

An Affinity for Wagner, Michelangelo, & Sadistic Torture:

The Implicit Homosexuality of Captain Munsey in Jules Dassin's Brute Force

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ABSTRACT: Known for its transgressive narratives and anti-hero characters, film noir is an American film cycle that dominated the box office in the 1940s and 50s. At the time, homosexuality was banned from American cinema under the Production Code, yet film noir still managed to offer subtle and implicit representations of homosexuality. The sadistic prison guard in Jules Dassin's *Brute Force* (1947), Captain Munsey, is one such example and the film uses many signifiers to suggest his homosexuality. The implications that such a reading has on the narrative of the film are immense, and this paper merely scratches the surface of possible interpretations. Despite film noir offering some of the earliest portrayals of homosexuality in American cinema, scholarship on representations of homosexuality in film noir is few and far between. By revisiting *Brute Force* and examining how it manages to queercode Captain Munsey under the restraints of the Production Code, this paper seeks to spark new conversation among film scholars regarding homosexuality in film noir, and more broadly, films made under the Production Code. Moreover, the discourse surrounding representations of LGBTQ characters in American cinema has become increasingly mainstream, and by revisiting films from the past and analyzing them from a modern perspective, scholars can seek to gain new insight into the history of LGBTQ representation in cinema.

KEYWORDS: American cinema, film noir, homosexuality, LGBTQ+ representation, production code, queercoding

Whether intentional or not, the villain at the center of Jules Dassin's 1947 film *Brute Force*, Captain Munsey, is implicitly homosexual. In a chilling performance by Hume Cronyn, Munsey delights in blackmailing, punishing, and torturing the inmates of Westgate Penitentiary. Before Munsey even appears on screen, the film captures one of the inmates referring to a fellow inmate who has died as "another dead guy, compliments of Captain Munsey" (00:04:34), implying that death at the hands of Munsey is routine. This penchant for violence and sadistic torture is complicated by the fact that all of Munsey's victims are men. Due to the inherently sexual nature of sadism in film, as theorized by Linda Williams, which typically sees women victimized as a way of appealing to the male gaze (Williams 1991, 6), Munsey's proclivity for victimizing men potentially indicates a repressed homosexual desire. Under the Production Code, a set of censorship guidelines that American studios followed from 1934 to 1968, which banned sexuality, nudity, profanity, interracial relations, and violence—among other things—homosexuality was classified under the coded term "sexual perversion" (Noriega 1990, 22) and was heavily censored. Despite this, gay tropes and stereotypes were often used to mark characters, typically villains, as especially deviant. While there is a long history of film antagonists being coded as gay or queer, including in film noir (Dyer 1977, 18–21), there is an overall lack of academic study around the topic and even less focus on Munsey and *Brute Force*. Therefore, this essay will explore which specific signifiers the film uses to indicate that Munsey is a homosexual, including body language, costuming, and the use of Wagner's *Tannhäuser* and Michelangelo's "The Rebellious Slave." This essay will also explore the implications of such a reading on the larger narrative in relation to the depiction of homosocial bonds in predominantly masculine environments; the threats homosexuality purportedly poses to hegemonic masculinity; the link between queercoding and Nazi-coding; and how such depictions of villainous characters as homosexual deviants inherently harm the queer community.

What Makes Munsey Gay?

While there is no direct mention of Munsey's sexuality in the film, the *mise-en-scène* and characterization suggest that Munsey could be a homosexual, albeit a repressed one. His effeminate way of speaking, in a high and nasal tone with a softness that feels almost tender or loving, is a common stereotype associated with gay men. Furthermore, his small stature and scrawny frame put him in direct opposition to the inmates, particularly the protagonist, played by Burt Lancaster, who has

a muscular frame and taller stature and symbolizes traditional masculinity (see fig. 1 and 2).

Munsey's way of dressing is another signifier of his sexuality. While he wears a uniform similar to the rest of the prison guards, Munsey always looks impeccably put together, with precisely creased fatigues and a perfectly placed hat. Munsey does not wear a wedding ring, and while this alone does not indicate that he is gay, it is odd for a man of his status and age to be unmarried, especially in the 1940s. The lack of a female significant other in his life—or of any other family or close friends—is confirmed later in the film inside Munsey's office, where the only photograph seen hanging is one of himself. Not only does this support a reading of Munsey as alienated and alone, but it could be suggestive of how "during the twentieth century, He never married was a code phrase used by obituary writers in the UK to signify that the deceased had been gay" (Stollznow 2020, 105).

Munsey's body language is also suggestive of popular gay stereotypes, as he is often seen lounging in chairs with his legs crossed in a feminine manner (see fig. 3). He is also quite comfortable with laying his hands on the inmates, and not just for violent purposes. In the dining hall, he gently places his hand on the shoulder of an inmate who is sick (see fig. 4) and later, leans in



Figures 1 and 2. Examples of the physical difference between Cronyn and Lancaster. (*Brute Force*, directed by Jules Dassin, 1947, 00:05:11 and 00:06:10.)

close to Gallagher while speaking with him. When he visits Lister in his cell near the middle of the film, he sits close to him and brushes his hand as he reaches for his mail (see fig. 5). While these can be read as intimidation tactics, it is unclear why Munsey would need to resort to this since he already holds power over these men, as demonstrated by the entire room falling silent when he enters the dining hall. Therefore, it appears that Munsey is actively choosing to be physically close to the men; this choice can be read as another implication of his desire for men, with touch and closeness standing in as an outlet for that desire.



Figures 3. Munsey's impeccable dress and feminine way of lounging in chairs on full display. (Brute Force, 1947, 01:04:35.)

Figures 4 and 5. Physical contact and closeness with the inmates appears to be no issue for Munsey. (Brute Force, 1947, 00:10:10 and 00:38:30.)

The Interrogation

Near the end of the film, a particularly homoerotic

interrogation scene takes place between Munsey and an inmate, Miller, played by Sam Levene. Filled with homosexual symbolism, it is perhaps the most obvious display of Munsey's homo-sadism, in which violence against men gives him sexual pleasure and can be read as allegorical to a sex scene, where Munsey's homosexual desire is released through violence as opposed to sexuality.

When Munsey is first shown in the interrogation scene, he is partially undressed in an undershirt while polishing his gun. This state of undress is unusual for Munsey, who is typically well put-together, and the suggestive oiling of the phallic object that is his gun is a very provocative image (see fig. 6). The artworks that decorate his office are, upon closer examination, statues and images of nude men. For Munsey to be surrounded by images of naked men while half-undressed and manhandling a phallic object suggests that Munsey is preparing for the interrogation in a sexual way.

The overture to Wagner's *Tannhäuser* plays throughout the scene, and a shot of the opposite side of the office reveals that the music is coming from a record player (see fig. 7). While some may argue that Dassin's decision to use *Tannhäuser* functions as a reference to Munsey's Hitler-esque tendencies and dictatorial rule over the prison—Wagner was one of Hitler's favourite composers, and his music was often played at Nazi ceremonies and celebrations (Ticker 2016, 55–66)—Munsey's taste can also be read as a homosexual signifier, as a love of artwork and classical music, especially opera, is a stereotype often associated with gay men. This implication is reinforced considering that Wagner's sexuality is widely disputed due to his years-long affair with the King of Bavaria (Carpenter qtd. in Norton 1998) and that many members of the queer community view *Tannhäuser* as an allegory for the gay experience (Clarke n.d.). The opera follows the young knight *Tannhäuser* as he struggles to choose between his lover, Venus, and the sexual ecstasies he has discovered with her, and the sacred, yet chaste, life of knighthood. Choosing Christian knighthood can be read as a decision to remain morally 'pure,' or bound to a life of heterosexuality, while choosing Venus and a life of sexual fulfillment can be read as a decision to live freely as a homosexual. The dilemma of choosing between conformity (heterosexuality) and authenticity (homosexuality) is a common concern for members of the queer community; due to the inclusion of *Tannhäuser*, one wonders whether Munsey is reckoning with the same internal dilemma. There are further connections between *Tannhäuser* and homosexuality, as Oscar Wilde discusses *Tannhäuser* in *The Picture of Dorian*

Gray. This text is important to the gay community and is itself a text thematically concerned with homosexuality and homosexual desire (Endres 2016, 67–85). In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde uses Tannhäuser as a symbol of gay desire, where the music itself is so powerful that it can stir up even the most hidden of desires within his protagonist. Considering this context, it is clear that Munsey listening to Tannhäuser as he beats Miller arouses his homosexual desires and may even explain why the beating is so brutal, as though he



Figure 6. Munsey polishes his gun in a suggestive manner, while artwork of nude men adorns his office.
(*Brute Force*, 1947, 1:17:07.)

Figure 7. Michelangelo's The Rebellious Slave on the wall while Wagner's Tannhauser plays on the record player.
(*Brute Force*, 1947, 01:17:30.)

is overwhelmed by the feelings and desires brought up by the music that he takes it out on Miller. Therefore, the use of this specific piece of music, which is strongly connected to homosexuality, is one of the most explicit allusions to Munsey's implicit homosexuality.

The shot of the record player is also important as it reveals Michelangelo's "The Rebellious Slave," which hangs on the wall above it (see fig. 7). Michelangelo is a gay historical figure, and one of his series of sculptures also known as "Prisoners," which includes "The Rebellious Slave," portrays partially or completely nude men trapped in stone as if trying to free themselves. This series has been read by many as an allegory for attempting to escape the material world and its trappings in favour of pursuing desire ("Michaelangelo's Prisoners"). By having homosexual desires and being unable to act on them, Munsey himself is a kind of Rebellious Slave. He is trapped in a prison of his own making, literally and metaphorically, but yearns for an outlet for his desire. Munsey is the rebellious one because he does find an outlet, albeit a violent one, for his desire.

In the same scene, the guard brings Miller into the office as Munsey washes his hands. Miller is put into a chair close to Munsey's desk and handcuffed with his arms crossed, unable to move freely and forced to face Munsey, who sits uncomfortably close to Miller and speaks gently and softly to him, treating the interrogation more like a seduction than an attempt to procure a confession. When Munsey doesn't get the answer he wants, he backhands Miller, then draws the shades in his office and asks the guard to leave (see fig. 8 and 9). Threatening Miller with a length of rubber hose (another phallic object, like the gun, held near his groin), Munsey asks again for Miller to confess (see fig. 10). When Miller does not answer, Munsey turns up the music and proceeds to beat Miller with the rubber hose. In another context, the demand for privacy, followed by the drawing of the shades and the increase of the volume of the music would have sexual connotations and would precede an offscreen sexual encounter between lovers. Instead, a mostly off-screen sadistic beating takes place. This beating indicates some level of homosexual desire and reinforces the reading of Munsey's sadism as a psychosexual displacement of his repressed homosexual desire.

The scene concludes with Munsey beating Miller nearly unconscious, only to determine that Miller has no information for him. Turning off the music and throwing away the rubber hose with a look of disgust, he calls in the guard to have Miller taken away, and proceeds to wash his hands, an action that may symbolize him



Figures 8 and 9. Munsey draws the shades so he can be alone and up close with the handcuffed Miller. (Brute Force, 1947, 01:18:50 and 01:19:10.)

Figure 10. Munsey and his rubber hose, face to face with Miller. (Brute Force, 1947, 01:20:45.)

washing his hands of his sins, or in other words, purifying himself of the violent expression of his homosexual desire. The film is not shy to admit that Munsey is a sadist—as Dr. Walters says to Munsey at one point in the film: “The more pain you inflict, the more pleasure you get” —and this, alongside many suggestions of homosexuality, is an intentional means of magnifying Munsey’s sexual perversion and vileness.

Re-Interpreting the Narrative?

Prison is a predominantly masculine environment, and thus *Brute Force* is an extremely masculine film. In order to offset the homosexual undertones that are often present in prison and war movies due to the near exclusion of women, the film seeks to emphasize the perverted manifestation of the male-dominated environment through Munsey’s sadistic tendencies. Because the men of the prison are often depicted in intimate situations, including sharing their desires and heartaches with each other late at night, undressing in front of one another, and sleeping six to a cell, Munsey’s perverted sexuality reduces this homoerotic tension. While it may appear to be the result of the heavy censorship and ban on homosexuality in the Production Code, modern films have also employed such tactics. For example, in Frank Darabont’s 1994 film *The Shawshank Redemption*, the vilest antagonists of the film are a group of gay gangbangers, who pervert the all-male environment of the prison by raping Andy repeatedly; their violent actions make the deep and loving friendship between Andy and Red seem platonic and non-homosexual. In *Brute Force*, the homosocial bonds are offset by the sexual expression of Captain Munsey’s sadistic treatment of the men, freeing the prisoners from perceived homosexuality.

When placed alongside the rugged, physically strong, and traditionally masculine Burt Lancaster, Cronyn’s effeminate, slender, and shorter Munsey does not stack up. In addition to his physical shortcomings, Munsey’s implied homosexuality amplifies this lack of masculinity. Though his lack of masculine traits does not alone suggest that he is gay, it does reduce his perception as a man by other men, which is concerning in a male-dominated environment like a prison. The emasculate villain is widely used in film noir, as it amplifies the threat posed to traditional society and hegemonic masculinity. As James Naremore (1998) writes, “...classic noir was almost obsessed with sexual perversity. The villains... tend to be homosexual aesthetes... or homosexual Nazi sadists (*Brute Force*) who threaten the values of a democratic and somewhat proletarian masculinity” (98–99). Munsey’s sadistic ruling over the men is not only a sexual outlet, but a way of reasserting his dominance over the traditionally masculine men who threaten his effem-

inate masculinity. Within this interpretation, Munsey's death signifies the killing of the perverted and profane. As Burt Lancaster throws him down to his death while the other prisoners cheer from below, Munsey's murder is the ultimate example of 'proper' homosocial relations, in which the prisoners band together to eliminate the 'evil' homosexual.

James Naremore's (1998) description of Munsey as a "homosexual Nazi sadist" (98–99) supports the strong correlation between the queercoding of villains and the Nazi-coding of villains in film noir and more broadly, American cinema. Despite a lack of academic work on the subject, it can be argued that many American films—from Ralph Fiennes' scrawny, nasal-toned Amon Goethe in *Schindler's List* to Christoph Waltz's childish, orally-fixated Hans Landa in *Inglourious Bastards*, and most recently Taika Waititi's sexually ambiguous Hitler in *Jojo Rabbit*—depict Nazis as effeminate and implicitly homosexual. While Munsey is not a Nazi, his character is Nazi-coded: his authoritarian rule over the prison echoes the fascist Nazi regime; his precise uniform and attention to detail rival the ruthless perfectionism of Adolf Hitler; and his sadism and brutality parallel the cruelty of a Schutzstaffel (SS) officer. Representations of Nazi and Nazi-esque villains as queercoded are inherently problematic, especially for members of the queer community, though the consequences of such depictions have yet to be determined.

Conclusion

While Munsey may not be intentionally homosexual, it is hard to ignore the many gay signifiers throughout the film. In Production Code films, those who are not 'morally pure' are killed at some point in the narrative to punish them for their sins; Munsey's death continues this pattern, and his death is necessary to punish the homosexual for his 'sins.' It is not difficult to imagine that Dassin imbued Munsey with gay qualities to further pervert his character and make him a more effective villain. Representations of queer characters as villainous and sexually and morally perverse are incredibly harmful to the queer community and highlight the undercurrent of homophobia still prevalent in Hollywood films. While it may be argued that bad representation is better than no representation, why is it that when filmmakers want to make a villain even more deviant, they often employ gay stereotypes? This is just one of many questions that require further exploration within the study of queercoding in cinema. While there are few sources that cite Munsey as an implicitly gay character, it is important to remember the censorship of the era required filmmakers to be extremely subtle. As Richard Dyer writes in his paper "Homosexuality

and Film Noir," "[s]ome of the first widely available images of homosexuality in our time were those provided by the American film noir" (Dyer 1977, 18). The implications of Dyer's statement—that the first commercially available images of homosexuality were also depictions of perversion and immorality—have immense potential for study by other film scholars. With the aid of a modern lens and a close analysis of Captain Munsey, it is my greatest hope that this paper will reignite the conversation surrounding the representation of homosexuality in film noir under the Production Code and the effect such representations have had on the queer community.

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