100 years since the birth of American filmmaker Robert Aldrich

Including an interview with film historian Tony Williams

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Robert Aldrich, an important postwar American film director, was born a century ago on August 9, 1918 in Cranston, Rhode Island. He died in December 1983.

Aldrich directed some 30 feature films between 1953 and 1981, including *Apache* (1954), *Vera Cruz* (1954), *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), *The Big Knife* (1955), *Attack!* (1956), *The Last Sunset* (1961), *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962), *Hush…Hush, Sweet Charlotte* (1964), *The Flight of the Phoenix* (1966), *The Dirty Dozen* (1967), *The Legend of Lylah Clare* (1968), *Too Late the Hero* (1970), *The Grissom Gang* (1971), *Ulzana's Raid* (1972), *The Longest Yard* (1974) and *Twilight's Last Gleaming* (1977).

Aldrich was born into a wealthy, socially distinguished family. His grandfather, Nelson W. Aldrich, was a US Senator from Rhode Island and a leading member of the Republican Party around the turn of the 20th century, referred to by the press as the "General Manager of the Nation" for his dominance in determining federal government monetary policy. Nelson Aldrich's daughter Abigail married John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Their second son—and thus the film director's first cousin—was Nelson Aldrich Rockefeller, four-term governor of New York and US Vice President under Gerald Ford.

In the conditions of the Great Depression in the late 1930s, Robert Aldrich walked away from his family's immense wealth (including apparently a stake in Chase Bank—today JPMorgan Chase Bank) and status. He was disinherited when he dropped out of university and took a clerical position at RKO, the Hollywood studio, in 1941.

Between 1944 and 1952, he worked as an assistant to some remarkable directors, including William Wellman (*Story of G.I. Joe*), Jean Renoir (*The Southerner*), Robert Rossen (*Body and Soul*), Lewis Milestone (*A Walk in the Sun*, *Arch of Triumph*, *The Red Pony*), Abraham Polonsky (*Force of Evil*), Max Ophuls (*Caught*), Joseph Losey (*M*, *The Prowler*) and Charlie Chaplin (*Limelight*)!

Of particular importance was his association from 1946-48 with Enterprise Studios, the independent production company co-founded by left-wing actor John Garfield, which Aldrich later described as "a really brilliant idea of a communal way to make films."

Aldrich developed anti-establishment and generally left-wing ideas at this time and he maintained those views throughout his filmmaking career. This may help account for the fact that then-critic François Truffaut could write in 1955 that in Aldrich's films, as opposed to many others of the time, "it is not uncommon to greet one idea per shot."

Aldrich told an interviewer in 1976, "I think anybody with any brains in 1936 to '40 would have been a Communist. They were the brightest, they were the quickest, they were the best, and you found working with people of that persuasion more stimulating, more exciting." At the same time, he made it clear that his conception of being a "Communist" at the time had "nothing to do with wanting to mount the barricades," but with "liberal leanings" and "trying to make a better country."

After a stint working in television in 1952-53, he returned to Hollywood and directed his first feature film in 1953, at the height of the anti-communist witch-hunt. In *Body and Soul: The Cinematic Vision of Robert Aldrich* (2004), Tony Williams—an interview with whom is included below—asks two critical questions: "How could Aldrich follow these ideals in later inhospitable decades? How could he continue interrogating the false nature of the American dream when a reactionary society had silenced other critical voices?"

It is difficult to sum up a career as complex and full of vicissitudes—and as bound up with the social and political conditions of his day—as Aldrich's. He experienced both considerable commercial and artistic success and severe financial and critical failure. Aldrich was working in an industry geared to profit and doing its best to appease a ruling elite determined that nothing subversive or overly troubling should appear on movie screens.

He had many conflicts with the film studios. In 1981 he recounted (to interviewer Roderick Mann) a meeting with a studio executive during which "I got so frustrated I nearly had a heart attack … I was trying to stay in control and be charming … when I should have been throwing the guy out of the window." Aldrich attempted over the course of several decades to navigate, with honesty and integrity, this corrupt arena, and direct films that strongly and evocatively showed something about the world and how he felt about the world.

War movies

In three movies treating World War II, *Attack!*, *The Dirty Dozen* and *Too Late the Hero*, Aldrich does what would be almost unthinkable today: he paints American officers as cowardly, corrupt or brutal and generally pours cold water on the patriotic rubbish about the "Greatest Generation."

In *Attack!*, for instance, the inaction of a spineless and inept, but politically connected captain (Eddie Albert), results in the death of dozens of his men. A tough-minded subordinate (Jack Palance) threatens to do him in: "I'm gonna to give you something to think about. If I ever lose another man on account of you, just one, you'll never see the States again." "That's court-martial talk, soldier. I got a witness standing right here." "Let him hear me too, loud and clear, so there won't be any misunderstanding. … You play the gutless wonder once more and I'll come back and I'll get you. I'll shove this grenade down your throat and pull the pin."

In the end, another officer shoots the worthless captain, and one of the enlisted men asserts, "Speaking of justice, shooting him was about the most just thing I've ever seen."

In *The Dirty Dozen*, one of Aldrich's biggest commercial successes, which even allowed him to buy and operate his own studio for a few years, an Office of Strategic Services officer, Reisman (Lee Marvin), is charged with assembling a band of the army's worst wartime convicts for a special mission. They are to assault a meeting of high-ranking German officers and eliminate as many of them as they can.

As Tony Williams notes in his book on Aldrich, *The Dirty Dozen* "explodes the popular archetype of World War II as 'the Good War.' At the same time, the film also merges the premises of the Vietnam War into its context, especially in the final sequence when Reisman orders gasoline poured into the wine cellars where the German high command and innocent civilians are hiding."

Aldrich later pointed out, "Now, what I was trying to do was say that under the circumstances, it's not only the Germans who do unkind and hideous, horrible things in the name of war but that the Americans do it and anybody does it. The whole nature of war is dehumanizing. There's no such thing as a nice war. … European critics all picked up on the parallel between burning people alive and the use of napalm, whether they liked the picture or not. They got the significance of what was being said."

Too Late the Hero is set in the South Pacific in 1942. Again, a group—consisting this time of British commandos and one American Japanese language interpreter (Cliff Robertson)—sets out on what may well be a suicide mission: to destroy a Japanese radio transmitter and prevent the enemy from sounding the alarm about the arrival of an American naval convoy.

Just about everything goes wrong. Toward the end, only two men are alive, Lawson (Robertson), who has previously disgraced himself, and Tosh Hearne (Michael Caine), a cynical Cockney. The latter wants to hide out in the jungle for a few days and not try to make it back immediately to the British camp, although this will ensure the Japanese attack on the convoy is a surprise.

Hearne says: "We can just lie low for a couple of days, stroll back into camp, and nobody will say a dickie bird. What's so bad about that? I never asked those idiots to send me out here. But if I ever get back, it'll be, 'Well done, Hearne. Jolly good show. Now you can piss off home, back to whatever dirty little hole you came from.' And what are they gonna do for you, Lieutenant? Make you the bloody President?"

As it turns out, Hearne is the only member of the squad to survive. Staggering back to his base, wounded, he is asked about the other man, Lawson, who didn't survive. Caine-Hearne lies: "He was a bloody hero. He killed … fifteen bleeding Japs … single-handed. Killed fifteen? Thirty, if you like."

This sort of demythologizing of war and the military simply is not done in our day. Instead we are offered *Saving Private Ryan* and *Zero Dark Thirty*.

Aldrich's Westerns and *The Longest Yard*

Aldrich also made two "pro-Indian" films, *Apache* and *Ulzana's Raid*, each with Burt Lancaster. The films take as their starting-point the legitimacy of the Native American resistance to cruel mistreatment. In the former work, Lancaster plays Massai, the last Apache warrior. En route to a Florida reservation in 1886, he escapes and attempts to return home. The film has a semi-happy ending, with Massai surviving, which neither Lancaster or Aldrich cared for very much. *Ulzana's Raid* involves a small war party of Apaches who break out of a reservation and wreak havoc among the white settlers. It is one of Aldrich's most critically acclaimed films.

It is impossible not to be affected by the energy and commitment of Aldrich's films. Critic Manny Farber in 1957 ("Underground Films") described Aldrich as "a lurid psychiatric stormer who gets an overflow of vitality and sheer love for movie-making into the film. This enthusiasm is the rarest item in a dried, decayed-lemon type of movie period. … The Aldrich films are filled with exciting characterizations—by Lee Marvin, Rod Steiger, Jack Palance—of highly psyched-up, marred, and bothered men."

The Longest Yard was made possible by the civil rights movement of the 1960s and the radicalism of the 1970s. A former professional football player, Paul Crewe (Burt Reynolds), finds himself in prison after stealing his girl-friend's car and leading police on a high-speed chase. A sadistic, football-loving prison warden (again Eddie Albert) forces Crewe to organize a team of prisoners to play against his well-practiced guards.

Crewe overcomes various problems, including the initial unwillingness of black prisoners to join his team and various acts of sabotage by the authorities, and prepares an effective opposition to the guards. The warden then insists Crewe throw the game or he will see Crewe charged with accessory to a murder that has taken place in the prison. When the convicts narrowly win the game, the warden screams at one of his subordinates as Crewe walks off the field, "He's trying to escape. Shoot him. Shoot. Shoot him, you ... Shoot him. … Kill him. Kill that son of a bitch. Shoot him."

Vera Cruz, The Flight of the Phoenix, The Last Sunset and *Hustle* are all well-made and pleasurable films. There are remarkable, lively moments in nearly all of Aldrich's films, even the failures or semi-successes. There are intriguing moments and performances in *The Killing of Sister George* (1968) and *The Legend of Lylah Clare*, although the films as a whole don't make all that much sense.

Aldrich once explained the plight of the Hollywood filmmaker to an interviewer: "An American director might make every third or fourth picture for himself, but to get the money to live through that period or to finance that project or to search for that property, he has to go out and make pictures that maybe are not what he wants. Unlike painters he can't go home and get better. The only way to get better is to direct. I think a director is even better having made a bad picture than he was before he made the bad picture, even though it's a picture that he is not proud of. That's not in harmony with European theory—that you shouldn't direct unless it's just the picture you want to do. Well, I don't know how in the hell you get to be a better director unless you direct." "Hollywood. .. Still an Empty Tomb," in *Cinema*, May/June 1963.

Aldrich made two Depression films, *Emperor of the North* and *The Grissom Gang*, both of which point as much as anything else to the emotional collapse and desperation that economic breakdown can produce. Then there are the Gothic tales, both with Bette Davis, *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* and *Hush…Hush, Sweet Charlotte*, which may not be to everyone's taste, but the sincerity of Aldrich's direction and the "chemical combustibility" (in critic Andrew Sarris's phrase) of the Davis-Joan Crawford relationship in *Baby Jane*are not to be doubted.

The Big Knife* and *Twilight's Last Gleaming

The Big Knife, based on a play by Clifford Odets, is a scathing, if talky and melodramatic, look at the film industry. Charlie Castle (Palance) is a successful film star, who wants out of his contract with a thuggish studio executive (Rod Steiger). However, the studio has dirt on Castle. He faces an impossible situation, compounded by a failing marriage. The film's

general attitude toward the industry is summed up by Shelley Winters' Dixie Evans: "I don't care if I do see a snake. I'm sure I'd much rather see a snake than a Hollywood producer."

It is impossible to leave out *Twilight's Last Gleaming*, Aldrich's last major effort and a big financial disappointment. We discuss it below, but here's the story in a nutshell: a renegade US Air Force general, Lawrence Dell (Lancaster again), escapes from military prison, where he was sent in a frame-up intended to silence him, and takes over an ICBM silo in Montana ("Gentlemen, we are now a superpower," he tells his team after their successful operation). He threatens to launch a third world war unless the US president releases a document (similar to the Pentagon Papers) telling the truth about American involvement in Vietnam.

President Stevens (a wonderful Charles Durning), his Secretary of Defense (Melvyn Douglas), Secretary of State (Joseph Cotten), Attorney General (William Marshall), CIA chief (Leif Erickson) and the rest of the Cabinet debate Dell's demands. When an effort to incinerate the silo and its contents with a low-yield nuclear device falters, Dell initiates the launch sequence for his nine missiles, aimed at various locations in the Soviet Union.

In the end, the president acquiesces to Dells' demands and agrees to personally escort the general and his remaining accomplice, Powell (Paul Winfield), safely from the site. Snipers shoot and kill Dell, Powell and the president. As he lies dying, Stevens asks his Secretary of Defense to fulfill his promise and release the devastating document, which we know Guthrie will not do.

Twilight's Last Gleaming is a very radical film. As Williams notes in *Body and Soul*, "The film depicts the dark realities of an American political system desperately needing change. Aldrich allows his audience to confront the violent and destructive operations of an establishment that ruthlessly destroys any opposition, whether at home or abroad." For his part, Dell is "revealed to be insane both by his willingness to begin World War III in a mood of childish petulance and by his stubborn belief in a system that is no longer as honorable as he thinks. … [T]he status quo will never allow him to disseminate the truth."

Kiss Me Deadly

Anyone who has watched *Kiss Me Deadly* is not likely to forget the experience. Aldrich pursued his filmmaking during the Cold War, the nuclear age. An apocalyptic theme runs throughout his work.

Kiss Me Deadly is based on a novel by trash-writer Mickey Spillane, a reactionary non-talent. As Aldrich explained to an interviewer, "The book had nothing. We just took the title and threw the rest away." He told the same interviewer, "It was a time in America when the McCarthy thing was in full bloom and that was the principal anti-Spillane attitude of the picture, it was an anti-Spillane picture about Spillane. It was anti-McCarthy and anti-bomb in a minor way."

The reader should simply go and watch *Kiss Me Deadly*. But I will provide a few details. "Cynical, sadistic private eye, Mike Hammer" (in Aldrich's words) stops for a woman, Christina (Cloris Leachman), at night on a deserted road. She taunts him, and puts him on the defensive right away: "You have only one real, lasting love. … You. You're one of those self-indulgent males who thinks about nothing but his clothes, his car, himself. … Bet you do push-ups to keep your belly hard. … I could tolerate flabby muscles in a man if it would make him more friendly. You're the kind of person who never gives in a relationship, who only takes."

Thugs capture Hammer and Christina, torture and kill her, attempt to kill him. He decides to look into the case, both because Christina asked him to "Remember me" and because she must have been "connected with something big."

Hammer is a louse, a thug himself, a "private investigator" who "gets dirt on the wife, then does a deal with the wife to get dirt on the husband. Plays both ends against the middle."

His investigation leads him to gangsters and others who are after a box containing atomic material. A cop (Wesley Addy) tells him at one point: "I'm going to pronounce a few words. They're harmless words. Just a bunch of letters scrambled together. But their meaning is very important. Try to understand what they mean. Manhattan Project. Los Alamos. Trinity."

The ending of the film is terrifying, as one foolish, greedy woman meddles with this nuclear Pandora's Box. As I suggested, this is not a film one forgets, or wants to forget.

In his introduction to a book of interviews with Aldrich, Alain Silver wrote: "He was a big man and often an angry one, someone who would 'come across the table at you' when pushed beyond his limits. He had a simply but deeply-held view of the world. He believed that existence was conflict, that power inevitably corrupts, and that the honest man was bound to lose no matter how 'right' or 'moral' his intentions. Nevertheless, even though the cards were stacked against you, he believed that you had an almost existential obligation to hold on to your basic principles. Compromise was another word for betrayal. His films illustrated this belief again and again, and his professional life was an unusually rocky one, filled with great successes and unmitigated disasters."

Aldrich was a very decent and even honorable person, so it seems. At his memorial service in 1983, a number of people, filmmakers and crew members, friends, spoke warmly and sadly about him. An African American electrician said, "No way can I forget him … I had to come up and mention that he was the type of person that helped everybody no matter who you were. If you were on the low end, he'd give you a chance and if you could do that he was right behind you. But if you didn't, you were in trouble."

Another behind-the-scenes worker, a woman, explained: "We've heard all of his accomplishments, but no one so far has mentioned the Robert Aldrich I knew, the humanitarian. He was always kind, and thoughtful regardless of who you were. You didn't have to be a big name, you didn't need have your name in lights, but he treated everyone on a humanistic level."

Abe Polonsky, who knew Aldrich on and off for 40 years, spoke movingly. He observed that Aldrich "was amused by the amiable corruption of the world around him and he was horrified by the brutality, both personal and general in the world, and this came about not from a special political attitude, but from a private and personal sense of morality and I think it was this latter thing that drew us to each other." He ended, "I, like Bob, believe that almost anything in life is bearable in one way or another, but some things that are bearable are unbearable, and his death to me was that."

A conversation with Tony Williams

I spoke recently to Tony Williams, professor at Southern Illinois University and author of *Body and Soul: The Cinematic Vision of Robert Aldrich* (Scarecrow Press, 2004). Here is the conversation.

David Walsh: I watched a dozen or so of Robert Aldrich's films in the past two weeks. Several things stood out above all else: his anti-authoritarian and anti-establishment views, which endured to his last films, his visual style, suggesting, as Andrew Sarris writes, "an unstable

world full of awkward angles and harsh transitions," and the unfavorable, intellectually difficult circumstances in which he was working. All this makes for a sometimes exhilarating, sometimes disappointing, but generally intriguing body of work.

How would you introduce Aldrich to a younger generation, or to those unaware of his films? How would you explain his significance? Why is he significant to you?

Tony Williams: Robert Aldrich, I believe, is significant because he deliberately chose to work in Hollywood instead of going to Europe, although he did very briefly, and tried to make films that, on one level, belong to the entertainment genre and, on a deeper level, contained themes that went very much against the status quo of both Hollywood and the American society of which he was a part.

He acted as a destabilizing force in terms of depicting characters who were at odds with themselves and their society, who often found it difficult to collaborate, but, in certain films, eventually do against the system. And I would mention the three films, *The Flight of the Phoenix, The Dirty Dozen* and *The Longest Yard*.

DW: I watched *The Longest Yard* the other evening, and one element that stands out, and it's so rare today, for the reasons we understand, is that there's an assumption that the basic popular instincts—and I'm thinking of the crowds cheering on the prisoners—are anti-establishment and anti-police.

TW: Exactly, and, of course, the cheerleaders are drag queens …

DW: Yes, a wonderful touch!

Do you feel that Aldrich's work is undervalued at this point?

TW: I definitely do, because as well as Aldrich suffering from what Gore Vidal once termed the United States of Amnesia, which is also relevant to past culture, there's been a lack of attention paid to Aldrich's legacy in terms of how you can take a popular format, a genre, whether the Western or the war movie, and turn its premises on its head to make it something alternative.

DW: What about the unflattering portrait of Aldrich in the television series *Feud* ? Have you seen that?

TW: No, thank God, I have not, but I have a theory about it which has no provable basis whatsoever, and that is that it's due to the fact that Aldrich served as the president of the Directors Guild of America. He not only gave minorities jobs on his films, but he also pushed through a lot of benefits which the Hollywood establishment resented. I have a feeling that this inaccurate portrait is one way of getting back at Aldrich posthumously.

DW: Could you say a few words about Aldrich's upbringing and his family? It is interesting, and unexpected.

TW: He was the son of a banker, he came from the Aldriches of Rhode Island, a very rich, upper class family. He was a first cousin of Nelson Rockefeller. Although there is no documentation about this, I believe that Aldrich saw what was happening in the 1930s, during the Great Depression, in American society with open eyes. He rebelled against his family. He did not use his privileged background to get a top-level job when he went to Hollywood in 1941. He started at the bottom and worked his way to the top, gaining the respect of everybody who worked with him.

Also, I believe that he was very much influenced by the left culture of the New Deal period, represented, for example, by Orson Welles, who was an influence on him, stylistically, as well as Clifford Odets, the poet laureate of the Depression.

DW: His apprenticeship is remarkable. The very fact that Aldrich could apprentice with Jean Renoir, Charlie Chaplin, Max Ophuls, William Wellman, Lewis Milestone, in addition to Joseph Losey and Abraham Polonsky, is already a comment on the state of Hollywood at the time.

You spend some time in your book on the Polonsky-John Garfield-Odets milieu, which was generally left-wing, supportive of the Communist Party. You feel that had a profound influence on him.

TW: Definitely. He mentions in an interview that when he got to know them, including director John Berry and others, they were already "on the run" from the McCarthyite witch-hunt in Hollywood. I believe he was very much influenced by their progressive ideas, but also knew the tide was turning in Hollywood.

The FBI tried to serve Aldrich with a subpoena, but then withdrew it. It's possible the connection with the Aldrich family and the Rockefellers prevented that.

DW: As you explain in your book, he launched his career at an "inhospitable" time, the Cold War and the McCarthyite purges. Could you talk about some of the contradictory consequences or influences of those events on Aldrich's filmmaking?

TW: In my view, Aldrich very clearly saw what was going on, detested it, but realized that to continue working, to remain at the card table while the game was still being played, which was one of his favorite sayings, one had to exercise a particular type of discretion. He could not be explicit about it, but he wove the themes, with the help of his collaborators, into the various films he was making. I would say his most successful films are the least compromised films.

DW: *The Big Knife* is a remarkable film, considering that it's such a blistering attack on the film industry and released in 1955. This is a play from 1949, at which time Odets still considered himself to be a left-winger … then you had Odets' HUAC testimony in 1952, although, unlike Elia Kazan, he was not proud of it … and this film comes out in 1955. John Garfield is dead by that time, who appeared in it on stage. What a mass of painful contradictions!

TW: You have to remember what the late William Aldrich, Aldrich's son, said about his grandfather when he made one of his rare visits to Hollywood and looked at the script of *The Big Knife* —this is the banker-father—and said, 'To accept or not accept a million-dollar contract, what's the problem?'

DW: That's interesting, because that's exactly what Robert Aldrich didn't do. As I understand it, he probably walked away from more family money than anyone in Hollywood history.

TW: That's right, and I don't think many people really understood the implications of *The Big Knife*. The film was read as an industry exposé, but Aldrich explained that this situation was not unique to Hollywood, it could apply to any field, where someone is struggling with an impossible boss and trying to avoid being compromised.

DW: I must say that I've never forgotten watching *Kiss Me Deadly* for the first time, on television, many years ago. It was one of the most terrifying, terrifying but beautiful films that I'd ever seen.

TW: It's a master work. He took crime novelist Mickey Spillane apart and turned him on his head, showing the sickness and corruption of America at the time. The ostensible hero of *Kiss Me Deadly* is as corrupt and violent as the people he's fighting, in the same way that Gen. Dell in *Twilight's Last Gleaming* is found, eventually, to be psychotic and as much a danger to the world as the militaristic Gen. McKenzie.

DW: In the beginning of *Kiss Me Deadly* when Cloris Leachman's character taunts Mike Hammer, it's quite sharp.

TW: Not something you're likely to find in a Mickey Spillane novel. When a woman gets "uppity" like that in one of his books, she's likely to get hit and end up on the floor.

DW: In *Attack*, set during World War II, you have things said about the military, about essentially criminally negligent officers, who get great numbers of men killed, that you simply couldn't say today. Have you seen a film in recent decades that suggested an officer was psychotic, or that the officer class represented a danger, a threat?

TW: I don't think so, unless it was a tame depiction, like Willem Dafoe's character in *Flight of the Intruder* [1991], about the Vietnam War, which was a failure on every level.

DW: Then, of course, *Too Late the Hero* and *The Dirty Dozen*. Dell finally appears as mad as the system he is fighting against. He's the former film, Michael Caine's character is hardly exemplary, he's an individualist and something of a swine in his own right. But his comment, they're going to congratulate me and send me back to the dirty hole I came from, reflects a social and class understanding that is missing at present.

TW: *Too Late the Hero* is an underrated film, and it was Aldrich's own original story. It came out during the student protests against Vietnam, and it was misunderstood and interpreted as a pro-military film.

I think it's an iconoclastic attack on the role of heroism in war movies. You have a series of character reversals and changes of plot that you don't get in any traditional war film, and the real hero of the film is the Japanese officer, Maj. Yamaguchi, played by Takakura Ken, who is a more moral person than anybody on the Allied side. He's doing his job, but he doesn't massacre the two captured soldiers.

DW: Yes, that's an interesting moment, because you fully expect or consider it possible that Yamaguchi is going to carry out his threat, and kill the two British soldiers. And then he says to them, 'Do you really find it so easy to believe that I would shoot you?'

TW: And he says it with sorrow in his eyes.

DW: *The Dirty Dozen* does at times wallow in the psychotic violence. And some of the Method actors seem to be enjoying themselves a little too much.

In your book, you point to the scene in which Jimmy Brown drops the grenade in the wine cellar…. It's a horrible scene.

TW: Aldrich was told that if he dropped that scene, of American criminality, he would get an Academy Award, but to his credit, he did not.

DW: We've made the point numerous times in recent years, especially since Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* [1998], and also in regard to films like Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* [2008], that an anti-war film is not about what the "enemy" does to you, but what crimes you commit against the "enemy."

I saw *The Grissom Gang* again, and I'm not too fond of the "poor white trash" element and some of it is definitely over the top. But I thought Kim Darby, as the kidnapped girl, was very good. And Wesley Addy is excellent, chilly and chilling, as her wealthy father.

TW: Addy is a key character actor in several Aldrich films [*Kiss Me Deadly, The Big Knife, Ten Seconds to Hell, What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?, 4 for Texas, Hush…Hush, Sweet Charlotte*].

DW: What I found remarkable about *The Grissom Gang* in particular are the last five or ten minutes, when Scott Wilson stops being quite so frantic and neurotic. When Kim Darby's character comes out and finds his dead body, and her cold, unforgiving father cuts his ties with her, it's an extraordinarily moving, disturbing moment.

Incidentally, what about the Gothic films, *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* and *Hush…Hush, Sweet Charlotte?*

TW: They have been misread or misinterpreted as horror films, but they belong not only to a particular Gothic tradition, they are anticipations of the family horror films and the dysfunctional family that you find in the middle to late novels of Ross Macdonald, for example, dealing with the use and abuse of the vulnerable child and how this can have disastrous effects into adulthood.

When Bette Davis's Jane says to Joan Crawford at the end, "Then, you mean … all this time we could've been friends?," that's one of the most poignant lines in the film.

DW: Perhaps you could talk about *Twilight's Last Gleaming* a bit.

TW: On one level, it centers on an American hero personified by Gen. Dell [Burt Lancaster] who takes over a nuclear silo and who wants the truth about the Vietnam War, contained in a certain secret document, to be revealed to the American public. In a film that takes a black-and-white approach, Dell would be the hero, everyone else, including the president of the US, would be villains. But it doesn't turn out that way.

Aldrich savior-destroyer, a common motif, the individual who sets out on a mission, which is supposed to be saving society, like Mike Hammer in *Kiss Me Deadly*, and ends up either destroying it or destroying himself, or both.

The president is a corrupt person, but halfway through he does that reversal you see in *Too Late the Hero* and is morally disgusted by what his predecessors have been up to.

What Aldrich is doing in *Twilight's Last Gleaming* is demolishing the easy solution of heroic, individual action films, let alone our dumb superhero and superheroine movies of the present day, to show that life, as well as character, is really complex.

Aldrich looked on events in a very collective manner, believing that neither films nor individual agency can solve the problems facing society. There must be a collective, rational opposition, the kind you find in *The Flight of the Phoenix*, where a good many people of different backgrounds get together and finally succeed and get their plane in the air, or in *The Longest Yard*, where convicts of different ethnicities and character unite briefly against the system.

Twilight's Last Gleaming flopped at the box office, I think, not only because audiences wanted to forget the Vietnam War, but they wanted the Lancaster character to be the Chuck Norris/Sylvester Stallone heroic American character who is going to save the day. This was the last film over which he had complete control.

DW: Someone in the film says that this is the "last chance" for American democracy to come clean. I don't know whether Aldrich ever fully worked it out, and he's an artist, not a political thinker, but that sentence or thought has certain fairly drastic and radical implications.

TW: It really does, and I think the very understatement in that sentence brings that out more than any excessive, didactic message would do. The system is totally corrupt, it has failed.

DW: But what is the implication of the "last chance" for "democracy"?

TW: There has to be another, better system would be the implication.

DW: And as well—again I'm not suggesting that this was a fully worked out perspective—that this system is heading in the direction of authoritarianism. And, seeing the film 40 years after it was made, you'd have to say that it was correct, this is what we've seen in the intervening years. There's something profound about the artistic instinct in *Twilight's Last Gleaming*, as the title also suggests.

TW: Aldrich was anticipating the future, beyond his immediate day or even his lifetime. Unless an alternative to the present system is found, that system will deteriorate further and further, and 40 years later, these processes are coming to a head.

The film may be more interesting today than it was in 1977. This is one of the reasons that it's marginalized at the moment. It deserves re-evaluation and re-discovery.

DW: I think that's true of Aldrich's work as a whole. Not everything's perfect, how could it have been under the circumstances? There's unevenness, the work is pockmarked to a certain extent, Aldrich was negotiating a pretty corrupt and increasingly right-wing Hollywood set-up.

Aldrich was fighting for integrity, for anti-establishment views, for some sympathy for and confidence in often fairly damaged people, with the belief that such people can get together and do something fairly significant.

That confidence is not there today. It will come back, but at present it has been knocked out of Hollywood. It's appalling. Aldrich was one of the last classical directors who retained that feeling for the population, even up through the late 1970s and early 1980s.

TW: I think Aldrich, all in all, is an interesting and important director.

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