HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Burak Sevingen, MA

The Big Heat 1953

Fritz Lang (1890-1976)

OVERVIEW

An Exposé Film. An American town threatened by alien invasion is a recurrent theme in 1950s science fiction. That decade also introduced a fresh wave of thrillers with a similar premise—except that the threat is not UFOs but mobs. The exposé films flourished in the wake of the Senate investigations of organized crime. These films' hero typically struggles to expose corruption in a city controlled by the mob. In the hearings of 1950-1951, well known mobsters testified before the Kefauver Committee (named after its chairman). The trailblazer for the cycle of films that drew inspiration from the findings of the committee was Robert Wise's *The Captive City* (1951) which also featured Senator Kefauver himself in an epilogue. Among other exposés were *Kansas City Confidential* (1952) and *The Big Combo* (1955). Fritz Lang's *The Big Heat* (1953 was the first of Lang's exposés. The other two, *While the City Sleeps* and *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* would both be released in 1956.

Organized Crime. *The Big Heat* was based on a serial written by William P. McGivern and published in *The Saturday Evening Post.* The film's main character is a vindictive former policeman who tries to find his wife's killers. He is faced with a well respected crime lord and needs to unveil a network of corruption that has infected the city including the police department. The villain himself not only makes a direct reference to the social context but compares his own predicament with that of famous mafia godfather Charles "Lucky" Luciano who was deported to Italy a few years ago. Mike Lagana cautions his aggressive second-in-command to keep a low profile:

> *We've stirred up enough headlines—the election's too close. Things are changing in this country, Vince… A man who can't see that hasn't got eyes. Never get the people steamed up, they start doing things. Grand juries, election investigations, deportation proceedings… I don't want to land in the same ditch with Lucky Luciano.*

A Rogue Cop. In *The Big Heat,* a loose cannon police detective challenges Lagana's grip on power. Among other examples of 1950s films with such a protagonist were *Where the Sidewalk Ends* (1950) and *Rogue Cop* (1954) which was also based on another McGivern novel. Later, Clint Eastwood's Dirty Harry saga created the iconic image of the law enforcer using unconventional methods. This type of hero would often find himself pitched against his shady colleagues, as seen in contemporary examples such as *Serpico* (1973), *Training Day* (2001), and *16 Blocks* (2006).

The Stars. *The Big Heat*'s protagonist is played by Glenn Ford who was the lead in *Gilda* from a few years back. In a bar scene, "Put the Blame on Mame", the song popularized by the titular character of that film noir can be heard playing. It can prove difficult to like Ford's Sergeant Bannion, a bitter and somewhat cruel character. He may be the center of action but the leading woman Debby steers the story. Gloria Grahame's sparkling performance creates a nice balance with the restraint of Ford. The two actors would get together for another Fritz Lang film the following year for *Human Desire*.

Soundtrack and Settings. Lang's two films also shared the same esteemed and versatile composer, Daniele Amfitheatrof, who had worked on diverse films ranging from the tense *Gaslight* (1944) to the adventures of the adorable collie Lassie. *The Big Heat*'s suburban home scenes have a low key melody one would expect to hear in a TV drama. The soundtrack highlights the contrast between the hero's peaceful home and the dangerous city. Major characters' homes in the fictional Kenport form the backdrop to the story. They are presented as a panorama of 50s domestic spaces.

Violence. They say that any review of *The Big Heat* can't not mention the violent coffee scene—this one won't be an exception. The attack leaves one side of glamorous Debby's face scarred—the disturbing effect was created by make up artist Clay Campbell who had crafted the wax figures in Michael Curtiz's 1933 horror *The Mystery of the Wax Museum* (1933). The coffee scenes (two of them, including her payback) may well be shockingly unforgettable but *The Big Heat* as a whole is a chilling exercise in representing violence—one aspect of it that continues to influence contemporary filmmakers.

Contemporary References to the Film. In a scene of Martin Scorcese's *Mean Streets* (1973), the old fashioned gangster is seen watching *The Big Heat.* Among films that show the exploits of crime families, Lang's film is closer in spirit to Scorcese's since it does not romanticize the kingpin or his cohorts. *Mean Streets* is not the only instance of a fictional character seen totally immersed, watching *The Big Heat* on a TV screen. Among other examples are *Finding Forrester* (2000) and the series *Breaking Bad* (Episode "Say My Name" from 2012). The film is seen playing at a drive-in cinema in *My One and Only* (from 2009—in a story taking place in the 1950s). In such instances it is briefly featured as a film within film, and if we are lucky we get to see the particular scene that happens to be playing. Such references are interesting and we can speculate about their purpose—they might be expected to connote a certain feeling of the character enjoying *The Big Heat* i.e. hinting at a spiteful or vindictive mood. They might serve irony—or perhaps signify nothing at all, being just instances of the directors having fun with their favorite classic.

A powerful patriarch reigns over a city and his vicious underlings spread terror; corruption is on all levels, a vitriolic rogue cop wreaks havoc and a strong female character makes the ultimate sacrifice as she delivers the decisive blow to the mafia. Next time you see *The Big Heat* pop up fleetingly on a screen in some sleek thriller or psychological drama, think about the qualities that make it Lang's timeless classic.

CHARACTERS

Dave Bannion. Homicide detective Bannion collides with Mike Lagana's crime ring and eventually brings it to justice.
Debby Marsh. Girlfriend of gangster Vince Duncan aligns herself with Bannion's crusade. Duncan scars her face and eventually she does the same to him. Debbie delivers the deadly blow to the crime ring—when she kills Mrs. Duncan, the dead policeman's letter becomes public property.
Mike Lagana. On the surface, Lagana is a respectable businessman who is devoted to his family. In reality, he is a high profile gangster responsible for organized crime, murders and an extensive network of bribery.
Katie Bannion. Wife, mother and housewife, Katie Bannion is murdered by a car bomb intended for her husband.

Other Characters

Vince Stone. Top lieutenant of Lagana is a sadistic murderer.
Tom Duncan. The policeman who commits suicide at the beginning of the film.
Bertha Duncan. Deceitful widow of the senior cop who commits suicide at the beginning. She blackmails Lagana to keep her late husband's letter to the district attorney a secret.
Larry Gordon. Gordon is Vince Stone's obnoxious associate and a vicious contract killer. He murders Lucy Chapman—off screen, possibly together with Vince Stone—and arranges a car bomb to be planted in Bannion's car. He is coded as a queer character.
Police Lieutenant Wilks. He tries to keep Bannion under control, not because he is personally corrupt (at least not totally) but due to his fear of losing his pension. Towards the end, he redeems himself by volunteering to protect Bannion's daughter against the mob's anticipated attack.
Police Commissioner Higgins. Higgins is the top policeman in Kenport and is in Lagana's payroll. He regularly participates in the card games at Vince Stone's home.
Lucy Chapman. Tom Duncan's mistress contacts the police to share her doubts about his motive for killing himself. She hints at Mrs. Duncan's involvement in corruption but Bannion turns a deaf ear to her. She is savagely murdered by Lagana's henchmen.
Mr. Atkins. Fearful owner of the Victory Auto Wrecking who refuses to answer Bannion's questions.

Selma Parker. Parker is the handicapped older clerk at the scrapyard who provides valuable information about the bomb plot. She tips Bannion about "a man named Larry" (Gordon) who oversaw a mechanic (now dead) to carry out the task. She also defends her boss, Atkins: "he is not a mean man. Not many people would hire someone like me"—with reference to her limping leg. In a later scene, she personally confirms the identity of Gordon to help Bannion.

SYNOPSIS

A senior police officer named Tom Duncan commits suicide; his widow informs mobster Mike Lagana and takes over her husband's share of the corrupt relationship. Sergeant Dave Bannion sets out working on the case. A promising tip takes the sergeant to a bar named The Retreat. The potential informant is a woman named Lucy Chapman, one of the regulars of the sleazy joint. He finds her claims unsubstantiated and she is soon murdered by the mob. Mrs. Duncan is not happy about Bannion's investigation; consequently, Lagana pressures his supervisors. When Bannion's family is harassed, he confronts Lagana and defies him. Not before long, Bannion's wife gets killed when the gangsters sabotage the family car. He resigns and becomes a rogue cop. Bannion packs up and moves to a hotel. He places his daughter in his step-brother's care and the police department provides a security detail for her protection.

Bannion's investigations lead him to the Lagana's lieutenant Vince Stone—and a henchman employed by him named Larry Gordon. Meanwhile, he makes an impression on Stone's girlfriend Debby Marsh. For her interest in his enemy, Vince Stone punishes Marsh terribly, disfiguring her face. Marsh then tips Bannion about Larry's full name and address—from the hoodlum, Banniom acquires Duncan's incriminating letter. Larry Gordon is murdered by Vince Stone (off-screen) for talking to Bannion.

Debby makes an unexpected move that will soon prove to be conclusive. She goes to Bertha Duncan's house and kills her with the gun Bannion gave her. Then she goes to Vince Stone's apartment and ambushes him with a pot of hot coffee. Served his own medicine, Stone quivers in pain and shoots her. Bannion comes running and overpowers him after a fierce struggle. The gangster is arrested and. Debby Marsh dies as a result of her wounds. Before she dies, Debby says that she "took the lid of the garbage can". With the death of Bertha Duncan, her late husband's letter to the district attorney is finally made public. Newspaper headlines announce the arrest of the principal figures of the crime syndicate including Lagana and Higgins. Bannion returns to the police force and the last scene shows him rushing out for a new assignment.

SCENES



Kenport, 3 am: A Suicide and Two Phone Calls. A man commits suicide in his study, leaving behind a letter addressed to the district attorney. Moments after the gun shot, his wife descends down the stairs and calmly approaches the body for a look over. She sees the envelope, opens it and skims the pages. Right away she grabs the phone and calls Mike Lagana, the number one mobster of Kenport. He thanks her for informing him and politely advises the widow to call the police. Lagana himself makes a phone call to his chief lieutenant Vince Stone to have him deal with the situation. Behind the facade of a respectable family and businessman, Lagana holds the strings in the city and rules with an iron grip aided by the menacing Stone—Mike Lagana, a devoted son and father—also the top gangster in Kenport, stands in front of his mother's portrait. The model for the painting is Celia Lovsky, actor Peter Lorre's wife. Lovsky would play the flower seller in Lang's *The Blue Gardenia*.

Dead Man's Testimony. The dead man was Tom Duncan, the head of the Records Bureau of the police force. He was one of many senior officials in Lagana's payroll. It will soon become apparent that Duncan had intended the letter as damning evidence about the corruption in the city. Lagana makes a deal with his widow to keep it secret and in exchange she becomes the new beneficiary of the monthly payments.

What is There to Investigate? Sergeant Dave Bannion sets out working on the case. He interviews Duncan's widow who pretends to be upset. She convinces the sergeant that her husband's health issues must have led him to take his own life. At this point, it looks like there is no reason not to close the case. Bannion goes home to his wife and young daughter.

Digging Deeper. A promising tip takes the sergeant to a bar named The Retreat. The potential informant is a woman named Lucy Chapman, one of the regulars of the sleazy joint. She claims to be the mistress of the late Head of Records Bureau. She asserts that Duncan had happily led a double life with her in his other house in the Lakeside. Chapman is suspicious about the suicide but Bannion curtly ignores her pleas and leaves. Nevertheless, he stops by the widow's house once again, mainly to get a reassuring clarification about the financing of the expensive Lakeside house.

Dead End. Mrs. Duncan is not happy with his questions and instead of helping the sergeant she informs Lagana. Although Chapman was mistaken to doubt that her lover had killed himself, she had a point. Lately, Duncan was having pangs of conscience and wanted to opt out of corruption—he had committed suicide after failing to do so. It will take a while for Bannion to grasp the full picture.

The Widow Gets Her Payback. The visit costs Lucy Chapman her life—her tortured body is found on a county road. Annoying Duncan's widow earns Bannion a reprimand from his supervisor Lieutenant Wilks.

Back to the Retreat. In spite of his superior's instructions, Bannion goes to The Retreat once again. He interviews the unhelpful bartender who promptly reports the visit to Lagana. Later that night, the Bannions' are harassed by phone. The caller tells the sergeant to stop investigating or else. Bannion is enraged and heads out to sort things out with none other than Lagana—his assumption being that no illicit activity in the city could take place without the latter's directive or approval.

The Face-Off at Lagana's Mansion. It is no simple task to enter Lagana's residence guarded by several uniformed police officers. Lagana initially greets Bannion courteously—he assumes that the sergeant has come to squeeze him for money. When Bannion accuses him with the Chapman murder and the phone threat, the mobster gets derogatory. Bannion ups the ante by calling him a cockroach, creep and hoodlum. At this point, Lagana calls his bodyguard to kick him out but Bannion batters the man and leaves after uttering more insults.



Attacked From All Sides. The following morning at the office, Bannion is rebuked for the second time for his visit to Lagana. The threats and lashings have taken their toll on Bannion who looks weary. Back at home, his wife observes that he is attacking himself "from all sides like jersey mosquitoes". Nonetheless, she urges him not to bow down. The couple is planning to go to the movies for the evening and she leaves to bring the babysitter. Moments after she heads out to the car, a blast rocks their house. Bannion dashes out, but a bomb intended for him takes his wife's life. All he can do is to pull her body from the wreck of the car. Bannion was with their daughter when the bomb exploded outside—the blinding light outside is from the blast that killed his wife. In "'Keep the Coffee Hot, Hugo': Nuclear Trauma in Lang's 'The Big Heat'", Walter Metz argues that 1950s viewers could have associated the visuals with the imagery of nuclear test explosions.



Rogue Cop. Police Commissioner Higgins and Lieutenant Wilks meet with Bannion, supposedly to show their support. Bannion's immediate superior Wilks cares mostly for his approaching retirement which makes him reluctant to stand up against corruption. On the other hand, the top policeman in the city Commissioner Higgins is a totally crooked cop and a regular gaming partner to Lagana's man Vince Stone—the latter often hosts them at his lavish apartment. Bannion sees through Higgins' rhetoric and accuses him of trying to dilute the investigation. A heated exchange of words ends with the resignation of the sergeant.

In Search of a "Fancy Looking" Hitman. Bannion packs up and moves to a hotel. He places his daughter in his step-brother's care and the police department provides a security detail for her protection. He begins his personal investigation with a list of mechanics who might have planted the bomb in the car. At a scrapyard, the manager gets nervous by his presence and reacts with hostility to questioning. A little later, a handicapped female clerk who is sympathetic to his plight approaches him to offer help. Selma Parker tells him that "a Larry" in "fancy" attire had been there to talk some business with one of the mechanics. This man had left a note to be contacted at The Retreat. The person she is referring to is Vince Stone's sidekick Larry Gordon. Armed with his first name, Bannion once again goes to the bar to find out more.

The Spectacular and Lively Debby Marsh. Vince Stone happens to be at The Retreat and Bannion saves a dice girl from the gangster's savage abuses. His forceful intervention makes an impression on Stone's girlfriend Debby Marsh. She goes after Bannion as he leaves the bar and accompanies him to his hotel. He is unfriendly and she leaves following his snide remarks.



Boiling Point. When Debby returns to the apartment, Vince Stone is playing cards with his underling Larry Gordon and Commissioner Higgins. Having been tipped about his girlfriend's interaction with Bannion, he confronts her and gets infuriated with her evasive responses. Suddenly, Stone throws coffee over her face, severely injuring one side of it.





Against a Brick Wall. Later that night, Debby shows up at Bannion's hotel room with half of her face bandaged. She tips Bannion about Larry's full name and address. Right away, Bannion goes to the hoodlum's apartment, roughs him up and gets him to talk. He learns about the dead policeman's letter incriminating the mob. He also realizes that it would remain private as long as Duncan's widow is alive. Once again, he goes to her house. Bertha Duncan is brashly defiant about her involvement with the crime ring. Bannion attempts to strangle her but is halted by the arrival of policemen sent over by Lagana.



Bannion's Daughter Becomes a Target. Larry Gordon is murdered by Vince Stone (off-screen) for talking to Bannion. Stone and Lagana speculate that Bannion might have left a record of his findings somewhere so they decide not to touch him. Instead, they plan to kidnap his daughter to keep his mouth shut. Lagana has the police security detail guarding Bannion's in-laws' apartment removed.

Civilians Take Up Arms. Once Bannion learns that the police have been called off, he rushes to the apartment. Just before doing so he shares with Debby his findings about the incriminating Duncan letter and leaves her a gun—presumably for her protection. When he gets to his step-brother's home, Bannion finds that everything is alright—his relative has gathered his war veteran buddies who are fully armed. He is also pleased to see Lieutenant Wilks hanging around at the entrance to deter an intrusion.

Debby Takes the Lid off the Garbage Can. Debby makes an unexpected move that will soon prove to be conclusive. She goes to Bertha Duncan's house and kills her with the gun Bannion gave her. Then she goes to Vince Stone's apartment and ambushes him with a pot of hot coffee. Served his own medicine, Stone quivers in pain and shoots her. Bannion comes running and overpowers him after a fierce struggle. The gangster is arrested and. Debby Marsh dies as a result of her wounds.

Big Heat Falls on the Godfather of Crime. Before she dies, Debby says that she "took the lid of the garbage can". With the death of Bertha Duncan, her late husband's letter to the district attorney is finally made public. Newspaper headlines announce the arrest of the principal figures of the crime syndicate including Lagana and Higgins. Bannion returns to the police force and the last scene shows him rushing out for a new assignment. His last line—"keep the



coffee hot"—is a disturbing reminder of the great cost of eradicating organized crime in Kenport.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Dave Bannion – Closed (Laconic and Reserved, Obstinate, Blemished Hero, Transformed)
Debbie Marsh – Conscientious (Glamorous, Sarcastic, Resolute and Self-Sacrificing)

DAVE BANNION **Closed** (Laconic and Reserved, Obstinate, Blemished Hero, Transformed)

Bannion is the prototype of the rogue cop who is on a crusade against a powerful crime empire.

Illustrative moments

Laconic and Reserved. Except for the times he is with his family, Bannion is distant and dispassionate. It is difficult to tell what he thinks or feels at least until the end when he seems to become slightly more emotive.

Obstinate. Bannion ignores his supervisor's order to change his course of action. Lieutenant Wilks tells Bannion that he is "a corn stepper by instinct" and his stubbornness is annoying individuals in important positions.

Blemished Hero. The prejudiced Bannion is not only skeptical about Lucy Chapman's allegations about Duncan's widow, he treats her with disdain. Soon Chapman is killed for speaking up. At times it looks like the hard boiled detective is also hard hearted (and quite dislikable). Debby tells him that if he kills Mrs. Duncan he won't be any different than Vince Stone. He may indeed be not very different.

Transformed. The description provided for Lucy Chapman in the homicide report that Bannion receives via facsimile reads: "28 / brown eyes and hair / fair complexion"—the bare essentials of identification as far as police are concerned. The description is echoed when Debby asks Bannion to tell her about his late wife: "Twenty-Seven years old, light hair, gray eyes" says Bannion. "That's a police description" she aptly protests. The ending shows the two returning to the same subject. That's when Debby is lying wounded after being shot by Vince and Bannion is trying to comfort her. This time he talks to her about his wife's personality and their memories, Bannion starts out as a bigoted character but ends up more humane. We may assume that he is transformed and Debby is largely responsible for that.

DEBBY MARSH **Conscientious** (Glamorous, Sarcastic, Resolute and Self-Sacrificing)

Debby is Vince Stone's girlfriend who enjoys the luxury and turns a blind eye to the criminal activity. She "shops six days a week and sleeps on the seventh"—that's how Vince describes her. As she later tells Bannion, it is her dislike and fear of being poor that causes her to stick with a gangster.

Illustrative moments

Glamorous. While her boyfriend socializes with high profile guests in the penthouse, Debbie spends her time checking mirrors, reading *Elite* magazine and drinking cocktails.

Sarcastic. Her insightful jokes are an early sign that Debbie is neither passive nor clueless. She subtly ridicules the gangsters around her—for her own amusement and they never seem to get the jokes anyway. She mocks her boyfriend's subservience to his boss Lagana—e.g. "Vince, his highness is calling". When Vince tells her that he likes her perfume she replies that it "repels men and attracts mosquitoes"—he doesn't even notice her sarcasm. In one scene, she likens the crooks' relations with one another to a circus act. Not only does she articulate this but she performs a quick "impersonation" in the presence of all three. Lagana is the master of ceremonies "a man with a big hat that holds up the hoop—cracks the whip and the animals jump through—Hop, Vince! Hop, Larry!" Lagana simply assumes that she is drunk.

Resolute and Self-sacrificing. Bannion's crusade against organized crime disturbs the powers that may be but it is Debby's decisive action that exposes the crime ring and destroys it. The rogue cop explains to her that with her husband's incriminating letter in her possession Mrs. Duncan serves as "a brick wall" against any attempt to get at the mob. The letter is her insurance—it would become public only if she were killed. Bannion adds that he nearly killed the widow but was stopped by the arrival of policemen. Debbie thinks that he shouldn't be the one to kill her since it would make him no different than her boyfriend Vince. Just as Bannion's investigation seems to be stalled, Debbie takes it upon herself to remove the main obstacle by shooting Mrs. Duncan. Consequently, the letter makes the headlines and the ring of corruption is exposed. She also takes her revenge from Vince and is killed by the latter's bullets in the finale.

THEMES

Society – (Space and Identity, Representation of Queer Characters)
Justice – (Organized Crime and Corruption, Violence, Banality of Evil)

SOCIETY

Space and Identity. *The Big Heat*'s interest in space recalls Lang's *Dr Mabuse the Gambler*. Of course, their focus is different—the 1922 film had offered a tour of Berlin's nightlife with half a dozen entertainment venues. A bar is a key setting in *The Big Heat* but the film turns the spotlight to an assortment of private spaces of the decade,, all with distinctive interiors: The suburban houses of two policemen (Duncan and Bannion), the in-laws' apartment where Bannion's daughter stays, the downtown apartments of the two henchmen (Stone and Gordon) and the stately home of the mafia boss. Last but not least is Bannion's room at the Marland Hotel.

The Bannions live in a typical suburban home far from the chaos of the city. It is peaceful and has a utilitarian decor. Officer Duncan's widow also lives in the suburbs; the corrupt policeman's house is larger and looks cozy with its ruffled curtains. The stepbrother's (a veteran) apartment is furnished modestly but it has lots of books and several paintings.

Of the three gangsters, the flamboyant hitman Larry Gordon has a nicely decorated dwelling that reflects his lower rank (but not his "colorful" clothing). As the boss' second in command, Vince Stone has a penthouse lavishly furnished with modernist furniture and art including an Easter Island head and a bronze Chinese bust. Its terrace offers a great view of the city. The mob controls it and needs it to thrive.

His home may be Dave Bannion's castle but chief mobster Mike Lagana lives in one. It has a large ballroom where his teenager daughter has jitterbug dance parties and a huge chandelier hangs in the reception hall. Lagana's study is decorated with antiques, ivory and tapestries all signifying his wealth and power. On his desk is a horn of plenty and behind him a wooden globe (anticipating the huge "The World is Yours" globe of Cuban drug lord Tony Montana in Brian de Palma's 1985 film *Scarface*—apparently gangsters love globes).

Finally there is the hotel room—"Hey I like this! Early nothing" as Debby wittily observes. It has only a bed, bedside table, a chair and a small dresser—all lacking distinctive features. The only object that provides some character is the generic looking painting on the wall (depicting a beach cabin). According to Fredric Jameson the motel chain is the perfect example of the homogeneous spatial experience of postmodernity with its "shapeless space" (Jameson, 116). From this perspective, the room signifies the new era more accurately than all the other domestic spaces. Debby, it seems, has a point.

Representation of Queer Characters. Similar to Lang's *Hangmen Also Die!,* at least one of the villains in *The Big Heat* is coded as queer. First, there is Lagana himself, whose first appearance is in his bed wearing a satin pajamas while his bodyguard is standing by his bedside wearing a robe. The implication is more explicit with Larry Gordon the contract killer. "Well, he wore rather fancy clothes… you know, colorful"—is the way Selma Parker describes Gordon. We have to take her word for the color but it looks distinctive even in black and white—when Bannion attacks him at his apartment—with an eye

catching floral pattern. When Bannion punches him, he reacts passively and cries “you are punchy!”—unlike the other gangster Vince Stone, who puts up a fight at the end.

JUSTICE

Organized Crime and Corruption. Lagana represents a new breed of criminals who prefer to operate in the shades and take care to maintain a respectable façade. His house is protected by six uniformed police offices in two shifts during the day and four of them after midnight. Bannion briefly converses with one before entering the house. Just in case the significance of allocating ten policemen for the villain is lost on the viewers, he recaps the security detail’s cost to the tax payers. The patrolman explains that ”Mr. Lagana kind of runs things, I guess that’s no secret”. Once inside his mansion Lagana verbally attacks the crime boss and insinuates his connection to the murder would be informant b-girl Lucy Chapman. Bannion refers to the overtly violent murder as “prohibition style” which outrages Lagana. He doesn’t want to be associated with the flashy mobsters of previous decades.

Violence. “And those four girls were alive before they met him”—a tagline boldly states in the original trailer for *The Big Heat.* It is not exactly accurate summary of what takes place, but nonetheless draws attention to a fact: the four women in the film—Tom Duncan’s widow, his mistress Lucy Chapman, the protagonist’s wife Katie Bannion and leading woman Debby March—all get murdered. *The Big Heat* is certainly a violent film, after all hot coffee is—twice—used as a devastating weapon. These may well be the most memorable scenes but not the deadly ones. Guns come into play a few times: Duncan commits suicide with one and Debby kills his widow with Bannion’s revolver. Debby herself is shot by Vince Duncan who is wounded in the climactic gunfire exchange with Bannion.

Even more appalling are those scenes when violence is merely implied. Duncan’s mistress Lucy Chapman tries in vain to have Bannion scrutinize the circumstances behind his death. The sergeant ignores her but the mob takes her seriously to kill her (off screen). The official—neatly typewritten—police report that lands on Bannion’s desk states that Chapman had been “beaten and tortured” before being killed. In the next scene at the autopsy room, the coroner informs Bannion that there were several cigarette burns on her body. As he utters it, the sentence sounds like a cold scientific fact. Bannion may be one to rarely show emotions but his reaction here—putting out his cigarette in disgust—serves to magnify the effect of the physician’s observation.

Banality of Evil. “I just take orders” the triggerman Larry Gordon cries, when Bannion strangles him for information. That’s his excuse for killing Lucy Chapman and Katie Bannion. It sounds similar to what the uniformed officer patrolling around Lagana’s mansion tells Bannion: “I do what I am told”. These recall Hannah Arendt’s concept of “banality of evil”. “That's what we're all supposed to do, isn't it?” the Bannion responds with sarcasm thinly veiled as empathy. Coming from the reserved sergeant the question implies that everyone dutifully following orders may have something to do with a corrupt order.

Discussion questions

In his essay “Keep the Coffee Hot, Hugo” (43-65) Walter Metz argues that *The Big Heat* can be read as allegory of “nuclear trauma” i.e. The Cold War’s nuclear proliferation, threat of war, apocalypse. What do you think about this reading? Metz’s calls for an allegorical reading of popular films where traces of historic issues such as war and the Holocaust could be found. Is it possible to interpret *The Big Heat* as a different allegory? Could you use this approach to interpret another film of the same decade?

Is the Big Heat a film noir or crime melodrama?

1970s feminist critic Molly Haskell argues that *The Big Heat*‘s two women, Debbie Marsh and Sergeant Bannion’s wife Katie initially represent two stereotypes:

> *Lang’s women are generally Madonnas or Mary Magdalenes, and their interest lies not in their psychological complexity, but in the strange conjunction of the archetype and the idiosyncratic. In ‘The Big Heat,’ the opposing principles – Jocelyn Brando’s [Katie Bannion] Madonna and Gloria*

> *Grahame's [Debby Marsh] whore – gradually merge and, with the death of the former and the atonement of the latter, are symbolically fused.* (Haskell, 294)

Can you point to scenes that support this thesis? Do you see a similar dynamic at work in other films?

What do you think about the use of décor in *The Big Heat*? How do you view the design of the interior spaces of (the homes of the gangsters, the police officers, Bannion's in-laws and the motel room)?

Mike Lagana makes a reference to famous crime boss "Lucky" Luciano. What kind of representation of a "godfather" is he himself? How would one compare it with other movie mobsters, such as Don Corleone?

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