1999  Selected for National Film Registry

Directed and produced by Robert Aldrich
Based on the novel by Mickey Spillane
Screenplay by A.I. Bezzerides
Original Music by Frank De Vol
Cinematography by Ernest Laszlo
Film Editing by Michael Luciano
Art Direction by William Glasgow
Set Decoration by Howard Bristol

Cast
Ralph Meeker...Mike Hammer
Albert Dekker...Dr. G.E. Soberin
Paul Stewart...Carl Evello
Juano Hernandez...Eddie Yeager
Wesley Addy...Lt. Pat Murphy
Marian Carr...Friday
Marjorie Bennett...Manager
Mort Marshall...Ray Diker
Fortunio Bonanova...Carmen Trivago
Strother Martin...Harvey Wallace
Mady Comfort...Nightclub Singer
James McCallion...Horace
Robert Cornthwaite...FBI Agent
Silvio Minciotti...Mover
Nick Dennis...Nick
Ben Morris...Radio Announcer
Jack Elam...Charlie Max
Paul Richards...Attacker
Jesslyn Fax...Horace's Wife
James Seay...FBI Agent
Percy Helton...Doc Kennedy
Leigh Snowden...Cheesecake
Jack Lambert...Sugar Smallhouse
Jerry Zinneman...Sammy
Maxine Cooper...Velda
Cloris Leachman...Christina Bailey
Gaby Rodgers...Carver


Mickey Spillane (b. Frank Morrison Spillane, March 9, 1918, Brooklyn, New York – July 17, 2006, Murrells Inlet, South Carolina) had 19 of his novels or stories turned into films or TV series: 1997-


Paul Stewart...Carl Evello (b. Paul Sternberg, March 13, 1908, New York City, New York – February 17, 1986, Los Angeles, California)


Cloris Leachman (April 30, 1926, Des Moines, Iowa) won a Best Actress in a Supporting Role for The Last Picture Show (1971). Among her other 247 film and TV roles are 2013 The Bronx Bull...
only brief period as persona non grata in Hollywood was because of a disagreement with Harry Cohn on the Columbia project The Garment Jungle (1957). Aldrich was active in the Directors Guild of America throughout his career and ultimately served as its president, overseeing the negotiation of a break-through contract in terms of creative rights in 1978. Ironically for a director seldom regarded as an artist by American critics, Aldrich’s union activism on behalf of directors’ prerogatives alienated studio heads and cost him work at the end of his career.

If there is a core to Aldrich’s worldview as expressed over the course of thirty feature films, it would simply be the oft-confessed proclivity for “turning things upside down.” Aldrich conforms to the traditional narrative requirements of heroes and villains, but within that he often skirts the issue of good and evil in favor of personal codes and moralities. “He didn’t divide the world up into good and evil,” Abraham Polonsky said of Aldrich, “he didn’t see it that simply. He found himself as someone who knew that his idea of himself was why he existed; and that his self-esteem and respect for himself could never be jeopardized by any compromise that involved that deep portion of himself.”

Perhaps the best example of this process is Aldrich’s adaptation of Kiss Me Deadly (1955). A quest for the Grail, in the sense that social historian Mike Davis describes as “that great anti-myth usually known as noir,” Kiss Me Deadly is equally what Borde and Chaumeton call a “dark and fascinating close” to the noir era, whose main character is an “anti-Galadad” in search of his “great whatstis.”

This tension between myth and anti-myth, between hero and anti-hero, is the key to Aldrich’s work. Hammer is a radically different character than many who preceded and followed him in Aldrich’s work, equally unlike the defiant warrior Massai in Apache (1954) and the tormented Charlie Castle in The Big Knife (1955). But all these characters inhabit the same cinematic milieu, a world where men’s greed for land, money and power challenge the individual to survive. “I guess you have a weakness for a certain kind of character,” Aldrich readily admitted; “It’s the same character in a number of pictures that keeps reappearing, characters that are bigger than life, that find their own integrity in doing what they do the way they do it, even if it causes their own deaths.” Although they are culturally quite different, both Massai and Charlie Castle appealed to Aldrich because of their idealistic struggle. As supporting characters remark, Massai cannot give up his fight and Charlie cannot sustain his; both are fatally imperiled by “doing what they do the way they do it.” From Aldrich’s earliest work, cynicism and idealism combined to create violent, angst-ridden outbursts of existential despair. Little wonder that such a thematic outlook should give Aldrich a cutting edge status with European observers. As a filmmaker, Aldrich always came straight on, usually with more visual style than Ray, more raw energy than Fuller, and more social consciousness than Losey.

Aldrich’s films concentrate on the most basic situation: man attempting to survive in a hostile universe. Like most filmmakers, Aldrich uses and reuses such general devices as narrative tension between subjective and objective viewpoints and the frustration or fulfillment of the audience’s genre expectations. In order to survive, certain Aldrich heroes can be more consistently vicious, self-centered and cynical than any villain. Christina’s assessment of Hammer – “You’re the kind of person that has only one true love: you” – in Kiss Me Deadly is echoed in the admission by Zarkan in The Legend of

Alan Silver: Robert Aldrich. From Senses of Cinema 20, 2002

The critical reputation of Robert Aldrich, scion of the Eastern establishment and graduate of the best finishing schools in Hollywood, burst out of Europe with la politique des auteurs. As early as 1957, Aldrich became No. 7 of the “Les Grands Créateurs du Cinéma” series of director monographs published by the Belgian Club du Livre du Cinéma, which followed studies of Robert Bresson, John Huston, Jean Renoir, Vittorio De Sica, Luis Buñuel, and Marcel Carné. This was certainly heady company for a new American director, not yet forty years old. Aldrich’s relatives included politicians and bankers – the Rockefellers were both – but the first and last favor he asked from any of them was when an uncle at Chase Bank helped him get his first job as a production clerk at RKO. From there he progressed through the ranks of assistant directors and graduated to directing television in the early 1950s. Although a lifelong liberal and the co-worker of many blacklistees, Aldrich’s

Lylah Clare (1968): “I’m not sick, I’m in love…with me.” Others like Massai in Apache, Joe Costa in Attack! (1956), and Phil Gaines in Hustle (1975) are driven by an irreducible and essentially idealistic personal code. In following it, their behavior becomes even more extreme than either Hammer’s or Zarkán’s. Characters who are in narrative terms antagonists, like Joe Erin in Vera Cruz (1954) and Karl Wirtz in Ten Seconds to Hell (1959), reflect on and try to explain their compulsive destructiveness by telling essentially the same story: learning from and eventually murdering a father figure who had taught them to look out for number one.

In films such as these, the presence of a ruthless pragmatism in one of the two principals would normally promise a clear-cut alignment into hero and villain, into Erin versus Ben Trane, Wirtz versus Eric Koertner, black versus white. The actual result is ambiguous. Each film is less than absolute in its definition of a moral man yet is absolute in its definition of morality. In Vera Cruz and Ten Seconds to Hell, the protagonist does finally defeat the antagonist; but the triumph is more societal than personal. In The Flight of the Phoenix (1966) and Too Late the Hero (1970), the moral distinctions among the members of a group are so finely drawn that the chance or haphazard manner deciding which of them live and which die constitutes the pervasive irony of the films. As Major Reisman counsels the prisoner Wladislaw early in The Dirty Dozen (1967), innocence or guilt, reward or condemnation, are purely matters of circumstance. “You only made one mistake,” he says, pausing by the cell door and grinning back at the man sentenced to death, “you let somebody see you do it.”

In this sense, Aldrich is a rigorous determinist. His fables about bands of outsiders remain remarkably consistent across generic lines. Attack!, Ten Seconds to Hell, The Flight of the Phoenix, The Dirty Dozen, Too Late the Hero, Uzlanza’s Raid (1972), The Longest Yard (1974), and Twilight’s Last Gleaming (1977), adventure films, war films, and Westerns – all isolate a group of men in a specific, self-contained and threatening universe. The core plots are diverse: soldiers behind enemy lines; a bomb disposal unit in post-World War II Berlin; passengers on a plane down in the Sahara; inmates of a prison; ex-convicts in a missile silo. Yet in each situation, the characters undergo the same, inexorable moral reduction. And often both the idealists and the cynics – the social extremists – perish.

Usually, these conflicts are between men and nature and between men and other men. All three war films as well as The Flight of the Phoenix and Uzlanza’s Raid have effectively no women characters at all. In The Longest Yard and The Choirboys (1977), the restricted perspective of convicts and cops respectively reduces women to objects, and unattractive ones at that. In the few films that do focus entirely on them, The Killing of Sister George (1968), What Ever Happened To Baby Jane? (1962) or Hush...Hush, Sweet Charlotte (1964), many of the women are deviate or psychotic. Notably, Baby Jane and Sister George are performers, personas behind which some women retreat in a male-dominated society. Even more notably, Frennesey in World for Ransom (1954) and the title character in The Legend of Lylah Clare are also performers and bisexuals. For both, Lesbianism is an alternative to the men who love them obsessively and want desperately to control their behavior. The societal assumptions which make relationships between men and women so difficult are most clearly addressed – and left unresolved – in Hustle. The man is too alienated to make a commitment; the woman is forced to separate sex from love by working as a prostitute. For Aldrich, the gender of his protagonists was less important than their struggle: a film is only “masculine” in the sense that it was done by a majority of masculine players. In theory, it was supposed to be metaphorical. In practice, it wasn’t that important.” Beyond Westerns and war films, Aldrich’s films have a generic breadth matched by few other filmmakers. Aldrich’s work ranges widely from the self-described “classy soap opera” Autumn Leaves (1956) to the “sex and sand epic” Sodom and Gomorrah (1963) to the “desperately important” political thriller Twilight’s Last Gleaming. In between, there are a few comedies and several noir films, as well as the occasional psychological melodrama and the neo-Gothic. There are prison pictures, cop pictures, sports pictures, and pictures about people who make pictures. The interior consistency of theme and style in Aldrich’s films resists classification according to genre. Erin and Wirtz recount their twisted, nearly identical histories in the context of an adventure Western and a return-from-the-war melodrama respectively. Zarkán is a retired film director, Hammer is a private detective: yet their self-love, their egocentric disdain for the lives and feelings of others, and their inability to rectify this attitude even when presented with second chances are traits which mark them as sibling personalities from radically different genre backgrounds.

Aldrich’s visualization also transcends the conventions of genre. Strong side lighting, the camera placed in an unusually high or low position, foreground clutter, and staging in depth appear as frequently in his Westerns, war pictures, neo-Gothic thrillers, even in his television work, not just where they might be expected in a ’50s film noir like Kiss Me Deadly or the richly colored frames of a Hollywood melodrama like The Legend of Lylah Clare. Transmuting and expressing in sensory terms the physical and emotional make-up of the situation, of the characters caught in these frames, remains the basic dynamic of an Aldrich picture regardless of genre. Aldrich’s camera may capture a figure crouching behind a lamp, like Charlie Castle in The Big Knife, or lurking at the edge of a pool of light, like Lily Carver in Kiss Me Deadly. Grimacing faces or dark objects will suddenly intrude into the foreground of medium long shots, disturbing previously flaccid compositions, possibly in anticipation of a violent turn in plot events. Recurring high angle medium shots peer down from behind ceiling ventilators in every type of film, World for Ransom, The Angry Hills (1959), Hush...Hush, Sweet Charlotte, and Too Late The Hero, so that the dark blades slowly rotating above the characters’ heads become an ominous shorthand for the tension whirring incessantly inside them. Conversely, the hissing sound of man’s life leaking out in Kiss Me Deadly or a postmortem burst of gunfire in Attack? become objective correlatives to the dissipation of the audience’s tension. In a subjective manner, the characters
sometimes “choose” to situate themselves within the frame. For the guilt-ridden Charles Castle, the lamps about the room have a symbolic value which unconsciously draw him back to them again and again. Or characters may be placed objectively: Lily Carver at the edge of the light in Kiss Me Deadly is simultaneously in a figurative darkness appropriate to her mental state.

Even an off-beat, particular icon, such as a ceiling fan, can become a variable metaphor. In World for Ransom the slowly turning overhead blades in the room where Mike Callahan is interrogated by an underworld figure are not only a distracting influence at the frame’s center but cast multiple shadows on the surrounding walls. This defocuses the reading of the shot away from the human figures to create a visual confusion equivalent to Callahan’s mixed emotions. In The Angry Hills, a crane down to eye level from an opening position behind a similar fan diminishes the object’s importance as a distraction and suggests an unwinding, an impending détente rather than a knotting up of plot events. In both these pictures, Aldrich adapts the photographic styles of film noir to make specific visual statements about characters and events. In Callahan’s initial movements through the somber streets, alleys, and stairwells of Singapore, angle and editing shift the wedges of light and the dim boundaries of narrow passageways as if he were traveling through a dark maze, anticipating for the audience the uncertainty of his actual, emotional condition. From early films as narratively diverse as Attack!, Autumn Leaves and The Angry Hills, Aldrich’s characteristic low light and side light cast long shadows on interior walls and floors and form rectangular blocks to give the frame a severe, constricting geometry which can symbolise the director’s moral determinism.

While Aldrich’s definition of milieu may be superficially realist – must be so, in fact, as the overall context of the films themselves is superficially realist – selection of detail is the most readily applicable method by which figurative meaning may be injected. In The Legend of Lylah Clare, the contrast between Barney Sheean’s office and Lewis Zarkan’s home, between autographed black and white photos of various stars on the walls and lustrious oil paintings of Lylah, between evenly distributed fluorescent light on flat white surfaces and candelabras glistening off the broken texture of wood paneling – all this is not merely a contrast of setting, but of sensibility as well. Both are established within a stylised conception of “producer’s office” and “director’s home” that is ambivalent, being both serious and satirical, descriptive and analytical. Subject/object split when viewing reality, genre preconceptions, and sensory input are all in play. Decor and camera angle inform character, character affects angle and decor; and the recognition of type reconciles or estranges the audience to the aptness or inaptness of these interactions.

If there is an indisputable cynicism in Aldrich’s presentation of figures like Zarkan and Sheean, it is bifocal, acting as both authorial opinion and authorial conjecture of what the world’s opinion of such men might be. If there is any vulgarity in the way they are presented, it is less a formal deficiency than an appropriate reflection of the lifestyle in which they are trapped. Ultimately, characterization and caricature, like all of Aldrich’s thematic and stylistic components, refocus on the basic question: survival.

In Hustle, Lt. Phil Gaines’ partner remarks as the two watch pornographic home movies featuring a suicide victim that her action was rash because “her survival wasn’t threatened.” Gaines’s reply is: “It depends on how you define survival.” Reflecting this personal belief, Aldrich’s judgment of Ben Trane or Eric Koertner, of Zarkan or Joe Costa is more severe than the judgment he passes on characters less idealistic or with less sense of honor. The former are foolish enough to place their faith in societal institutions, which collapse around them or betray them. They repress personal values for the vaguely postulated good of society at large; their disillusionment and sometimes fatal alienation is the price that must be paid. Not that the “mealy-mouthed” compromisers from the self-immolating Charlie Castle to the craven Captain Cooney in Attack! fare any better. Aldrich and most of his heroes are caught in a dichotomy between natural and artificial, between chaotic and ordered, between instinctual and institutionalised conduct that impels the unaware or unprepared into indecision and that can short-circuit a saving or creative act into an impotent or deadly one. The ending of Ten Seconds to Hell is a montage of the introductory close-ups of the men of the unit intercut with shots of the rebuilt city. A quick reading might be that those who died did so meaningfully, for a reconstructive purpose. The conclusion of Ten Seconds to Hell is echoed in The Dirty Dozen which uses similar shots of the commando unit at the dinner celebration before the mission that will kill most of them. The same reiteration of the “male unit” takes place in the end credits of The Choirboys.

“What really gets you is the idea that maybe you’re wrong” is the accusation aimed at Frank Towns in The Flight of the Phoenix. It could be hurled at many other Aldrich heroes as well. Trane and Koertner, Towns and Lt. DeBuin in Ulzana’s Raid survive their mistakes and misjudgments. For others, the rectification of error comes too late. For none is it easily accomplished. Being wrong is not a moral deficiency in Aldrich’s work. It neither mitigates nor insures salvation. What it does is make the “offenders” into outsiders, because, as Reisman tells Wladislaw, it is getting caught, not being wrong, that creates the violation of acceptable social conduct. When circumstances put the protagonist in an untenable situation, any solution is permitted. What separates the amoral Hammer from the self-righteous Costa are not just personal codes of conduct. Each protagonist also has an experiential notion of how society will react to his behavior, whether it will validate or condemn it. That is what separates Reisman from Wladislaw.
“Pilot error” is what Frank Towns ultimately enters into his log as the cause of the crash in Flight of the Phoenix. Most of Aldrich’s films, in their own genre contexts and particular plots, are explorations of the infrastructure of error. What each makes progressively clearer is the conditional limitations of attributing blame. A frustrated Towns takes solace in his bitter and defensive accusations of Moran: “If you hadn’t made a career of being a drunk, if you hadn’t stayed in your bunk to have that last bottle, you might have checked that engineer’s report and we might not be here.” Blaming another gives way gradually to the resignation of Fenner in The Grissom Gang (1971), McIntosh in Ulzana’s Raid, or Crewe in The Longest Yard. Some early characters like Koertner anticipate the grim assessment of McIntosh in Ulzana’s Raid: “Ain’t no sense hating the Apaches for killing, Lieutenant. That’d be like laying the desert ‘cause there ain’t no water on it.” This is a conscious expression of the capricious causality at work in Aldrich’s pictures. For the reasons for the crash in the Sahara in The Flight of the Phoenix are as arbitrary, as free of pure causality, as the military assignments in Too Late the Hero or Ulzana’s Raid.

From Mike Callahan’s rejection by the perverse and aptly named Frennessey in World for Ransom through the fatalistic freeze-frames at the end of The Legend of Lyrlah Clare and The Grissom Gang to Gaines’s offhanded dea of the Apaches for killing, Lieutenant. McSweeny in The Longest Yard, it resides there because these are persons who survive. They survive by resolving all the conflicting impulses of nature and society, of real and ideal, of right and wrong, in and through action.


Genres collide in the great Hollywood movies of the mid-fifties cold-war thaw. With the truce in Korea and the red scare on the wane, ambitious directors seemed freer to mix and match and even ponder the new situation. The western goes south in The Searchers; the cartoon merges with the musical in The Girl Can’t Help It. Science fiction becomes pop sociology in Invasion of the Body Snatchers. And noir veers into apocalyptic sci-fi in Robert Aldrich’s 1955 masterpiece Kiss Me Deadly, which, briefly described, tracks one of the sleaziest, stupidest, most brutal detectives in American movies through a nocturnal, inexplicably violent labyrinth to a white-hot vision of cosmic annihilation.

A crass private eye looking for the big score, Mike Hammer plays with fire and gets burned. From the perversely backward title crawl (outrageously accompanied by orgasmic heavy breathing) through the climactic explosion, Kiss Me Deadly is sensationally baroque, eschewing straight exposition for a jarring succession of bizarre images, bravura sound matching, and encoded riddles the likes of which had not been seen in Hollywood since Orson Welles kissed the industry good-bye. Like one of Mad’s parodies, the movie unfolds in a deranged cubist space, amid the debris of Western civilization—shards of opera, deserted museums, molls who paraphrase Shakespeare, mad references to Greek mythology and the New Testament. A nineteenth-century poem furnishes the movie’s major clue.

Kiss Me Deadly exploited as it satirized Mickey Spillane, the most commercially successful American novelist of the cold war. Spillane’s violent thrillers, including I, the Jury; My Gun Is Quick; and Vengeance Is Mine, sold twenty-four million copies between 1947 and 1952; at one point, he was responsible for seven of the ten best-selling titles in the entire history of American fiction. In Mike Hammer, Spillane imagined a new sort of hero—a vigilante enforcer who was detective, judge, jury, and executioner in one. Spillane offered his readers God’s Angry Man—a function that would later be satisfied by irate evangelists and talk-radio personalities, as well as fictional characters like Dirty Harry. Hammer was the personification of rage, a self-righteous avenger whose antagonists were gangsters and Communists. At the end of One Lonely Night, he exults, “I killed more people tonight than I have fingers on my hands. I shot them in cold blood and enjoyed every minute of it . . . They were Commies.” Hammer knows he is rotten, and he knows why his rottenness is tolerated: “I was the evil that opposed the other evil.” This end-justify-the-means brutality had its contemporary political manifestation in Senator Joseph McCarthy, described by one colleague, in suitably Hammer-esque terms, as “a fighting Irish marine [who] would give the shirt off his back to anyone who needs it—except a dirty, lying, stinking Communist. That guy, he’d kill.” In late 1954, the Saturday Review published an essay by poet Christopher LaFarge comparing Hammer to McCarthy, also a “privileged savior.”

LaFarge noted that, however “soft, homosexual, stupid, gullible, childish, or easily tricked,” Hammer’s antagonists also represented “the Most Dangerous Thing in the United States,” and “any means which will, with Hammer, lead to their extirpation and in particular their death by his hand are Good.” Similarly, “with Senator McCarthy, any means that will expose Communists, including the derogation of all public servants, the telling of lies, the irreparable damaging of the innocent, the sensational and unfounded charge, are justified so long as he thinks it is the right thing to do. Each, then, reflects the other.”

This analogy seems also to have occurred to Aldrich, who was already working on an adaptation of Kiss Me, Deadly around the time the Saturday Review article appeared. Or perhaps Aldrich and A. I. Bezzeries, whom he hired to adapt the novel, simply made use of it. In some interviews, Aldrich would characterize Hammer as “a cynical fascist” and call Spillane “an antidemocratic figure,” arguing before the MPAA’s Production Code Administration—which was prepared not to pass Kiss Me Deadly—that the film demonstrated that “justice is not to be found in a self-anointed, one-man vigilante.”
Ironically, Aldrich was himself something like the leader of a personal rebellion. Born in 1918, he was the scion of a prominent Rhode Island family. His grandfather Nelson Aldrich served as a U.S. senator; his uncle was ambassador to Great Britain during the period Kiss Me Deadly was made; his aunt married John D. Rockefeller Jr., and his first cousin was Nelson Aldrich Rockefeller.

Aldrich broke with his family in 1941, when he went to work at RKO. During the forties, he served a distinguished apprenticeship as an assistant director with Jean Renoir (The Southerner), Lewis Milestone (Arch of Triumph), William Wellman (The Story of G.I. Joe), and Charles Chaplin (Monsieur Verdoux). Most crucially, Aldrich worked with leftists Abraham Polonsky, Robert Rossen, and John Garfield on Body and Soul and Force of Evil, and Joseph Losey on The Prowler and M (another Kiss Me Deadly precursor). Among his first solo features were the anti-American Apache, which, starring Burt Lancaster as the last unreconciled member of Geronimo's band, was the top-grossing western of 1954, and the remarkably cynical mercenary oat opera Vera Cruz, also from 1954.

Given this background, and the company he kept, Aldrich expected to be named during the Hollywood witch hunt. He wasn’t, nor does he seem to have inspired an FBI file. Perhaps he was too unimportant, or, conversely, too well connected. When he teamed with producer Victor Saville to make Kiss Me Deadly, he hired Bezzerides, another Hollywood fellow traveler, to adapt Spillane’s novel. Bezzerides’s script was saturated with cynicism and predicated on free association: “I wrote it fast because I had contempt for it. It was automatic writing. Things were in the air at the time, and I put them in.”

Bezzerides shifted the novel’s location from New York to Los Angeles, eliminated the first-person voice-over, and downgraded Hammer from private eye to divorce dick. Rather than an adoring fiancée who “could whip off a shoe and crack a skull before you could bat an eye,” Hammer’s secretary Velma is his devotedly amoral mistress, serving as sexual bait to entrap the husbands of Hammer’s female clients. It’s a not unprofitable line of work. The detective, played by Ralph Meeker (the actor who replaced Marlon Brando in A Streetcar Named Desire), drives a Jaguar, has a futuristic telephone answering machine built into his bachelor pad’s wall, and, a bag of golf clubs in the corner, lives a version of what was not yet called the Playboy philosophy. The faux Calder mobile and checkerboard floor pattern add to the crazy, clashing expressionism.

After reading the script that Aldrich submitted in September 1954, the MPAA informed him that his story was totally unacceptable, both for its treatment of narcotics and for the hero’s cold-blooded, never entirely justified vigilante killings, as well as “numerous items of brutality and sexual suggestiveness.” The script was resubmitted in early November sans drugs and with atomic spies substituted for gangsters. The context shifted, the mercenary antihero remained. As embodied by the muscular, smirking Meeker, Hammer is a hustler who, as one cop grudgingly allows, “can sniff out information like nobody I ever saw”—not to mention a voyeuristic creep who takes sadistic pleasure in violence, exhibiting a surplus of macho behavior that, aggravated by sexual repression and crass self-interest, ultimately becomes a criticism of itself. The movie stops in its tracks to focus on his excited grin as he snaps a collector’s priceless 78 record, a crime also committed by the punks of Blackboard Jungle, or slams a desk drawer shut on another potential informant’s fingers—or when, with a mix of pity and contempt, a police detective gives him the clue “Manhattan Project” as though addressing a dumb animal. Everyone is under surveillance, everything is a secret; the protagonist, who is described as returning from the grave, is a walking corpse. Jagged and aggressive, Kiss Me Deadly is one paranoid movie—with all that implies. Fear of a nuclear holocaust fuses with fear of a female fatale. Hammer pursues and is pursued by a shadowy cabal—a mysterious “They,” as they’re called in the film’s key exchange, “the nameless ones who kill people for the Great Whatsit.”

Some months before Kiss Me Deadly opened, Aldrich pragmatically defended the movie’s violence in a February 20, 1955, New York Herald-Tribune article titled “You Can’t Hang Up the Meat Hook”: “We think we have kept faith with the sixty million Mickey Spillane readers” while making “a movie of action, violence, and suspense in good taste.” Only days before, the director had written to the MPAA with thanks for its reconsideration of its decision not to approve the production—and about two months later, he would be appealing to the association for help: in May, just as the film was to be released, the Legion of Decency condemned it, demanding “over thirty changes, cuts, and deletions.” Aldrich made minor cuts, ensuring a B rating (condemned in part).

Kiss Me Deadly’s ads were displayed in June 1955 during Senate hearings on juvenile delinquency, with Senator Estes Kefauver interrogating the director of the MPAA’s Advertising Code Administration, Gordon S. White. Pointing to a poster for “Mickey Spillane’s Latest H-Bomb!” Kefauver lectured White: These producers have told us that in all of the pictures, horror and crime and sex pictures, there is some moral they are trying to prove. I just wonder if you get the moral in this advertising up here. There is a “Kiss Me Deadly. White-Hot Thrills! Blood-Red Kisses!” That is all it says about it. What is moral?

“I don’t like that any more than you do, Senator,” White maintained, without answering the question, even though Kiss Me Deadly had a good deal to say about greed, corruption, vigilante justice, and the apocalypse.

Taken for trash, this great movie was never reviewed in the New York Times and was banned in Britain. In France, Kiss Me Deadly was admired mainly by the young critics at Cahiers du cinéma, where it was considered “the thriller of tomorrow” and Aldrich, dubbed Le gros Bob, was hailed as “the first director of the atomic age.” Kiss Me Deadly, Claude Chabrol wrote in his passionate review, “has chosen to create itself out of the worst material to be found, the most deplorable, the most nauseous product of a genre in a state of
Aldrich and Bezzerides “have taken this threadbare and lackluster fabric and splendidly rewoven it into rich patterns of the most enigmatic arabesques.” Amen.

COMING UP IN THE FALL 2012 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XXV:

Oct 9 LONELY ARE THE BRAVE David Miller 1962
Oct 16 FAIL-SAFE Sidney Lumet 1964
Oct 23 THE STUNT MAN Richard Rush 1980
Oct 30 COME AND SEE Elem Klimov 1985
Nov 6 GRAVE OF THE FIREFLIES Isao Takahata 1988
Nov 13 MAGNOLIA Paul Thomas Anderson 1999
Nov 20 RUSSIAN ARK Alexander Sokurov 2002
Nov 27 WHITE MATERIAL Claire Denis 2009
Dec 4 A SEPARATION Asghar Farhadi 2011

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