

THE BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS

CONVERSATIONS ABOUT GREAT FILMS WITH BRUCE JACKSON & DIANE CHRISTIAN

PRESENTED BY THE UNIVERSITY AT BUFFALO AND THE MARKET ARCADE FILM AND ARTS CENTER

MARCH 13, 2001 (III:8): KISS ME DEADLY (1955)

ROBERT ALDRICH (9 August 1918, Cranston, Rhode Island – 5 December 1983, Los Angeles, kidney failure), a nephew of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and cousin of New York's quondam governor, worked as an assistant director to Chaplin and Renoir before becoming a director himself. He is one of those directors whose films are more likely to turn up on critics' Secret Pleasures lists than their Grand Films lists. He directed 31 films, among them *All the Marbles* 1981, *The Choirboys* 1977, *Twilight's Last Gleaming* 1977, *Hustle* 1975, *The Longest Yard* 1974, *The Killing of Sister George* 1968, *The Dirty Dozen* 1967, *Hush... Hush, Sweet Charlotte* 1964, *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* 1962, *The Big Knife* 1955, *Apache* 1954, and *Vera Cruz* 1954.

ERNEST LASZLO (23 April 1898 – 6 January 1984, Hollywood) was a cinematographer for 50 years, beginning with *The Pace that Kills* 1928 and ending with *The Domino Principle* 1977. He shot 66 other films, among them *Logan's Run* 1976, *Airport* 1970, *Star!* 1968, *Luv* 1967, *Fantastic Voyage* 1966, *Baby the Rain Must Fall* 1965, *Ship of Fools* 1965, *It's a Mad Mad Mad Mad World* 1963, *Judgment at Nuremberg* 1961, *Inherit the Wind* 1960, *The Big Knife* 1955, *The Kentuckian* 1955, *Apache* 1954, *The Naked Jungle* 1954, *Vera Cruz* 1954, *Stalag 17* 1953, *The Moon Is Blue* 1953, *D.O.A.* 1950, *The Big Wheel* 1949, *Cover-Up* 1949, *Road to Rio* 1947, *Two Years Before the Mast* 1946. Laszlo was nominated for 8 Academy Awards and won one, for *Ship of Fools*.

MICKEY SPILLANE Frank Morrison Spillane (9 March 1918, Brooklyn) is famous for his seven Mike Hammer novels, several of which have been made into films and which have twice been tv series. All were written in about two weeks, without revision. Before discovering crime novels, he wrote stories and dialog for *Captain Marvel* and *Captain America* comic books. From 1973 to 1989 he was a tv spokesman for Miller Lite beer. In his later years, he took to writing children's books, some of which were highly successful. He lives in South Carolina and celebrated his 83rd birthday last Friday.

FRANK DE VOL (20 September 1911, Moundsville, WV – 27 October 1999, Lafayette, California, congestive heart failure) composed the scores for most of Aldrich's films as well as *All the Marbles* 1981, *Herbie Goes Bananas* 1980, "Fernwood 2-Night" 1977, "The Love Boat" 1977, "The Brady Bunch" 1969 TV Series, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* 1967, *Cat Ballou* 1965, *Under the Yum Yum Tree* 1963, and more.

RALPH MEEKER (Ralph Rathgeber, 21 November 1920, Minneapolis, Minnesota – 5 August 1988, Woodland Hills, California, heart attack) is probably better known for his scores of roles in made-for-tv movies and on tv series: "Harry-O," "Kaz," "Canon," "The F.B.I.," "The Virginian," "Route 66," "Alfred Hitchcock Presents." He rarely got to play the lead in anything and is one of those supporting actors about whom other actors say, "He's better than you think." You get an idea how good he can be from the way he plays the anti-hero in this film and his masterful job as the unjustly condemned Corporal Paris in Stanley Kubrick's *Paths of Glory* 1957. Some of his other films were *Without Warning* 1980, *Winter Kills* 1979, *The Detective* 1968, *The St. Valentine's Day Massacre* 1967, *The Dirty Dozen* 1967, *Big House, U.S.A.* 1955, and *The Naked Spur* 1953. He

succeeded (to very good reviews) Marlon Brando in the Broadway production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

ALBERT DEKKER (20 December 1905, Brooklyn – 5 May 1968, Hollywood, strangulation) was in *Suddenly*, *Last Summer* 1959, *East of Eden* 1955, *The Silver Chalice* 1954, *Tarzan's Magic Fountain* 1949, *Cass Timberlane* 1947, *Gentleman's Agreement* 1947, *Two Years Before the Mast* 1946, *The Killers* 1946, *Salome, Where She Danced* 1945, *Wake Island* 1942, *Beau Geste* 1939, *The Man in the Iron Mask* 1939 and 65 other films. His last role, in Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* 1969 was perhaps his best. In his latter years he returned to the very successful stage career stage he'd left

Kiss Me Deadly 1955, 106 minutes, Parklane Pictures

Director Robert Aldrich
Script by A.I. Bezzerides, based on Mickey Spillane's novel
Producer Robert Aldrich
Original music Frank De Vol
Cinematographer Ernest Laszlo
Film Editor Michael Luciano
Art Director William Glasgow

Ralph Meeker Mike Hammer
Albert Dekker Dr. G.E. Soberin
Paul Stewart Carl Evello
Juano Hernandez Eddie Yeager
Wesley Addy Pat Chambers
Gaby Rogers Lily Carver
Marian Carr Friday
Fortunio Bonanova Carmen Trivago
Madi Comfort Singer
Robert Cornthwaite F.B.I. Man
Nick Dennis Nick
Jack Elam Charlie Max
Percy Helton Doc Kennedy
Jack Lambert Sugar Smallhouse
Strother Martin Truck Driver
Silvio Minciotti Mover
Maxine Cooper Velda

when he started making films 30 years earlier.

PAUL STEWART (Paul Sternberg, 13 March 1908, New York – 17 February 1986, Los Angeles, heart attack) was an original member of Orson Welles' "Mercury Theatre" and is perhaps best known to film buffs for his role as the smarmy butler in *Citizen Kane* 1941. He also appeared in *S.O.B.* 1981, *Revenge of the Pink Panther* 1978, *The Day of the Locust* 1975, *In Cold Blood* 1967, *King Creole* 1958, *The Bad and the Beautiful* 1952, *Twelve O'Clock High* 1949, and *Champion* 1949. He did a huge amount of tv work in such series as "Remington Steele," "The Rockford Files," "Cannon," "Ellery Queen," "Matt Helm," "Hawaii Five-O," "Gunsmoke," "It Takes a Thief," "Perry Mason," "Wagon Train," "Alfred Hitchcock Presents."

CLORIS LEACHMAN (30 April 1926, Des Moines, Iowa) is the only actress who has won five Emmys in five separate categories. She also won a Best Supporting Actress Oscar for her work in *The Last Picture Show* coming up in two weeks. She's a great character actor, perhaps best known in recent years for her work for Mel Brooks in *Young*

Frankenstein 1974, *High Anxiety* 1977, and *History of the World, Part 1* 1981. In 1977 she posed nude on the cover of *Alternative Medicine Digest*, body painted like a fruit basket, a parody of Demi Moore's famous nude *Vanity Fair* cover. She appeared for years on "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" 1970-77, and "Phyllis" 1975-77.

JACK ELAM (13 November 1916, Miami, Arizona) was an accountant who got his first film role in exchange for some accounting work. He has appeared in more than 130 theatrical and made-for-tv films, among them Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* 1969, which you can see in this screening room one week from tonight. Elam appeared frequently in all the tv western series: "Kung Fu," "Gunsmoke," "Bonanza," "The Virginian," "The High Chaparral," "F Troop," "Daniel Boone," "Rawhide," "The Rifleman," "Laramie," "Zane Grey Theater," "Zorro," "The Lone Ranger," and more.

GABY RODGERS appeared three times on the Goodyear Television Playhouse all in 1951, twice on the Philco Television Playhouse both in 1948, and in this one film.

from "Notes on Film Noir" Paul Schrader 1972.

Film Noir is not a genre (as Raymond Durgan has helpfully pointed out over the objections of Higham and Greenberg's *Hollywood in the Forties*). It is not defined as are the western and gangster genres, by conventions of setting and conflict, but rather by the more subtle qualities of tone and mood. It is a film "noir," as opposed to the possible variants of film gray or film off-white.

Film noir is an extremely unwieldy period. It harks back to many previous periods: Warner's Thirties gangster films, the French "poetic realism" of Carné and Duvivier, Sternbergian melodrama, and farthest back, German Expressionist crime films (Lang's *Mabuse* cycle). *Film noir* can stretch at its outer limits from *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) to *Touch of Evil* (1958), and most every dramatic Hollywood film from 1941 to 1953 contains some *noir* elements. There are also foreign offshoots of *film noir* such as *The Third Man*, *Breathless* and *Le Doulos*.

...Appropriately, the masterpiece of *film noir* was a straggler, *Kiss Me Deadly*, produced in 1955. Its time delay gives it a sense of detachment and thoroughgoing seediness – it stands at the end of a long sleazy tradition. The private eye hero, Mike Hammer, undergoes the final stages of degradation. He is a small-time "bed room dick," and makes no qualms about it because the world around him isn't much better. Ralph Meeker, in his best performance, plays Hammer, a midget among dwarfs. Robert Aldrich's teasing direction carries *noir* to its sleaziest and most perversely erotic. Hammer overturns the world in search of the "great whatsis," and when he finally finds it it turns out to be a joke of jokes – an exploding atomic bomb. The inhumanity and meaninglessness of the hero are small matters in a world in which The Bomb has the final say.

...in retrospect the gangster films Warshaw wrote about are inferior to *film noir*. The Thirties gangster was primarily a reflection of what was happening in the country, and Warshaw analyzed this. The *film noir*, although it was also a sociological reflection, went further than the gangster film. Toward the end *film noir* was engaged in a life-and-death struggle with the materials it reflected; it tried to make America accept a moral vision of life based on style. That very contradiction – promoting style in a culture which valued themes – forced *film noir* into artistically invigorating twists and turns. *Film noir* attacked and interpreted its sociological conditions, and, by the close of the *noir* period, created a new artistic world which went beyond a simple sociological reflection, a nightmarish world of American mannerism which was by far more a creation than a reflection.

Because *film noir* was first of all a style, because it worked out its conflicts visually rather than thematically, because it was aware of its own identity, it was able to create artistic solutions to sociological problems. And for these reasons films like *Kiss Me Deadly*, *Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye*, and *Gun Crazy* can be works of art in a way that gangster films like *Scarface*, *Public Enemy*, and *Little Caesar* can never be.

Remember
by Christina Rossetti

Remember me when I am gone away,
Gone far away into the silent land;
When you can no more hold me by the hand,

Not I half turn to go, yet turning stay.
Remember me when no more day by day
You tell me of our future that you planned:
Only remember me; you understand
It will be too late to counsel or pray.
Yet if you should forget me for a while
And afterwards remember, do not grieve:
For if the darkness and corruption leave
A vestige of thoughts I once had,
Better by far you should forget and smile
Than that you should remember and be sad.

Velda: Do me a favor, will you? Keep away from the windows. Somebody might... blow you a kiss.

Lily Carver: Kiss me, Mike. I want you to kiss me. Kiss me. The liar's kiss that says I love you, and means something else.

Dr. Soberin: The head of Medusa. That's what's in the box, and who looks on her will be changed not into stone but into brimstone and ashes. But of course you wouldn't believe me, you'd have to see for yourself, wouldn't you?

Dr. G.E. Soberin: Listen to me, as if I were Cerberus barking with all his heads at the gates of hell. I will tell you where to take it, but don't... don't open it!

All I saw was the dame standing there in the glare of the headlights waving her arms like a huge puppet and the curse I spit out filled the car and my own ears. I wrenched the car over, felt the rear end start to slide, brought it out with a splash of power and almost ran up the side of the cliff as the car fishtailed. The brakes bit in, gouging a furrow in the shoulder, then jumped to the pavement and held. Somehow I had managed a sweeping curve around the babe. Mickey Spillane, *Kiss Me Deadly*, 1952, p. 1.

From Aldrich entry in John Wakeman, ed., *World Film Directors*, vol. 2, 1988: Aldrich explained that he had wanted "to depict my utter contempt and loathing. . .for the cynical, fascistic private eye, Mike Hammer." When the picture was released in 1955, however, he found that most American critics passed over it as no more than "a Spillane movie done with a little more energy. . . .So they didn't understand at all the political implications"—the implicit indictment of the assumption that the defense of America justified any means (including McCarthyism) and any weapons (including atomic ones). In France the response was very different. Aldrich said, "I had a career due to the European reaction to *Kiss Me Deadly*"; Claude Chabrol and other Cahiers du Cinéma critics "jumped on that picture like it was the Second Coming." American critics caught up and the movie is regarded by some as Aldrich's "unquestioned masterpiece."

Tim Dirks on *film noir* (<http://www.filmsite.org/filmnoir.html>):

The primary moods of classic *film noir* are melancholy, alienation, bleakness, disillusionment, disenchantment, pessimism, ambiguity, moral corruption, evil, guilt and paranoia. Heroes (or anti-heroes), corrupt characters and villains include down-and-out, hard-boiled detectives or private eyes, cops, gangsters, government agents, crooks, war veterans, petty criminals, and murderers. These protagonists are often low lifes from the dark and gloomy underworld of violent crime and corruption. Distinctively, they are cynical, tarnished, obsessive (sexual or otherwise), brooding, menacing, sinister, sardonic, disillusioned, frightened and insecure loners, struggling to survive and ultimately losing.... The females in film noir are either of two types - dutiful, reliable, trustworthy and loving women; or *femmes fatales* - duplicitous, double-crossing, gorgeous, unloving, predatory, tough-sweet, unreliable, irresponsible, manipulative and desperate women.... *Film noir* films...show the dark and inhumane side of human nature with cynicism and doomed love, and they emphasize the brutal, unhealthy, seamy, shadowy, dark and sadistic sides of the human experience. Film noir is marked by expressionistic lighting ... disorienting visual schemes, circling cigarette smoke, existential sensibilities, and unbalanced compositions. Settings are often interiors with low-key lighting, Venetian-blinded windows, and dark and gloomy appearances. Exteriors are often night scenes with deep shadows, wet asphalt, rain-slicked or mean streets, flashing neon lights, and low key lighting.... Story locations are often in murky and dark streets, dimly-lit apartments and hotel rooms of big cities.... An atmosphere of menace, pessimism, anxiety, suspicion that anything can go wrong, dingy realism, fatalism, defeat and entrapment are stylized characteristics of *film noir*. Narratives are frequently complex and convoluted, typically with flashbacks (or a series of flashbacks) and/or reflective voice-over narration.

Some other FsNs: *Murder, My Sweet* (1944), *The Big Sleep* (1946) *Lady in the Lake* (1946) *Farewell, My Lovely* (1945 & 1975), *The Long Goodbye* (1973), *Scarlet Street* (1945), *D.O.A.* (1950), *The House on 92nd Street* (1945), *Call Northside 777* (1948), *The Naked City* (1948), *The Wrong Man* (1956), *Double Indemnity* (1944), *Mildred Pierce* (1945), *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946), *The Lady From Shanghai* (1948), *Gilda* (1946), *You Only Live Once* (1937), *They Live By Night* (1948), *Citizen Kane* (1941), *Gaslight* (1944), *Laura* (1944), *Sorry, Wrong Number* (1948), *In A Lonely Place* (1950), *Rebecca* (1940), *Suspicion* (1941), *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943), *Spellbound* (1945), *Notorious* (1946), *The Woman in the Window* (1944), *Leave Her to Heaven* (1945), *The Night of the Hunter* (1955), *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950), *The Big Heat* (1953), *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), *The Killing* (1956), *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957), *They Drive By Night* (1940), *Key Largo* (1948), *White Heat* (1949), *Chinatown* (1974), *Body Heat* (1981), *Blade Runner* (1982), *Blood Simple* (1984), *L.A. Confidential* (1997).

Alain Silver, "Kiss Me Deadly: Evidence of a Style" (*Film Comment*): At the core of *Kiss Me Deadly* are speed and violence. The adaptation of Mickey Spillane's novel takes Mike Hammer from New York to Los Angeles, where it situates him in a landscape of somber streets and decaying houses even less inviting than those stalked by Spade and Marlowe in the preceding decades of Depression and War years. Much like Hammer's fast cars, the movie swerves frenziedly through a series of disconnected and cataclysmic scenes. As such, it typifies the frenetic, post-Bomb L.A. with all its malignant undercurrents. It records the degenerative half life of an unstable universe as it moves towards critical mass. When it reaches the fission point, the graphic threat of machine-gun bullets traced in the door of a house on Laurel Canyon in *The Big Sleep* in the 40s is explosively superseded in the 50s as a beach cottage in Malibu becomes

ground zero.

...*Kiss Me Deadly* continues to be one of the classic period's most discussed films. In the "Postface" of a new printing of their text, a decade after Paul Schrader called it "the masterpiece of film noir," Borde and Chaumeton wrote: "1955, the end of an epoch. Film Noir has fulfilled its role by creating a particular disquiet and providing a vehicle for social criticism in the United States. Robert Aldrich gives this happening a fascinating and shadowy conclusion, *Kiss Me Deadly*. It is the despairing opposite of the film which, fourteen years earlier, opened the noir cycle, *The Maltese Falcon*."

For notes on Spillane: [//www.kirjasto.sci.fi/spillane.htm](http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/spillane.htm)...Alain Silver, "Kiss Me Deadly: Evidence of a Style," [//members.aol.com/alainsil/noirkmd/noirkmd1.htm](http://members.aol.com/alainsil/noirkmd/noirkmd1.htm) (Revised and expanded version of the article originally in *Film Comment*)...Alain Silver, "So what's with the ending of *Kiss Me Deadly*?" online at Images, [//www.imagejournal.com/issue02/infocus/kissdead.htm](http://www.imagejournal.com/issue02/infocus/kissdead.htm)...Glenn Erickson, "The Kiss Me Mangled Mystery: Refurbishing a Film Noir," Images, [//www.imagejournal.com/issue03/features/kmd1.htm](http://www.imagejournal.com/issue03/features/kmd1.htm)...To see a recreation of the original ending of the film: [//www.imagejournal.com/issue02/infocus/kissend.htm](http://www.imagejournal.com/issue02/infocus/kissend.htm). The basic *film noir* reference book is Alan Silver and Elizabeth Ward, eds., *Film Noir: An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style*, 3rd ed., 1992. And there are a bunch of good essays in Alan Silver and James Ursini, eds., *Film Noir Reader* 5th ed., & *Film Noir Reader 2*, both Limelight, NY 1999.

OUR MOTTO I (BY LUIS BUÑUEL): Filmmaking seems to me a transitory and threatened art. It is very closely bound up with technical developments. If in thirty or fifty years the screen no longer exists, if editing isn't necessary, cinema will have ceased to exist. It will have become something else. That's already almost the case when a film is shown on television: the smallness of the screen falsifies everything.

OUR MOTTO II (IN FRIDAY'S NY TIMES BY ANG LEE): "The intellectualizing, the analysis — that can come later," Mr. Lee said. "In my movies, I hope that is all in hiding. It is the juice that we want. I think that's what brings us to the movie theater. All the ways and means and heart are just vehicles, ways of peering down through a protection, to reach that juicy part that is very vulnerable and that you can only reach when you are in the dark, in a movie theater, and you are with people."

THIS WEEK'S BONUS: Diane will be introducing the last film in this year's International Women's Film Festival, Dorothy Arzner's excellent *Dance, Girl, Dance* (1940), this Thursday, March 15, at 7:00 p.m. in our regular screening room at the Market Arcade. Arzner was one of the first women to crack Hollywood's all-male system, the first woman to join the Directors' Guild of America. For more info on her and the film, go to <http://www.womenandgender.buffalo.edu/events/film2001/dance.htm>.

Join us next week, Tuesday March 20, for Henry Fonda, Claudia Cardinale, Charles Bronson & Jason Robards in Sergio Leone's epic *ONCE UPON A TIME IN THE WEST*

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