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KISS ME DEADLY, U.S.A., 1955

Certificate: A. Distributors: United Artists. Production Company: Parklane Pictures. Producer/Director: Robert Aldrich. Script: A. I. Bezzerides, from a novel by Mickey Spillane. Photography: Ernest Laszlo. Editor: Mike Luciani. Art Director: William Glasgow. Music: Frank Devol. Leading Players: Ralph Meeker (Mike Hammer), Albert Dekker (Dr. Soberin), Paul Stewart (Carl Eyello), Juano Hernandez (Eddie Eager), Wesley Addy (Pat), Marian Carr (Friday), Maxine Cooper (Velda), Cloris Leachman (Christina), Nick Dennis (Nick). 8,640 ft. 96 mins.

Special investigator Mike Hammer gives a lift one night to a blonde called Christina, who has escaped from a mental home. She is very frightened, but also very cryptic, and before she properly specifies her danger Mike's car is wrecked and she is killed. Through a clue left by Christina—a reference to a poem by her namesake, Christina Rossetti—Mike discovers she knew the whereabouts of a case of radio-active material which a gang is planning to smuggle to an unnamed power. The gang kidnaps Velda, Mike's secretary, in order to discourage him; but he carries on, and eventually rescues her from a beach-side house where the gang-leader has hidden the radio-active material. Mike is able to rescue Velda just before the house explodes into flames.

The latest Mike Hammer adventure is distinguished from its predecessors by an extraordinary arty style—bold, formalised low-key effects, tilted shots, extreme close-ups, complicated long takes, sometimes *outré* compositions. This meeting of “art” and pulp literature is, at the least, curious. One cannot say that Robert Aldrich's direction lends clarity to a narrative already somewhat confused and difficult to follow—indeed, at times it further obscures it; but it does create an atmosphere of its own. There are curious undertones to the film—Mike is presented as a kind of underworld crusader, continually questioned by Velda as to “the mysterious whatsit” he is after, and at the same time is hated and despised by the police. The women—Velda excepted—are either mad or highly treacherous; the villains are rich hedonists or art dilettantes.

Ralph Meeker is an effectively dour, withdrawn Mike, and the rest of the acting, strongly mannered, makes its points. The censor has excised a few (presumably brutal) moments, making one scene almost incomprehensible.

Suitability: A.

G.L.