HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Burak Sevingen, MA

Clash by Night 1952

Fritz Lang (1890-1976)

OVERVIEW

> And we are here as on a darkling plain
> Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
> Where ignorant armies clash by night.
> —"Dover Beach", Matthew Arnold

The Title and the Play. Fritz Lang's *Clash by Night* (1952) takes its title from Matthew Arnold's lyric 1867 poem "Dover Beach". It is based on Clifford Odets' play that was directed by Lee Strasberg, the father of method acting. The play was staged around January 1942, less than a month after the Pearl Harbor Raid. The film was shot nine years later and released in 1952. Scriptwriter Alfred Hayes moved the setting from New York to a fishing town in California's Monterey Bay, where shooting was completed in 32 days (Bogdanovich, 137).

The Plot. A worldly-wise woman's return to her hometown ignites passions and triggers a love triangle involving her kindhearted fisherman husband and his sardonic friend. A subplot follows a younger woman who is on the verge of making a choice between commitment and her dreams.

Characteristics and Genre. No one dies in *Clash by Night*, which makes it an unusual Fritz Lang film. It is also distinguished by its realism, location shooting and theatrical performances. The film opens with a montage sequence showing the return of the fishing fleet and the catch being processed at the cannery. Lang had previously used intense montage sequences in *Spies* and *You and Me*. This time, it has a mini-documentary feel. Lang fondly recounted recording substantial footage with his cinematographer ahead of the actual shooting of the film (83). With its realistic depiction of people living off the sea, *Clash by Night* is a "psychological drama"—or a "naturalist melodrama" (McElhaney, 524) with scenes of nature mirroring characters' moods.

Steinbeck. Lang maintained that an influence was John Steinbeck, particularly the 1945 novel *Cannery Row.* For Steinbeck, "Cannery Row in Monterey in California is a poem, a stink, a grating noise, a quality of light, a tone, a habit, a nostalgia, a dream" (Steinbeck, 1) and his novel revolved around colorful characters that inhabit it during the Great Depression. Lang's documentary sequence cinematically conveys the novel's description of the canneries, which "rumble and rattle and squeak until the last fish is cleaned and cut and cooked and canned and then the whistles scream again" (3).

Scriptwriter Hayes. Scriptwriter Hayes had written a tribute poem to the labor activist Joe Hill, who was executed in 1915. "I dreamt I saw Joe Hill Last Night" became a popular folk song sang by many performers including Joan Baez and Paul Robeson. Hayes would write the screenplay for Lang's other realist film *Human Desire* (1954) which focused on a railway community.

Italian Neorealism. In the 1940s, Hayes had collaborated with Italian neorealist directors. The trailblazers for neorealism in cinema were Luchino Visconti's *Ossessione* (1943) and 1945's *Rome, Open City* directed by Roberto Rossellini. Hayes was one of the writers of Rossellini's *Paisan* (1946) and had contributed to the screenplay of Vittoria De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) (Bailey). Both *Clash by Night* and *Human Desire*'s working class characters and on location scenes point out to the influence of neorealism. Particularly relevant in the case of *Clash by Night* is Rossellini's *Stromboli* and its island setting with fishermen.

The Cold War. Alfred Hayes had met the Italian directors while he was serving in the US Army during WW2. The protagonist of *Human Desire* is also a veteran who has just returned from the Korean War. On the other hand, neither WW2 nor the Korean War is referenced in *Clash by Night*. Nonetheless, it came to fruitation in the anti-communist climate of the Cold War. Just as the film premiered, playwright Odets appeared before the House Un-American Activities Committee (McGilligan, 394). Lang himself believed he was blacklisted to be a communist during the Red Scare (Bogdanovich, 83).

1950s Film Noir. *Clash by Night* has an affinity to film noirs released in 1950-1951, which were notable for their gritty realism—*The Asphalt Jungle* (John Huston), *Night and the City* (Jules Dassin), *In a Lonely Place* and *On Dangerous Ground* (Nicholas Ray).

Creative Team and Producer. *Clash by Night*'s producer, RKO Pictures' (defunct in 1959) portfolio included films such as *King Kong, Citizen Kane,* and *It's a Wonderful Life.* Cinematographer Nicholas Musuraca and art directors Carroll Clark and Albert S. D'Agostino had worked together for the classic film noir *Out of the Past* (1947). *Clash by Night*'s location producer Harriet Parsons was one of the pioneering female producers in Hollywood.

Assessment. With its female protagonist, *Clash by Night* can be grouped with Lang's *Secret Beyond the Door, Rancho Notorious*, and *The Blue Gardenia*. As a woman's "narrative of exile and return" (McElhaney, 518), it recalls one of Lang's early films, *The Wandering Image*. According to Joe McElhaney, the oceanside setting and the theater play as an "uncongenial source material" (516) provided challenges to Lang. The result is a film unlike most of his other works and one that Tom Gunning considers "the most 'adult' drama that Lang ever filmed" (Gunning, 393).

Marilyn Monroe. Gunning observes that *Clash by Night* was a product of "the era of *Playboy*", which was marked by two contradictory social motivations, conformity and hedonism (391). The younger woman in the film is played by Marilyn Monroe, whose nude calendar pictures scandal had erupted at the time of filming. Monroe had read Odets' play while taking drama lessons and had later said that Peggy—the character she played in the film—was "a girl that reminded me of myself" (Spoto, 148). Is Peggy going to become a depressed free-spirit like the older Mae or will she conform to expectations? The question is answered at the end of the film, but the tension between conformism and hedonism remains.

The New Media. Lang considered Monroe to be a "peculiar mixture of shyness and uncertainty" (Bogdanovich, 81) and was annoyed by the presence of her personal acting coach Natasha Lytess on the set. The rise of celebrity culture, journalism, paparazzi and new media environment would be subjects for Lang to explore in his forthcoming films *The Blue Gardenia, Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* and *While the City Sleeps*.

CHARACTERS

Mae Doyle. After leaving her hometown ten years ago, Mae had become the mistress of a rich man. Following his death, she returns as an emotionally drained woman. She gets married to Jerry D'Amato and has an affair with his friend Earl.

Jerry D'Amato. Kind and trustful skipper lives with his father and uncle.

Earl. Earl is a projectionist at the movie theater. He eventually gets divorced from his burlesque dancer wife who was cheating him. Jerry is very fond of his cynical friend.

Joe Doyle. Mae's brother is a fisherman who works on Jerry's boat and wants to get married to Peggy. Although he is resentful to his sister for her ten year absence, he welcomes her to their family home.

Peggy. 20 year old Peggy works at the sardine packaging plant and is Joe Doyle's girlfriend.

Uncle Vince. Uncle Vince lives off Jerry and drinks most of the time. He often makes misogynistic remarks and tries to incite Jerry to violence.

Papa D'Amato. Jerry's father emigrated from Sicily, where he used to be a fisherman. He occasionally rambles in Italian and wanders around the wharf, which worries Jerry.

SYNOPSIS

Cannery Row's fishing fleet return with their cargo of sardines, which are processed at San Xavier Fish Packing Co. One of the workers is Peggy; she plans to marry her boyfriend Joe Doyle, who is a fisherman. Joe's older sister Mae returns to town after a long absence and begins to live with him. Mae soon begins to date skipper and Joe's boss Joe D'Amato. Jerry introduces Mae to his friend, a movie projectionist named Earl. Mae decides to settle down, she and Jerry marry.

A year goes by, and the D'Amatos have a baby. Mae is frustrated with her life; Earl's interest in his best friend's wife triggers a love triangle. Jerry is tipped about the affair, which has already become the talk of the town, and finally scolds the two. He moves to his boat while Mae remains undecided. After a long and restless deliberation, she eventually decides to leave with Earl. In the meantime, her brother Joe, who had been annoyed by Mae's affair, presents his girlfriend with an ultimatum—commit for life or part ways. Peggy is touched by his determination and the two get engaged.

Agitated by his uncle, Jerry goes after Earl in a frenzy of rage and attacks him at the projection booth. He nearly strangles Earl, who is saved when Mae falls down during the scuffle. This prompts Jerry to pull himself together and leave the scene. He takes the baby and moves to the boat. Accompanied by Earl, Mae comes home to pick up her baby and personal belongings. Shocked to learn that Jerry had taken their daughter with him, she has a tense conversation with Earl—which turns out to be their final one, as Mae apparently becomes regretful of her actions. She goes to the boat and asks Jerry for another chance. Although reluctant at first, he eventually accepts moving on. The film ends with Mae taking the baby home and the couple reuniting.

SCENES

Morning at Cannery Row. Otters and seagulls of Monterey Bay greet the town's fishing fleet as boats return to the wharf. Concurrently, morning shift begins at San Xavier Fish Packing Co. Tons of sardines are unloaded and meticulously processed on the conveyor belt by female workers. At the end of the shift, a young worker named Peggy meets her boyfriend Joe Doyle. (*Clash by Night* was location shot at Cannery Row and Monterey Bay.)
The brief but intense opening shows how the fish are processed, canned and turned into a commodity.
Marilyn Monroe appears as Peggy, one of the workers at the plant.
Peggy also helps her boyfriend Jerry with work on his boat, a purse seiner.









Clash by Night was one of Marilyn Monroe's first important films. The film's official trailer used aquatic imagery and introduced her as the starlet—the star was Barbara Stanwyck.



Coming Home. A passenger gets off the train and stops by Angelo's Bar at the Fisherman's Wharf. Mae Doyle has been away from Monterey for ten years. Even though her brother Joe is less than delighted to see his sister, he welcomes her to their family home. The worldly Mae makes a strong impression on Peggy and the two women get along well.



Jerry D'Amato. Joe works for skipper Jerry D'Amato, who lives with his father, a retired fisherman who emigrated from Sicily. His Uncle Vince, an unemployed and obnoxious character, also stays with them. With the encouragement of Mae's brother, Jerry soon begins dating her; they go to the movies.



Earl Pfeiffer. Jerry introduces Mae to his friend Earl, a projectionist at the local cinema who is going through a divorce. In contrast to the trustful and good-natured Jerry, Earl is a cynical and embittered character. Mae appears to be irked by his patronizing attitude and obvious contempt for women. As they enter the projection room, she has to put off her cigarette, since nitrate celluloid film stock is highly flammable.



Marriage. After some hesitation, Mae accepts Jerry's proposal and they marry. Earl walks out of the joyful wedding party looking disgruntled. Meanwhile, Peggy is having a personal debate about her options in life and getting married to Joe.

Storms over Monterey. A year goes by and the D'Amatos have a baby. Mae has kicked Uncle Vince out of the house because of his drinking and pin-up photo collection. It is revealed how frustrated she is with her domestic routines. Earl reappears, having finalized his divorce from his burlesque dancer wife. Not before long, the two begin an affair. Their frequent and less than discrete outings soon become the talk of the town. Stills from the official trailer emphasize that the film's focus is on adultery.







A Love Triangle. Finally, Jerry is tipped by Uncle Vince; he finds in Mae's drawers a bottle of perfume and a negligee that were gifted by Earl. "Animals"—Jerry lashes at Mae and Earl, after they return from the amusement park with a prize teddy bear. Earl remains defiant while Mae appears to be unsure of what to do.



Fritz Lang's typical low and high angle shots underscore the tension and shifting dynamics in the love triangle. These are particularly used in scenes with ladders and staircases.



The Younger Couple. Jerry attempts to fix things by offering Mae to forget what happened and move on. After a long and restless deliberation, she eventually decides to leave with Earl. In the meantime, her brother Joe, who had been annoyed by Mae's affair, presents his girlfriend with an ultimatum—commit for life or part ways. Joe is jealous and possessive; he even attempts to choke Peggy—supposedly playfully. Peggy is apparently touched by his determination and the two get engaged.



Jerry's Rage. Agitated by his uncle, Jerry goes after Earl in a frenzy of rage and attacks him at the projection booth. He nearly strangles Earl, who is saved when Mae falls down during the scuffle. This prompts Jerry to pull himself together and leave the scene. He takes the baby and moves to the boat.



Reconciliation. Accompanied by Earl, Mae comes home to pick up her baby and personal belongings. Shocked to learn that Jerry had taken their daughter with him, she has a tense conversation with Earl—which turns out to be their final one, as Mae apparently becomes regretful of her actions. She goes to the boat and asks Jerry for another chance. Although reluctant at first, he eventually accepts moving on. The film ends with Mae taking the baby home and the couple reuniting. Final scene shows Monterey Bay.

An earlier scene had offered a view of the bay, with the statue of Saint Xavier that oversees it. A sequence connected to the saint and the fishermen was removed from the final cut.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Mae Doyle – Emotional (Worldly and Weary)
Jerry D'amato – Closed (Simpleton, Potentially Violent)
Earl Pfeiffer – Disagreeable (Physical, Patronizing and Bullying, Reckless)

MAE DOYLE (Emotional**)**

Mae is looking for a respite and thinks that getting married to Jerry would provide her "a place to rest".

Illustrative moment

Worldly and Weary. Her experiences has made Mae depressed and cynical. She thinks marriage would be a solution to her problems but she soon discovers that she dislikes many things about domestic life and work: "Mae, Mae, Mae… Wash my face, Mae. Comb my hair, Mae. Be my cook, nurse, accountant, bottle washer…" In spite of her diatribes against marriage, Mae eventually chooses to stay with her husband. Which raises the question, does the film have a happy ending?

JERRY D'AMATO (Closed)

The skipper's physical power contrasts with his underwhelming character.

Illustrative moments

Simpleton. Jerry amazes Mae with his naivety and trustfulness. She seems to like this side of him—but is annoyed that Jerry fails to see that Earl is patronizing him.

Potentially Violent. Very early in the film, Jerry is annoyed at his uncle for some trivial matter and slams the fridge's door with unexpected force. This is one of several moments when his great strength and potential for violence is hinted at. This trait of Jerry becomes manifest when he finally explodes at the end and nearly strangles Earl.

EARL PFEIFFER *(Disagreeable)*

Unlike the obnoxious Uncle Vince character, Earl can be charming as well as repulsive.

Illustrative moments

Physical. Earl is an intense character who likes to have the spotlight turned on him. In this respect, he is the male counterpart of Marilyn Monroe's attractive Peggy. One scene has him sporting a wife beater tank top, famously worn by Marlon Brando the previous year in *A Street Car Named Desire*.

Patronizing and Bullying. An extended scene shows Earl repeatedly bullying an older waiter; Uncle Vince dislikes being goaded by him; Joe Doyle is irritated by Earl mockingly calling him "the sardine fleet" and flirting with his girlfriend Peggy. When Jerry asks Earl to lend him some cash to cover his father's bar bill, Mae makes quite a scene trying to prevent him from taking Earl's money. Eventually, Jerry comes to notice Earl's patronizing attitude—one of the signs is Jerry scolding him to stop calling him Jeremiah.

Reckless. "Responsibility? I'll spell it for you: T.R.A.P.", Earl tells Mae. Just as she was leaving Jerry to be with him, their final exchange gives her second thoughts. Earl makes it clear that he would be happier without her baby—which makes Mae realize her husband's virtue and she changes her mind.

THEMES

Society – (Roles for Women, Misogyny, Violence Against Women, Modernity and Cinema, Environment)
Flaw – (Infidelity)

SOCIETY

Roles for Women. Despite her endeavor to commit to Jerry, Mae eventually concedes her aversion to marriage:

> You say to yourself, wait, be patient, things will change, you'll feel different. No good. Nothing changes. The days go by. Down to the grocery store, back to the house. Hang out the wash, take the dishes out of the closet. Go to bed, wake up. Wait, wait. Shut your mouth, close your eyes. This is the man you married. This is the life you've made. Expect nothing, hope for nothing.

A sub-plot of the film revolves around the question whether Marilyn Monroe's 20 year old Peggy would choose to marry Joe Doyle—or adopt Mae as a role model. For Peggy, the worldly-wise Mae represents the independent woman she would like to be. She is unsure whether she wants to get married and raise kids—initially she prefers the idea of travelling the country with a trailer. Joe's attempts to control her appear as a friction in their relationship and prompt her to vent "I hate people bossing me". In the end, parallel to Mae regretting her decisions, Peggy chooses to commit to Joe.

Misogyny. Uncle Vince is an obnoxious character who is also blatantly misogynistic. He tells Jerry that "we spoil women in this country; too much education, too much free speech". He uses every opportunity to agitate Jerry and push him to violence by saying things like "women and horses, use the whip on them". Earl also sometimes makes comparable remarks—his contempt for women seems to be linked to his troubled marriage. Mae insightfully identifies the root of the problem to be the insecurity of men, who are "nervous like sparrows or big and worried like sick bears".

Violence against Women. No one dies in *Clash by Night* and there are only references to off-screen deaths unrelated to the story; Jerry reads about a drowned girl and his father is saddened by a dead baby found under the bridge. The film has few scenes with actual violence—which tend to be mild by Fritz Lang's standards. However, violence—particularly against women—is brought up when characters interact. "Well, he's her husband" Joe responds, when Peggy tells him about a man beating up a female coworker. A scene that comes up later shows Joe choking her with a towel, supposedly playfully. With his sadistic remarks, Earl is a worse case—recalling *Scarlet Street*'s Johnny played by Dan Duryea. He shocks Jerry by half-jokingly talking about "cutting up" women, but he looks quite serious when he talks about sticking pins to his wife to see if "her blood runs out".

Modernity and Cinema. *Clash by Night* showcases cinema as a modern technology with two scenes taking place inside the projection booth of the movie theater. As Earl welcomes Jerry and Mae to the booth, he is holding a roll of film. "I handle them all day" he jokes referring to movie stars that he calls

"celluloid angels". Highly flammable celluloid nitrate film was still in use and particular emphasis is placed on the non-smoking ban around the booth—at a time when such designation was not widespread. Nitrate film would soon be replaced with safer material.

Other innovations, such as three-dimensional films were a product of the period with pioneering examples such as *House of Wax* helming the Golden era of 3D filmmaking (1952-1954). That novelty would be followed in 1953 by the use of Cinemascope technique which would allow for widescreen movies in 1953. Fritz Lang (playing Fritz Lang in Jean-Luc Godard's 1963 film *Contempt*) would dismiss Cinemascope—"only good for snakes and funerals"—and yet would film the interesting *Moonfleet* three years later with this technique.

Environment. Jerry likes to talk in detail about fishing, even though the topic obviously bores Mae. "Last year we brought in almost 2500 tons" he remarks and in another scene he refers to previous decades: "in the old days, Papa says sea was full of fish, you could go out of the harbor two, three miles... ...make a set, haul in 150, 200 ton of sardines". The numbers he provides point to an environmental crisis. Reportedly, Monterey Bay's sardine stocks declined very rapidly—from a quarter million tons a year in the 1940s to 1000 tons a year in mid 1950s (Hemp). As the fish became depleted, Cannery Row's economy collapsed—not more than a couple of years following the release of the film.

FLAW

Infidelity. Tom Gunning points out that scriptwriter Hayes shifted the focus to adultery instead of murder—in Odets' play, Jerry kills Earl. Lang stated that as part of his preparation for the film he had researched the subject and read in a magazine that 75% of wives had been unfaithful to their husbands (Bogdanovich, 81). Accordingly, the official trailer promoted the film as a dissection of infidelity—with the taglines "every fury and outraged husband can know" and "every shame an erring wife can feel".

Discussion questions

According to auteur theory, certain directors' films consistently display stylistic elements and themes that are identifiable with them. Considering that *Clash by Night* is an unusual Fritz Lang film, does it provide a counter-example to this theory or does it support it?

What does the documentary footage of daily life at Monterey add to the film?

What do you make of the Uncle Vince character and his misogyny? Is he presented as a positive character, some sort of comic relief or does the film disavow his views?

According to Patrick McGilligan, *Clash by Night*'s is an "overwrought film" (394) whose message was "contrition and redemption" (395). Do you agree with this observation? Why?

Is *Clash by Night* a film noir? Why or why not?

Does the film have a happy ending?

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