



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Kiss Me Deadly

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

The dead of night. A distressed woman, out of breath, running along a desert road. The broken lines in the middle of the asphalt flash by luminously like a premonition of Lynch. A speeding roadster is forced to a halt. 'You almost wrecked my car,' the driver snarls, before letting her in. Nat King Cole comes in on the radio as the breathless woman settles into the passenger seat, and we're off, into the night, as the opening credits roll perversely from top to bottom.

If the hairs aren't prickling on the back of your neck after this minute of screen time, then film noir's not for you. The man is Mike Hammer (Ralph Meeker), the most unpleasant gumshoe in the whole canon; the woman is Christina (Cloris Leachman), though she doesn't last long. Why is she running at night, wearing nothing but a trenchcoat? It's something to do with 'the great whatsit' – a mysterious, glowing must-have that results in a trail of corpses. Like *Pickup on South Street*, *Kiss Me Deadly* is film noir in its Cold War phase, when the evil looms as big as a mushroom cloud and petulant protagonists are liable to get more than their fingers burned.

Samuel Wigley, bfi.org.uk, 10 August 2018

Five years after 9/11 and one year after the London bombings, Robert Aldrich's 1955 *noir* masterpiece *Kiss Me Deadly* – a disorientingly baroque blend of vertiginous expressionistic angles and modernistic 3D or penetrative deep-focus vistas – has an eerie resonance at a time when movies are grappling with the modern face of terrorism. Referenced as a pop-culture icon in *Repo Man* and *Pulp Fiction* and as a biblical weapon of mass destruction in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, 'the great whatsit' sought in the movie by Mike Hammer (Ralph Meeker) is nothing less than a prototypical suitcase bomb, which scientist-spy Dr Soberin (Albert Dekker) intends to sell to a foreign country. Once opened by Lily Carver (Gaby Rodgers), this Pandora's box of fissionable material ignites a brilliant firestorm that, in the apocalyptic climax, consumes her and possibly greater Los Angeles.

That apocalypse has ramifications for film history, not just for Hammer's abortive quest. Though Orson Welles' 1957 *Touch of Evil* officially concluded the classic *noir* cycle, *Kiss Me Deadly* self-consciously gave it the kiss of death by obliterating the world (specifically nocturnal LA) that had engendered it and by ruthlessly deconstructing the image of *noir*'s mythic private eye in the person of the brutal, callous protagonist. Casually beating or killing his antagonists as he trolls through LA's most corrupt corners, from a hoodlum's mansion in Bel Air to a Malibu beach house, the technocratic, anti-intellectual Hammer is a demiurge, a scourge of vice and the 'decadence' found in high art. Though his materialistic machismo anticipates *Chinatown*'s Jake Gittes, and also James Bond, he is more accurately a fascistic forebear of Dirty Harry. He is so repugnant that Aldrich told François Truffaut that he shouldn't have made the film. Screenwriter A.I. Bezzerides, who reluctantly adapted a Mickey Spillane novel he considered 'a piece of junk', set about rendering the misogynistic Hammer unequivocally impotent.

Hammer's sexuality is comically identified with the fate of his flashy Jag convertible. In the film's opening sequence Christina Bailey (Cloris Leachman), running from the asylum where Soberin has incarcerated her, flags down Hammer on a highway at night, causing the car to swerve off the road. Accepting the ride Hammer grudgingly offers, she criticises his narcissistic values: 'I was just thinking how much you can tell about a person from such little things – your car, for instance. You have only one real, lasting love: you. You're one of those self-indulgent males who thinks about nothing but his clothes, his car, himself.'

Shortly afterwards she is tortured and killed by Soberin's henchmen, and she and Hammer are pushed over a cliff in the Jag. 'You ought to have seen that beautiful and pretty little rod of yours. All torn up, scrapped, junk. Never gonna go vava-voom no more. Break my heart,' says Hammer's mechanic friend Nick (Nick Dennis). This speech not only announces Hammer's castration but hints at homoerotic desire. Certainly, his grief at Nick's murder is the only tender emotion Hammer shows in the film.

When it comes to women Christina, his assistant Velda (Maxine Cooper), Lily, the hoodlum's nympha sister, whose aggressive overtures he spurns – Hammer is emasculate, otiose. Like Marlowe in Robert Altman's *The Long Goodbye*, he is a man out of time. The metaphorical coitus that frames the movie is started and finished respectively by Christina and Lily – both deranged, both naked under their terry-cloth robes when we first see them, linked by their knowledge of the missing atomic bomb. The fleeing Christina's laboured but sensual panting is answered by Lily's ecstatic immolation.

'The great whatsit' can thus be construed, albeit hyperbolically, as an atomic female orgasm, which Hammer brought on by his blundering and is unable to staunch. There's a fierce irony in a production still that shows Lily reclining on her bed reading a magazine with an ad headlined 'Be protected', since Hammer neither poses a sexual threat nor protects her from the movie's thugs, or even from herself; he similarly fails Christina and Velda. In his essay *Kiss Me Deadly: Evidence of a Style*, Alain Silver contends that Hammer, unlike the chivalric Marlowe, is an 'anti-Galahad'. Both Christina and Velda denounce him as such.

Interestingly enough, Rodgers revealed in a 2002 interview that Aldrich told her to play Lily as a lesbian. As Soberin's mistress, pimped out by him to Hammer as Hammer pimps out Velda to frame errant husbands, Lily has no qualms about killing him in order to acquire the 'whatsit'. Though it moves from phallogentrism to gynaeentrism, *Kiss Me Deadly* doesn't encourage a positive feminist analysis. At the morgue where Christina's body is held Hammer and Lily learn that the key to the locker where the atomic box is hidden has been retrieved from the corpse. Caryl Flinn has noted: 'By placing the literal "key" of the narrative inside of Christina Bailey's body, women's sexuality (her own 'hot box') is constructed as the film's final object of inquiry and ultimate source of terror... *Kiss Me Deadly's* morbid conclusion successfully fuses the widespread fear of atomic destruction in the 1950s with the equally widespread fear of women, effectively mapping the former onto the latter.'

For 40 years *Kiss Me Deadly* was mostly seen with a false ending: Soberin's beach house explodes with Hammer and Velda inside. But detective work by Silver and film editor Glenn Erickson led to the discovery of the ending Aldrich had filmed from Bezzerides' script. In 1997 they were granted permission to

view Aldrich's personal print, which had been donated to the Directors Guild of America after he died in 1983. This version, which shows the distraught Hammer rescuing Velda and staggering into the Malibu surf as they watch the beach house go up, was issued on home video in 1997. It softens Hammer's character by hinting that he does care about Velda, while showing him the consequences of the havoc he has wrought through his reactionary agenda. Erickson asserts: 'By dwelling on Hammer's powerlessness against the fiery evil he has released, the film's original final statement now firmly reinforces Bezzerides' condemnation of the whole Spillane ethos and what it says about American arrogance and greed.' That message won't be lost on anyone who sees *Kiss Me Deadly* today, nor will the existential wisdom that Velda imparts to her unthinking lover/boss: 'They. A wonderful word. And who are they? They are the nameless ones who kill people for the great whatsit. Does it exist? Who cares? Everyone everywhere is so involved in the fruitless search for what?'

Graham Fuller, *Sight & Sound*, July 2006

KISS ME DEADLY

Director: Robert Aldrich

Production Company: Parklane Pictures

A Presentation by: Victor Saville

Producer: Robert Aldrich

Production Supervisor: Jack R. Berne

Assistant to the Producer: Robert Sherman

Assistant Director: Robert Justman

Casting Supervisor: Jack Murton

Screenplay: A.I. Bezzerides

Based on the novel by: Mickey Spillane

Director of Photography: Ernest Laszlo

Photographic Effects/Titles: Complete Film Service

Editor: Michael Luciano

Art Director: William Glasgow

Set Decorator: Howard Bristol

Make-up: Bob Schiffer

Music/Music Conductor: Frank Devol

Orchestral Arranger: Albert Harris

Sound: Jack Solomon

Cast

Ralph Meeker (*Mike Hammer*)

Albert Dekker (*Dr G.E. Soberin*)

Cloris Leachman (*Christina Bailey*)

Wesley Addy (*Pat Murphy*)

Paul Stewart (*Carl Evello*)

Maxine Cooper (*Velda*)

Juano Hernandez (*Eddie Yeager*)

Marion Carr (*Friday*)

Fortunio Bonanova (*Trivaco, opera fan*)

Madi Comfort (*night club singer*)

Nick Dennis (*Nick, the garage owner*)

Jack Elam (*Charlie Max*)

Jesslyn Fax (*Mrs Super*)

Percy Helton (*Doc Kennedy, morgue attendant*)

Jack Lambert (*Sugar Smallhouse*)

Mort Marshall (*Ray Diker*)

Strother Martin (*truck driver*)

James McCallion (*Horace, apartment super*)

Silvio Minciotti (*old man with load*)

Paul Richards (*hood with knife*)

James Seay, Robert Cornthwaite (*Crime Commission men*)

Leigh Snowden (*girl at pool*)

Jerry Zinneman (*Sammy, Nick's assistant*)

Gaby Rodgers (*Gabrielle, 'Lily Carver'*)

Joe Hernandez, Sam Balter, Marjorie Bennett,

Ben Morris (*radio announcers*)

Mara McAfee (*nurse*)*

Charles Lane (*doctor*)*

USA 1955

106 mins

* Uncredited

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