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Film and Video, The Museum of Modern Art.

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For further information or film stills, contact Graham Leggat, Film and Video Press Representative, 212/708-9752.