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*Film Noir: An Encyclopedic Reference to the*

*American Style, Editor, 3rd Edition*

*More Things Than Are Dreamt Of*

*What Ever Happened to Robert Aldrich?*

# FILM NOIR

R E A D E R

EDITED BY

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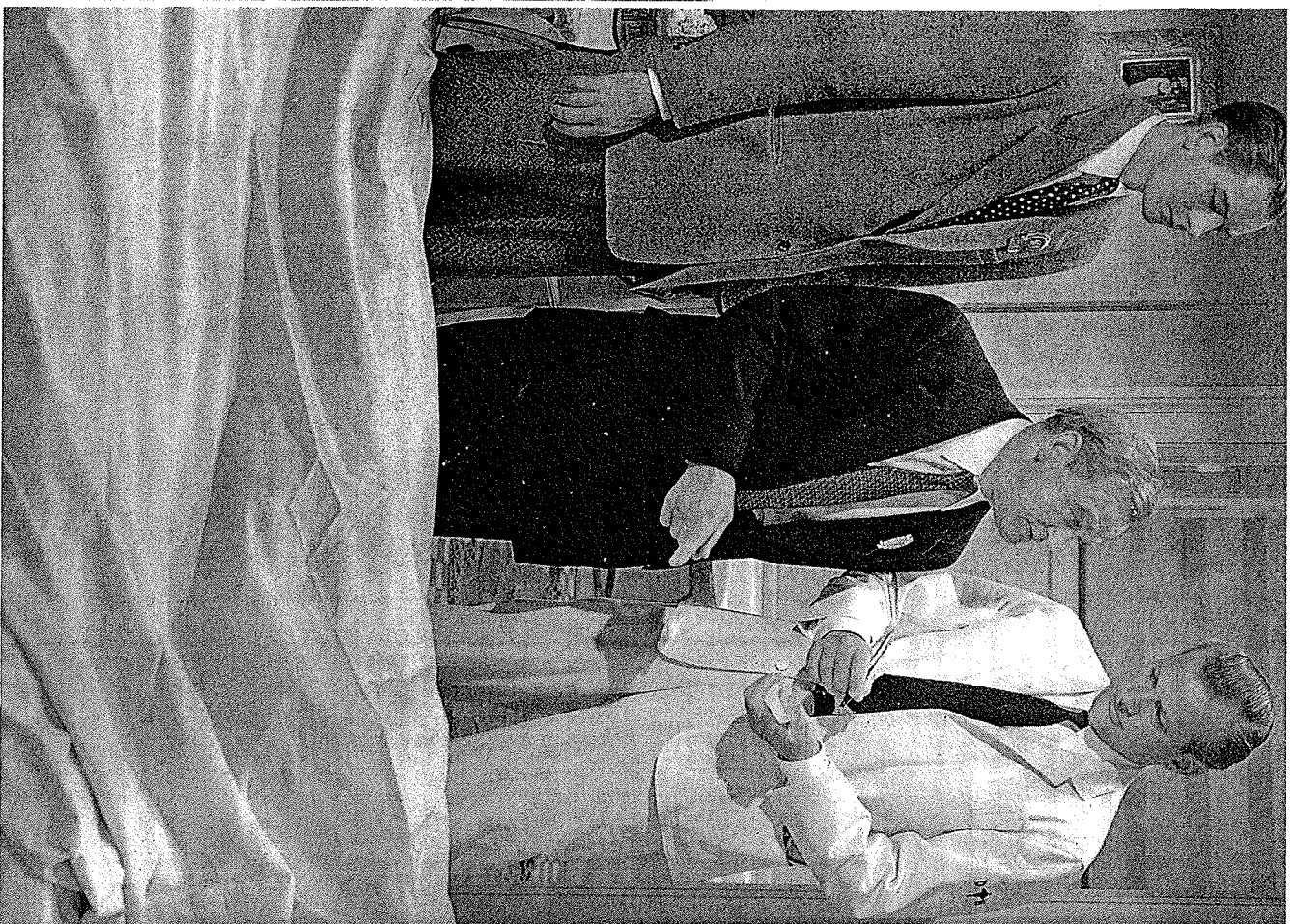
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Above, Barry Fitzgerald (center) as a traditional "brave and incorruptible" hero, Lt. Muldoon, "the diminutive Irish detective of *The Naked City*, who believes in God and works on his own time to see justice done." His short stature is emphasized when flanked by his much taller partner, Hallofran (Don Taylor, left) and an ambulance doctor (Russ Conway); but in his dark suit he nonetheless dominates the scene.

## Towards a Definition of Film Noir

Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton (1955)

[The following is excerpted from the book *Panorama du Film Noir Américain* <sup>1</sup>]

It was during the summer of 1946 that French moviegoers discovered a new type of American film. In the course of a few weeks, from mid-July to the end of August, five movies flashed one after the other across Parisian screens, movies which shared a strange and violent tone, tinged with a unique kind of eroticism: John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon*, Otto Preminger's *Laura*, Edward Dmytryk's *Murder, My Sweet*, Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity*, and Fritz Lang's *The Woman in the Window*.

Long cut off from the United States, with little news of Hollywood production during the war, living on the memory of Wyler, of Ford and Capra, ignorant even of the newest luminaries in the directorial ranks, French critics could not fully absorb this sudden revelation. Nino Frank, who was among the first to speak of "dark film" and who seemed to discern from the first the basic traits of the noir style, nonetheless wrote of *The Maltese Falcon* and *Double Indemnity* that "[these films] belong to what we used to call the police genre but that we should more appropriately describe from now on by the term 're criminal adventure' or, better still, 're criminal psychology'."<sup>2</sup> This was also the reaction of genre critics who, it must be said, failed to grasp the full impact of these releases.

But a few months later Frank Tuttle's *This Gun for Hire*, Robert Siodmak's *The Killers*, Robert Montgomery's *The Lady in the Lake*, Charles Vidor's *Gilda*, and Howard Hawks' *The Big Sleep* imposed the concept of *film noir* on moviegoers. A new "series" had emerged in the history of film.

A series can be defined as a group of motion pictures from one country sharing certain traits (style, atmosphere, subject matter...) strongly enough to mark them unequivocally and to give them, over time, an unmistakable character. Series persist for differing amounts of time: sometimes two years, sometimes ten. To some extent, the viewer decides on this. From the point of view of "filmic evolution," series spring from certain older features, from long-ago titles. Moreover they all reach a peak, that is, a moment of purest expression. Afterwards they slowly fade and disappear leaving traces and informal sequels in other genres.

The history of film is, in large part, a history of film cycles. There are, of course, certain titles that resist classification: Welles' *Citizen Kane* or Clifford Odets' *None but the Lonely Heart* are among these. Often a remarkable film cannot be classified because it is the first in a new movement and the observer lacks the necessary perspective. *Caligari* was unclassifiable before it engendered "Caligariism."

Since the start of talkies, one could cite many examples: in the United States, social realism, gangster films; in Germany, the farces from 1930 to 1933 which inspired a like movement in American comedy; in the USSR, films dedicated to the October Revolution; in France, the realism of Carné, Renoir, and Duvivier.

More recently, we have seen British comedies, a French series dealing with mythic evasions (from *L'éternel Retour* to *Singulier et Juliette*), the social documentaries of Daquin, Rouquier and Nicole Védrès. From the USSR come paeanes to the glory of collective labor and the Kolkhoz cycle. In the United States: the crime documentary (Hathaway, Kazan, Dassin), the psychological melodrama, and the new school of the Western—so many types of films, each having its particular locales, traditions, and even fans.

The existence over the last few years of a "série noir" in Hollywood is obvious. Defining its essential traits is another matter.

One could simplify the problem by assigning to film noir qualities such as nightmarish, weird, erotic, ambivalent, and cruel. All these exist in the series: but at one moment, reverie may dominate and the result is *Shanghai Gesture*, at another, eroticism comes to the fore in *Gilda*. In still other titles, the cruelty of some bizarre behavior is preeminent. Often the noir aspect of a film is linked to a character, a scene, a setting. *The Set-up* is a good documentary on boxing: it becomes a film noir in the sequence when scores are settled by a savage beating in a blind alley. *Rope* is a psychological melodrama which attaches itself to film noir through its intriguing sadism. Alternately, *The Big Sleep*, *This Gun for Hire*, and *The Lady in the Lake* seem to be typical "thrillers." We will begin by addressing the problem of definition by discussing the pictures which critics have most often dubbed "films noirs."

One last note: by convention we will deem films to be created by their directors. This is a convention because one can never know with regard to American productions whether the director is really the ultimate creator of a work. Sternberg himself said "I work on assignment, that is to say by the job. And each job order, just like those given to a cabinet maker, bookbinder, or cobbler, is for a specific piece of work."<sup>3</sup> What is the contribution of the producer, the screenwriter, the editor? Is it coincidental that the late Mark Hellinger produced three such distinctive pictures as *The Killers*, *Brute Force*, and *The Naked City*? Who can say, other than those who were there, whether Hellinger put his own mark on these films or gave Dassin and Stodmak free rein?

In reality, while there may be few instances of a director who has the final word in Hollywood, his role is certainly a significant one; and his degree of independence will logically enough increase with his commercial success. This could explain the persistence of vision in a given director's work: the theme of failure and adventure in John Huston, the theme of violence with Raoul Walsh, the theme of urban realism with Dassin, and even Sternberg, who has never strayed far from exotic sensuality. By all accounts, this convention of authorship is entirely apt.

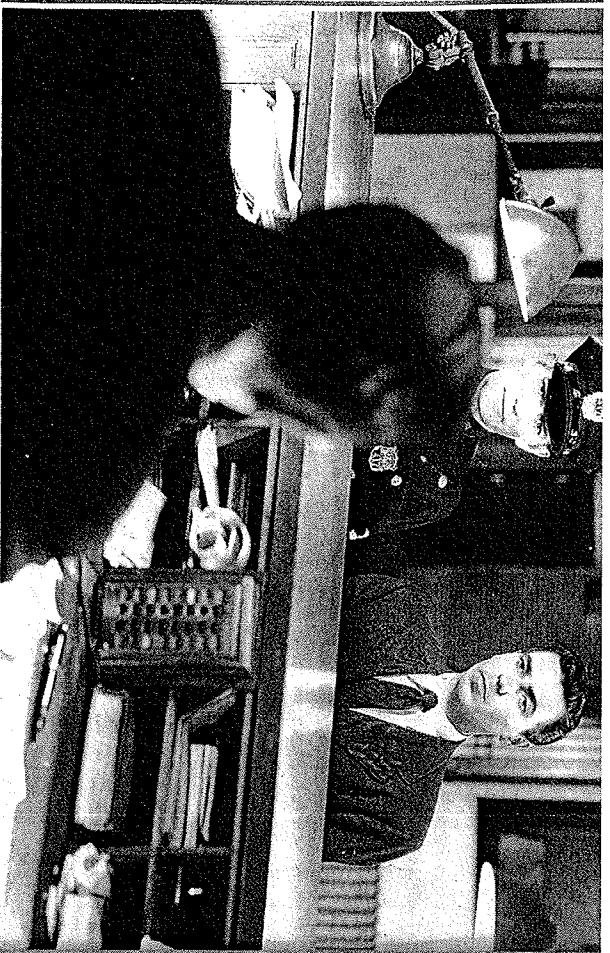
The bloody paths down which we drive logic into dread.<sup>4</sup>

The noir film is black for us, that is, specifically for the Western and American moviegoers of the 1950s. It exists in response to a certain mood at large in this particular time and place. Accordingly one who seeks the root of this "style" must think in terms of an affected and possibly ephemeral reaction to a moment in history. This is what links productions as diverse as *The Shanghai Gesture* and *The Asphalt Jungle*.

From this vantage, the method is obvious: while remaining as scientifically and objectively grounded as possible, one must examine the most prominent characteristics of the films which critics have classed as noir. From these characteristics one may then derive the common denominator and define that unique expressive attitude which all these works put into play.

It is the presence of crime which gives film noir its most constant characteristic. "The dynamism of violent death" is how Nino Frank evoked it, and the point is well taken. Blackmail, accusation, theft, or drug trafficking set the stage for a narrative where life and death are at stake. Few cycles in the entire history of film have put together in seven or eight years such a mix of foul play and murder. Sordidly or bizarrely, death always comes at the end of a tortured journey. In every sense of the word a noir film is a film of death.

But film noir has no monopoly on death, and an essential distinction must be overlaid. In principle, film noir is not a "crime documentary." We know that since 1946 Hollywood has exported a score of films to France which have as their main themes criminal inquiries supposedly based on actual cases. In fact, a title card or a narrator often alert the viewer at the start of the film that this is a true story which took place in such and such a time at such and such a place. The shots on the screen faithfully reconstruct the start of the process: a call to the homicide bureau, the discovery of a body. Sometimes it may be a seemingly inconsequential incident or some report from a neighborhood police station that sets events in motion. Then comes the tedious "leg" work by the cops: the careful but fruitless searches, ineffective surveillance, and futile decoys. Finally there is a glimmer, some object found, a witness, which leads to a climactic chase and uncovering a den of cutthroats. This series, which has produced interesting pictures (Henry Hathaway's *Call Northside 777* and *The House on 92nd Street*, Elia Kazan's *Boomer-*



Above, the realistic detail of the precinct station in the "police documentary," *House on 92nd Street*.

and *Panic in the Streets*, Laslo Benedek's *Port of New York*, Jules Dassin's *Naked City*, and, testing the limits of the genre, Breitraigne Windust's *The Enforcer*, shares several characteristics with *film noir*: realistic settings, well developed supporting roles, scenes of violence, and exciting pursuits. In fact, these documentary-style films often have typically *noir* elements: we won't soon forget the repellent aspect of the head of Murder Inc. in *The Enforcer* or the laconic gangster in *Panic in the Streets*. It sometimes happens that a given director will alternate between the genres. Jules Dassin is credited with *Naked City* and also with *Night and the City*. Joseph H. Lewis produced a classic *noir* work in 1950 with *Gun Crazy*, while a year earlier he had detailed the work of treasury agents in *The Undercover Man*.

Still there are differences between the two series. To begin with there is a difference in focus. The documentary-style picture examines a murder from within, from the point of view of the police official; the *film noir* is from within, from the point of view of the criminals. In features such as *The Naked City*, the action begins after the criminal act, and the murderers, their minions, and other accomplices move across the screen only to be followed, marked, interrogated, chased, and killed. If some flashback depicts a scene between gangsters it is to illustrate a disclosure or some testimony, a transcript of which is already in the police file. The police are always present, to act or to overhear. Nothing of this sort occurs in *film noir*, which situates itself within the very criminal milieu and describes it, sometimes in broad strokes (*The Big Sleep* or *Dark Passage*), sometimes in depth with correlative subtlety (*The Asphalt Jungle*). In any case, *film noir* posits a criminal

psychology which recalls, from another discipline, the popular psychology in vogue at the end of the last century; both delve into forbidden milieus.

The second difference between the series is one of moral determinism, and this may be even more essential. In the police documentary investigators are traditionally portrayed as righteous men, brave and incorruptible. The naval medical officer in *Panic in the Streets* is a hero. So is, if less obviously so, the diminutive Irish detective of *The Naked City*, who believes in God and works on his own time to see justice done. As message film, the American "police documentary" is more accurately a glorification of the police, much as is the French production *Identité Judiciaire* or the British *The Blue Lamp*.

This is not the case for the *noir* series. If police are featured, they are rotten—like the inspector in *The Asphalt Jungle* or the corrupt hard case portrayed by Lloyd Nolan in *The Lady in the Lake*—sometimes even murderers themselves (as in Otto Preminger's *Fallen Angel* or *Where the Sidewalk Ends*). At minimum, they let themselves get sucked into the criminal mechanism, like the attorney in *The File on Thelma Jordan*. As a result of this, it is not haphazardly that screenwriters have frequently fallen back on the private detective. It would have been too controversial always to impugn American police officials. The private detective is midway between lawful society and the underworld, walking on the brink, sometimes unscrupulous but putting only himself at risk, fulfilling the requirements of his own code and of the genre as well. As if to counterbalance all this, the actual law breakers are more or less sympathetic figures. Of course, the old motto of the pre-War shorts from MGM, "Crime does not pay," is still the order of the day, and there must be moral retribution. But the narrative is manipulated so that at times the moviegoer sympathizes, identifies with the criminals. Remember the suspenseful scene of the jewel theft in *The Asphalt Jungle*. What viewer failed to identify with the thieves? And *Gun Crazy*, we dare say, brought an exceptionally attractive but murderous couple to the screen.

As to the unstable alliances between individuals in the heart of the underworld, few films have described them as well as *The Big Sleep* and, in its *noir* sequence (Rico's testimony), *The Enforcer*. We perceive in this rogue's gallery of suspects and convicts, a complex and shifting pecking order based on bribery, blackmail, organized crime and the code of silence. Who will kill and who will be killed? The criminal milieu is an ambiguous one, where a position of strength can be quickly eroded.

This uncertainty is also manifest in the ambivalence of the characters themselves. The integral protagonist, the elemental figure of the *Scarface* type, has disappeared from *film noir* and given way to a crowd of sanctified killers, neurotic gangsters, megalomaniac crime bosses, and their perplexing or tainted cronies. Notable examples are the solitary and scientific serial killer in *He Walked by Night*, the self-destructive loser in *Night and the City*, or the hyperactive gang boss so at-

tached to his mother in *White Heat*: just as twisted are the vicious, drunken, grub-like henchmen in *The Enforcer*.

There is ambiguity, too, with regard to the victims, who usually are under some suspicion as well. Their ties to the unsavory milieu are what attract the attention of their executioners. Often, they are victims precisely because they cannot be executioners. The decadent partner in *The Lady from Shanghai* is such a type, a man who finds death when he tries to simulate his own murder and who will long remain a prototype of the sham victim. One could also cite the terrorized woman, who seems destined to be killed before the end of Jacques Tourneur's *Out of the Past* but who had already set up her would-be assassin for a fall. This tough guy had no more chance than a steer consigned to the slaughterhouse.

As for the ambiguous protagonist, he is often more mature, almost old, and not too handsome. Humphrey Bogart typifies him. He is also an inglorious victim who may suffer, before the happy ending, appalling abuse. He is often enough masochistic, even self-immolating, one who makes his own trouble, who may throw himself into peril neither for the sake of justice nor from avarice but simply out of morbid curiosity. At times, he is a passive hero who allows himself to dragged across the line into the gray area between legal and criminal behavior, such as Orson Welles in *The Lady from Shanghai*. As such, he is far from the "superman" of adventure films.

Finally, there is ambiguity surrounding the woman: the *femme fatale* who is fatal for herself. Frustrated and deviant, half predator, half prey, detached yet ensnared, she falls victim to her own traps. While the inconsistency of Lauren Bacall in *The Big Sleep* may not cost her her life, Barbara Stanwyck cannot escape the consequences of her murderous intrigues in *The File on Thelma Jordan*. This new type of woman, manipulative and evasive, as hard bitten as her environment, ready to shake down or to trade shots with anyone—and probably frigid—has put her mark on "noir," erodidism, which may be at times nothing more than violence eroticized. We are a long way from the chaste heroines of the traditional Western or historical drama.

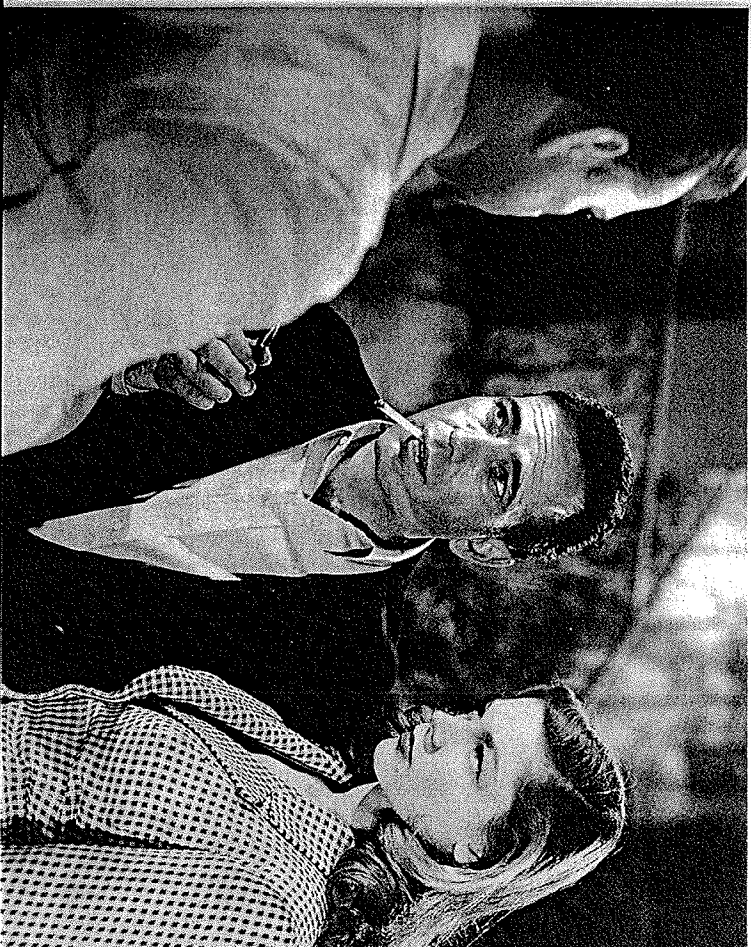
*Film noir* has renovated the theme of violence. To begin with, it abandoned the adventure film convention of the fair fight. A sporting chance has given way to setting scores, beatings, and cold-blooded murders. Bodyguards kick a powerless victim back and forth like football then toss his bloody body on a common thoroughfare (*Ride the Pink Horse*), in a back alley (*The Set-Up*), or with the garbage (*Walk Alone*). Crime itself is performed by the numbers, professionally, by a contract killer who does his job "without anger or hate." The opening of Robert Siodmak's *The Killers*, the celebrated scene in a roadhouse, where two men searching for their victim terrify the other patrons with their callous confidence, will remain one of the most gripping moments in American film, an unforgettable slice of life. Twitching and stigmatized, an unknown breed of men rose up before us. Their lot

includes mild-mannered hit men (Alan Ladd in *This Gun for Hire*), indiscriminate brutes (William Bendix), and the clear-eyed menacing organizers (Everett Sloane in *The Enforcer*). It also includes the twisted, corpulent killers, sweating in fear, humiliated by their cronies, who suddenly boil over (Laird Cregar and Raymond Burr).

As for the ceremony of execution itself, *film noir* has the widest array of examples. Random samplings are the offhanded gesture of a wealthy publisher who sends a bothersome witness who was washing windows down an elevator shaft; all that was needed was to tip over the stool with the handle of his cane while idly chatting (*The High Wall*)—or the atrocious death by razor in *The Enforcer*—or a kick to a car jack (*Red Light*). In other films, a paralyzed woman is tied to her wheelchair and hurled down a stairway (*Kiss of Death*); an informer is locked inside a Turkish bath and the steam valve is opened (*T-Men*); a convict is impelled under a pile driver by the threat of red-hot irons (*Brute Force*); one man is crushed by a tractor, another drowned in slime (*Border Incident*)... An unparalleled range of cruelties and torments are paraded before the viewer in *film noir*.

The anxiety in *film noir* possibly derives more from its strange plot twists than from its violence. A private detective takes on a dubious assignment: find a

Below, "the ambiguous protagonist... Humphrey Bogart typifies him" and "ambiguity surrounding the woman: the *femme fatale* [typified by] the inconsistency of Lauren Bacall in *The Big Sleep*."



woman, eliminate a blackmail threat, throw someone off track, and suddenly corpses are scattered across his path. He is followed, beaten, arrested. He asks for some information and finds himself trussed up and bloodied on the floor of a cellar. Men glimpsed in the night shoot at him and run off. There is something of the dream in this incoherent and brutal atmosphere, the atmosphere common to most noir films: *The Big Sleep*, *Ride the Pink Horse*, *The Lady in the Lake*, *Chicago Deadline*. Georges Sadoul remarked in this regard that "The plot is murky, like a nightmare or the ramblings of a drunkard."<sup>5</sup> In fact, one of the rare parodies of the genre, Elliott Nugent's *My Favorite Brunette*, begins exactly this way. Bob Hope wants to play detective and Dorothy Lamour gives him a retainer to tackle one of these vague assignments that only Americans understand, such as "Find my brother" or "Find my sister." Immediately a hail of daggers menaces him, bodiless pile up by the roadside, and inexorable gears of mischief drag him towards the electric chair by way of a hospital that doubles as a gangland hide-out.

Usually the mystery is a bit more realistic: an amnesiac tries to discover his past and flushes a crime out of its den. This theme was explored by Robert Florey in *The Crooked Way* and by Joseph Mankiewicz in *Somewhere in the Night*. But in these instances, the context of the narrative dilemma is such that the viewer expects confusion. In a true film noir, the bizarre is inseparable from what might be called the *uncertainty of motivations*. For instance, what are Bamister and his partner hoping to accomplish with their shadowy intrigues in *The Lady from Shanghai*? All the weirdness of the movie is focused on this: in these mysterious and metamorphosing creatures who tip their hands only in death. Elsewhere does a fleeing figure in a nightclub indicate a possible ally or an enemy? The enigmatic killer, will he be an executioner or a victim? Honor among thieves, an extortion network, unexplained motives, all this verges on madness.

In our opinion, this resounding confusion is at the core of film noir's peculiar oneirism. It is simple to find several titles the action of which is deliberately associated with dreams, such as Fritz Lang's *The Woman in the Window*. The same is true of pictures where the artifice focuses on the symbolic and the imaginary, as with Sternberg's *Shanghai*. But, as a general rule, the perspective of film noir is realistic and each scene in isolation could pass for an excerpt from a documentary. It is the sum total of these realistic snapshots of a weird theme which creates the atmosphere of the nightmare.

As we might have guessed, all the components of film noir yield the same result: disorienting the spectator, who can no longer find the familiar reference points. The moviegoer is accustomed to certain conventions: a logical development of the action, a clear distinction between good and evil, well-defined characters, sharp motives, scenes more showy than authentically violent, a beautiful heroine and an honest hero. At least, these were the conventions of American adventure films before the War.

Now the moviegoer is being presented a less severe version of the underworld, with likable killers and corrupt cops. Good and evil go hand in hand to the point of being indistinguishable. Robbers become ordinary guys: they have kids, love young women, and just want to go home again (*The Asphalt Jungle*). The victim seems as guilty as the hit man, who is just doing his job. The primary reference point of earlier days, the moral center, is completely skewed.

The heroine is depraved, murderous, doped-up or drunk. The hero is under the gun or, as they say in boxing, he absorbs a lot of punishment when accounts are settled up. So the secondary reference point, the myth of Superman and his chaste fiancée, also fades.

The action is confused, the motives are unclear. There is nothing resembling classic dramas or the moral tales from a realistic era: criminals vie against each other (*The Big Sleep*), a policeman arrives on the scene, reveals his criminal intent, and does nothing but enhance the viewer's apprehension (*The Lady in the Lake*); the sober process by which a man's fate is determined concludes in a fun house (*The Lady from Shanghai*). A film takes on the characteristics of a dream and the viewer searches in vain for some old-fashioned logic.

In the end, the chaos goes "beyond all limits." Gratuitous violence, the overweening rewards for murder, all this adds to the feeling of alienation. A sense of dread persists until the final images.

The conclusion is simple: the moral ambivalence, the criminality, the complex contradictions in motives and events, all conspire to make the viewer co-experience the anguish and insecurity which are the true emotions of contemporary film noir. All the films of this cycle create a similar emotional effect *that state of tension instilled in the spectator when the psychological reference points are removed*. The aim of film noir was to create a specific alienation.

Translated from the French by Alain Silver

### Notes

1. The Authors wish to thank Mr. Freddy Buache, secretary-general of the Cinémathèque of Lausanne, who agreed to publish this Introduction in the review *Carreau*.
2. *Écran Français*, No. 61, August 28, 1946.
3. *Le Figaro*, May 8, 1951.
4. Editors' Note: the quote is from Isidore Ducasse, Count Lautréamont, 19th Century pre-surrealist writer. The French reads: "Les filières sanglantes par où l'on fait passer la logique aux abois."
5. Review of *The Big Sleep* in *Les Lettres Françaises*.



Above, Dana Andrews as the cop who commits murder in *Where the Sidewalk Ends*.

## Paint It Black: The Family Tree of the Film Noir

### Raymond Durgnat (1970)

In 1946 French critics having missed Hollywood films for five years saw suddenly, sharply, a darkening tone, darkest around the crime film. The English spoke only of the "tough, cynical Hammett-Chandler thriller," although a bleak, cynical tone was invading all genres, from *The Long Voyage Home* to *Duel in the Sun*.

The tone was often castigated as Hollywood decadence, although black classics are as numerous as rosy (Euripides, Calvin, Ford, Tournneur, Goya, Lautréamont, Dostoevsky, Grosz, Faulkner, Francis Bacon). Black is as ubiquitous as shadow, and if the term *film noir* has a slightly exotic ring it's no doubt because it appears as figure against the rosy ground of Anglo-Saxon middle-class, and especially Hollywoodian, optimism and puritanism. If the term is French it's no doubt because, helped by their more lucid (and/or mellow, or cynical, or decadent) culture, the French first understood the full import of the American development.

Greek tragedy, Jacobean drama and the Romantic Agony (to name three black cycles) are earlier responses to epochs of disillusionment and alienation. But the socio-cultural parallels can't be made mechanically. Late '40s Hollywood is blacker than '30s precisely because its audience, being more secure, no longer needed cheering up. On the other hand, it was arguably insufficiently mature to enjoy the open, realistic discontent of, say, *Hotel du Nord*, *Look Back in Anger*, or Norman Mailer. The American *film noir*, in the narrower sense, paraphrases its social undertones by the melodramatics of crime and the underworld: *Scarface* and *On the Waterfront* mark its limits, both also "realistic" films. It's almost true to say that the French crime thriller evolves out of black realism, whereas American black realism evolves out of the crime thriller. Evolution apart, the black thriller is hardly perennial, drawing on the unconscious superego's sense of crime and punishment. The first detective thriller is *Oedipus Rex*, and it has the profoundest twist of all: detective, murderer, and executioner are one man. The Clytemnestra plot underlies innumerable *films noirs*, from *The Postman Always Rings Twice* to *Cronaca di Un Amore*.

The nineteenth century splits the classic tragic spirit into three genres: bourgeois realism (Ibsen), the ghost story, and the detective story. The avenger ceases to be a ghost (representative of a magic order) and becomes a detective, private



or public. The butler did it. *Uncle Silas*, *Fantomas*, and *The Cat and the Canary* illustrate the transitional stage between detective and ghost story. For ghosts the film noir substitutes, if only by implication, a nightmare society, or condition of man. In *Psycho*, Mummy's transvestite mummy is a secular ghost, just as abnormal Norman is, at the end, Lord of the Flies, a Satanic, megalomaniac, hollow in creation. The film noir is often nihilistic, cynical or stoic as reformatory; there are Fascist and apathetic denunciations of the bourgeois order, as well as Marxist ones.

There is obviously no clear line between the threat on a grey drama, the sombre drama, and the film noir, just as it's impossible to say exactly when a crime becomes the focus of a film rather merely a realistic incident. Some films seem black to cognoscenti, while the public of their time take the happy end in a complacent sense; this is true of, for example, *The Big Sleep*. On the waterfront is a film noir, given Brando's negativism and anguished playing, whereas *A Man Is Ten Feet Tall* is not, for reasons of tone suggested by the title. *Mourning Becomes Electra* is too self-consciously classic, although its adaptation in '40s Americana with Joan Crawford might not be. *Intruder in the Dust* is neither Faulkner nor noir, despite the fact that only a boy and an old lady defy the lynch-mob; its tone intimates that they tend to suffice. The happy end in a true film noir is that the worst of danger is averted, with little amelioration or congratulation. The film noir is not a genre, as the Western and gangster film, and takes us into the realm of classification by motif and tone. Only some crime films are noir, and films noirs in other genres include *The Blue Angel*, *King Kong*, *High Noon*, *Stalag 17*, *The Sweet Smell of Success*, *The Loves of Jeanne Eagels*, *Attack*, *Shadows*, *Lolita*, *Loneley Ave* *The Brave* and *2001*.

The French film noir precedes the American genre. French specialists include Feuillade, Duvviver, Carné, Clouzot, Yves Allegret and even, almost without noticing, Renoir (of *La Chienne*, *La Nuit du Carrefour*, *La Bête Humaine*, *Woman on the Beach*) and Godard. Two major cycles of the '30s and '40s are followed by a gangster cycle in the '50s, including *Toucher Pas Au Grisbi* (Becker, 1953), *Du Riff Chez Les Hommes* (Dassin, 1955), *Razzia Sur La Chnouf* (Decoin, 1957), *Mefez-vous Fillettes* (Allegret, 1957), and the long Eddie Constantine series to which Godard pays homage in *Alphaville*. *Fantomas*, made for Gaumont, inspired their rival Pathé to the Pearl White series, inaugurated by the New York office of this then French firm. *La Chienne* becomes *Scarlet Street*, *La Bête Humaine* becomes *Human Desire*, *Le Jour se Lève* becomes *The Long Night*, while *Pepe-le-Moko* becomes *Algiers* ("Come with me to the Casbah"), and also *Pepe-le-Pew*. The American version of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1945) is preceded by the French (*Le Dernier Tour-nant*, 1933) and an Italian (*Ossessione*, 1942). The '50s gangster series precedes the American revival of interest in gangsters and the group-job themes: Godard was offered Bonnie and Clyde, before Penn, presumably on the strength of *Breathless* rather than *Pierrot Le Fou*.

The Italian film noir, more closely linked with realism, may be represented by *Ossessione*, by *Senza Pietà*, *Caccia Tragica*, *Bitter Rice* (neo-realist melodramas

which pulverize Hollywood action equivalents by Walsh, et al.), and *Conaca di Un Amore*. Antonioni's mesmerically beautiful first feature. The American black Western, which falters in the early '60s, is developed by the Italians. Kracauer's *From Caligari to Hitler* details the profusion of films noirs in Germany in the '20s, although the crime theme is sometimes overlaid by the tyrant theme. *The Living Dead*, a compendium of Poe stories, anticipates the Cormans. The Germans also pioneered the horror film (*Nosferatu* precedes *Dracula*, *Homunculus* precedes *Frankenstein*). German expressionism heavily influences American films noirs, in which German directors (Stroheim, Leni, Lang, Stodmak, Preminger, Wilder) loom conspicuously (not to mention culturally Germanic Americans like Schoedsack and Sternberg).

The English cinema has its own, far from inconsiderable, line in films noirs, notably, the best pre-war Hitchcocks (*Rich and Strange*, *Sabotage*). An effective series of costume bullying dramas (*Gaslight*, 1940), through *Fanny by Gaslight* and *The Man in Grey* to *Daybreak* (1947), is followed by man-on-the-run films of which the best are probably *Odd Man Out*, *They Made Me a Fugitive* and *Secret People*. The also-trans include many which are arguably more convincing and adventurous than many formula-bound Hollywood cult favorites. The following subheadings offer, inevitably imperfect schematizations for some main lines of force in the American film noir. They describe not genres but dominant cycles or motifs, and many, if not most, films would come under at least two headings, since interbreeding is intrinsic to motif processes. In all these films, crime or criminals provide the real or apparent centre of focus, as distinct from films in the first category from non-criminal "populist" films such as *The Crowd*, *Street Scene*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Bachelor Party*, *Too Late Blues* and *Echoes of Silence*.

### I. CRIME AS SOCIAL CRITICISM

A first cycle might be labelled: "Pre-Depression: The Spontaneous Witnesses." Examples include *Easy Street* (1917), *Broken Blossoms* (1919), *Greed* (1924), *The Salvation Hunters* (1925). Two years later the director of *The Salvation Hunters* preludes with *Underworld*, the gangster cycle which is given its own category below. The financial and industry-labour battles of the '30s are poorly represented in Hollywood, for the obvious reason that the heads of studios tend to be Republican, and anyway depend on the banks. But as the rearmament restored prosperity, the association of industry and conflict was paraphrased in politically innocent melodrama, giving *Road to Frisco* (1939) and *Manpower* (1940). (Realistic variants like *The Grapes of Wrath* are not noir). *Wild Harvest* (1947) and *Give Us This Day* (1949) relate to this genre. The former has many lines openly critical of big capitalists, but its standpoint is ruralist-individualist and, probably, Goldwaterian. The second was directed by Dmytryk in English exile, but setting and spirit are entirely American.

Another cycle might be labelled: "The Sombre Cross-Section." A crime takes us through a variety of settings and types and implies an anguished view of society as a whole. Roughly coincident with the rise of neo-realism in Europe this cycle includes *Phantom Lady*, *The Naked City*, *Nightmare Alley*, *Panic in the Streets*, *Glory Alley*, *Fourteen Hours*, *The Well*, *The Big Night*, *Rear Window* and *Let No Man Write My Epitaph*. The genre shades into Chayefsky-type Populism and studies of social problems later predominate. European equivalents of the genre include *Hotel du Nord*, *It Always Rains on Sunday*, *Sophie* and even *Bicycle Thieves*; if we include the theft of bicycles as a crime, which of course it is, albeit of a non-melodramatic nature. The American weakness in social realism stems from post-puritan optimistic individualism, and may be summarised in political terms. The Republican line is that social problems arise from widespread wrong attitudes and are really individual moral problems. Remedial action must attack wrong ideas rather than the social set-up. The Democratic line is a kind of liberal environmentalism: social action is required to "prime the pump," to even things up sufficiently for the poor or handicapped to have a fairer deal, and be given a real, rather than a merely theoretical equality in which to prove themselves. Either way the neo-realist stress on economic environment as virtual determinant is conspicuous by its absence, although the phrase "wrong side of the tracks" expresses it fatalistically. It's a minor curiosity that English liberal critics invariably pour scorn on the phrases through which Hollywood expresses an English liberal awareness of class and underprivilege.

Two remarkable movies, *He Ran All the Way* and *The Sound of Fury*, both directed by victims of McCarthy (John Berry, Cy Enfield) illustrate the slick, elliptic terms through which serious social criticisms may be expressed. In the first film, the criminal hero (John Garfield) holds his girl (Shelley Winters) hostage in her father's tenement. The father asks a mate at work whether a hypothetical man in this position should call in the police. His mate replies: "Have you seen firemen go at a fire? Chop, chop, chop!" A multitude of such details assert a continuity between the hero's paranoid streak ("Nobody loves anybody!") and society as a paranoid (competitive) network. Similarly, in *The Sound of Fury*, the psycho killer (Lloyd Bridges) incarnates the real energies behind a thousand permitted prejudices: "Beer drinkers are jerks!" and "Rich boy, huh?" His reluctant accomplice is an unemployed man goaded by a thousand details. His son's greeting is: "Hullo father, mother won't give me 90 cents to go to the movies with the other kids," while the camera notes, in passing, the criminal violence blazoned forth in comic strips. When sick with remorse he confesses to a genteel manicurist, she denounces him. An idealistic journalist whips up hate; the two men are torn to death by an animal mob, who storming the jail, also batter their own cops mercilessly.

Socially critical films noirs are mainly Democratic (reformist) or cynical-nihilistic, Republican moralists tend to avoid the genre, although certain movies by Wellman, King Vidor, and Hawks appear to be Republican attempts to grasp the net-

tie, and tackle problems of self-help in desperate circumstances (e.g. *Public Enemy*, *Duel in the Sun*, *Only Angels Have Wings*).

However, certain conspicuous social malfunctions impose a black social realism. These are mostly connected with crime, precisely because this topic reintroduces the question of personal responsibility, such that right-wing spectators can congenially misunderstand hopefully liberal movies. These malfunctions give rise to various subgenres of the crime film:

(a) **Prohibition-type Gangsterism.** It's worth mentioning here a quiet but astonishing movie, *Kiss Tomorrow Good-bye* (1949), in which Cagney, as an old-time gangster making a comeback, corrupts and exploits the corruption of a whole town, including the chief of police. His plan, to murder his old friend's hell-cat daughter (Barbara Payton) so as to marry the tycoon's daughter (Helena Carter) and cement the dynasty, is foiled only by a personal quirk (his mistress's jealousy). The plot is an exact parallel to *A Place in the Sun* except that Dreiser's realistically weak characters are replaced by thrillingly tough ones. (Its scriptwriter worked on Stevens' film also.) Post-war gangster films are curiously devoid of all social criticism, except the post-war appeal of conscience, apart from its devious but effective reintroduction in *Bonnie and Clyde*.

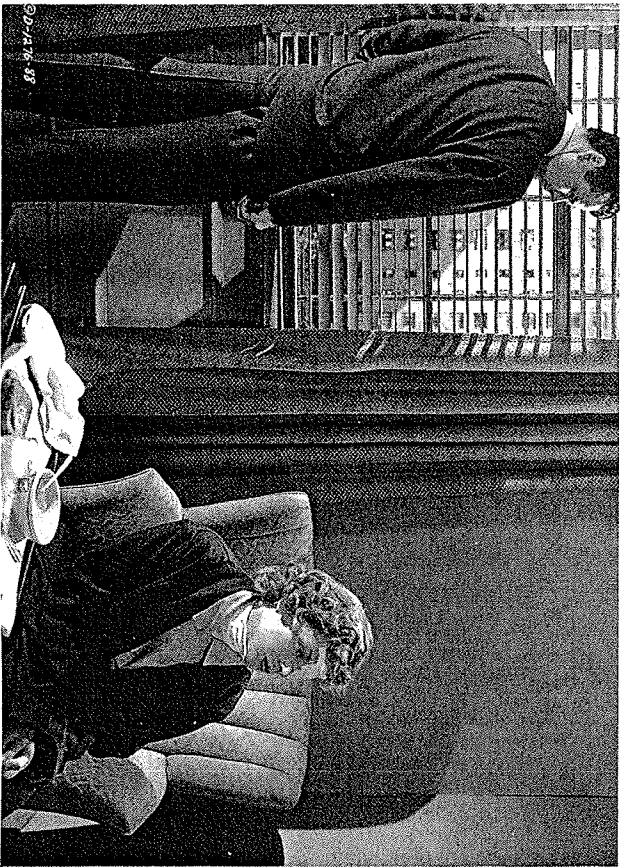
(b) **A Corrupt Penology** (miscarriages of justice, prison exposes, lynchlaw). Corrupt, or worse, merely lazy, justice is indicted in *I Want To Live*, *Anatomy of a Murder*, and *In the Heat of the Night*. Prison exposes range from *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* to Dassin's brilliant *Brute Force* and Don Siegel's forceful *Riot in Cell Block 11*. Lynching films range from *Fury* (1936) through *Storm Warning* (1951) to *The Chase*, and, of course, *In the Heat of the Night*.

(c) **The fight game** is another permitted topic, the late '40s springing a sizzling liberal combination (*Body and Soul*, *The Set-Up*, *Champion*, *Night and the City*).

(d) **Juvenile delinquency** appears first in a highly personalized, family motif concerning the youngster brother or friend whom the gangster is leading astray. The juvenile gang (*Dead End*, 1937) introduces a more "social" motif. *Angels with Dirty Faces* combines the two themes, with sufficient success to prompt a rosy sequel called *Angels Wash Their Faces*, which flopped. The late '40s seem awkwardly caught between the obvious inadequacy of the old personal-moral theme, and a new, sociology-based sophistication which doesn't filter down to the screen until *Rebel without a Cause* and *The Young Savages*. Meanwhile there is much to be said for the verve and accuracy of *So Young So Bad* and *The Wild One*.

Rackets other than prohibition are the subject of *Road to Frisco* (1939), *Force of Evil* (1947), *Thieves' Highway* (1949) and, from *The Man with the Golden Arm* (1955), drugs.

The first conspicuous post-war innovation is the neo-documentary thriller, much praised by critics who thought at that time that a documentary tone and location photography guaranteed neo-realism (when, tardily, disillusionment set in it



Above, Glenn Ford, "the cop hero," and Gloria Grahame in Lang's *The Big Heat*.

was, of course, with a British variant—*The Blue Lamp*). In 1945 a spy film (*The House on 92nd Street*) had borrowed the formula from the *March of Time* news-series, to give a newspaper-headline impact. The most open-air movies of the series (*The Naked City*, *Union Station*) now seem the weakest, whereas a certain thoughtfulness distinguishes *Boomerang*, *Call Northside 777* and *Panic in the Streets*. The cycle later transforms itself into the *Dragnet*-style TV thriller. Several of the above films are *noir*, in that, though the police (or their system) constitute an affirmative hero, a realistic despair or cynicism pervade them. A black cop cycle is opened by Wyler's *Detective Story* (1951), an important second impetus coming from Lang's *The Big Heat*. The cop hero, or villain, is corrupt, victimized or berserk in, notably, *The Naked Alibi*, *Rogue Cop*, and *Touch of Evil*. These tensions remain in a fourth cycle, which examine the cop as organization man, grappling with corruption and violence (*In the Heat of the Night*, *The Detective*, *Lady in Cement*, *Bullitt*, *Madigan* and *Coogan's Bluff*). Clearly the theme can be developed with either a right or left-wing inflection. Thus the post-*Big Heat* cycle of the lone-wolf fanatic cop suggest either "Pay the police more, don't skimp on social services," or "Give cops more power, permit more phone tapping," (as in *Dragnet* and *The Big Combo*). The theme of a Mr. Big running the city machine may be democratic (especially if he's an extremely WASP Mr. Big), or Republican ("those corrupt Democratic city machines!") or anarchist, of the right or the left. If a favourite setting for civil rights themes is the Southern small town, it's partly because civil rights liberalism is there balanced by the choice of ultra-violent, exotically backward, and Democratic, backwoods with which relatively few American filmmakers will identify. *Coogan's Bluff* depends on the contrast of Republican-fundamentalist-small-

town with Democratic-corrupt-but-human-big-city. The neo-documentary thrillers created a sense of social networks, that is, of society as organization. Thus they helped to pave the way for a more sophisticated tone and social awareness which appears in the late '40s.

A cycle of films use a crime to inculpate, not only the underworld, the dead-ends and the underprivileged, but the respectable, middle-class, WASP ethos as well. *Fury* had adumbrated this, melodramatically, in the '30s; the new cycle is more analytical and formidable. The trend has two origins, one in public opinion, the second in Hollywood. An affluent post-war America had more comfort and leisure in which to evolve, and endure, a more sophisticated type of self-criticism. Challengingly, poverty no longer explained everything. Second, the war helped Hollywood's young Democratic minority to assert itself, which it did in the late '40s, until checked by the McCarthyite counter-attack (which of course depended for its success on Hollywood Republicans). These films include *The Sound of Fury*, the early *Losers*, *Ace in the Hole*, *All My Sons* (if it isn't too articulate for a film *noir*), and, once the McCarthyite heat was off, *The Wild One*, *On The Waterfront* and *The Young Savages*. But McCarthy's impact forced film *noir* themes to retreat to the Western. Such films as *High Noon*, *Run of the Arrow* and *Ride Lonesome* make the '50s the Western's richest epoch. Subsequently, Hollywood fear of controversy mutes criticism of the middle-class from black to grey (e.g. *The Graduate*). *The Chase*, *The Detective*, even *Bonnie and Clyde* offer some hope that current tensions may force open the relentless social criticism onto the screen.

## 2. GANGSTERS

*Underworld* differs from subsequent gangster films in admiring its gangster hero (George Bancroft) as Nietzschean inspiration in a humiliating world. If *Scarface* borrows several of its settings and motifs it's partly because it's a riposte to it. In fact public opinion turned against the gangster before Hollywood denounced him with the famous trans-auteur triptych, *Little Caesar*, *Scarface* and *Public Enemy*. To Hawk's simple-minded propaganda piece, one may well prefer the daring, pro-and contra-alterations of *Public Enemy*. The mixture of social fact and moralizing myth in pre-war gangster movies is intriguing. Bancroft, like Cagney, represents the Irish gangster, Muni and Rafé the Italian type, Bogart's deadpan grotesque is transracial, fitting equally well the strayed WASP (Marlowe) and the East European Jew, who were a forceful gangster element. It's not at all absurd, as NFI audiences boisterously assume, that *Little Caesar* and *Scarface* should love their Italian mommas, nor that in *Angels With Dirty Faces* priest Pat O'Brien and gangster Cagney should be on speaking terms. 1920s gangsters were just as closely linked with race loyalties as today's Black Muslim leaders—the latter have typical gangster childhoods, and without the least facetiousness can be said to have shifted gangster energies into Civil Rights terms. It helps explain the ambivalence of violence and idealism in Black Muslim declarations: dialogues between "priest"

(Martin Luther King) and advocates of violence are by no means ridiculous. Disappointed Prohibitionist moralists found easier prey in Hollywood, and the Hays Office, and cut off the gangster cycle in its prime. A year or two passes before Hollywood evolves its "anti-gangster"—the G-Man or FBI agent who either infiltrates the gang or in one way or another beats the gangster at his own game. *Angels With Dirty Faces* (1938) combines the Dead End kids (from Wyler's film of the previous year) with gangster Cagney. When he's cornered, priest Pat O'Brien persuades him to go to the chair like a coward so that his fans will be disillusioned with him. By so doing, Cagney concedes that crime doesn't pay, but he also debunks movies like *Scarface*. In 1940 *The Roaring Twenties* attempts a naive little thesis about the relationship between gangsterism and unemployment.

Between 1939 and 1953 Nazi and then Russian spies push the gangster into the hero position. A small cycle of semi-nostalgic gangster movies appears. A unique, Hays Code-defying B feature *Dillinger* (1945), is less typical than *I Walk Alone* (1947). This opposes the old-fashioned Prohibition-era thug (Burt Lancaster) who, returning after a long spell in jail, finds himself outmoded and outwitted by the newer, nastier, richer operators who move in swell society and crudely prefigure the "organization men" who reach their climax in the Marvin-Galager-Reagan set-up of Siegel's *The Killers: Murder Inc. (The Enforcer)* is another hinge movie, putting D.A. Bogart against a gang which while actually Neanderthal in its techniques is felt to be a terrifyingly slick and ubiquitous contra-police network. *Kiss Tomorrow Good-bye* and *White Heat* are contemporary in setting but have an archaic feel. *The Asphalt Jungle* is a moralistic variant within this cycle rather than a precursor of *Rififi* and its gang-job imitations (which include *The Killing* and *Cairo*, a wet transposition of Huston's film).

The next major cycle is keyed by various Congressional investigations, which spotlight gangsterism run big business style. "Brooklyn, I'm very worried about Brooklyn," frowns the gang boss in *New York Confidential* (1954): "It's bringing down our average—collections are down 2%." An equally bad sequel, *The Naked Street* handles a collateral issue, gangster (or ex-gangster?) control of legitimate business (a tardy theme: during the war Western Union was bought by a gangster syndicate to ensure troublefree transmission of illegal betting results). Executive-style gangsterism has to await *Underworld U.S.A.* and *The Killers* for interesting treatment. For obvious reasons, the American equivalent of *La Mami Sullia Citra* has still to be made. *Johnny Cool* is a feeble "sequel" to Salvatore Giuliano.

Instead, the mid-'50's see a new cycle, the urban Western, which take a hint from the success of *The Big Heat*. A clump of movies from 1955-1960 includes *The Big Combo*, *Al Capone*, *The Rise and Fall of Legs Diamond*, *Babyface Nelson*, *The Phenix City Story* and *Pay Or Die*. Something of a lull follows until the latter-day Technicolor series (*The Killers*, *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Point Blank*). With or without pop nostalgia for the past, these movies exist, like the Western, for their action (though the killings relate more to atrocity than heroism). The first phase of the

cycle is ultra-cautious, and falters through sheer repetition of the one or two safe moral clichés, while the second phase renews itself by dropping the old underworld mystique and shading illegal America into virtuous (rural or grey flannel suit) America. The first phase carries on from the blackest period of the Western. The second coincides with the Kennedy assassinations and Watts riots.

### 3. ON THE RUN

Here the criminals or the framed innocents are essentially passive and fugitive, and, even if tragically or despicably guilty, sufficiently sympathetic for the audience to be caught between, on the one hand, pity, identification and regret, and, on the other, moral condemnation and conformist fatalism. Notable films include *The Informer*, *You Only Live Once*, *High Sierra*, *The Killers*, *He Ran All The Way*, *They Live By Night*, *Cry of the City*, *Dark Passage* and a variant, *The Third Man*. *Gun Crazy* (*Deadlier Than The Male*), an earlier version of the Bonnie and Clyde story, with Peggy Cummins as Bonnie, fascinatingly compromises between a Langian style and a Penn spirit; and, in double harness with the later film, might assert itself as a parallel classic.

### 4. PRIVATE EYES AND ADVENTURERS

This theme is closely interwoven with three literary figures, Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler and Hemingway. It constitutes for some English critics the poetic core of the film noir, endearing itself no doubt by the romanticism underlying Chandler's formula: "Down these mean streets must go a man who is not himself mean..." This knight errant relationship has severe limitations. The insistence on city corruption is countered by the trust in private enterprise, and one may well rate the genre below the complementary approach exemplified by *Double Indemnity* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, in which we identify with the criminals. The genre originates in a complacent, pre-war cycle, the *Thin Man* series (after Hammett) with William Powell, Myrna Loy and Asta the dog, being both sophisticated and happily married (then a rarity) as they solve crimes together. The motif is transformed by Bogart's incarnation of Sam Spade in the misogynistic *Maltese Falcon*, and the bleaker, lonelier, more anxious Hemingway adventurer in *To Have and Have Not*. In the late '40s Chandler's Marlowe wears five faces—Dick Powell's, Bogart's, Ladd's, Robert Montgomery's and George Montgomery's, in *Firewell My Lovely* (*Murder, My Sweet*), *The Big Sleep*, *The Blue Dahlia*, *Lady in The Lake* and *The High Window* (*The Brasher Doubloon*). An RKO series with Mitchum (sometimes Mature) as a vague, aimless wanderer, hounded and hounding, begins well with *Build My Gallows High* (*Out Of The Past*) but rapidly degenerates. The series seeks renewal in more exotic settings with *Key Largo*, *Ride the Pink Horse*, *The Brecking Point*, and *Beat The Devil*, but concludes in disillusionment. In *Kiss Me Deadly*, *Confidential Agent* and a late straggler, *Vertigo*, the private eye solves the mystery but undergoes extensive demoralization. In retrospect, films by well respected auteurs like Hawks, Ray, Siegel and Huston

seem to me to have worn less well than the most disillusioned of the series, Dmytryk's visionary *Forewell My Lovely* prefiguring the Aldrich-Welles-Hitchcock pessimism. The *Madrese Falcon*, notably, is deep camp. Huston's laughter deflates villainy into the perverted pretension of Greenstreet and Lorre who are to real villains as Al Jolson to Carmen Jones. In the scenes between Bogart and Mary Astor (a sad hard not-so-young vamp with more middle class perm than "it") it reaches an intensity like greatness. Huston's great film noir is a Western (*Treasure of Sierra Madre*).

## 5. MIDDLE CLASS MURDER

Crime has its harassed amateurs, and the theme of the respectable middle-class figure beguiled into, or secretly plotting, murder facilitates the sensitive study in black. The '30s see a series centering on Edward G. Robinson, who alternates between uncouth underworld leaders (*Little Caesar*, *Black Tuesday*) and a guilt-haunted or fear-bourgeoisie (in *The Amazing Dr. Citterhouse*, *The Woman In The Window*, *Scarlet Street*, *The Red House*, and *All My Sons*). Robinson, like Laughton, Cagney and Bogart, belongs to that select group of stars, who, even in Hollywood's simpler-minded years, could give meanness and cowardice a riveting monstrosity, even force. His role as pitiable scapegoat requires a little excursion into psychoanalytical sociology. Slightly exotic, that is, un-American, he symbolized the loved, but repudiated, father/elder sibling, apparently benevolent, ultimately sinister, never unlovable—either an immigrant father (*Little Rico* in *Little Caesar*) or that complementary bogey, the ultra-WASP intellectual, whose cold superior snobbery infiltrates so many late '40s movies (Clifton Webb in *Laura*). The evolution of these figures belongs to the process of assimilation in America. Robinson's '50s and '60s equivalents include Broderick Crawford, Anthony Quinn, Rod Steiger and Vincent Price. The theme of respectable eccentricity taking murder lightly is treated in *Arsenic and Old Lace*. *Monsieur Verdoux*, *Rope*, and *Strangers On A Train*. The theme of the tramp corrupting the not-always-so-innocent bourgeois is artistically fruitful, with *Double Indemnity*. The *Postman Always Rings Twice*, *The Woman in the Window*, *The Woman On the Beach* and, a straggler *The Pushover*. The Prowler reverses the formula: the lower-class and, a straggler *The Lonely Wife*. The theme can be considered an American cop victimizes the DJ's lonely wife. The theme can be considered an American adaptation of a pre-war European favourite (cf. *Pandora's Box* *La Bête Humaine*), and the European versions of *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. The cycle synchronizes with a climax in the perennial theme of Woman: Executioner/Victim, involving such figures as Bette Davis, Barbara Stanwyck, Gene Tierney, Joan Crawford and Lana Turner. Jacques Siclier dates the misogynistic cycle from Wyler's *Jezabel* (1938), and it can be traced through *Double Indemnity*, *Gilda*, *Dragonwyck*, *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers*, *Ivy*, *Sunset Boulevard*, *Leave Her To Heaven*, *Beyond The Forest*, *Flamingo Road*, *The File on Thelma Jordan*, *Clash By Night*, *Angel Face*, *Portrait in Black* and *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* A collateral cycle sees woman as grim heroic victim, struggling against despair

where her men all but succumb or betray her (*Rebecca*, *Phantom Lady*). Many films have it both ways, perhaps by contrasting strong feminine figures, the heroine lower-class and embittered, the other respectable but callous (like Joan Crawford and her daughter in *Mildred Pierce*), or by plot twists proving that the apparent vamp was misjudged by an embittered hero (as Rita Hayworth beautifully taunts Glenn Ford in *Gilda* "Put the blame on mama, boys..."). The whole subgenre can be seen as a development out of the "confession" stories of the Depression years, when Helen Twelveteens and others became prostitutes, goldiggers and kept women for various tear-jerking reasons. Replace the tears by a glum, baffled deadpan, modulate self pity into suspicion, and the later cycle appears. Maybe the misogyny is only an aspect of the claustrophobic paranoia so marked in late '40s movies.

*Double Indemnity* is perhaps the central film noir, not only for its atmospheric power, but as a junction of major themes, combining the vamp (Barbara Stanwyck), the morally weak murderer (Fred MacMurray) and the investigator (Edward G. Robinson). The murderer sells insurance. The investigator checks on claims. If the latter is incorruptible, he is unromantically so: only his cruel Calvinist energy distinguishes his "justice" from meanness. The film's stress on money and false friendliness as a means of making it justifies an alternative title: *Death of A Salesman*. This, and Miller's play all but parallel the relationship between *A Place In The Sun* and *Kiss Tomorrow Good-bye* (realistic weakness becomes wish fulfillment violence).

## 6. PORTRAITS AND DOUBLES

The characteristic tone of the '40s is sombre, claustrophobic, deadpan and paranoid. In the shaded lights and raining night it is often just a little difficult to tell one character from another. A strange, diffuse play on facial and bodily resemblances reaches a climax in Vidor's *Beyond The Forest* (where sullen Bette Davis is the spitting image, in long-shot, of her Indian maid) and, in exile, in Losey's *The Sleeping Tiger*, where dominant Alexis Smith is the spitting image of her frightened maid. A cycle of grim romantic thrillers focused on women who, dominant even in their absence, stare haughty enigmas at us from their portraits over the fireplace. Sometimes the portrait is the mirror of split personality. The series included *Rebecca*, *Experiment Perilous*, *Laura*, *The Woman in the Window*, *Scarlet Street* and *The Dark Mirror*. Variants include the all-male, but sexually inverted, *Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Portrait of Jennie* (rosy and tardy, but reputedly one of Buñuel's favourite films), *Under Capricorn* (the shrunken head), and a beautiful straggler, *Vertigo*.

## 7. SEXUAL PATHOLOGY

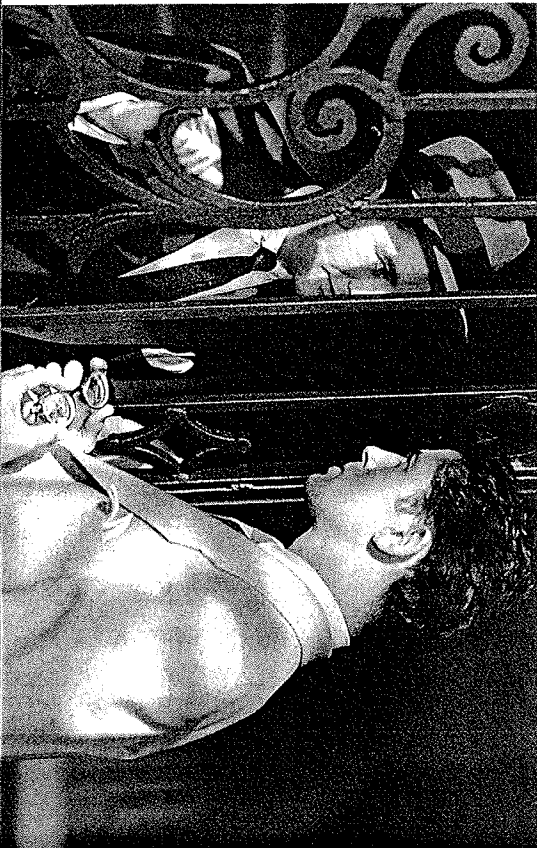
In *The Big Sleep* Bogart and Bacall, pretending to discuss horse-racing, discuss the tactics of copulation, exemplifying the clandestine cynicism and romanticism which the film noir opposes to the Hays Office. Similarly, "love at first sight"

between Ladd and Lake in *The Blue Dahlia* looks suspiciously like a casual, heavy pick-up. In *A Lonely Place*, *The Big Heat* (and, just outside the film noir, *Bus Stop*) make another basic equation: the hero whose tragic flaw is psychopathic violence meets his match in the loving whore.

The yin and yang of puritanism and cynicism, of egoism and paranoia, of greed and idealism, deeply perturbs sexual relationships, and films noirs abound in love-hate relationships ranging through all degrees of intensity. Before untying Bogart, Bacall kisses his bruised lips. Heston rapes Jennifer Jones in *Ruby Gentry*, and next morning she shoots her puritanical brother for shooting him. Lover and beloved exterminate each other in *Double Indemnity* and *Build My Gallows High*. He has to kill her in *Gun Crazy* and lets her die of a stomach wound in *The Lady From Shanghai*.

Intimations of non-effeminate homosexuality are laid on thick in, notably, *Gilda*, where loyal Glenn Ford gets compared to both his boss's kept woman and swordstick. A certain flabbiness paraphrases effeminacy in *The Mattese Falcon* (the Lorre-Greenstreet duo repeated in the Morley-Lorre pair in *Beat The Devil*), and in *Rope* and *Strangers On A Train* (where Farley Granger and Robert Walker respectively evoke a youthful Vincent Price). Lesbianism rears a sado-masochistic head in *Rebecca* (between Judith Anderson and her dead mistress) and in *A Lonely Place* (between Gloria Grahame and a brawny masseuse who is also perhaps a symbol for a coarse vulgarity she cannot escape). Homosexual and heterosexual sadism are everyday conditions. In *Clash By Night* Robert Ryan wants to stick pins all over Paul Douglas's floosie wife (Barbara Stanwyck) and watch the blood run down; we're not so far from the needle stuck through a goose's head to tenderize its flesh in *Diary of A Chambermaid* ("Sounds like they're murdering somebody," says Paulette Goddard).

Below, Robert Walker (left) and Farley Granger in *Strangers on a Train*.



Slim knives horrify but fascinate the paranoid '40s as shotguns delight the cool '60s. Notable sadists include Richard Widmark (chuckling as he pushes the old lady down stairs in her wheelchair in *Kiss of Death*), Paul Henreid in *Rope of Sand* (experimenting with a variety of whips on Burt Lancaster's behind), Hume Cronyn in *Brute Force* (truncheoning the intellectual prisoner to the strains of the *Liebestod*), Lee Marvin flinging boiling coffee in his mistress's face in *The Big Heat*; and so on to Clu Gulager's showmanlike eccentricities in *The Killers* and, of course, Tony Curtis in *The Boston Strangler*.

## 8. PSYCHOPATHS

Film noir psychopaths, who are legion, are divisible into three main groups: the heroes with a tragic flaw, the unassuming monsters, and the obvious monsters; in particular, the Prohibition-type gangster. Cagney's *Public Enemy* crisis-crosses the boundaries between them, thus providing the moral challenge and suspense which is the film's mainspring. Cagney later contributes a rousing portrait of a gangster with a raging Oedipus complex in *White Heat*, from Hollywood's misogynistic period. Trapped on an oil storage tank, he cries exultantly: "On top of the world, ma!" before joining his dead mother via the auto-destructive orgasm of his own personal mushroom cloud. The unassuming monster may be exemplified by *The Blue Dahlia*, whose paranoid structure is almost as interesting as that of *Phantom Lady*. Returned war hero Alan Ladd nearly puts a bullet in his unfaithful wife. As so often in late '40's films, the police believe him guilty of the crime of which he is nearly guilty. The real murderer is not the hero with the motive, not the wartime buddy whom shellshock drives into paroxysms of rage followed by amnesia, not the smooth gangster with whom the trollop was two-timing her husband. It was the friendly hotel house-detective.

On our right, we find the simple and satisfying view of the psychopath as a morally responsible mad dog deserving to be put down (thus simple, satisfying films like *Scarface* and *Panic In Year Zero*). On the left, he is an ordinary, or understandably weak, or unusually energetic character whose inner defects are worsened by factors outside his control (*Public Enemy*, *The Young Savages*). These factors may be summarized as (1) slum environments, (2) psychological traits subtly extrinsic to character (neurosis) and (3) a subtly corrupting social morality. In Depression America, the first explanation seems plausible enough (*Public Enemy*, with exceptional thoughtfulness, goes for all three explanations while insisting that he's become a mad dog who must die). In 1939, *Of Mice and Men* prefigures a change of emphasis, and in post-war America, with its supposedly universal affluence, other terms seem necessary to account for the still festering propensity to violence. Given the individualism even of Democratic thought, recourse is had to trauma, either wartime (*The Blue Dahlia*, *Act of Violence*) or Freudian (*The Dark Corner*, *The Dark Past*). A second group of films, without exonerating society, key psychopathy to a tone of tragic confusion (*Of Mice and Men*, *Kiss The Blood Off My Hands*). A third group relates violence to the spirit of

society (*Force of Evil*, *The Sound of Fury*). A cooler more domestic tone prevails with *Don't Bother To Knock*, with its switch-casting (ex-psychopath Richard Widmark becomes the embittered, kindly hero, against Marilyn Monroe as a homicidal baby-sitter). This last shift might be described as anti-expressionism, or coolism, with psychopathy accepted as a normal condition of life. Critics of the period scoff at the psychopathic theme, although in retrospect Hollywood seems to have shown more awareness of American undertones than its supercilious critics. The Killers, *Point Blank* and *Bonnie and Clyde* resume the "Democratic" social criticism of *Force of Evil* and *The Sound of Fury*. A highly plausible interpretation of *Point Blank* sees its hero as a ghost, the victims of his revenge quest destroy one another, or themselves. The psychopathy theme is anticipated in pre-war French movies (e.g. *Le Jour Se Lève*) with a social crisis of confidence, a generalised, hot, violent mode of alienation (as distinct from the glacial variety, a la Antonioni). With a few extra-lucid exceptions, neither the French nor the American films seem to realize the breakdown of confidence as a social matter.

## 9. HOSTAGES TO FORTUNE

The imprisonment of a family, an individual, or a group of citizens, by desperate or callous criminals is a hardy perennial. But a cycle climaxes soon after the Korean War with the shock, to Americans, of peacetime conscripts in action. A parallel inspiration in domestic violence is indicated by *The Petrified Forest* (1938), *He Ran All The Way* and *The Dark Past*. But the early '50s see a sudden cluster including *The Desperate Hours*, *Suddenly*, *Cry Terror* and *Violent Saturday*. The confrontation between middle-class father and family, and killer, acts out, in fuller social metaphor, although, often, with a more facile Manicheanism, the normal and abnormal sides of the psychopathic hero.

## 10. BLACKS AND REDS

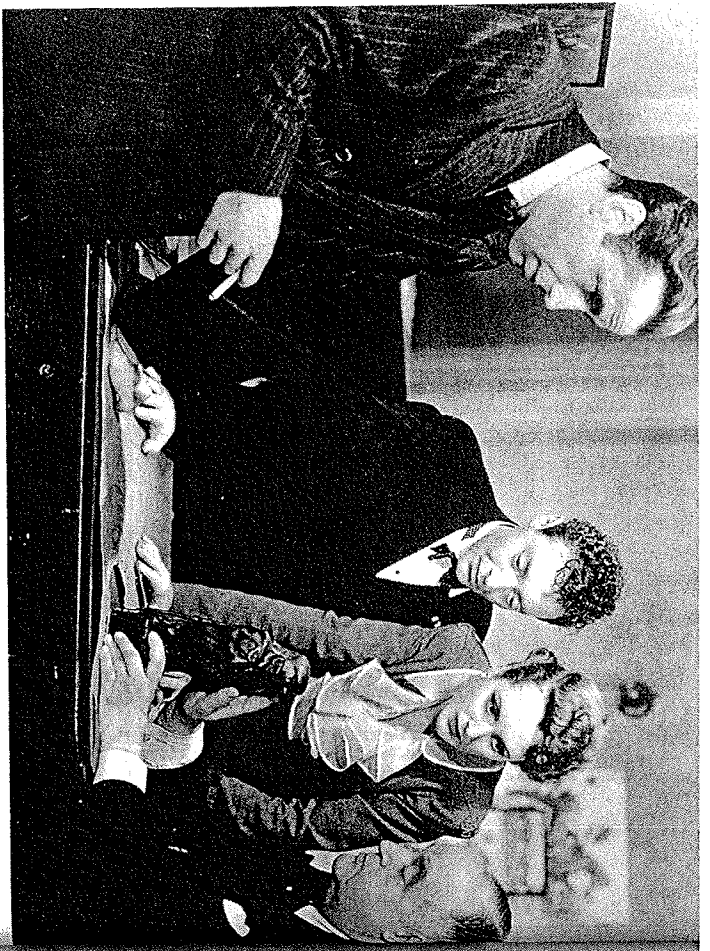
A cycle substituting Nazi agents and the Gestapo for gangsters gets under way with *Confessions Of A Nazi Spy* (1939). The cold war anti-Communist cycle begins with *The Iron Curtain* (1948), and most of its products were box-office as well as artistic flops, probably because the Communists and fellow-travellers were so evil as to be dramatically boring. The principal exceptions are by Samuel Fuller (*Pick Up On South Street*) and Aldrich (*Kiss Me Deadly*). Some films contrast the good American gangster with the nasty foreign agents (*Pick Up On South Street*), *Woman On Pier 13* links Russian agents with culture-loving waterfront union leaders and can be regarded as ultra-right, like *One Minute To Zero* and *Suddenly*, whose timid liberal modification (rather than reply) is *The Manchurian Candidate*. *Advise and Consent* is closely related to the political film noir.

## 11. GIGNOL, HORROR, FANTASY

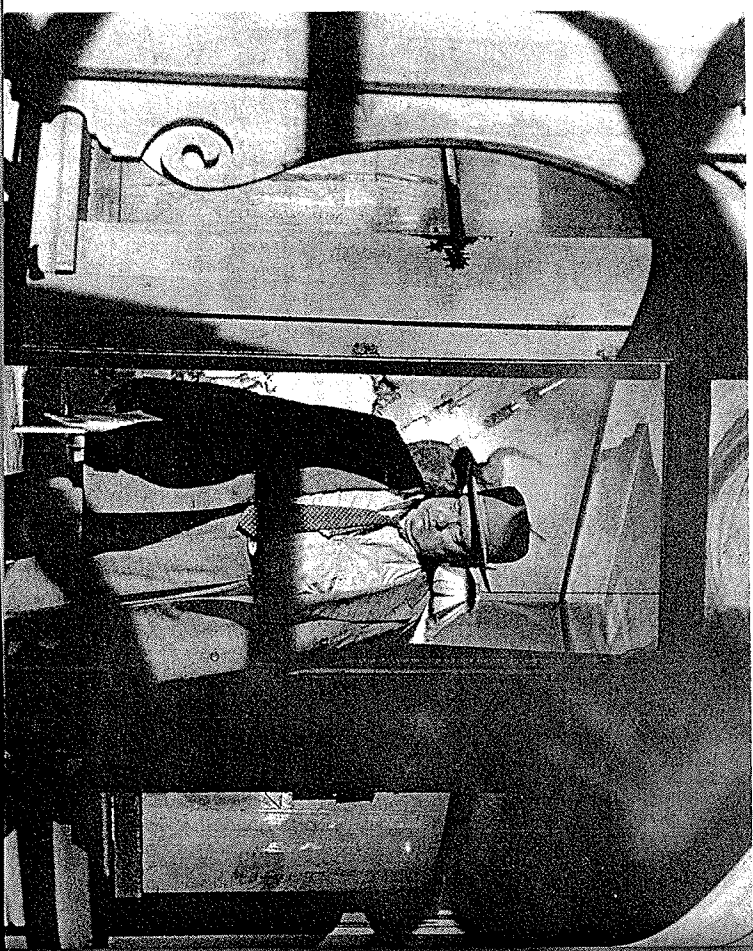
The three genres are clearly first cousins to the film noir. Hardy perennials, they seem to have enjoyed periods of special popularity. Siegfried Kracauer has

sufficiently related German expressionist movies with the angst of pre-Nazi Germany. Collaterally, a diluted expressionism was a minor American genre, indeterminate as between film noir and horror fantasy. Lon Chaney's Gothic grotesques (*The Unknown*, *The Phantom of the Opera*) parallel stories of haunted houses (*The Cat and the Canary*) which conclude with rational explanations. Sternberg's *The Last Command* can be considered a variant of the Chaney genre, with Jannings as Chaney, and neo-realist in that its hero's plight symbolizes the agonies of the uprooted immigrants who adapted with difficulty to the tenement jungles. The Depression sparked off the full-blown, visionary gignol of *Dracula*, *Frankenstein* (with Karloff as Chaney), *King Kong* (with Kong as Chaney!), *The Hounds of Zaroff*, *Island of Lost Souls*, etc. (the Kracauer-type tyrant looms, but is defeated, often with pathos). Together with gangster and sex films, the genre suffers from the Hays Office. After the shock of the Great Crash, the demoralizing stagnation of the depressed '30's leads to a minor cycle of black brooding fantasies of death and time (*Death Takes A Holiday*, *Peter Ibbetson*). The war continues the social unsettledness which films balance by cosy, enclosed, claustrophobic settings (*Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, *Flesh and Fantasy*, *Cat People*). A post-war subgenre is the thriller, developed into plain clothes Gothic (*The Spiral Staircase*, *The Red House*, *Sorry Wrong Number*). *Phantom Lady* (in its very title) indicates their interechoing. A second Monster cycle coincides with the Korean War. A connection with scientists, radioactivity and outer space suggests fear of atomic apocalypse (overt in *This Island Earth*, *It Came From Outer Space* and *Them*, covert in *Tarantula* and *The Thing From Another World*). *The Red Planet Mars* speaks for the hawks, *The Day The Earth Stood Still* for the doves. *Invasion of the Body snatchers* is a classic paranoid fantasy (arguably justified). As the glaciers of callous alienation advance, the Corman Poes create their nightmare compensation: the aesthetic hothouse of Victorian incest. *Psycho* crossbreeds the genre with a collateral revival of plainclothes gignol, often revolving round a feminine, rather than a masculine, figure (Joan Crawford and Bette Davis substitute for Chaney in *Whatever Happened To Baby Jane?*). The English anticipate of the Corman Poes are the Fisher *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*. With *Dutchman*, the genre matures into an expressionistic social realism.

The '60s obsession with violent death in all forms and genres may be seen as marking the admission of the film noir into the mainstream of Western pop art, encouraged by (a) the comforts of relative affluence, (b) moral disillusionment, in outcome variously radical, liberal, reactionary or nihilist, (c) a post-Hiroshima sense of man as his own executioner, rather than nature, God or fate, and (d) an enhanced awareness of social conflict. The cinema is in its Jacobean period, and the stress on gratuitous tormenting, evilly jocular in *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, less jocular in *Laughter In the Dark*, parallel that in Webster's plays. Such films as *Paths of Glory*, *Evil*, and *The Loved One* emphasize their crimes less than the rotteness of a society or, perhaps, man himself.



The beginning and end of the noir cycle as recapped by Paul Schrader: above, Bogart, Lorre, Astor, and Greenstreet in the 1941 *Maltese Falcon*. Below, Orson Welles in the 1958 *Touch of Evil*.



## Notes on Film Noir

### Paul Schrader (1972)

In 1946 French critics, seeing the American films they had missed during the war, noticed the new mood of cynicism, pessimism and darkness which had crept into the American cinema. The darkening stain was most evident in routine crime thrillers, but was also apparent in prestigious melodramas.

The French cineastes soon realized they had seen only the tip of the iceberg: as the years went by, Hollywood lighting grew darker, characters more corrupt, themes more fatalistic and the tone more hopeless. By 1949 American movies were in the throes of their deepest and most creative funk. Never before had films dared to take such a harsh uncomplimentary look at American life, and they would not dare to do so again for twenty years.

Hollywood's film noir has recently become the subject of renewed interest among moviegoers and critics. The fascination film noir holds for today's young filmgoers and film students reflects recent trends in American cinema: American movies are again taking a look at the underside of the American character, but compared to such relentlessly cynical films noir as *Kiss Me Deadly* or *Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye*, the new self-hate cinema of *Easy Rider* and *Medium Cool* seems naive and romantic. As the current political mood hardens, filmgoers and filmmakers will find the film noir of the late Forties increasingly attractive. The Forties may be to the Seventies what the Thirties were to the Sixties.

Film noir is equally interesting to critics. It offers writers a cache of excellent, little-known films (film noir is oddly both one of Hollywood's best periods and least known), and gives auteur-weary critics an opportunity to apply themselves to the newer questions of classification and transdirectorial style. After all, what is film noir?

Film noir is not a genre (as Raymond Durgan has helpfully pointed out over the objections of Hlgham and Greenberg's *Hollywood in the Forties*). It is not defined, as are the western and gangster genres, by conventions of setting and conflict, but rather by the more subtle qualities of tone and mood. It is a film "noir," as opposed to the possible variants of film gray or film off-white.

Film noir is also a specific period of film history, like German Expressionism or the French New Wave. In general, film noir refers to those Hollywood films of the



Forties and early Fifties which portrayed the world of dark, slick city streets, crime and corruption.

*Film noir* is an extremely unwieldy period. It harks back to many previous periods: Warner's Thirties gangster films, the French "poetic realism" of Carné and Duvivier, Sternbergian melodrama, and, farthest back, German Expressionist crime films (Lang's *Mdbuse* cycle). *Film noir* can stretch at its outer limits from *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) to *Touch of Evil* (1958), and most every dramatic Hollywood film from 1941 to 1953 contains some *noir* elements. There are also foreign offshoots of *film noir*, such as *The Third Man*, *Breathless* and *Le Doulos*.

Almost every critic has his own definition of *film noir*, and personal list of film titles and dates to back it up. Personal and descriptive definitions, however, can get a bit sticky. A film of urban night life is not necessarily a *film noir*, and a *film noir* need not necessarily concern crime and corruption. Since *film noir* is defined by tone rather than genre, it is almost impossible to argue one critic's descriptive definition against another's. How many *noir* elements does it take to make *film noir*?

Rather than haggle definitions, I would rather attempt to reduce *film noir* to its primary colors (all shades of black), those cultural and stylistic elements to which any definition must return.

At the risk of sounding like Arthur Knight, I would suggest that there were four conditions in Hollywood in the Forties which brought about *film noir*. (The danger of Knight's *Liveliest Art* method is that it makes film history less a matter of structural analysis, and more a case of artistic and social forces magically interacting and coalescing.) Each of the following four catalytic elements, however, can define the *film noir*, the distinctly *noir* tonality draws from each of these elements.

War and post-war disillusionment. The acute downer which hit the U.S. after the Second World War was, in fact, a delayed reaction to the Thirties. All through the Depression, movies were needed to keep people's spirits up, and, for the most part, they did. The crime films of this period were Horatio Algerish and socially conscious: Toward the end of the Thirties a darker crime film began to appear (*You Only Live Once*, *The Roaring Twenties*) and, were it not for the War, *film noir* would have been at full steam by the early Forties.

The need to produce Allied propaganda abroad and promote patriotism at home blunted the fledgling moves toward a dark cinema, and the *film noir* thrashed about in the studio system, not quite able to come into full prominence. During the War the first uniquely *film noir* appeared: *The Maltese Falcon*. *The Glass Key*, *This Gun for Hire*, *Laura*, but these films lacked the distinctly *noir* bite the end of the war would bring.

As soon as the War was over, however, American films became markedly more sardonic—and there was a boom in the crime film. For fifteen years the pressures against America's amelioristic cinema had been building up and, given

the freedom, audiences and artists were now eager to take a less optimistic view of things. The disillusionment many soldiers, small businessmen and housewife/factory employees felt in returning to a peacetime economy was directly mirrored in the sordidness of the urban crime film.

This immediate post-war disillusionment was directly demonstrated in films like *Cornered*, *The Blue Dahlia*, *Dead Reckoning*, and *Ride the Pink Horse*, in which a serviceman returns from the war to find his sweetheart unfaithful or dead, or his business partner cheating him, or the whole society something less than worth fighting for. The war continues, but now the antagonism turns with a new viciousness toward the American society itself.

Post-war realism. Shortly after the War every film-producing country had a resurgence of realism. In America it first took the form of films by such producers as Louis de Rochemont (*House on 92nd Street*, *Call Northside 777*) and Mark Hellinger (*The Killers*, *Brute Force*), and directors like Henry Hathaway and Jules Dassin. "Every scene was filmed on the actual location depicted," the 1947 de Rochemont-Hathaway *Kiss of Death* proudly proclaimed. Even after de Rochemont's particular "March of Time" authenticity fell from vogue, realistic exteriors remained a permanent fixture of *film noir*.

The realistic movement also suited America's post-war mood; the public's desire for a more honest and harsh view of America would not be satisfied by the same studio streets they had been watching for a dozen years. The post-war realistic trend succeeded in breaking *film noir* away from the domain of the high-class melodrama, placing it where it more properly belonged, in the streets with everyday people. In retrospect, the pre-de Rochemont *film noir* looks definitely tamer than the post-war realistic films. The studio look of films like *The Big Sleep* and *The Mask of Dimitrios* blunts their sting, making them seem more polite and conventional in contrast to their later, more realistic counterparts.

The German influence. Hollywood played host to an influx of German expatriates in the Twenties and Thirties, and these filmmakers and technicians had, for the most part, integrated themselves into the American film establishment. Hollywood never experienced the "Germanization" some civic-minded natives feared, and there is a danger of over-emphasizing the German influence in Hollywood.

But when, in the late Forties, Hollywood decided to paint it black, there were no greater masters of chiaroscuro than the Germans. The influence of expressionist lighting has always been just beneath the surface of Hollywood films, and it is not surprising, in *film noir*, to find it bursting to find a larger number of German and East Europeans working in *film noir*: Fritz Lang, Robert Siodmak, Billy Wilder, Franz Waxman, Otto Preminger, John Brahm, Anatole Litvak, Karl Freund, Max Ophüls, John Alton, Douglas Sirk, Fred Zinnemann, William Dieterle, Max Steiner, Edgar G. Ulmer, Curtis Bernhardt, Rudolph Maté.

On the surface the German expressionist influence, with its reliance on artificial studio lighting, seems incompatible with post-war realism, with its harsh unadorned exteriors; but it is the unique quality of film noir that it was able to weld seemingly contradictory elements into a uniform style. The best noir technicians simply made all the world a sound stage, directing unnatural and expressionistic lighting onto realistic settings. In films like *Union Station*, *They Live by Night*, *The Killers* there is an uneasy, exhilarating combination of realism and expressionism.

Perhaps the greatest master of noir was Hungarian-born John Alton, an expressionist cinematographer who could re-light Times Square at noon if necessary. No cinematographer better adapted the old expressionist techniques to the new desire for realism, and his black-and-white photography in such gritty film noir as *T-Men*, *Raw Deal*, *I the Jury*, *The Big Combo* equals that of such German expressionist masters as Fritz Wagner and Karl Freund.

The hard-boiled tradition: Another stylistic influence waiting in the wings was the "hard-boiled" school of writers. In the Thirties, authors such as Ernest Hemingway, Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain, Horace McCoy and John O'Hara created the "tough," cynical way of acting and thinking which separated one from the world of everyday emotions—romanticism with a protective shell. The hard-boiled writers had their roots in pulp fiction or journalism, and their protagonists lived out a narcissistic, defeatist code. The hard-boiled hero was, in reality, a soft egg compared to his existential counterpart (Camus is said to have based *The Stranger* on McCoy), but he was a good deal tougher than anything American fiction had seen.

When the movies of the Forties turned to the American "tough" moral understrata, the hard-boiled school was waiting with preset conventions of heroes, minor characters, plots, dialogue and themes. Like the German expatriates, the hard-boiled writers had a style made to order for film noir; and, in turn, they influenced noir screenwriting as much as the German influenced noir cinematography. The most hard-boiled of Hollywood's writers was Raymond Chandler himself, whose script of *Double Indemnity* (from a James M. Cain story) was the best written and most characteristically noir of the period. *Double Indemnity* was the first film which played film noir for what it essentially was: small-time, unredeemed, unheroic; it made a break from the romantic noir cinema of [the later] *Mildred Pierce* and *The Big Sleep*.

(In its final stages, however, film noir adapted and then bypassed the hard-boiled school. Manic, neurotic post-1948 films such as *Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye*, *D.O.A.*, *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, *White Heat*, and *The Big Heat* are all post-hard-boiled: the air in these regions was even too thin for old-time cynics like Chandler.)

STYLISTICS: There is not yet a study of the stylistics of film noir, and the task is certainly too large to be attempted here. Like all film movements film noir drew

upon a reservoir of film techniques, and given the time one could correlate its techniques, themes and causal elements into a stylistic schema. For the present, however, I'd like to point out some of film noir's recurring techniques.

■ The majority of scenes are lit for night. Gangsters sit in the offices at midday with shades pulled and the lights off. Ceiling lights are hung low and floor lamps are seldom more than five feet high. One always has the suspicion that if the lights were all suddenly flipped on the characters would shriek and shrink from the scene like Count Dracula at sunrise.

■ As in German expressionism, oblique and vertical lines are preferred to horizontal. Obliquity adheres to the choreography of the city, and is in direct opposition to the horizontal American tradition of Griffith and Ford. Oblique lines tend to splinter a screen, making it restless and unstable. Light enters the dingy rooms of film noir in such odd shapes—jagged trapezoids, obtuse triangles, vertical slits—that one suspects the windows were cut out with a pen knife. No character can speak authoritatively from a space which is being continually cut into ribbons of light. The Anthony Mann/John Alton *T-Men* is the most dramatic but far from the only example of oblique noir choreography.

■ The actors and setting are often given equal lighting emphasis. An actor is often hidden in the realistic tableau of the city at night, and, more obviously, his face is often blacked out by shadow as he speaks. These shadow effects are unlike the famous Warner Brothers lighting of the Thirties in which the central character was accentuated by a heavy shadow; in film noir, the central character is likely to be standing in the shadow. When the environment is given an equal or greater weight than the actor, it, of course, creates a fatalistic, hopeless mood. There is nothing the protagonist can do; the city will outlast and negate even his best efforts.

■ Compositional tension is preferred to physical action. A typical film noir would rather move the scene cinematographically around the actor than have the actor control the scene by physical action. The beating of Robert Ryan in *The Set-Up*, the gunning down of Farley Granger in *They Live by Night*, the execution of the taxi driver in *The Enforcer* and of Brian Donley in *The Big Combo* are all marked by measured pacing, restrained anger and oppressive compositions, and seem much closer to the film noir spirit than the rat-tat-tat and screeching tress of *Scarface* twenty years before or the violent, expressive actions of *Underworld* U.S.A. ten years later.

■ There seems to be an almost Freudian attachment to water. The empty noir streets are almost always glistening with fresh evening rain (even in Los Angeles), and the rainfall tends to increase in direct proportion to the drama. Docks and piers are second only to alleyways as the most popular rendezvous points.

■ There is a love of romantic narration. In such films as *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, *Laura*, *Double Indemnity*, *The Lady from Shanghai*, *Out of the Past* and *Sunset*

Boulevard the narration creates a mood of temps perdu: an irretrievable past, a predetermined fate and an all-enveloping hopelessness. In *Out of the Past*, Robert Mitchum relates his history with such pathetic relish that it is obvious there is no hope for any future: one can only take pleasure in reliving a doomed past:

■ A complex chronological order is frequently used to reinforce the feelings of hopelessness and lost time. Such films as *The Enforcer*, *The Killers*, *Mildred Pierce*, *The Dark Past*, *Chicago Deadline*, *Out of the Past* and *The Killing* use a convoluted time sequence to immerse the viewer in a time-disoriented but highly stylized world. The manipulation of time, whether slight or complex, is often used to reinforce a noir principle: the how is always more important than the what.

THEMES. Raymond Durngat has delineated the themes of film noir in an excellent article in the British *Cinema* magazine ("The Family Tree of Film noir," August, 1970), and it would be foolish for me to attempt to redo his thorough work in this short space. Durngat divides film noir into eleven thematic categories, and although one might criticize some of his specific groupings, he does cover the whole gamut of noir production (thematically categorizing over 300 films):

In each of Durngat's noir themes (whether Black Widow, killers-on-the-run, *doppelgangers*) one finds that the upwardly mobile forces of the Thirties have halted; frontierism has turned to paranoia and claustrophobia. The small-time gangster has now made it big and sits in the mayor's chair, the private eye has quit the police force in disgust, and the young heroine, sick of going along for the ride, is taking others for a ride.

Durngat, however, does not touch upon what is perhaps the over-riding noir theme: a passion for the past and present, but also a fear of the future. The noir hero dreads to look ahead, but instead tries to survive by the day, and if unsuccessful at that, he retreats to the past. Thus film noir's techniques emphasize loss, nostalgia, lack of clear priorities, insecurity; then submerge these self-doubts in mannerism and style. In such a world style becomes paramount; it is all that separates one from meaninglessness. Chandler described this fundamental noir theme when he described his own fictional world: "It is not a very fragrant world, but it is the world you live in, and certain writers with tough minds and a cool spirit of detachment can make very interesting patterns out of it."

Film noir can be subdivided into three broad phases. The first, the wartime period, 1941-46 approximately, was the phase of the private eye and the lone wolf, of Chandler, Hammett and Greene, of Bogart and Bacall, Ladd and Lake, class directors like Curtiz and Garnett, studio sets, and, in general, more talk than action. The studio look of this period was reflected in such pictures as *The Matinee Falcon*, *Casablanca*, *Gaslight*, *This Gun for Hire*, *The Lodger*, *The Woman in the Window*, *Mildred Pierce*, *Spellbound*, *The Big Sleep*, *Laura*, *The Lost Weekend*, *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers*, *To Have and Have Not*, *Fallen Angel*, *Gilda*, *Murder My Sweet*,

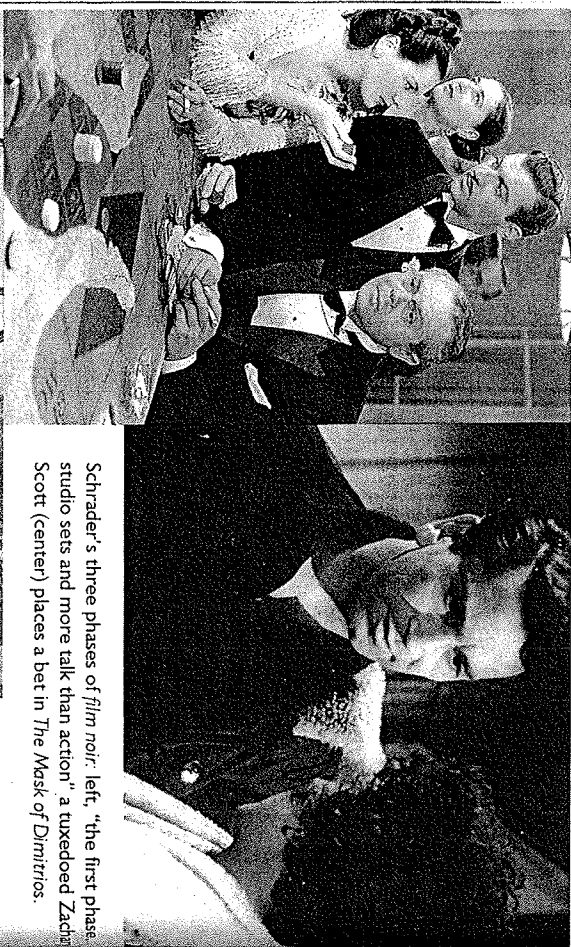
*The Postman Always Rings Twice*, *Dark Waters*, *Scarlet Street*, *So Dark the Night*, *The Glass Key*, *The Mask of Dimitrios*, and *The Dark Mirror*.

The Wilder/Chandler *Double Indemnity* provided a bridge to the post-war phase of film noir. The unflinching noir vision of *Double Indemnity* came as a shock in 1944, and the film was almost blocked by the combined efforts of Paramount, the Hays Office and star Fred MacMurray. Three years later, however, *Double Indemnity* were dropping off the studio assembly line.

The second phase was the post-war realistic period from 1945-49 (the dates overlap and so do the films; these are all approximate phases for which there are many exceptions). These films tended more toward the problems of crime in the streets, political corruption and police routine. Less romantic heroes like Richard Conte, Burt Lancaster and Charles McGraw were more suited to this period, as were proletarian directors like Hathaway, Dassin and Kazan. The realistic urban look of this phase is seen in such films as *The House on 92nd Street*, *The Killers*, *Raw Deal*, *Act of Violence*, *Union Station*, *Kiss of Death*, *Johnny O'Clock*, *Force of Evil*, *Dead Reckoning*, *Ride the Pink Horse*, *Dark Passage*, *Cry of the City*, *The Set-Up*, *T-Men*, *Call Northside 777*, *Brute Force*, *The Big Clock*, *Thieves' Highway*, *Ruthless*, *Pitfall*, *Boomerang*, and *The Naked City*.

The third and final phase of film noir, from 1949-53, was the period of psychotic action and suicidal impulse. The noir hero, seemingly under the weight of ten years of despair, started to go bananas. The psychotic killer, who in the first period been a subject worthy of study (Olivia de Havilland in *The Dark Mirror*), in the second a fringe threat (Richard Widmark in *Kiss of Death*), now became the active protagonist (James Cagney in *Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye*). There were no excuses given for the psychopathy in *Gun Crazy*—it was just "crazy." James Cagney made a neurotic comeback and his instability was matched by that of younger actors like Robert Ryan and Lee Marvin. This was the phase of the "B" noir film, and of psychoanalytically-inclined directors like Ray and Walsh. The forces of personal disintegration are reflected in such films as *White Heat*, *Gun Crazy*, *D.O.A.*, *Caught*, *They Live by Night*, *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, *Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye*, *Detective Story*, *In a Lonely Place*, *I the Jury*, *Ace in the Hole*, *Panic in the Streets*, *The Big Heat*, *On Dangerous Ground*, and *Sunset Boulevard*.

This third phase is the cream of the film noir period. Some critics may prefer the early "gray" melodramas, other the post-war "street" films, but film noir's final phase was the most aesthetically and sociologically piercing. After ten years of steadily shedding romantic conventions, the later noir films finally got down to the root causes of the period: the loss of public honor, heroic conventions, personal integrity, and, finally, psychic stability. The third-phase films were painfully self-aware; they seemed to know they stood at the end of a long tradition based on despair and disintegration and did not shy away from the fact. The best and characteristically noir films—*Gun Crazy*, *White Heat*, *Out of the Past*, *Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye*, *D.O.A.*, *They Live by Night*, and *The Big Heat*—stand at the end of the pe-



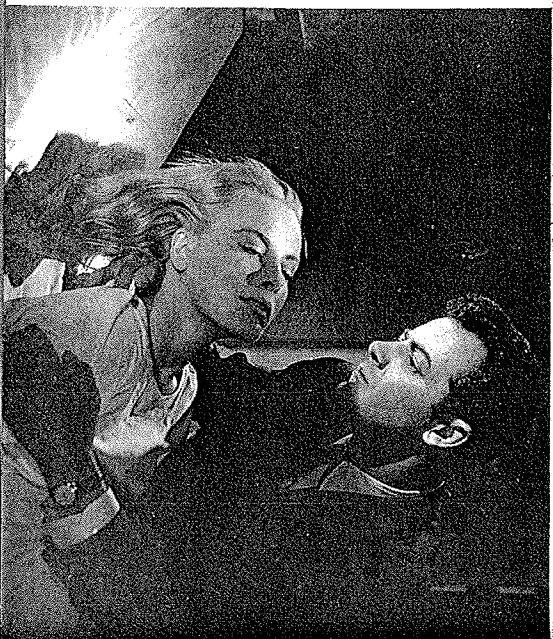
Schrader's three phases of film noir: left, "the first phase: studio sets and more talk than action," a tuxedoed Zoltan Scott (center) places a bet in *The Mask of Dimitrios*.



Above, phase two, post-War realism: ethnic proletarians Richard Conte and Valentina Cortese in *Thieves' Highway*.

Left, "the third and final phase of film noir. [featuring] the forces of personal disintegration" as when Kirk Douglas menaces Jan Sterling in *Ace in the Hole*.

Right, "there were a few notable stragglers" such as the John Alton photographed *The Big Combo*



riod and are the results of self-awareness. The third phase is rife with end-of-the-line noir heroes: *The Big Heat* and *Where the Sidewalk Ends* are the last stops for the urban cop, *Ace in the Hole* for the newspaper man, the Victor Saville-produced *Spillane* series (I, *the Jury*, *The Long Wait*, *Kiss Me Deadly*) for the private eye, *Sunset Boulevard* for the Black Widow, *White Heat* and *Kiss Tomorrow Good-bye* for the gangster, *D.O.A.* for the John Doe American.

Appropriately, the masterpiece of film noir was a straggler, *Kiss Me Deadly*, produced in 1955. Its time delay gives it a sense of detachment and thoroughgoing seediness—it stands at the end of a long sleazy tradition. The private eye hero, Mike Hammer, undergoes the final stages of degradation. He is a small-time "bedroom dick," and makes no qualms about it because the world around him isn't much better. Ralph Meeker, in his best performance, plays Hammer, a midge among dwarfs. Robert Aldrich's teasing direction carries noir to its sleaziest and most perversely erotic. Hammer overturns the underworld in search of the "great whatsit," and when he finally finds it, it turns out to be—joke of jokes—an exploding atomic bomb. The inhumanity and meaningless of the hero are small matters in a world in which *The Bomb* has the final say.

By the middle Fifties film noir had ground to a halt: There were a few notable stragglers, *Kiss Me Deadly*, the Lewis/Alton *The Big Combo*, and film noir's epitaph, *Touch of Evil*, but for the most part a new style of crime film had become popular.

At the rise of McCarthy and Eisenhower demonstrated, Americans were eager to see a more bourgeois view of themselves. Crime had to move to the suburbs. The criminal put on a gray flannel suit and the footsore cop was replaced by the "mobile unit" careening down the expressway. Any attempt at social criticism had to be cloaked in ludicrous affirmations of the American way of life. Technically, television, with its demand for full lighting and close-ups, gradually undercut the German influence, and color cinematography was, of course, the final blow to the "noir" look.

New directors like Siegel, Fleischer, Karlson and Fuller, and TV shows like *Diogenes*, *M-Squad*, *Lineup* and *Highway Patrol* stepped in to create the new crime drama. This transition can be seen in Samuel Fuller's 1953 *Pickup on South Street*, a film which blends the black look with the red scare. The waterfront scenes with Richard Widmark and Jean Peters are in the best noir tradition, but a later, dynamic fight in the subway marks Fuller as a director who would be better suited to the crime school of the middle and late Fifties.

Film noir was an immensely creative period—probably the most creative in Hollywood's history—at least, if this creativity is measured not by its peaks but by its median level of artistry. Picked at random, a film noir is likely to be a better made film than a randomly selected silent comedy, musical, western and so on. (A Joseph H. Lewis "B" film noir is better than a Lewis "B" western, for example.) Taken as a whole period, film noir achieved an unusually high level of artistry.

Film noir seemed to bring out the best in everyone: directors, cameramen, screenwriters, actors. Again and again, a film noir will make the high point on an artist's career graph. Some directors, for example, did their best work in film noir (Stuart Heisler, Robert Siodmak, Gordon Douglas, Edward Dmytryk, John Brahm, John Cromwell, Raoul Walsh, Henry Hathaway); other directors began in film noir and, it seems to me, never regained their original heights (Otto Preminger, Rudolph Maté, Nicholas Ray, Robert Wise, Jules Dassin, Richard Fleischer, John Huston, Andre de Toth, and Robert Aldrich); and other directors who made great films in other molds also made great film noir (Orson Welles, Max Ophüls, Fritz Lang, Elia Kazan, Howard Hawks, Robert Rossen, Anthony Mann, Joseph Losey, Alfred Hitchcock, and Stanley Kubrick). Whether or not one agrees with this particular schema, its message is irrefutable: film noir was good for practically every director's career. (Two interesting exceptions to prove the case are King Vidor and Jean Renoir.)

Film noir seems to have been a creative release for everyone involved. It gave artists a chance to work with previously forbidden themes, yet had conventions strong enough to protect the mediocre. Cinematographers were allowed to become highly mannered, and actors were sheltered by the cinematographers. It was not until years later that critics were able to distinguish between great directors and great noir directors.

Film noir's remarkable creativity makes its longtime neglect the more baffling. The French, of course, have been students of the period for some time (Borde and Chaumeton's *Panorama du Film Noir* was published in 1955), but American critics until recently have preferred the western, the musical or the gangster film to the film noir.

Some of the reasons for this neglect are superficial; others strike to the heart of the noir style. For a long time film noir, with its emphasis on corruption and despair, was considered an aberration of the American character. The western, with its moral primitivism, and the gangster film, with its Horatio Alger values, were considered more American than the film noir.

This prejudice was reinforced by the fact that film noir was ideally suited to the low budget "B" film, and many of the best noir films were "B" films. This odd sort of economic snobbery still lingers on in some critical circles: high-budget trash is considered more worthy of attention than low-budget trash, and to praise a "B" film is somehow to slight (often intentionally) an "A" film.

There has been a critical revival in the U.S. over the last ten years, but film noir lost out on that too. The revival was auteur (director) oriented, and film noir wasn't. Auteur criticism is interested in how directors are different; film noir criticism is concerned with what they have in common.

The fundamental reason for film noir's neglect, however, is the fact that it depends more on choreography than sociology, and American critics have always

been slow on the uptake when it comes to visual style. Like its protagonists, film noir is more interested in style than theme, whereas American critics have been traditionally more interested in theme than style.

American film critics have always been sociologists first and scientists second: film is important as it relates to large masses, and if a film goes awry it is often because the theme has been somehow "violated" by the style. Film noir operates on opposite principles: the theme is hidden in the style, and bogus themes are often flaunted ("middle-class values are best") which contradict the style. Although, I believe, style determines the theme in every film, it was easier for sociological critics to discuss the themes of the western and gangster film apart from stylistic analysis than it was to do for film noir.

Not surprisingly it was the gangster film, not the film noir, which was canonized in *The Partisan Review* in 1948 by Robert Warshaw's famous essay, "The Gangster as Tragic Hero." Although Warshaw could be an aesthetic as well as a sociological critic, in this case he was interested in the western and gangster film as "popular" art rather than as style. This sociological orientation blinded Warshaw, as it has many subsequent critics, to an aesthetically more important development in the gangster film—film noir.

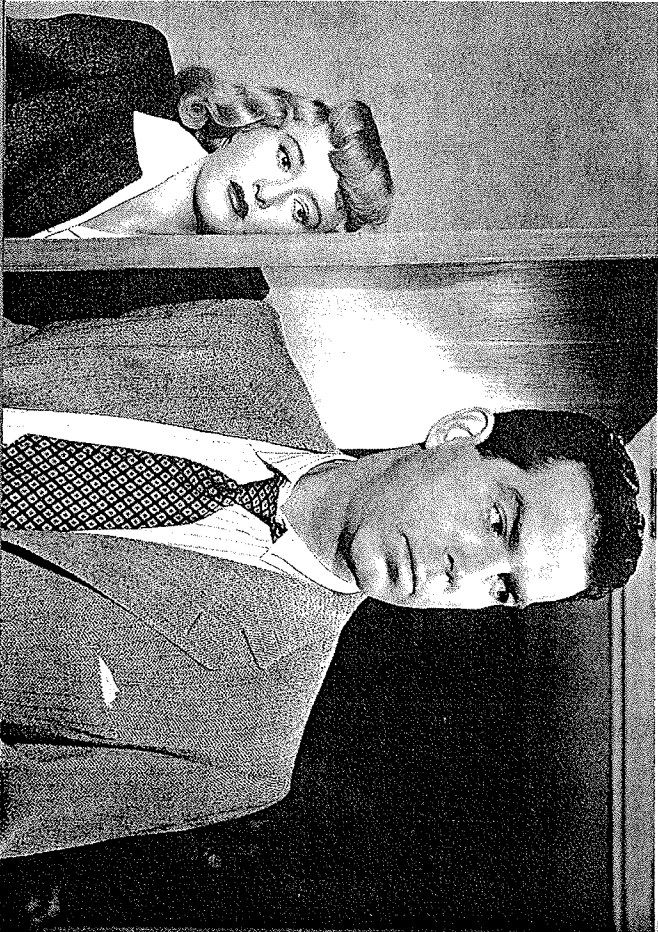
The irony of this neglect is that in retrospect the gangster films Warshaw wrote about are inferior to film noir. The Thirties gangster was primarily a reflection of what was happening in the country, and Warshaw analyzed this. The film noir, although it was also a sociological reflection, went further than the gangster film. Toward the end film noir was engaged in a life-and-death struggle with the materials it reflected; it tried to make America accept a moral vision of life based on style. That very contradiction—promoting style in a culture which valued themes—forced film noir into artistically invigorating twists and turns. Film noir attacked and interpreted its sociological conditions, and, by the close of the noir period, created a new artistic world which went beyond a simple sociological reflection, a nightmarish world of American mannerism which was by far more a creation than a reflection.

Because film noir was first of all a style, because it worked out its conflicts visually rather than thematically, because it was aware of its own identity, it was able to create artistic solutions to sociological problems. And for these reason films like *Kiss Me Deadly*, *Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye* and *Gun Crazy* can be works of art in a way that gangster films like *Scarface*, *Public Enemy* and *Little Caesar* can never be.



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Above, silhouetted figures standing in rigid position become abstracted Modern Man and Woman in the final sequence of *The Big Combo*. The back-lighting of heavy smoke and an ominously circling light visible in the background further abstracts the environment into a modern neather world. Below, direct, undiffused lighting of Barbara Stanwyck in *Double Indemnity* creates a hard-edged, mask-like surface beauty. By comparison, "hard-boiled" Fred MacMurray seems soft and vulnerable.



## Some Visual Motifs of Film Noir

### Janey Place & Lowell Peterson (1974)

A dark street in the early morning hours, splashed with a sudden downpour. Lamps form haloes in the murk. In a walk-up room, filled with the intermittent flashing of a neon sign from across the street, a man is waiting to murder or be murdered... shadow upon shadow upon shadow... every shot in glistening low-key, so that rain always glittered across windows or windscreens like quicksilver, furs shone with a faint halo, faces were barred deeply with those shadows that usually symbolized some imprisonment of body or soul.

Joel Greenberg and Charles Higham.

*Hollywood in the Forties*

Nearly every attempt to define *film noir* has agreed that visual style is the consistent thread that unites the very diverse films that together comprise this phenomenon. Indeed, no pat political or sociological explanations—"postwar disillusionment," "fear of the bomb," "modern alienation"—can coalesce in a satisfactory way such disparate yet essential *film noir* as *Double Indemnity*, *Laura*, *In a Lonely Place*, *The Big Combo* and *Kiss Me Deadly*. The characteristic *film noir* moods of claustrophobia, paranoia, despair, and nihilism constitute a world view that is expressed not through the films' terse, elliptical dialogue, nor through their confusing, often insoluble plots, but ultimately through their remarkable style.

But how can we discuss style? Without the films before us it is difficult to isolate the elements of the *noir* visual style and examine how they operate. Furthermore, while film critics and students would like to speak of the shots and the images, we often lack a language for communicating these visual ideas. This article is an attempt to employ in a critical context the technical terminology commonly used for fifty years by Hollywood directors and cameramen, in the hope that it might be a good step toward the implementation of such a critical language. The article is not meant to be either exhaustive or exacting; it is merely a discussion—with actual frame enlargements from the films—of some of the visual motifs of the *film noir* style: why they are used, how they work, and what we can call them.

### The "Noir" Photographic Style: Antitraditional Lighting and Camera

In order to photograph a character in a simple, basic lighting set-up, three different kinds of light, called by some cinematographers the "key light," "fill light," and "back light," are required. The key light is the primary source of illumination, directed on the character usually from high and to one side of the camera. The key is generally a hard direct light that produces sharply defined shadows. The fill light, placed near the camera, is a soft, diffused or indirect light that "fills in" the shadows created by the key. Finally, the back light is a direct light shining on the actor from behind, which adds interesting highlights and which has the effect of giving him form by differentiating him from the background.

The dominant lighting technique which had evolved by the early Forties is "high-key lighting," in which the ratio of key light to fill light is small. Thus the intensity of the fill is great enough to soften the harsh shadows created by the key. This gives what was considered to be an impression of reality, in which the character's face is attractively modeled, but without exaggerated or unnatural areas of darkness. *Noir* lighting is "low-key." The ratio of key to fill light is great, creating areas of high contrast and rich, black shadows. Unlike the even illumination of high-key lighting which seeks to display attractively all areas of the frame, the low-key *noir* style opposes light and dark, hiding faces, rooms, urban landscapes—and, by extension, motivations and true character—in shadow and darkness which carry connotations of the mysterious and the unknown.

The harsh lighting of the low-key *noir* style was even employed in the photography of the lead actresses, whose close-ups are traditionally diffused (by placing either spun glass or other diffusion over the key light, or glass diffusion or gauze over the camera lens itself) in order to show the actress to her best advantage. Far removed from the feeling of softness and vulnerability created by these diffusion techniques, the *noir* heroines were shot in tough, unromantic close-ups of direct, undiffused light, which create a hard, statuesque surface beauty that seems more seductive but less attainable, at once alluring and impenetrable.

The common and most traditional placement of lights, then and now, is known as the "three-quarter lighting" set-up, in which the key light is positioned high and about forty-five degrees to one side in front of the actor, and the fill is low and close to the camera. Because the attractive, balanced, harmonious face thus produced would have been antithetical to the depiction of the typical *noir* moods of paranoia, delirium, and menace, the *noir* cinematographers placed their key, fill and back light in every conceivable variation to produce the most striking and off-beat schemes of light and dark. The elimination of the fill produces areas of total black. Strange highlights are introduced, often on the faces of the sinister or demented. The key light may be moved behind and to one side of the actor and is then called the "kick light." Or it can be moved below or high above the charac-

ters to create unnatural shadows and strange facial expressions. The actors may play a scene totally in shadow, or they may be silhouetted against an illuminated background.

Above all, it is the constant opposition of areas of light and dark that characterizes *film noir* cinematography. Small areas of light seen on the verge of being completely overwhelmed by the darkness that now threatens them from all sides. Thus faces are shot: low-key, interior sets are always dark, with forboding shadow patterns facing the walls, and exteriors are shot "night-for-night." Night scenes previous to *film noir* were most often shot "day-for-night", that is, the scene is photographed in bright daylight, but filters placed over the camera lens, combined with a restriction of the amount of light entering the camera, create the illusion of night. Night-for-night—night scenes actually shot at night—required that artificial light sources be brought in to illuminate each area of light seen in the frame. The effect produced is one of the highest contrast, the sky rendered jet black, as opposed to the gray sky of day-for-night. Although night-for-night becomes quite a bit more costly and time-consuming to shoot than day-for-night, nearly every *film noir*, even of the cheapest "B" variety, used night-for-night extensively as an integral component of the *noir* look.

Another requirement of *noir* photography was greater "depth of field." It was essential in many close or medium shots that focus be carried into the background so that all objects and characters in the frame be in sharp focus, giving equal weight to each. The world of the film is thus made a closed universe, with each character seen as just another facet of an unheeding environment that will exist unchanged long after his death; and the interaction between man and the forces represented by that *noir* environment is always clearly visible. Because of the characteristics of the camera lens, there are two methods for increasing depth of field: increasing the amount of light entering the lens, or using a lens of wider focal length. Obviously, because of the low light levels involved in the shooting of low-key and night-for-night photography, wide-angle lenses were used in order to obtain the additional depth of field required.

Beside their effect on depth of field, wide-angle lenses have certain distorting characteristics which, as *noir* photography developed, began to be used expressively. As faces or objects come closer to the wide lens they tend to bulge outward. (The first shot of Quinlan in *Touch of Evil* is an extreme example.) This effect is often used in *noir* films on close-ups of porcine gangsters or politicians, or to intensify the look of terror on the hero's face as the forces of fate close in upon him. These lenses also create the converse of the well-known "endstancing effects" of the long, telephoto lenses: wide-angle has the effect of drawing the viewer into the picture, of including him in the world of the film and thus rendering emotional or dramatic events more immediate.

### The "Noir" Directorial Style: Antitraditional Mise-en-scène

Complementary to the noir photographic style among the better-directed films is a *mise-en-scène* designed to unsettle, jar, and disorient the viewer in correlation with the disorientation felt by the noir heroes. In particular, compositional balance within the frame is often disruptive and unnerving. Those traditionally harmonious triangular three-shots and balanced two-shots, which are borrowed from the compositional principles of Renaissance painting, are seldom seen in the better film noir. More common are bizarre, off-angle compositions of figures placed irregularly in the frame, which create a world that is never stable or safe, that is always threatening to change drastically and unexpectedly. Claustrophobic framing devices such as doors, windows, stairways, metal bed frames, or simply shadows separate the character from other characters, from his world, or from his own emotions. And objects seem to push their way into the foreground of the frame to assume more power than the people.

Often, objects in the frame take on an assumed importance simply because they act to determine a stable composition. Framed portraits and mirror reflections, beyond their symbolic representations of fragmented ego or idealized image, sometimes assume ominous and foreboding qualities solely because they are so compositionally prominent. It is common for a character to form constant balanced two-shots of himself and his own mirror reflection or shadow. Such compositions, though superficially balanced, begin to lose their stability in the course of the film as the symbolic *Doppelgänger* either is shown to lack its apparent substantiality or else proves to be a dominant and destructive alter ego. Similarly, those omnipresent framed portraits of women seem to confine the safe, powerless aspects of feminine sexuality with which the noir heroes invariably fall in love. But in the course of the film, as the forces mirrored in the painting come closer to more sinister flesh and blood, the compositions that have depended on the "rectangular" portrait for balance topple into chaos, the silently omniscient framed face becoming a mocking reminder of the threat of the real women.

In the use of "screen size," too, the noir directors use unsettling variations on the traditional close-up, medium and long shots. Establishing long shots of a new locale are often withheld, providing the viewer with no means of spatial orientation. Choker close-ups, framing the head or chin, are obtrusive and disturbing. These are sometimes used on the menacing heavy, other times reserved to show the couple-on-the-run whose intimacy is threatened or invaded. The archetypal noir shot is probably the extreme high-angle long shot, an oppressive and fatalistic angle that looks down on its helpless victim to make it look like a rat in a maze. Noir cutting often opposes such extreme changes in angle and screen size to create jarring juxtapositions, as with the oft-used cut from huge close-up to high-angle long shot of a man being pursued through the dark city streets.

Camera movements are used sparingly in most noir films, perhaps because of the great expense necessary to mount an elaborate tracking or boom shot, or perhaps simply because the noir directors would rather cut for effect from a close-up to a long shot than bridge that distance smoothly and less immediately booming. What moving shots that were made seem to have been carefully considered and often tied very directly to the emotions of the characters. Typical is the shot in which the camera tracks backward before a running man, at once involving the audience in the movement and excitement of the chase, recording the terror on the character's face, and looking over his shoulder at the forces, visible or not, which are pursuing him. The cameras of Lang, Ray, and Preminger often make short tracking movements which are hardly perceptible, yet which subtly undermine a stable composition, or which slightly emphasize a character to whom we then give greater notice.

The "dark mirror" of film noir creates a visually unstable environment in which no character has a firm moral base from which he can confidently operate. All attempts to find safety or security are undercut by the antitraditional cinematography and *mise-en-scène*. Right and wrong become relative, subject to the same distortions and disruptions created in the lighting and camera work. Moral values, like identities that pass in and out of shadow, are constantly shifting and must be redefined at every turn. And in the most notable examples of film noir, as the narratives drift headlong into confusion and irrelevance, each character's precarious relationship to the world, the people who inhabit it, and to himself and his own emotions, becomes a function of visual style.

Below, the "normalcy" of this typical couple in love in *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* is undercut by their unsettling positions in an unbalanced frame.

