

Document Citation

Title	The big heat
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Source	<i>Sight and Sound</i>
Date	
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	The big heat, Lang, Fritz, 1953

Sight & Sound

THE BIG HEAT (Columbia). It seems a long time since Fritz Lang gave us a good film: in fact, the sense of strain and stylistic pretentiousness in his recent work—when it has not been mere commercial hokum—had almost made one abandon hope. This makes it the more unfortunate that his latest film should have passed almost unnoticed. For it is an extremely good thriller, distinguished by precisely those virtues which Lang's pictures have in the past few years so painfully lacked: tautness and speed; modesty of intention; intelligent, craftsman-like writing. Above all, it is directed with a dramatic incisiveness, a sharp-edged observation that keeps the pitch of interest and excitement continuously high.

Adapted from a novel by William McGivern, *The Big Heat* is scripted by Sidney Boehm. He has not done so well since *Union Station*—a film which this rather recalls in its ingenious construction and clever, likely motivation. The handling here, however, is more frankly melodramatic, and the world evoked nearer to that of Raymond Chandler. The situation is classic: the unassuming crusader versus the high-class racketeer; the crusader operating alone; the racketeer manœuvring his thugs (inside and outside the city police) from his guarded mansion in the snob section of town. Unlike Marlowe, Dave Bannion is a professional cop; but his disrespect of persons soon gets him suspended, and his conduct shows the same doggedness, the same human fallibility, the same hunger after righteousness as the Chandler hero's. He challenges the racketeer, and pays for it: his wife is murdered; bitterly he dedicates himself to vengeance. Glenn Ford plays this part with a deceptively casual charm that covers without concealing a real inward intensity. (This admirable actor is one of the few surviving in Hollywood who are able convincingly to convey any *moral* awareness or conflict.) As the gay, incautious girl friend of a vicious hoodlum, Gloria Grahame acts with brilliant wit and considerable subtlety; and all the way down the cast—of generally unfamiliar faces—the characterisations have a welcome individuality of line.

The Big Heat is one of those enjoyable films which make no great claims for themselves, yet which so balance style and intention (like the early Hitchcock's, for instance) that they are finally more satisfying than many more ambitious works. The film lacks the density of a *Maltese Falcon*; one or two of its elements are over-conventional; Lang's viewpoint remains exterior. All the same, it creates its world, and proves that, when his interest is engaged, this director still has at his control the technique of a master. Contributory skills that also deserve praise are Charles Lang's, whose lighting powerfully contributes to the atmosphere of tension and incipient violence, and Charles Nelson's, whose editing is immaculate. The timing of the end-title, in its relation to sound track as well as image, is a little triumph in itself.—Lindsay Anderson.