

12 September 2006 XIII:3

MILDRED PIERCE (1945) 111 min.

Selected for the National Film Registry 1996

Joan Crawford...Mildred Pierce Beragon

Jack Carson...Wally Fay

Zachary Scott...Monte Beragon

Eve Arden...Ida Corwin

Ann Blyth...Veda Pierce Forrester

Bruce Bennett...Albert ('Bert') Pierce

Lee Patrick...Mrs. Maggie Biederhof

Moroni Olsen...Inspector Peterson

Veda Ann Borg...Miriam Ellis

Jo Ann Marlowe...Kay Pierce

Directed by Michael Curtiz

Based on the novel by James M. Cain

Screenplay by Ranald MacDougall, William Faulkner, Catherine Turney

Produced by Jerry Wald

Original Music by Max Steiner

Cinematography by Ernest Haller

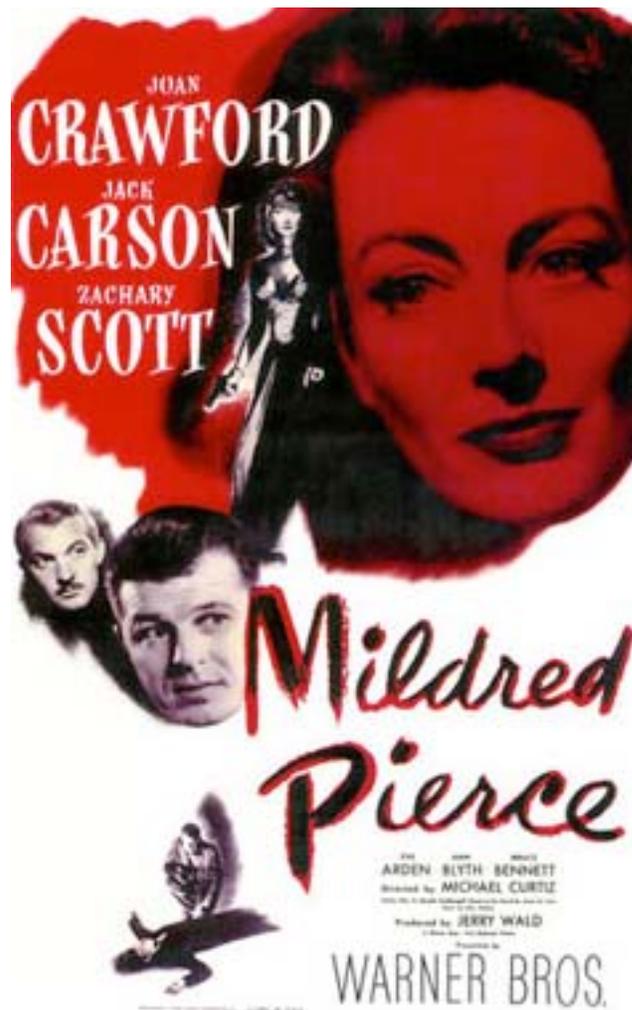
Makeup Department Perc Westmore

Oscar for Best Actress (Crawford), nominations for Best Supporting Actress (Arden, Blyth), Cinematography-B&W (Haller), Picture (Wald), Screenplay (MacDougall)

Selected for National Film Registry by the National Film Preservation Board, 1996

MICHAEL CURTIZ (Mihály Kertész) 24 December 1886, Budapest, Austria-Hungary—10 April 1962, Hollywood, cancer) directed 172 films, the last of which was *The Comancheros* (1961). Some of the others were *King Creole* (1958), *White Christmas* (1954), *The Jazz Singer* (1952), *Force of Arms* (1951), *Young Man with a Horn* (1950), *Flamingo Road* (1949), *Night and Day* (1946), *Casablanca* (1942), *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (1942), *Santa Fe Trail* (1940), *Virginia City* (1940), *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* (1939), *Dodge City* (1939), *Kid Galahad* (1937), *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1936), *Captain Blood* (1935), *Mammy* (1930), *The Third Degree* (1926), *Der Goldene Schmetterling* (1926), *Boccaccio* (1920), and *Az Utolsó bohém* (1912). He won a best director Oscar for *Casablanca* (1942).

ERNEST HALLER (31 May 1896, Los Angeles--21 October 1970, Marina del Rey, California, road accident) shot 180 films. He won one Best Cinematography Oscar (*Gone With the Wind*, 1939) and was nominated for five others: *Lilies of the Field* (1963), *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962), *The Flame and the Arrow* (1950), *Mildred Pierce* (1945), and *Jezebel* (1938). Some of his other films were *Dead Ringer* (1964), *Lilies of the Field* (1963), *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), *Jim Thorpe—All-American* (1951), *Humoresque* (1946), *Saratoga Trunk* (1945), *Rhapsody in Blue* (1945), *Mr.*



Skeffington (1944), *The Roaring Twenties* (1939), *Dark Victory* (1939), *Jezebel* (1938), *Captain Blood* (1935), *The Emperor Jones* (1933), *Parisian Nights* (1925), and *The Discarded Woman* (1920).

JOAN CRAWFORD (23 March 1904, San Antonio, Texas--10 May 1977, NYC, pancreatic cancer) acted in 106 films and (mostly in the 1960s) TV series. Some of her notable films were *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962), *The Story of Esther Costello* (1957), *Queen Bee* (1955), *Johnny Guitar* (1954), *Harriet Craig* (1950), *The Damned Don't Cry* (1950), *Flamingo Road* (1949), *Possessed* (1947) *Daisy Kenyon* (1947), *Humoresque* (1946), *The Women* (1939), *Dancing Lady* (1933), *Grand Hotel* (1932), *Our Dancing Daughters* (1928), *The Unknown* (1927), *The Boob* (1926), and (a bit part, her first film appearance so far as anyone knows) *Lady of the Night* (1925).

JACK CARSON (27 October 1910, Carman, Manitoba, Canada--2 January 1963, Encino, California, stomach cancer) acted in 175 films and (in the late 1950s and the 1960s) TV series. Some of his films were *The Tarnished Angels* (1958), *Arsenic and Old Lace* (1944), *Gentleman Jim* (1942), *The Strawberry Blonde* (1941), *Destry Rides Again* (1939), *The Kid from Texas* (1939), *Go Chase Yourself* (1938), and *Too Many Wives* (1937). **ZACHARY SCOTT** (21 February 1914, Austin, Texas—3 October 1965, malignant brain tumor) appeared in 69 films and all the important 1950s and early 1960s TV dramatic series. Some of his other films were *Pretty Baby* (1950), *Flamingo Road* (1949), *Whiplash* (1948), *Cass Timberlane* (1947), *Stallion Road* (1947), *The Southerner* (1945) and *The Mask of Dimitrios* (1944). **EVE ARDEN** (30 April 1909, Mill Valley, California--12 November 1990, Los Angeles, cardiac arrest due to arteriosclerotic heart disease) acted in 90 films and tv series, among them "Falcon Crest," "Amazing Stories," "Faerie Tale Theatre," *Grease 2* (1982), *Under the Rainbow* (1981), "Hart to Hart," "Vegas," "Ellery Queen," "The Man from U.N.C.L.E.," *Butterfield 8* (1960), *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959), "Our Miss Brooks," *Goodbye, My Fancy* (1951), *Whiplash* (1948), *One Touch of Venus* (1948), *The Voice of the Turtle* (1947), *Night and Day* (1946), *The Kid from Brooklyn* (1946), *Cover Girl* (1944), *Ziegfeld Girl* (1941), and *Oh Doctor* (1937). **ANN BLYTH** (16 August 1928, Mount Kisco, New York) acted in 46 films and tv series, among them "Murder, She Wrote," "Quincy M.E.," "Burke's Law," "The Twilight Zone," "Wagon Train," "The DuPont Show with June Allyson," *The Buster Keaton Story* (1957), *Kismet* (1955), *The Student Prince* (1954), *Rose Marie* (1954), *The Great Caruso* (1951), *Mr. Peabody and the Mermaid* (1948), *Another Part of the Forest* (1948), *Brute Force* (1947), and *Chip Off the Old Block* (1944).

Michael/Mihaly Kertesz From World Film Directors, V. I. Ed John Wakeman. H.W. Wilson Co. NY 1987.

Entry by Philip Kemp

American director and producer, [Curtiz/Kertesz] was born in Budapest, Hungary, of Jewish parentage, the eldest of three sons. Later in life, Curtiz enjoyed creating mystery about his origins and upbringing and sometimes maintained that his father was "a poor carpenter." The generally accepted account, though, is that his family was comfortably off, his father being an architect and his mother an opera singer. Curtiz himself is said to have made his stage debut, aged eleven, in an opera in which his mother was starring. At seventeen, he ran away to join a traveling circus, performing with them as strongman, acrobat, juggler, and mime. He is also reported to have been a member of the Hungarian fencing team at the 1912 Stockholm Olympics.

It seems certain, at any rate, that Curtiz studied at Markoszy University in Budapest and then at the Royal Academy of Theatre and Art. Having completed his studies, he joined the National Hungarian Theatre, whose repertoire consisted mostly of "boulevard comedies" like those of Molnar, several of which Curtiz would later film. He began his theatrical career in traditional style, taking on all the dogsbody jobs from candyseller to cashier. Curtiz soon graduated to acting roles and before long was established as one of the company's most promising young directors.

Ma és holnap (*Today and Tomorrow*, 1912) was proudly announced as "The First Hungarian Dramatic Art Film." Curtiz took one of the leading roles and is generally believed to have directed as well, although no director was credited. He was certainly named as the director of *Az utolsó bohém* (*The Last Bohemian*, 1912), and he made at least two more pictures before setting out for the Nordisk Studios in Copenhagen, at that time the preeminent center of film production in Europe. Curtiz spent six months at Nordisk, learning all he could about filmmaking and working with leading Scandanavian directors like Mauritz Stiller and Victor Sjöström. He assisted August Blom in the direction of a big-budget epic, *Atlantis* (1913) and is supposed to have directed a film of his own for Nordisk, although no record of it has survived.

Back in Hungary, adorned with the prestige of his Danish experience, Curtiz found himself much in demand. From 1914 to 1919 he directed at least thirty-seven films, many of which—following the contemporary Scandanavian example—showed a preference for outdoor locations. *Bánk bán* (1914), based on a popular Hungarian folk story, was the first of several major successes. On the outbreak of war, Curtiz was drafted into the Austro-Hungarian artillery, but through shrewd use of personal connections got himself first transferred to the Army film unit and then in 1915 discharged.

Early in 1917, Curtiz was appointed director of production at Phoenix Films, the leading studio in

Budapest. He worked exclusively for them until he left Hungary. None of his Hungarian films has survived intact, and most are completely lost; but the fragments that remain suggest that Curtiz's talent for fluid narrative and vivid composition was already well-developed. So, too, was his notoriously autocratic attitude to filmmaking: in a 1917 article for the periodical *Mozzihét* he stated "An actor's success is no more than the success of the director whose concept of the whole brings into harmony the performance of each character on the screen."

In April 1919, Bela Kun's short-lived socialist Republic of Councils announced the nationalization of the film industry. This was little to Curtiz's taste. Abandoning his current project, a version of Molnár's *Liliom*, he left Hungary for good. According to some sources, he visited Sweden, where a persistent but improbable legend has him directing a film featuring the fourteen-year-old Greta Gustafsson (Garbo) as Marie Antoinette. No trace of any such work has survived, nor of an early episode of Fritz Lang's serial *Die Spinnen* (*The Spiders*, 1919), which Curtiz is said to have directed in Germany. With or without detours, he ended up in Vienna, where he and Lucy Doraine [his actress wife] were signed up by Count Alexander Kolowrat, owner of Sascha Films.

While working for Sascha, Curtiz later wrote, he "learned the basic laws of film art, which, in those days, had progressed further in Vienna than anywhere else" (thus apparently dismissing as negligible the experience gained on his forty or so Hungarian films). The pictures that he directed for Sascha—twenty-one at least—fall mainly into two categories: sophisticated light comedies and historical (in the loosest sense) spectaculars....

His own reputation...was established by his DeMille-style biblical spectaculars, notably *Sodom und Gomorrha* (1922) and *Die Sklavenkönigin* (*Moon of Israel*, 1924), with their cannily commercial mixture of sexual display and moral deprecation. *Sodom und Gomorrha*, though at the time the most expensive film ever made in Austria, more than recouped its cost; thanks largely to Curtiz, Sascha was fast becoming the leading Austrian studio and establishing lucrative connections with the mighty UFA company of Berlin.

Moon of Israel, produced by a fellow Hungarian exile, Sandor (later Sir Alexander) Korda, achieved wide international distribution. Jack Warner, scouting for talent in Europe with his brother Harry, saw it in Paris and was "laid in the aisles by Curtiz's camera work. . . [by] shots and angles that were pure genius." Warners, lean and ambitious, had already snapped up Lubitsch, and now decided to sign Curtiz for their planned superproduction, *Noah's Ark*—a film intended to beat De Mille at his own game....

In 1926, when Curtiz arrived in Hollywood, Warner Brothers was still a small and financially shaky studio; the jackpot of Vitaphone and *The Jazz Singer* was a year in the future. Kertész now became Curtiz; but

before letting their newly-christened director loose on *Noah's Ark*, the studio cautiously assigned him to a batch of programmers, beginning with a melodrama, *The Third Degree* (1926). Curtiz, with some sixty films already to his credit and obsessively dedicated to his work, slid effortlessly into the Hollywood system, rapidly proving himself capable of making a smooth, professional job out of even the least promising material. He was to stay with Warners for the next twenty-eight years and directed eighty-six films for them, including all his best work.

...His first commercial failure, *The Mad Genius* (1931), starred John Barrymore as a megalomaniac dance impresario; the film, which marks an early appearance of Curtiz's recurrent theme of cynicism versus idealism, was probably too similar to the recent *Svengal* (also with Barrymore) to impress the public. *The Strange Love of Molly Louvain* (1932), a social drama, rates in John Baxter's opinion as "among the earliest of his masterpieces....The milieu of the slum streets and hotel rooms is recreated with chilling detail, the story told with a pitiless intensity."

Warners were now the fastest-growing studio in Hollywood, and Curtiz's stock rose with them. *Cabin in the Cotton* (1932) was an early example of a Warners specialty—hard-hitting social (near-) realism. Is this case enlivened by the first of Bette Davis's rich gallery of malicious Southern belles. She appeared in a more sympathetic light in another "message picture," *20,000 Years in Sing Sing* (1933), playing the girlfriend of Spencer Tracy; in a wildly romantic gesture of self-sacrifice, Tracy goes to the chair for a murder she has committed. Curtiz's realistic portrayal of the dreariness and squalor of prison life may now seem commonplace, but was found fresh and revelatory at the time.

All through the 1930s, Curtiz tirelessly hammered out four or five movies a year, seemingly as ready to take on low-budget programmers as more prestigious assignments. By the middle of the decade, though, he was established as Warners' top director, increasingly assigned to the studio's major stars (Davis, Cagney, Muni, William Powell) and more expensive productions—at least by Warners' notoriously parsimonious standards. The studio's financial stability was now assured, but old habits died hard—especially those of Hal Wallis, Warners' formidable and tight-fisted production chief. Curtiz, versatile, industrious, and supremely adept at creating lavish results on minimal budgets, fitted the studio philosophy perfectly. "Curtiz never gave second-hand treatment to an assignment once it was accepted," commented William Meyer; "he went ahead and graced plot and character with fluid camera movement, exquisite lighting, and a lightening-fast pace. Even if a script was truly poor and the leading players were real amateurs, Curtiz glossed over inadequacies so well that an audience often failed to recognise a shallow substance until it was hungry for another film a half-hour later."

Equally well established by this time was Curtiz's reputations as one of the most detested directors in Hollywood, second only perhaps to Josef von Sternberg. Jack Edmund Nolan (*Films in Review*, November 1970) described him as "a manic-depressive sort of a man, up one day and down the next. In the euphoric phase he would appear on the set splendidly accoutred, even flamboyantly (scarf, costume jewelry), and be full of extroverted, self-confident assertiveness. In the depressed phase he would be unkempt and would refuse to talk even about things that were of concern to him. In both states he was mindful of the feelings of others only occasionally."

Autocratic and overbearing on the set, Curtiz clashed constantly with his actors; thriving under pressure, he expected them to do the same. Many actors, including Errol Flynn, eventually refused to work with Curtiz. Bette Davis, never one to be dominated, fought with him ceaselessly. (Curtiz is said to have referred to her, in her presence, as a "goddamned nothing nogood sexless son of a bitch.") Joan Blondell described him as "a cruel man, with animals and actors, and he swung that whip around pretty good. He overworked everyone. But he was also amusing, and he turned out some good pictures."

All his life Curtiz retained a strong Hungarian accent, and his creative mishandlings of the English language deserve to be as famous as those of Sam Goldwyn. He once stormed at a confused propman: "Next time I send a damn fool, I go myself!" He expressed dissatisfaction with a child actor by remarking scathingly: "By the time I was your age, I was fifteen." A scene in one of his films, he predicted, would "make your blood curl."

For all his unsympathetic treatment of actors, Curtiz showed a knack for detecting and fostering unknown talent. Among the actors who achieved stardom under his direction were Walter Slezak, John Garfield, and—rather unexpectedly—Doris Day. His most famous discovery, though, was undoubtedly Errol Flynn, who in Curtiz's hands rose from minor bit parts to become one of the great romantic heroes of the cinema, the first (and perhaps only) true successor to Douglas Fairbanks. The first of their dozen collaborations, *Captain Blood* (1935), defined the most enduring aspect of Flynn's screen performance: the dashing, devil-may-care swashbuckler, sword in hand and heart on sleeve....

Curtiz, William Meyer maintained, "is to the swashbuckler what John Ford is to the Western." *Robin Hood* alone might well serve to substantiate such a claim....

Curtiz won the first of his two Oscars for a patriotic short, *Sons of Liberty* (1939). It starred Claude Rains, exceptional among actors in that he generally got on well with Curtiz and enjoyed working for him.

With the start of the 1940s and the ending of the ebullient Flynn cycle, a darker, more pessimistic tone gradually seemed to suffuse Curtiz's output—although

many critics would argue that in this, as throughout his career, Curtiz the archetypal studio workhorse was merely reflecting an overall shift in Hollywood's—and America's—mood.

Moral despair...was conspicuously absent from the first of Curtiz's wartime hits, *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (1942). Davis and Flinn considered it "the finest musical biography ever filmed"; it was without any doubt the most energetic. As George M. Cohan, composer, showman, and superpatriot, James Cagney strutted superlatively, earning himself an Oscar; his performance, and that of Walter Huston as his father, did much to ensure the film's lasting appeal, despite the deafening blare of nationalistic bombast....

Also in 1943, Curtiz was assigned to what had originally been planned as a low-budget melodramatic programmer, to star Ronald Reagan and Ann Sheridan. For some reason, the project was upgraded to major-budget status, Bogart and Bergman were brought in to play the leads, a new scriptwriter was drafted (Howard Koch, who also scripted *Mission to Moscow*) and one of the great cult movies was born. *Casablanca* (1943) is undoubtedly Curtiz's best-known film, more written about than any of his others (quite possible more than all his others put together); it won him his only Best Director Oscar; and it established, more decisively even than *The Maltese Falcon* or *The Big Sleep*, the iconographic Bogart persona. Its low-key, nostalgically romantic appeal has not diminished; in August 1983 a British Film Institute Members' poll voted it, by a wide margin, top of a list of all-time favorite films.

As Rick, jaded and world-weary proprietor of a night spot in Vichy Casablanca, Bogart embodies perfectly the moral choice that lies at the heart of so many Curtiz films: public versus private morality, cynical detachment versus commitment. In the easy-going 1930s, the choice had been largely a formality; Errol Flynn's reluctance to become a sheriff and clean up Dodge City had been little more than a momentary hesitation. In *Casablanca*, though we sense that ultimately Bogart will do the right thing, the choice is more drawn-out, more agonized: not until the very last moments of the film does he relinquish Bergman to resistance leader Victor Laszlo (Paul Henreid) and ally himself irreversibly to the cause of freedom and democracy. This ambiguity no doubt stems partly from the uncertainty of the actors (and even of the director) as to how the film would end; most of the script was apparently written as shooting progressed. "That picture was made good on set," Curtiz remarked later. "I have three writers working on set every day as we shoot..."

By this stage in his career, Curtiz had to some extent modified his cinematic style and toned down the vividly dramatic expressionism of his earlier years. His camera remained fluid, but the angles were becoming less startling, the compositions less crowded and complex,

though he retained his taste for stark contrasts in lighting. "I have progressed too," he remarked around this time. "I was too European, too stagey, too sentimental. Now at fifty-six I do better work." Most critics would say that, on the contrary, at fifty-six Curtiz had almost all his best work behind him and was about to direct his last major film.

Mildred Pierce (1945), adapted from a novel by James M. Cain, was intended as a vehicle for Joan Crawford, recently ousted from MGM and badly in need of a boost for her flagging career. She got it; the film won her an Academy Award (her first and only) for her performance as the drivingly ambitious housewife who works her way up from waitress to owner of a chain of restaurants, and in doing so destroys her life and her family. But *Mildred Pierce* transcends its origins as a Crawford vehicle; a model *film noir*, presents an icily graphic picture of the souring of the American dream of success. "The family and mother love are both undermined," observed David Thomson. "Suburbia inextricably confuses happiness and the dollar."

Michael Wood cited *Mildred Pierce* as one of the few *films noirs* in which the action of the movie lives up (or perhaps down) to the lowering menace of the atmosphere: "The unrequited love of Joan Crawford for her stuck-up daughter dominates even the film's murky, compelling mood, converting that mood into a metaphor for the stormy, tortured confusion of her feelings." The opening has become deservedly famous: in a remote night-bound beach house shots are fired, shattering a mirror; a man slumps to the lamplit floor, gasping a woman's name with his last breath; a car revs off into the night. "The film," wrote Higham and Greenberg, "conveys Curtiz's love of the American night world, of piers shining under rain, of dark beaches, the Pacific moonlight seen through a bar's windows; and the tough direction of the players at all times pays dividends."

By way of total contrast, Curtiz's next two films offered optimistic, upbeat Americana. *Night and Day* (1946) purported, without much justification, to be a biography of Cole Porter, represented by Cary Grant at his most debonair, casually scribbling snatches of the title song in the World War I trenches. *Life With Father* (1947) was a sunlit period piece, set in 1880s New York, with William Powell perfectly cast as the irascible but finally soft-hearted paterfamilias; the film made up in charm for what it lacked in pace....

John Baxter [said] that he brought to all his films "a sly and highly sexual Viennese humour," and elsewhere remarked that he "lays a substantial claim to being the best director of the Thirties....Curtiz seems the embodiment of a European tradition totally opposed to the elegance and sly wit of a Lubitsch....His films are among the most pitiless grotesque and erotic in the history of the cinema."

...Paul Henreid, whom Curtiz directed in

Casablanca, also noted his "instinctive visual sense....Every now and again he would stop the camera and say, 'There's something wrong here, I don't know what it is.' By and by he'd realize what it was and we'd begin the scene again."

Sidney Rosenzweig identified Curtiz's visual style as the key aspect of his directorial signature, with its "unusual camera angles and carefully detailed, crowded, complex compositions, full of mirrors and reflections, smoke and fog, and physical objects, furniture, foliage, bars, and windows, that stand between the camera and the human characters and seem to surround and entrap them."

Rosenzweig further suggested that Curtiz's personal attitude to his material can be deduced from this visual approach: "Curtiz seems to define his characters by their environment. In fact, environment becomes a form of fate, and Curtiz's characters often struggle against fate, trying to mold their own lives, shape their own destinies. The typical Curtiz hero is a morally divided figure, forced...to make a serious moral decision."...

Curtiz himself tended to deflect with irony any attempt to delve beneath the polished surface of his films. "I put all the art into my pictures I think the audience can stand," he once remarked; and, again, "I don't see black-and-white words in a script when I read it. I see action." If he hardly qualifies, as John Baxter conceded, as "an artist of ideas," the bittersweet romanticism that suffuses all his best films would still make him something more than the impersonally efficient studio filmsmith he has sometimes been taken for. "One must allow Curtiz the credit," wrote David Thomson, "for making melodrama and sentimentality so searingly effective and such glowing causes for nostalgia...*Yankee Doodle Dandy*, *Casablanca*, and *Mildred Pierce* are an unrivalled trinity of inventiveness transforming sopiness to such an extent that reason and taste begin to waver at the conviction of genre in full flow."

Michael Curtiz never retired. Indefatigable to the last, he continued to direct a regular two films a year well into his seventies. Almost his last movie, bringing him full circle to his starting point, was an adaptation of a play by Molnar, *Olympia* (filmed as *A Breath of Scandal*, 1960). Curtiz died of cancer in a Hollywood hospital a few months after completing *The Comancheros* (1961), a John Wayne Western.

from *Mildred Pierce*. Edited, with introduction by Albert J. La Valley. Wisconsin/Warner Bros Screenplay Series. U Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1980.

The film *Mildred Pierce* has its origins in James M. Cain's novel of the same name. Published in 1941, it followed Cain's successful series of tough guy novels: *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, *Career in C Major*, *Double Indemnity*, and *Serenade*. Departing from their narrow framework, taut narratives, and first-person male

protagonists, Cain offered a female protagonist, both strong and weak, as his central character....

The book and the film are similar in broad outline except that the film adds a murder and omits Veda's success in a musical career. The film differs strikingly from its source, however, by tying into different cinematic traditions: the women's movie, *film noir*, and murder mysteries. With the addition of glamorous sets, star treatment, and a contemporary setting, all made lavish by a big budget and producer Jerry Wald's desire for the grand treatment, *Mildred Pierce* (hereafter referred to as *MP*) struck a tone and style far removed from Cain's novel. Its highly glossy look and its somewhat lurid subject matter were to become a hallmark of Warners films of the late 1940s, particularly those produced by Wald after his great success with *MP*.

Ironically, before Wald decided to make *MP*, it was most likely the milieu of the novel and its struggling working-class heroine that made it an appropriate vehicle for Warner Brothers with its strong tradition of proletarian heroes and heroines and concern for social causes dating from the early 1930s. The positive aspect of Mildred probably prompted Warners to buy the book. Tough, resilient, lower-class and lower-middle-class women who made their way up in life had been portrayed at Warners by Bette Davis, Ginger Rogers, Joan Blondell, Glenda Farrell, Ann Sheridan, and Ida Lupino. The noble self-sacrificial side of Mildred also easily allied itself with the later 1930s and early 1940s women's movies, such as Bette Davis vehicles as *Dark Victory* (1939), *The Old Maid* (1939), and *Now, Voyager* (1942).

There was also a long-standing tradition of tough crime dramas at Warners, much of it concerned with gangsters, racketeers, and tough young men raised in street settings (*Little Caesar*, 1930; *The Public Enemy*, 1931; *They Made Me a Criminal*, 1939; *Angels with Dirty Faces*, 1938; and the Wald co-scripted *They Drive by Night*, 1940, and *The Roaring Twenties*, 1939). By the 1940s this tradition had taken a turn toward a more romantic less sociological *noir* film, often with Bogart as the charismatic hero, doomed in *High Sierra* (1941) and *The Big Shot* (1942) but positive and victorious in *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *Casablanca* (1943), and *The Big Sleep* (1946). [*The Big Sleep* was released in 1946 but actually shot before *MP*.]

To some extent the film *MP* adhered to these traditions. The great success of *Double Indemnity* (Paramount, 1944), adapted from Cain's 1937 novella, practically ensured that a crime would be added (although he had taken pains to avoid violence in *MP*). *Laura* (20th Century-Fox, 1944) was a striking example of how the women's movie could be combined with the whodunit.

Cain's name on the book and Veda's presence as a catalyst for Mildred's neurotic drives also pushed the film away from the Warners social dramas and women's movies of the thirties and toward the dark, brooding *film*

noir of the forties with its tress on melodrama, the unconscious, and unsettling emotions.

MP is at once in touch with the oldest and strongest Warners traditions of the 1930s and early 1940s as it also heralds the more sour, disenchanted, and disturbing world of Warners postwar America. This division is evident both thematically and stylistically within the film itself. Its flashbacks are shot in a higher key, a brighter light than its murky *film noir* present-tense framework....

Yet these themes are much altered. Unlike Stella's daughter, Mildred's Veda is ungrateful and vicious. As a catalyst for Mildred's drive to power, Veda taints the film's central action. The aims of power become questionable. The American dream of greater success for one's children acquires a sour edge. In its path lie sexual excess, business corruption, and depersonalization. Even Mildred's nobility has overtones of masochism. While Mildred attempts to salvage basic familial values outside her oppressed housewife role, she jeopardizes those same values by her grim drive for power and her iron determination. Domestic relations in the film are fragmented and riddled with a mixture of sexuality, business calculation, and deceit....

The tangle of passions and duplicitous motives and the bitter views of marriage, family, and business distinguish *MP* from such *noir* films as the classic Warners detective stories, *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Big Sleep*, in which the detective provides a moral norm that counters the often cynical world view. *MP* is also distinguished from such romantic *noir* films as *Spellbound* (1945), *Laura*, and *The Dark Mirror* (1946), in which the narratives end with an affirmation of the couple. The strong disenchantment in *MP* and the somewhat despicable quality of all the characters point the way to what Paul Schrader calls the "second phase of *film noir*. It is a phase marked by bitterness, disenchantment, turbulent emotions, and the failure of love....

Cain's novels of the late 1930s and the early 1940s constitute one of the fundamental influences on *film noir*. Three of them—*The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934), *Double Indemnity* (1936), and *MP* (1941)—made excellent *noir* films in 1945, 1943, and 1945 respectively. Other minor novels and stories came to the screen earlier; Warners had produced and adapted *The Embezzler* in 1940 under its original title, *Money and the Woman*. But in an even stronger and more basic sense, Cain's novels acted as a shaping influence on the whole *noir* tradition. His books mirror the bleak world of shifting values and isolated individualism that was the Southern California of the 1930s and that became the movies' picture of it in the 1940s. In their urban setting, their tough guy knowingness, their mixture of strong realism and surrealistic detail and mood, their sense of universal treachery and futility, their reliance for narrative progression on the complications of passion, dream, and unconscious wishes, they antedate

much of *film noir*'s themes and methods. Like *film noir*, Cain's major books chronicle the lure of the American dream and brand it a falsity....

Since most people think of *MP* the film when the title is mentioned, it may be useful to point out the most significant ways in which the novel differs from the film, before discussing the difficulties with the novel itself—difficulties that were to translate into problems with the scripting of *MP*. Briefly put, in the novel (1) there is no murder, though Mildred in the penultimate chapter nearly strangles Veda when she discovers her in bed with Monte; (2) the narration is told without flashbacks in standard fashion, chronologically; (3) the period of time covered is longer, from the early Depression to 1941 rather than from 1941 to 1945; (4) the narration is third person not first, though there is much close attention to Mildred's thoughts and feelings; (5) Veda achieves a successful career as a coloratura soprano with a climactic performance in the Hollywood Bowl; (6) the setting is much more tawdry and lower class—Mildred, though she has shapely legs and some sexual attractiveness, is no Joan Crawford and by the end of the book is fat on booze; and (7) the narrative is very episodic in structure with events linked loosely, much less dramatically. [Charles Higham reports that Cain wrote Wald a series of stinging letters objecting to these changes, particularly Wald's dramatic idea of making Veda a washout musically and putting her in a tawdry nightclub. Interestingly, Cain himself was the son of an opera singer, aspired to an operatic career, and made his last and most successful marriage with a coloratura soprano. Music plays a large and often learned role in many of his novels. As Oates has observed, music for Cain was a reservoir of the unconscious.]

...Cain seems uncomfortable in this third-person voice, which he here used extensively for the first time. Oates finds this the chief flaw of the novel: "*Mildred Pierce*,...over-long and shapeless, must surely owe its flaws to the third-person omniscient narration, which takes us too far from the victim and allows us more freedom than we want. To be successful, such narrowly-conceived art must blot out what landscape it cannot cover; hence the blurred surrealistic backgrounds of the successful Cain novels, *Postman*...and *Serenade*."...

At other times she is mercilessly victimized by a sexuality that she cannot control, despite all her noble ambitions and plans. Ultimately all she does must be judged in light of her wish to gain Veda's affection—in a sense, to be the Veda that she cannot be because of her background, class, appearance, and work.

From the perspectives of the unconscious, Veda represents all that Mildred most desires: art, music, elegance, and sexual beauty. Veda is an intensification of Mildred's yearnings and ideals, and also of her darker unconscious impulses and energies. Mildred's money-making schemes, noble in purpose but corrupt in their original design to win Veda's love, are mirrored in Veda

in a more distorted form: the ruthlessness of blackmail, marriage as a way to class and money. Further, Mildred's commitment to realize her wish exacts a repression of sexuality that takes revenge upon her. Despite her resistances, Mildred regularly falls victim to Wally's and Monte's sexual designs upon her. She prefers snuggling or cuddling with Veda to sleeping with Bert or Monte. When Veda announces her pregnancy, she is stricken with sexual jealousy. Given the projection of her sexuality onto Veda, it is not unreasonable that it is Veda who finally goes to bed with Monte. Sexual repression and the need to work, the demand to subordinate all concerns to winning Veda back, produce a Mildred who becomes tough on booze. At the end of the book Mildred is described as a plump, savage animal who flings herself at Veda in fury. Cain gives Mildred noble plans and ambitions but cynically subverts them by her constant failure to see the larger, overarching forces of society and sexuality that really direct her.

What Cain was attempting in *MP* is not always clear. He is on record as having said he tried to write a novel about a woman who uses men to gain her end, not the traditional *femme fatale* but a "victim of the Depression, a venal American housewife who didn't know she was using men, but imagined herself quite noble." He stresses Mildred's neurotic, compulsive behavior as she tries to gain Veda's love and respect. In the preface to *The Butterfly* (1946), he said, "I write of the wish that comes true...for some reason a terrifying concept, at least to my imagination. Of course, the wish must have terror in it. I think my stories have some quality of the opening of a forbidden box, and that it is this, rather than violence, sex, or any of the things usually cited by way of explanation, that gives them the drive so often noted."...

Just as *MP* was emerging from property to project in 1944, Paramount released *Double Indemnity* to great critical acclaim. With a screenplay by its director Billy Wilder and the noted mystery writer Raymond Chandler, *Double Indemnity* went further than previous *noir* films in depicting the meanness, venality, lust, and sordidness of its central characters. Its dark location photography, which departed from studio practice, won high acclaim for enhancing that realism. Its retrospective narration and bitter voice-over added to the mood of futility, disenchantment, and failure—especially since it was being told by a dying man.

...Wald nowhere pressed to break the carefully controlled pattern of studio filming and to follow *Double Indemnity* into its pioneering on-location realistic camera work. Instead, studio lighting and camera work on *MP* were reinforced to highlight glamour, luxury, and Crawford's star status. Yet, with its sense of bitterness and duplicity in family life, love, and business, *MP* introduced an important note of disenchantment into the world of Warners films and heralded the new trend of blending crime and the women's movie.

...Mildred walks a fine line between the sexual deficiency of Ida and the sexual excess of Veda; she may protect her power thereby, but it is short lived. She projects a sense of control, a kind of mask abetted by Crawford's performance. It begins to crumble when the worlds of business and sexuality take their revenge upon her. If Mildred partly represents a new ideal for woman, a movement away from the home and into a career, much like what the war had spawned, she also represents the vulnerability of that role, its demands of control upon the sexual self and its subservience to the world of masculinity in business. Ultimately Mildred must be avenged and restored to her woman's role in the home...

Once again with *MP* his smooth and gliding camera movement covers the sharper junctures of a script still being reworked. With its dark overtones *MP* allowed Curtiz to use his expressionist techniques more fully than he usually did. Curtiz gave the present-tense framework of *MP* a *noir* style with several angled and startling expressionist shots. By contrast the flashbacks are highlighted and told in a more traditional narrative manner. Within the present, *noir* lighting is employed. Mildred appears regularly with the upper right portion of her face darkened. She seems to carry her mark of guilt with her; Bert, when under suspicion, has the same lighting. By contrast Mildred in her home setting or in the business world is always fully lighted.

The opening sequences are particularly marked by startling shots. Monte is shown in a reaction shot receiving the bullets and falling on the floor, but Curtiz withholds the standard "action" shot that would tell us who is firing the gun; the gap creates a disruptive mood for the whole movie....

It is with Crawford, of course, that Curtiz has singular success. At first refusing to work with her, he envisioned a washed up *grande dame* with "high-hat airs and her goddam shoulder pads." Whatever their differences, they were soon patched up. Curtiz and cameraman Ernest Heller were especially sensitive to Crawford; she is given a great number of close-ups, far more than the script calls for, and so always looks elegant, so much so that the theme of her rise from lower-class origins is underplayed. She appears in a housedress only in the opening flashback sequence, and then it seems spotless. As Molly Haskell notes, she seems peculiarly unruffled either psychologically or physically by her background or ordeal....

Critics had almost universal praise for most of the cast and Curtiz's sensitive handling of them. Ann Blyth and Eve Arden were nominated for Oscars and Crawford won her only Oscar. For most people Crawford is Mildred Pierce. And Mildred Pierce she would remain: the strong, powerful, stoic, determined woman working for the noblest ends. No matter that this mutes the picture of a lower-class Mildred or that it underplays the more disturbing aspects of her conduct. These are there, but

they are not foregrounded by Crawford's performance. What we see is the new image of Joan Crawford both on screen and off, a woman who could run not only restaurants but also, later in real life, the Pepsi-Cola company.

According to Crawford, she carefully chose this role for herself, her first major one in two years and her first role at Warners where she had previously done only a guest appearance as herself in *Hollywood Canteen* (1944)....

Crawford wrote about how she came to choose the Mildred Pierce role in *The Saturday Evening Post* of November 2, 1946. Her statement is interesting, but, like everything else about her art and life, it seems to be part of a carefully orchestrated and controlled image....

...In her life offscreen Crawford sought to project the image she manufactured on screen, In a male-dominated industry she had carefully forged the image of a strong career woman with lower-middle-class roots, one who is resourceful and strong, but still sexually appealing, and who could hold her own in a man's world. The cost of this was the same on screen and off. The mark of control and determination shutting off the surfacing of other emotions; her controlled performance in *MP* is less a brake applied to melodrama than the careful construction of a deliberate new image....In the last analysis, despite the diametrically opposed treatment of Veda and her own children, *MP* is an icon of Joan Crawford's life.

Only the great critic James Agee, in *The Nation* offered a contemporary review that got at the thematic problems and the tone of the film: "Nasty, gratifying version of the Cain novel about suburban grass-widowhood and the power of the native passion for money and all that money can buy. Attempt made to sell Mildred as noble when she is merely idiotic or at best pathetic; but constant, virulent, lambent attention to money and its effects, and more authentic suggestions of sex than one hopes to see in American films." (October 13, 1945)

What made *MP* so successful was not the reviews but the drawing power of Crawford in her comeback role, coupled with a memorable promotional campaign to sell her in the role. Early trade paper ads were a good deal racier than the film. Crawford was pictured with a bare midriff (which nowhere appears in the film) leering down in typical *femme fatale* style at the small upturned faces of Jack Carson and Zachary Scott. The copy read: "Kinda Hard...Kinda Soft...Mildred Pierce...The kind of woman most men want...but shouldn't have." Once the picture was launched, however, a tease line was coined that was, according to Paul Lazarus, former vice-president of Columbia and executive vice-president of National Screen Service, the advertising arm of the industry, one of the most successful phrases ever coined to sell a picture. The new line was "Mildred Pierce—don't ever tell anyone what she did." This tantalizing line proved so original and

intriguing that, according to Lazarus, it was picked up by radio comedians, entertainers, and a variety of other people in the media and, quite naturally, made the movie even more famous and successful....

The recent spate of criticism on *MP* shows, however, that the film is one of those with a submerged life and that its themes still speak to us in ways mysterious ways. What Agee spotted in it now looms forth with clarity, and these themes blend with complicated sexual, social, and semiological questions that lead us back to the powerful and troubling image of Mildred once more.

Lee Horsely: The Development of Post-war Literary and Cinematic Noir (crimeculture.com)

Definitions of Film Noir

Both literary and cinematic noir can be seen as closely related to the modernist crisis of culture – as reflecting the feelings of nightmarish alienation, disorientation and disintegration that are often taken as hallmarks of the modernist sensibility. James Naremore, in his recent analysis of the contexts of film noir (*More Than Night*), suggests that the French critics who, in the mid-1940s, first applied the term 'film noir' might well have agreed on a formulation that defined noir as 'a kind of modernism in the popular cinema'. Modernism might seem to be separated from both Hollywood and pulp fiction by such qualities as its formal complexity and technical display, its aesthetic self-consciousness, its association with high culture and its rejection of classical narrative. But with its 'extraordinary compound' of apparently contradictory elements, modernism did encompass many impulses that found

natural expression in a popular genre engaged in undermining the essentially optimistic thrust of other popular forms, such as detective and action adventure stories.

Discussions of noir often centre on visual and specifically cinematic elements – on things like low-key lighting, chiaroscuro effects, deep focus photography, extreme camera angles and expressionist distortion. But it is essential as well to take account of themes, mood, characterisation, point of view and narrative pattern. Both literary and cinematic noir are defined by: (i) the subjective point of view; (ii) the shifting roles of the protagonist; (iii) the ill-fated relationship between the protagonist and society (generating the themes of alienation and entrapment); and (iv) the ways in which noir functions as a socio-political critique.

The representation of the protagonist's subjectivity is crucial his perceptions (both accurate and deluded), his state of mind, his desires, obsessions and anxieties. The need for attending to the handling of perspective in film noir is concisely summed up in Fritz Lang's explanation of his subjective camera work: 'You show the protagonist so that the audience can put themselves under the skin of the man'; by showing things 'wherever possible, from the viewpoint of the protagonist' the film gives the audience visual and psychological access to his nightmarish experiences....

Coming up in Buffalo Film Seminars XIII, Fall 2006:
Sept 26 Howard Hawks *The Big Sleep* 1946
Oct 3 Satyajit Ray, *Aparajito/The Unvanquished* 1956
Oct 10 Jean-Pierre Melville *Le Samourai* 1967
Oct 17 Roman Polanski *Chinatown* 1974
Oct 24 Robert Altman *M*A*S*H* 1970
Oct 31 Fred Zinnemann, *The Day of the Jackal* 1973
Nov 7 Emile de Antonio *In the Year of the Pig* 1969
Nov 14 Bob Rafelson, *Five Easy Pieces* 1970
Nov 21 Nicolas Roeg *The Man Who Fell to Earth* 1976
Nov 28 Spike Lee *Do the Right Thing* 1989
Dec 5 Peter Greenaway *Prospero's Books* 1991

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with support from the John R. Oishei Foundation and the Buffalo News