FILM NOIR
From German Expressionism to Film Noir

The term Expressionism has a deep resonance in the history of the cinema. As Thomas Elsaesser explains in ‘Weimar Cinema and After’, it is not just a stylistic term for some of the films from the early 1920s, but “a generic term for most of the art cinema of the Weimar Republic in Germany, and beyond Germany, echoing down film history across the periods and genres, turning up in the description of Universal horror films of the 1930s and film noir of the 1940s.” Clips mentioned in this section are not available to view on the website but are readily available to buy or rent from the usual outlets or from other mentioned sources.

The journey of German Expressionism from art cinema to the Hollywood mainstream began with the exile and expulsion of many film producers, directors, writers, actors, and music composers from Germany after Hitler came to power in January 1933. Settling in California, these German émigrés had a significant artistic influence on Hollywood filmmaking. This influence was most clearly felt, Thomas Elsaesser writes, “in the existence of that famous ‘Expressionist’ genre, the film noir, combining the haunted screen of the early 1920s with the lure of the sinful metropolis Berlin of the late 1920s (the femme fatales, Louise Brooks and Marlene Dietrich) mixed with the angst of German emigres during the 1930s and 40s as they contemplated personal tragedies and national disaster.”

The term film noir was first coined by French film critics in August 1946 to describe a daring and stylish new type of Hollywood crime thriller, films such as The Maltese Falcon, Double Indemnity, Laura and Murder, My Sweet. Standard histories describe film noir as a synthesis of hardboiled crime fiction and German expressionism. The term is also associated, James Naremore writes in ‘More Than Night: Film Noir and its contexts’, “with certain visual and narrative traits, including lowkey photography, images of wet city streets and romantic fascination with femme fatales.” Most commentators locate the period of film noir as beginning in 1941 with The Maltese Falcon and culminating in 1958 with Orson Welles' Touch of Evil. Some commentators believe that noir began much earlier and that it has never gone away. The hardboiled private eye stories of authors Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain and Cornell Woolrich provided the narrative source for many classic film noirs. John Huston began the trend of crime novel adaptations with his 1941 version of The Maltese Falcon. This was quickly followed by Double Indemnity (directed by German émigré, Billy Wilder who went on to write and direct Sunset Boulevard), The Postman Always Rings Twice, Mildred Pierce and the Raymond Chandler adaptations, The Big Sleep and Murder, My Sweet. Other classic film noirs that feature an investigative narrative structure include The Killers, Out of the Past, The Big Heat, Kiss Me Deadly and the Big Combo.
A direct connection between the crime films of the German Expressionist cinema and the American private eye movie is made in the work of Fritz Lang, the German émigré director who fled into exile in 1933. Lang brought the dark vision of criminality of his Expressionistic classics, Dr Mabuse, the Gambler and M to Hollywood and became one of the most prolific directors of the noir genre. His films include The Woman in the Window, Scarlet Street, The Big Heat, The Blue Gardenia, The Secret Beyond the Door, While the City Sleeps and Beyond a Reasonable Doubt. Lang’s special subject was the paranoid mentality. According to Martin Rubin, “No filmmaker has conveyed more powerfully than Lang a sense of overwhelming entrapment, of a world whose every circumstance, every twist and turning, every corner and corridor, seem to conspire against the individual and draw him or her more deeply into a spider’s web.”

It is the visual style of film noir, rather than story or character type, that is seen as its defining characteristic. The noir look was created by cinematographers, costume designers, art directors and production designers. Its enduring influence on all genres of Hollywood filmmaking can be seen today in films as diverse as Bladerunner, Seven, Barton Fink and Sin City. The visual style of film noir, James Naremore writes, “is characterised by unbalanced and disturbing frame compositions, strong contrasts of light and dark, the prevalence of shadows and areas of darkness within the frame, the visual tension created by curious camera angles and so forth. Moreover, in film noir, these strained compositions and angles are not merely embellishments or rhetorical flourishes, but form the very substance of the film.” The noir world is corrupt, threatening and violent. French film critics saw the typical noir narrative as an existential nightmare from which the protagonist can never awaken. He is a doomed figure journeying through an underworld of crime and deception until the final betrayal by the femme fatale that he has fallen for. Expressionist lighting schemes and camera angles convey a sense of entrapment as the hero makes his way through an often labyrinthine plot. In film noir, Expressionism found a worthy subject in the archetypal American antihero as film scholar Janey Place explains: "The visual style of film noir conveys the dominant mood (male psychological instability and moral uncertainty, paranoia, claustrophobia, a sense of doom and hopelessness, etc) through expressive use of darkness: both real, in predominantly underlit and nighttime scenes, and psychologically through shadows and claustrophobic compositions which overwhelm the character in exterior as well as interior settings. Characters (and we in the audience) are given little opportunity to orientate themselves to the threatening and shifting shadowy environment. Silhouettes, shadows, mirrors and reflections (generally darker than the reflected person) indicate his lack of both unity and control. They suggest a doppelganger, a dark ghost, alter ego or distorted side of man's personality that will emerge in the dark street at night to destroy him."
The sexual, dangerous woman lives in this darkness, and is the psychological expression of his own internal fears of sexuality, and his need to control and repress it.”

**A Personal Journey through American Movies: (02:06:36 02: 28:00)**

The BFI DVD ‘A Personal Journey through American Movies’, contains a 22 minute dedicated to film noir. Martin Scorsese discusses the work of key émigré directors such Fritz Lang

**The American Cinema television series (available on video)**

The second volume in this series contains a 50 minute programme on film noir. A dedicated section of the programme explores noir lighting techniques.
The ‘dark film’

The word ‘noir’ is literally French for ‘black’, giving us the concept of ‘dark film’. French film critics coined the term soon after the end of WWII. In the early part of the 1940s France was occupied by Nazis, making it enemy territory forbidden to receive Hollywood product. By war’s end there was a half-decade backlog of American movies which hit French viewers suddenly in one rush, rather than gradually over the years as usual. From a Hollywood point of view, they’d been an audience asleep for half a decade.

The French noticed with surprise after the war how a gloomy, pessimistic worldview had replaced much of the formerly sunny optimism of can-do U.S.A. America’s movies were growing darker in the 1940s - not just visually, but also in terms of theme and content. There were numerous reasons for this, springing from changes both in consciousness and practicalities. The world had become a darker place and the more word seeped out of atrocities of war, the deeper the shadows grew over human nature.

America at that time felt powerless to avoid enigmatic conflicts in foreign climes. This was mirrored in movies with doomed heroes whose fate seemed pre-ordained, and immune to free will. Also the popularity of Freudianism brought psychological concerns into common discourse as the world turned inward. Films reflected this introspection through the use of voice-over to describe interior states. Thrillers of the 1940s (and horror flicks of the time like Val Lewton’s RKO series) often took on the ‘otherworldly’ feel of a waking dream. These and other elements (described below) came together in a fortuitous accident of cinematic history to express the mood: film noir.

Late 1940s – the ‘postwar malaise’

For Americans victory abroad, perhaps surprisingly, was followed at home by an aftermath of social frustration and disappointment called the ‘postwar malaise’. There were widespread industrial disputes (strike action being unpatriotic in wartime), continued rationing of many consumer durables, race riots (from Detroit in the midwest, to the ‘zoot suit’ battles on the west coast), sickening photographic evidence of the Holocaust and a frightening future revealed by the A-bomb. The ‘dark film’, appropriately, would enter its heyday in the postwar years.
Noir’s ‘spiderweb’ of fate

A defining film noir characteristic (notably absent from many pseudo-noirs of modern times) is fatalism. One small misstep, such as a petty crime, minor evasion - even a ‘white lie’ - sends our doomed protagonist, typically an ‘ordinary Joe’ American male, into a quicksand of obliteration made only more intractable by his futile attempts to escape. A ‘spiderweb of deceit’ is how it’s often described. This is what happens in the noir underworld, but it tells us something of ordinary peoples’ attitudes and expectations. That such minor transgressions could lead to such out-of-control punishments suggests an air of hysteria, even moral panic.

The ‘look’ of noir

Being fundamentally an action genre, and often low budget thrillers, noir used a strong, punchy filmmaking style for maximum impact. Besides its thematic elements which could include fatalism, alienation and transgression, its look was the other half of the noir equation. These films’ long, sharply-defined shadows, frames bathed in inky blackness, tilted camera angles and claustrophobic compositions created an overall aesthetic of nocturnal, subterranean unreality that is easily recognised (and imitated).

Film noir linked this look to its dark plotlines to express themes of shadowy motivations and bleak prospects. Using visual elements in this way to express the story is the basis of Expressionism, an extreme visual style of heightened perceptions. Its sense of drama is at the opposite pole from the style of ‘realism’. Expressionist visual techniques were pioneered in Germany during the 1920s and redeployed in Hollywood by refugee filmmakers fleeing Hitler like Fritz Lang, Billy Wilder, Robert Siodmak, Edward Dmytryk and Fred Zinnemann, all of whom are strongly associated with the noir style.

(There is no easy formula to what constitutes film noir. One of the greatest noirs of the 1940s drew on neither Expressionism nor even Hollywood for its strength [though it did draw on the American hardboiled fiction common to film noir]. This is Visconti’s version of James M.Cain’s The Postman Always Rings Twice, renamed Ossessione (1942), which used realism to link the pulp novel to topical local concerns, so beginning the Italian ‘neo-realist’ movement.)

The ‘femme fatale’
The 1940s also brought a major challenge in the area of gender and family roles. The male draft combined with the industrial mobilisation for the war effort (the entire U.S. auto industry ceased making cars from 1942-46 to concentrate on armaments) made women the primary source of factory workers for the huge number of vacancies. The previous female stereotype of the housewife financially dependent on the male was blown away. This was called the ‘Rosie-the-Riveter’ syndrome.

Soldiers returning from the stresses of war came home to newly independent women unlike those they’d left behind. Arising from this new male anxiety and eternal male fantasies of women was the ‘femme fatale’, a siren-like figure of desire whose distinctive characteristics, compared to previous female archetypes, were her independence, strength and ruthless desire.

A key element of this strength is her sexual forthrightness. The femme fatale is not passive when it comes to desire. She takes action to get what - and whom - she wants with a directness and aggression previously reserved for male players. As a result she is sometimes labelled a ‘predator’, despite acting no differently from accepted male norms.

It’s vital to understand this gender development as just one part of the overall noir context. Stereotypes of dangerous women, such as ‘the vamp’ from the 1920s, were not new, and without the other elements such as uncertainty, destabilisation and transgression which coalesced into film noir, the femme fatale wouldn’t have existed. Nor must every film noir include a femme fatale; many don’t. She reinforces film noir’s fatalism. The Ordinary Joe American is helpless to resist the lure of the ‘spiderwoman’ at the heart of these movies, just as America felt helpless to resist being drawn in to a European conflict as dark and shadowy as those darn Europeans’ movie-making style!

A particularly essential feature of this archetype is structural. The true femme fatale forms a triangle with a married couple. She’s a ‘stray electron’, threatening the stability of their nuclear family. More than just attracting the easily duped noir protagonist, she lures him into eliminating the ‘passive spouse’. This spouse may be either his wife or her husband, but either way they are portrayed as inadequately fulfilling the marriage’s needs – for excitement, mainly. The femme fatale thus occupies a space of transgression, of crossing over into illicit desires and actions.

The femme fatale is a key element in noir’s crossing over to the dark side of human nature. She arose as a response to threatened male authority but the needs of the thriller to excite audiences made her so exotic and intriguing (if not necessarily attractive) that she’s still compelling today.

Decline and fall
Nothing stands still however, and as returned GIs abandoned urban life for the new invention ‘the suburb’, working women were tamed and the Baby Boom began its 10-15 year surge. The new-fangled television forced film noir out to suburbia to compete with ‘pulp’ crime on TV where, in all the bright sunshine and open spaces, noir was effectively dead as a film genre by 1955.

‘Neo-noir’

The femme fatale disappeared too, until a new era of social unease, the 1970s, with the much greater gender challenge of feminism, saw film noir’s first true revival. Like the 1940s, this era’s uncertainty in the areas of changed social roles, questionable government morality and foreign involvement (not to mention drugs, the Generation Gap, etc) showed a society in crisis. Martin Scorsese’s Taxi Driver (1976) explicitly revived film noir visual motifs (rain soaked streets reflecting harsh neon, etc), voice-over narration, urban claustrophobia - even a melancholy Bernard Hermann score! - but portrayed a level of social breakdown as foreign to the 1940s as Vietnam and Watergate were to Harry Truman’s administration. Other thrillers in this period like W.U.S.A. (1970), Badge 373 and The Outfit (both 1973) instinctively turned back to film noir for style and/or content. This 70s revival is often termed ‘neo-noir’.

Aussie noir?

America’s ‘America’s ‘classic’ film noir phase of the 1940s had some parallels in English and French cinematic output of the time, but no Australian equivalents.

After decades of very sporadic production, Australia experienced a filmmaking renaissance in the 1970s. In the seventies Australian film’s drivers were quite different from Hollywood’s, and even ‘neo-noir’ had few (if any) antipodean variants. Peter Weir’s vision (The Cars That Ate Paris [1974], The Last Wave [1977], Fearless [1993], etc) came closest to noir’s mix of fatalism and dark visuals, while occasional darkish Aussie dramas like Wake In Fright (1971) emerged in isolation. Interestingly, low budget Aussie TV cop series like Homicide and Matlock Police unselfconsciously portrayed throwbacks to the crude black-and-white law enforcement clichés of Hollywood in the 1940s, making them unexpectedly reminiscent of film noir, though hardly a direct Australian equivalent.
Here and now

Every few years Hollywood thrillers reinvent themselves. The 1930s ‘Gangster flick’ was followed by film noir until that genre petered out in the 1950s. In the late 60s and early 70s streetwise thrillers like Madigan (1968) and Mean Streets (1973) breathed new life into the crime film just as Tarantino would in the 1990s with Reservoir Dogs (1992) and especially Pulp Fiction (1994). Tarantino’s mix of cool, ironic detachment, plus knowing references to older films mixed with graphic violence was repeated by young filmmakers from many countries, including Australia.

The ironic contrast between bright sunshine and entrenched corruption in both L.A. and Sydney reinforced the universal language of the new contemporary thrillers, many of which have only emerged from Australia around the turn of the millennia. Notable examples include: Kiss or Kill (1997), Two Hands (1999), Monkey’s Mask (2000), The Hard Word (2002), Dirty Deeds (2002), etc. (Fitting the ‘post-Tarantino’ mold is one thing, but it still begs the question of whether these qualify as a film noir, and each title needs to be considered on an individual basis.) Urban crime also underpins grittier Australian films like Ghosts of the Civil Dead (1988), The Nirvana Street Murders (1990), Romper Stomper (1992), The Boys (1999) – even ‘comedies’ like Death in Brunswick (1990).

Conclusion

Whether you think past breakthroughs like film noir can be dusted off and revived, or (as I do) that each cinematic development feeds the next, film noir’s influence has long outlasted its originating purpose. Every film noir is a vicarious ride into the underworld, an exotic, dreamlike passage through forbidden worlds. Is it any wonder it’s never really gone away?

Roger Westcombe (copyright 2003)
The Development of Post-war Literary and Cinematic Noir

Lee Horsley, Lancaster University

The years immediately following the end of World War Two marked the start of a crucial phase in the creation, definition and popularising of both literary and cinematic noir. There were several concurrent developments: the Hollywood production of a growing number of pessimistic, downbeat crime films, the post-war release in Europe of a large backlog of American films, the publication in France of a new series of crime novels and the appearance in America of a new kind of book, the paperback original. Films released in America just before the end of the war, such as Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* and Edward Dmytryk's *Murder, My Sweet* (both 1944), were taken as evidence, when they appeared in France, that 'the Americans are making dark films too'.

In 1945, under the editorship of Marcel Duhamel, Gallimard started publishing its translations of British and American crime novels in the the *Série Noire*. In 1946, echoing the Gallimard label, the French critics Nino Frank and Jean-Pierre Chartier wrote the two earliest essays to identify a departure in film-making, the American 'film noir'. Although they were not thought of in the United States as films noirs (the French label did not become widely known there until the 1970s), numerous post-war Hollywood movies seemed to confirm the French judgement that a new type of American film had emerged, very different from the usual studio product and capable of conveying an impression of 'certain disagreeable realities that do in truth exist'.

The Hollywood releases of 1945 included Edgar G. Ulmer's *Detour*, Michael Curtiz's *Mildred Pierce* and three films noirs directed by Fritz Lang - *Ministry of Fear*, *Scarlet Street* and *The Woman in the Window*. In 1946 David Goodis published the first of his crime novels, *Dark Passage*, and Delmar Daves began filming it; in the spring and summer months of 1946 alone, Hollywood released *Blue Dahlia* (George Marshall), *Dark Corner* (Henry Hathaway), *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Tay Garnett), *Gilda* (Charles Vidor), *The Killers* (Robert Siodmak) and *The Big Sleep* (Howard Hawks). In the same year Gallimard brought out
French translations of two of Horace McCoy's novels, the first American novels to be included in the *Série Noire*.

**The Iconic Figures of Film Noi**

The figure of the hard-boiled detective is often taken to be one of the defining features of film noir, particularly as exemplified by Humphrey Bogart, whose performances as Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon* and as Marlowe in *The Big Sleep* established him as the iconic private eye. Revisions of the detective story were, however, only one element in the phenomenon, and Bogart's place as 'a key iconographic figure in all of film noir' was secured by the fact that he was cast, as well, in a range of non-investigative films noirs, such as *High Sierra* (1941), *Dark Passage* (1946) and *In a Lonely Place* (1950). Bogart's roles in them suggest the different forms noir took as it developed during forties. In addition to the weary integrity of the private eye, there was the pathos of the ageing gangster (Roy 'Mad Dog' Earle in *High Sierra*), the desperation of the 'wrong man' (the escaped convict wrongly accused of his wife's murder in *Dark Passage*) and the violence of the suspected psychopath (the self-destructive writer in *In a Lonely Place*).

In creating this range of films noirs, Hollywood drew on the work both of earlier writers (especially, of course, Hammett and Chandler) and of the late forties-early fifties novelists who were writing crime fiction that very often had no role for the private eye. Amongst those whose work was adapted during this period were W.R. Burnett, David Goodis, Dorothy B. Hughes, William Lindsay Gresham, Horace McCoy and William P. McGivern, all of whom produced novels that had as their protagonists violent, self-deceived men, criminals, crooked cops, killers, psychotics.

One of the most important influences on noir characterisation was the work of Cornell Woolrich, whose novels embodied in an extreme form the noir sense of helplessness and paranoia. Between 1942 and 1949, there were eleven Woolrich novels or stories made into films, the protagonists of which include a man
hypnotised into thinking he is a murderer (*Fear in the Night*) and a mind-reader who predicts his own death (*Night Has a Thousand Eyes*), as well as alcoholics, amnesiacs, hunted men and fall guys. Private eye films continued, of course, to be made, but if investigative figures were included, they tended to become increasingly vulnerable and flawed - for example, Bogart's confused, hunted Rip Murdoch in John Cromwell's *Dead Reckoning* (1947), Robert Mitchum as the traumatised Jeff Markham in *Out of the Past* (Jacques Tourneur, 1947), Edmund O'Brien as the dying protagonist hunting his own killers in Rudolph Maté's *D.O.A.* (1950).

The other key iconic figure of noir is, of course, the fatal woman, who poses seductively both on film posters and on hundreds of mid-twentieth century pulp covers. The elements of the image are a kind of visual shorthand for perilous attraction and steamy corruption. Sometimes the dangerous woman is simply a sexual predator who tempts and weakens a male protagonist; sometimes she actually imitates male aggression and appropriates male power. On the poster or pulp cover she perhaps holds only a cocktail glass and a smouldering cigarette, or she might hold a gun and might by the end of the narrative have pulled the trigger. Constrained by the Hays Code, Hollywood tended to package the femme fatale narrative in ways that ensured the defeat of the independent female, but such was the power of the image of the sexual, aggressive, strong woman that she in many ways, in the minds of audiences, resisted this formulaic reassertion of male control.

**Definitions of Film Noir**

Both literary and cinematic noir can be seen as closely related to the modernist crisis of culture - as reflecting the feelings of nightmarish alienation, disorientation and disintegration that are often taken as hallmarks of the modernist sensibility. James Naremore, in his recent analysis of the contexts of film noir (*More Than Night*), suggests that the French critics who, in the mid-1940s, first applied the term 'film noir' might well have agreed on a formulation that defined noir as 'a kind of
modernism in the popular cinema'. Modernism might seem to be separated from both Hollywood and pulp fiction by such qualities as its formal complexity and technical display, its aesthetic self-consciousness, its association with high culture and its rejection of classical narrative. But with its 'extraordinary compound' of apparently contradictory elements, modernism did encompass many impulses that found natural expression in a popular genre engaged in undermining the essentially optimistic thrust of other popular forms, such as detective and action adventure stories.

Discussions of noir often centre on visual and specifically cinematic elements – on things like low-key lighting, chiaroscuro effects, deep focus photography, extreme camera angles and expressionist distortion. But it is essential as well to take account of themes, mood, characterisation, point of view and narrative pattern. Both literary and cinematic noir are defined by: (i) the subjective point of view; (ii) the shifting roles of the protagonist; (iii) the ill-fated relationship between the protagonist and society (generating the themes of alienation and entrapment); and (iv) the ways in which noir functions as a socio-political critique.

The representation of the protagonist's subjectivity is crucial - his perceptions (both accurate and deluded), his state of mind, his desires, obsessions and anxieties. The need for attending to the handling of perspective in film noir is concisely summed up in Fritz Lang's explanation of his subjective camera work: 'You show the protagonist so that the audience can put themselves under the skin of the man'; by showing things 'wherever possible, from the viewpoint of the protagonist' the film gives the audience visual and psychological access to his nightmarish experiences.

We are brought close to the mind of a protagonist whose position vis a vis other characters is not fixed. Treacherous confusions of his role and the movement of the protagonist from one role to another constitute key structural elements in noir narrative. The victim might, for example, become the aggressor; the hunter might turn into the hunted or vice versa; the investigator might double as either the victim or the perpetrator. Whereas the
traditional mystery story, with its stable triangle of detective, victim and murderer, is reasonably certain to have the detective as the protagonist, noir is a deliberate violation of this convention.

Shared guilt is often the only common bond amongst noir characters, who are usually doomed to be isolated and marginalised. The main themes are generalisations of the ill-fated relationship between the protagonist and his society. Characters suffer either from failures of agency (powerlessness, immobilising uncertainty) or from loss of community (isolation, betrayal). Obsessed, alienated, vulnerable, pursued or paranoid, they suffer existential despair as they act out narratives that raise the question of whether they are making their own choices or following a course dictated by fate.

The noir narrative confronts the protagonist with a rift in the familiar order of things or with a recognition that apparent normality is actually the antithesis of what it seems to be: it is brutal rather than benign, dehumanised not civilised. In the course of the story, it becomes clear that the things that are amiss cannot be dealt with rationally and cannot ultimately be put to rights. The dispersal of guilt, the instability of roles, and the difficulties of grasping the events taking place all mean that there can be no 'simple solution'. Even if there is a gesture in the direction of a happy ending, the group reformed is damaged and cannot return to prior innocence. It is in the nature of noir that guilt never disappears, and any resolution will be coloured by the cynical, existentially bitter attitude that is generally taken to be one of the hallmarks of noir, creating a tone that can be blackly comic but that, if it modulates too far towards light humour, or becomes upbeat or sentimental, will lose its 'noirish' quality.

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Domesticity That Never Sleeps: the Emergence of the Suburban Thriller

Roger Westcombe

Less than a decade after World War II, the urban crime thriller had transmuted into the suburban crime thriller. But almost no one noticed [1].

Crime films, particularly 'Bs' (since they're less self-conscious and more reflect the audience they need to connect with [2]), reveal the postwar 'white flight' from the cities with unbeatable accuracy and purity. Because this movement was so incidental to the filmmakers themselves it went unremarked. Half a century later it's the very incongruity of criminal plotting and scheming in settings straight out of Home Beautiful that lets us track the changes taking place.

Urban Prerequisites

The first major crime genre to emerge in Hollywood was the Gangster flick. Balancing censorship requirements against their subjects' undeniable charisma, the studios turned Scarface, Public Enemy and Little Caesar plus their lesser progeny into each way bets, hedging the star turns of Cagney and Edward G. with po-faced pronouncements that Crime Doesn't Pay, despite all the celluloid evidence to the contrary [3].

The prevailing zeitgeist strongly linked such malfeasance with slum life [4], as if tenement squalor was the petri dish that hoodlums depended on for their breeding ground. A corollary was the city/country divide, and the dichotomy between rural purity and urban degeneracy is a strand which can be seen running, somewhat unevenly, through Hollywood for decades, often within the one film [5] as it passed from city to country, from darkness into light. This dichotomy sowed the seeds for the 'suburban drift' after the War, and mirrored it.

"Swell Layout Ya Got Here"
The next major genre in crime flicks, *film noir*, found its oxygen in the urban milieu. (For a largely German-derived aesthetic this is ironic, but that's Art for you.)

*Noir* could happen anywhere, but it lent matter-of-fact acceptability to showing the same brownstone walkups where family life often occurred to be simultaneously the backdrop and setting of the most anti-social criminal behaviour and planning. With everyone living on top of each other in these tenements, a criminal caper could be hatched around the same table from which the kids were sent packing to bed. Not even a thin membrane separated criminal speculation from family life in numerous 1940s scenarios and no one batted an eyelid. That petri dish was now taken for granted.

Thus when the 'B' crime film continued on unrepentant and largely unchanged postwar [6], its makers seemed unfussed by the social upheavals they were chronicling and reflecting. They just adapted their tried and true tropes to the new realities and settings.

Two films epitomize this. Don Siegel's minor gem *Private Hell 36* (1954) offers a striking illustration of how old criminality fit into new lounge rooms while Andre deToth's *Pitfall* (1948) gathers almost its entire energy from this clash of texts - urban noir impulses versus emerging suburbanism. Spanning nearly the entire ten year 'B' thriller cycle ('46 - '55 [7]), both show crime moving out to the 'burbs along with the newly minted middle class majority, even as old concepts like the urban petri dish died hard.

**Private Hell 36**

*Private Hell 36* is a late effort from Filmmakers, production vehicle of producer Collier Young and ex-wife Ida Lupino, who handed over director duties here to Don Siegel due to her marital problems at the time with one of *Hell*'s stars, Howard Duff.

It's a brisk 80 minutes of typical Siegel efficiency strengthened by the crisp visual sense of cinematographer Burnett Guffey ( *Bonnie and Clyde* [1967, for which he won an Oscar] and the unsung Robert ( *The Hustler*) Rossen noir, *Johnny O'Clock* [1946], among many others).

Duff and Steve Cochran (the saturnine gang member who aroused Cody Jarrett's jealousy in *White Heat*) are detectives of differing corruptibility, a contrast mirrored by their taste in women. Duff's wife (Dorothy Malone) is an anxious suburban mother, while Cochran transforms nightclub chanteuse Lupino from initial suspect to eventual squeeze.
Each cop has dame-driven money problems. So when a large chunk of stolen cash comes their way they can't resist skimming off one third, though Duff acquiesces to the scam only grudgingly, egged on by Cochran, and wallows in guilt thereafter.

Domesticity, and its different versions, is one of the most influential determinants of the story. On hearing of the death of a fellow detective in his opening scene Duff worries about the impact his own demise would have on his young family, establishing a domestic angle in him from the outset. Soon we have our first sighting of Duff's suburban bungalow - in darkness, as is his wife, in a very noir visual which establishes the shadows which hang over their dream home.

Early contrast is set up as Cochran grills Ida at her place, an apartment whose unmistakable noirish associations revive the 'petri dish' distinction, now between 1940s-style urban habitats (lowlife) and 1950s suburbia (anxious families). The divide is subtly reinforced when Duff invites Cochran, on behalf of his wife, to "come out to the house sometime" (emphasis added). Lupino's shift to the good guys' (relatively speaking) side of the law is symbolised by her waking up in Cochran's suburban house (admittedly on the couch), where they subsequently consummated their new allegiance.

All of this is groundwork preparing us for the key domestic scene, when the two suburban couples socialise in the Life magazine living room of Duff and Malone. This is an incredible scene, with its style - all polo shirts, casual chilling with the neighbours - totally at odds with its content: guilt and criminality.

The placement in the film of this brightly lit segment is crucial, as it immediately follows the scene where the detectives cross the line into theft, rendering none of its participants (the oblivious Dorothy Malone apart) as pure and clean as the setting. This sense of sanctuary 'polluted' is made explicit when Duff prevents Malone from bringing their child into the lounge room while Cochran and Lupino are sprawled on the new sofa.

Siegel and/or the writers (Young and Lupino) deftly distinguish this from the wider environment's purity when an All-American delivery boy turns up at the door, all freckly innocence and peachy keen. The impurities here are not society's, they've been imported. Strengthening this, in this setting open criminal conspiracy can only occur when the women - the cops' 'others' - are absent from the shiny room.
The theme is maintained. The lovers' final abscondment into a fugitive lifestyle is hatched back at Ida's apartment (where else?), while the final conspiracy between the detectives is cemented in a sleazy diner where Cochran absent-mindedly acknowledges a 'lady of the night' in passing. But before this, the penultimate scene of criminal conspiracy returns us to Duff's house, outside in darkness again in a shot remarkably echoing a near identical scene in *Pitfall*, following the transgression which *that* film revolves around, adultery.

### Pitfall

Adultery may not be of the same order of magnitude as theft, but its impact on the nuclear 1950s family is the same, and in these films that's what counts. What's striking about *Pitfall* 's parallel scene (tarnished 'hero' skulks home to darkened house) is that we only feel the guilt of *this* protagonist's adulterous tryst when he comes in late to his sleeping household, thus instantly establishing domesticity (rather than love, individual integrity, etc) as what's at stake here.

The protagonist in *Pitfall* is Dick Powell, still enriched in complexity by his successful turn as Phillip Marlowe in *Farewell My Lovely* some four years earlier. His jowly demeanour here renders him positively Nixonian and, as insurance investigator John Forbes, this saturnine countenance instantly conjures up echoes of MacMurray's Walter Neff in *Double Indemnity*.

Powell's Forbes is introduced going through the ennui of what we would now call a mid-life crisis but instead of turning to a meno-Porsche it's a femme fatale, the sultry Lizabeth Scott, for him. Extra complication materialises in the form of Raymond Burr (in one of his earliest roles) who stalks the aforementioned Scott - with less successful results than Powell. Burr, a wrong-side-of - the-tracks private eye, is the best thing in *Pitfall*, with a chillingly understated menace that would have done Laird Cregar proud.

Throughout *Pitfall* it's the home where threats are most keenly felt. It is here, after Forbes returns home in darkness again from his second *assignation* with Scott, that he and the jealous Burr violently tangle. Shortly thereafter Scott brings the same threat home in a different form, parking outside the house in daylight but moving on after assessing the serenity of the scene and speaking to Forbes' wife Sue (Jane Wyatt).

As femme fatales go, this one is quite pro-domesticity, giving 'Johnny' Forbes the kiss-off after the above encounter: "If I had a nice home like you did, I wouldn't take a chance with it for anything in the world", she opines (only in the 50s!). That Scott means it becomes
apparent soon after when Burr gets her to play ball with him by threatening Johnny, not her. We're constantly reminded that what's at stake here is the nuclear family, rather than the individual; we never see guilt individualised in a reaction shot or one-shot, only in the family context at home.

Visually there's some angular noir ish framing: in a prison scene, in a cocktail bar where Powell encounters the usual suspects of noir world and in the reunion between Scott and her jailbird boyfriend Smiley, where she's framed in venetian blind shadows showing her imprisonment is of the metaphysical variety. Like the previous year's Bogey/Bacall Dark Passage, there's an evident day/night symbolism operating throughout Pitfall.

But the suspense here is all domestic, not noir ish. It's a domestic situation - when Burr packs away the dresses and shoes of Scott's wardrobe - which provides the climactic tension between these two characters, resolvable only by a slug from a .45.

Pitfall by now has become an odd clash of texts with each - domestic/ noir - given its head without finding a common ground, until it all comes together in a wonderful fusion when Smiley seeks out Forbes in his house (natch) which he, tipped to the threat, has thrust into shadows and darkened, finally uniting the two strands in one powerful and violent symbolic realization: suburban noir.

Oh, Hank...

Now that Mr and Mrs Public had a slice of the American Dream in the affluent postwar years, they had something to lose. Domestic bliss of this new, materialistic variety was such a novelty that maintaining it seemed a jittery, fraught process [8]. That quintessentially 50s 'B' genre, the alien invasion sci-fi flick, springs partially from this locus too. Thrillers of a more 'A' provenance (The Desperate Hours [1955]; Cape Fear [1962]) occasionally made this threat explicit, but as their budgets rose so did their self-consciousness. Even merely sexual predators could threaten the suburban split-level, as Kim Novak found courtesy of Kirk Douglas in 1960's Strangers When We Meet.

Then, as suburbia gradually became entrenched and normalised in the brave new 1960s world of Camelot, such depictions faded. The 1960s was a rotten decade for thrillers, but interestingly one of the few exceptions, 1967's In Cold Blood, draws on a harsh noir look in black and white and extends its throwback nature by centering its threat on the site of the nuclear family under attack - their comfortable home.
The next time thrillers took on a similar vitality - the early/mid-70s - their audience was also feeling fresh anxieties which key films reflected. This was seen in the conspiracy theory/covert threat scenarios of *The Parallax View* [1974], *The Conversation* [1974], *Three Days of the Condor* [1975], *Capricorn One* [1978] et al (can it be mere coincidence that a Kennedyesque assassination, in long shot a la Zapruder, is seen played out at the climax of *WUSA* [1970], *The Parallax View* and *Nashville* [1975]?).

Smart filmmakers have always intuitively recognised the value of incorporating our collective (albeit unconscious) concerns in their plotlines, as thrillers take us on vicarious rides from destabilised uncertainty to resolution. Embedded as they are with the unresolved anxieties of their era, it makes the thriller movie a natural window into some of the deepest underlying currents of our times. These hidden subcurrents of the shift to suburbia are the faultlines which numerous postwar thrillers [9] revolved around and are still revealing to us today.

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**Notes**

[1] single exception is Paul Schrader who, in his landmark 1971 essay, *Notes on Film Noir* (*Film Genre Reader*, ed. Barry Keith Grant, University of Texas Press, 1986) recognised that in the Eisenhower and McCarthy years "crime had to move to the suburbs". Schrader saw this as a function of Americans' increasingly bourgeois aspirations, rather than a reflection of new 1950s anxieties, as this essay argues.


[5] See Nick Ray's *On Dangerous Ground* (1951) for one of the more extreme illustrations, but it's fundamental to Capra, Hitchcock would mischievously toy with it in *Shadow of A Doubt* (1943), and I believe it underpins the previous year's Cary Grant-as-fugitive vehicle, *Talk of the Town*, with the Supreme Court representing urban functioning. 1937's *Nothing Sacred* inverts it for comedy but without the naivete, the country town being shown as a
prickly, monosyllabic backwater (which is probably pretty accurate), contrasted against the gleeful, freewheeling corruption of New York City. (It was written by Ben Hecht, after all!)


[7] Despite the death knell to the double ('A'/B') feature format levelled by 1948's anti-trust Paramount case (Movie Made America, Robert Sklar, Vintage Books, 1975, at 272-274), the slow phasing out of the studios' monopoly over exhibition enabled the classic 'B' to hang on until the mid 50s - see The Economic Imperative in Kings of the Bs, at 16.


In a disturbing scene from *Dark Passage* (1947), a back alley plastic surgeon tells Vincent Parry (Humphrey Bogart), "There's no such thing as courage. There's only fear, the fear of getting hurt and the fear of dying. That's why human beings live so long." He is looking straight at Parry and — through the use of the subjective camera — straight at the audience. His statement is especially striking because it dismisses courage as a myth soon after World War II, rejecting a basic cultural belief that all of America and all of Hollywood had just spent four years trying to build up. Such an attack on society's (and Hollywood's) most cherished values is characteristic of *film noir*, and perhaps its favorite target is the most fundamental value of all — the family.

**A short description of *film noir***

In classical Hollywood cinema, as in American culture generally, the family and home life are celebrated as a safe haven from the world outside and a common aspiration of each generation. When we say that a film has a "happy ending," we often mean that the male hero and his female love interest are united in marriage — or seem to be headed in that direction — before the closing credits. Indeed, many of the most popular films of the 1930s and ‘40s depict the family almost as a cure-all that will save the hero from any trouble, if he or she can only learn to appreciate it. Thus, Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) runs away from home, but discovers in the end that "There's no place like home"; George Bailey in *It's A Wonderful Life* (1946) nearly attempts suicide, only to find that friends and family make any crisis worth living through; and even Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone With the Wind* (1939) comes to value Tara, the family home, above all other things.

World War II only intensified American culture's endorsement of society's dominant ideology and the importance of shared values — values that may be said to begin with the
"traditional" nuclear family. The urge to affirm marriage and the family, already a popular and therefore profitable formula for filmmakers before the War, became an absolute political and cultural imperative during the War years. As the War came to an end, however, films began to experiment with alternative formulas and introduced a radically different visual and narrative style. This body of films, which is generally thought to begin with *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and end with *Touch of Evil* (1958), became known as *film noir* for its dark, disturbing visual style and thematic content.

Of course, *film noir* confronts a range of status quo values and institutions and does not focus exclusively on the family. In many of these films, the criminal justice system is incompetent,¹ the white-collar office is dull and dehumanizing,² the police force is corrupt,³ and even the federal government is threatening and oppressive.⁴ Yet, like classical Hollywood cinema, *film noir* often expresses its view of American society through the image of the family generally and specifically woman's place in the family. Dana Polan suggests that in mainstream Hollywood films, "realizing one's place can only mean realizing one's place in the family. . . . Family and public ideology are indeed one."⁵ Sylvia Harvey elaborates on this viewpoint, tracing the complex connections between the depiction of women, family, and society in film:

All movies express social values, or the erosion of these values, through the ways in which they depict both institutions and relations between people. Certain institutions are more revealing of social values and beliefs than others, and the family is perhaps one of the most significant of these institutions. For it is through the particular representations of the family in various movies that we are able to study the process whereby existing social relations are rendered acceptable and valid.⁶

Harvey emphasizes the special function that women perform in communicating American culture's view of the family: "[T]he representation of women has always been linked to this value-generating nexus of the family. . . . Woman's place in the home determines her position in society, but also serves as a reflection of oppressive social relationships generally."⁷
In *film noir*, women serve to express these films' skepticism toward the family and the values that it supports. With few variations, *noir* films divide women into three categories: the *femme fatale*, an independent, ambitious woman who feels confined within a marriage or a close male-female relationship and attempts to break free, usually with violent results; the nurturing woman, who is often depicted as dull, featureless, and, in the end, unattainable—a chance at conventional marriage that is denied to the hero; and the "marrying type," a woman who threatens the hero by insisting that he marry her and accept his conventional role as husband and father. Each type of *film noir* woman functions in a way that undermines society's image of the traditional family.

Still, *noir* films usually stop short of rejecting the family altogether. While criticizing the family and marriage in a fairly overt way, *film noir* cannot resist the urge to restore or reinforce the family, even if it is only at the last minute. This restoration involves punishing or destroying women (and men) who transgress the boundaries of "normal" family relations or providing a tacked-on "happy ending" in which the hero marries the nurturing woman or even a converted *femme fatale* who has learned to accept her proper role. In either case, the ending contradicts the content and style of the film itself.

Thus, *film noir* inverts the classical Hollywood formula of wish fulfillment through the family and marriage — where marriage is the "happy ending" that resolves all conflicts — by denying such an ending or by providing a conventional happy ending that draws attention to itself as unrealistic or inappropriate in the context of a particular film. Indeed, either type of *noir* ending — the denial of marriage or the unrealistic happy ending — can be seen as a critique of classical Hollywood cinema and the traditional values that it reinforces.

*Film noir* began to take shape just before the United States entered World War II with films such as *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940), *I Wake Up Screaming* (1941), and *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), but it did not develop fully until the late stages of the War and flourished in the immediate post-War years. Since *noir* films generally question social and governmental institutions, it seems likely that wartime pressure to represent the United States and American society in a positive light and to keep up the people's spirits prevented Hollywood from exploring the darker aspects of *noir* while the outcome of the War was still in doubt.
Dana Polan argues that the cultural imperative of wartime America was to promote a sense of community and shared commitment to a single cause — one nation and one people working together to win the War. The family was inextricably linked to this sense of community and commitment. It was celebrated as the foundation on which community is built as well as the motivation behind the war effort itself. The family was seen as “what ‘we’ are fighting for: the woman in the home, builder of healthy families, prime consumer of products.”

It was not until after the War that Hollywood felt free — perhaps even obligated — to reassert its independence by revealing the negative side of American society: “[R]ecent work on film noir (especially postwar noir) has read it as a moment of re-relativization of the cinematic institution, its distancing from any simple confirmation of dominant ideological practice.”

Still, even after the War had ended, American culture — including most Hollywood films — continued to work overtime to support the status quo values of community and family, and to prescribe strict gender roles for men and women. Nina Leibman places post-War film noir in the context of a society obsessed with returning women to their “proper place” in the home and converting men from adventurous soldiers to reliable breadwinners. Leibman points to the dominant social imperative of post-war America with its emphasis on the importance of nuclear family life, the proper role of the sexes, the superiority of suburbia. . . . McCall’s magazine launched an issue on family “togetherness” as the crucial factor in the family enclave. Housewifery became professionalized with a plethora of books and articles extolling the virtues of domesticity and urging women to leave their "Rosie-the-Riveter" jobs for the less tangible rewards of child-rearing and housekeeping. In addition, these articles cautioned both men and women to assume their proper roles lest their aberrant behavior result in untold psychological trauma.

Describing a later noir film, The Big Heat (1953), Leibman defines the family as “very much constructed along traditional lines: the working father, the helpmate mother, the child who is both nuisance and source of comfort." It is this image of the "traditional" nuclear family that prescriptive sources such as McCall’s and non-noir Hollywood films held up as an ideal to which all "normal" American men and
women must aspire. And it is this image of the ideal family and the mass production of that image in American culture (especially classical Hollywood cinema) that *film noir* calls into question.

*Film noir*'s view of the family contrasted not only with the dictates of society at large, but also with the images or myths of family life propagated by other films coming out of Hollywood. These more mainstream films, dating back to the beginnings of large-scale filmmaking in the early 1920s, belonged to the body of films loosely termed classical Hollywood cinema, or CHC. CHC films depicted a very narrow range of acceptable family relationships and rigid gender roles within the family. They also reinforced the dominant culture's endorsement of the traditional nuclear family as a necessity for successful, "normal" life and the foundation of community and society in general.

The depiction of women in classical Hollywood cinema is especially significant to an understanding of the contrasting images presented in *film noir*, since both bodies of films express their attitudes toward the family largely through the female characters. Women in CHC films were allowed to be heroic only within the boundaries of their proper sphere.

Meanwhile, by far the most common image of women in classical Hollywood cinema was the wife or mother who was not the heroine, but merely a supporting character for the film's star. Although they may temporarily resist the hero's advances or oppose his wishes, traditional women seldom are depicted as threatening to or incompatible with the hero, the nuclear family, or the status quo. Instead, they promote the ideal of the traditional family by giving up all resistance to the hero, submitting to male authority, and embracing their proper place in the nuclear family.

Still, classical Hollywood cinema does contain many examples of nontraditional women —
women who do not readily accept their place in the nuclear family. These characters generally fall into two categories: the dangerous seductress and the abnormally independent woman. Among the women of CHC films, they come closest to achieving the power and independence of the femmes fatales of film noir, but they are not allowed to keep their independence. Invariably, these women are destroyed, punished, or converted to more traditional roles after learning that their independence was a mistake. Thus, rather than challenging the supremacy of the nuclear family, the nontraditional woman in non-noir films ultimately reinforces the family and traditional womanhood as the only acceptable choice for women.

Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich created many of the earliest examples of deadly independent women. Both actresses specialized in playing women who used their sexual attractiveness to ensnare unsuspecting men or otherwise controlled their own sexuality outside of marriage and the nuclear family. But in all of her movies, Garbo's character renounced her independence through her love for the hero or made a noble gesture to preserve the family that she had threatened — often just before her death. Similarly, Dietrich's fallen women are converted to "normal" womanhood or reveal themselves to be soft-hearted, traditional women beneath their heavy makeup.

Other examples of strong, independent, but non-film noir women include heroines such as Scarlett O'Hara (Vivian Leigh) in Gone with the Wind (1939), the self-reliant career women of 1930s and '40s comedies, and the overtly "feminist" characters often portrayed by Katharine Hepburn. Yet, these women also stop short of the femme fatale's total rebellion against the status quo and the social disruption that she creates. Despite her talent for manipulating men, Scarlett O'Hara is no femme fatale; she dedicates her life to one man, and her greatest triumph is restoring and protecting the family home. The cynical, city-wise career women played so often by Jean Arthur, Barbara Stanwyck, and Rosalind Russell usually end up happily married to the hero and cured of their cynicism by the final reel. Even Katharine Hepburn's liberated heroines are chastened for their refusal to embrace traditional womanhood and are forced to "reform" and reassess their values because of their love for the hero.

Thus, the majority of Hollywood films produced before and during the appearance of film noir use women to communicate an unqualified pro-family message. They reward women
who play traditional roles in the nuclear family, punish women who refuse to stay in their proper place, and convert or castigate women who openly question the validity of the nuclear family and female gender roles. Above all, these films consistently portray traditional family relationships and women's place in those relationships as "natural" or "normal" — so much so that even the most independent women cannot resist the family beyond the end of the film.

Many critics have argued convincingly that film noir follows much the same pattern of rewarding "good" women and punishing "bad" women as conventional Hollywood films. The rewards and punishments for women (and men) in film noir are especially serious — characters who willingly play their proper roles tend to survive beyond the end of the film, while characters who resist playing these roles often die violently or, less commonly, go to jail. On rare occasions, these films even deliver a Hollywood happy ending, when a family or a relationship that was threatened or torn apart during the course of the film actually is restored in the final scene. Meanwhile, critics who find a conservative message in film noir point out that these films endorse the family not only in their narrative content, but even in their visual style, which creates a negative contrast between the noir world and the world of traditional family life.

Claire Johnston argues that film noir reinforces the male-dominated status quo family by destroying characters who threaten the established order — particularly women. She points out that noir films like Double Indemnity (1944) often depict transgressions against the family that involve a discontented wife who murders her husband. But rather than casting doubt on the traditional nuclear family, these female transgressors exist only to be beaten down and destroyed. This pattern is repeated in classics of film noir such as The Postman Always Rings Twice (1946), Out of the Past (1947), The Lady from Shanghai (1947), and Dead Reckoning (1947). The wife who achieves independence through murder inevitably dies violently — sentenced to death by a film that supports the status quo as represented by the law against murder. Film noir therefore provides an affirmation of the dominant social order and a warning against disturbing it.
"Far from opening up social contradictions, the [detective] genre as a whole . . . performs a profoundly confirmatory function for the reader, both revealing and simultaneously eliminating the problematic aspects of social reality by the assertion of the unproblematic nature of the Law." 19

Janey Place agrees that *film noir* tends to destroy the independent woman as a moral lesson to the audience and to the male characters who fall under her spell:

"The ideological operation of the myth (the absolute necessity of controlling the strong, sexual woman) is thus achieved by first demonstrating her dangerous power and its frightening results, then destroying it." 20

This view of *film noir* emphasizes the danger that independent women represent for men by tempting them to venture beyond the safety of the family, if only temporarily. Women in *film noir* tend to express their independence in sexual terms — they use their sexuality to manipulate men, rather than submitting it to the moral code of a traditional family and the control of a husband. Their sexual independence threatens the men and the family relationships around them by providing a dangerous alternative to the traditional family unit. The sexually independent woman serves to reinforce the status quo family because it is through her that the hero learns his "proper place." Thus, in a film such as *Pitfall* (1948), according to Nina Leibman, the errant husband learns that the only appropriate and indeed safe place for a man or a woman is the nuclear family:

*John is bored and cynical about his family life and is looking for excitement. It is John's search for adventure outside the socially approved realm of his family that leads to his relationship with Mona and ultimate danger. . . . Because John dares to criticize the socially approved family unit, because he transgresses the boundaries of such an ideal enclave, he is punished.* 21

The same lesson can be found in *D.O.A.* (1950), a film in which the hero's attempt to escape from a family relationship leads to even graver consequences. Frank Bigelow (Edmond O'Brien) takes an out-of-town vacation in order to break free of his fiancée's grasp and to have one last sexual fling, but soon learns that he has been "murdered" with a dose of incurable poison. Deborah Thomas notes that the film makes a clear connection between Bigelow's infidelity and his "murder" — his rejection of marriage leads directly to his death: "Significantly, it is while Frank was trying to pick up another woman in a bar that the poisoned drink . . . has been substituted for his own." 22
Although the characters of film noir often are doomed to suffer severe punishment for their nontraditional behavior, a significant number of noir films might appear to take a different approach to reinforcing the status quo. These films borrow their endings from conventional Hollywood melodrama and romance by allowing the hero and his love interest to overcome obstacles to their relationship and emerge from the noir world into the world of successful marriage and family life. This type of conventional "happy ending" occurs in such noir classics as Stranger on the Third Floor (1940), I Wake Up Screaming (1941), Laura (1944), Murder, My Sweet (1944), Gilda (1946), The Big Sleep (1946), The Lady in the Lake (1947), and Dark Passage (1947).

Noir films' visual representation of these characters and their surroundings also can be interpreted to show support for the nuclear family and disapproval of independent women and unsatisfied husbands. Traditional women typically appear in daylight or high-key lighting, exist outside of the city's corruption and danger, and live contentedly in the family home. In contrast, the anti-traditional femme fatale, according to Janey Place, "is comfortable in the world of cheap dives, shadowy doorways and mysterious settings." 23

Nina Leibman writes that noir films such as Pitfall and The Big Heat endorse the traditional family by creating a visual distinction between the world of the family home and the noir world outside:

The mise-en-scène displays open doorways, neatly stacked dishes in glass cabinets, kitchens with talkover counters, a charming child's room. The characters interact with the domestic items in a familiar, contented manner.

... The nuclear family is reinforced as ideal by the films' visual preference of the suburban home as well as the negative repercussions that befall those who express unhappiness with or neglect of the nuclear unit. 24

The explicit messages of film noir seem to be clear regarding women and the family: Women who transgress the boundaries of conventional family life meet with and deserve the most extreme punishment, and the men who fall victim to their sexual charms meet a similar fate. Characters who resist or threaten the nuclear family become trapped in the noir world, which is abnormal, dark, dangerous, and incompatible with traditional family values. The family home and the women who choose to live there in their proper place appear as ideals or models of correct behavior.
But beyond the more explicit lessons and images lies a much different interpretation of *film noir* and the function of women in these films. Women in *film noir* do not merely provide a variation on the pro-family theme of contemporary Hollywood films — rather, they reveal a distinctly anti-family current running just beneath the surface of *noir* films. This barely hidden message, according to Sylvia Harvey, never amounts to an all-out attack on the status quo family, but it exists nonetheless: “[T]he kinds of tension characteristic of the portrayal of the family in these films suggests the beginnings of an attack on the dominant social values normally expressed through the representation of the family.”

Critics tend to classify the women of *film noir* into two categories identified by Janey Place: the "rejuvenating redeemer" or "good" woman and the "spider woman" or *femme fatale*. But *noir* films also feature a third type of female character, the "marrying type" — a woman who poses a threat to the hero by pressuring him to marry her and "settle down" into his traditional role as breadwinner, husband, and father. These women are qualitatively different from the women of classical Hollywood cinema. Perhaps more than any other single element of *film noir*, the women function as an expression of the films' underlying skepticism toward the traditional family. Indeed, the three types of female characters are so essential to the meaning of these films and so peculiar to this body of films that they can be seen as part of the iconography of *film noir*.

Of the three types of *noir* women, the *femme fatale* represents the most direct attack on traditional womanhood and the nuclear family. She refuses to play the role of devoted wife and loving mother that mainstream society prescribes for women. She finds marriage to be confining, loveless, sexless, and dull, and she uses all of her cunning and sexual attractiveness to gain her independence. As Janey Place points out, "She is not often won over and pacified by love for the hero, as is the strong heroine of the forties who is significantly less sexual than the *film noir* woman." She remains fiercely independent even when faced with her own destruction. And in spite of her inevitable death, she leaves behind the image of a strong, exciting, and unrepentant woman who defies the control of men and rejects the institution of the family.
The classic *femme fatale* resorts to murder to free herself from an unbearable relationship with a man who would try to possess and control her, as if she were a piece of property or a pet. According to Sylvia Harvey, the women of *film noir* are "[p]resented as prizes, desirable objects" for the men of these films, and men's treatment of women as mere possessions is a recurring theme in *film noir*. In a telling scene from an early *noir* thriller, *I Wake Up Screaming* (1941), three men sit in a bar lamenting their unsuccessful attempts to seduce the *femme fatale*, clearly resenting her inexplicable refusal to be possessed. When one man complains that "Women are all alike," another responds simply, "Well, you've got to have them around — they're standard equipment."

In *Out of the Past* (1947), Kathie Moffett shoots her way out of a confining relationship with gambler Whit Sterling, but Whit hires detective Jeff Markham to retrieve her. When Jeff asks Whit for some assurance that he will not harm Kathie if he gets her back, Whit answers by comparing her to a racehorse that he once owned. Whit obviously thinks of Kathie as his prize possession. Similarly, Rip Murdoch (Humphrey Bogart) in *Dead Reckoning* (1947) wishes aloud that women could be reduced to pocket size, to be put away when not desired and returned to normal size when needed.

This attitude is not lost on the women themselves. They feel trapped by husbands or lovers who treat them as "standard equipment" and by an institution — marriage — that makes such treatment possible. Marriage for the *femme fatale* is associated with unhappiness, boredom, and the absence of romantic love and sexual desire. In *Double Indemnity* (1944), Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck) feels like a caged animal in her husband's home and is driven to murder him largely because he shows no affection for her, only indifference: "I feel as if he was watching me. Not that he cares, not anymore. But he keeps me on a leash so tight I can't breathe." As Sylvia Harvey suggests, *film noir* attributes the *femme fatale*'s violent behavior at least partially to women's lack of status and fulfillment in conventional marriage:

Other imagery in these films suggests that a routinised boredom and a sense of stifling entrapment are characteristic of marriage. . . . The family home in *Double Indemnity* is the place where three people who hate each other spend endlessly boring evenings together. The husband does not merely not notice his wife, he ignores her sexually . . . . 28
Double Indemnity

In some films, the husband's lack of interest in his wife seems almost sadistic. The elderly husband of young and beautiful Cora Smith (Lana Turner) in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946) encourages his wife to spend time with Frank Chambers (John Garfield), as if he enjoys tempting Frank and frustrating Cora. Rita Hayworth receives similar treatment in both *Gilda* (1946) and *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947). In the latter film, Hayworth is married to a much older man who compensates for his physical paralysis and spiritual ugliness by arranging and then frustrating her relationship with Michael (Orson Welles). Even his insistence on calling her "Lover" has ironic and sadistic overtones, considering her obvious aversion to him.

The image of disabled, paralysed, or elderly men married to much younger women is a further indication that marriage and family life restrict sexual desire and romantic love. Sylvia Harvey sees this recurring image as a critique of traditional family relationships, which appear dull and lifeless, particularly from the point of view of the young, sexually exciting *femme fatale*:

It is perhaps most clear in this movie [*Double Indemnity*] that the expression of sexuality and the institution of marriage are at odds with one another, and that both pleasure and death lie outside the safe circle of family relations.

Moreover, there is clearly an impetus in film noir to transgress the boundaries of this circle; for the presence of husbands on crutches or in wheelchairs (*Double Indemnity, Lady from Shanghai*) suggests that impotence is somehow a normal component of the married state. 29

Another sign of the sterility of *film noir* marriages is the absence of children produced by these marriages. Childless couples are far more common in *film noir* than the traditional father-mother-children nuclear family. The husband of the *femme fatale* may have a full-grown child from a previous marriage (*Double Indemnity, Murder, My Sweet*), but the child's age implies that the father's sexual activity is long past and that his current marriage is empty of sexual desire.

The family home only intensifies this atmosphere of coldness and entrapment for the married *femme fatale*. In *Double Indemnity*, Phyllis paces the living room as she describes the routine of her life to Walter, crossing and recrossing bars of shadow cast by a window.
blind — like a prisoner in her own home. When Walter first enters the house, he notices a pair of framed photographs of the father and his daughter — no pictures of Phyllis are displayed, as if she has been frozen out of the family unit. The family home in Murder, My Sweet (1944) is a vast, marble-floored mansion, where echoes drown out people's voices and statues outnumber human beings. Detective Philip Marlowe (Dick Powell) remarks sarcastically that the house is somewhat smaller than Buckingham Palace, and he later describes it as a "mausoleum" and a "fun house."

The lighting and mise-en-scène of the family home contribute further to its image as a trap or "mausoleum," particularly for the femme fatale. Nina Leibman writes that the living space inhabited by the married femme fatale and her husband creates an atmosphere of alienation between the characters:

In Double Indemnity and The Lady from Shanghai, the family home is a huge gloomy mansion. Stairways, room dividers, and davenports split the rooms and the characters. The lack of light gives a haunted feeling to these homes, which are invariably filled with too many knick-knacks, oversized portraits, and fishbowls. These visual cues contradict the myth of the family home as the center of safety, fulfillment, and love. The benefits normally associated with marriage and the family - especially in conventional Hollywood films — are conspicuously absent from the film noir family.

In stark contrast to the visual and narrative representation of the family home is that of the femme fatale herself. She exudes a unique sexuality, which she uses to define herself and manipulate men in order to gain independence from an oppressive family life or relationship. Her body, her clothing, her words, her actions, and her ability to hold the camera's gaze create a highly charged sexual image that defies attempts by the men in her life and by the film itself to control her or return her to her "proper sphere" as a woman. Although she often is destroyed in the final reel, she lingers in the audience's imagination as a sexually exciting, living character who never accepted the role that society had chosen for her. Even in the few films in which she is actually converted to a more traditional role, the violence and power of
her rebellion against that role earlier in the film overcomes the contrived ending, so that the
dominant image of the femme fatale is one of defiance against the traditional family and
woman's place in society.

Noir films create this image of the strong, unpressed woman, then attempt to contain it by
destroying the femme fatale or converting her to traditional womanhood. But the femme
fatale cannot be made to serve the status quo so easily — even if that is the film's intention.
Both Sylvia Harvey and Janey Place suggest that the femme fatale effectively undermines
the supremacy of the traditional family and its values in spite of her final punishment or
conversion. Harvey argues that the femme fatale's transgressions against the traditional
family constitute a far more enduring image than her final punishment:

Despite the ritual punishment of acts of transgression, the vitality with which these acts are
endowed produces an excess of meaning which cannot finally be contained. Narrative
resolutions cannot recuperate their subversive significance. 31

Place agrees, asserting that the audience remembers the nontraditional female as free and
powerful, not punished and neutralized:

It is not their inevitable demise we remember but rather their strong, dangerous, and above
all exciting sexuality. . . . [T]he final "lesson" of the myth often fades into the background
and we retain the image of the erotic, strong, unpressed (if destructive) woman. The style
of these films thus overwhelms their conventional narrative content, or interacts with it to
produce a remarkably potent image of woman. 32

Place attributes the femme fatale's unique power to her willingness and ability to express
herself in sexual terms. 33 The femme fatale threatens the status quo and the hero precisely
because she controls her own sexuality outside of marriage. She uses sex for pleasure and
as a weapon or a tool to control men, not merely in the culturally acceptable capacity of
procreation within marriage. Her sexual emancipation commands the gaze of the hero, the
audience, and the camera in a way that cannot be erased by her final punishment. Place
writes that "the visual style gives her such freedom of movement and dominance that it is
her strength and sensual visual texture that is inevitably printed in our memory, not her
ultimate destruction." 34

Noir films immediately convey the intense sexual presence of the femme fatale by
introducing her as a fully established object of the hero's obsession. Since the camera often
represents the hero's subjective memory — revealed via flashback — it projects his privileged knowledge about her dangerous sexuality even before he actually acquires that knowledge. Thus, according to Janey Place, the \textit{femme fatale}'s visual and sexual dominance — and the threat that she poses to the hero — are felt from her very first scene:

The \textit{femme fatale} is characterised by her long lovely legs: our first view of the elusive Velma in \textit{Murder My Sweet} (Farewell My Lovely) and of Cora in \textit{The Postman Always Rings Twice} is a significant, appreciative shot of their bare legs,

a directed glance (so directed in the latter film that the shot begins on her calves, cuts to a shot of her whole body, cuts back to the man looking, then finally back to Lana Turner's turban-wrapped, angelic face) from the viewpoint of the male character who is to be seduced. 35

Her ability to hold both the hero and the audience spellbound continues throughout the film to the point of her death and beyond. In \textit{The Lady from Shanghai}, director Orson Welles uses the camera to roam over the tanned, swimsuit-clad body of his real-life wife, Rita Hayworth, engaging the audience in the hero's growing obsession. Later in the film, when Elsa (Hayworth) and Michael (Welles) confront each other in an amusement park hall of mirrors, the gun-wielding \textit{femme fatale} fills the screen via multiple reflected images — at once supremely powerful, cold, and vulnerable.

Even after her death, the strong female character has the power to intrude visually on the narrative, often continuing to "live" through her portrait. In \textit{Laura} (1944), certainly the most famous illustration of this point, a striking portrait of the dead woman commands the center of every scene in her apartment. The detective assigned to solve her murder actually falls in love with her portrait without ever having seen her alive. Thus, Laura actually re-asserts her independence and power from beyond the grave.

\textit{I Wake Up Screaming} (1941) features a less celebrated but more extreme example of the \textit{femme fatale} whose portrait commands the gaze of the camera and the other characters
even after her murder. In many key scenes, Vicki’s photograph appears at the center of the camera’s field of vision. She seems to be watching each character as the investigation of her murder places that character in danger. In the final scene of the film, the camera reveals the full visual power of the murdered *femme fatale* — the detective’s entire apartment is filled with her photographs in a shrine to his obsession.

Attempts to neutralize the power of the *femme fatale* by destroying her at the end are usually unsuccessful, because her power extends beyond death. But *film noir* does not always deal with women’s transgressions against the family in this way. A handful of *noir* films add conventional happy endings, in which a converted *femme fatale* or a "good" woman marries the hero and restores the status quo. In *The Lady in the Lake* (1947), the supposed *femme fatale* — an independent, gold-digging career woman during most of the film — suddenly abandons her dream of money and a high-ranking position to become the wife of seedy private eye Philip Marlowe (Robert Montgomery), who has spent the entire film demonstrating his misogyny at her expense. In *Dark Passage* (1947), Vincent Parry (Humphrey Bogart) escapes from prison to clear his name of a murder charge, but decides in the end to flee the country for a romantic rendezvous with Irene Jansen (Lauren Bacall). Yet, such resolutions seem tacked-on and contrived, and they cannot compensate for the disturbing images created earlier in these films. Rather than reinforcing the status quo, these last-minute reversals merely emphasize the more subversive elements of *film noir*’s visual style, characterization, and narration. 36

In the majority of *noir* films, however, the *femme fatale* remains committed to her independence, seldom allowing herself to be converted by the hero or captured by the police. She refuses to be defined by the male hero or submit her sexuality to the male-dominated institution of the family; instead, she defines herself and resists all efforts by the hero to "put her in her place." 37 As Kathie Moffett explains to Jeff Bailey in *Out of the Past*, “I never told you I was anything but what I am — you just wanted to imagine I was.”

It is not surprising that Kathie — alive, independent, and defiant — exerts a much more powerful hold on our imagination and our memory than her ultimate destruction. Even when we acknowledge that the *femme fatale* is killed at the end of the film, we are more moved by how she is killed. Kathie controls even her death. She chooses to die rather than be
captured. Her death is essentially a murder/suicide, because she shoots Jeff while he is driving the car and while she is caught in a police crossfire. Thus, unlike the independent women of non-*noir* films, the *femme fatale* remains true to her nature, refusing to be converted or to accept capture, even when the alternative is death.

*Film noir*'s subversive view of family life and women's accepted role in society extends to its portrayal of the "good" or "normal" woman. The good woman embraces her traditional "place" in the family, but she is out of place in *film noir*. Although she offers the hero a chance to escape from the sexy, destructive *femme fatale* and the dangerous *noir* world, the good woman often proves to be a mirage that the hero cannot reach. She functions as a foil for the *femme fatale*, not as a realistic alternative or a prescription for female behavior. Indeed, Janey Place argues that "the lack of excitement offered by the safe woman is so clearly contrasted with the sensual, passionate appeal of the other that the detective's destruction is inevitable." 38 Ultimately, the good woman suggests that society's prescription for happiness, the traditional family, is uninteresting and unattainable.

The world of the good woman and "normal" family values contrasts sharply with the dominant world of *film noir* in both visual style and narrative content, as if the cultural ideal of family life — the dominant image of most Hollywood films at the time — is a mere fantasy for the *noir* characters. In *film noir*, the American dream is indeed a dream. The good woman often lives in an idealized country setting or in a well-kept apartment, outside of the dark, rain-soaked urban streets associated with the *noir* world. She is filmed using the visual techniques of classical Hollywood cinema: high-key lighting, eye-level camera angles, and open spaces — free of the disturbing mise-en-scène that surrounds the *femme fatale*. 39 And she remains passive, nurturing, and nonthreatening — a redeeming angel for a hero hopelessly tempted by the active, independent, and dangerous *femme fatale*. 40

Within the context of *film noir*, the good woman and nuclear family life may seem "too good to last" — and they usually are. Ann, the idyllic but featureless good woman in *Out of the Past*, remains loyal to Jeff even when he tells her that he is mixed up with murder and another woman. The final scene of the film implies that Ann is not strong enough to know the truth about Jeff's death and his continuing love for her; the Kid lies to her in order to make the rest of her life easier — perhaps suggesting that conventional family life is built on
such lies. In *The Big Heat*, police detective Dave Bannion (Glenn Ford) first realizes that his family is vulnerable to the *noir* world when his wife receives a threatening phone call at home — she is later killed by a bomb planted in the family car. Thus, according to Janey Place, *film noir* depicts the good woman as an unlikely choice for the hero and sees the traditional family as an unsafe and undesirable refuge from the world outside:

On the rare occasions that the normal world of families, children, homes and domesticity appears in *film noir* it is either so fragile and ideal that we anxiously anticipate its destruction (*The Big Heat*), or, like the "good" but boring women who contrast with the exciting, sexy femmes fatales, it is so dull and constricting that it offers no compelling alternative to the dangerous but exciting life on the fringe. 41

As Place suggests, *film noir* exhibits a noticeable lack of balancing or prescriptive images of traditional women and families. *Out of the Past* contains no marriages at all, with the exception of a brief scene featuring Ann's parents. In *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *Double Indemnity*, *Laura*, and most other noir films, even the "good guys" are unmarried, have bad marriages, or express contempt for marriage. Sam Spade remarks that his murdered partner, Miles Archer, "had a wife who didn't like him" — and Spade should know, because he is having an affair with her. Barton Keyes, the insurance investigator and father figure in *Double Indemnity*, tells Walter that he once came close to marriage, but canceled the wedding after having his fiancée investigated. Laura's detective Mark McPherson says simply that he has never been married, although a "dame" did get a fur coat out of him once.

Marriage and a stable family life usually are denied to the hero of *film noir*, reversing the Hollywood formula of romance and melodrama that inevitably ends in marriage for the main characters. The *femme fatale* is too dangerous and must be destroyed, while the good woman is too far removed from the *noir* world of the hero. Thus, as Sylvia Harvey points out, *film noir* admits the possibility of marriage for the hero, only to deny its existence: "It is at the end of the movie [*The Lady from Shanghai*] a condition of the lonely and frustrating freedom of Michael (as well as for the crusading private eye in *The Maltese Falcon*, 1941) that he is not married, that marriage is an impossible

By the late 1940s, a third distinct type of female character began to appear in *film noir* — the marrying woman. Unlike the *femme fatale* or the good woman, the marrying woman seriously threatens to domesticate the hero. She pressures him to fulfill his socially approved role of
husband and breadwinner — a role that he finds confining, dull, and even dehumanizing. The hero, like the *femme fatale*, resists his "proper" role within the status quo family and suffers for his transgressions. He also seeks comfort and understanding from male friends or, in a significant shifting of roles, from a nurturing *femme fatale*. Indeed, in films such as *Pitfall* (1948), *D.O.A.* (1950), *The Big Heat* (1953), *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), and especially *Touch of Evil* (1958), the good woman disappears or is split into two personalities: the domesticating marrying type and the nurturing *femme fatale*. Thus, in the last decade of the *film noir* cycle, it is the marrying woman who seems threatening and must be neutralized or destroyed, while other men and *femmes fatales* are seen as nurturing and nonthreatening — perhaps because they can never marry the hero.

The appearance of the marrying woman coincides roughly with a change in the hero himself. In later *noir* films, the solitary private eye is gradually replaced by the engaged or married white-collar worker or police detective. The hero in *Pitfall* works for a large, faceless insurance company, and complains to his wife that a person could set a clock by his daily routine; *D.O.A.*'s Frank Bigelow is a CPA engaged to his secretary; in *The Big Heat*, Dave Bannion is a homicide detective for the police department; and the ostensible hero in *Touch of Evil* (1958) is a United Nations narcotics agent. For these more stable heroes, marriage and domesticity are no longer an impossible dream, but an all-too-possible reality.

The opening scene of *Pitfall* establishes the "perfect" family as the center of a dull, unsatisfying routine for the married hero. The first image of the film shows a woman frying eggs and calling to her husband to hurry up or he'll be late for work. As he sits down to breakfast, insurance man Johnny Forbes (Dick Powell) muses aloud about quitting his job and sailing to South America. His wife, Sue (Jane Wyatt), merely reminds him that he is running late. His son, Tommy, asks him for the $5 that he needs for camp, and his wife says that Tommy also needs new shoes. After complaining about the rising cost of supporting a family, Johnny wonders why his dreams for an exciting and meaningful life have faded, but he receives no sympathy from his wife, only sarcasm:

**Johnny**: "You were voted the prettiest girl in the class. I was voted the boy most likely to succeed. Something should happen to people like that."
Sue: "Something did — we got married."

Johnny: "Whatever happened to those two people who were going to build a boat and sail around the world?"

Sue: "Well, I had a baby — I never did hear what happened to you. (pause) Oh, come on, Wanderlust. You've got a family to support."

Johnny: "No South America?"

Sue: "Not today."

The marrying women in these films are not "bad" women like the murderous *femmes fatales* of earlier *noir* films — they often represent society's ideal of the perfect wife or sweetheart. But it is precisely this status quo perfection that marks them as dangerous to the hero. Indeed, Deborah Thomas argues that the marrying woman can be just as threatening as the *femme fatale*: "[T]hough the *femme fatale* is indeed a threat, she is no more so than the so-called 'redemptive' woman intent on the hero's domestication and the restoration of the status quo." 43 Thomas also points out that the hero's anxiety regarding marriage and family responsibilities often runs so deep that he is not consciously aware of it, while the marrying woman knows that she is the cause of his anxiety:

Most striking, given the fact that critical attention has tended to focus on the centrality to the genre of the *femme fatale*, is the prominence of the "marrying woman" who sets her sights on the hero, to his obvious but unavowed discomfiture, an unease of which such a woman is fully aware, even if the hero is not. 44

Although she recognizes the anxiety that the hero feels toward marriage, the marrying woman cannot understand it. She seems to accept without question the rules that society has laid down for marriage and family life, willingly playing her prescribed role and expecting the hero to do the same. In *Pitfall*, when Johnny complains, "Sometimes I feel like a wheel within a wheel within a wheel," his wife replies drily, "You and 50 million others." In *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), detective Mike Hammer unravels the mystery behind an escaped mental patient's death, only to be criticized by his fiancée (who is also his secretary) for needlessly pursuing "the great whatsit" — implying, perhaps with good reason, that he is using the mystery as an excuse to avoid her. And in *D.O.A.*, Frank Bigelow's fiancée, Paula (Pamela Britton), reluctantly accepts his decision to take a vacation alone, while expressing his fear of their upcoming marriage:
Paula: "Frank, you'll take me with you, won't you? You will, won't you? Or am I crowding you?"

Frank: "What do you mean, crowding me?"

Paula: "Maybe you do need this week away alone. Maybe we both do. I know what's going on inside of you, Frank. You're just like any other man, only a little more so. You have a feeling of being trapped, hemmed in, and you don't know whether or not you like it."

It soon becomes clear that Frank does know whether or not he likes feeling "hemmed in" — he flees from Paula and imminent domesticity for a hotel in San Francisco filled with convention goers and available women. Upon arrival, he cuts short a phone call with Paula to join a party in the hallway, and when he follows the party to a jazz club, Frank immediately attempts to pick up an attractive woman at the bar. It is at this point, as he tries to initiate one more sexual encounter before marriage, that Frank's drink is poisoned. The next day, Frank learns that he has been "murdered," and as he sets out to track down his killer, he also begins to see Paula and his now impossible marriage in a new light. Frank slowly realizes that he never loved Paula more than when he learned he would not live long enough to marry her.

The timing of Frank's murder suggests two opposite interpretations: It is obvious that he is being punished for betraying his engagement to Paula, but it is equally clear that his engagement is directly linked to his death — that Frank would not have been susceptible to murder if he had not first been threatened with marriage. But more important is Frank's reaction to the completely unexpected news that he is going to die. Even as he gives in to panic and runs from the doctor's office, he begins to reassess his relationship with Paula — a relationship that he has lost forever. Deborah Thomas describes a brief scene at this point in the film that indicates the noir hero's inability to appreciate marriage or the marrying woman until the threat of marriage and domesticity has been removed:

[T]he men . . . seem both to resist marriage and to deny that they are doing so, unable to resolve their ambivalence until the dangerous alternatives to a conventional marriage have proved to be dead ends. This happens literally in D.O.A., Frank Bigelow/Edmond O'Brien incurably poisoned and doomed to death before he can — "safely" — feel sentimental about marriage and family (it is after his condition is confirmed at the hospital . . . that a lingering shot is provided of his looking at a little girl, and then at a young romantic couple). Frank's
included in the shot. Marriage and family can be idealized only when they are doomed (The Big Heat [1953]) or out of reach. 45

The hero in Dead Reckoning also resists marriage and suppresses his feelings for the marrying woman until the possibility of marriage has been eliminated. Rip Murdoch meets Coral Chandler (Lizabeth Scott) while investigating the murder of his wartime buddy, Johnny. Coral soon senses Rip's anxiety about their relationship and gives him a playful yet serious warning: "Be careful what you say to me — I'm the marrying type." Rip tries to follow her advice, but finds himself falling in love with her. He is saved by the discovery that Coral was part of the conspiracy that led to Johnny's death. As he drives her to the police station, Coral shoots him, causing an accident that leaves her mortally injured. In the film's final scene, Rip holds Coral's hand as she slips into unconsciousness. Although he has been the cause of her destruction, Rip comforts her while she lies dying on a hospital bed; his love for the marrying woman can be expressed safely only at the point of her death.

The noir hero's fear of marriage and conventional family life leads him to seek comfort not from the nurturing woman — who has become the duplicitous marrying type — but from other men and, particularly in '50s noir, from nurturing femme fatale-type women. It is Rip's love for Johnny that saves him from a potentially fatal relationship with Coral. Rip and Johnny seem to have enjoyed unconditional friendship. They parachuted into enemy territory together during the War; they spent their furloughs together; they even had their own private cipher for writing messages that only the two of them could understand. When Rip realizes that Coral played a part in Johnny's murder, he tells Coral (whom Johnny had nicknamed Dusty) that his love for Johnny is stronger than his love for her, and that this love makes it easier for him to send her to the electric chair:

Rip: "You're going to fry, Dusty."

Coral: "Rip, can't we put this behind us. Can't you forget?"

Rip: "The trouble is I can't forget that I might die tomorrow. Suppose you got sore at me some morning for leaving the top off the toothpaste tube? Then there's Johnny. When a guy's pal's killed he ought to do something about it."

Coral: "Don't you love me?"

Rip: "That's the tough part of it. But it'll pass. Those things do in time. Then there's one other thing: I loved him more." 46
Another indication that Rip Murdoch feels more comfortable with male friends than with "marrying type" Coral Chandler — even when he is in love with her — is his choice of nicknames for her. (She is seldom addressed as Coral.) In the beginning of the film, when he suspects her involvement in Johnny's murder, Rip uses the nickname that Johnny had given her, Dusty. As their relationship grows closer and they decide to make a fresh start at life, she asks him for a new name — which she also would do if they were to be married. Rip signals his newfound trust in her by choosing a male nickname, Mike. But when he later finds proof that she was involved in the murder, Rip again calls her Dusty. He returns to using his affectionate name for her — the name that he gave her, suggesting marriage — only when she is dying. His deliberate decision to use her male nickname only when he trusts her and when marriage has become impossible implies his mistrust of women and the threat of marriage that they represent. 47

The three types of film noir women appear throughout the noir cycle, but as the immediate post-War years give way to the 1950s, a shift begins to take place in the treatment and function of these female types. The good woman, who offered an idealized but unattainable vision of domesticity for the hero of 1940s noir, becomes even more elusive in later noir films, often proving to be too vulnerable to survive through the end of the film. The more threatening marrying type becomes far more common and tends to replace the femme fatale as the source of the hero's anxiety and danger. And the femme fatale, whose unchecked sexuality was indeed "fatal" to herself and the hero in 1940s noir, is transformed into a "nurturing redeemer" who does not threaten the hero because she does not expect to marry or domesticate him.

While the hero in later noir films often gains friendship, aid, and sympathy from the other male characters, he also finds a nurturing femme fatale-type woman who offers him even more. This new type of femme fatale gives the hero something that his male friends cannot: a safe romantic alternative to the threatening marrying type (because she is not a potential wife) or even an idealized vision of the past (a function previously served by the "good woman"). As the "good woman" is replaced by the far less angelic marrying woman — who takes on many of the characteristics of the femme fatale — the "nurturing" femme fatale becomes a source of comfort, understanding, and redemption.

This shifting of noir conventions can be found in Pitfall in the contrast between Johnny's wife, who makes little effort to understand his discontentment within the "perfect" family, and Mona Stevens, who offers Johnny comfort and refuge even when she learns that he is married. In earlier noir films, Mona — the "other woman" — would have been cast as a
*femme fatale*, while Sue, content to be a wife and mother, would have been an idealized nurturing woman. Instead, Mona ends her relationship with Johnny because she does not wish to break up his marriage and ultimately sacrifices herself — by killing Mac — to protect Johnny and his family. Johnny's wife, on the other hand, refuses to forgive his infidelity and demonstrates throughout the film that the family is rigid and insensitive to the needs of the husband. Although Johnny's family is restored, *Pitfall* cannot be said to have a "happy ending" — the only heroic character, Mona, is led off to jail, while Johnny's unhappy family life is made worse by the sin of his infidelity.

In *The Big Heat*, marriage and the family prove to be sources of both vulnerability and danger. When police sergeant Dave Bannion attempts to bring down the city's most powerful gangster, Lagana, his wife is killed by a car bomb in the family's driveway. Nonetheless, Bannion refuses to drop the investigation and soon discovers that Lagana is being blackmailed by Bertha Duncan — a traditional woman on the surface who turns out to be a *femme fatale*. Mrs. Duncan's husband had committed suicide in the film's opening scene, leaving his wife a detailed record of Lagana's illegal activities. But rather than make the record public, Mrs. Duncan uses it to extort a lifetime income from Lagana, while playing the part of a grieving widow. Thus, marriage in The Big Heat offers only a fleeting period of happiness that is too easily cut short, or a loveless relationship that the married woman uses to satisfy her greed.

A more significant reversal of roles takes place when the film's ostensible *femme fatale*, Debby Marsh (Gloria Grahame), acts as a redemptive woman for Bannion following his wife's murder. At first glance, Debby, the girlfriend of Lagana's psychotic henchman, Vince (Lee Marvin), appears to be a typical *femme fatale*. But when Vince deliberately scars her face with boiling coffee, she decides to join Bannion in seeking revenge on Vince and Lagana. Debby not only helps Bannion destroy Lagana's organization, she also saves him from the self-destructive depression he experiences after his wife's death. It is Debby who first persuades Bannion to talk about his wife, in a scene suggesting that his recovery could not have begun without her. Debby therefore offers redemption to the hero without threatening to domesticate him.
Perhaps the most extreme variation on the redemptive *femme fatale*, however, occurs at the end of the *film noir* cycle in *Touch of Evil*. When corrupt police chief Hank Quinlan (Orson Welles) is pursued by UN narcotics agent Mike Vargas (Charleton Heston), he finds temporary refuge in a brothel that he used to visit regularly. There, Marlene Dietrich's madame — like the good woman of earlier *noir* films — represents for Quinlan an idealized and unattainable past. Tanya has all of the surface characteristics of a mysterious spider woman: long, dark hair, earrings, a foreign accent, heavy makeup, and an ever-present cigarette trailing smoke that obscures the jaded expression on her face. Yet, as each of Quinlan's friends abandons him, Tanya alone remains true to Quinlan and - helps him escape both from Vargas and from his own self-created demons. The film implies that she loved him, and indeed she is the only person who appreciates the tragedy of his fall and seems moved by his death.

In contrast to Dietrich's redemptive prostitute, Suzy Vargas (Janet Leigh) embraces her traditional role within the status quo family. But in this film, as in *Pitfall*, *D.O.A.*, *The Big Heat*, and *Kiss Me Deadly*, the traditional woman has become a source of danger, vulnerability, and restraint rather than redemption. Although Suzy is in almost every way the opposite of Tanya — blond, married, American, and remarkably innocent, considering her husband's profession — she exhibits some of the characteristics of the classic *femme fatale*. Indeed, the severity of her punishment in this film suggests that as the *film noir* cycle came to an end the traditional married woman represented a threat to men at least equal to that of the *femme fatale* of earlier *noir* films.

Unlike earlier traditional women, Suzy exudes an exaggerated sexuality that commands the gaze of the male characters and of the camera. Like the *femme fatale* of classic *film noir*, Suzy is fully aware of her sexual attractiveness and even takes steps to accentuate or advertise it. She often is seen dressing or undressing in front of the open window of her hotel room, and she tends to wear tight-fitting clothing that sets off her figure. This aspect of Suzy's behavior marks her less as a classic "good" woman than as a sexually threatening *femme fatale*, particularly within the context of this film. Reflecting as it does the dangerous image of the *femme fatale*, Suzy's extreme sexuality inevitably leads to the containment and punishment that *film noir* usually inflicted on such women.

Suzy also shows "abnormal" independence in her choice of a husband. In a film that associates guilt with crossing boundaries — the murder takes place at a border checkpoint; Quinlan changes from a good cop to a bad one; Vargas's concern for civil rights becomes a quest for revenge — Suzy's decision to marry a Mexican man incurs a heavy penalty.
Meanwhile, Suzy's threat increases as she tries to persuade her husband to put aside his duty as a narcotics agent and continue their honeymoon. She does not understand his need to expose Quinlan and urges Vargas to leave before his investigation is complete. Vargas feels constrained by her presence and sends her to a motel outside of town. It is here that she isterrorized and drugged by a gang sent by one of her husband's enemies — a sign of the vulnerability that Suzy causes for her husband.

The sadistic violence and the duration of this attack, which demoralizes Suzy and renders her helpless for the rest of the film, suggests torture or even rape. Suzy's punishment is therefore more extreme and perhaps more disturbing than the punishment suffered by even the most dangerous *femme fatale*. Significantly, Suzy is a traditional woman who is punished severely, not for transgressing the boundaries of the traditional family, but for attempting to hold her husband within those boundaries. Thus, in the final film of the *noir* cycle, the film that Paul Schrader calls "*film noir*'s epitaph," 49 it is the traditional married woman whose very existence is a threat and who must be reduced to powerlessness, while a prostitute — the ultimate unmarried woman who demands no commitment from men — is portrayed as nonthreatening and nurturing.

The reworking of the classic *femme fatale*/nurturing woman dichotomy evident in *Touch of Evil* and even in earlier films like 1948's *Pitfall* indicates that, in the last decade of the *film noir* cycle, filmmakers consciously altered *noir* conventions developed for the 1940s to reflect the American psyche of the 1950s. As early as 1948, the "threat" of the independent female represented by working women during World War II had been effectively contained by the post-War marriage and baby boom. But this feminine threat was rapidly being replaced by a new, equally threatening image of woman — the demanding housewife. Particularly during the 1950s, women often were viewed either as shameless gold-diggers out to capture wealthy husbands or as selfish housewives relentlessly pressuring their husbands to play the traditional role of breadwinner. 50 Indeed, as Barbara Ehrenreich observes in *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment*, which chronicles a male revolt against domesticity beginning in the 1950s, men increasingly saw marriage and family life as a self-serving scheme devised by women:

The popular masculine wisdom of the fifties was that women had already won, not just the ballot, but the budget and most of the gross national product. Homemaking was a leisure activity reserved for the more powerful sex, while a proletariat of husbands labored thanklessly to pay the bills. 51
In this context, it is not surprising that film noir — always suspicious of women — reconfigured its conventions to question the latest perceived threat to masculinity. In Touch of Evil, Kiss Me Deadly, D.O.A., Pitfall, and even The Big Heat, men and women are more alienated from one another than they ever were in the classic period of film noir, and the basis for that alienation is marriage and the family — or its possibility.

This skillful reshaping of noir conventions reminds us that film noir is by definition a reshaping or rejection of Hollywood formulas and, by extension, Hollywood's endorsement of the status quo family. And no convention is more strongly associated with classical Hollywood cinema than the happy ending in which the hero marries the woman he loves. Yet in film noir, no convention is more often reworked or rejected. Although film noir typically offers the hero a chance to marry the femme fatale, the good woman, or the marrying type, the hero (and the film) consciously or unconsciously makes such a resolution impossible. Moreover, marriage cannot serve as the resolution of a noir film or the goal of its characters without disrupting the continuity of the film, particularly when the body of the film attacks or questions the norms of conventional family life.

In rejecting the formula of Hollywood romance, film noir exposes the myths by which we fulfill our desires — e.g., the happy ending in marriage — as well as the myth of the family itself. That is, noir films question not only marriage and the traditional family, but also the cultural supports (e.g., popular films) that reinforce these institutions. Sylvia Harvey concludes that, by replacing the formula of romance - the fulfillment of desire through marriage — with the frustration of desire and the denial of marriage, film noir questions the validity of both the classical Hollywood formula and the values that it endorses:

[R]omantic love and the institution of the family are logically and inevitably linked. The logical conclusion to that romantic love which seeks always the passionate and enduring love of a lifetime is the family, which must serve as the point of termination and fulfillment of romance. And if successful romantic love leads inevitably in the direction of the stable institution of marriage, the point about film noir, by contrast, is that it is structured around the destruction or absence of romantic love and the family. 52
ENDNOTES

1. For example, in the following films, an innocent man is found guilty of murder by the courts: *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940); *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946); *Dark Passage* (1947); *The Lady from Shanghai* (1948).

2. *Double Indemnity* (1944); *The Killers* (1946); *Pitfall* (1948); *D.O.A.* (1950).


5. Polan, Dana B. *Blind Insights and Dark Passages: The Problem of Placement in Forties Film*. p. 29. (Course materials; complete citation unavailable.)


7. Harvey, p. 23.

8. Polan, p. 27.

9. Polan, p. 27.


   Deborah Thomas suggests that the dominant society at the end of World War II put pressure on both men and women to abandon roles that they had been playing during the War in favor of the much more restricting (and mutually exclusive) roles of husband/father and wife/mother in the suburban, consumer-oriented nuclear family. Film noir may reflect the tensions caused by a dominant ideology that first encouraged men and women to take on new roles (soldier and worker, respectively) during the War, then insisted that they return to their previous roles (or society's version of their previous roles) immediately after the War:

   What I would like to maintain is that an exclusive emphasis on shifts in female roles as a result of the war and its aftermath obscures equally significant shifts in male roles during the same period of time.

   . . .

   . . . In the post-war period in particular, the return to normality may well have produced ambivalent feelings in men and women alike, giving rise to both noir and melodramatic
explorations of such themes, from male and female perspectives respectively. Women are not the only ones whom family life and gender norms may constrain, of course, and many cinematic examples can be given of the oppressiveness to men of family and small-town life . . .


12. For example, Ginger Rogers was pursued by Fred Astaire through ten musicals from 1933 to 1948; Katharine Hepburn fell in love with Cary Grant in romantic comedies such as Bringing Up Baby (1938) and Holiday (1938); Irene Dunne was the faithful wife in screwball comedies and tearjerkers like The Awful Truth (1937), My Favorite Wife (1940), and Penny Serenade (1941); Gene Tierney gallantly put up with husband Don Ameche's affairs in Heaven Can Wait (1943); and Betsy Drake captured real-life husband Cary Grant in a film whose very title attests to the national preoccupation with marriage and family following the War, Every Girl Should Be Married (1948).

13. Some of the most prominent strong but traditional women include Jane Darwell as Ma Joad in The Grapes of Wrath (1940); Sara Allgood as the indomitable wife and mother in How Green Was My Valley (1941); Greer Garson as the title character (identified only by her married name) in Mrs. Miniver (1942); and Myrna Loy and Teresa Wright as loyal, nurturing wife and daughter to Fredric March in The Best Years of Our Lives (1946).

14. Examples include the mother/wife characters played by Spring Byington (Little Women (1933), Meet John Doe (1941), The Devil and Miss Jones (1942)); Beulah Bondi (Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (1939), It's a Wonderful Life (1946)); and even Myrna Loy (The Thin Man series (1934-46)).

15. In films like Flesh and the Devil (1927), Anna Christie (1930), Mata Hari (1931), and Camille (1936), Garbo played a seductress or a prostitute; in Anna Karenina (1935) and Ninotchka (1939), she portrayed a woman who refused to submit to a traditional marriage and a woman who denied the existence of romantic love.

16. For example, in Morocco (1930), Blonde Venus (1932), Shanghai Express (1932), and Destry Rides Again (1939).

17. Jean Arthur: Mr. Deeds Goes to Town (1938), Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (1939); Barbara Stanwyck: Meet John Doe (1941), Ball of Fire (1941), The Lady Eve (1941); Rosalind Russell: His Girl Friday (1940).

18. This pattern is most notable in films such as The Philadelphia Story (1940), Woman of the Year (1942), and Adam's Rib (1949).


23. Place, p. 41.


25. Harvey, p. 23.

26. Place, pp. 52, 54.

27. Harvey, p. 27.

28. Harvey, p. 29

29. Harvey, p. 29.


31. Harvey, p. 33.

32. Place, p. 36.

33. Place, p. 35.

34. Place, p. 54.

35. Place, p. 45.

36. ee Harvey, p. 34, n.4.

In a few of the films noirs, for example *Pick Up On South Street* (1953), the ending suggests that the lovers are to live happily ever after. However, it can be argued that the mood created and the knowledge produced by the visual style of the film negates or undercuts the apparent happiness of the ending.

See also Thomas, p. 25.

A mood of pervasive anxiety produced by these conflicts and the struggle to resolve them, both by the protagonist and the film, overdetermination (protesting too much) on either of their parts often signalling particularly sensitive areas of conflict.

37. See Place, p. 35.
Film noir is a male fantasy, as is most of our art. Thus woman here as elsewhere is defined by her sexuality: the dark lady has access to it and the virgin does not. . . . [W]omen are defined in relation to men, and the centrality of sexuality in this definition is a key to understanding the position of women in our culture. The primary crime the "liberated" woman is guilty of is refusing to be defined in such a way, and this refusal can be perversely seen (in art, or in life) as an attack on men's very existence. [emphasis in final sentence added]

38. Place, p. 50.


40. See Place, p. 50.

She [the nurturing woman] gives love, understanding (or at least forgiveness), asks very little in return (just that he come back to her) and is generally visually passive and static. Often, in order to offer this alternative to the nightmare landscape of film noir, she herself must not be a part of it. She is then linked to the pastoral environment of open spaces, light, and safety characterised by even, flat, high-key lighting.

41. Place, p. 50.

42. Harvey, p. 31

43. Thomas, p. 18.

44. Thomas, p. 22.

45. Thomas, p. 23.

46. The dialogue in this scene resonates uncannily with that of the final scene of an earlier Bogart film noir, The Maltese Falcon. In that film, Bogart's Sam Spade tells the woman he loves that he must send her to jail for murdering his partner, that his love for her will make his decision difficult (but it will pass), and that if he let her go free she might someday decide to murder him. The only significant difference in Bogart's two speeches is the love that Rip Murdoch expresses for Johnny. In the earlier film, Bogart/Spade had sent the femme fatale to jail out of a sense of honor and loyalty to his profession, not out of love for his dead partnerpthough he despised. The revision of this scene in Dead Reckoning suggests that the noir hero had grown more comfortable with male-male friendships than with male-female romantic relationships, perhaps due to the disappearance of the nurturing woman as a safe (though temporary) alternative to the femme fatale and the emergence of the dangerous marrying type.

47. Other examples of film noir in which the male hero receives unusually sympathetic reactions from other men — even his adversaries — include Double Indemnity, Out of the Past, and Dark Passage. In Double Indemnity, Keyes, Walter Neff's boss and the man who investigates his crime, suggests that Walter is like a son to him. Jeff Bailey (Robert Mitchum), the hero in Out of the Past, relies on the Kid (Dickie Moore), who saves his
life at one point, and on a San Francisco cab driver; in the end, he seems to accept his own death as punishment for betraying Whit, who had trusted him to find Kathie. And in Dark Passage, Vincent Parry accepts help and advice from his friend George, a cab driver, the plastic surgeon, and even the man who attempts to blackmail him, yet he tries to refuse the help of Irene Jansen, who is essentially the "good woman" of the film.

See also a comment in Harvey, p. 31:

Destructive passion characterises the central male-female relationship [in Gun Crazy], while the more protective gestures of loving are exchanged, as in Double Indemnity, between men.

**Double Indemnity**

48. See Place, pp. 43-44.

The source and the operation of the sexual woman's power and its danger to the male character is expressed visually both in the iconography of the image and in the visual style. The iconography is explicitly sexual, and often explicitly violent as well: long hair (blond or dark), makeup, and jewellery. Cigarettes with their wispy trails of smoke can become cues of dark and immoral sensuality, . . . .

49. Schrader, Paul (1972). Notes on Film Noir. p. 287. (Course materials; complete citation unavailable.)

50. See, for example, '50s Hollywood films and film titles playing on the adversarial nature of marriage: How to Marry a Millionaire (1953); Gentlemen Prefer Blondes (1953); Gentlemen Marry Brunettes (1955); The Seven-Year Itch (1955); The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit (1956).


52. Harvey, p. 25.
James M. Cain was born in 1892 in Maryland into an academic environment (his father would become president of Washington College), a milieu where he felt "like a pygmy among giants". The geography of his origins is significant, for Cain would go on to be, along with Raymond Chandler and Nathaniel West, one of the first authentic chroniclers of the peculiar reality that became Southern California.

After graduating from university he drifted from job to job, often in positions associated with the love of singing which would later be reflected in his writings (see *Serenade* especially). This aimlessness came to an end in what is sometimes referred to as an ‘epiphantic moment’ when, sitting on a park bench on Pennsylvania Avenue across from the White House (!), his own voice enunciated the words "you’re going to be a writer", a mysterious portent which he puzzled over endlessly, but never questioned (Hoopes, p3).

Various stints in the writing profession followed, including several as a reporter, editing a military paper during active duty in WWI France, and even a short-lived period editing the august *New Yorker*, his failure at which convinced him to accept an offer from Hollywood which followed some minor publication successes, primarily writings associated with another well known Maryland iconoclast, H.L. Mencken, in his *Mercury* magazine.

Cain found fame in California with the success of 1934’s *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, its multimedia dissemination as serial, hardback, paperback, syndication, play and film (this
latter delayed over ten years in the U.S. due to censorship) being a forerunner of today’s vertically-integrated blockbusters.

*Double Indemnity* was originally published in 1936 in eight installments as a serial in the magazine *Liberty*, which was best known for preparing its readers by having each story’s reading time listed just below the title! Seven years later one of these readers would be film director Billy Wilder, then at the start of his legendary Hollywood career but already with successes under his belt as co-screenwriter of Ernst Lubitsch’s *Ninotchka* (1939) and director of *The Major and the Minor* (1942).

*Double Indemnity* would have a troubled translation to celluloid, the first sign of which came when Wilder’s usual writing collaborator, Charles Brackett, refused point blank to touch it on ‘moral grounds’. Paramount producer Joe Sistrom was instrumental in moving things along at this point (mid-1943), being a fan of the hardboiled school of crime fiction then in its ascendant. Since Cain himself was tied up writing a John Ford western, the search for a screenwriting collaborator turned to Raymond Chandler, who (inexplicably) surprised studio people by living in L.A., the very city he’d been writing about in his increasingly popular Philip Marlowe series of private eye novels.

The tetchy Chandler bristled at being associated with the hardboiled style (notwithstanding being an alumnus, like so many other soon-to-be-household names in thriller writing, of the pulp periodical *Black Mask*): "I hope the day will come when I don’t have to ride around on Hammett and James Cain", he moaned to his publisher after *The High Window*’s publication (MacShane, p.101). Cain felt likewise: "I belong to no school, hardboiled or otherwise, and I believe these so-called schools exist mainly in the imagination of critics... I have read less than twenty pages of Mr Dashiel Hammett in my life... " (O’Brien, pp 71-2). Ironically Chandler was contemptuously dismissive of Cain: "It has always irritated me to be associated with Cain...I’m not in the least like Cain... Cain is a writer of the *faux naïf* type, which I particularly dislike" (Zolotow, p112).

The story of the ‘marriage made in hell’ between Wilder and Chandler is justifiably legendary but needs no repeating here (see Clark p.29, Zolotow pp113-115, MacShane pp 108-9). Suffice to say, Paramount were so worried about the novelist’s naiveté to the ways of
Hollywood they organised an agent to protect him from the studio itself! This rocky partnership initially took the novella (barely 190 pages) at face value, but soon found problems being so literal. When actors read the words off the page it sounded "like a bad high school play", Chandler complained. "The dialogue oversaid everything and when spoken sounded quite colorless and tame". The book's atmospheric feel and apparent 'realism' seemed to derive from technical strategies - straight speech with minimal descriptive passages and little attribution to the characters. It was dialogue written for the eye, not for the ear, as Chandler said later (MacShane, p.107)

Maintaining the sense of the written page in a different medium put the emphasis on the story's construction. Wilder: "I would just guide the structure and I would also do a lot of the dialogue, and he (Chandler) would then comprehend and start constructing too" (Moffat, p.47). Wilder always acknowledged that the ramped-up dialogue which makes the film so memorable was largely Chandler's.

This unsurpassed prose stylist came to understand just how different the two media are. "If you really believe in the art of the film...", wrote Chandler later, "you ought to forget about any other type of writing. A preoccupation with words for their own sake is fatal to good film making... the best scenes I ever wrote were practically monosyllabic. The hell of good film writing is that the most important part is what is left out. It's left out because the camera and the actors can do it better and quicker, above all quicker, but it had to be there in the beginning..." (Zolotow, p.122). This caveat - that substance is a prerequisite for successful reduction - underlines the writer's preoccupation with a good story, and is reflected in any comparison between written and filmed versions of Double Indemnity, both of which succeed brilliantly.

Oscar nominations for the screenplay and Best Picture followed and at the awards ceremony that year the combative Wilder famously tripped up the winning director Leo McCary on his way to pick up the gong Wilder felt was deservedly his. (Perhaps some tangible acknowledgment came in 1968 when an actual case came to trial in California for an insurance scam which cited the book and film of Double Indemnity as its inspiration!)
For the stars, Barbara Stanwyck and Fred MacMurray, it would be the high point of their careers, yet each had to be bluffed and cajoled into accepting their part. The moral climate at the time made *Double Indemnity* a dangerous project. Cain’s reputation for trawling the seamier side of life didn’t help and the story’s unflinching point of view - seeing the crime through its perpetrator’s eyes - blinded many onlookers to the film’s overall impact, largely delivered through the Edward G.Robinson character whose paternal affection for MacMurray’s Walter Neff is betrayed. Barbara Stanwyck had a similar view, though apparently for different reasons: "The picture is very moral. It’s anti-crime and anti-sweater. It shows what happens if you fall for a gal who wears a sweater" (*Uncut*, p.60).

With its representation of a dark, depersonalised urban environment, devoid of communal values, through which we go on a journey that is doomed from the outset, *Double Indemnity* also became one of the basic templates for a new genre, *film noir*, whose attractions and opportunities have long since outgrown its original inspirations.

**References**


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An Introduction to Neo-Noir

Lee Horsley, Lancaster University

Coining a Term

There was for some time a tendency on the part of film critics to argue that the label ‘noir’ could legitimately be applied only to a specific cycle of post-World War Two Hollywood films, the limits of which were most often fixed as 1941 (the year of John Huston's film of The Maltese Falcon) and 1958 (with Welles' Touch of Evil marking the end of the cycle). In recent years, however, there has been increasing acceptance of a much more flexible use of the term - in particular, of a chronological broadening of the term, both to draw in pre-World War Two examples and, more importantly, to expand the category sufficiently to include the burgeoning phenomenon of 'neo-noir', which was already beginning to appear at the time that American critics first adopted the French label.

Silver and Ward, for example, in their Film Noir: An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style, choose as their first film the 1927 Underworld, directed by Josef von Sternberg - 'the first modern gangster film in which the heroes are actually criminals'. At the same time, they push their analysis forward, including in their list of canonical films noirs a movie as recent as Scorsese's 1976 Taxi Driver, and separately discussing neo-noir films up to 1992 (twenty-one films in that year alone, including Tarantino's Reservoir Dogs). The 1996 Film Noir Reader (edited by Silver and Ursini) reprints essays that range over noir from Borde and Chaumeton's seminal piece of
the mid-1950s to, for example, a 1990 Todd Erickson article arguing that noir really only becomes a genre (neo-noir) in the 80s, when it emerges from its 'embryonic' state in the sixties and seventies. One of the best recent analyses, Naremore's *More Than Night*, explores 'noir and its contexts' from the classic 1940s films to *L. A. Confidential* (1997).

This widening of the term, of course, complicates one of the questions that critics continue to debate. That is, what kind of classification is 'noir'? Is it a visual style, a tone, a genre, a generic field, a movement, a cycle, a series - or just a helpful category? Naremore argues that having a 'noir category' serves an important function: even if it is not, strictly speaking, a genre (in the sense that, say, the western or science fiction or the detective story are genres), it is a label that at the very least invokes 'a network of ideas' that is valuable as an organising principle. Such is the 'flexibility, range, and mythic force' of the concept of noir that it belongs 'to the history of ideas as much as to the history of cinema'. There have been over three hundred noir-influenced films released since 1971, and, whatever its generic status, the word 'noir' has become widespread both in academic discourse and as 'a major signifier of sleekly commercial artistic ambition.'

**The 1960s and 1970s**

In both Britain and America, tensions, doubts, failures and signs of dissent gathered force as the events of the 60s, from the assassination of Kennedy on, undermined confidence and strengthened the spirit of protest. As Mailer implies in *The American Dream*, after the trauma of the assassination the 'dream' turns to a vision of violence and murder. At the end of the 60s and in the early 70s, American society was being shaken by riots in the black ghettos, the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, the growing opposition to the Vietnam War, higher crime and unemployment rates, Watergate and increasingly vociferous demonstrations of
counter-culture discontent. Though the changes in British society were less dramatic, there was nevertheless a comparable movement away from the mood of the 60s. The early 70s saw bitter confrontations between Government and unions, the collapse of the boom in the stock market and the property market, rising unemployment and inflation and worsening conflict with the IRA. Both countries, then, were experiencing the kind of political and social malaise that made the cynicism and satiric edge of noir seem all too appropriate.

Even during the 60s there had been a number of films - some of which Silver and Ward group with canonical film noir, some with neo-noir - that drew on the films and novels of earlier decades, and by the early 70s the phenomenon was attracting considerable critical attention. There was increased use of the 'noir' label by film critics and more 'consciously neo-noir' films began to appear (Walter Hill's 1978 film, *The Driver*, is singled out by Silver and Ward as one of the 'earliest and most stylised' examples). Adaptations of literary noir were becoming more numerous: J. Lee Thompson's 1962 film of John D. MacDonald's *The Executioners* (*Cape Fear*); three adaptations of Chandler novels - Paul Bogart's 1969 *Marlowe* (an adaptation of *Little Sister*), Robert Altman 's 1973 film of *The Long Goodbye* and the Dick Richards ' remake of *Farewell, My Lovely* (1975); Altman's 1974 film of Anderson's *Thieves Like Us*; the adaptations of Ross Macdonald's early Lew Archer novels, *Harper* (Jack Smight, 1966) and *Drowning Pool* (Stuart Rosenberg, 1975 - 'the last vestiges of the classic gumshoe'); Burt Kennedy's 1976 adaptation of Thompson's *The Killer Inside Me*; and three separate American adaptations of the more nearly contemporary but equally noir Parker novels of Richard Stark (Donald Westlake): *Point Blank* (John Boorman, 1967 - see clip below), *The Split* (Gordon Flemyng, 1968) and *The Outfit* (John Flynn, 1973).
Postmodern Nostalgia?

In recent critical debate, one question frequently raised is whether the fashionable trappings of neo-noir are themselves symptomatic of an acquiescence in slickly commercial postmodern nostalgia. The sense that 'noir' created in the 70s and 80s was a 'retro' and nostalgic avoidance of contemporary experience has been encouraged by the often-cited essay, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', in which Frederic Jameson assigns to film noir a central role in the vocabulary of commercialized postmodernism.

Referring to *Body Heat* (Lawrence Kasdan, 1981), Jameson notes the film's 'faintly archaic feel' and its small-town setting, which 'has a crucial strategic function: it allows the film to do without most of the signals and references which we might associate with the contemporary world, with consumer society - the appliances and artefacts, the high rises, the object world of late capitalism'.

Leaving aside for the moment the matter of nostalgic pastiche, the most important question is whether self-consciously 'noir' contemporary narratives are to be seen as escaping from or as engaging with contemporary issues. There are good grounds for taking issue with Jameson’s arguments. Even when its settings are retro, both literary and cinematic neo-noir have been as concerned with exposing the nature of contemporary consumer society as earlier noir was with satirising, for example, the conformist ethos of small town America in the fifties.
A Culture of Consumption

The view of contemporary society as a culture of consumption, consuming not just commodities but performances and spectacles - and consuming the consumer - has come to the fore, increasingly in the 80s and 90s, as one of the dominant themes of literary noir, shaping the representation of protagonists as well as the content and structure of narratives. Just as 30s thrillers took deprivation as their theme, the noir films and novels of more recent decades have turned their attention to the excesses and dependencies of the society of the media, the spectacle, the consumer.

Consumerism is obviously not an element new to noir. The 30s gangsters, characterised by stylish consumption, 'swell clothes', penthouses, high-powered cars, expensive restaurants, were used as a means of exploring the growth of American consumerism, often with an anti-consumerist subtext that equated vulgar display with moral disorder. Close attention to fetishistic detail (hats, guns, shoes and other accessories) and a general fascination with fashion (for example, the 'to-be-looked-at-ness' signified by the clothing of fashionably dressed women) were part and parcel of classic noir.

In neo-noir films with a retro look, the incorporation of such things can be seen as a consumer society indulgence (nostalgic window-shopping), and there are unquestionably neo-noir films of which this is a fair enough criticism - Mulholland Falls (Lee Tamahori, 1996), for example, in which (as Naremore says) 'the chief function of these four tough guys is to light cigarettes with Zippos and model a peacock collection of suits and accessories'.

Even retro noir, however, often engages seriously not only with the historical period it represents but with issues that are of contemporary relevance, and the detailed observation of consumption, style and decor can be part of the critical thrust of the film. For example, in Ulu Grosbard 's 1981 film, True Confessions, a thoroughly noir
tale of two brothers set in mid-forties L.A., the whole style of life of the priest (Robert De Niro) - his surroundings, his dining out, his golf clothes and clubs - is used to establish him in opposition to his brother, a detective (Robert Duvall).

The detective's single brown suit and modest apartment help to confirm his status as a figure who will pursue the corrupt regardless of the consequences. They are also, however, no guarantee of his own incorruptibility, and his conspicuous non-consumption is in part an ironic reference back to the integrity of the shabby private eye. This is a detective who has been a bagman and who doesn't 'give a shit' that Jack Amsterdam did not kill the 'virgin tramp'. He will go after him anyway. *True Confessions* is not, then, an exercise in nostalgic reincarnation, but instead uses retro evocation of the forties private eye films both to demythologise the traditional genre and to raise complex questions about moral responsibility and complicity in a corrupt society.

### The Durability of Noir

The contemporary refashioning of noir themes is a manifestation of the flexibility and responsiveness to social change that have characterised noir from its inception and of the continued vitality of the form. The transformations of the genre in neo-noir have helped to clarify some of the constant, recognisable elements of 'the noir vision', most importantly the moral ambivalence of the protagonist and his (or in neo-noir often her) ill-fated relationship with a wider society that itself is guilty of corruption and criminality.

In the mid-fifties, Borde and Chaumeton drew the conclusion that the 'moral ambiguity, the criminal violence, and the contradictory complexity of events and motives' worked together in film noir 'to give the spectator the same feeling of anxiety and insecurity', and that this was 'the distinguishing feature of film noir in our
time'. Their summary captures some of the identifying traits of noir, but the persistence of this 'network of ideas' from the 1920s through the end of the 1990s suggests the necessity of revising the Borde and Chaumeton argument regarding the historical specificity of noir: 'The noir of dark film is dark for us,' they wrote, 'that is, for European and American viewers in the 1950s.' If noir is 'the reflex of a particular kind of sensibility...unique in time as in space', then the historical limits set must correspond to the greater part of the twentieth century.

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