



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

The Undercover Man

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

Picking through Joseph H. Lewis' diverse filmography, it is quite easy to find evidence of a director with a strong personality – and just as much evidence of one who never really found a subject. Lewis might almost embody the kind of caricatured figure that an anti-auteurist critic would hold up as the epitome of the cult of director: stylistic authority operating in a vacuum. Certainly, his last feature film, *Terror in a Texas Town*, shows him stylistically at full stretch with almost non-existent content – or at least material so banal that it is distended beyond meaningful interpretation by the director's mannerisms. In no sense did Lewis 'transcend' any of the genres in which he worked, nor tease out thematic continuities and consistencies through a variety of subjects. His stylistic extravagances and atmospheric flights of fancy seem prompted more by a response to something *within* the material, no matter how irredeemable it might be by external appearances.

Strong feelings rather than themes seem to account for the electrifying quality of his best work, but they don't mesh consistently with any particular genre or subject. Hence the critical confusion when confronted with his overall oeuvre, and the sense that even in his best films a lot is left unexplored when director and material mysteriously and incandescently ignite. His response to the 'gun craziness' of his one generally acknowledged masterpiece undoubtedly resulted in something of enduring and fascinating oddity. But behind that orgiastic display there is a blankness that is not really accounted for by an 'artful' reticence on psychological issues, which Andrew Sarris and others have favourably (and simplistically) compared to *Bonnie and Clyde*. The baroque flourishes of camera movement and angle that distinguish Lewis might be thought most appropriate to *noir* subjects – in whatever genre – and it is from these that Sarris presumably has taken his assessment that the director has a 'sombre personality'.

The Undercover Man, made the same year as *Gun Crazy*, would fit that mould, and one might almost recognise with a pleasurable purr how well Lewis has activated the familiar seamy tale of three federal men trying to crack a huge crime syndicate. A meeting with an underworld informer takes place in a cinema showing a newsreel of 'The Big Fellow's' latest exploits; a high shot of the detective later leaving the cinema includes an excited crowd across the street, before we see the spilled Crackerjack box that signals the informer's elimination; a police line-up sequence features threatening low angles of intimidated witnesses and a brilliant chiaroscuro division of space; various montages inevitably compress the business of picking up witnesses and collecting evidence; the climax lucidly lays out the action and throws in one unbeatable subjective shot of a major villain's death.

In atmospheric terms, the film is also admirably attuned to the homely nature of the Treasury men's enquiry: given the enormity of The Big Fellow's crimes, it is ironic, as one of the investigators complains, in their cubby-hole of an office stuffed with financial records over which they pore with adding machine and pencil, that '... three bookkeepers chase him for income tax.' In talking about the film, however (in *Cinema*, Vol. 7, No. 1), Lewis suggests the emotional rather than generic component that actually holds the film together: 'It was about Capone and gangsters and what not, yet there was a thread of warmth that any human being ... truly they all have to have the same thing, and that's love. Love from one man to another.' So much is obvious in the

conventional love-versus-duty conflict of Warren and his wife, although Lewis realises it with unconventional deftness, particularly the initial farewell in the dreary stake-out room, with the half-embarrassed, half-resentful agent played by James Whitmore dancing attendance (the scene of which Lewis talks most proudly in the same interview, improvised between Glenn Ford and Nina Foch at the point when he has decided to give up the job, is unfortunately missing entirely from the print under review).

The sentiment is reinforced, however, by the emotional entanglements of the Rocco family, and by the way Lewis plays out Rocco's death to emphasise its effect on his small daughter – who has shortly before begged her errant father to sign her school report card, a detail which ironically recalls how the Treasury men break the syndicate by comparing signatures with those on dummy bank account slips. But the crucial scene in the film's emotional sub-text is probably the confession of Sergeant Shannon – the grizzled policeman, despised by his superior, who has made up for a mistake in his past (when over-zealousness in going after the syndicate led to his demotion from captain) by playing things safe until his retirement. In an extended, apparently inconsequential conversation with Warren, Shannon mulls over his ambition of retiring to sit in the sun 'like a lizard' before dismissing it by giving Warren the inside information he needs. It is typical of Lewis that he confers on Shannon's monologue a lengthy tracking shot, while the later revelation that Shannon has shot himself is given the conventional clipped Hollywood emphasis. Lewis, in other words, more than pays his respects to the genre, while carrying out his own project that neither violates nor has much to do with it.

Richard Combs, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, March 1980

A letter from screenwriter Malvin Wald to *Sight and Sound*

Sir, – I read with great interest Philip French's article 'Incitement Against Violence' in your Winter 1967/68 issue. In it, Mr French made reference to three works on which I have writing credits – the films *Al Capone* (1959) and *The Undercover Man* (1949), and the CBS television show, *Albert Anastasia: His Life and Death* (1957).

Mr French might be interested in a few footnotes to his fascinating article. The film *The Undercover Man*, although directed by Joseph Lewis, was produced by director Robert Rossen, who directed such famous American films as *Body and Soul*, *All the King's Men* and *The Hustler*. Incidentally, during the making of *The Undercover Man*, we were forbidden by the American censors to mention Al Capone by name, and were forced to refer to him obliquely as 'The Big Fellow'. At first the censor refused to let us state that Capone owed the government over a million dollars in income taxes, but Harry Cohn, head of Columbia Studios, refused to give in – and we were allowed to mention the amount of money.

The first draft of *Al Capone* was turned down by the Hollywood censors. The script had to be rewritten with the story told from the viewpoint of an honest police officer who witnessed the rise of the Al Capone organisation, but was ineffective in fighting it because of political corruption and public apathy. Incidentally, I have just written a screenplay called *Jake*, based on the career of Jake Lingle, a Chicago reporter who served as a link between Capone and the city officials.

Yours faithfully,
Malvin Wald

***Sight and Sound*, Summer 1968**

THE UNDERCOVER MAN

Director: Joseph H. Lewis
Production Company: Columbia Pictures Corporation
A Production by: Robert Rossen
Assistant Director: Wilbur McGaugh
Written for the screen by: Sydney Boehm
Additional dialogue: Malvin Wald
Based upon an article by: Frank J. Wilson
Story Outline: Jack Rubin
Director of Photography: Burnett Guffey
Editor: Al Clark
Art Director: Walter Holscher
Set Decorator: William Kiernan
Gowns: Jean Louis
Music: George Duning
Music Director: M.W. Stoloff
Sound Engineer: Jack Goodrich

Cast

Glenn Ford (Frank Warren)
Nina Foch (Judith Warren)
James Whitmore (George Pappas)
Barry Kelley (Edward J. O’Rourke)
David Wolfe (Stanley Weinberg)
Frank Tweddell (Inspector Herzog)
Howard St. John (Joseph S. Horan)
John F. Hamilton (Sergeant Shannon)
Leo Penn (Sidney Gordon)
Joan Lazer (Rosa Rocco)
Esther Minciotti (Maria Rocco)
Angela Clarke (Theresa Rocco)
Anthony Caruso (Salvatore Rocco)
Robert Osterloh (Manny Zanger)
Kay Medford (Gladys LaVerne)
Patricia White (Muriel Gordon)
Peter Brocco (Johnny) *
Everett Glass (Judge Parker) *
Joe Mantell (newsboy) *
Michael Cisney (Fred Ferguson) *
Marcella Cisney (Alice Ferguson) *
Sidney Dubby (Harris) *
William Vedder (druggist) *

USA 1949
84 mins

* Uncredited

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

The Stranger

Wed 1 Sep 18:00 (+ pre-recorded intro by film critic Farran Smith Nehme); Fri 17 Sep 21:00; Fri 1 Oct 14:30

Detective Story

Thu 2 Sep 18:00; Fri 24 Sep 18:00; Sun 3 Oct 12:10

Double Indemnity

Thu 2 Sep 14:45; Sun 12 Sep 15:00; Wed 29 Sep 17:45 (+ intro by Lucy Bolton, Queen Mary University of London); Sat 2 Oct 20:50

Call Northside 777

Fri 3 Sep 20:40; Thu 9 Sep 14:30; Tue 14 Sep 17:50; Mon 20 Sep 17:50

The Hound of the Baskervilles

Sat 4 Sep 15:15; Thu 30 Sep 18:15

Cry of the City

Sun 5 Sep 18:10; Thu 9 Sep 18:10; Sat 18 Sep 21:00; Tue 21 Sep 14:45

The Undercover Man

Mon 6 Sep 18:10; Thu 23 Sep 14:45; Sun 26 Sep 12:00

The Big Sleep

Tue 7 Sep 20:45; Sun 19 Sep 11:00; Mon 4 Oct 17:45

Laura

Wed 8 Sep 18:10 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large); Thu 16 Sep 14:30; Tue 21 Sep 21:00; Fri 1 Oct 20:50

The Third Man

Wed 8 Sep 21:00; Fri 10 Sep 14:30; Tue 14 Sep 20:50; Sat 2 Oct 11:30

Rear Window

Thu 9 Sep 20:45; Wed 15 Sep 17:20 (+ pre-recorded intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large); Sat 25 Sep 11:30; Tue 28 Sep 20:45; Tue 5 Oct 14:30

The Big Heat

Sat 11 Sep 14:30; Mon 13 Sep 21:00; Wed 22 Sep 18:00 (+ intro by Simran Hans, writer and film critic for ‘The Observer’); Mon 27 Sep 17:50

Philosophical Screens: Temptation and Coincidence in ‘Double Indemnity’

Wed 29 Sep 20:00 Blue Room

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