

# PULP



# CONTENTS

Cast and Crew ... 3

*A Death Rattle in Paperback (2017)*  
by Alexandra Heller-Nicholas ... 4

*The Letter J.G. Ballard Wrote to Me About  
My Thriller Pulp (2017)*  
by Mike Hodges ... 19

*About the Restoration ... 28*

## CAST AND CREW

Michael Caine Mickey King  
Mickey Rooney Preston Gilbert

Lionel Stander Ben Dinuccio

Lizabeth Scott Betty Cippola

Nadia Cassini Liz

Dennis Price The Englishman

Al Lettieri Miller

Leopoldo Trieste Marcovic

Amerigo Tot Parisan

Roberto Sacchi The Bogeyman

Giulio Donnini Typing Pool Manager

Joe Zammit Cordina The Beautiful Thing

Written and Directed by Mike Hodges

Produced by Michael Klinger

Music Composed and Conducted by George Martin

Director of Photography Ousama Rawi

Editor John Glen

## A DEATH RATTLE IN PAPERBACK

by Alexandra Heller-Nicholas

From its opening close-ups of a Dictaphone and a typewriter onward, Mike Hodges' *Pulp* (1972) is a film about voices. One of the greatest fictional exposés of the unreliable narrator, there's a distinct disconnect between the content of what we hear during this opening sequence – saucy yet inescapably tacky machismo-drenched erotica – with the way it *sounds*, thanks to Michael Caine's hilariously monotone voice-over. This is, of course, one of the film's first jokes, and there will be many. *Pulp*'s punch lies in what makes it such a curious beast from an ontological perspective, even before Caine appears on screen: what we see and what we are told are not always the same thing. Not only can first-person narrators lie, but film can, too. In *Pulp*, this isn't a cute narrative gimmick, but ultimately a strategy to expose and critique the intersection power and corruption. In this way – while very different movies – at its heart it is thematically loyal to the spirit of Hodges' previous feature, the iconic *Get Carter* (1971).

As the title indicates, *Pulp* is a parody of hardboiled fiction. Caine's Mickey Spillanesque Chester Thomas "Mickey" King is a figure of ridicule and pity as much as any kind of the literary form's traditional tortured-yet-macho investigator-protagonist. With his white suit and signature giant square-rimmed spectacles, Caine is in *Pulp* the epitome of British 70s masculinity, but that he is so joyously goofy – even bumbling at times – underscores Hodges' broader deconstruction (rather than unquestioning proliferation) of that very image. *Pulp* gently and lovingly mocks that kind of macho hardboiled figure rather than explicitly championing it as such. The film's energy comes from the tension between its status as a replication and parody





of pulp fiction: its dynamic stems not as much from its increasingly complex (even deliberately convoluted) plot twists and turns as much as it does from its status as both a caricature and as an exemplar of pulp itself. In *Pulp*, the fantasy of the story Mickey tells us via voice-over is consistently contradicted by the often banal 'reality' that renders him a little more fallible than the top-shit hot-shot hardboiled protagonist he keeps telling us he is. The 'reality' of the author's life itself often stands in contrast to the more fast-paced lifestyle he tells us that comes with it: as Mickey says at one point, "The writer's life would be ideal, except for the writing."

## From Get Carter to Pulp (and Back Again)

Knowing and self-reflexive, *Pulp* is also a lot of fun: one of its first moments of slapstick is when a truck named 'Al Capone' knocks the doors off two taxis that have just collided as Caine first appears. *Pulp* follows Mickey's misadventures as a ghost writer on a fictional Mediterranean island for the memoirs of former silver screen great Preston Gilbert (Mickey Rooney). Ditching his wife and family, and what he sarcastically calls his "lucrative job as a funeral director" in London, he "elbowed the ones he loved" to pursue what he described as a "burning creative urge". While no literary star, he cobbles together a functional career as a pulp writer, Hodges not missing the opportunity for some deliberately tawdry one-liners with Mickey's aliases including Les Behan and S. Odomy on books with titles including *The Organ Grinder* and *My Gun Is Long*. Mickey's path to Gilbert is a convoluted one: the identity of his client is at first fiercely protected when he is initially hired by Ben Dinuccio (Lionel Stander) to take the job, then sent on a complicated journey to meet a mysterious contact who will lead him towards his client. Mistaking that contact to be American priest-lecturer Miller (Al Lettieri), their meeting nevertheless kicks off in earnest a complex (and consciously overwrought) narrative of deception, deceit and – in true pulp fiction style – murder.

It's not necessary to read too deeply into production histories of the film to realise that by moving to more superficially light-hearted terrain with *Pulp*, Hodges was indulging in a passion for comedy. While defining the film itself as a political satire, Hodges was clearly (to resort to the vernacular) in it for the lulz. At a screening of *Get Carter* in September 1993, Hodges said, "I must say that the most seductive thing about *Carter* was hearing an audience laugh – I love hearing laughter." That addition underpins his motivations for making *Pulp*, and he has often expressed similar sentiments in other interviews. But these similarities aside, in tone at least *Get Carter* and *Pulp* are a world apart. Encouraged by the response of audiences to the more comic aspects of *Get Carter*, Hodges was keen to make a straight-out comedy film, in part also due to his instinct to shift away from the more violent aspects of *Get Carter* (although he himself has admitted that much of the comedy in *Pulp* is certainly on the darker side).

It wasn't a straight leap from *Get Carter* to *Pulp*, however: in between, Hodges contributed to London Weekend Television's 1972 anthology series, *The Frighteners*, with an episode called 'The Manipulators'. Again focusing on an investigator-centred crime narrative, 'The Manipulators' – like both *Pulp* and *Get Carter* – continues Hodges' through-line of detective figures under the impression that they are in control, but ultimately revealed to be victims of cruel conspiracies linked to power. On the back of the astonishing success of *Get Carter*, producer Michael Klinger was keen to attempt to catch lightning in a bottle a second time around with Hodges and Caine. Under the auspices of their Three Michaels production company, Hodges set to work writing the script for *Pulp* with Caine specifically in mind to be the figure of Mickey. But Hodges was also keen for *Pulp* to feel fresh, so he enlisted a number of key creatives who were on the whole new to feature films. This included most notably both cinematographer Ousama Rawi (who had previously worked on David Bowie's film debut, Michael Armstrong's short *The Image* in 1969, and would re-join Caine again in 1974 on Don Siegel's extraordinary *The Black Windmill*) and production designer Patrick Downing, *Pulp* being his only







non-television credit. Despite Hodges desire for *Pulp* to be something entirely new, however, many (including Hodges himself) have noted the inescapable areas of overlap with *Get Carter*: not simply the central casting of Caine, but the fact that both concern the centrality of exploited, violated young women and the comparative lack of punishment of the power élite who are responsible.

## Life, Death and Cinematic Immortality on the Rich Man's Alcatraz

Originally titled *Memoirs of a Ghost Writer*, Hodges cited the rise of neo-fascism in Italy at the time as one of the factors that sparked the political conspiracy elements of the script. Cinematic influences included John Huston's *Beat the Devil* (1954), with Rooney's character explicitly inspired by George Raft (although Gilbert also obviously also recalls other mob-connected Hollywood stars of the era like Frank Sinatra). Painted as a deliberately absurd figure – at one point he poses ridiculously in front of his full-length mirror in his Y-front underpants, less a figure of strength than an object of pity – Rooney's performance is deliberately over the top. His casting as a forgotten has-been is a knowing one, straddling comedy and tragedy in equal measure. "Is he still alive?", Mickey asks when the identity of his client is revealed, a shared foreshadowing of Gilbert's fate, trapped as he is on the small isolated island that Mickey cannily calls "a rich man's Alcatraz".

*Pulp* was filmed in Malta over winter 1971/72 after pressure from the Mafia made it too difficult to shoot in Italy. Hodges owned property in Malta and knew the country well, but Caine loathed it and suffered through the production. At his end, Hodges found working with Hollywood greats Rooney and Lizbeth Scott a challenge, and the film later faced post-production issues when the initial editor was fired for

cutting the film in a more art-house manner against Hodges' requests. Despite the strong critical response, *Pulp* was of little interest to actual audiences when it was finally released: it effectively fizzled out of memory, receiving very little attention by home entertainment distributors during the 1980s and 1990s, becoming close to forgotten.

In some obvious ways, *Pulp* is inescapably a product of its time: Mickey at one points mocks Miller by calling him "a big girl", demanding he "get over his menopause by morning" and discovering – after Miller's apparent murder – that he was a "tranny". But watching the film 45 years after its initial release, what is more immediately striking is just how contemporary it feels in terms of its deeper thematic core: the bad guys are still getting away with it more than ever, and yet we still try to console ourselves with endless fictions about how empowered we are, that we have some aspect of control, some degree of power in the way the world is run. If this was true in 1972, it is no less so today.

For all its classical Hollywood stars returned to their once reigning place on the silver screen and cute references to *The Maltese Falcon*, *Pulp*'s ultimate punch stems not from its nostalgia or its surface giggles – of which there are many. Like *Get Carter*, what renders it still devastating and sadly relevant is its inescapable central premise: power and corruption will endure and will remain unpunished, no matter how flagrant the crimes or unjust the outcomes. One of the most shocking images in *Pulp* from today's perspective is what was no doubt then intended as simply a joke: a police line-up of priests. While on the surface it's 'funny' for its contrast of a symbol of 'good' in a context of 'evil' (see also the line-up of Santas in Lewis Jackson's 1980 horror classic *Christmas Evil*), from a contemporary perspective it is almost overwhelming, inextricably granted a degree of further gravitas by the horrors still being revealed about decades of sexual, physical and





emotional abuse of children and the concurrent high-level cover-up riddling the Roman Catholic church.

Putting its slapstick and goofy intertextuality to the side, the darker, more potent thematic impact of *Pulp* hinges upon the ultimate failure – and unrelenting self-delusion – of Mickey himself. By increasingly separating his voice-over description of what he tells us is happening with the 'reality' we see unfolding before us on the screen, Hodges actively destabilises the omnipotence and reliability of pulp fiction's signature first-person narration. We see this in the film's opening moments and it only continues to ramp up in its overtness throughout the film: at one point, Mickey tells us when he has a sexy woman visitor in his room that, "I flipped off the light and showed her the door, I have my pride." What we see in the scene, however, contradicts this: approaching her in the bed, he simply says, "Move over." He's not the man of strength and resolve he would like us to believe he is. Here, the tension between narration and action is a convention used for comic effect, but in the film's concluding scenes the Mickey he tells us he is and the Mickey we see deviate almost completely. The heroic bravado with which he speaks after the death of Miller on the beach contradicts the fact we see him pass out with a gunshot wound to the leg (itself a conscious call-back to *Get Carter*).

With the true villain of the film finally revealed, Mickey rewrites the ending to his story so he is the victor. But what we see is far from this scenario, with him utterly at the mercy of his captor-hosts, representatives of a power élite who always have – if *Get Carter* is anything to go by – and always will literally get away with murder. As these élite take part in a wild boar hunt, it's unmissable that Mickey himself is nothing but prey in a sport that has a long, long heritage. In contrast to his own telling of his story – a version that casts him as the hero – as the film ends, Mickey is far from victorious. The mask momentarily slips as he vows "I'll get the bastards

yet", watching his enemy drink champagne to toast his victory over the boar. Mickey probably won't get the bastards – we know it, Hodges knows it, and ultimately, as the film concludes, Mickey himself knows it – but perhaps there are small victories to be found elsewhere, if not for him, then for us. After all, neglected films can sometimes return to the light, reminding us of cinema's own simple, inescapable truths: for starters, no one says the word "bastard" with more venom, passion and humour than Michael Caine.

*Alexandra Heller-Nicholas is an Australian film critic and an editor of the film journal Senses of Cinema.*







# THE LETTER THAT J.G. BALLARD WROTE TO ME ABOUT MY THRILLER PULP

by Mike Hodges

*The following article was originally published on the BFI website on 26 July 2017. Reprinted with kind permission.*

*Dear Mike,*

*Yes, Pulp is a special favourite of mine – I must have watched my tape a dozen times, or more – a wonderfully witty script, and the brilliant attention to detail, as in Get Carter – so many superb performances, like the typing pool manager, or Caine himself, Lionel Stander and [A] Lettieri. Lizabeth Scott was never better, and of course best of all was the great Mickey Rooney, totally unappreciated by film critics – you drew a fantastic performance out of him, which can't have been easy – I love the scene of his dressing, moving layers of flattering mirrors past himself – I take my hat off – “A tip – don't stand too close to him” – a great film.*

*Sadly, I haven't seen Black Rainbow, but I'll try to track it down. It's great news about your new film, and the title is excellent. It sounds just right for Clive Owen, who's slightly wooden in an interesting way – a couple of years ago Channel 5 showed a very interesting American thriller with him.*

*[...]*

*Meanwhile, best of luck with the new film – it will be great.*

*Best wishes,*

*Jim*

Since I first went to the cinema in the early 1950s I was always partial to B movies. They were short, fast, black and white in every sense, and often better than the 'A' films they were married to. This enthusiasm ran parallel with my discovery of the dark literature of Chandler, Cain, Conrad, West and (much despised by the cultural élite) Mickey Spillane. So, after *Get Carter* (1971), when Michaels Klinger and Caine decided to make another film with me, I chose to write an original screenplay on spec. If they liked it then we'd make it, if not we wouldn't. That script was *Pulp*. And they liked it!

Originally called *Memoirs of a Ghost Writer*, its conception was a rather convoluted affair. In *Rumour*, the 1969 television film that brought me to the attention of producer Michael Klinger, I'd used the voiceover technique much favoured by B moviemakers. In this film, it was the voice of a sleazy newspaper gossip columnist, a Walter Winchell replicant, that constantly revealed the discrepancy between what he was reporting and what the viewer was seeing. Deciding to use the same device was probably the first element in constructing *Pulp's* script.

But *Rumour* was also very political. It was about the responsibilities of a free press and how those without influence can be badly mangled by devious and malicious journalism. For the new script, I was now seeking a similar political edge and it came from the most unlikely of places: Italy. I was dumbfounded when the current elections there showed strong support for the fascist party. Can it be a mere 25 years after the war that this malignant ideology re-emerged? It was barely believable.

But how to incorporate it into a narrative? It then occurred to me that many B movies were about another Italian institution, the Mafia, and there were many





similarities between them. Unlike Hitler and Nazism, I'd always found Mussolini and Italian fascism close to comic opera. Their uniforms and strutting were comedic not sinister, even if their intentions weren't. Intuitively, my thinking shifted to satire; more Fellini than Bertolucci.

In Italy tragedy can quickly and easily turn into comedy. In 1953 a young woman, Wilma Montesi, was found drowned on a beach 15 miles south of Rome. On the basis of very shaky evidence the communist press talked of murder and a political cover-up in an attempt to undermine the Christian Democrat government. Rumours were rife when the doctors who examined Wilma's body contradicted each other. She was a virgin; she wasn't a virgin; she was pregnant; her stomach was empty, was full of ice cream, was full of drugs.

Suspects were arrested then set free. Soon film stars, priests, prostitutes, members of a hunting syndicate, aristocrats all became embroiled. Even the 'Wizard of Milan' helped the police with their investigations. The scandal continued for years and the case remains unresolved to this day. Of course, the journalists (it was the birth of the paparazzi!) had more copy than they could dream of. Along with the rest of the world, I remember following every crazy twist and turn as they unfolded. The Montesi scandal was to be the third element in my script.

The fourth was George Raft, the American actor identified with portrayals of gangsters in 1930s and 40s crime melodramas. When his career went into decline he ended up in a London casino as a greeter. Worse, his purported connections with the Mafia made it difficult for him to re-enter the US. This was the source of my first imagined character: Preston Gilbert. Preston, too, was an ex-gangster

star, small of stature as many of them were, and now exiled on an island in the Mediterranean. He was eventually to be played by *the* Mickey Rooney.

I have, of course, omitted the one ingredient that was there from the beginning: Michael Caine. For Michael I created the character of Mickey King, a desperate writer of bad pulp novels under suggestive pseudo-names (O.R. Gan; S. Odomy) and titles (*My Gun Is Long*; *The Organ Grinder*) who gets suckered into ghost writing (hence the original title) the biography of the faded star Preston Gilbert. The consequences of this career move have a certain irony in that King is trapped as securely as a fly on fly paper by a plot every bit as lurid as his own novels.

Once the script was accepted I went to Italy to do more research and look for locations. I visited Mussolini's mausoleum and was led to a small shop which sold, illegally, Il Duce memorabilia. Among my purchases was an LP of his political rants which can be heard emitting from a loudspeaker van in the film's fictional election campaign.


But when it came to choosing locations there was a problem, a big problem. It seemed that everywhere I wanted to shoot (so the Italian production manager informed me) a protection fee would have to be paid to – yes – the Mafia. I soon realised we were going to be either taken to the cleaners, or fitted with cement slippers, so I contacted Michael Klinger and suggested we shift the whole production to Malta, an island I knew well. We did just that.

There is a literary postscript to all this. Over the years I noticed that writers in particular wanted to talk about this film. They enjoyed the labyrinthine plot, the







The background of the page is a dark, teal-colored image featuring a dense pattern of palm fronds. Overlaid on this pattern is a repeating watermark that reads "ARROW VIDEO" in a light, semi-transparent font, oriented diagonally from the top-left to the bottom-right. The text of the paragraph is centered in the upper half of the page.

literary jokes and political references. In 2002, seven years before he died, J.G. Ballard happened to see a documentary I'd made about serial killer films, *Murder by Numbers*. From there we got to correspond and in one letter he revealed that he'd watched *Pulp* at least a "dozen times". He, too, remembered almost every line and visual gag; listing them in the letter. I was over the moon. Ballard was one of my all-time heroes. I loved his books, his journalism, listening to him on the radio and seeing him on television. Needless to say, I've still got that letter, handwritten too.

## ABOUT THE RESTORATION

*Pulp* has been exclusively restored for this release by Arrow Films. The film is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.85:1 with mono audio.

The original 35mm Interpositive was scanned in 2K resolution on a Lasergraphics Director Scanner at EFilm, Burbank. Picture grading was completed on a DaVinci Resolve. Picture restoration was performed using PFClean software. Thousands of instances of dirt, debris, scratches and other instances of film wear were repaired or removed through a combination of digital restoration tools and techniques. Image stability was also improved.

Director of Photography Ousama Rawi supervised the colour grading for this new restoration. The specific visual design for *Pulp* was carefully created in shooting and lighting. This look has been faithfully reproduced for this presentation.

All original materials were made available for this restoration by MGM.

The mono soundtrack was created by MGM.

**Restoration Supervised by** James White, Arrow Films

**Restoration Services by Pinewood Studios Group**

Jake Chapman, Michael Davis, Lucie Hancock, Jashesh Jhaveri, Rob Langridge, Jon Mann, Leigh Reed, Jason Stevens, Patrick Wilbraham

**EFilm**

Sean Casey, David Morales

**MGM**

Scott Grossman



## PRODUCTION CREDITS

**Discs and Booklet Produced by** Anthony Nield

**Executive Producers** Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni

**Technical Producer** James White

**QC Manager** Nora Mehenni

**Authoring and Subtitling** The Engine House

**Design** Oink Creative

**Artwork** Nathanael Marsh

## SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Michael Brooke, John Glen, Mike Hodges, Tony Klinger, Ian Mantgani, James McCabe, Ousama Rawi, Samuel Wigley, Rob Winter





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