KISS ME, DEADLY

Edward Gallafent

The opening shot of Robert Aldrich's *Kiss Me, Deadly* (1955) is of an empty road in the countryside at night. A woman is running down this road – we see her bare feet and hear her gasping breath on the soundtrack. Two cars pass – she waves at them to stop but they drive on. A third car approaches, and she stands directly in its path, forcing it to brake so hard that it skids off the carriageway. There is a shot of the driver, private eye Mike Hammer (Ralph Meeker), and the opening line of the script is: 'You almost wrecked my car . . . Well?' When she does not reply, he says, 'Get in,' and even opens the door for her. He is driving an open sports car, and the radio is already on. As they pull back onto the road, the continuing sound of her sobbing breath is joined by Nat 'King' Cole singing 'Rather Have the Blues'. The camera is now positioned behind the heads of the couple, looking slightly down, so that we look through the windscreen on to the empty road as it passes under the wheels of the car. Against this background the credits roll. The words scroll from top to bottom of the screen, so that we must read them unconventionally, from the bottom upwards. So used is the eye to reading downwards that the effect is difficult and disorienting – we are being taken in a direction in which we are unwilling to follow. Throughout this sequence, the song on the radio competes with the sound of the girl's strained breathing.

Darkness, a moody song, a girl in trouble, and a striking visual style. In this discussion of *Kiss Me, Deadly*, I will not be concerned mainly with that style. What I wish to consider is how, by the mid 1950s, the concerns of the private-eye *film noir* – which is to say the skills of the hero, the pleasures of watching him, and the quality of his relations to women – have shifted away from the earlier versions of Raymond Chandler or Dashiell Hammett texts.

At first, the differences do not seem very obvious. The events which follow the credit sequence show the erotic potential of this uneasy couple. We learn that the girl, Christina Bailey (Cloris Leachman), is naked under the trench coat that she stole in order to escape her unidentified tormentors. When the car is stopped at a police roadblock, she nestles close to Hammer, who lies to the police that she is his wife. When they stop at a filling station to have the car checked after its spin off the road, the attendant assumes that they pulled into the bushes to make love. Hammer's coolness towards the girl does not contradict any of this – rather, it establishes his status in a familiar way as the hard-boiled private eye, the man who sees a lot of beautiful women, and whose strength is expressed by his ability to resist their seductions. Or at least to resist them until he has identified the good and the corrupt, one point of the narrative often being to dramatise a choice between women.

There is another element in the exposition here. As they drive through the night, Christina criticises her rescuer. She speaks generally, identifying him as a type of man whose 'one lasting love' is himself – his car, his clothes, his physical fitness – these are more important to him than any ability to 'give in a relationship'. The excitement of the rescue and the sexual frisson that goes with it are complicated by her awareness of the inadequacy of her potential partner, summed up in her rhetorical irony: 'And what does woman need to complete her – why, man, of course, wonderful man.' For this terrorised woman, the self-absorbed Hammer is less than satisfactory, but facing the likelihood of her own death, he is all she has got.

The action of the opening is lifted complete from Mickey Spillane's novel of the same title, but Christina's critique of Hammer's narcissism is introduced by Aldrich and his scriptwriter A.I. Bezzerides. To understand the problems of filming Spillane, I want to look briefly at his writing and its contemporary reception. The massively successful series of Spillane novels (twenty-four million copies were in print in June 1954) begins with *I, The Jury* (1947), *One Lonely Night* (1951), *The Long Wait* (1951) and *Kiss Me, Deadly* (1953). Only *The Long Wait* does not feature private eye Mike Hammer as the central character. The popularity of the novels and of Hammer led to several films made by Parklane Pictures and released through United Artists: *I, The Jury* (Harry Essex, 1953), *The Long Wait* (Victor Saville, 1954) and Aldrich's version of *Kiss Me, Deadly*, released by Parklane/UA in April 1955.

In the novels, the figure of Mike Hammer is a right-wing vigilante, a war veteran impatient with the process of law and suspicious about corruption in high, and specifically governmental, circles. The novels are narratives about revenge, and the ability of one man to destroy a corrupt organisation. In each case, the organisation is seen as specifically threatening Hammer and those under his protection, but also more generally as undermining American democracy. The novels reflect the paranoia of their witch-hunting times; in *Kiss Me, Deadly*, the organisation is identified as the Mafia, and in *One Lonely Night*, it is explicitly the Communist party. Perhaps what is most striking about the novel compared to, say, Chandler is the interest in sadism; the destruction of the evil or guilty men enacted by Hammer is presented in terms of the graphic detail of the effects of his violence on these 'soft, pulpy people'.

The perception of the novels as both McCarthyite and pornographic is not new. It was current in the early 'fifties, part of a wider anxiety about pulp fiction and elements of popular culture such as horror comics, which were the subject of investigation by a Congressional committee at the time. Intellectuals were also concerned: in November 1954, Christopher La Farge's piece for *The Saturday Review*, 'Mickey Spillane and his Bloody Hammer', explicitly made the connection between 'Hammerism and McCarthyism' and expressed 'the disgust of all truly liberal minds' at both.

This was the context for Robert Aldrich's treatment of the Spillane material. According in part to the director's own accounts, and certainly according to some critical discussions of the film, Aldrich took it as an opportunity to express his disgust for Hammer and the politics of Spillane. In an interview with François Truffaut shortly after the film was released (*Cahiers du Cinéma*, November 1956), he argued that Spillane was 'anti-democratic'. But we should look at his comments over a period of time. In 1956, he said to Truffaut, 'I regret having accepted the job of making *Kiss Me, Deadly*. Two horrible films had already been made of the Spillane series, and I should have refused.' Interviewed by Joel Greenberg twelve years later (*Sight & Sound*, Winter 1968/69), he said 'I was very proud of the film,' and in answer to the next question (on his debt to Spillane's novel) claimed – inaccurately – 'The book had nothing. We just took the title and threw the rest away.' This seems to accord with current accounts of the film, such as Robin Wood's description of the critique of the hero as 'devastating and uncompromised' (*CineAction* 21/22, Summer/Fall 1990). But in 1956, Aldrich's honesty was disarming: '. . . when I asked my American friends to tell me whether they felt my disgust for that whole mess, they said that between the fights and the kissing scenes they hadn't noticed anything of the sort.'

The problem would seem to be as follows. To film a Spillane novel and attempt to be faithful to the effects evoked in the text would have been very difficult in 1955. Even had it been technically possible to present the smashing of faces, the fascination with female nudity recurrent in the novels would have been impossible to present on screen under prevailing censorship regulations. Equally, it seems unsurprising that a liberal director at this time would want to make a film that appeared critical of author and hero. I would argue that the figure of Hammer created by Aldrich and Bezzerides is actually quite unlike the figure in the novels and owes a lot to their vision of the role of the *film noir* private eye in the mid-'fifties. What they have done is to create a different model of the hero and then offer a critique of that figure, rather than treating Spillane's hero from an oppositional point of view. To establish this, we need to understand the ways in which the central figure – and central couple – of the film are conceived.

The opening exposition of *Kiss Me, Deadly* concludes with Hammer unable to protect Christina. Unidentified hoods again force his car off the road, capturing them both. Christina is tortured to death, but a faked car accident fails to kill Hammer, and he wakes up in hospital. When he recovers, he is questioned by the FBI in the guise of the 'Interstate Crime Commission'. In the novel this scene is treated as a conversation between equals and serves only to establish some facts about the dead girl before Hammer starts on his mission of revenge. Aldrich's version is radically different. In a series of shots which express the alienation of the two sides from each other, Hammer stares away from the investigators as they describe him, starting with his name and moving on to his profession. We are told that the main form of his activity as a private eye is not crime but divorce work. Their account makes it indistinguishable from a seamy blackmail racket, with Hammer seducing the wives, and his secretary and girlfriend Velda (Maxine Cooper) acting as bait for errant husbands.

A simple attack on Hammer might have thrown its weight behind this account of him, but we are not asked to identify with the FBI. The scene suggests that their professed contempt is tinged with envy – Hammer and Velda ('real woo-bait', according to one FBI man) are being attacked precisely because they have found a financially rewarding way of exploiting their sexuality without doing anything that is literally illegal. Behind the censure lie the tensions widely observed in the America of the period, the envy of the individual entrepreneur that was felt by those swallowed up by the relentless expansion of corporations inside and outside Government, and the feeling of those whose success depends on the repression of their sexuality towards the couple who use sexuality to create their success.

The hostility of the FBI is also contrasted with the friendliness of the local cop, Pat Chambers (Wesley Addy), in two scenes with Hammer which frame the interrogation scene, and underlined by the fact that Pat refuses the FBI's invitation to join in the questioning. The quality of Meeker's

delivery of Hammer's final line to the FBI - 'All right, you've got me convinced, I'm a real stinker' - makes clear that this is not so much his admission of moral corruption as a piece of weary sarcasm.

Our attitude to Hammer and Velda is refined in a later scene, when he finally returns to his apartment. The set – one of two specially constructed for the film, the other being Velda's apartment – is important here. It speaks of modernity, of precise order, and of money. It is of a piece with Hammer's fast car and his neat suits and ties, the place of a man who has exploited new technologies successfully for gain – one of its most prominent features is a reel-to-reel tape recorder built into the wall as an answering machine. The technology of audio tape, first commercially exploited in the late 'forties, is central to the divorce business; later, we gather that Velda's role has involved the making of 'incriminating' tapes.

Velda arrives, and the ensuing scene is an amalgam of different kinds of work and pleasure. We see the couple's sexual interest in each other, Hammer's desire to investigate Christina's death, and the ongoing detail of the divorce business. These are not sequential – even in a clinch, Hammer is giving Velda instructions. The overall effect of the scene is one of frustration and anxiety, their lovemaking blocked both by the sense that Velda's seductiveness needs to be put to work on her latest 'Mr Friendly' and by the consciousness that Christina's death has inserted Hammer into a mysterious and possibly dangerous world.

How can we sum up an attitude to the couple? The reservations are clear. There is the sordid side to the divorce business, of which Velda is painfully aware – unsurprisingly, given the greater odium heaped on women in these areas. There is the cockiness of Hammer, prepared to brush this aside in the light of the money and success it has brought. More subtle is the sense of stagnation, of the pair trapped in the endless round of the business – it is significant that part of the conversation in the apartment scene is about a piece of seduction that is having to be done over again. But these reservations operate against the fact that as the young, attractive couple at the centre of this narrative, the roles that they occupy – boss and secretary, heterosexual lovers, strong man and beautiful woman – relate clearly to elements that this culture supports, and their success or failure is central to any vision of the strengths and weaknesses of America in 1955.

It is in this context that Hammer's motivation in uncovering what is behind Christina's death can be understood. Unlike the figure in Spillane's novel, he is not interested in vengeance, but rather fascinated by power. He reasons to Pat that when a girl's death rings bells all the way to Washington,' whatever is behind it must be 'something big' . His desire to find the treasure that he assumes Christina to have been protecting is that most American fantasy, of fabulous riches, something that will change his and Velda's life entirely.

But his abilities are in question. Velda's exit line in the apartment scene is 'Stay away from the window – somebody might blow you a kiss.' This neatly juxtaposes her anxiety that Hammer may be on a death list with the awareness behind her irony that, given Hammer's specific field of expertise, he is possibly more used to having kisses aimed at him than bullets.

The next sequence appears to answer this, engaging with the question of the kind of power that the *film noir* private eye needs to possess. Night falls, and Hammer leaves his apartment to follow the first of the leads that will hopefully take him to his prize. As he walks the street, he is followed by a small-time hood. In outline, this has the quality of a moment familiar in the genre; the experience of the private eye is to be expressed by the fact that he invariably knows when he is being tailed, and so can turn on his pursuer and despatch him back to his bosses with a message that he is not a man to be trifled with. Add a little violence, and this is exactly how the scene appears in Spillane's novel.

Aldrich presents the landscape of the street as a series of screens and frames – opaque windows, a mirror, the bars of a news-stand outlining a figure – walking these streets is a matter of seeing, of knowing how light falls and how it is reflected. The moment of conflict, when Hammer, watching his assailant's reflection in the mirror on a cigarette machine, turns and blinds him with popcorn thrown into his face, demonstrates his control in this area. As they fight, the position of the knife makes a visual point about phallic power – Hammer emerges as stronger, smarter, even more of a man than his opponent.

The scene does not end with the hood being sent away. Rather, we see Hammer beat the head of the man viciously against a wall. He slumps to the ground but recovers and attacks Hammer again. It now emerges that the fight is effectively taking place at the edge of a precipice, as the hood is sent hurtling down a long, steep set of steps.

What is of interest here is not Hammer's dominance – that is routine – but the excess, the degree to which the frustrations of the earlier scene with Velda are resolved by the release of massive physical violence. The crucial contrast is between the ease with which satisfactions seem to flow from the exercising of physical violence and the visceral pleasures of speed, compared with the relative frustrations associated with the exercise of sexuality. It might sound as if I am describing the situation of the Robert Stack character in Douglas Sirk's *Written on the Wind*, made in the following year – there are many connections, but both the role of the high performance car as a finally unsatisfying form of access to pleasure and the use of the staircase as a central part of the *mise-en-scène* are obvious links.

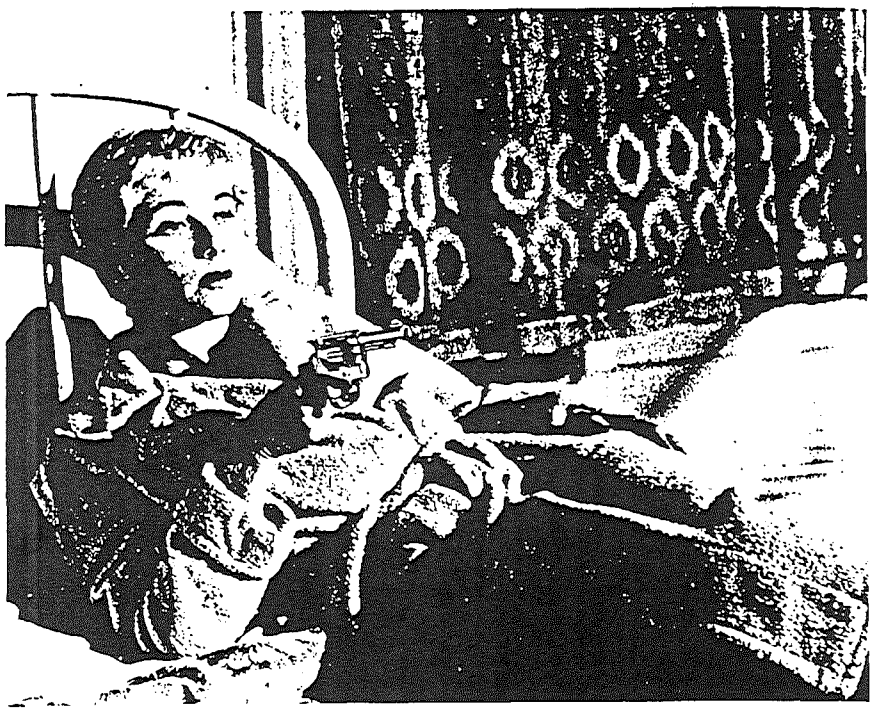
Still: the modern couple – Mike Hammer (Ralph Meeker) and Velda (Maxine Cooper).

Hammer now follows his one lead, and thereby obtains the address of Christina's apartment. At the apartment, a kindness to the porter earns him another lead, the new address of Christina's flatmate, Lily Carver (Gaby Rodgers). She claims to be frightened of the men who came for Christina, and in a later scene, Hammer rescues her and takes her back to his apartment. These actions conform in part with how we believe a good detective should act. There are familiar virtues, such as the sympathy for the little guy which commonly earns the private eye information denied to others. And again there is rescue of the threatened woman linked with the control of sexuality, his refusal to let Lily seduce him.

In other ways, Hammer is ill-equipped for his detective role. What is perhaps most clearly lacking in him is sympathy for and relation to the past. Narrative in *film noir* is often a disinterring and ordering of information buried in the past, and it is clear that Hammer is a man with no understanding of or response to a world which relates to earlier times. He knows that he should be able to read the clues buried in the past, but is unable to do so, or even to determine if there are hidden meanings at all. This produces a series of anxious gestures. He had never heard of Christina Rossetti before encountering Christina Bailey, but removes the book of poems from Christina's bedside when he visits the apartment. In the same scene, he notices the Tchaikowsky which is playing on her radio. When he returns to his own apartment, he tunes to the same station in a baffled attempt to gain some access to the dead girl. His visits to his various leads are similar, all pictured in sets that speak of the old city, in contrast to his own modern apartment block. An exemplary case is the sequence in the room of the opera singer Carmen Trivaco (Fortunio Bonanova). Trivaco is playing a recording of Caruso singing Flotow's *Martha*. Hammer moves around the set, poking in the clutter with which Aldrich has filled it, threateningly breaking a record, aware that he has no apparatus for understanding such material.

We may compare this to his competence in the context of modern technologies. When Hammer is offered a bribe in the form of a new car, his unwary mechanic friend Nick (Nick Dennis) is about to kill himself by starting the engine. Hammer instantly locates one booby trap and is accurate in his guess that there will be another one of a different kind, one associated with pleasure, which would have exploded on the highway, 'when you open her up wide'. The reference to sexual pleasure here is obvious, and can be put in context by considering the figure of Nick.

The fact that he is the only character in the narrative who does not appear in Spillane's novel hints at the importance of Nick. He could be



Still: the treacherous woman – Lily Carver (Gaby Rodgers) threatens Hammer.

said to represent the kinds of energy and pleasure that the novel gives directly to Hammer. Aldrich links this brio with Hammer indirectly and implies that pleasures are perhaps entirely satisfying only when assigned to the world of the imagination. They exist in Nick not as action but as catch phrases. His memorable 'Va-Va-Voom' and 'Pretty-Pow!' represent the energy of sex and speed free from the confusions and anxieties of status and progress that haunt Hammer, but we never see Nick driving a fast car and never see him with a girl.

Earlier, Aldrich has cut from Hammer's success in locating the bombs in the car to his first visit to Velda's apartment. There he plots his pursuit of something big, telling Velda that they are giving up the 'penny-ante divorce business' for a while. Her research has dug up some more names, but two of these are the names of men who died in 'accidents' like the one that nearly killed Hammer. Her anxiety is clear, but Hammer, at his most cocky and least attractive, remains impervious to it. He goes off to interrogate the leads, even visiting the head of the hoods, Carl Evello (Paul Stewart), in his mansion. Here, Hammer firmly puts off the blonde who offers herself to him and paralyses the hood sent to dispatch him with a trick that reduces the man to unconsciousness in seconds. In this context, and for a moment, the private eye still appears to have powers that approximate to magic. But Aldrich emphasises the narrowness of his range – his competence extends only to blondes and hoods, as the subsequent frustrating interrogation of Trivaco shows.

When Hammer finds that Nick has been killed, Aldrich again makes a cut which takes Hammer from the garage to Velda's apartment. The shocked reaction to Nick's death is another mark of the distance from the world of Spillane, where death is commonplace, and the death of the good simply stokes the fires of revenge. We may assume that the divorce business does not generally result in bodies; the scene makes clear that this hero is not one who routinely deals with death.

I take this scene to be central to *Kiss Me, Deadly*, and it is difficult to discuss it adequately in a short space. We see the couple first in an erotic encounter, as Hammer wakes Velda in her bedroom. For a moment, they kiss – then, as Hammer gives her the news, the eroticism seeps away and we see repetition of an earlier device, a series of shots in which a couple talk without being able to look each other in the face. Velda offers a scathing critique of the whole undertaking, and her fear and anger touches on the central question: is the object of the search worth dying for? Hammer's 'something Big' now becomes Velda's contemptuous 'the great Whatsit', suggestive of trickery or illusion, and the enemy becomes 'the nameless ones'. The point here is her recognition that they are caught up in something very different from the world of divorce cases or even of ordinary police work, and that the difference is not simply one of scale – as Hammer's name for the prize implies – but one of quality.

Nor is it the case that the old behaviour becomes heroic in this new situation – it is simply dangerous. As the scene develops, Velda tells Hammer of another man related to the case and asks if he wants her to seduce this man. Maxine Cooper makes Velda's depression and self-disgust here delicately evident. Hammer abstractedly replies that he wants revenge on those who killed Nick, and Velda finally turns on him in utter scorn:

'You want to avenge the death of your dear friend. How touching. How sweet. How nicely it justifies your quest for the great Whatsit. [pauses] . . . Why don't you leave, Mike?'

Even after this, she makes an appointment to meet him again later – the insight that Hammer is trapped in a view of his role that will very possibly destroy them coexists for Velda with recognition of her own dependence.

Hammer now visits a nightclub where he hears 'Rather Have the Blues' again. This chance reference to the night of Christina's death leads to the realisation that the one essential clue is the note that she asked the petrol station attendant to post. This in turn leads, via an interlude in which he again bests Evello's thugs, to the morgue, where the doctor (Percy Helton) has extracted a key from Christina's body. The desire to reach the prize now becomes increasingly hysterical; Hammer first tries to bribe and then attacks the doctor, and repeats the process with the desk clerk in charge of the lockers where the prize is kept. We now learn that it is a box of fissionable material, in effect a very small atom bomb.

In the Spillane novel, the object of the search was a large quantity of drugs. There was apparently a straightforward reason for moving away from this. In his interview with Truffaut, Aldrich raised the problem of censorship, that 'up to *The Man With the Golden Arm*, drugs couldn't be mentioned in American films.' This seems likely; the change in Samuel Fuller's *Pickup on South Street* (1953) from Dwight Taylor's original story, which had dealt with drug traffic rather than spying, may have been similarly motivated.

In *Kiss Me Deadly* the effect of the change to atomic material is pervasive. Aldrich said that 'once we made that decision, everything fell into place.' The bomb exists as both a confirmation and an explanation of the view that Velda expressed in her criticism of Hammer, a rationale for the fact that the age in which they are living is beginning to make the hero, whose prowess is founded on the 'fights and the kissing scenes', an anachronism. The bomb itself is a whatsit of massive destructive capacity and no solid, exchangeable matter – what we finally see consists cinematically of almost contentless white light and sound. Similarly, the change from drugs to bomb entails the move from the named ones (the Mafia of the novel) to Velda's 'nameless ones'. Behind the traditional thugs like Evello where the private eye's prowess, or magic, still works is the figure of Doctor Soberin (Albert Dekker), ambiguously scientist and spy, for whom Hammer is just an irrelevant nuisance.

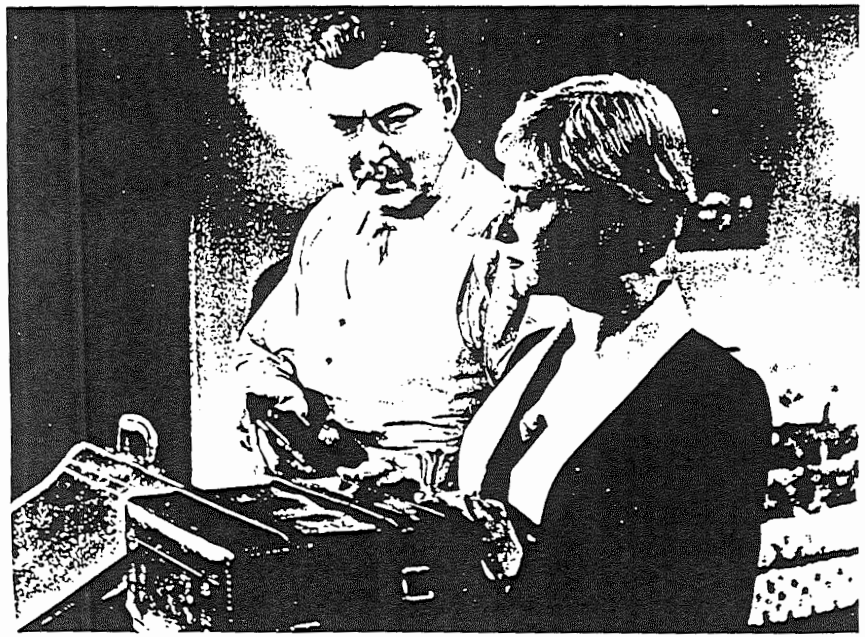
Still: traditional strengths – Hammer escapes his bonds.

Soberin is defeated in this film, but not by the hero. It emerges that Lily Carver's role as Christina's dead flatmate was a masquerade. In fact, she is Soberin's girl, the exact equivalent of Velda, given the task of attempting to seduce Hammer in order to find out what he knows. Now she too turns on her man, demanding half of what is in the sealed box that contains the bomb.

Soberin's indifference to Lily is marked by his self-absorbed game of trying to characterise the bomb through learned references: Pandora's box, Lot's Wife, the head of the Medusa. Lily's reply is, 'Never mind about the evil, what's in it?' He tells her that he is leaving her, adding almost in the same sentence that she is creasing his overcoat by carelessly sitting on it – unsurprisingly, she shoots him. Although it is certainly clear that whatever the box contains is deadly, she now embraces her own death by opening it fully. The ensuing explosion destroys everything, but a gesture to the benign couple remains on some prints – Hammer has arrived at the house to rescue the abducted Velda, and they stand watching the holocaust in the final shot.

To understand *Kiss Me, Deadly*, it is necessary to connect the woman who opens the film and dies at the beginning of it with the one who closes it by dying at the end, and to link them both to Velda. An important part of my pleasure in this film is the performances of these three actors, and an important part of its coherence is the argument that links them together. Christina's initial criticism, that men are absorbed in their own physicality and the status reflected in their possessions and money, becomes Velda's awareness that Hammer's vision of his powers is positively dangerous. The subject concludes with Lily's murderous response to Soberin's abandonment of her, a response which, suggestively, he completely fails to anticipate. What these three women have in common is their frustration in the face of the self-absorbed, indifferent men. The choice faced by the hero between the 'good' and the 'bad' woman common in *film noir* falls away here, where in every case the eroticised woman is now isolated by male unresponsiveness.

Again, elements in *Written on the Wind* present a parallel context. There male anxiety about expressing sexual need is diverted into both a forward and a backward movement, a reliance on the thrills of new technologies and a nostalgia for an age dependent on simpler physical prowess. In the Sirk, at least one half of this movement is interpreted positively, the pioneer values and the country world offering a fragment of the past as benign. In *Kiss Me, Deadly*, the negative past – represented as a high culture that is becoming progressively incomprehensible and a city of dark spaces – is placed next to a vision of modernity that takes us from the high speed car crash to the atomic bomb. It is the women in Aldrich's film – two of them will die horribly – who speak of this bleakness.



Still: 'Never mind about the evil, what's in it?' – Lily, Soberin (Albert Dekker) and the closed box.