



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

The Big Heat

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

Contemporary reviews

With *The Big Heat*, Fritz Lang found a subject – a small town dominated by a racketeer, and a young detective's determination to break his tyranny – in which he could combine American 'realism' and the more abstract, symbolic menace of his most characteristic melodrama. The result is a minor but frequently brilliant film that stands comparison with his best work.

The background, in its broad elements, is Chandlertown; but the temperament is a distinctive one. From the opening shot, the close-up of the revolver – with which the corrupt police chief is to shoot himself – lying on the table, there is a morose intentness on violence. The killings and outrages, of which there are an unusually large number, are not presented with gross physical emphasis or detail – several of them occur offscreen – but they determine, menacingly, the course of action.

Lagana (Alexander Scourby) the racketeer, who has police and civil officials as well as thugs in his pay, is characterised in a disturbing but remote manner, reminiscent of Lang's earlier great master-criminals. He lives in a large, soberly furnished house, guarded by strong-arm men and liveried servants, a portrait of his aristocratic-looking mother hangs over the study fireplace; once, through another door, a party given by his daughter is glimpsed in progress, jazz blaring out and teenager couples gaily jiving; and there is a remarkable image of Lagana standing on his terrace at night, talking of the need for care in rigging elections, advising a minion not to act rashly and arouse people's suspicions – while, behind his elegant smiling figure is a huge office block, squares of light in the windows, forming an abstract backdrop to the scene. We never see Lagana enjoying the fruits of his power, and when he boasts of it, it is for itself, not for what it brings. He hates to have his façade of respectability challenged, and most of all he takes pride in the fact that he gave his mother a fine house to live in before she died. This, incidentally, is no sentimental boast, but a statement of cold satisfaction that the myth of an 'exclusive' family has been completed. Like his predecessors, Lagana is a dedicated, joyless and solitary power-maniac.

In its greater variety of human comment, and its more intimate observation of character, *The Big Heat* marks a development in Lang's work. The policeman's cold-blooded, grasping widow, his anxious, fading mistress, the cruel sensual Vince (Lagana's righthand man) and his frivolous, childish girlfriend Debby – these are unusually rounded portraits, presented more acutely and vividly for themselves than is usual with Lang; and, at the centre, is the impressive, restrained figure of Bannion the detective (Glenn Ford) who persists, in the face of corrupt superiors, in his crusade against Lagana – even after one of his thugs has placed a bomb in his car and blown up his wife. This characterisation has a suggestion of moral force and human fervour that the enemies of Mabuse and Haighi never possessed. Bannion, like Eddie Taylor in *You Only Live Once*, is one of Lang's few personal heroes.

The texture of the film is richer and more concentrated than in any of his work since the '30s, and its tension slackens only in the last 20 minutes, due partly to some ambiguities (notably the unmotivated change of heart by Bannion's superior) in Sydney Boehm's otherwise excellently written script, and partly to Gloria Grahame's performance. Her Debby of the early scenes, immature, pleasure-loving, easily bored, easily delighted, is beautifully drawn; but after the horrific incident in which Vince, believing she has been treacherous, throws a pot of boiling coffee in her face and scars it, the character doesn't rise to the necessary intensity. Fleeing to Bannion for protection, Debby can at first talk only of the fact that one side of her face will be permanently disfigured, that she will no longer be desirable – it seems the end of the world to her. Later, she comes to see a kindness, a decency in Bannion that she has never encountered before, and which makes her want to help him. This growth, these complexities, the actress does not achieve, and as a result there is something unconvincing about the last scenes.

As well as revolvers, Lang uses other objects in the atmospheric German manner, notably the rows of gleaming brandy glasses that always introduce the scenes at the tawdry smart bar – a shadow of one even falls across a close-up of a clock on the wall. There is, too, a characteristically handled scene, very Mabuse in style, of the crippled old woman who helps Bannion identify his wife's murderer. She meets him on a wasteland plot adjoining a garage; the space is broken up by derelict cars and piles of scrap; she hobbles towards the wire fence by which Bannion is standing, and the camera shoots the whole scene through the wire-pattern of the fence. This is the only daylight location scene in the film, and its actuality is appropriately filtered; apart from a few nocturnal streets, *The Big Heat* is a resolutely interior film, distinguished from most contemporary American melodrama by its relatively formal approach to settings, its indifference to documentation. The world of shadows persists, and their force reminds one of Lotte Eisner's remark that the shadow, in Lang's films, is always an image of destiny.

Gavin Lambert, *Sight & Sound*, Autumn 1955

It seems a long time since Fritz Lang gave us a good film: in fact, the sense of strain and stylistic pretentiousness in his recent work – when it has not been mere commercial hokum – had almost made one abandon hope. This makes it the more unfortunate that his latest film should have passed almost unnoticed. For it is an extremely good thriller, distinguished by precisely those virtues which Lang's pictures have in the past few years so painfully lacked: tautness and speed; modesty of intention; intelligent, craftsman-like writing. Above all, it is directed with a dramatic incisiveness, a sharp-edged observation that keeps the pitch of interest and excitement continuously high.

Adapted from a novel by William McGivern, *The Big Heat* is scripted by Sydney Boehm. He has not done so well since *Union Station* – a film which this rather recalls in its ingenious construction and clever, likely motivation. The handling here, however, is more frankly melodramatic, and the world evoked nearer to that of Raymond Chandler.

The situation is classic: the unassuming crusader versus the high-class racketeer; the crusader operating alone; the racketeer manoeuvring his thugs (inside and outside the city police) from his guarded mansion in the snob section of town. Unlike Marlowe, Dave Bannion is a professional cop; but his disrespect of persons soon gets him suspended, and his conduct shows the

same doggedness, the same human fallibility, the same hunger after righteousness as the Chandler hero’s. He challenges the racketeer, and pays for it: his wife is murdered; bitterly he dedicates himself to vengeance. Glenn Ford plays this part with a deceptively casual charm that covers without concealing a real inward intensity. (This admirable actor is one of the few surviving in Hollywood who are able convincingly to convey any moral awareness or conflict.) As the gay, incautious girl friend of a vicious hoodlum, Gloria Grahame acts with brilliant wit and considerable subtlety; and all the way down the cast – of generally unfamiliar faces – the characterisations have a welcome individuality of line.

The Big Heat is one of those enjoyable films which make no great claims for themselves, yet which so balance style and intention (like the early Hitchcock’s, for instance) that they are finally more satisfying than many more ambitious works. The film lacks the density of a *Maltese Falcon*; one or two of its elements are over-conventional; Lang’s viewpoint remains exterior. All the same, it creates its world, and proves that, when his interest is engaged, this director still has at his control the technique of a master.

Contributory skills that also deserve praise are Charles Lang’s, whose lighting powerfully contributes to the atmosphere of tension and incipient violence, and Charles Nelson’s, whose editing is immaculate. The timing of the end-title, in its relation to soundtrack as well as image, is a little triumph in itself.

Lindsay Anderson, *Sight and Sound*, July-September 1954

THE BIG HEAT

Director: Fritz Lang
Production Company: Columbia Pictures Corporation
Producer: Robert Arthur
Assistant Director: Milton Feldman
Screenplay: Sydney Boehm
Based on a Saturday Evening Post serial by: William P. McGivern
Director of Photography: Charles Lang
Editor: Charles Nelson
Art Director: Robert Peterson
Set Decorator: William Kiernan
Gowns: Jean Louis
Make-up: Clay Campbell
Hairstyles: Helen Hunt
Music: Daniele Amfitheatrof
Music Director: Mischa Bakaleinikoff
Sound Engineer: George Cooper

Cast

Glenn Ford (*Dave Bannion*)
Gloria Grahame (*Debby Marsh*)
Jocelyn Brando (*Katherine ‘Katie’ Bannion*)
Alexander Scourby (*Mike Lagana*)
Lee Marvin (*Vince Stone*)
Jeanette Nolan (*Bertha Duncan*)
Peter Whitney (*Tierney*)
William D. Bouchey (*Lieutenant T. Wilkes*)
Robert Burton (*Gus Burke*)
Adam Williams (*Larry Gordon*)
Howard Wendell (*Commissioner Higgins*)

uncredited
Chris Alcaide (*George Rose*)
Michael Granger (*Hugo*)
Dorothy Green (*Lucy Chapman*)
Carolyn Jones (*Doris*)
Ric Roman (*Baldy*)
Dan Seymour (*Atkins*)
Edith Evanson (*Selma Parker*)
Norma Randall (*Jill*)
Sidney Clute (*bartender*)
Joe Mell (*Dr Kane*)
Linda Bennett (*Joyce*)
Herbert Lytton (*Martin*)
Lyle Latell (*moving man*)
Ezelle Poule (*Mrs Tucker*)
Byron Kane (*Dr Jones*)
Michael Ross (*Segal*)
Ted Stanhope (*butler*)
Phil Arnold (*Nick*)
William Murphy (*Reds*)
Douglas Evans (*Gillen*)
Mike Mahoney (*Dixon*)
Paul Maxey (*Fuller*)
Pat Miller (*intern*)
Charles Cane (*Hopkins*)
John Merton (*man*)
Kathryn Eames (*Marge*)
Al Eben (*Harry Shoenstein*)
William Vedder (*janitor*)
Harry Lauter (*Hank O’Connell*)
Robert Forrest (*Bill Rutherford*)
Phil Chambers (*Hettrick*)
John Crawford (*Al*)
John Doucette (*Mark Reiner*)

The screening on Wed 22 Sep will be introduced by Simran Hans, writer and film critic for *The Observer*

USA 1953©
89 mins

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 (+ pre-recorded 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

NFTS AT 50

Saint Maud + Q&A with director Rose Glass

Thu 2 Sep 17:45

The Last Tree + Q&A with director Shola Amoo

Sat 11 Sep 17:00

Il Postino (The Postman) + Q&A with director Michael Radford

Sun 12 Sep 17:00

An Evening with Roger and James Deakins

Sun 12 Sep 20:30

Absolute Beginners + Q&A with director Julian Temple and cinematographer Oliver Stapleton BSC

Wed 15 Sep 20:25

The Souvenir + Q&A with director Joanna Hogg

Fri 17 Sep 17:45

The Selfish Giant + Q&A with director Clio Barnard

Mon 20 Sep 20:50

Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit + Q&A with director Beeban Kidron

Thu 23 Sep 18:00

Kurt & Courtney + Q&A with director Nick Broomfield

Sat 25 Sep 14:30

Theatre Girls + Q&A with director Kim Longinotto

Sun 26 Sep 15:40

Surge + Q&A with director Aneil Karia

Tue 28 Sep 17:40

Of Time and the City + Q&A with director Terence Davies

Sat 2 Oct 14:15

Rocks + Q&A with director Sarah Gavron

Sat 2 Oct 17:30

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