



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The French *film noir* precedes the American genre. French specialists include Feuillade, Duvivier, Carné, Clouzot, Yves Allegret and even, almost without noticing, Renoir (of *La Chienne*, *La Nuit du Carrefour*, *La Bête Humaine*, *Woman on the Beach*) and Godard. Two major cycles of the '30s and '40s are followed by a gangster cycle in the '50s, including *Touchez Pas Au Grisbi* (Becker, 1953), *Du Riffi Chez Les Hommes* (Dassin, 1955), *Razzia Sur La Chnouf* (Decein, 1957), *Méfiez-vous Fillettes* (Allegret, 1957), and the long Eddie Constantine series to which Godard pays homage in *Alphaville*. *Fantomas*, made for Gaumont, inspired their rival Pathé to the Pearl White series, inaugurated by the New York office of this then French firm. *La Chienne* becomes *Scarlet Street*, *La Bête Humaine* becomes *Human Desire*, *Le Jour se Leve* becomes *The Long Night*, while *Pepe-le-Moko* becomes *Algiers* ("Come with me to the Casbah") and also *Pepe-le-Pew*. The American version of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1945) is preceded by the French (*Le Dernier Tour-nant*, 1939) and an Italian (*Osessione*, 1942). The '50s gangster series precedes the American revival of interest in gangsters and the group-job themes. Godard was offered *Bonnie and Clyde*, before Penn, presumably on the strength of *Breathless* rather than *Pierrot Le Fou*.

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

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

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

I. CRIME AS SOCIAL CRITICISM

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

2. GANGSTERS

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

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

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

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

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

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

3. ON THE RUN

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

4. PRIVATE EYES AND ADVENTURERS

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

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

5. MIDDLE CLASS MURDER

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

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

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

6. PORTRAITS AND DOUBLES

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

7. SEXUAL PATHOLOGY

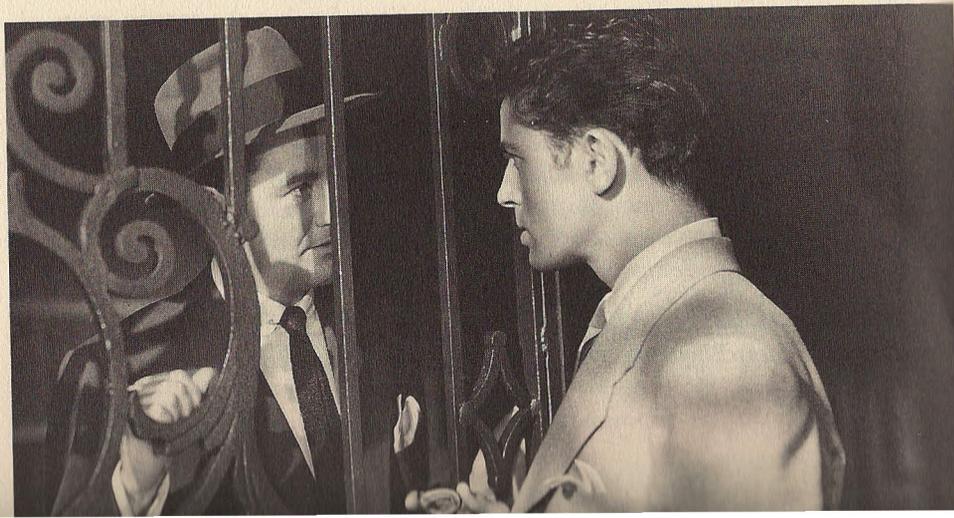
In *The Big Sleep* Bogart and Bacall, pretending to discuss horse-racing, discuss the tactics of copulation, exemplifying the clandestine cynicism and romanticism which the *film noir* apposes to the Hays Office. Similarly, "love at first sight"

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

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

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

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



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

8. PSYCHOPATHS

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

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

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

9. HOSTAGES TO FORTUNE

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

10. BLACKS AND REDS

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

11. GUIGNOL, HORROR, FANTASY

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

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

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