



The Big Heat: Acts of Violence

The Big Heat (1953) opens with a close-up of a .38 revolver lying on a table. Subsequent shots will link the weapon with the suicide of a corrupt policeman, but in this first appearance its isolated prominence in the frame provides early commentary on the violence endemic in a troubled and dangerous society. The film opens up familiar Lang territory: the perverse and violent male-dominated world of complicit sinners and saints (from crime barons to law enforcers) threatened by the disruptive presence of unruly women, here epitomised by Debbie (Gloria Grahame), the uncontrollable and irreverent mistress of the brutal hitman Vince (Lee Marvin). There is an almost Sadean ambience (already noted by Colin McArthur in *Underworld USA*) of a Nature at war with itself, of human beings exemplifying in their relationships with one another the cruelties of a malevolent world.

The Big Heat explores relentlessly the origins and consequences of violence. The alterations made to William McGivern's novel on which the film is based (serialised in *The Saturday Evening Post* from December 1952 to February 1953) enable it to develop even further the original's brutality. As Patrick McGilligan has remarked, the camera consistently focuses more on the perpetrators than on the victims of violence (1997: 407). Perhaps the most shocking example of this tendency occurs in the notorious scene of Vince's assault on Debbie with a piping hot cup of coffee where we are shown not the appalling effects on Debbie of Vince's savagery but 'Marvin's face and lips, glistening and quivering with evil' (1997: 405). McGilligan reads these scenes as partially informed by the background of Lang's own anger at his enforced exile from Germany, and his

humiliation and helplessness in the face of Nazi atrocity. Although the film was not chosen by Lang himself – it was suggested to Columbia by Jerry Wald – its themes were clearly in line with his known interests (Leblanc and Devismes 1991: 9). While to some extent gesturing to personal experience, *The Big Heat* also has a wider focus that takes in the private and institutionalised violence at the heart of 1950s America.

When the film went into production in 1952, the war had been over for seven years, yet its long-term effects continued to be reflected in this and many other films made well into the 1950s. Deborah Thomas (1992: 59-70) and others have examined the repercussions of the war on films



of this period, especially with regard to the so-called crisis of masculinity provoked partly by mental disturbances caused by involvement in the war itself, but also by reaction to changing social attitudes at home at the end of the war. Significantly, in this respect, when Bannion (Glenn Ford) fears for the safety of his daughter after the death of his wife (who has been killed by a car bomb destined for him), he relies on the support of his brother-in-law and the army chums who briefly recreate the camaraderie and displaced family dynamics of the all-male battle-front groups of World War II. As well as providing a narrative solution to Bannion's quest for a safe place to leave his imperiled daughter, the scene restages the psychological securities of male bonding in the provisional and alternative family-like structures of wartime. It also allows the men to connect again with the violent drives of a self shaped in the crucible of military warfare. Like Chabrol's soft-centred, almost apologetic and uncomprehending killer in *Le Boucher* (1970), Bannion comes across as someone whose aggression has to some considerable extent been honed by war, the context in which dominant forms of masculinity are both defined and tested.

In Bannion's case, this brutalisation, under normal circumstances kept within the legitimate bounds of police duties, erupts and takes on almost pathological forms in the wake of his wife's murder. He becomes a focus for the film's exploration of institutionalised violence, of drives that extend beyond understandable rage against a pitiless world indifferent to human suffering, and offer commentary on the dehumanisation of individuals through the pressures of social circumstances. In that respect, as others have noted (e.g. Jensen 1969: 13), he becomes in some ways the mirror image of Lagana (who, like Bannion, also has a family, of sorts), as well as of Vince. The legitimisation of violence – in war, in police work, in peer group rituals of the all-male group – links these men in a dark pattern of inescapable collusion.

In all of these instances the distinctions between aggressive and defensive violence become blurred. In questioning whether aggression is innate in human beings or a reaction to ill-treatment, Jonathan Pedder distinguishes between two levels: a primary form or 'healthy innate assertiveness which man needs for survival and competition' and a secondary form which is a response to frustrations of various kinds (1992: 95-106). This preliminary distinction is further clarified in comparisons made between phylogeny and ontogeny: 'In the development of the species, or phylogeny, there has evolved a primary kind of innate potential aggressiveness; but in personal development, or ontogeny, hate arises in a secondary sense' (1992: 104).

As Anthony Storr also argues ([1968] 1982: 145), aggressive drives in childhood are a necessary component of the individual's pursuit of independence from parental control. In adult life these drives contribute towards the construction of identity, but where that process is undermined, especially through threats to self-esteem (often resting on questions of sexuality), the male is liable to react violently. Yet, as James Gilligan notes, even defensive violence, or violent behaviour associated with survival, can be 'considered a symptom of pathology', and this is the area that so fascinates Lang in *The Big Heat* (1997: 99). Where lies the difference between the defensive or assertive form of violence that seemingly characterises Bannion's behaviour, and the secondary form which more obviously springs from the symptomatic pathological disturbance of the criminal?



The film's male star is Glenn Ford, not perhaps in the 1940s and 1950s quite the equal in box office terms of, say, Robert Taylor or Errol Flynn, but nevertheless a major figure, often playing somewhat sardonic, embattled heroes struggling against powerful forces, his chiselled, craggy features unsoftened by a characteristically stony smile betraying the grim determination of a troubled man. This film avoids laying bare the darkest depths of its *noir* hero, preferring instead to displace them onto other characters. The violence embedded in Bannion's psyche is real enough, but its most horrific consequences are as if transferred on to Lagana and, especially, Vince who become the hyperbolised projections of what Poe would have called Lang's 'man of the crowd'. Bannion, Lagana and Vince are like distorting mirrors of one another. Vince, a monster of primary aggression, is the key to unlocking the complex psychology of Bannion, whose secondary aggression – in both cases – is shaped by the prejudices of peer expectation as well as by unresolved childhood traumas displaced onto colleagues, acquaintances, lovers or wives.

The psychological complexities of Vince's violence, expressed both through brutish acts and cruel appearance, are explored through cultural, ethnic and social perspectives, the most significant of which are related to the film's interest in the relationship between business, crime and America's Italian community. In *film noir*, as in the gangster genre, a fine line separates legal from criminal business and, in keeping with a long Hollywood tradition, that line is characteristically traced through the representation of the immigrant Italian community. The film's interest in family-related provocations of violence is neatly twinned with explorations of contrasts between Italian, Irish and Anglo-Saxon cultural norms.

Although not ethnically marked as Italian, Vince is identified with Italian-American gangsterism through his boss Frank Lagana, whose name, appearance, and slightly Italianate grammar and pronunciation clearly indicate his ethnicity. The positive features of the Italian stereotype in Hollywood cinema include an emphasis on family life (as in, for instance, *Moonstruck*, Norman Jewison, 1987), and music (from Caruso to Mario Lanza and Perry Como). On the other hand, Hollywood cinema has consistently linked Italians with gangsterism (from *Scarface* [Howard Hawks, 1932] and *Little Caesar* [Mervyn LeRoy, 1931] to the films of Coppola, Scorsese, De Palma and beyond). This association probably has its roots in prejudice sparked off by the massive influx of immigrants from Italy to the USA at the end of the nineteenth century, the majority of whom

came from the South, a predominantly poor region whose population was frowned upon by the rest of Italy as unreliable and barely civilised (Glazer and Moynihan 1923:184). Between 1899 and 1910, of the 2,300,000 Italian immigrants to the USA, 1,900,000 came from the South, most of them with no professional skills, a contributing factor to the drift into crime of many among them. By the time of the making of *The Big Heat*, of course, the Italian community in the USA was firmly established, and its contribution considerable to American life in general, and to cinema in particular (e.g. Frank Capra, Dean Martin, Frank Sinatra). The links between certain sections of the Italian community and crime, however, persisted, and *The Big Heat* was made against the background of the scandal surrounding the resignation of William O'Dwyer as Mayor of New York in 1950. O'Dwyer had been friendly with Frank Costello, a businessman involved in illegal gambling and other shady activities, one of many Italians identified as instrumental in organised crime in the USA at the time of the Kefauver Committee investigation.

Frank Lagana's links with the police and local government officials in *The Big Heat* recall that scandal in New York. The potential for criminality in the Italian psyche is underlined by the comparisons between Anglo-Saxon, Irish and Italian attitudes to the family. The structure and dynamics of all three ultimately differ very little as regards their attitude to hierarchy and order but, superficially at least, a contrast is established between the sunny, healthy ethos of the mixed Anglo-Saxon or Irish model, represented by the Bannion family, and the unhealthy, mother-fixated equivalent in Lagana's. The importance of the portrait of

Lagana's mother, referred to by Lagana himself during Bannion's unwelcome intrusion, has been noted by others, and is clearly designed to highlight the potential for damage contained in the over-protectiveness of the Italian matriarch. There is even a hint here of homosexuality – noted by McArthur (1972) and others as negatively represented – in the predominantly male ethos of the Lagana household. Like Bannion, Lagana has a daughter, but she is never seen. The only display of femininity is the portrait of the deceased mother. Lagana's reverential attitude towards her, as well as the homosocial dynamics of the criminal triumvirate, their narcissism and brutality towards women, are all signs of a deep-rooted misogyny, reinforced by disavowed homosocial tendencies (see: Girard 1969; and Sedgwick 1985). The crucial place of the mother in this bundle of attitudes and motivations even earns a casual reference in the scene at the bar, where the bartender, also in Lagana's pay, is caught by Bannion phoning his paymaster when the former believes the coast is clear.

Bannion: OK buster, who'd you call?

Bartender: My mother.

The reply provokes Bannion into threatening to close the joint down, adding, 'Tell that to your mother!'. These remarks imply disapproval of matriarchal power in Italian families, and are used in this scene as a sign of the contagion of other ethnic groups belonging to Lagana's criminal world by his negatively coded ethnicity. The narcissism and brutality of the group are most clearly highlighted in the portrayal of Larry and Vince.





Larry, who styles himself the 'rebound man' when he thinks Vince's girlfriend Debbie has become surplus to her lover's requirements, is significantly seen grooming himself in the same mirror that moments earlier had caught the reflections both of his partner and of Debbie, his secret object of desire. From one point of view, hegemonic heterosexuality is reaffirmed through the construction of the vampish moll (Gloria Grahame) as an object uniformly desired by Lagana's male entourage; from another, though, and in a way that subverts the appeal of the eroticised female, Larry's narcissism – read culturally against the background of American interest in Freud in the 1950s – points to latent homosocial desire, and reinforces suspicions about the group's ambivalence towards women. The 'rebound man' wants Debbie perhaps largely because she belongs to Vince, the true object of his esteem, if not necessarily of his sexual desire.

These attitudes of mutual esteem are given an even sharper focus through Vince's brutality towards Debbie, in a film that exposes the 'rougher edges of the relations between the sexes' (Gunning 2000: 408). Here, especially among those in Lagana's circle, men are both controlled by and in flight from the control of women. The reverential portrait of Lagana's austere mother and the bartender's flip-pant phone call reference are both examples of the lingering shadow of maternal influence over men whose law-breaking acts are to some extent readable as unconscious gestures of rebellion against the mother. And even though there is no early family history to provide the evidence for these delayed acts of childhood revenge one wonders whether Vince's violence towards Debbie is a reaction to her attempts at resisting his control and, more specifically, at re-asserting in the fantasy of his disturbed mind the power and authority of the mother.

As many have noted, the texts of popular culture frequently offer their audiences polarised views of women – for instance, Sylvia Harvey and Janey Place on film, and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar on literature (Harvey 1978; Place 1978; Gilbert and Gubar 1979). The madonna / whore duality resurfaces in this film where the clearest examples of it involve Jocelyn Brando's Katie as the domesticated virgin and Gloria Grahame's Debbie as the whore whose identity is primarily defined through her self-conscious sexuality ('When Vince talks business I go out to get my legs waxed or something'). As well as reflecting the experience of 1950s women struggling to live up to or to confound their social identities, these characters are also used by the film to project the fantasies of men whose views of women are partly conditioned by unresolved attitudes



towards the mother. As Adam Jukes remarks, 'Since Freud first made the observation, it has become a commonplace to observe that every man is seeking his mother in a prospective partner' (1993: 73). The good mother becomes the vessel for the transfer of the male's positive qualities, the prospect of her loss or destruction a threat to his own identity. This fusion of self and other is made quite explicit in Bannion's tender eulogy of his wife as he consoles Debbie when she is moments away from dying, fatally wounded by Vince in the final duel of their mutual love / hatred. His description of his wife, Katie, the good mother, simultaneously underlines the identification of the married couple, and makes a direct link between the madonna and the whore, the polar opposites of cultural stereotype, different yet also identical, both products of a reductive fantasy:

A real Irish blow-top but she always got over it fast. She used to raise the roof with me missing dinner or leaving the bathroom in a mess. Later she'd come in with a drink for me in her hand just as though nothing had happened. You know, Kate, she was a sampler. She used to take sips of my drinks, puffs on my cigarettes. Sometimes she used to taste the food off my plate. She got a big kick out of that.

Katie's actions here turn her into her husband's other self, the perfect missing half that matches her true love; but they also highlight her function as a nurturer, as the good Irish Mother Earth figure who cares not only for the couple's daughter but also for her husband / son. Bannion's relationship with his wife / mother is imaged in a way that has none of the anxieties about control or dependency which emerge forcefully, however indirectly, in the Lagana milieu, and especially in Vince's relationship with Debbie. The authoritarian male is free of anxiety because his wife conforms to the stereotype of the good mother, and, in the idiom of the film, is the law-abiding wife of a cop – the Irish are often law-enforcers in Hollywood – prepared to respect patriarchal law to safeguard a trouble-free marriage. The wife / mother's submission leads to repression and denial (in both partners), the consequences of which come fully into view only when Bannion's mask of control and decency begins to slip during his pursuit of Vince and also, significantly, both in his eventually aggressive treatment of Bertha Duncan, the corrupt policeman's widow, and in his initial contempt for Debbie. Bannion despises Debbie not only because she is Vince's mistress, a woman living off the ill-gotten gains of her criminal lover, but also, we suspect, because she unleashes in him, as in Vince, anger and re-



sentiment towards women that has been latent since childhood, feelings normally at no risk of exposure in a marriage to someone who poses little threat to male hegemony.

The disturbed child's resentment of the mother's power is recast in adult life as control over the female partner, and the traumatised adult, always sensitive to threats to peer esteem, attacks her to preserve his socially sanctioned male authority. The point is made most forcefully through the relationship between Vince and Debbie. As Debbie, Gloria Grahame performs her characteristic role of the sensual but scoffing 'Girl who can't say "no"', who ultimately pays a price for her insubordination (her role as Ado Annie in *Oklahoma* [Fred Zinneman, 1955] came only two years after *The Big Heat*). By the time of the making of *The Big Heat*, Grahame had already appeared in a string of films, graduating from minor roles in films like *It's a Wonderful Life* (Frank Capra, 1946), *It Happened in Brooklyn* (Richard Whorf, 1947), *Crossfire* (Edward Dmytryk, 1947), to more substantial ones in *In a Lonely Place* (Nicholas Ray, 1950), *Macao* (Josef Von Sternberg, 1952), *Sudden Fear* (David Miller, 1952), and, perhaps above all, *The Bad and the Beautiful* (Vincente Minnelli, 1952), for which she was awarded a Best Supporting Actress Oscar. Grahame's allure was at odds with dominant Hollywood tendencies in the 1950s. No D Cup hourglass beauty, she is one of the industry's apostate stars, a mocking rejoinder to its idolatry of artifice, playing roles that involve defiance of male authority, the ironic sensualist who can outstare and out-talk her partners in trials of wit and courtship. The lisp in that characteristic drawl, so full of humorous contempt for her often brutish male companions, affirms her humanity (like the dimple in Kirk Douglas' chin), a reminder to the audience of possible resistance to the make over processes of the film industry. Gloria Grahame's women, in Lang as elsewhere, are free spirits, usually irresistible to men and appealing to women, too full of daring independence for the threatened, often neurotic or traumatised male, a character exemplified perhaps most starkly by Lee Marvin's sadistic lover Vince.

In *The Big Heat* gradually mounting tension culminates in Vince's seemingly inevitable act of savagery, the scolding of Debbie with steaming coffee. Debbie provokes Vince throughout the film, establishing herself in her first appearance as the carefree scourge of the very order to which she belongs. Her erotic pose, as she lies across the frame, voluptuously stretching out one leg while bending the other to expose their shapely form, asserts the power of the self-consciously sexual woman. As Leblanc and Devismes argue, Debbie lives 'in the sight of others' (Leblanc and Devismes 1991:132). Her display of languid,



playfully predatory sensuality is of a piece with the characteristic tone of mock servility and childish insolence with which she addresses Lagana on the telephone: 'Oh well, sure, Mr Lagana. I always like to tell Vince you're calling. I like to see him jump . . . V-i-n-ce. It's h-i-m!'. Her references to Lagana – 'Him', the petty deity of the underworld inhabited by Vince – are accompanied by gestures of mock servility. Unlike her lover, she is neither intimidated by Lagana nor inhibited by the men's strict adherence to the rules of hierarchy. While one cannot imagine Debbie, who is ultimately too enslaved by luxury, stepping eagerly into the shoes of an absent World War II warrior, the resilience and self-confidence of those women who rose to the challenges of public life back home in the 1940s have left their mark.

That combination of temperamental and socially acceptable independence proves to be a mixture too potent, and ultimately too threatening, for the kind of man represented in extreme terms by Vince, whose self-esteem depends on female subservience. The Sadean anti-hero, Vince, whose cruel eyes and cavernous growl betray the psychology of a severe malcontent, delights in the subservience of others but despises it in himself, enhancing through his fusion of sex and cruelty his own sense of mastery and self-esteem. Vince's condition is psychopathic, leading him to inflict violence indiscriminately, as Storr argues in a general discussion of violent men, like an unthinking child. The psychopath is caught as if in a time warp, continuing to play out his drama of independence, treating others, even the woman closest to him, not as an individual but as a thing, the 'obstacle in the way to his desires, or else the means by which he can obtain gratification' ([1968] 1982: 145). And although there is a more affirmative Sadean element to Vince's role in his contribution to the film's critique of the pieties and hidden psychological constraints of traditional family life in its Anglo-Saxon, Irish or Mediterranean forms, his overriding importance lies in the potential in his character for exploring the sources and effects of the violent male's rage against himself and others, a destructive urge satisfied primarily through his treatment of women, the ultimate benchmark of a man's self-respect or shame.

As soon as a woman begins to venture too far from the boundaries imposed upon her by the traumatised male, particularly one who fears feminisation as a result of the assertive woman's resistance to his authority, she becomes a target of abuse. In this film, Debbie represents in Vince's mind the female as object, defined through sexual allure, triviality and, above all, submissiveness, a figure of both gratification and contempt. There are various moments in the film, espe-

cially early on, where Debbie's eroticism is irresistible to him. At other times his power over her is exercised through trivialisation:

Vince: What have you been doin' all day?

Debbie: Shopping.

Vince: Some career, huh? Six days a week she shops. On the seventh she rests, all tired out.

To some extent, of course, Debbie colludes with this process, content most of the time to live in comfort on the proceeds of crime. She likes mink and jewellery, expensive slinky dresses, and an easy life ('I've been rich and I've been poor. Believe me, rich is better', she tells Bannion). Yet, part of Debbie's desire for Vince is also clearly attributable to her masochistic weakness for brutal reprobates, an attachment determined not just by a regressive need for security but also by what in a general discussion of female masochism Maria Marcus refers to as a 'taste for pain' (Marcus [1978] 1981).

A healthier assertiveness does eventually triumph over perverse desire. But Debbie's niggling remarks, spirited teasing of Lagana and mockery of Vince's slavish obedience to his depraved master steadily and relentlessly provoke resentment and irritation in Vince, taunting him to the point where her seeming friendship with Bannion provides an opportune trigger for his act of brutality against her and, through her, all women who dare to undermine the patriarchal order. When Vince scalds Debbie's face (just as when he also beats, tortures and then kills Lucy Chapman, the

woman who was on the point of exposing the full extent of police corruption), his delight in 'working women over', as Bannion puts it, derives from a sense of retaliation against a perceived threat to the order that legitimates his warped masculinity. It is not insignificant that in the scene where he marks the hand of the woman at 'The Retreat' bar with a lit cigar (another act of gratuitous violence against the female), the non-diegetic music on the soundtrack is 'Put the Blame on Mame, Boys', the song, of course, from another key Columbia / Glenn Ford film, *Gilda* (Charles Vidor, 1946), that delves into the male psyche's encounter with the feminine.

Beyond the psychopathic nature of his own disturbed condition, Vince is to a considerable extent the character through whom the film hyperbolises the violence of society at large, the background against which personality disorders develop in men who cannot cope with the perceived or real subversion of their sense of identity as men brought about by the refusal of the women in their lives to conform to stereotype. Vince's reaction to Debbie is partly a projection of his own inner conflicts which arise from attitudes towards women in general. The pain inflicted by Vince on Debbie, Lucy and the girl at 'The Retreat' bar is an expression of his own need to protect himself against the possibility of a threat to his very identity. Moreover, through Vince's strategy of self-protection and his sadistic pleasure in the abuse of women, the film uncompromisingly dramatises the traumatised male's anxieties over imagined defiance to a culture's institutionalisation of male control and power. In the context of the socio-political realities of



the time, the themes of violence and control register the threatened post-war American male's attempts to reassert his dominance over the chaotic forces of nature as well as expressing his refusal of identification with the feminine and his reaffirmation through aggression of difference. Even though the film ultimately belongs to Bannion, the law enforcer who triumphs over the barbarism of Vince and his kind, enough is revealed of Bannion's own violent instincts to suggest that these drives cannot simply be explained away as the eccentric tendencies of monstrous personalities.

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