

SEX AND POWER IN THE BIG COMBO

One of the genre's grittiest films, Joseph H. Lewis' film noir *The Big Combo* packs a considerable punch even fifty years after its release. All of the genre conventions are present in the film - tough-talking gangsters, hard-boiled cops, alluring dames - but Lewis' direction and John Alton's cinematography, arguably some of the best black and white photography ever put on film, allow the film to transcend its B production values and genre trappings. Existing outside of the mainstream Hollywood studio system and produced by an independent studio, Lewis and screenwriter Philip Yordan are allowed to delve more deeply into the psychosexual motives of its characters than any other film of the era.

Lt. Diamond (Cornel Wilde) is a cop with a mission: to take down the crime ring headed by Mr. Brown (Richard Conte). Mixed in with his crusade against organized crime is his personal obsession with Susan (Jean Wallace), the sultry blonde who dates Brown, a woman he has never met and knows only through reputation. Diamond keeps Susan on constant surveillance, ostensibly to question her about Brown's alleged criminal activities, but as the film progresses, it becomes clear that his infatuation with Susan is more than one of professional inquiry. Because the police captain finds it increasingly difficult to fund his investigation since it has yielded few

results, Diamond funds this surveillance out of his own pocket. Consequently, Brown protects his investment in Susan by having her constantly escorted by two thugs, Fante (Lee Van Cleef) and Mingo (Earl Holliman). A stunning blonde, Susan is no vicious, dark-haired femme fatale present in most genre films. (An archetype best portrayed, in the author's opinion, by Ann Savage in Edgar G. Ulmer's B-noir *Detour*.) She is a vulnerable character who, rather than trying to manipulate her lover, desperately tries to end the relationship, even going so far as to attempt suicide by overdosing on pills. Atypical of the noir genre, it is the masculine Brown who exerts his influence over the emotionally vulnerable female. Brown's methods of exerting his power are explored throughout the film.

Diamond's preoccupation with destroying Mr. Brown's crime ring is entirely personal. There is no direct evidence that he has any involvement in criminal activities, nor has he been implicated in murders or other illegal activities. Brown clearly states his motto late in the film when he reprimands McClure (Brian Donlevy), his former boss but current underling, for murdering a policeman: "I'm trying to run an impersonal business. Killing is very personal." Mr. Brown distances himself from his crimes, relying on his henchmen to do his dirty work, while he focuses his attention on convincing Susan to stay with him after her release from the hospital. Susan tells Brown that

she hates him, but he is nevertheless able to win her over, promising, "I'll give you anything you want...anything." As he says this he kisses her entire body, eventually dropping out of frame as Susan moans in ecstasy. The implication here is of oral sex. Once again Susan is trapped by Brown's sexual power.

Earlier, at the hospital, Diamond confronts Brown, playing his righteous cop schtick to the hilt: "You must have done something pretty fine to get as high as you are, Mr. Brown. I'm looking into that. I'm gonna open you up, and I'm gonna operate. I hate to think of what I'll find." Brown is unintimidated and rather bemused. He replies that Diamond "has reason to hate me. His salary's \$96.50 a week. The busboys in my hotel make better money than that." Brown, seemingly aware of Diamond's insecurity, adds insult to injury: "Diamond, the only trouble with you is, you'd like to be me. You'd like to have my organization, my influence, my fix. You can't. It's impossible. You think it's money, it's not. It's personality. You haven't got it, Lieutenant, you're a cop. Slow, steady, intelligent, with a bad temper, and a gun under your arm. And with a big yen for a girl you can't have." Diamond shows no outward signs of humiliation but his embarrassment is apparent when he increases his offensive against Brown. This is the first but certainly not last time the characters come into conflict, nor is it the last time Brown asserts his masculinity while playing off of

Diamond's insecurity. Brown's confidence is contrasted with Diamond's total failure to bring charges against him, reflecting both Brown's virility as well as Diamond's impotence.

Sex and power are further linked in the relationship between the two hitmen. They are never seen apart, sleep in the same bedroom, and when Fante dies Mingo cries and yearns for him. As such sensitivity is atypical in a cinematic hitman-hitman relationship, the film implies the two killers are lovers. The implication of a homosexual relationship is reinforced in a slyly humorous scene in which Mingo, on the lam with Fante, says that, "The cops will be searching every closet in town for us." They, too, link sex with power and more specifically with violence. They are always eager to kill or torture, and their passions are aroused by violence. This sex-violence motif is best reflected in a later sequence, which is film's - as well as the genre's - most gruesome moment, rivaled only by the "coffee-in-the-face" scene in Fritz Lang's *The Big Heat*.

Susan's unwillingness to cooperate in the investigation drives Diamond to desperate measures. He arrests ninety of Brown's hoods, including Brown himself, under false charges to question them about Alicia, Brown's estranged wife. Only one hood could not be found: Bettini. Naturally, the mobsters refuse to talk but Brown gets nervous while taking a polygraph test

after the mention of Bettini's name, confirming his importance in the case.

Before Diamond can track down Bettini, the intrusive cop is abducted by Fante and Mingo and brought to Brown's hideout. Brown's sexual power and Diamond's sexual inadequacy come into conflict in this, film's most brutal and certainly most famous sequence. They tie him to a chair and use McClure's hearing aid at full volume and a loud radio to blast into him that he needs to stay out of their affairs with ear-shattering volume. Having sufficiently tortured him they look for alcohol to make him drunk. Fante suggests paint thinner but realizing that will kill him settles on, "Hair tonic. Forty percent alcohol," forcing Diamond to guzzle the entire bottle. By the end of the scene, Brown has exerted his power while Diamond lies flaccid on the floor. Fante and Mingo's sadism acts as a sexual stimulant and their relationship seems to be driven by violence.

This sex-power/sex-violence connection is further reflected by a scene late in the film in which McClure, jealous of Brown's power, tries to pay Fante and Mingo to murder Brown. They are all too excited to kill, but they instead turn their guns on McClure. In a mockingly sympathetic moment Brown decides to "give McClure a break" by removing his hearing aid so he doesn't hear the bullets, a touch that allows Brown to flaunt his dominance. This scene is the ultimate reflection of these

characters' neuroses.

Diamond is undeterred by his torture. He continues his investigation and eventually discovers that the mysterious Alicia is Brown's wife, believed to be murdered. With the help of Susan and Bettini he discovers that she is still alive. They track her down to a mental hospital and she gives them enough evidence to implicate Brown in the murder of his former boss. Word reaches Brown and he takes Susan to the airport to leave the country. The cops track him to the airport and he begins firing at them. Susan finally discovers a way to break Brown's sexual hold, by betraying him. She shines a car headlight in his face, rendering his gunshots ineffective. Susan is able to break away from Brown by stripping him of his power and reducing him to his macho insecurities. The cops nab Brown after he runs out of bullets. The fact that Brown does not go down in a blaze of bullets as often happens in the noir/gangster genre is yet another reinforcement of his vigor; he may be arrested but he survives unscathed is one final clue that he is impervious to Diamond's attempt to usurp his sexual power.

With Brown in jail, Fante dead, and Susan free of Brown's grasp and guilt, three of the characters' sexual neuroses are resolved. Only Diamond's remains unresolved. He has prevailed over Brown but his relationship with Susan is unclear. After the cops take Brown away he waits in the hangar while Susan remains

by the car. There is no kiss, no declaration of love, just a shot of the two silhouetted figures in the hangar. The film ends with this hauntingly beautiful shot, suggesting hope for their future but guaranteeing nothing, concluding the film with an ambiguity that defines not only the relationships in this film but the film noir genre as a whole.