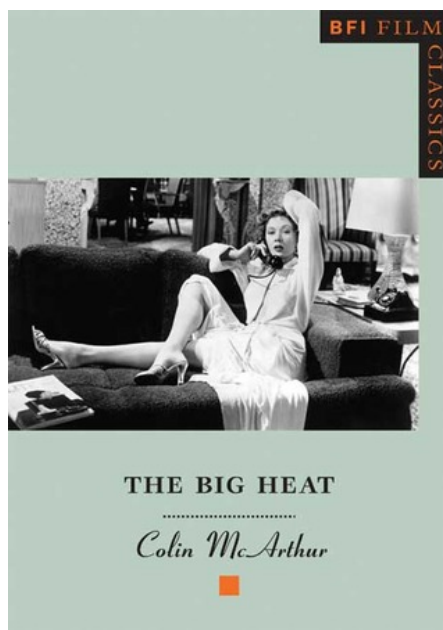




The Big Heat

Colin McArthur

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The Big Heat first appeared in 1953, towards the end of the film noir cycle that had begun in the early '40s. It was greeted in the United States and Britain as a successful but modest product of the Hollywood system, "slickly written and directed" in the words of one critic. Only the extreme violence, as in the infamous scalding coffee scene, was singled out for special mention. Yet by the time the film was reissued in Britain in 1988 it had achieved undisputed classic status.

How had this transformation come about? Colin McArthur takes *The Big Heat* as a case study in film criticism. He examines the film's changing critical fortunes under the influence of the so called auteur theory, and shows how other intellectual currents led to a reassessment of Lang's work in the 1970s. McArthur provides his own perceptive analysis of the film in the light of these revolutions in film criticism.

The Big Heat Details

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From Reader Review The Big Heat for online ebook

Thomas Lampion says

i have a confessed love for the film classics series BFI has done over the years. here, i've encountered my first disappointment in colin mcarthur's analysis of the big heat, which is barely much of an analysis in the first place.

he spends most of the first part discussing the british reaction to 'the big heat.' comparing the british reception on its initial release in 1953 to its british re-release in 1988 is somewhat interesting, but most of his 'personal memoir' is simply unbearable. here he bemoans and whines about the hierarchy of the much bally-hooded film magazine 'screen' as put out by BFI in the 70's and 80's. here, he defends the magazines marxist, foucault drenched analysis. but his reflections are for the most part, pure masturbation and almost completely unreadable. he further dismisses, or puts aside the endless theories of lang as 'auteur' or 'the lang text.' he spends almost the entire analysis defending his book, 'Underworld USA' with an almost comical sensitivity. he promises us a 'detailed analysis' and we are enlightened further with barely forty pages of examining the scripts basic structure. perhaps i'm a little too french ala cahiers du cinema, beguiled by moving images and hints of expressionism or surrealism, but i don't love lang's 'the big heat' for the script work. true, i love syd fields work on screenwriting as much as mcarthur, but 'the big heat' is a cheapie, paint by numbers 50's noir made in less than three months by a total genius with limited means.its sense of visual style is lacking here in this analysis, only talking vaguely about camera work and editing. these parts, are the books strength but they are few and far between. in the end, the whole thing reads like the analysis of a copied mona lisa painting as done by a lonely house-wife. there is genius in langs 'the big heat', perhaps it is better noted by the critics mcarthur points out earlier, but what is left is a paltry summary you could find in any screenwriting class you've barely attended in college.

Nick Jones says

An essay on Fritz Lang's *The Big Heat*. Or, rather, this is not a study of 'Lang's' *The Big Heat*, Colin McArthur placing the film into a series of other contexts, insisting that the director or 'auteur' is only one influence on the completed film. McArthur was part of the 'heroic' age of British film criticism: a new generation of young critics appeared in the 1960s, deeply influenced by the French journal *Cahiers du cinema*, they revalued Hollywood cinema and searched for auteurs, film directors with consistent visual styles and thematic interests; there were then attempts to broaden this response, one notable example being McArthur's *Underworld U.S.A.*, a study of the Hollywood gangster and crime movie that acknowledged the importance of genre to the form and meanings of a individual films...it didn't disregard the importance of the auteur, but also looked to other influences; then, in the early 1970s, a new wave of critics deeply influenced by French structuralism and Marxism arrived, bulldozing the previous critical generation out of the way; but some of the 1960s generation were influenced by the new upstarts and began to write about films in new terms, now talking about films not just in terms of creative individuals, but noting the organisation of the industry, and the ideology or political values held by the films, and so on. In the fifth and longest chapter of this study McArthur responds to *The Big Heat* as a text, but in the first four he places the film in a number of other contexts. The first compares the film with William McGivern's original book: I found this most interesting where differences were pinpointed: for narrative economy the film condenses two police officers from the book into one character, but in doing so brings a sympathetic and a negative character together, creating a much more ambiguous and interesting figure; the film responded to Hollywood censorship in creative ways, etc. The second chapter places the film into an industrial context, as a product of Columbia, but it doesn't do that much more than noting it was treated as a run of the mill crime movie. The third chapter considers the critical response at the time (a run of the mill crime movie) and how this had altered by

the film's British reissue in the late 1980s. To explain this change, McArthur, in the fourth chapter, considers the changes in film culture, notably during the 1960s and '70s, but he does this by referring to his experience in the British Film Institute's Education Department, the debates that went on and the shifts in power...this is a strange way to make his point and I am sure many readers will be perplexed about their relevance to the film, finding them a little parochial. The fifth chapter works through the film and, although it places aspects into generic and auteur contexts, a lot is a fairly straightforward relating of the plot. I share McArthur's enthusiasm for *The Big Heat*, but I am uncertain how many uncommitted readers he would win over. Strangely McArthur keeps pointing out that the film complies with the ideas of script construction put forward by popular screenwriting gurus Syd Field and Robert McKee: I presume this shows that the film works within well established conventions, but it could show that the film is unimaginatively conventional. There are interesting points scattered through the essay, but overall a disappointing response to a wonderful film.
