

CASE STUDY: VICTIM (BASIL DEARDEN, 1961)

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Genre, star and theme

Victim has a solidly-crafted script in the thriller/detective genre, with the reasons for the suicide of 'Boy' Barrett gradually coming to light through the investigations of barrister Melville Farr supported by his wife. The black and white cinematography recalls *film noir* in its depiction of urban bed-sitters, pubs and clubs, and the key investigator is not the police but a private individual. Tense music evokes mystery and urban spaces. In the tradition of the genre hero, Farr not only uncovers the reasons for the young man's suicide but makes a heroic stand against injustice.

As well as genre, the film utilised the British star system of the time with Dirk Bogarde, a male sex-symbol of the 1950s, playing the lead. The element which makes this film unusual for its time is not only its main theme of homosexuality, but the fact that some of its character portrayals are relatively sympathetic, given the era and social climate in which the film was made.

Victim was produced by the Rank studios at a key period of social change in British attitudes towards gay people, and was unique in being specifically seen, at the time of its release in 1961, as a liberal film campaigning against the legal oppression of male homosexuals. In 1957, a government report had recommended a limited reform of the laws that then existed against male homosexual relations. These changes became law in 1967, and the intervening period was one of widespread debate in the British media about homosexuality, a central theme of which was the vulnerability of homosexuals to blackmail, which forms a central theme of *Victim*. A very high proportion of gay men were blackmail victims.

The construction of images

American *film noir*, the genre which *Victim* echoes, often featured homosexual characters. The insinuatingly weak Cairo in *The Maltese Falcon* and the mean, manipulative Waldo Lydecker in *Laura* are two examples. A major generic element of *film noir* was its dealings with characters, themes and settings that were considered abnormal, corrupt or deviant in some way, and *Victim* makes use of this tradition in its creation of a secretive, oppressive homosexual underworld whose only solace seems to be the pub with its unsympathetic landlord.

As Farr uncovers more victims of blackmail, we see a succession of nervous, oppressed men paying money to the blackmailers in order to protect their jobs and social standing, which in that era would be destroyed by revelations of then-illegal homosexual relations. The film deliberately depicts a wide social cross-section of men, most leading successful lives. The film's most pathetic minor character is Eddie Henry, the barber. He is jumpy and defensive in conversation with Farr, where he reveals that he has been to prison four times as a result of his homosexuality. Apologetic for his own existence, he is subsequently attacked by the thuggish blackmailer, and dies of a heart attack. Throughout the film minor characters express various types of anti-gay prejudice and the words 'Farr is queer' are painted on the Farris' garage door in large letters.

Liberal arguments

So far, the representations dealt with in this film have been predominantly negative in that they indicate secretiveness, oppression and misery. They tie in with an underlying social view at that time of homosexuality as some sort of unfortunate affliction. Critics have pointed out this negativity. In his essay '*Victim*: hegemonic project' (in Dyer 1993a), Richard Dyer argues that the whole film

promotes an attitude of pity for homosexuals as pathetic outsiders. At the same time the film arguably reflects the discrimination and distress experienced by many gay men in the late fifties and early sixties. By pointing out these conditions as unjust the film itself formed part of a wider discourse about the need for change.

A key figure in pointing out legal injustice is the sympathetic, worldly-wise Detective Inspector. The film is punctuated by office discussions which, although over-wordy at times, serve to make the audience aware of the main argument of the film. The Inspector says that it is unjustifiable for the police to interfere in private consensual behaviour between adults and concentrates his anger against blackmailers who make the lives of homosexuals a misery. As the film unfolds and the audience witness this misery, a classic build-up of narrative expectation is brought into play by the Inspector's heartfelt assertion that if only one blackmail victim had the courage to come forward, he could do something.

New attitudes

The film is an important precursor of newer attitudes towards homosexuals which were to culminate a decade later in the gay movement. The character of Melville Farr epitomises these changes. At the start he is secretive and ashamed, refusing to see Boy or even speak to him on the phone. He later admits; 'I thought he was trying to blackmail me.' It takes the knowledge of Boy's motivations to galvanise him into positive action. Boy has in fact been trying to shield him from blackmail by stealing money from his employers in a brave but futile attempt to pay off the blackmailer for the negative of a photograph of the two of them together. Boy's last action before being apprehended by the police was to attempt to destroy his collection of press cuttings about Farr, which Boy's friend has retrieved and brought to Farr.

Both Boy and his friend are attractive, ordinary-looking young men, a very important point for positive representation. The half-burnt pile of press-cuttings attests to Boy's continuing devotion to Farr. Boy's suicide when he thought Farr was rejecting him is yet more evidence of the depth of his feelings, as well as his courage in not betraying the 'secret'.

Once Farr takes the decision to act positively, his character is seen to develop in courage and moral responsibility. Jolted by the injustice of Boy's death, Farr is clearly prepared to risk his career and marriage to expose the blackmailers' injustice. He enlists the help of Boy's friend, saying 'fear is the oxygen of blackmail' and asking the friend to 'watch for signs of fear' among his circle. The friend clearly points out to Farr that his actions will bring him down.

The emotional impact on Farr's wife, Laura, of seeing the newspaper headline about her husband's involvement with the suicide leads to a climactic confrontation where she draws her husband out into declaring his true feelings. The audience, significantly, never see the blackmail photograph so pivotal to the plot. Instead, we see various people's reactions to it, mainly Laura's. On seeing the photo she asks: 'Why is he crying?' and Farr replies; 'Because I just told him I couldn't see him again.'

The ensuing conversation imbues Laura's character with strength and psychological credibility. She doesn't hesitate to point out the pain and emotion on both men's faces in the photo, and makes her husband come clean and declare: 'I stopped seeing him because I wanted him.' To which she replies: 'You don't call that love?' Her subsequent courageous declaration that she will stand by her husband gives Farr courage to continue his pursuit.

Melville Farr has other supporters in his quest for justice. The Inspector admires and supports him. Boy's friend advises him and makes enquiries on his behalf in London's homosexual community. It is

this friend who notices that Eddie Henry is looking harassed and has decided to sell his business and move out, thus enabling Farr to home in on one of the blackmail suspects.

Ambiguous messages

Certain figures in the film are presented in such a way as to reverse conventional audience expectations, a recognised genre tactic in the thriller/detective tradition. The bowler-hatted man in the pub who seems to be trying to pick other men up turns out to be a plain-clothes police officer on the track of the blackmailers. When Doe's secretary and her thuggish accomplice are eventually tracked down, the case is thereby solved and genre expectations are clearly satisfied.

On the other hand, the ending of the film is ambiguous on the level of its homosexual theme, and has been much discussed. Perhaps this ambiguity is a suitable reflection of the era in which the film was made. Farr insists that Laura leave him for the duration of the difficult period ahead, when, as he points out, terrible things will be said about him and he couldn't bear to see her implicated and hurt. This is a brave act on his part, and Laura reluctantly agrees. The audience is left with several questions: Will Laura and Mel get back together again, and what kind of relationship might they have if they do? Should Laura pursue her own life? Melville Farr's final act is to tear up the photo of himself and Boy and throw it in the fire. What does this indicate about his attitude towards his own homosexuality, or his relationship with Jack Barrett? The film's final image is of Dirk Bogarde/Melville Farr leaning on the mantelpiece in a pose that conveys despair and dejection. What kind of feeling does this leave the audience with about Farr, and perhaps about homosexuals in general? Does the film as a whole portray homosexual men as sad cases or does a feeling of hope for the future emerge from the brave stand of Melville Farr and his friends?