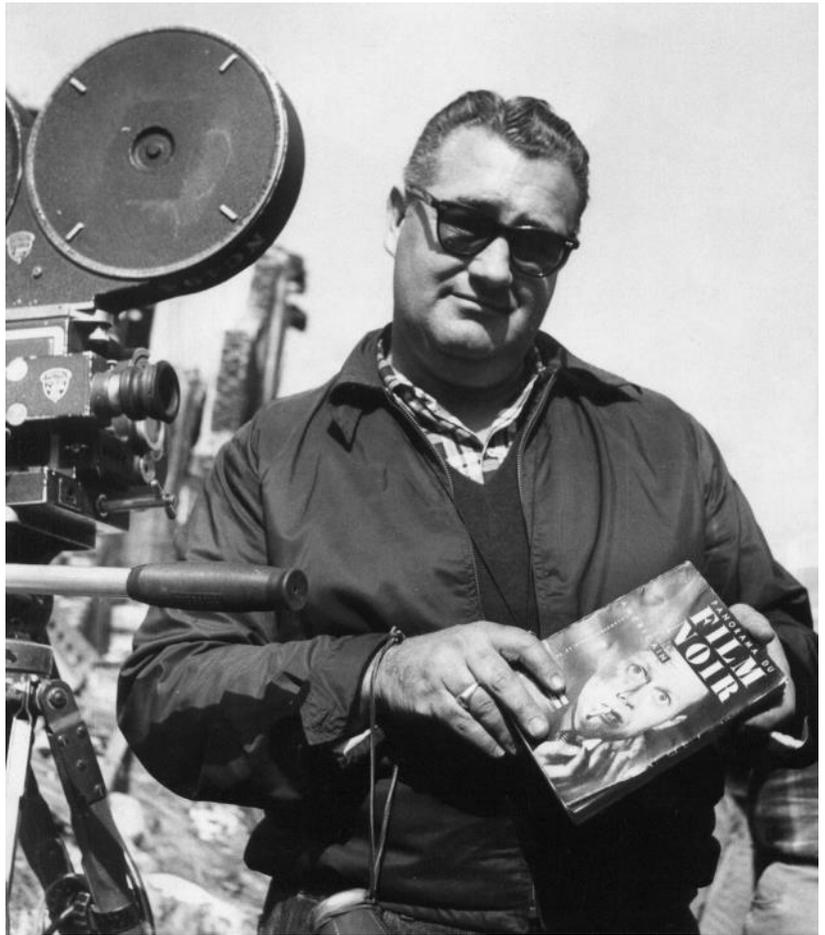


Kiss Me Deadly

By Alain Silver

"A savage lyricism hurls us into a world in full decomposition, ruled by the dissolute and the cruel," wrote Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton about "Kiss Me Deadly" in their seminal study "Panorama du Film Noir Américain." "To these violent and corrupt intrigues, Aldrich brings the most radical of solutions: nuclear apocalypse." From the beginning, "Kiss Me Deadly" is a true sensory explosion. In the pre-credit sequence writer A.I. Bezzerides and producer/director Robert Aldrich introduce Christina (Cloris Leachman), a woman in a trench coat, who stumbles out of the pitch darkness onto a two-lane blacktop. While her breathing fills the soundtrack with amplified, staccato gasps, blurred metallic shapes flash by without stopping. She positions herself in the center of the roadway until oncoming headlights blind her with the harsh glare of their high beams. Brakes grab, tires scream across the asphalt, and a Jaguar spins off the highway in a swirl of dust. A close shot reveals Mike Hammer (Ralph Meeker) behind the wheel: over the sounds of her panting and jazz on the car radio. The ignition grinds repeatedly as he tries to restart the engine. Finally, he snarls at her, "You almost wrecked my car! Well? Get in!"

For pulp novelist Mickey Spillane, Hammer's very name revealed all: a hard, heavy, unrelenting object pounding away mindlessly at social outcasts like two penny nails. Noir filmmakers Aldrich and Bezzerides refined this archetype considerably: Hammer does think, mostly about how to turn a buck. Christina is arguably the most conventionally "sensitive" of the picture's characters, as she reads poetry and, although mockingly, lyricizes her own predicament. It is not without irony that she is the "loony," the one institutionalized by society, yet quickest to penetrate Hammer's tough-guy pose. She knows immediately that "You're one of those self-indulgent males who thinks about nothing but his clothes, his car, himself. Bet you do push-ups every morning just to keep your belly hard." In the very first scene, Christina reveals that the hero of "Kiss Me Deadly" is less like a Spillane character and closer to those in other Aldrich pictures like "Vera Cruz" and "The Legend of Lylah Clare." As Ralph Meeker's interpretation propels Hammer beyond the smugness and self-



Robert Aldrich on the set of "Attack" in 1956 poses with the first edition of "Panorama of American Film Noir." Photograph courtesy Adell Aldrich.

satisfaction of the novel into a blacker, more sardonic disdain for the world in general, the character becomes a cipher for all the unsavory denizens of the film noir underworld.

Equally ironic is that director Aldrich came from the brighter world of East Coast high society, but insisted on entering show business at the bottom, as a production clerk at RKO, and eventually formed his own production company. For his fifth feature, the low-budget "Kiss Me Deadly," Aldrich collaborated with Albert Isaac "Buzz" Bezzerides, a proletarian novelist transitioning from B pictures to television, and the result was a movie that many commentators have cited as "the masterpiece of film noir."

For Aldrich and Bezzerides, Mike Hammer is a quester, not an outsider in the noir underworld but right at home in its environment. For Hammer, dark, wet streets and ramshackle buildings are a questing ground conspicuously detached from the commonplace material world. Deception is the key to this world, so deception not detection is Hammer's real trade. His livelihood depends on the divorce frame-

up and the generally shady deal. For anyone on a film noir quest, instability is an overriding factor and disjunction is the rule. The sensational elements in “Kiss Me Deadly” follow this line. The craning down and the hiss of the hydraulic jack as Mike’s mechanic friend Nick (Nick Dennis) is crushed under the weight of a car; the eerie growl of the black box full of radioactive material; and, of course, the pillar of fire that consumes femme fatale Lily Carver (Gaby Rodgers) in the cataclysmic conclusion—these random sights and sounds transcend context to deliver a shock that is purely sensory.

Most of the striking visual style of “Kiss Me Deadly” is refined from Aldrich’s prior work: high and low angles, depth of field, strong side light, constriction of the frame through foreground clutter, and spot use of the long take or sequence shot. The trap is a part of Aldrich’s figurative scheme and its constructs in “Kiss Me Deadly” are primarily visual; but there are clear indicators in the plot and dialogue as well. In another Aldrich noir, “World for Ransom,” the protagonist is criticized for playing Sir Galahad: “You shouldn’t play Galahad. You’re way out of character.” For many film noir investigators, “playing Galahad” is entirely in character. But not for Mike Hammer. In “City of Quartz” social historian Mike Davis recognizes “that great anti-myth usually known as noir.” In this context, Hammer is clearly an “anti-Galahad” as he searches for a “great whatsit” that parodies the fabled concept of a Grail. This tension between myth and anti-myth, between hero and antihero, is key to “Kiss Me Deadly,” as Mike Hammer becomes a radically different investigator than most who preceded him in film noir. For Aldrich, who often spoke of turning concepts on their heads, Hammer is the consummate anti-idealist.

In “Kiss Me Deadly” there is also an explicit, aural fabric of allusions and metaphor. The recurrent mention of the Christina Rossetti poem, “Remember Me,” that speaks of “darkness and corruption” is a prime example. Even simple sounds like the gasp of mobster Carl Evello (Paul Stewart) as he dies, which echoes the hiss of the car jack in Nick’s murder, become telling tropes. The play of sounds and meaning can create disturbing anomalies and even black humor. There is not just the “Pretty pow!” that Nick exclaims as he jams a fist into his open palm but subtler interplay, as when his secretary Velda (Maxine Cooper) approaches and whispers in Mike’s ear, “But under any other name, would you be as sweet?” and Hammer, not paying attention to her, says, “Kowalski.” In the end, sight and sound merge explo-

sively when nothing can stop Lily Carver from opening her own Pandora’s box to reveal that the “great whatsit” contains pure phlogiston. The quest for it becomes the quest for the cleansing, combustible element, for the spark of the purifying fire that, as a wounded Hammer and Velda watch from the nearby surf, reduces both the beach house and the nether world of “Kiss Me Deadly” to radioactive ash.

One of the most discussed aspects of “Kiss Me Deadly” is this ending, which the filmmakers themselves referred to as “Let’s go fission.” [It should be noted that for many years, because of negative damage, the shots of Hammer and Velda escaping the house and standing in the surf were missing from new prints but fortunately were restored before a DVD release in 1996.] For many observers, both then and now, this nuclear conclusion to a noir narrative in an era of bomb tests and McCarthyism is a clear indictment of America’s postwar social values. Aldrich had certainly worked with and for a number of black-listed filmmakers; but whether he or A.I. Bezzerides were leftists, anarchists, or any other type of radical, what they created in “Kiss Me Deadly” is more than a masterpiece of noir or a critique of the self-serving 1950s. The ending turns the movie on its head again. While Velda and Hammer witness what their avarice has wrought, myth and anti-myth merge into the poetry of the apocalypse. The “savage lyricism” of the film echoes Christina Rossetti’s chilling verse, as “the darkness and corruption leave a vestige of the thoughts that once we had.”

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

As a film historian Alain Silver has written and edited more than two dozen genre and director studies including Film Noir the Encyclopedia, The Noir Style, and What Ever Happened to Robert Aldrich, as well as The Samurai Film, The Vampire Film, and David Lean and his Films. He first wrote about Kiss Me Deadly for Film Comment in 1975. As a filmmaker (who started out like Aldrich as an assistant director), he has produced more than thirty independent features including several as writer and director. His commentaries have been heard and seen on KCET Television, Starz, Channel Four UK, AMC, the Sci-fi Channel, CBC/Ontario and numerous DVDs discussing Raymond Chandler, Robert Aldrich, the gangster film, David Lean, and the classic period of film noir from Murder My Sweet to most recently Ride the Pink Horse and, of course, Kiss Me Deadly.