Elle ne trouvait pas d'autre défense, elle niait pour qu'il ne la tuât pas. [*Her only defense was to deny the truth lest he kill her.*][1]

(Emile Zola 1890)

In believing that we know the truth we are placed in a situation similar to that of the characters who are expressing in a variety of ways their confidence in what they "know". Yet, in the drama, Lang exposes the emptiness of that confidence and the tenuous basis that it rests on.

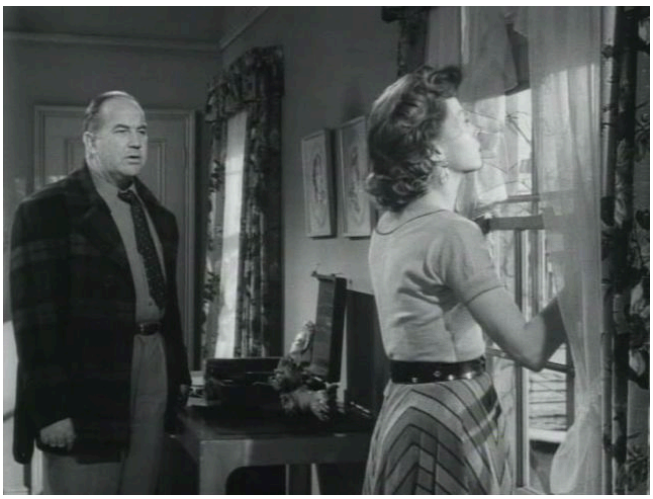
(Douglas Pye 1992:102)

Human Desire shares with other Lang films a pervading interest in epistemological concerns – what do we know and how do we know it, what do we believe we know and why do we believe it? Here, this interest becomes evident through the film's presentation of complex inter-relationships among its three central characters: Vicki (Gloria Grahame), her husband Carl (Broderick Crawford) and her lover Jeff (Glenn Ford). More specifically, the possibilities open to men and women really to know and understand one another, and the way that these possibilities both complicate heterosexual desire and are in turn complicated by it, form the subject matter of the film. When Vicki's friend Jean (Peggy Maley) remarks to Carl that 'most men see much better than they think', she is suggesting that judgment may be clouded by desire – especially for men – a proposition borne out by subsequent events. The confidence of both Carl and Jeff in their ability to 'read' Vicki's motives and veracity will be shown to be badly misplaced (and, in the process, as we shall see, our own capacity to interpret the narrative will be subjected to strain).

The tendency of men in the film to misread women is most apparent when, after an argument, Carl has been fired from his job as assistant yard-master at the railway by his boss Thurston (Carl Lee). He asks Vicki to help him get his job back by using her influence with Owens (Grandon Rhodes), a shipper who puts a lot of work the railroad's way and for whom Vicki's mother used to work. Vicki refuses, and Carl grudgingly concedes, 'All right, I know, I should have been smarter than Thurston. But you know me. One thing I can't stand is a guy tryin' to put something over on me'. Telling Vicki to forget it, Carl walks into another room, but when she follows him, asking in even tones, 'Are you sure you want me to call him?' he eagerly accepts the offer. The scene's irony is heavily dependent on our epistemological superiority over Carl (underlined by numerous refer-

ences to knowledge and certainty in the dialogue) and our increasing sympathy with Vicki's growing desire precisely to 'put something over' on Carl as revenge for his insensitivity towards her: in effect, he is asking her to prostitute herself with Owens for his sake. Thus, *she* pays the price for Carl's earlier temper tantrum with Thurston, which cost him his job. For, of course, the one thing which is made clear to us, but which Carl chooses not to see, is that Vicki's influence over Owens derives from the desire that Owens has felt for her in the past.

That Vicki and Owens have a history together is insinuated in a number of ways, though not verbalised: for example, when Carl asks her to see Owens, Vicki's expression changes perceptibly and as she answers that she cannot do so, she turns her back on Carl and looks out of the window rather than meeting his gaze, her physical withdrawal all the more pointed in view of the physically affectionate way in

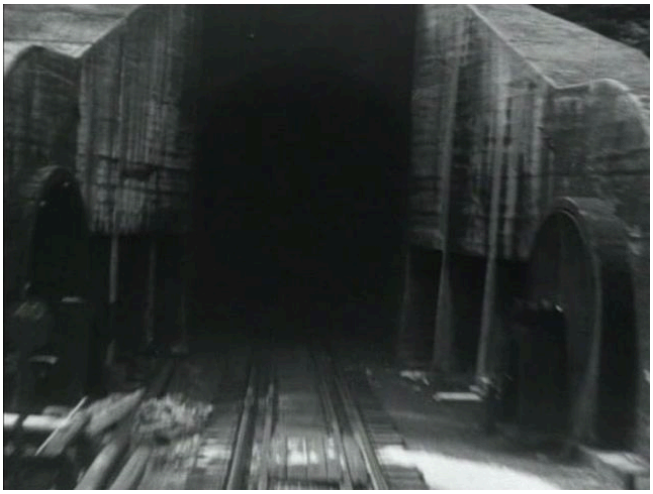


which she had behaved towards him earlier in the scene. In contrast to the clarity of such non-verbal signals, words are frequently veiled or double-edged. The audience's knowledge that Vicki and Owens have been sexually involved in some way invests his secretary's apparently innocuous greeting when Vicki arrives at Owens's office – 'Well, Mrs Buckley, we haven't seen you in some time' – with a disturbing ambiguity. It could mean that Vicki has been there before as 'Mrs Buckley' (that is, that the affair continued after her marriage). Or, it could suggest that in whatever guise, she *hasn't* been there 'in some time', that is, at least since her marriage (a reading presumably confirmed when Owens observes that Vicki's put on weight since she got married). The secretary's relatively neutral tone of voice can be read as either friendly and innocent or knowingly salacious, depending upon the assumptions made about Vicki and her relationship with Owens by the audience.

I've begun with a discussion of the moment when Vicki agrees to see Owens on Carl's behalf, not only because it is a good example of Carl's willful blindness where Vicki is concerned, but also because it may be seen as the fateful moment which sets the events of the narrative in motion. Vicki's decision is itself motivated by Carl's request and by the way he appears to want to push her into resuming the relationship with Owens despite the alternatives that she initially suggests: he could get another job, for example, or they could move away and make a fresh start, or she could return to work herself. Carl's insistence on pushing her towards Owens is ostensibly to do with having lost his job after blowing up at Thurston, thus making Carl's temper the mainspring of the plot, but the fact that he will later also push her into Jeff's arms may suggest less obvious levels of motivation than merely getting his job back. The limitations to Carl's knowledge of Vicki take the overt form of naively seeing her as innocent (he misses the indications of her past relationship with Owens which are obvious to the viewer) but perhaps he is also contriving situations – whether consciously or not - which will allow him to see Vicki as guilty, thereby justifying the punishment he metes out, rather than his having to admit to his own sadism. His knowledge of himself is thus as limited as his knowledge of her.

Before pursuing such issues in more detail, it may be useful to backtrack to the beginning of the film, to our point of entry into the narrative, which is through Glenn Ford's character, Jeff, an engine-driver who is returning to his job from a stint as a soldier in the Korean War, rather than through either Vicki or Carl. The film starts with shots of railway tracks from the front of the train that Jeff is driving home at great speed, the soundtrack music reinforcing the sense of relentless movement forward. The camera cuts from the opening shots of the tracks to a shot of Jeff in the driver's seat, apparently in control of this large machine, then back to the tracks. However, in a typical Langian inflection, any sense of Jeff being in control is immediately undermined in several ways. Firstly, there is a tension between the interior shots of Jeff (taken mainly from the side) and the exterior shots which convey the train's forward movement and are not limited to Jeff's point of view through the windscreen (for example, there is an early shot from beneath the train). Secondly, particularly as the train approaches the station, Jeff barely touches the controls, and the train appears to drive itself for much of the time as he leans back in his seat. Thirdly, and retrospectively of greatest interest, there is a shot of a tunnel from the point of view of the train as it enters it when the screen momentarily turns completely black – an implication perhaps that Jeff may have a darker side to him which is minimised and disguised by early intimations of his affability and good-natured decency. In this way, the groundwork for the links between Jeff and Carl that will be developed later in the film is

Opening shots: undermining Jeff's control



already being laid by this ominous movement into the darkness of the tunnel, even if it is only with the benefit of hindsight that we will grasp the full significance of such symbolic connections.

The pessimism of this move into darkness is followed by an overhead shot of the train as it emerges from the tunnel, which distances us from Jeff while implying a fate beyond his awareness. By contrast, the atmosphere inside the train appears to be one of easy and affectionate companionship between Jeff and his friend Alec (Edgar Buchanan), who is seated beside him, as Jeff takes out a cigarette and signals to Alec, who holds out his pipe so that Jeff can use it to light his cigarette. Thus, as in the later scene with Vicki and Carl,

what is communicated through gestures seems authentic and reliable when words may not always be so. Whereas Carl refuses to read the truth in Vicki's withdrawal from him when he suggests that she approach Owens for a favour, Jeff and Alec are in harmony with each other's thoughts, displaying a good-humoured ease which in this film is absent from the relationships between women and men.

Nonetheless, when, shortly afterwards, Alec points to his watch and indicates, again wordlessly, with gestures alone, that they are exactly on time, Jeff's smile seems forced, as if his arrival home troubles him in some way. The camera emphasises Jeff's vulnerability as the train pulls in and he looks down from the side window, a small figure suspended high above the platform and surrounded by the bulk of the train. The sense which Jeff's behaviour has just given of a rote response of good humour, rather than genuine ease, is further betrayed by his voice when a fellow railwayman greets him and asks, 'No medals?' and Jeff replies, 'They ran out of 'em'. A little later, as Jeff and Alec walk across the yard, another colleague jokes, 'How come they didn't make you a general?' and Jeff answers, again with no pretense of replying seriously, 'They'll make me a general next time'. His reaction to the world to which he has returned is uneasy, and his words ring hollow, suggesting a feeling of failure and defensiveness, despite the brave front.

When Jeff and Alec show up at Alec's home, where Jeff is going to stay, Alec sneaks up on his wife, who is hammering a nail into the wall, intending to give her a playful slap. 'Just try it', is her reply, the hammer held up threateningly in a gesture that speaks louder than words, despite the jokey tone of the scene. This seems to be a well-honed routine, with Alec's wife clearly aware of his presence before she turns around. The couple play-act marital aggression with considerable relish; this 'good' marriage seems intended to represent at least a partial contrast with Carl and Vicki's 'bad' one. Nevertheless, the hammer aimed at Alec's head provides an anticipation, however light-hearted, of the knife that will be used by Carl in his whittling on the train as he takes Vicki to her meeting with Owens. As Carl's later actions make clear, the everyday uses of such tools can easily be subverted.

Further, whereas Alec's house is almost a cliché of suburban 'niceness', complete with a child riding a tricycle on the pavement outside as a woman walks past with a pram, Carl's and Vicki's house, on the other hand, is both shabbier and stands on its own just a few steps from the tracks on the edge of the railway yard, its white picket fence underlining the isolation of its inhabitants and their pretensions to respectability. Both households, however, harbour implications of disappointment and potential violence, and these are most fully developed in the parallels between Jeff and Carl.

Initially, Jeff presents himself as being firmly on the side of the ordinary and the innocent (like the hammer and the knife), an allegiance confirmed by his remark that the town looks 'one hundred per cent' better than Korea. Still, this remark again sounds forced, an effect compounded a little later when he gives a kimono to Alec's daughter Ellen (Kathleen Case), a gesture which not only brings a bit of the Orient back home with him but perhaps reveals a desire to exoticise Ellen rather than to accept her as she is: a small-town girl with an interest in settling down with Jeff. Later in the same scene, when Ellen tells him that he needs to find the right girl – clearly with herself in mind – his voice breaks when he answers, 'You know one?'; Ellen senses his resistance and at this point keeps any further thoughts to herself. Our growing conviction that Jeff's return has landed him in a situation which he experiences as a dead end is reinforced too by the way the dynamism of the train's movement in the opening shots of the film is followed by the engine being detached and rotated on a turntable once it arrives in the station, no longer moving under its own steam or under Jeff's control, before being shunted off and stowed in a shed at the end of a siding.

The film's concern with the risks of drawing conclusions based on faulty or limited points of view is foregrounded in a number of ways in the early stages of the film. For example, just as Alec and Jeff are about to arrive back home, Alec cleans the window of the train to get a better view, and when they walk across the yard shortly before they meet Carl, we see a sign there that read: SAFETY FIRST THINK which could well be sounding a warning to the film's viewers, as well as to its male characters. Along similar lines, our first sight of Vicki, when Carl

returns home and enters the bedroom, reveals her lying on her back looking up at her outstretched leg as she admires the new stockings she's just bought, dramatising the difference – here, quite literally – between her viewpoint and Carl's. When she agrees to telephone Owens, she does so standing directly in front of the television, in place of its screen, presenting herself as another sort of image to Carl.

Carl's apparent lack of awareness of the front that Vicki is presenting to him – his misplaced confidence in his ability to know her – becomes evident as we watch the film, leaving us with a sense of knowing better than Carl, whose condescension is reinforced by his unattractive appearance and a certain crassness in the mix of self-satisfaction and self-pity he presents. The contrast with Jeff's much more attractive combination of vulnerability and modest good nature prepare us – along with the relative star status of the three lead actors – to see Jeff and Vicki as a much more suitable couple than Vicki and Carl. Our early sympathetic involvement with Jeff and Vicki, however, may partially blind us to the fact that it is not just the characters' access to each other's motives and histories which is limited, but ours as well. In our case too, judgment may be weakened by the wish for a certain sort of narrative (where Vicki gets the better of Carl, say, and finds happiness with Jeff), which has the effect of suppressing or delaying our realisation that Jeff is not such a positive alternative to Carl after all. The film thus mobilises both our desires for particular outcomes and our eventual disillusionment with Jeff – and to some extent with Vicki – at the end.

We've already seen that Jeff has not had a 'successful' war (not only did he come up short on medals and promotions, but he jokes to Ellen that the officers kept all the pretty women for themselves), whereas Carl is fed up with being chewed out by his boss. The self-images of both men, in terms of conventional masculinity, are less than fully robust. Carl's one advantage over Jeff is that he has somehow managed to get himself an attractive wife, a fact that he casually drops into their brief conversation when they first meet as Jeff and Alec cross the railway yard; in a matter of fact tone of voice, Carl remarks that he worked so many double shifts the previous week that 'I'd get home nights, my wife'd hardly recognise me'. Although the talk is mainly of Thurston and his treatment of Carl, Jeff immediately picks up on the reference to Vicki, commenting to Alec,

once Carl has gone, 'Got himself a wife, huh?'. Alec's reply – 'Yes, sir, he sure did' – both reinforces our sense of the status which this marriage confers on Carl and hints at a mismatch between them that can lead to no good (implying simultaneously that Carl's wife is really something, and also out of his league).

Carl appears to be compensating for his diet of humiliation at Thurston's hands not merely by enjoying such an extraordinary wife but by being seen to do so by other men. Jeff's eventual relationship with Vicki is already being prepared for, and it will have a complex causality indeed: in different ways, both men use Vicki to save face in response to disappointment, in the context of a film where, ironically, 'face' (or appearance) is both evanescent and misleading. As Jeff and Alec walk off through the smoke from a nearby brazier in the yard, the way the smoke envelops them provides a graphic expression of the ambiguities of motives and identities at stake in the film. The scene then dissolves to Alec's and Jeff's arrival home, as mentioned earlier, showing Alec's jokey attempt to slap his wife and her retaliation with the hammer, as well as Jeff's uneasy resistance to Ellen's implicit offer of an 'ordinary' romance.

The next scene, of Carl's return home, has also already been discussed. The juxtaposition of the two homecomings, each introduced through a dissolve, reinforces the parallels between Jeff and Carl, and Vicki's first appearance here may remind us of her function as a link between them (this has already been implied in the course of the brief meeting in the railway yard). The fates of all three become even more closely enmeshed when Jeff turns out to be the driver of the train on which Carl and Vicki travel to her meeting with Owens, though their paths don't actually cross until the return trip home, when Jeff is off duty and a passenger like them. The main thing which has happened between the train journeys there and back is that Vicki has got Carl his job back. However, in striking contrast to the earlier homecoming scene when he'd been so blind to the signs of Vicki's physical withdrawal from him, he is this time quick to spot her resistance to his embrace when she meets up with him at her friend Jean's apartment, prior to the return train journey, and to pick up on the nuances of her speech: 'Oh, don't paw at me. I'm sick of it from all of you'.

Carl's furious response is interesting in that his feelings of anger towards Owens ('He palmed you off on me, didn't he?') take shape as deadly violence towards Vicki ('Admit it. Admit it or I'll kill you'). If Vicki's function has been to shore up his insecure masculinity by providing him with the status of husband to a desirable wife, this becomes unsustainable once it emerges that Owens got there first. Vicki is no longer a 'trophy wife', but comes to represent yet another humiliation, though one less openly displayed than when the loudspeaker in the railway yard so publicly summoned Carl to Thurston for the dressing-down. However, although Owens is a witness to Carl's humiliation (through his knowledge of his own past with Vicki), Vicki remains its embodiment, so that when Carl murders Owens on the train, Owens' death does little to alleviate Carl's unarticulated anger towards Vicki, which expresses itself in increasingly sadistic ways. Vicki's dilemma is a very real one in view of the double bind set up by Carl. In effect, he requires her to tell the truth so that he can justify punishing her, while insisting that he'll kill her if she lies. It is little wonder that, as Vicki tries to develop a strategy of self-preservation, her behaviour becomes more and more ambivalent, since her husband – and eventually Jeff – give her no way out.

Carl's concentration on the past (in his angry apprehension that Vicki married him straight from a relationship with Owens) oddly displaces any concern on his part with what Vicki has had to do *now* to convince Owens to get Carl back his job, and it likewise distracts *us* from the fact that we have no idea of what has taken place off-screen. Did Owens merely 'paw at' Vicki – and did she resist? – or did things go much further? The eager welcome that Owens gives her when she comes to his compartment on the train does nothing to clarify this, but what is so Langian is the extent to which our awareness of the gaps in our understanding is deferred by more pressing narrative concerns, in particular Carl's murder of Owens immediately after Carl pushes Vicki into the compartment ahead of himself.

After the murder, Carl sends Vicki out of Owens' compartment to the train's corridor where Jeff is smoking, ostensibly in order to get Jeff out of the corridor so that Carl, who has Owens' blood on him, can return to their own compartment unseen, but it is an action that, at first glance, makes little sense (especially given the way that Carl carelessly wipes the blood from the knife onto the jacket of his suit, where it is readily visible). Not only does it bring Vicki to Jeff's attention extraordinarily blatantly, but it does so in a manner which, once the murder is discovered and Vicki's relationship to Carl has been revealed, is far more likely to arouse Jeff's suspicions. The act of returning to their compartment unobserved could more sensibly have been achieved after Jeff had finished his smoke and left the corridor of his own accord, though, once again, we are given no time to reflect on such troubling matters, our attention and interest redirected instead to the first meeting of Vicki and

Jeff. Retrospectively, however, one can make sense of Carl's act of pushing Vicki towards Jeff by seeing it as a repetition of his earlier act of pushing her towards Owens. The relationship between Vicki and Jeff which results from Carl's manipulations provides him with a reason – however much he may refuse such knowledge, at least at the conscious level – to continue to despise and punish her now that Owens is dead.

Vicki's initial approach to Jeff (from which their relationship develops) is therefore necessarily built upon lies – in terms both of Jeff's ignorance of Carl's backstage orchestrations and of Vicki's involvement with Owens – and it will also give Jeff a reason to despise and punish Vicki once he discovers what he takes to be the truth, and, thus, to maintain his uneasy collusion with Carl. His willingness to get involved with Vicki when she approaches him on the train is made clear by his ease and smiles throughout the scene, suggesting his smug appreciation of the chance of a brief encounter with no strings attached, but when he learns that she is Carl's wife his manner shifts dramatically as he suspects that he's been had, an effect to be repeated with the revelations to come.

Apart from a passing brakeman, the only people we see on the train are Owens, Carl, Vicki and Jeff, and the effect is of a symbolic drama being played out in stark and abstract terms. This sense of symbolism is most strikingly apparent when, at Carl's instigation, Vicki approaches Jeff, whose presence is represented by a cloud of cigarette smoke, with Jeff himself just out of sight. The effect recalls the moment in the railway yard, when Alec and Jeff walk through the smoke from a brazier, and it is echoed again when Carl and Vicki disembark and see Jeff on the platform, the steam from the train swirling around Jeff as he approaches them and discovers that Vicki is married to Carl, and then again as Carl and Vicki walk away. These two symbolic scenes following Owens' murder thus reinforce the implications present at earlier moments of the film that Jeff's identity is unstable and his motives uncertain.

As Carl's and Vicki's relationship continues to deteriorate in the days that follow the murder, Carl concludes that 'It would've been better if I never found out about you and Owens', though he continues to push her towards Jeff. Thus, he encourages Jeff to call Vicki by her first name when Jeff comes upon them in a bar, and goes on to comment pointedly that he doesn't mind his friends dancing with his wife. Once Jeff and his wife have helped him home, he staggers drunkenly to his room, leaving Jeff and Vicki together in the adjoining room, thereby both facilitating and turning his back on what he has no wish to see. However, his lack of interest in asking Vicki to reveal anything further – for what more does he need to know? – and his turning to drink as consolation for the knowledge he already believes himself to possess, do little to relieve the pressure on Vicki to continue to account for herself, since, by this stage, the desire to find out about Vicki's past has been transferred to Jeff: 'Don't you think you owe me an explanation?'. Her conversations with Jeff as their relationship begins to deepen are a combination of increasingly intimate truths and self-protective lies, the latter circling round the murder of Owens and her relationship with him in the past.

The scenes in which Vicki begins to open up to Jeff mark the beginnings of a shift in our relationship to her. This is partly to do with the fact that the sense of epistemological privilege that we have enjoyed up to this point (the feeling that, unlike Carl and Jeff, we are aligned with Vicki in knowing what really happened) is now intermingled with a deepening awareness that there is much we don't know. Our uncertainties regarding how far Vicki is telling the truth are partly to do with the film's elisions, which are retrospectively brought to our attention as we try to match Vicki's accounts of the murder and of her relationships with Carl and Owens with our own observations earlier in the film.

There are five conversations between Vicki and Jeff which make the gaps in our knowledge of the film's events increasingly evident. The first takes place after Jeff has helped Vicki bring Carl home from the bar; Carl takes himself off to bed, as we've seen, leaving the way clear for Jeff to be alone with Carl's wife. Although Vicki lies to Jeff about her part in the murder, claiming that she found Owens dead, it is understandable that she should try to protect herself when she hardly knows Jeff and has no idea whether he can be trusted. Our first hand knowledge of what really happened, as well as the ready access we appear to have to her motives here, ensure that our alignment with Vicki, as opposed to Jeff, initially remains intact. More perplexing, however, are her revelations about Carl's jealousy and brutality, since her body language (eyes lowered, face turned away) is reminiscent of her reaction to Carl's request that she go to Owens to get him his job back, a reaction which we readily took at that stage as evidence of her holding back from Carl the knowledge of her relationship with Owens in the past. The music in the present scene with Jeff, as well as the emphatic final dissolve as Vicki tells him, 'I'll never be able to thank you for what you said at the inquest', contribute further to an impression of insincerity and self-interest on her part. Nevertheless, her bruises are real, leaving us confounded in our attempt to distinguish lies from truth. Given Carl's behaviour elsewhere, as well as the bruises, it is reasonable to conclude that what she says about Carl is surely true, but the film's rhetoric and that of Gloria Grahame's performance are sufficiently at odds with this to unsteady us.

The scene marks a key stage in the growth of Jeff's commitment to her, but it also raises disturbing questions about whether Jeff's attraction to her is based on a desire to protect her from Carl, or whether the bruises have the effect of awakening fantasies of brutality in *him*. (This latter reading finds some support, perhaps, when Jeff later asks Ellen how you can tell the right girl from the wrong one, and she replies 'By the way you love her', admitting that she doesn't know much 'about the kind of love that makes people hurt one another'.) Thus, not only is our sense of having easy access to Vicki's motives and truthfulness rendered less secure, but our first impressions of Jeff as attractively

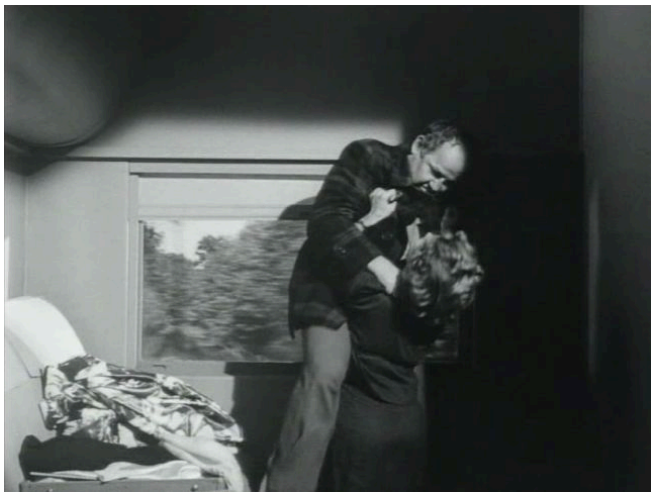
vulnerable and good-natured are taking on progressively darker tones.

The next conversation between Jeff and Vicki takes place as they walk in the railway yard, each uncertain about the other ('You never can tell about men, can you?' 'I'd say the same thing about women, you know'), yet beginning to show signs of trust and growing intimacy, touching hands as they talk. As in the earlier scene when Jeff refused to believe that Carl was capable of violence until Vicki showed him her bruises, he now counters her claim that 'Most women are unhappy. They just pretend they aren't', with a dogmatic 'That's not true'. But the scene is tender and, in spite of some evasiveness on his part about the war, the two appear much more open to each other than before; we are given no reason to doubt Vicki when she tells Jeff she'd married Carl because he'd seemed 'decent', providing a parallel, perhaps, with our own wish to see her with Jeff because of *his* apparent decency, and suggesting a similar prospect of disillusionment in the end. They are now joined in a shared betrayal of Carl, but it quickly becomes an open secret, as Alec makes clear when he remarks to Jeff soon after that the whole town knows.

In the course of the third conversation, which takes place when Vicki and Jeff meet at her friend Jean's apartment in the city, she finally tells him the truth about the murder, although her account – that Carl killed Owens because he thought she was having an affair with Owens, but she *wasn't* – continues to plant escalating doubts about what we actually know and what Vicki's words imply. Is she saying she wasn't having an affair with Owens at the time of the murder? Or in the past? Did Owens get Carl his job back courtesy of his past affair with Vicki? Or in exchange for new sexual favours? Regardless, Jeff's tone of voice contains intonations of suspicion and barely suppressed anger when Vicki tells him she can't go to the police and he realises that she had lied to him before, at least about the murder. More interestingly, he places Vicki in exactly the same double-bind as Carl had done earlier, following up his question – 'Why didn't you tell me the truth, Vicki?' – with his accusation later in the same scene: 'You had to tell me about the murder, didn't you? You had to tell me because once I knew about it I'd be in it just as deep as you are'. Clearly, Vicki just can't win, and she is finally driven to assume the very character that both men's fantasies seek to impose upon her: 'dirty' and in need of punishment.

In pushing Jeff to kill her oppressive husband, Vicki does turn into a sort of *femme fatale*, rather than remaining the largely sympathetic victim of male jealousy and violence which she has been up to this point, and the resulting shift in our understanding produces a partial break in our alignment with her, compelling us to rethink and revise our sense of much that has gone before. Nevertheless, just as her speculation in the course of the third conversation ('If only I were free ...') is ambiguous in its implications, so it is possible, even as late as the fourth conversation, to take her spoken desire to be rid of Carl as no more than wishful thinking ('If only we'd been luckier. If something had happened to him ...'). Further, she resists Jeff's attempts to take action ('What *is* there to do? ... it's no use'), while *he* is the one who insists it doesn't have to be that way and that it isn't too late. It is only in the final scene between them, after Jeff has turned out to be unable to kill Carl, that Vicki expresses her indignation and scorn at his failure ('You couldn't kill him. You tried and you couldn't ... I guess it's only people like Carl who can kill for something they love'), her accusations playing on insecurities already hinted at in his defensiveness about the war, where killing is 'what they give you medals for,' and he came home with none. From her point of view, however, his shortcoming is not so much a failure to kill as a failure to trust her and to love her enough.

Jeff once again refutes Vicki's account of their relationship – in particular, her insistence that she loves him – and refuses to believe that she ever told him the truth about anything, 'not even about Owens'. Here, at last, is what his anger is really all about, and Vicki tells him what I think we must take as the final word about her involvement with Owens: a story of herself as a sixteen-year-old girl victimised by an older man's sexual abuse. Her willingness to share such a painful truth – as with all Vicki's attempts to be honest with both Jeff and Carl – is met by callous cruelty, as Jeff breaks off their relationship for good. The film ends with Carl catching up with Vicki on the train as she tries to run away from both him and Jeff. Vicki now has nowhere left to run, and her final account of the relationship with Owens, which she presents to Carl with some defiance, is presumably nothing more than a deliberate lie which she must surely realise will goad him into violence, as she at last gives up the effort to untangle the complicated desires and insecurities of the men who wanted her but never wanted to know her. Her words to Carl – 'You never knew me. You never bothered to figure me out' – are equally applicable to Jeff. In any case, it is the version Carl wants to hear – Vicki taking all blame upon herself as a predatory seductress after Owens's wealth – and it provides him with the justification he needs to finish her off. Carl strangles her



and falls back on his seat in the train, exhausted, and the camera cuts to Jeff, who is driving the train. Alec lights Jeff's cigarette with his pipe, just as he'd done in the film's first scene, while Jeff smiles. The overwhelming effect is of a final act of collusion among all three men as the tracks – now perfectly straight – stretch out ahead of the train.

The film has come full circle, though Vicki's death has silenced her voice and suppressed her perspective, allowing Carl and Jeff to sustain a version of the world in which male fantasies of violence towards women have been projected outward, and their own guilt denied and attributed to her. Characteristically, however, Lang has dramatised these concerns in ways that consistently embed them in problems of perception, knowledge and understanding – both for the characters and for the spectator. These failures of perception and understanding make the relationships between men and women just as liable to go bad as the boxcars of 'perishables' which Thurston accuses Carl of allowing to spoil in the unseen incident early in the film. In relationships

'spoiled' by jealousy and mistrust, lying can, at times, become a necessary strategy for self-preservation, while a bullying insistence on the truth becomes an exercise in brute power. That Broderick Crawford, who plays Carl, bears more than a passing resemblance to Senator Joseph McCarthy, and that Lang's film was released the year McCarthy finally got his come-uppance at the hands of the United States Senate, who censured him in 1954, could be no more than coincidence, but it is surely a fortuitous conjunction which may have brought an ironic smile of appreciation to Fritz Lang's face.

Deborah Thomas

Deborah Thomas, Professor of Film Studies at the University of Sunderland until her retirement in 2007, has been associated with *Movie* since she joined the editorial board in 1989; she is the author of *Beyond Genre*, of *Reading Hollywood*, and of a monograph on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

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[1] Translation by Deborah Thomas, 2011.