# Film Noir: Somewhere in the Night

## MADE IN THE USA

Film noir—literally "black film"—is a French phrase, but it refers to an American phenomenon made in Hollywood, USA. Though several of the directors associated with film noir, such as Billy Wilder, Fritz Lang, Otto Preminger, and Edgar G. Ulmer, were foreign-born, the majority of those who explored the darker reaches of the noir experience were American, born and bred. They have included, among others, Orson Welles, John Huston, Nicholas Ray, Samuel Fuller, Joseph H. Lewis, Anthony Mann, Raoul Walsh, Joseph Mankiewicz, Don Siegel, Phil Karlson, Tay Garnett, Frank Tuttle, Edward Dmytryk, Henry Hathaway, and Jacques Tourneur who, though born in Paris (1904), grew up in Hollywood (from 1914).

Even more important, the source material for the bulk of noir narratives came from the underworld of American pulp fiction. For example, nearly 20 percent of the films noirs made between 1941 and 1948 were adaptations of

hard-boiled novels written by American authors such as Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain, Horace McCoy, Cornell Woolrich, and others. An even greater percentage of films noirs were written by American screenwriters whose original scripts were heavily influenced by the hard-boiled style of these proletarian, tough-guy writers of the 1930s and 1940s. And, as we shall see, film noir deals with a uniquely American experience of wartime and postwar despair and alienation as a disoriented America readjusts to a new social and political reality.

There is a French connection, however. Film noir was discovered and christened in postwar France. On August 26, 1944, the Allies liberated Paris. During the Nazi occupation, which began in the summer of 1940, the Germans had banned the exhibition of American films in French theaters. Finally, in 1945, an enormous backlog of American films, which had been made during the war but had not been seen in Nazi-controlled territories, reached French screens.

French audiences were overwhelmed by a flood of American films, and critics were startled by the changes that had taken place in American film production during the war. The prewar classical Hollywood cinema, which was dominated by the rationality, symmetry, and order of their favorite directors such as William Wyler, John Ford, and Frank Capra, had given way to a subversive strain of behavioral deviance in American films, which were now dominated by crime, corruption, cruelty, and an apparently unhealthy interest in the erotic. American film had suddenly—from the French perspective, at least—turned grimmer, bleaker, and blacker.

During a short period from mid-July to the end of August 1946, a succession of extremely downbeat films opened in Paris. The cycle began with a Hammett detective yarn, *The Maltese Falcon* (Huston, 1941). It was followed by *Laura* (Preminger, 1944), an *amor fou* in which a police detective falls in love with a murder victim by looking at her portrait. Then there were a Raymond Chandler–Philip Marlowe mystery, *Murder, My Sweet* (Dmytryk, 1944); James Cain's study of corruption, distrust, and betrayal, *Double Indemnity* (Wilder, 1944); and the nightmarish *Woman in the Window* (Lang, 1944). Several months later, a second wave of similarly dark American motion pictures hit the French capital, including *This Gun for Hire* (Tuttle, 1942), *The Killers* (Siodmak, 1946), *The Lady in the Lake* (Montgomery, 1946), *Gilda* (Vidor, 1946), and *The Big Sleep* (Hawks, 1946).

French critics were quick to recognize that many of these films possessed similar stylistic elements and settings, common character and narrative traits, and recurrent thematic concerns. They pointed out that these features resembled, in a number of ways, certain characteristics found in prewar American pulp fiction. In fact, most of these first ten films were adaptations of hard-boiled novels. Dozens of such novels had recently been translated into French and published as a group in a series edited by Marcel Duhamel at Gallimard Press, which marketed them under the generic title of *Serie Noire* or "Black Series."

The term *film noir* was coined by two French critics in an attempt to describe these movies. The adjective *noir* aptly conveys not only the films'

In *Laura,* detective McPherson (Dana Andrews) falls in love with the dead woman in the portrait.

antecedents in the *romans noirs* (black novels) of Hammett, Chandler, Cain, McCoy, Woolrich, Graham Greene, and others, but also the essential nature of the *experience* that audiences have in watching the films. These films unsettled audiences. Through their violation of the traditional narrative and stylistic practices of classical Hollywood cinema that oriented and stabilized specta-tors, these films created an uncomfortable and disturbing malaise or anxiety in their viewers.

## FILM NOIR: GENRE, SERIES, OR MODE?

### Noir as Genre: A Set of Conventions

Though most critics and historians regard noir as a mode of film practice whose identity resides chiefly in its ability to make audiences uneasy, there is considerable disagreement over what *exactly* film noir is. A number of scholars treat film noir as a *genre,* discussing it in terms of its iconography (dark city streets glistening at night with fresh rain), fixed character types (proletarian, tough-guy antiheroes ensnared by treacherous femmes fatales), and predictable narrative patterns (murder plots and criminal investigations in which the hero's moral fallibility leads to his defeat at the hands of his enemies and often results in his death or in an otherwise unhappy ending).

For those who view it as a genre, film noir (like the Western, gangster film, and musical) relies on a well-defined system of conventions and expectations. Yet these critics also acknowledge film noir's distinctive *style*—it is *dark.* Low-key lighting becomes the norm, replacing the pre–noir norm of cheerful, high-key lighting setups. But style is a feature that rarely, if ever, figures in the definition of a genre.

## Noir as Series: A Certain Style

Others insist that film noir is not a genre but a *series* or cycle, and view it as an aesthetic movement, somewhat as German Expressionism was in the 1920s. Though certain characters, narrative situations, and thematic concerns appear again and again in film noir, these elements tend to resist conventionalization and play against expectations. In addition, critics of the genre argument note that film noir lacked the institutional status of traditional genres. Producers, directors, and screenwriters of 1940s and 1950s films noirs, unlike those of Westerns, musicals, or gangster films, did not deliberately set out to make films noirs. There was no body of noir conventions for them to follow. Nor did audiences who saw films noirs view them as they did conventional genre pictures. That is, they did not look at them in relation to a fixed system of prior expectations.

At the same time, a number of critics contend that film noir cannot be a genre because it crosses over traditional genre boundaries; there are noir Westerns (*Pursued,* 1947; *Duel in the Sun,* 1946), gangster films (*White Heat,* 1949), melodramas (*Mildred Pierce* and *Leave Her to Heaven,* 1945), costume pictures (*Hangover Square,* 1945; *Reign of Terror,* 1949), sequences in musicals ("The Girl Hunt Ballet" in *The Band Wagon,* 1953), and even comedies (*Arsenic and Old Lace,* 1944; *M. Verdoux,* 1947).

Yet both the pro and con positions concerning noir's status as a genre have a certain validity. Like genre films, every film noir does rely, to some extent, on identifiable character types and conventionalized narrative patterns. The detective hero falls into the clutches of the spider woman, extricating himself from danger only by repressing those passions that drew him to her in the first place and by "sending her over" (i.e., giving her over to the police). Yet, it is just as clear that that which is *generic* in film noir is precisely that which is *not* noir. There is nothing in the above outline of the typical detective story that is necessarily eery, disorienting, or anxiety-producing for the audience.

The problem of film noir's status lies in its essentially schizophrenic nature: film noir is not a genre, but every film noir is also a genre film. In other words, the conventions and systems of expectations that can be found in films noirs are those of the various genres to which these films belong—those of the detective film, the melodrama, or the Western. But what makes these films noir is the similar, transgeneric attitude they take toward their particular genre—the twist they give to conventional genre types, forms, and patterns. Thus, films noirs are all genre films; yet the genre to which they belong is not that of film

noir but that of the detective film, the crime film, the Western, the melodrama, or some other genre.

## Noir as Mode: An Uneasy Feeling

Another way of understanding the relationship of film noir to the question of genre is to return to the notion of noir as a specific emotional reaction produced by certain films in an audience. In this respect, film noir can be seen as a purely affective phenomenon; that is, it produces certain emotional responses in people. Given this definition of noir, not every film noir needs to be noir from start to finish; it needs only to be noir for a moment or two. It requires only a single character, situation, or scene that is noir to produce the disturbance or disorientation that is necessary to give the audience an unsettling twist or distressing jolt.

*Noir* thus emerges as an adjectival attribute or characteristic, functioning much as the terms *tragic, comic,* or *melodramatic* do in relation to the genres of tragedy, comedy, and melodrama; noir becomes a description of tone, attitude, or mood. In other words, noir, like the melodramatic, which also crosses over generic boundaries, is not so much a genre as a *mode*—a particular way in which genre information is conveyed.

Traditional modes, however, do not have any temporal boundaries; they are just the way certain stories are told. Although that way of telling stories changes slightly from year to year, in general, it remains fairly consistent over extended lengths of time. Melodramatic historical pictures, for example, continue to be made from period to period, ranging from *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Gone With the Wind* (1939) to *Titanic* (1997). Melodramatic Westerns flourished back in the 1940s (*Duel in the Sun, Pursued*) as well as in the 1980s (*Lonesome Dove*) and later (*Lone Star,* 1996; *The Hi-Lo Country,* 1999; *Brokeback Mountain,* 2005).

If film noir is a mode, should it not also transcend time? If so, then *Fatal Attraction* (1987) would be as much a film noir as earlier films such as *Leave Her to Heaven* (1945) or *Angel Face* (1953) in which demonic women wreak their vengeance on men. Similarly, *L.A. Confidential* (1997) resembles classic noir films such as *The Big Heat* (1953), in which a rogue cop battles crime on the street and corruption in the police department. But neither *Fatal Attraction* nor *L.A. Confidential* are really noir; they merely imitate noir stylistics and thematics. They are better understood as neo-noir, as a revival of an older body of films.

By the same token, remakes of postwar films noirs—*Body Heat* (a 1981 reworking of *Double Indemnity*), *Against All Odds* (a 1984 remake of *Out of the Past*), *Farewell, My Lovely* (a 1975 remake of *Murder, My Sweet*) or *Underneath* (a 1995 remake of *Criss Cross*)—are frequently mistaken as films noirs. A number of critics, especially those who view film noir as a genre, insist that these recent works are films noirs. However, others, especially Paul Schrader, contend that they are not, arguing that film noir, as a cycle, came to an end in the late 1950s.

Indeed, Schrader, whose own projects as a screenwriter (*Taxi Driver,* 1976) and director (*Cat People,* 1982) have clearly been heavily influenced by film noir, refuses to describe his own work or even noirish contemporary detective films such as *Chinatown* (1974) as films noirs. For Schrader, film noir belongs to a specific historical era lasting roughly from 1941 (*The Maltese Falcon*) to 1958 (*Touch of Evil*).
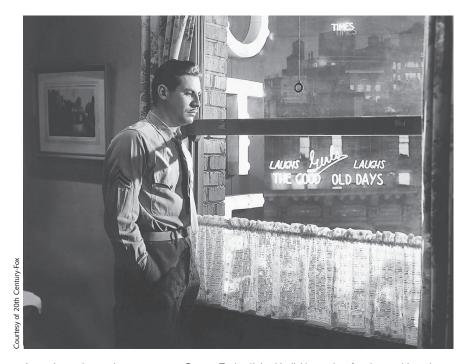
## NOIR AESTHETICS, THEMES, AND CHARACTER TYPES

For Schrader, film noir as a mode (rather than a genre) was an aesthetic movement. Like the more familiar, European aesthetic movements of German Expressionism or Italian Neorealism, film noir emerged as a cycle or series of films. It consists of a finite group of motion pictures made during a specific historical period that share certain aesthetic traits and thematic concerns.

Aesthetically, noir relies heavily on shadowy, low-key lighting; deep-focus cinematography; distorting, wide-angle lenses; sequence shots; disorienting mise-en-scène; tension-inducing, oblique, and vertical compositional lines; jarring juxtapositions between shots involving extreme changes in camera angle or screen size; claustrophobic framing; romantic voiceover narration; and a complex narrative structure, characterized by flashbacks and/or a convoluted temporal sequencing of events.

Thematically, film noir grapples, as Robert Porfirio suggests, with existential issues such as the futility of individual action; the alienation, loneliness, and isolation of the individual in industrialized, mass society; the problematic choice between being and nothingness; the absurdity, meaninglessness, and purposelessness of life; and the arbitrariness of social justice, which results in individual despair, leading to chaos, violence, and paranoia.

Typical noir heroes do not need to be detectives, though the social alienation of figures in that profession makes them archetypal noir protagonists. Often, they are merely antisocial loners—tramps or drifters as in *Detour* (1945) and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946). But even the gainfully employed—such as insurance salesman Walter Neff in *Double Indemnity* (1944) or cashier Chris Cross in *Scarlet Street* (1945)—can be subject to a certain dead-pan, existential angst, especially given their relatively faceless anonymity in a larger, dehumanizing work environment.

But perhaps the most existential of all noir heroes is the amnesiac. In *Somewhere in the Night* (1946), he is an ex-Marine (played by John Hodiak) who possesses only two enigmatic clues to his identity and is plunged into a sinister underworld of crime as he follows these leads in an attempt to figure out who he is. A similar mystery centered around an amnesiac became the central focus of Alfred Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945), in which Gregory Peck is cured

Courtesy of 20th Century-Fox

Amnesiac and returning war veteran George Taylor (John Hodiak) searches for clues to his real identity in *Somewhere in the Night* (1946).

of his amnesia by a psychiatrist (played by Ingrid Bergman) with whom he has fallen in love. The amnesiac reappeared in Robert Florey's *The Crooked Way* (1949), which tells the story of another shell-shocked veteran who becomes involved with racketeers as he investigates his own past. These amnesiacs epitomize the social estrangement and psychological confusion that had settled in the formerly healthy American psyche after the war. Audiences established a troubled identification with these heroes who had become cut off from their own pasts and whose identity crises mirrored those of the nation as a whole.

As both a style and a bundle of thematic concerns, film noir initially seems to be a phenomenon that could appear at any moment in time. But, as an aesthetic movement, it is necessarily grounded in a particular historical period—that of wartime and postwar America. To what extent is it a style or (thematic) content? To what extent is it a unique feature of American film history? Clearly, noir is a combination of all of its various identities. It is part genre, part series, part mode.

Certain stylistic elements and thematic concerns associated with film noir look back to 1920s German Expressionism and 1930s French Poetic Realism. They also look forward to certain American films of the 1970s and 1980s that

appropriated noir stylistics in an attempt to capture the apocalyptic mood of an era disillusioned by the Watergate cover-up and psychically scarred by the Vietnam War. But they finally belong to only one period and place—to 1940s and early 1950s America.

Neither the German Expressionist *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919) nor the French Poetic Realist *La Bête Humaine* (1938) have ever been described as films noirs. However, Hollywood's reworking of the former (*Strange Illusion,* 1945) and remake of the latter (*Human Desire,* 1954) have. Why? And why is it that Schrader and others have not accepted contemporary remakes of postwar films noirs, ranging from *Farewell, My Lovely* (1975) and *The Big Sleep* (1978) to *Body Heat* (1981) and *Against All Odds* (1984), as films noirs? The answers to these questions return us to the moment of the discovery of film noir in postwar France and to the notion that film noir's identity is somehow bound up with its ability to disturb audiences.

## NOIR STYLISTICS: A SHIFT IN PERSPECTIVE

### American Expressionism

What struck French critics about film noir was its essential difference from earlier American films. The narrative linearity of 1930s classical cinema had suddenly given way to narrative disjunction, fragmentation, and disorientation, as seen in the flashback-within-flashback-within-flashback structure of *The Locket* (1946). *Citizen Kane* (1941) had blazed the trail for complex narrative structure, and dozens of films noirs, even including marginal, low-budget efforts such as *Raw Deal* (1948) and *Ruthless* (1948), modeled themselves on Welles's masterpiece. *Kane* served as a source for much of noir's subsequent stylistic and narrative practice, though it lacks one ingredient crucial to most definitions of noir: its narrative is not concerned with crime nor are its characters situated in a criminal milieu.

The soft, evenly distributed, high-key lighting style of the 1930s, which functioned to direct the audience's attention and to glamorize stars, yielded virtually overnight to the harsh, low-key lighting of the 1940s, which obscured the action, deglamorized the star, and reduced the actors to shadowy formal elements embedded in the overall design of the composition. The carefully constructed sense of space found in classical cinema, which worked to maintain the spatial orientation of the spectator, disappeared and was replaced by wide-angle cinematography, which, as in films such as Welles's *Touch of Evil* (1958), distorted space and disoriented the spectator.

Conventional eye-level camera positions gave way, in films such as *Kiss Me Deadly* (Aldrich, 1955), to extreme low- and high-angle perspectives. Welles and Aldrich frequently cut from one extreme angle to another to heighten the assault on the spectator's sense of spatial orientation. With every violation of

the norm, film noir stylistics marked an intrusive intervention between the spectator and the straightforward exposition of the story, foregrounding narrative form and thus making it visible.

From the perspective of French and presumably American audiences as well, film noir could be understood as the same old familiar classical Hollywood cinema possessed by a new, recognizably alien spirit, which incorporates aesthetic elements and thematic concerns previously found only in foreign art films. Expressionistic devices such as highly subjective, voiceover narration (*Detour,* 1945) or hallucinatory sequences (*Murder, My Sweet,* 1944) suddenly replaced more conventional, less visible narrative practices. It was all right for foreign films, such as *Caligari,* to be a bit odd. American audiences expected that. But when American films began to adopt—even for only a moment—a foreign tongue, the disquieting forces of fear and paranoia crept into what used to be, for most American audiences at least, the stabilizing and reassuring experience of going to the movies.

## From Disturbing Conventions to Conventional Disturbances

If foreign elements had appeared in American films that had more overt artistic pretensions, they might have been understood as justified by the artistic nature of the film itself, as in the case of *Citizen Kane.* But they cropped up in the least likely places—in sleazy detective films, low-budget crime pictures, and run-of-the-mill melodramas. No wonder audiences became uneasy. The staple of the industry and the films most frequently identified with everyday motion picture entertainment—genre films—had developed psychotic tendencies. Something had clearly gone wrong somewhere. In other words, these films were noir in the context of the more conventional body of Hollywood cinema that preceded them. They were noir for audiences seeing them for the first time in the 1940s and 1950s. And, though they continue to appear noir in relation to earlier films for subsequent audiences, we tend to be less disturbed by them today than our grandparents must have been in the postwar era. Subsequent American cinema—itself influenced by film noir—has hardened us to its unsettling power.

This is clearly not the case for the derivative films noirs of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, which look back stylistically and thematically to the authentic films noirs of the 1940s and 1950s. Following the publication of Schrader's "Notes on Film Noir" in 1972, screenwriters and directors deliberately set out to make films noirs, transforming the disruptive stylistic strategies and disturbing thematic obsessions of postwar film noir into a system of expectations and conventions. As they watched *The Long Goodbye* (1973), *Chinatown* (1974), or even the science fiction film *Blade Runner* (1982), audiences recalled the private-eye films of the 1940s to which these works allude. Directors in the 1970s quoted film noir stylistic devices in an attempt to reconstruct the postwar period in which their films are set.

In these instances, film noir has been transformed from an aesthetic movement into a genre. Stylistic elements that, in the 1940s and 1950s, were

part of a strategy to disorient spectators have been refashioned, in the 1970s and later, into a systematic, carefully tailored look designed to trigger a conventional acknowledgment on the part of viewers who identify that look with films of the late 1940s. The overall effect of these allusions to earlier films noirs on contemporary audiences is more reassuring than unsettling. The noir films of the 1970s and later are not noir. They are neo-noir.

## NOIR AND THE PRODUCTION CODE

### Forbidden Subjects, Twisted Treatments

The Production Code—the body of censorship regulations governing what Hollywood was permitted to show on the screen—played a crucial role in making films of the 1940s and early 1950s noir. Subsequent changes in this Code resulted in the production of films that were decidedly less noir. Prior to 1968, when the Production Code instituted in the 1930s was abandoned for a version of the present film-rating system, certain subject matter was prohibited from the screen. Taboo subjects ranged from the depiction of nudity, homosexuality, interracial sexual activity, incest, rape, and abortion to excessive violence or brutality, profanity, the detailed depiction of criminal acts, and the use of drugs.

American films of the mid- to late 1930s rarely dealt with these subjects, but film noir frequently did, often resulting in amazing displays of narrative contortion as the films alluded to prohibited material without directly violating the Code. Acts of sadism and violence, such as the scalding of an individual's face with a pot of boiling hot coffee in *The Big Heat* (1953), regularly took place offscreen. Their intensity was amplified by violent or otherwise disjunctive editing or offscreen sound effects. Homosexuality figured prominently in the motivation of the plots of several original novels later made into films noirs; but on the screen this motivation was concealed, disguised, or recast in another form. It was desexualized and displaced—occasionally in ways that laid bare deep cultural fears about homosexuality with an astounding clarity. Thus, the homophobia that prompts the central murder in Richard Brooks's novel, *The Brick Foxhole,* was transformed by Hollywood self-censorship into anti-Semitism in Edward Dmytryk's screen adaptation of the book, *Crossfire* (1947).

In other instances, the presence of sexual abnormality and the use of drugs in novels were repressed altogether in their film adaptations, resulting in narrative incoherence, as in *The Big Sleep* (1946). Indeed, the centrality of drugs and sex to the Raymond Chandler novel on which the Hawks film was based forced its producers to resort to the most obscure sorts of subterfuges in an attempt to adapt the original plot to the screen. These gymnastics resulted in a final product that, although directed by one of the most obsessive practitioners of narrative logic—Howard Hawks—was almost incomprehensible to anyone who had not read the original Chandler novel.

In *The Big Sleep,* Marlowe (Humphrey Bogart) finds his client's daughter, Carmen (Martha Vickers), drugged and incoherent in a blackmailer's apartment with the body of a dead man at her feet.

### The End of Censorship, the End of Noir?

The relaxation of the Production Code in the late 1950s, along with the advent of the ratings system in the late 1960s, prepared the way for a new era of explicitness in the 1970s. By that time, films dealt more or less openly with adultery (*Body Heat* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice,* 1981), rape (*Straw Dogs,* 1971; *Frenzy,* 1972), incest (*Chinatown,* 1974), drugs (*The French Connection* I and II, 1971, 1975; *Farewell, My Lovely,* 1975), extreme violence (*Dirty Harry,* 1971; *Taxi Driver,* 1976), prostitution (*Klute,* 1971; *Hustle,* 1975), and, last but not least, nudity and sexual intercourse (see all of the above films and a large percentage of all 1970s films). The matter-of-factness with which previously taboo material was dealt in the sexually liberated climate of the 1970s is what distinguishes the earlier films noirs of the 1940s and 1950s from the neo-films noirs of the 1970s and later.

## INNOCENCE LOST: THE LITERARY ORIGINS OF FILM NOIR

In examining film noir as an affective phenomenon—as an uncomfortable experience for spectators—we have tended so far to define it negatively by stating what it is not and what is not it: it is not a genre, and films of the 1970s and later that appropriate the style and themes of earlier films noirs are not necessarily noir. But it is also possible to define film noir more positively in

terms of the various negative forces that helped bring it into being. For instance, the outbreak of war in Europe, American entry into World War II, and postwar efforts to return to normal set the agenda for a more downbeat brand of cinema than audiences had encountered in the 1930s.

The immediate postwar era, in particular, seems to have been guided by the mistaken belief that the relatively simple world of prewar America for which returning servicemen had fought and for which they nostalgically longed could be magically re-created. The general realization that this was a delusion clearly influenced both the world weary cynicism of film noir and the sense of frustration and experience of disempowerment that stood at its center. American innocence could not be easily recaptured.

In fact, film noir suggested that American innocence had been lost long before the war. It became clearer and clearer that something more than money and jobs was lost during the Great Depression. The spirit of noir traces its origins back to certain thematic and stylistic antecedents that it shares with American popular fiction of the 1920s and 1930s.

## Hard-Boiled Fiction

In both content and style, American hard-boiled novels introduced a new tradition of realism to the genre of detective fiction. This realism was characterized by a revolutionary shift in both the class and the technique of the detective, the milieu in which the detective worked, and the language that he or she spoke. Unlike English detective fiction, which was dominated by aristocratic dabblers in detection, armchair experts in the art of deduction, or dotty old women armed with upper- or middle-class sensibilities, the novels of Hammett, Cain, McCoy, Chandler, and others featured a proletarian tough guy who lived on the fringe of the criminal world.

As Ross Macdonald, the creator of Lew Archer, explains, the protagonist of these works was "the classless, restless man [sic] of American democracy, who spoke the language of the street." As Macdonald's own language suggests, American hard-boiled detectives were almost by definition, male. While the relative gentility of the world in which English detectives functioned permitted female sleuths, the "mean streets" down which the hard-boiled detective walked were not safe for women.

The private eye's milieu was characterized not by garden parties, teas, masked balls, and other ceremonies of the well-to-do but by dark city streets, back alleys, grungy offices (with a pint of booze in the desk drawer), desolate hotel rooms, sleazy bars, pool halls, gambling dens, houses of prostitution, and other attractions in the neon-lit, red-light districts that dominated the wrong side of town. Hammett's Personville (pronounced "Poisonville") and Chandler's Bay City epitomized the corrupt metropolises the typical hard-boiled detective haunted. As Steven Marcus suggests, this was a Hobbesian world in which life was nasty, brutish, and short—a world characterized by universal warfare, anarchy, and mistrust.

For the majority of these Depression-era novelists, contemporary America was an urban, industrialized landscape peopled by characters caught in the grip of passion, lust, greed, jealousy, and other naturalistic drives. The "boys in the back room," as Edmund Wilson called the "Black Mask" school of writers of pulp detective fiction, looked back for inspiration neither to Wilkie Collins, the Dickensian author of *The Moonstone* and *The Woman in White,* nor to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, but to Émile Zola and other nineteenth-century naturalists, whose matter-of-fact depiction of decadence and corruption caught their imagination.

## The Detective Hero

Unlike their European predecessors, Edgar Allan Poe's Dupin or Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, the hard-boiled detectives did not rely on the powers of deductive reasoning, acute observation, or scientific method to solve their cases but rather on dogged perseverance, animal cunning, physical stamina, and brute force. Noir heroes, whether detectives or not, were similarly weak as intellects. In *Double Indemnity,* when insurance investigator Barton Keyes asks Walter Neff to give up his sales job to work behind a desk with him, Neff refuses. After noting that he has always considered Neff "a shade less dumb" than the other salesmen, Keyes sarcastically quips that Walter isn't really smarter than the others; he is just a bit taller.

In matching wits with Phyllis, the film's femme fatale, Neff comes in second. She successfully manipulates him into helping her do away with her husband and then, when he begins to suspect her of treachery at the end, she outmaneuvers him, countering his plot against her with a plot of her own against him. About all he can do is arrange to die last (i.e., after she has died), enjoying the fate that lies in store for most noir heroes.

Though the brawny, proletarian tough guy of American detective fiction might have lacked the mental powers of his brainy predecessors, he, like his successors in film noir, attempted to make up for his failings as a man of intellect with his verbal wit. Both the writer of detective fiction and the detective hero controlled their worlds by controlling language. They had style—verbal style. Hammett's sparse, highly verbal, prose style and straightforward syntactical style established a no-nonsense world in which the monosyllabic directness and the dogged, one-fact-or-clue-after-another, linear logic of the detective hero effectively cut through the web of lies spun by everyone he encountered, from the Fat Man and his gunsel to Joel Cairo and the femme fatale.

At the other end of the stylistic spectrum, Chandler's complex syntactical style, colorful metaphors, and descriptive excesses established a narrative voice that valued the ability to turn a phrase. The prowess of his private eye was measured by his control of language, especially witty repartee that enables him to enjoy an edge over his opponents in the verbal arena, even though they may have been able to dominate him physically. In *Farewell, My Lovely,* Marlowe even dubbed one of his flat-footed, slow-witted antagonists "Hemingway."

Insurance salesman Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) spars with his client's wife (Barbara Stanwyck) in *Double Indemnity* (1944).

Here Chandler, through his detective hero, took a jab at the impoverished verbal style that informs a number of Hemingway-influenced American mystery writers and confirmed the privileged status, in his work at least, of verbal wit over linguistic directness.

### Noir and Verbal Wit

In Chandler's reworking for the screen of Cain's *Double Indemnity*, the first encounter between Fred MacMurray's Walter Neff and Barbara Stanwyck's Phyllis Dietrichson provides the chief example of hard-boiled repartee used as a mode of playful combat. Always the glib insurance salesman trying to make a sale, Neff attempts to talk his client's wife into bed with him while she coyly counters his advances. Their conversation concludes with the following exchange:

> PHYLLIS: There's a speed limit in this state, Mr. Neff. Forty-five miles per hour.
>
> WALTER: How fast was I going, officer?
>
> PHYLLIS: I'd say around 90.
>
> WALTER: Suppose you get down off your motorcycle and give me a ticket?

PHYLLIS:  Suppose I let you off with a warning this time?

WALTER:  Suppose it doesn't take?

PHYLLIS:  Suppose I have to whack you over the knuckles?

WALTER:  Suppose I bust out crying and put my head on your shoulder?

PHYLLIS:  Suppose you try putting it on my husband's shoulder?

WALTER:  That tears it! [*pause*] Eight-thirty tomorrow evening then?

PHYLLIS:  That's what I suggested.

WALTER:  Will you be here too?

PHYLLIS:  I guess so. I usually am.

WALTER:  Same chair, same perfume, same anklet?

PHYLLIS:  I wonder if I know what you mean?

WALTER:  I wonder if you wonder?

*Double Indemnity*'s double entendres about "speeding" and "traffic tickets" not only introduce the couple's relationship in terms of crime and punishment, but also establish their basic sexual antagonism. This initial, seemingly harmless, sexual banter serves to structure the implicit sexual hostility that governs their relationship during the remainder of the film and prepares the groundwork for their last, nonverbal exchange, when they finally stop talking and shoot each other.

## WOMEN IN FILM NOIR

The origins of film noir in pulp fiction help explain its distinctive attitude toward the representation of women. The proletarian tough guy achieves his toughness by repressing all signs of weakness in himself—and all weakness, for him, is associated with the feminine. At the end of *The Maltese Falcon*, Humphrey Bogart's Sam Spade deliberates between his feelings (a "feminine" virtue) for Brigid O'Shaughnessy (Mary Astor) and his loyalty to professional codes (a "male" virtue), which requires him to avenge the murder of his former partner. Spade sticks by the male codes of the detective and, by resisting Brigid's final appeals and turning her over to the police, rejects his feminine side.

### Women as Social Menace

The threat that women and the feminine posed to the noir hero presented itself on two different fronts—the socioeconomic and the psychoanalytic. On the socioeconomic front, as Sylvia Harvey shows, the changing status of American women during the war and postwar period challenged male dominance. The entry of women into the workforce and their taking over of traditional male roles violated the fundamental order of sexual relations. Previously,

middle-class women were confined to the home, where they took care of the domestic needs of the family, while men were able to move back and forth freely between the home and the workplace. In the 1940s, women took jobs in factories, replacing men who had gone into the service (see *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter,* 1980). They worked on assembly lines in defense plants, making tanks or airplanes (see *Swing Shift Maisie,* 1943, or *Swing Shift,* 1984).

These changes posed a threat to traditional values, which were seen as centered in the institution of the family. Film noir registered the antifeminist backlash by providing a picture of a postwar America in which there is no family or in which the family exists chiefly as a negative phenomenon. In noir, the family was characterized either as a claustrophobic, emasculating trap (snaring the henpecked husband, Chris Cross, in *Scarlet Street*) or as a bankrupt system of perfunctory relationships, featuring murderous wives (*Double Indemnity*) and corrupt children (*Mildred Pierce*). In leaving the private sphere of home and family to enter the public sphere of work, women (such as Mildred Pierce), it was assumed, had abandoned—or at least neglected—the domestic needs of their sweethearts, husbands, and children. Film noir dramatized the consequences of this neglect, transforming women into willful creatures intent on destroying both their mates and the sacred institution of the family.

Classical Hollywood cinema had taken great efforts to shield the family from the world of crime. Traditional genre films routinely opposed the sacred space of the family to that of the world outside. Even gangster films sought to contrast the bonds of family with those of the gang. Crime films centered dramatic conflict around the struggle of each institution with the other over the possession of the identity or soul of the gangster hero, a process illustrated in *Public Enemy* (1931) through the (ineffectual) efforts of Tom Powers's family to keep him from a life of crime. In film noir, the world of crime and that of the family overlap. Crime had moved from outside the family to within it, and the impetus for crime came as often from women as from men.

Typical film noir families consisted of wives who killed their husbands (*Double Indemnity, The Postman Always Rings Twice*), husbands who killed or tried to kill their wives (*Gaslight, The Two Mrs. Carrolls*), children who killed or tried to kill their parents or stepparents (*The Strange Love of Martha Ivers, Angel Face*), uncles who tried to kill their nieces (*Shadow of a Doubt*), and lovers who killed each another (*Out of the Past, Gun Crazy*).

### Women as Psychological Terror

The powerful women in film noir presented a psychic threat to the typically insecure noir hero. Laura Mulvey, following Freud, argues that the image of women on the screen functioned to recall, for the male spectator, the castration anxiety he experienced on first perceiving sexual difference as a child. As an institution that supported male dominance and patriarchy, classical Hollywood cinema attempted to alleviate this anxiety through a process known as disavowal

in which the female's castrated status was denied. This denial could be achieved either through her fetishization or through her devaluation, or both.

In fetishization, the image of the woman was *overvalued,* often through the use of lingering close-ups, glamorous costumes, or other techniques that transformed her into a spectacle. In becoming pure spectacle, the lack that she signified was thus filled in, replaced by her objectification. Marlene Dietrich, for example, was routinely fetishized by Josef von Sternberg in films such as *The Blue Angel* and *Morocco* (1930) and *Shanghai Express* (1932), in which close-ups of her legs or her face turned her into an object of both male desire and male fantasy.

Through a process of *devaluation,* woman was seen as guilty object—her "castration" serving as the symbol of her punishment. Thus, Alfred Hitchcock, in films such as *Notorious* (1946) or *Vertigo* (1958), presented guilty women who were the objects of male investigations into the original source of their guilt. The heroine in the former film is a "fallen woman"—the daughter of a Nazi spy, an alcoholic, and a playmate of wealthy men; the heroine in the latter film is a paid accomplice to a murder. These women are first punished and then later, having revealed their guilty secrets, rescued (or, in the case of *Vertigo,* not rescued) by the heroes. A similar logic motivated the representation of women in film noir. As Mulvey explains, female sexuality was routinely devalued by the male protagonists, who felt threatened by it.

Thus, women in film noir tended to be characterized as femmes fatales, intent on castrating or otherwise destroying the male hero. This role was played with nightmarish fidelity by Jean Simmons in *Angel Face* (1953), Barbara Stanwyck in *Double Indemnity*, and Joan Bennett in *Scarlet Street.*



Courtesy of RKO

The iconography of film noir: the treacherous femme fatale (Jane Greer, *left*) holds a smoking gun, while the vulnerable male hero (Robert Mitchum) smokes a cigarette.

Often noir women were both fetishized and devalued, constructed as spectacular objects of male sexual fantasy who then turned on those whose desires initially empowered them. Thus, Stanwyck first appears in *Double Indemnity* standing at the top of the stairs, dressed only in a bath towel. Moments later, her body is fetishized through close-ups of her ankle as she descends the stairs. Yet her initial appearance as spectacle is subsequently revealed to have been staged; it is all part of her seduction and subsequent entrapment of the hero, whom she then manipulates into killing her husband.

The femme fatale in *Out of the Past* (1947) romantically materializes before the detective hero in the exotic setting of Mexico, emerging first out of the sunlight, then out of the moonlight, as he sits in a small cantina in Acapulco. By the end of the film, her path has been strewn with the bodies of an apparently endless succession of dead men, culminating with that of the hapless hero (Robert Mitchum), whom she shoots in the groin.

## A CRITIQUE OF POPULISM

### New Culture, Old Myths

The destabilization of sexual relationships found in film noir is symptomatic of a larger social disorder. Prior to World War II, American society had been held together by various myths that structured its identity as a nation. These myths rested, in large part, on the principles of Jeffersonian democracy, which assumed a fundamental equality based on the universal ownership of property. More specifically, Jeffersonian democracy was based on the agrarian ideal of the yeoman farmer, whose self-sufficiency was rooted in his ability to grow enough food for himself as well as additional produce to sell to his neighbors. In other words, notions of democratic equality were founded on the universal ownership of property. This equality-through-universal-ownership concept provided the fundamental principle for a mythology that drove nineteenth-century American expansionist ideology. The democratic promise of cheap or free land to those who settled the frontier thus served as the motivation for western settlement, which became, in turn, a realization of America's manifest destiny.

But the closing of the frontier, the exhaustion of free land, and the rapid industrialization of America in the latter part of the nineteenth century began a slow process of social change. The agrarian ideal gave way to an industrialized mass society. By 1920, for the first time in American history, more people lived in urban than in rural areas. The old middle class consisting of shopkeepers, farmers, and other property owners gave way to a new middle class dominated by hourly wage earners, who owned neither land nor houses.

Though millions of laborers and white-collar workers lived this new reality, they continued to subscribe to the old, preindustrial-era myths. It was only after

the Depression that the power of these myths began to waver. Film noir reflects a transitional stage in American ideology as American identity shifted from nineteenth-century, preindustrial, agrarian prototypes to twentieth-century models that acknowledged the nation's transformation into a mass consumer society and an industrialized, corporate state.

*Double Indemnity*'s Walter Neff, for example, works for a large, anonymous, consumer-based corporation—the Pacific All-Risk Insurance Co. He is a product of postwar consumer society. He lives alone in an efficiency apartment, goes bowling for fun and relaxation, has clandestine rendezvous with married women among shelves of mass-produced baby food and other mass-market products at the local supermarket, and drinks beer in his car at a drive-in restaurant. Film noir captured the emptiness of Neff's world. As a movement, it reflected the chaotic period in which old myths began to crumble and no new myths were there to take their place—the period in which national identity was in crisis.

## Capra and Film Noir

The best examples of these old myths appear in the work of Frank Capra, whose films epitomize the classicism and order of pre–noir Hollywood cinema. Capra's vision of America was set forth in a series of films made in the late 1930s, culminating in *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936) and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), which articulated a populist ideology. These films celebrated nineteenth-century agrarian values such as hard work, frugality, honesty, good neighborliness, self-sufficiency, egalitarianism, common sense, personal authenticity (as opposed to phoniness), and moral sincerity. Through the heroic



Author's frame enlargement

George Bailey (James Stewart) finds his beloved Bedford Falls transformed into a noirish Pottersville in *It's a Wonderful Life*.

efforts of their stalwart protagonists, they attacked the twentieth-century evils of industrialism, big business, special interest groups, commercialism, political machines, urban corruption, cynicism, and intellectualism—all of which threatened the populist spirit that had animated small-town America.

The threat to this idyllic world was presented most powerfully in Capra's postwar celebration of small-town American values—*It's a Wonderful Life* (1946). Here George Bailey (James Stewart), through his building and loan company, holds off the efforts of corrupt, greedy capitalists such as Mr. Potter (Lionel Barrymore) to transform the city of Bedford Falls into an ugly, modern American metropolis. George Bailey, having sacrificed his own desires and needs in the service of his family, friends, and the larger community, believes that his life has been a failure and, like the existential noir hero, is driven to contemplate suicide. But his guardian angel rescues him from his own self-destructive efforts and reveals to him what Bedford Falls would have been like if he had never lived.

Like the alienated hero of film noir, George wanders through Bedford Falls, which has now become Pottersville, in search of someone who would confirm his identity and the fact of his prior existence. In a reversal of certain earlier noir films such as *Somewhere in the Night* (1946), it is the town, not George, that has developed amnesia. Yet, the experience for George remains as weird and alienating as that which any of his shell-shocked predecessors had undergone. The Pottersville sequence reverses the populist ideal of small-town America, displaying no families, homes, or small businesses. All of these have apparently been destroyed by the forces of big business and industrialization identified with Potter, who reduces proud homeowners to tenants in slum dwellings.

For a few minutes, the corrupt nature of contemporary corporate America that this and Capra's earlier 1930s films had struggled so hard to combat and, through their heroes' ultimate triumphs, to deny, surfaces. It is a world in which the individual has no stake in society and thus no power or place in a social system that is suddenly revealed to be nondemocratic (i.e., not based on an equal ownership of property). Capra, however, quickly patches up this crack in American populist ideology, relegating the Pottersville sequence to the status of a bad dream and restoring George to his family, friends, and community.

Yet, the presence of this nightmarish inversion of Capra's ideal American community in the film brilliantly illustrates film noir's subversive relationship to classical Hollywood cinema, which attempted to repress the very forces to which film noir gave voice. Film noir, as a phenomenon of the 1940s, grew out of the horrifying realization that the populist myth that had given comfort and order to American identity in the past was just that—only a myth—and that a new reality—that of Pottersville—had taken its place. It was a realization that, coupled with the trauma of war and the disillusionment of the postwar period, served to smash the utopian fantasy world of 1930s ideology. In other words, film noir represents a remarkable epistemological shift in America's self-conceptualization. Capra's utopian, small-town America did not exist anymore—except in Capra pictures.

## FILM NOIR: AN UNDERCURRENT
## IN THE MAINSTREAM

Film noir, however, did not entirely dismantle American myth and American identity in the 1940s; it proved to be only one major current in (and clearly beneath) a flood of films that reaffirmed traditional American values and identity. With the exception of certain downbeat items such as *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), and *Duel in the Sun* (1946), the box-office champs of the postwar era tended to be films that were decidedly not noir—films such as *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944), *National Velvet* (1944), *The Bells of St. Mary's* (1945), *The Jolson Story* (1946), *Life With Father* (1947), *The Road to Rio* (1947), *Easter Parade* (1948), *Jolson Sings Again* (1949), *Samson and Delilah* (1949), *David and Bathsheba* (1951), *Show Boat* (1951), *An American in Paris* (1951), *Quo Vadis?* (1951), and *Ivanhoe* (1952).

By the late 1950s, the advent of television virtually destroyed the low-budget, B-film industry that provided the bulk of films noirs. The mood of the country began to reflect a newfound, postwar prosperity (indeed, economic historians began to refer to the United States as "the affluent society"); and, at the end of the decade, the promise of John F. Kennedy's "New Frontier" turned Americans from potentially depressing thoughts of the technological blight produced by industrialization to utopian visions of a machine-age paradise filled with labor-saving devices. The trauma of the Depression and the shell shock of the war years, which destabilized American identity briefly in the postwar era, had supposedly been treated and cured. The films noirs that were noir "for us" no longer spoke to the needs some Americans felt for films that addressed their own existential malaise.

But the scar on the American psyche that film noir represented remains visible today for all of us to see. It was brought back to the surface of the American psyche by another war—that in Vietnam. And film noir's ability to convey a sense of paranoia and betrayal made it the ideal form for capturing the spirit of post-Watergate America. Americans rediscovered film noir in the 1970s because it provided a way of looking at experience that not only reflected that experience but also finally made sense. Film noir of the 1940s and 1950s became the source material that prompted a new understanding of postwar American reality. In rediscovering it, Americans located a more modern body of myths through which they might come to terms with contemporary American experience.

### ■ ■ ■ SELECT FILMOGRAPHY

| | |
|---|---|
| *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) | *Murder, My Sweet* (1944) |
| *This Gun for Hire* (1942) | *Detour* (1945) |
| *Double Indemnity* (1944) | *Leave Her to Heaven* (1945) |

*Mildred Pierce* (1945)
*Scarlet Street* (1945)
*The Killers* (1946)
*The Locket* (1946)
*Somewhere in the Night* (1946)
*Crossfire* (1947)
*M. Verdoux* (1947)
*Out of the Past* (1947)
*Pursued* (1947)
*The Lady from Shanghai* (1948)
*Gun Crazy* (1949)
*Sunset Blvd.* (1950)
*Angel Face* (1953)
*The Big Heat* (1953)
*The Big Combo* (1955)
*Kiss Me Deadly* (1955)
*Touch of Evil* (1958)

**Neo-Noirs**
*The Long Goodbye* (1973)
*Chinatown* (1974)
*Farewell, My Lovely* (1975)
*The Big Sleep* (1978)
*Body Heat* (1981)
*The Postman Always Rings Twice*
  (1981)
*Blood Simple* (1984)
*Miller's Crossing* (1990)
*The Grifters* (1990)
*Red Rock West* (1993)
*L.A. Confidential* (1997)
*Sin City* (2005)
*Brick* (2005)