

**BIG SCREEN CLASSICS**

# Victim

## John Coldstream on 'Victim'

Artistic endeavour too often attracts exaggerated claims. In my research, I attempted to identify films that had genuinely made an impact not merely on the minds of those who watched them, but also on life in the culture from which they had sprung.

Professor Richard Dyer of King's College, London told me he had considered teaching a course on 'movies that had changed the world – films where the case seemed pretty strong that they really had had an effect beyond the amorphous drip-drip of lots of films.' He had quickly isolated *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Triumph of the Will* (1934): 'Awful films politically, but wonderful in a certain sense.' He had considered Eisenstein and the masterpieces that emerged from Russia: 'But they came *after* the Revolution.' *Victim* seemed to be the only other contender – 'Which didn't really give me enough for a course!' Indisputably, *Cathy Come Home*, Jeremy Sandford's play about social welfare, had a devastating effect when it was screened by the BBC in 1966, but it is hard to pin down works for the cinema that influenced British society to the same extent.

*Victim's* originator, Janet Green, its producer, Michael Relph, and its director, Basil Dearden, had already used the thriller format to attack racial prejudice in London with *Sapphire* (1959); whether it contributed in any significant way towards the eventual enactment of the first Race Relations Bill is, however, open to question. J. Lee Thompson's *Yield to the Night* (1956) was part of the groundswell against the death penalty, which led to suspension in 1965 and abolition in 1969. Guy Green's *The Angry Silence* (1960), written by Bryan Forbes, opened eyes to the injustice of the factory floor, but in terms of effect was ahead of its time. It took ten years, almost to the month, for the principal recommendation of the Wolfenden Report on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution to be enshrined in the Sexual Offences Act 1967; but that *Victim* helped, even if in a small way, to ease its turbulent trajectory is beyond any doubt.

We know this from a letter composed soon afterwards by the 8th Earl of Arran, who had introduced the Bill and piloted it through the House of Lords. Curiously, Arran had not seen *Victim* at the time of its release, but finally caught up with it 'on telly'. He took the opportunity to write to its star, Dirk Bogarde, telling him 'how much I admire your courage in undertaking this difficult and potentially damaging part'. The swing in popular opinion favouring reform had been from 48 per cent to 63 per cent, and he understood that this was in no small measure due to *Victim*. 'It is comforting to think,' concluded the Earl, 'that perhaps a million men are no longer living in fear.' When Bogarde responded, underplaying his own contribution, Arran insisted: 'We both did our bit.'

Progress has taken its inevitable toll on the social-realist films of the period. By the time of a 1981 screening on television, *Radio Times* had already decided that *Victim* looked ‘as dated as a Victorian sex manual’. Yet it still delivers a potent dramatic punch: recent theatrical showings confirm as much. Witness the sequence when a garage door is dragged shut and the protagonist’s wife sees it has been daubed with ‘FARR IS QUEER’. Witness, too, the central sequence, scripted in part by Bogarde himself, when, as the compromised barrister, he declares to her with extraordinary force: ‘I stopped seeing him because I *wanted* him.’ It was arguably the key moment in the actor’s career, coming two years before *The Servant*. With that scene he shrugged off the cloak of matinée idol to reveal an actor who both could be, and needed to be, taken seriously. The film’s ‘message’ – about the need for society to remove a means of persecuting a specific minority – was one with which he identified fully, but could, for obvious reasons, champion only through a work of fiction. Other leading men had turned down the role; indeed, according to Bogarde, they had ‘backed away like rearing horses in terror at the subject’. He, with more to lose than they, had seized it with relish.

*Victim* was a landmark not only on his professional path but also in the personal lives of many who went to see the film – among them the director Terence Davies, who speaks of the near-epiphany he had as a teenager at a screening in Liverpool. On a more general level, the background to the production – described at the time by Michael Relph as ‘the most controversial subject ever backed by the Rank Organisation’ – provides a fascinating case history. Janet Green’s papers in the BFI show just how extensive was the collaboration between the filmmakers and the Censor, John Trevelyan, who wielded far greater power than does his equivalent today. As the archives disclose, the team behind *Victim* gave full weight to their responsibilities.

At the beginning of the film’s 50th anniversary year and the centenary of its director’s birth, a box of four DVDs was released in the United States under the title *Basil Dearden’s London Underground*. The reviewers were united in singling out *Victim* as the highlight of the set: ‘bold’; ‘provocative’; ‘a startling social treatise on an outdated law ... and an effective whodunit’; ‘much more than a historical curio. Its anger still resonates.’ Once, America rejected it as unpalatable. Half a century later, *Victim*’s status is far more secure for it is a film that did truly make a difference.

**Extracted from *Victim* by John Coldstream (BFI Film Classics, 2011).**

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## **A contemporary review**

In a time-honoured tradition, *Victim* uses the framework of a thriller – and rather a good one – to investigate a social problem. The only innovation is the problem itself: for the first time, a British picture concerns itself largely with the lives and problems of homosexuals. Understandably its plot deals with blackmail; and the film unequivocally condemns the way this is encouraged by the present state of the law. An elaborate blackmail racket is described, leading to the death of a young man, until a barrister friend of the dead youth

hunts down the blackmailers and gives evidence against them, at the cost of probably wrecking his own career. His investigations allow for a tour of the more respectable parts of the London homosexual underworld, with glimpses of the ways in which different men cope with or are destroyed by their abnormality.

Basil Dearden's journalistic method works well in these circumstances. With reservations about Sylvia Syms' portrayal of a judge's daughter, one can give his casting and control of actors high praise. Among the relatively unfamiliar players, one notes Peter McEnery, Donald Churchill, and particularly Derren Nesbitt, giving a striking presence to the blackmailers' courier; of the older supporting actors, Hilton Edwards, Charles Lloyd Pack and Norman Bird impress in varying homosexual roles. Dirk Bogarde offers one of his best performances as the barrister, wavering between guilt and resolution. But with this character the script inevitably compromises: he is homosexual only by inclination, never by act. Yet even such equivocation is a big step towards candour, and casting a star in such a part demands courage.

The half-world through which the action moves is portrayed with deliberate tact: there is none of the actors' camp talk or behaviour which would repel or bewilder most audiences; many an everyday British comedy contains far more risqué jokes; physical relationships are never more than obliquely implied. In short, with the tragedies of death or ruined lives on one hand, and sadism and blackmail on the other, the emotional argument is heavily weighted.

It is easy to sneer that Aunt Edna will have no trouble in being high-mindedly tolerant here. But allowing for public opinion – even after the Wolfenden plea for tolerance, which is not mentioned here – and allowing for industry attitudes and for censorship, could *Victim* in fact have been more frank than it is? It is only fair to say that it could not. As far as those who made it are concerned, the challenge to their skill and integrity has, for the Britain of 1961, been successfully met. The tougher challenge will come when the case is put with less sympathetic characters in unflattering circumstances, and still presented convincingly.

**Terence Kelly, *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1961**

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## VICTIM

*Directed by:* Basil Dearden  
*@:* Parkway Films  
*Made by:* Allied Film Makers  
*Produced by:* Michael Relph  
*Production Manager:* Denis Holt  
*Assistant Director:* Bert Batt  
*Continuity:* Joan Davis  
*Screenplay by:* Janet Green, John McCormick  
*Director of Photography:* Otto Heller  
*Camera Operator:* H.A.R. Thomson  
*Stills:* George Courtney Ward \*  
*Editor:* John D. Guthridge  
*Art Director:* Alex Vetchinsky  
*Set Dresser:* Vernon Dixon  
*Make-up:* Harry Frampton  
*Hairdressing:* Barbara Ritchie  
*Music by:* Philip Green  
*Sound Recordists:* C.C. Stevens, Gordon K. McCallum  
*Sound Editor:* Leslie Wiggins  
*Studio:* Pinewood Studios

## Cast

Dirk Bogarde (*Melville Farr*)  
Sylvia Syms (*Laura Farr*)  
Dennis Price (*Calloway*)  
Nigel Stock (*Phip*)  
Peter McEnery (*Jack Barrett*)  
Donald Churchill (*Eddy Stone*)  
Anthony Nicholls (*Lord Charles Fullbrook*)  
Hilton Edwards (*P.H.*)  
Norman Bird (*Harold Doe*)  
Derren Nesbitt (*sandy youth*)  
Alan MacNaughtan (*Scott Hankin*)  
Noel Howlett (*William Patterson*)  
Charles Lloyd Pack (*Henry*)  
John Barrie (*Detective Inspector Harris*)  
John Cairney (*Bridie*)  
David Evans (*Mickey*)  
Peter Copley (*Paul Mandrake*)  
Frank Pettit (*barman*)  
Mavis Villiers (*Madge*)  
Margaret Diamond (*Miss Benham*)  
Alan Howard (*Frank*)  
Dawn Beret (*Sylvie*)  
Frank Thornton (*barber's assistant*)\*

UK 1961  
100 mins

\* Uncredited

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## BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

### To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar

Tue 1 Feb 18:20; Fri 25 Feb 20:45

### Young Soul Rebels

Wed 2 Feb 18:20 (+ intro by BFI Race Equality Lead Rico Johnson-Sinclair); Thu 17 Feb 20:45

### All About My Mother (Todo sobre mi madre)

Wed 2 Feb 20:45; Wed 16 Feb 21:00

### Beautiful Thing

Thu 3 Feb 20:45; Mon 14 Feb 20:30

### The Handmaiden (Ah-ga-ssi)

Fri 4 Feb 17:50; Sat 12 Feb 20:10; Sun 27 Feb 17:50

### Rent

Sat 5 Feb 12:30; Sun 20 Feb 18:10

### Maurice

Sun 6 Feb 15:20; Mon 14 Feb 18:00

### The Watermelon Woman

Mon 7 Feb 20:45; Sat 26 Feb 20:30

### Happy Together (Chun gwong cha sit)

Tue 8 Feb 18:15 (+ intro by Yi Wang, Queer East); Sun 13 Feb 15:20

### My Own Private Idaho

Tue 8 Feb 20:45; Wed 23 Feb 18:00 (+ intro by BFI Race Equality Lead Rico Johnson-Sinclair)

### Brokeback Mountain

Wed 9 Feb 17:45 (+ intro by BFI Race Equality Lead Rico Johnson-Sinclair); Mon 21 Feb 20:25

### Go Fish

Wed 9 Feb 20:40; Sat 26 Feb 18:20

### Rope

Thu 10 Feb 18:30; Tue 22 Feb 14:30

### Victim

Thu 10 Feb 20:40; Sun 13 Feb 13:00; Mon 21 Feb 18:00

### Desert Hearts

Fri 11 Feb 20:40; Wed 16 Feb 18:20 (+ intro by BFI Head Librarian Emma Smart)

### My Beautiful Laundrette

Sat 12 Feb 18:20; Tue 15 Feb 20:45; Sat 19 Feb 20:45

### A Fantastic Woman (Una mujer fantástica)

Sun 13 Feb 18:40; Tue 22 Feb 20:50

### Mädchen in Uniform

Fri 18 Feb 20:30; Sat 26 Feb 16:00

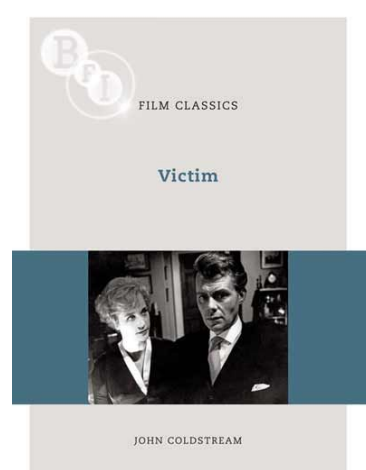
### Moonlight

Thu 24 Feb 14:30; Mon 28 Feb 20:45

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<https://shop.bfi.org.uk/victim-bfi-film-classics.html>



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