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YUMA

'Delmer Daves is the documentarian of the Western film, one of America's under-rated directors precisely because his films don't fit into any preconceived pattern'



'This is the West. When the legend conflicts with the facts, print the legend'. That line, spoken by a newspaperman in Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* is, in essence, just what the early pulp-writers did when they batted on 'Buffalo Bill' Cody in the 'eighties. They printed a legend which the Easterners and then the rest of the world came to accept as gospel. Hollywood, from its earliest days, took over the legend intact, built on it, until the story of America's last frontier has crossed the barrier separating fact from fiction and lost itself in folk-myth.

The impetus was always there, of course, even Walt Whitman could lose himself in the romantic image of the Westerners, 'bright eyed as hawks with their swarthy complexions and broad-brimmed hats, with loose arms slightly raised and swinging as they ride'. It's an attractive legend from which many men have made poetry, this last *exploited* epic of history. Ford is the dominant figure of the cinematic western, the American primitive who turned a romantic, nostalgic eye on this lost era when men stood alone, facing death in the afternoon on the dust and heat of main street. During the last decade, though, three directors (John Sturges, Anthony Mann, Delmer Daves) have contributed new dimensions to the western and, of these, Daves is the most under-rated.

In the Daves westerns the hero isn't the man on the mythological frontier, the *genre* figure taken over from a hundred predecessors, he is a man fighting and, more important, *working* to keep a toe-hold in a hostile land. Few directors have caught so exactly the flavour of bleak, wooden constructions and sterile dust of the shack-towns of the desert or have tried to set their characters so firmly as part of a *working* community.

The whole plot of *3.10 to Yuma* turns on the lack of 200 dollars for a water-right during a drought; the background detail of life on the Easy Moses ranch in *Jubal* is a necessary part of the film's construction; the isolated mining community in *The Hanging Tree* has an identity, smouldering and threatening, of its own; *Cowboy* is the story of man shaped by his work and his environment. These films are not grandly heroic on the epic-scale, that is not Daves' approach (and he has, undoubtedly, suffered critically because of it). Daves pre-

● *'3.10 to Yuma' (1957)—'the perfect miniature, or "chamber" western'—examines the nature of heroism in its story about a farmer (Van Heflin) who takes an outlaw (Glenn Ford) to the penitentiary*

by Richard Whitehall

fers *Cowboy* to *3.10 to Yuma* because it allowed a thoroughly documentary approach ('This is the way they lived'). He is, in fact, the documentarian of the western film.

Daves is one (of the many) under-rated American directors precisely because his films don't fit into a preconceived pattern. Most of his westerns have suffered, in Britain at any rate, from being judged to a formula he was deliberately avoiding. They can be approached as 'interior' westerns, with the essential conflicts in the minds rather than in the firearms of the characters, or as domestic westerns, but not simply as bang-bang-you're-dead westerns. He remains, too, uninfluenced by the Ford mystique of the old west which, in itself, has meant a quick dismissal by the British critics who judge the success or failure of a western by its likeness to the work of that director. Ford's imagination has pictured the west as it ought to have been, Daves has tried to recapture the west as it was.

Daves is no dude Easterner coming west dazzled by the legend, subscribing to it whole-heartedly, unquestioningly. He knows that, beneath the overlay of myth, there is a truth more interesting than the Homeric epic-cycle to which it gave birth. Daves' pioneering links are strong and direct. His grandfather, born in Bagnalstown, Ireland, emigrated to the US during the Civil War, fought for the Union, then made two covered wagon crossings with Mormon wagon trains after the war; this ended in his being invited by the Mormons to settle in Salt Lake City, which he did. Later he took wagon-train freighting contracts with the Army, transporting supplies from Utah and Denver, Colorado, to Santa Fe, New Mexico. An early Pony Express



rider, this intrepid Irishman had his heel shot off by Ute Indians. Daves' grandmother was born in Santa Clara, California, in 1854, two months after her mother had crossed in a covered wagon.

Daves himself was born in San Francisco in 1904, leaving that city a year later on a refugee train after the great earthquake. His family settled in Southern California and here he studied civil engineering and later worked his way through Stanford University, where he took his law degree. During his time at Stanford, Daves became interested in dramatics, acting in some 20 plays—ranging from farce to tragedy—including *Macbeth* in his last graduate year. In addition to acting he also directed and, for a couple of years, was business manager of the dramatic productions. After graduation he decided he would sooner be an actor than a lawyer so he and Lloyd Nolan, also from Stanford, joined the Pasadena Playhouse.

Nolan decided to concentrate on the theatre, but Daves broke into films as assistant property boy with James Cruze, director of *The Covered Wagon*. His employment was something of a fluke, the head property man had kidney trouble and needed someone strong and husky (Daves

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weighed 200 pounds and stood 6 ft 2 ins) who could lift things, but the young man made himself generally useful around the unit—by designing poster ideas, acting minor rôles on location, stunt work, helping with special effects—so much so that when shooting was completed Cruze sent for him and asked him what his ambitions were. Daves said he hoped to become a director eventually so Cruze, rightly believing that a knowledge of editing is indispensable to any director, had Daves go into the cutting-room and watch Mildred Johnson cut the film on which he had been working.

In 1928 Cruze moved over to MGM, taking Daves with him as property boy. He worked on several films in this capacity until Cruze, preparing a college film *The Duke Steps Out* with William Haines and Joan Crawford, promoted him to Technical Director because he was only recently out of college and Cruze had never been inside one. Shortly after shooting began, the director became dissatisfied with the young actor playing the heavyweight boxing champion of the campus, remarking to his assistant that the man wasn't big enough to be a threat, he ought to be someone like . . . he glanced around, saw Daves standing nearby, and said, 'Like Del. In fact, it ought to be Del'. So Daves was given the third-lead in the film, playing Joan Crawford's boy-friend.

The specialist in college films during this period was Sam Wood who, shortly afterwards, was anxious to make the first college talkie. Cruze recommended Daves to Wood, so the latter sent for him and asked if he had any ideas for a story. 'This offer took me unawares and I was totally unprofessional in my submission: 20 pages written in pencil on yellow sheets. The famous director seemed mildly startled when I brought the material in, but told me to sit down while he read it. This was the deciding moment of my life. At the end of the reading he looked up and said, "You ought to be a writer, would you like to be one?" I assented, and he lifted the telephone, called the Story Editor and said: "Put Delmer Daves on the writing staff, he is working for me". And thus it began'.

This first film, *So This is College*, which introduced Robert Montgomery and Elliot Nugent to the cinema, was a success. Daves had a rôle in this, too, for he continued to act during the period he was with MGM until several years later when Ward Bond asked him to give up acting and stick to his writing (they were always being considered for the same rôles, and Daves always seemed to get the parts). Daves told Bond that whichever of them got the rôle—it was in the first *Good News*—Daves would never try for another part. Daves did get it, and he did make it his last acting appearance.

In 1934 Daves moved over to Warners, where he wrote most of the Dick Powell musicals of the period (*Flirtation Walk*, *Dames*, *Shipmates Forever*, *Page Miss Glory*, *The Singing Marine*) before being assigned to his first dramatic subject, *The Petrified Forest*, in 1936. Shortly thereafter



he decided to freelance and, over the next five years, his credits include a wide range of subjects, from Harold Lloyd's *Professor Beware* to a Fred Astaire-Rita Hayworth musical *You Were Never Lovelier*, from Columbia's *She Married an Artist* to Sol Lesser's *Stage Door Canteen*. His best known writing credit from this period is probably Leo McCarey's charming comedy-drama *Love Affair* (1939), where Daves had to evolve a story to fit the title. One day McCarey arrived at Daves house saying he was stuck with a title and no script, did Daves have any ideas. (McCarey's story had involved an American mistress with the French Ambassador to Washington at the crucial times just before the war, so he was asked to forget it.) Daves suggested a story line, and the script grew from there. Later McCarey remade the story as *An Affair to Remember* but the script remained the same at the request of Cary Grant, who felt that if plays could be revived in the original, why not films.

In 1943 Daves went back to Warners to script a submarine story, *Destination Tokyo*, which required that its writers spend a certain amount of time with submarines at sea to gain authenticity. When the script was finally approved Jack Warner sent for Daves, to say that because of its highly technical nature, it would mean sending out a director to duplicate the writer's experience of submarines, so why didn't Daves direct it himself? Strangely Daves didn't jump at the opportunity. His life as a writer allowed him to work for nine months and to travel for three months ('still a happy pattern' he remarks) and he wasn't anxious to give it up—besides, directors developed ulcers (later he did). Warner and Jerry Wald, the producer,

● 'a vivid use of diagonal lines, usually a lattice' suggests the forces which Parry (Humphrey Bogart) has to overcome in 'Dark Passage' (1947)

were insistent, and when Cary Grant approved him as director, as was Grant's right under his contract, he was committed.

Destination Tokyo (1943), the story of the US submarine Copperfin, had a good reception. The film was fluently handled (if not as fluidly as René Clément's *Les Maudits*, the best of all submarine films) with a firm control of situation and character—Cary Grant's Captain Cassidy opening his sealed orders on Christmas Eve to find that his destination is Tokyo Bay, the womanising 'Wolf' of John Garfield, full of braggadocio about his romantic exploits, most of them completely phoney, and a long well-handled sequence in which a pharmacist has to operate for acute appendicitis. The faults were a tendency to sentimentality, particularly of the men singing carols and exchanging presents on Christmas Eve, handled without the welcome touch of astringency Daves brought to the Christmas scene in *A Summer Place*.

Sentimentality hurt the ending of *The Very Thought of You* (1944) with a baby spreading happiness and goodwill in a family damaged by the dissensions and disasters of a wartime marriage. Released in Britain the week after VE Day, when the war already seemed to be entering its last phase and the problems of wartime marriage no longer very pressing, the film was little noticed. A pity, for its long searching look at the All-American family—territory which Frankenheimer is now making peculiarly his own—was refreshingly free from the clichés of the genre. Daves portrays the family unit as a trap from which the young should endeavour to escape (this is explicitly stated in the duologues between Eleanor Parker and her mother, Beulah Bondi—with Bondi, superficially the all-embracing Mother figure, regretting the 'mistake' of her marriage and the dwindling into domesticity). This idea of the family as an octopus with tenacious tentacles, strangling the initiative of the young, is a recurrent theme in the early Daves films but one which he has consistently modified over the years until, in the latest films, the family is a refuge rather than a trap.

After *Hollywood Canteen* (1944), an all-star musical memorable for Joan McCracken's ballet sequence, *The Pride of the Marines* (1945) was a gathering in of all the Daves themes. Again a little known work, but an excellent one, dealing with the adjustment of Al Schmid, the Philadelphia marine blinded by a grenade after killing 200 Japs, to his blindness. It is hardly a war film in the strictest sense, despite the excellence of the scenes on Guadalcanal and the long sequence with Dane Clark, Anthony Caruso, and John Garfield (as Schmid) in a foxhole. Specifically this is a drama of civilians adjust-

ing to wartime, and then the readjustment to peacetime, culminating in a nightmarish dream sequence in which the use of negatives is imaginatively superior to most experiments of its kind. The family scenes at the beginning (with again the suggestion that marriage is a trap to be avoided) are handled with understanding and truth, particularly the unemphatic treatment of that Sunday morning, December 7 1941, when the radio interrupts its normal programme with the news of Pearl Harbour. None of the family knows where it is and none of them particularly cares—only very slowly does the realisation of what the newflash means slowly dawn on them.

Here, too, Daves handles a crucial scene in which a central character is unbandaged (Bogart in *Dark Passage*, Maria Schell in *The Hanging Tree*). The doctor, not knowing whether or not he has managed to save Schmid's sight, begins to unwind the bandages, the camera placed behind Schmid's head; as the final bandages are unwound the camera moves, slowly, unobtrusively, forward until the back of Schmid's head blacks out the screen and, slowly, in the darkness a faint wavering light is seen—the doctor's torch moving to and fro before Schmid's eyes—distant and indistinct. Schmid is blind.

If *Pride of the Marines* touched on several recurrent Daves themes his next one, *The Red House* (1946), directed for Sol Lessor, introduced the distinctive Daves figure, usually a man (Steiger in *Jubal*, Malden in *The Hanging Tree*) but once a woman (Agnes Moorehead in *Dark Passage*), whose selfishness and propensity to evil bring disaster to those around them. 'Everything I love dies', Edward G Robinson cries out in *The Red House*, but the character, completely self-centred, is really a force of destruction in himself; when he cannot possess the woman he loves Robinson murders both her and her husband. The sister (Judith Anderson) who has devoted her life to him is cruelly pushed aside when her self-sacrifice conflicts with his self-interest. When he is in danger of losing his adopted daughter (a lovely Lillian Gish-type performance from Allene Roberts) he attempts to destroy her, but is himself killed in the attempt.

The conflict at the core of most Daves films is between self-interest and disinterest, between selfishness and friendship; he sees self-love as the most destroying of all emotions (it destroys Valerie French in *Jubal*, Constance Ford in *A Summer Place*, although they are weak rather than evil

people) but the obverse of this self-delusion, self-interest, is friendship, the reaching out of one person to another. This is done without the Freudian implications of a Hawksian relationship, it is sketched in briefly, economically, but powerfully; there is a quality of respect between his characters which is never overplayed, never sentimentalised, and is far from the hearty comradeship which some students of psychology find so fascinating in the American cinema.

Respect is the basis of most of the principal relationships in a Daves film. It is the whole motivation of *Broken Arrow* (the respect Cochise and Tom Jeffords have for each other) but it appears and reappears with varying degree of importance in most of the films, most notably in *Jubal*, where Glenn Ford's relationships with Ernest Borgnine, with Charles Bronson, with Noah Beery Jr, with Basil Ruysdal, are all founded on this one quality.

The Red House, though, is less concerned with Daves's usual subsidiary theme of friendship as it builds its strange, beautiful, dream-like 'Sleeping Beauty' atmosphere; a work much closer in spirit to a work like Cocteau's *La Belle et le Bête* than to the genre of melodramatic mystery-thrillers in which it is usually contained. Although the story rationalises its supernatural aspects at the end, it is still a powerful mood-piece in which Daves' ex-

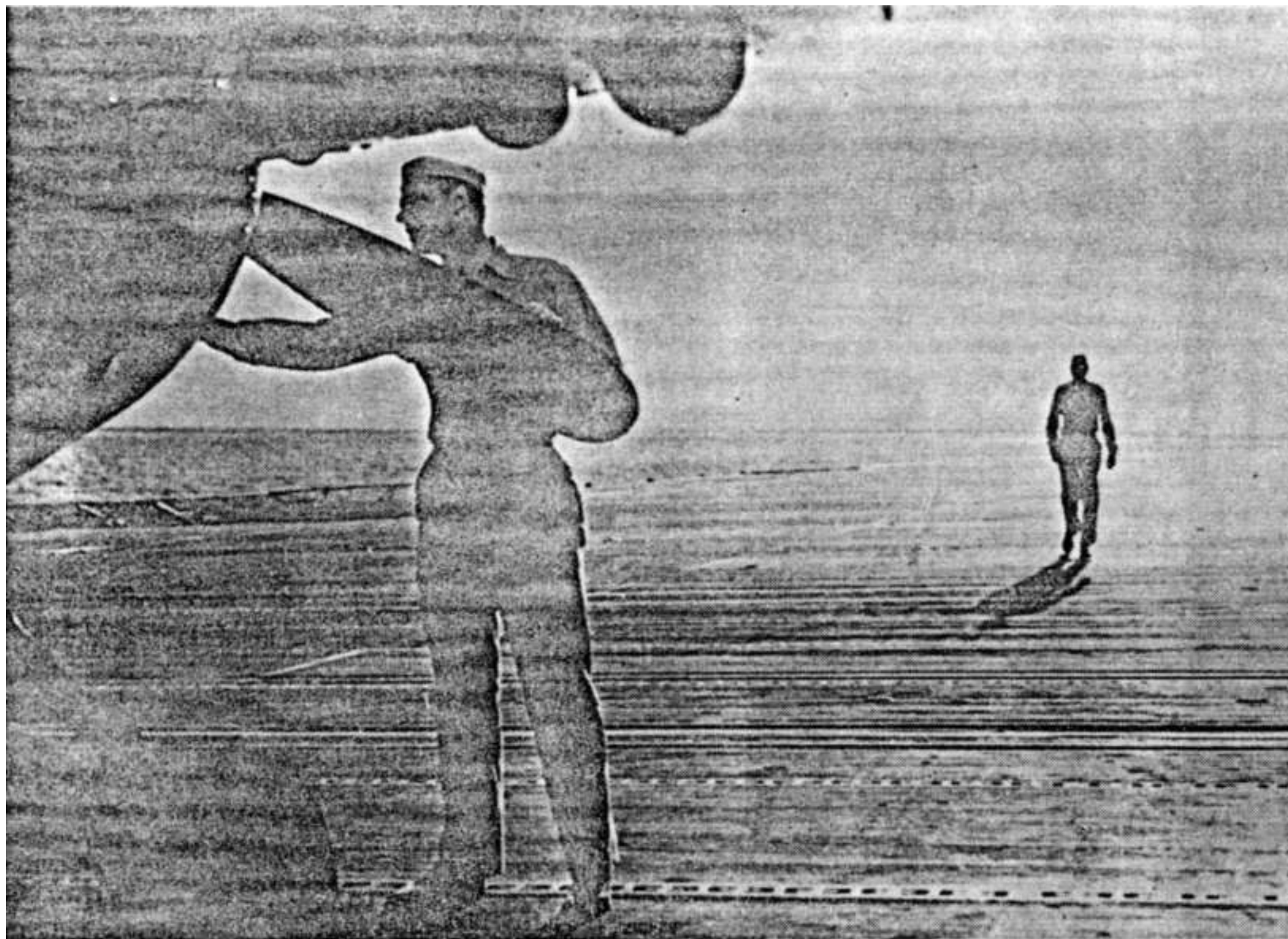
cellent handling of his young players (an ability which has recently landed him in a rut) is notable—Allene Roberts, Julie London, and Rory Calhoun all gave indications of abilities which no subsequent director ever fully exploited. But Daves' next, *Dark Passage* (1947) is not only his most notable film of this period, it is one of the most extraordinary American films of the late 'forties.

Superficially *Dark Passage* is just another excursion into the familiar Bogartian whiskey-sour world, less successful than Hawks' *Big Sleep*, but in actual fact the presence of Bogart and Bacall has led the critics into their usual stupid practice of thrusting square pegs into round holes. Daves' screenplay hewed pretty closely to David Goodis' original novel, only omitting such bizarre incidents as a four-page dialogue between the hero and a murdered man. It refined and polished the novel's subtle dialogue until it glittered with a scintillating brilliance; while the direction, with its meticulous observation of background detail, minor characters, and above all its strange Teutonic undertones (in feeling it is closer to an early Fritz Lang than any other American film I can recall) is so remarkable it is difficult to know why the film's unique qualities have been so consistently overlooked.

The novel opens with two short, stark sentences: 'It was a tough break. Parry

● Daves' first western, '*Broken Arrow*' (1950) was the start of a western cycle which was sympathetic to the Indian viewpoint. It starred Debra Paget and James Stewart





● 'Task Force' (1949) traced the growth of the US Naval Air Arm, and the fight for naval air power

was innocent'. The story tells how Parry (Bogart) escapes from San Quentin where he is a lifer for wife-murder; is helped by the beautiful San Franciscan socialite who has always believed in his innocence (Bacall); undergoes plastic surgery to alter his appearance; traces, but fails to bring to justice, the real murderer. At the final fade-out Parry and Irene are reunited in the Peruvian seaport to which Parry has escaped. This story is conventional enough but the treatment, both in the novel and the film, elevates it from just another thriller into an absorbing study in human relationships. All the people Parry meets, whether friend or enemy, are beautifully realised, and the whole work has an exhilarating compactness and freedom, a sheer unexpectedness and a remarkable visual ambience.

In structure the work divides into three sections. The first part, dealing with the prison escape, the meeting with Irene, the flight to San Francisco, the arrival at Dr Coley's plastic surgery ('I'll make you look as if you've lived') is done with a subjective camera. This, it is true, was a fashionable gimmick at the time, but whereas in a film such as Robert Montgomery's *Lady in the Lake* the gimmick became self-defeating, here it is used with a thematic justification, effective in that it is never prolonged beyond the point at which the subjectiveness is necessary to the dramatic construction. (These scenes, incidentally, were done with a captured German Arriflex camera when the nearest American equivalent, the Eymo, proved too bulky to use with the specially constructed shoulder-holster.)

This sequence ends with the 'camera' entering the surgery and lying down on the operating table to be covered with hot towels. There is a superb montage of faces

as Parry goes under the anaesthetic (the film is beautifully edited by David Weisbart, particularly in its use of very quick wipes), and when Parry comes back to consciousness the second phase of the work begins, with Bogart's head, except for the eyes, completely swathed in bandages. This second section is the most original and inventive in the film, aided by a magnificent bit of acting from Bogart who must convey Parry's mistrust and suspicions entirely through stance and the eyes (a remarkable close-up of his face when he thinks Irene has betrayed him).

With the removal of the bandages the film reverts to a more conventional form for its final third. But it retains its imaginative amplitude of atmosphere and detail—the quiet intensity of the parting between Bogart and Bacall when she chooses a new name to go with his new face, one of those remarkable love-scenes Daves can do so well (there's another splendid one between Dennis Morgan and Viveca Lindfors in *To The Victor* on the Omaha beach in Normandy, with the twisted hulks of wrecked ships behind them, and there's the brief but poetic meeting of Felicia Farr and Glenn Ford in *3.10 to Yuma*).

Although the forces ranged against Parry are less powerful and world-threatening than the legions of darkness rampaging through a Fritz Lang film, Daves' methods of suggestion are somewhat similar; a vivid use of diagonal lines, usually a lattice. But in the crucial scene between Parry and Madge Rapf (Agnes Moorehead as one of the most unusual of vamps; 'causing unhappiness is the only thing that gives her happiness' is Irene's verdict on Madge) the striped motif, the visualisation of menace, is reflected in the vivid pattern of the woman's clothes. Even the sympathetic characters often seem heavy with menace—

Irene casually 'betraying' Parry over the telephone, Dr Coley asking for his fee while thumbing a cut-throat razor, a taxi-driver's long and apparently pointless monologue about a bowl of goldfish; or the scene where the bandaged and agonised Parry staggers through the streets of San Francisco at dawn to the derision of the few passers-by who think he's drunk.

Dark Passage is some sort of minor masterpiece, which is more than can be claimed for *A Kiss in the Dark* (1948) written and produced by Harry Kurnitz, using most of the musical jokes which were to re-appear in *Once More With Feeling*. Apart from one very funny sequence in which Broderick Crawford tries to sleep through innumerable distractions, the comedy was handicapped by an uninventive script. But *To The Victor* (1948) gave the director one of Richard Brooks' best scripts as a basis from which to build. This is an even more neglected film than *Dark Passage* (it was, so far as I know, never even shown to the British critics) but the combination of powerful writing and excellent direction make this a work which, if not as unique as *Dark Passage* (which is Daves' own favourite from this period) is something rich and strange and compelling.

The action takes place in and around Paris, with a brief idyll in Normandy, just after the war. Basically it is a love-story between Paul, a ruthless ex-major in the American forces, now a black marketeer, bitter that peace hasn't brought the better world he had anticipated, and Christine, a collaborator's wife whose life is in danger because she is going to testify against her husband. There is a strong element of moral conflict—between love and duty—highlighted throughout by the hopeless cynicism of most of the characters who already feel the stirrings of the Third World War. Again, as in *Dark Passage*, Daves has brilliantly captured the element of hidden menace. Again this is basically a thriller (the climactic gun-fight is a first-rate piece of action-filming) which overflows the confines of the genre. Here, too, Daves' friendship theme was at its most poignant as Paul is forced to sit and watch the friend he has introduced to the rackets gunned down while he is helpless to aid him.

Daves' final film of the 'forties, *Task Force* (1949) follows the progress of Jonathan Scott (Gary Cooper) from lieutenant to rear-admiral, a historical survey of the growth of the US Naval Air Arm from 1921 onwards. It is a story of political manoeuvring, as Scott and a few others fight a ceaseless and, apparently, hopeless fight for naval air power, ending with a burst into Technicolor and action with newsreel footage of sea-air engagements, brilliantly intercutting fictional reconstructions with the actual combat material.

END OF PART ONE