

Sometimes Nothin' Can Be a Real Cool Hand

JEFFREY BLEHAR (in the National Review)

The film *Cool Hand Luke* (1967) is now 55 years old; that has no particular significance save that it's when I finally watched it for the first time a month ago. What is more significant is that I haven't stopped thinking about it since.

For those unaware, *Cool Hand Luke* is the tale of a man (Paul Newman) sent to a prison chain-gang in the deep South for a minor act of vandalism (chopping down parking meters, the futility of which is symbolic) and who refuses to stop rebelling against unjust authority. He eventually pays the price for it.

Given its status as an acknowledged cinematic classic, it's downright bizarre that I had somehow avoided seeing it until now. My memories of Newman come from his youth (the hungry pool shark in *The Hustler*), his work alongside Robert Redford (*Butch Cassidy & the Sundance Kid* and *The Sting*), and his remarkable late-middle-age turn in *The Verdict* (quite simply one of the most compelling legal dramas ever filmed). And yet when you close your eyes and think of Newman, you think of *Cool Hand Luke*. Even I did in my mind, despite never having seen the film. It's his classic image: impossibly bright-blue eyes, a quiet, manly, intelligently rebellious streak, and that smile. (The film knows this and leans into it so hard that there is a "cliche montage" of his smiling face from various scenes at the end of it. And because it's Paul Newman, this works.)

Aside from Newman's star turn, *Luke* benefits from inspired casting all around. It's easy to see why Strother Martin's performance as The Captain, Luke's oppressor as warden of the prison, has become such an iconic portrait of evil (and not just for those of us raised on the corny Guns 'N Roses ballad "Civil War"): It is impeccably well characterized. The acting choices Martin makes — his unique gait, his vocal inflections, the way his normally placid, considered affect curdles tighter into a brittle, panting rhythm when flustered — result in one of the starkest embodiments of the insolence of office ever put on film. When Martin delivers his famous speech declaring to the prisoners (after Luke has temporarily escaped and been recaptured) that "what we got here is *failure to communicate*," his visible insecurity — enraged that he cannot command this man to obey him, enraged that Luke wields a

moral authority over the prisoners that his physical authority will never approach — drips off of every quivering word he enunciates.

Beyond that, however, the cast is stocked with remarkable smaller performances: Dennis Hopper (in his pre-*Easy Rider* days), Harry Dean Stanton, and Joe Don Baker (the *Mystery Science Theater 3000* fan in me took immediate notice) all make memorable appearances. But aside from Martin it is obviously George Kennedy, as Luke's persecutor-turned-disciple "Dragline," who commands attention. For a child of 1980, Kennedy is a revelation: The man I had previously associated with *The Naked Gun* or [B-movies about genetically mutated stowaway cats](#) here exudes hyperactive energy, transforming from jail-yard bully into awestruck friend once he finally takes Luke's full measure in a brutal boxing match and a later game of cards (Luke displays similar qualities in both).

Cool Hand Luke is not perfect. There are clear flaws in tone and pacing. For a film that otherwise brilliantly mines the innate laconic power of Newman's tiniest utterances and facial gestures for meaning, the segment in the middle where Luke pauses to have a long discussion with his dying mother is jarringly clumsy, a blemish on the screenplay all the more remarkable because it is both the movie's sole misstep and, alas, also a *major* one. For a thuddingly literal eight minutes of soap operatics, the psychological subtlety of the film's dominant narrative style disappears, replaced instead with a wholly unnecessary *deus-ex-mamina* discussion of Luke's past that adds little to his character (except to sanctify him a bit more) and answers questions better left unresolved. We don't need to know *why* this person is. We are interested in knowing *who* this person is.

And who he is, of course, is . . . you guessed it, Jesus. The basic Christ allegory of *Cool Hand Luke* is impossible to miss and fundamental to the meaning of the film: In visual iconography, thematics, and plotting, Newman's Luke is a rebellious echo of societal impulses that were then, in late 1966, surging to the forefront of American culture. Add in a self-sacrificially Christian-themed twist to provide the moral ballast to the choices he makes and the authorities he mocks.

Yet despite occasional heavy-handedness in visual symbolism, the complexity of the screenplay is so compelling that I've been turning it over in my head for the past month. Luke is fascinating as a Christlike martyr. But in what is more than just a typical Christ allegory, he's also a quasi-Greek (perhaps Shakespearean is closer to the mark) tragic archetype. His fatal flaw, his nemesis always hinted at but rarely stated directly (and thus so much more effective as characterization)? His unquenchable, almost mindless refusal to give up. To never quit, to never cease fighting back if your opponent is In The Wrong. An earlier generation reckoned with the *Rebel without a Cause*. Lucas Jackson was something different: The rebel *with* a cause. But that cause — and this is its

key subversion — was the cause of rebellion itself. And it undoes him, even as it completes him.

Luke fights a losing battle, a battle he tacitly knows [he will lose even before he has begun to fight it](#). But he doesn't have to accept it, and therefore refuses. His final moment comes when he rises to spit Strother's Martin's famous "failure to communicate" speech back in his face as he waits for his death. *We have never understood one another, because I cannot be broken by the likes of you.* A man with nothing left to gamble on except his own sense of dignity and self-possession, he plays the one card left to him: defiance. It is a losing hand.

But then again, sometimes nothin' can be a real cool hand.

2nd Review from the Hollywood Reporter

‘Cool Hand Luke’: THR’s 1967 Review

BY [JOHN MAHONEY](#)

OCTOBER 31, 2019 5:48AM

On Nov. 1, 1967, Warner Bros. unveiled director Stuart Rosenberg's prison drama *Cool Hand Luke*, starring Paul Newman, in theaters. The film went on to be nominated for four Oscars at the 40th Academy Awards, winning one in the supporting actor category for George Kennedy. The Hollywood Reporter's original review, headlined "Rosenberg's Megging on Pic [...]"

Stuart Rosenberg, with his second completed theatrical film, Warners' *Cool Hand Luke*, makes a powerful bid for a position among the top ranks of directors for the big screen. *Luke*, adapted for the screen by Donn Pearce and Frank R. Pierson from Pearce's novel of comradeship and individual conflict on a southern chain gang, is the product of Jack Lemmon's Jalem Productions and is a potentially strong release. Gordon Carroll produced with a cast featuring a formidable lineup of male actors, an outstanding cameo appearance by Jo Van Fleet, and Paul Newman, dropping his "H's" to star in the title role.

Newman's *Luke* is highly individual though enigmatic, a born loser, with more guts than brains, who has always tried to live free and above board. He finds himself assigned to the chain gang with the Dept. of Prisons Roads Company #36 as a result of a rebellious night of good-natured drunkenness and

roughhouse. Possessed of an unbreakable cool, he refuses to bow to the system or admit defeat in personal battles. To the men with whom he is imprisoned he becomes a symbol of indomitable individuality. Yet human symbols are always vulnerable, and just as quickly, they reject him, when it appears that he has chosen to grovel at the feet of his wardens to avoid further harassment. It is simply a ruse by which he hopes to facilitate his third attempt to escape. It is foredoomed and his martyrdom fertilizes the perpetuation of his legend.

Well written by Pearce and Pierson and acted by a most talented ensemble of performers, Luke succeeds as both a highly humorous and deeply dramatic study of the immolation of human spirit in captivity and as an allegory. Luke is clearly a contemporary Christ figure, an analogy complete to his denial by the disciples, the final agony in the garden, the confrontation with a betrayer and his sacrifice for humanity. These do not emerge as parody, though there are moments of visual overstatement as in the lingering, overhead shot of the exhausted Newman in a crucifixion pose. This follows Newman's accomplishment in the small miracle of consuming 50 hard-boiled eggs.

The balance between story and significance is a delicate one, but Rosenberg maintains it overall, despite a few moments of arty camera work and some heavy-handed underlining of the Christ parallel. Though at times Rosenberg seems to overextend probing use of zooms in closeups, panoramic reflections in sunglasses and repetitious use of traveling closeups of walking feet, these moments do not disrupt the whole, do not intrude upon audience involvement with the characters and conflicts. That they do not is a tribute to Rosenberg's controlled style, that highly elusive and often lamented ingredient that distinguishes the work of the finest filmmakers.

Given that direction, and excellent characterization and dialogue by Pearce and Pierson, the large cast shines. Newman is excellent as Luke, though ultimately the situations and the reactions of his peers tell us most of what we know of him. As a final montage reminds us at the end of the film, what we remember of him is his cool smile throughout the punishments to "get his mind right" and a succession of quixotic gestures of defiant individualism. But Newman is among a few current stars who could so totally embody the spirit of today's uncommitted individual.

As the boisterous leader of the barracks community, who loses a fight in which he bests the still slugging remnant of Newman, George Kennedy gives an outstanding supporting performance as Newman's staunchest, though weak, supporter. One is reminded of the sentimental, beefy performances of Victor McLaglen. In a brief appearance as Newman's dying mother, Jo Van Fleet

delivers one of her finest performances in a scene which is also Newman's best, the film's best and one of those scenes which should be coveted by actors' workshops for years to come.

Strother Martin provides a superior portrait of sorghum-coated decadence as the Captain of the compound. J.D. Cannon is allowed less footage than his billing suggests, but delivers well in his few scenes. Lou Antonio, as one of the men Newman challenges to "stop feedin' off of me; get out there yourself," makes a promising impression, while Robert Drivas, Dennis Hopper, Dean Stanton, Richard Davalos, Marc Cavell and Wayne Rogers etch distinctive individual characterizations. Clifton James is good as the leader of the barracks, while Luke Askew and Morgan Woodward stand out in roles as bosses of the road gang. Joy Harmon is lasciviously sensuous in a mimed sequence wherein she taunts the men while washing a jalopy. Author Pearce also plays a bit part.

Conrad Hall's Technicolor and Panavision is exceptional, glowing with the burnished colors of location sites at the San Joaquin River Delta in California. Sound by Larry Jost and the sharp editing of Sam O'Steen also deserve applause, as do the carefully authenticated settings by Cary O'Dell. Lalo Schifrin's score is perhaps the best he has done for films, a credit to the pervading unity of effort in the production. He has incorporated folk spirituals, source instrumentation and submerged rumblings of violent rhythms to underscore the burning torments of work on the roads. — John Mahoney, originally published May 31, 1967.