

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION



The ominous silhouette of a man on crutches approaching the camera that appears under the opening credits of *Double Indemnity* (1944) provides a prototypical image for *film noir* (Plate 1). Something is wrong – with the man’s legs, with the man, with what will follow these credits – and the grim orchestral music accompanying the image reinforces this impression. The

silhouette applies not to a single character but to three men in the film: one a murderer, one his victim, and the third an innocent man set up to take the blame for the crime. All three are drawn into this ugly vortex by the same seductive woman who exploits them and orchestrates their doom. The dark silhouette also menaces the viewer’s space – it comes at us, it somehow involves us in whatever is to happen, and whatever it is won’t be nice. Something is wrong.

This image appeared at the dawn of *film noir*, before the term was even coined. *Double Indemnity* establishes one, but only one, paradigm for the genre. It concerns an adulterous couple who murder the woman’s husband for insurance money; in doing so, they generate their own doom. Everybody loses. The story is told mostly in flashback by the guilty man at a point just after he killed his lover and was, himself, shot by her (Plate 2). This retrospective storytelling strategy, heavily reliant on voice-over narration, was innovative at this time and shapes the viewer’s response to the film’s events in three significant ways. First, it presents



PLATE 1 *Double Indemnity*— credits: Silhouette of a man on crutches approaching the viewer. © 1944 Paramount Pictures, INC.



PLATE 2 *Double Indemnity*: Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) speaking into a dictaphone. © 1944 Paramount Pictures, INC.

the story not from an “objective” perspective but rather from its narrator’s perspective, drawing us into his anxieties, moral failures, and feelings of entrapment. It makes our main point of identification not someone who conformed to contemporary Hollywood moral codes but rather someone who violated them. This eliminated traditional viewer security in presumptively identifying with the main characters. Even if such characters in traditional movies were doomed – as when, for example, *A Tale of Two Cities* (1935) ended with Sydney Carton going to the guillotine – those movies presented that doom as heroic and uplifting. But the doom of many characters in *film noir* is neither noble nor uplifting, and viewer empathy with such characters can be destabilizing.

This leads to disorienting situations such as one in *Double Indemnity* when the couple, having just murdered the woman’s husband, prepare to flee the crime scene in her car. She turns the key but the car will not start. The two look tensely at one another since this simple, unexpected problem could lead to imminent discovery. She tries again and fails again, increasing the tension between them, as well as in the viewer. The scene is shot and edited in such a way as to draw us into their anxiety, to encourage us to want the car to start. Consequently, after having just witnessed the couple murder the woman’s husband and then drag his body onto railway tracks to be mangled, we are suddenly maneuvered into fearing that these cold-blooded murderers might not succeed with their grisly crime. The investment of much *film noir* in an individual rather than “objective” point of view shifts the viewer away from the position of moral security that earlier Hollywood films tended to offer and disconcertingly toward sympathy for the devil.

A second effect of the retrospective narration is to undermine suspense concerning the story’s outcome. As the film progresses, we watch not to see what will happen but rather to see what has already happened. We know from the outset that the couple’s scheme (which comprises most of the film’s storyline) is doomed because the guilty narrator reveals that it has already failed. However high the couple’s hopes rise during the flashback story, we know all along that those hopes are fruitless (Plate 3). Traditional crime/mystery films had centered upon the solver of the crime, the one who acts to rectify the wrong done to society; they had not centered upon the person who committed that wrong. Such films generally moved their narrative in a forward direction, starting with the crime or its discovery and progressing to the detective’s solution of the case, with the viewer uncertain as to the outcome until the conclusion; this film, to the contrary, moves us backwards, over what has already happened. This strategy does not seek to engage us either with the puzzle of figuring out “whodunit” (as with traditional murder mysteries) or with wondering whether or not



PLATE 3 *Double Indemnity*: Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck) enticing Walter into murder. © 1944 Paramount Pictures, INC.

the criminal will succeed (as with “caper” films); we already know the answers to those questions. Instead, the film entices us into voyeuristically dwelling upon the ugly specifics of the way in which these two people ruin their lives and those of others. We are watching what has already gone wrong.

A useful analogue to the viewer’s position in such films is that of a reader of a tabloid newspaper. A cliché about “whodunit” mysteries is that the ending should not be revealed lest the reader lose all interest in the story. After all, why read on if you know the outcome? *Double Indemnity* and much of *film noir* operate on different premises. In a tabloid the headline and the opening sentence serve to grab the reader’s attention but, at the same time, eliminate suspense. “Man Murders Lover and Her Husband, Confesses and Loses All!” And yet tabloid readers avidly read on, not to see how the story turns out, which they already know, but rather to voyeuristically learn more about the sordid details of the case.

A third effect of the narrational strategy is to infuse the narrator’s dark mood into all that we see. He is in physical and psychological pain, grimly aware that he is probably dying and certainly ruined because of the failed activities he describes, and we are largely confined within his point of view. His voice-over narration runs throughout the film and becomes

particularly disturbing during scenes that depict his younger self preparing for and committing his crimes. His somber, present-tense, narrating self provides a stark contrast to his earlier, optimistic self, and that contrast destabilizes everything we see and hear. Further darkening his perspective is the fact that he is confessing his crimes to his mentor and boss, a friend he respects and has betrayed. He exists in an almost post-mortem zone, without hope or a viable future.

This narrative strategy underscores the centrality of point of view structures to *film noir*. Film after film concentrates upon the doomed plight of an individual as presented from that individual's perspective, so we get not *the* story but, rather, that person's perception of the story. This shift away from presumptions of pure objectivity was not unique to *film noir*; it was widespread and part of the cultural ferment of the times. It appears in presumptively factually based biographical films like *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (1942), which presents George M. Cohan's life primarily through his retrospective description of it, and even documentaries. Frank Capra's seven *Why We Fight* films (1942–5), for example, while constructed primarily of documentary-style footage, made no attempt to conceal their propagandistic agendas. Although they present their images as having the status of "reality," those images are clearly organized to support the films' points of view. The increase in flashback sequences in Hollywood films of this time underscores the growing interest in exploring individual points of view. A wartime drama like *Passage to Marseille* (1944) is famous for having flashbacks within flashbacks, something virtually unthinkable in Hollywood film a decade earlier. Furthermore, this shift away from presumptions of objectivity appears in many modernist art forms, from fiction and poetry to painting and sculpture, and modernism provided the dominant cultural context for *film noir*.

Much of *film noir* invites us to experience its stories from the inside out. Many films underscore their narrator's subjectivity with the soundtrack presence of that person's voice interwoven with scenes dramatizing events in that story; the subjectivity is further underscored by Expressionistic visuals evoking the narrator's nightmares, feelings of entrapment, and hallucinations. This focus upon interiority, particularly upon that of doomed people struggling to contain their own escalating panic, often foregrounds distortions of perception as well as states of paralyzing despair. This accounts for the preponderance of nightmares and of hallucinations in *film noir* and for the particular value that Freudian theory had not only in the conceptualizing of many of the films but also for the ongoing study of the genre.

In the *Double Indemnity* credits, the silhouette ominously approaching the camera resembles something from a nightmare. Its relentless

movement toward the camera suggests that it will overwhelm us; it will draw us into it or itself into us. This is immediately followed by the appearance of the main character, who begins his confessional narrative. As one of the three men symbolized by the silhouette, he is bringing us into his darkness.

Much of the appeal of *film noir* involves its masochistic erotics of doom, its ability to draw viewers into nightmare-like, paranoid narratives of degeneration and failure. Where many genres, such as the Western, romantic comedy, or coming-of-age films, explore the prospect of a successful future for sympathetic characters, *film noir* tends to present flawed characters without a future and show how their past went wrong. It bucks the cliché that Hollywood films must end happily; *film noir* cued its audiences in multiple ways to expect these films to end badly, very badly.

Film noir's allure resembles that of tragedy or the horror film, forms which invite their audiences to watch worst-case scenarios unfold. For their initial audiences, *films noirs* resembled nightmares in contemporary life. They were set in and about "today." Although they evoked the audience's deepest fears about all going wrong, they did not engage the supernatural as did horror films. *Film noir* invoked dark forces, from within individuals or from criminal conspiracies or social injustices, but rooted those forces in the everyday contemporary world of domestic or business antagonisms, psychic disturbances, criminal schemes, and political machinations. Within the growing hysteria of many characters, such forces often assumed mythic dimensions, and those fears infused the films with an atmosphere of unseen but malevolent presences. This environment of doom, evil, and failure paralleled the troubled subjectivity of many of the films. It generated the sense that the characters' deepest fears were becoming palpable. Even *films noirs* without a retrospective narrational structure, like *Scarlet Street* (1945) or *The Big Sleep* (1946), often establish an atmosphere of generic doom. Many of the movies, like *Mildred Pierce* (1945) or *Crossfire* (1947), resemble traditional mysteries in that they begin abruptly with an unexplained murder which the viewer can only partially see. The remainders of the films involve the unraveling of the mystery of who committed the crime. However, where the atmosphere of doom would dissolve in traditional mysteries (such as those featuring Sherlock Holmes, Lord Peter Wimsey, or Hercule Poirot) when the crime was solved, in *film noir* it lingers on, suggesting a world pervaded with ongoing, ineradicable forces.

Although this book concludes with detailed analyses of six exemplary *films noirs*, it also uses *Double Indemnity* throughout as a reference point for multiple perspectives upon *film noir*. For example, it is one of many films

dominated by the point of view of a doomed character. These characters exist on the penumbra between life and death; although most of them are alive, they have resigned themselves to imminent death. Following this logic to an extreme, *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), directed by Billy Wilder six years after he directed *Double Indemnity*, is bizarrely narrated by a character who is already dead when the film begins (Plate 4). Although this strategy clearly violated realist conventions, the movie does not invoke any other fantastic, supernatural, or science fiction strategies. With this one glaring exception, it remains resolutely realist and the exception simply reinforces its grim, post-mortem tone.

Not far removed is *D.O.A.* (1950), which opens with its central character reporting a murder. Asked who was murdered, he replies, “I was” (Plate 5). He has been poisoned, has only hours to live, and spends the remainder of the movie desperately trying to discover how and why it all happened. He becomes a surrogate detective investigating his own murder, making this film one in which the detective and the victim are the same person. *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946) is narrated by a character about to be executed for murder. All of these characters have led morally compromised



PLATE 4 *Sunset Boulevard*: The film is narrated by the corpse of Joe Gillis (William Holden) as it floats face down in a swimming pool. © 1950 Paramount Pictures Corporation.



PLATE 5 *D.O.A.*: Frank Bigelow (Edmund O'Brien) opens the movie by reporting his own murder. © 1949 Cardinal Pictures, INC.

lives that end badly, and that end is inevitable from the outset. *Film noir* frequently focuses upon central characters who, by traditional criteria, would have been villains and, at its inception, it deviated from Hollywood norms of narration, content, character construction, tone, representation, cinematography, and moral accountability. Its very break with/inversion of conventional practice has been cited as one of its generic hallmarks.

Such deviations contributed to the aura of transgression that surrounded the films when they initially appeared and that continues to be associated with the genre. Some were based upon source material (such as James M. Cain's "hard-boiled" fiction *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *Double Indemnity*) that studios had earlier considered too racy, depraved, or downbeat to adapt; many of the films violated generic conventions and challenged contemporary censorship codes; some prominent actors such as George Raft declined parts for fear of tarnishing their star images with unsavory roles; reviewers commented upon heightened levels of immorality and brutality. Audiences could expect to see morally compromised characters doing the wrong thing; the underbelly of contemporary life.

Contemporary critics frequently acknowledged the transgressive appeal of the films, the pleasure of the wrong. While many registered their distaste

for the films' moral transgressions, they simultaneously acknowledged how entertaining they were. *Time* magazine's unsigned review of *Double Indemnity* describes it as "the season's nattiest, nastiest, most satisfying melodrama. James M. Cain's novelette was carnal and criminal well beyond screen convention. Director Billy Wilder's casting is just as unconventional. . . . Scripter Raymond Chandler . . . is himself no mean writer of hard-boiled melodrama. With his help Director Wilder and his players manage admirably to translate into hard-boiled cinema James Cain's hard-boiled talents" (*Time*, 1944). Bosley Crowther's *New York Times* review of that film opened: "The cooling-system in the Paramount Theatre was supplemented yesterday by a screen attraction designed plainly to freeze the marrow in an audience's bones" (Crowther, 1944)

Two years later, Crowther reiterated similar presumptions in his *New York Times* review of *The Blue Dahlia*.

To the present expanding cycle of hard-boiled and cynical films, Paramount has contributed a honey of a rough-'em-up romance which goes by the name of "The Blue Dahlia." . . . And in this floral fracas it has starred its leading tough guy, Alan Ladd, and its equally dangerous and dynamic lady V-bomb, Veronica Lake. What with that combination in this Raymond Chandler tale, it won't be simply blasting that you will hear in Times Square for weeks to come.

For bones are being crushed with cold abandon, teeth are being callously kicked in and shocks are being blandly detonated at close and regular intervals. . . . Also an air of deepening mystery overhangs this tempestuous tale which shall render it none the less intriguing to those lovers of the brutal and bizarre. (Crowther, 1946a)

In closing, the review acknowledges the film's transgressive appeal: "The tact of all this may be severely questioned, but it does make for a brisk, exciting show."

The Longevity of Film Noir

Film noir is perhaps the most influential American film form as well as one particularly evocative of the socio-political fabric of the 1940s and 1950s. It emerged in the early 1940s and, with the collapse of the Hollywood studio system and the supplanting of black and white by color cinematography, among other things, died out as a commercially viable form around 1960. It reemerged by 1970 in a nostalgic mode, called neo-*noir* or retro-*noir*, and has remained potent ever since. Why? Most of the people

making neo-*noir* films now were not even alive when the form they are memorializing appeared; they are invoking nostalgia for a form they never experienced first hand. But what is that nostalgia for? Is it for the American 1940s and 1950s, for Hollywood filmmaking practices of the classical era (1930s through the 1950s), for black and white cinematography, for a lost style of masculinity and femininity, for the possibly simpler evils of a bygone age?

Why is there, in the twenty-first century, a *film noir* lipstick of a deep, rich red? Most of *film noir* was photographed in black and white so, with few exceptions, color did not exist in *film noir*. On one level, the idea of a richly colored lipstick evoking a form without color is preposterous; on another, however, if we consider not the actual films themselves but rather the ways in which those films and their era have been filtered through collective memory and historical association, there is a symbolic logic behind this, presumably seductive, lipstick color. The color is meant to resemble that worn by glamorous seductresses in *films noirs* and, by this indirect, symbolic path, recalls *film noir's* exotic, transgressive aura. Considered from the vantage point of the twenty-first century, memory and its distortions are important components of *film noir* as we have come to know it.

This informs the diverse and contested canons of *film noir*. Frank Krutnik has observed:

Many crime-films produced from the 1950s to the present day have become incorporated within the “genre” of *film noir*. In this regard I would advise a certain degree of caution, for such films need to be considered not only in regard to the *films noirs* of the 1940s but also in regard to the cinematic and cultural-ideological contexts in which and for which they were produced. For the conditions which “germinated” the *films noirs* of the 1940s were . . . specific to the 1940s. To generalize beyond this risks destroying the credibility of both the *films noirs* and the crime films *après noir*. (Krutnik, 1989, p. 329, cited in Butler, 2002, p. xv)

Approaching this problem from another direction, David Butler begins his book *Jazz Noir: Listening to Music from Phantom Lady to The Last Seduction* by observing that his interest in the topic originated in his sharing of “a widespread belief that jazz and film noir were entwined during the 1940s and 1950s, that the shadows cast by one were inescapably echoed in the sounds of the other” (Butler, 2002, p. 3). He soon discovered, however, that this belief was not supported by research into the actual music of *films noirs*; in fact, most *films noirs* primarily used not jazz but orchestral music in the symphonic tradition (p. 3). “The association of jazz

with film noir can be found in all manner of media today, but is curiously not so prevalent in the actual original artifacts – the films noir of American cinema from the 1940s and 1950s. Despite this fact, the belief that jazz flourished in these films is commonly held and perpetuated” (p. 2).

James Naremore addresses the widespread acceptance of historically inaccurate conclusions about the nature of *film noir* in his updated and expanded *More Than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts*. Partially acknowledging his resignation to the situation, he cites a newspaper reporter’s famous line from *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), “When the legend becomes fact, print the legend” (Naremore, 2008, p. 279). Furthermore, since the *noir* tradition is ongoing, such legends have become incorporated into newer works in that tradition by younger filmmakers, and those more recent films can influence the ways in which the older ones are remembered. Shifts in cultural memory can affect the object remembered, incorrectly remembered, or desired.

Questions about precisely what it is that neo-*noir* filmmakers are attempting to evoke from the past are complicated by the permutations within *film noir*, by the fact that the term is commonly used as if it referred to a single, widely agreed-upon entity rather than a cluster of intersecting but often diverse styles, themes, ideologies, and practices. When it was coined in 1946, the term referred to films made largely on studio sound stages with dark, chiaroscuro lighting that dealt with doomed, often sexually tormented characters. By the late 1940s, however, some movies now called *noir* operated on different imperatives. Some even appear conspicuously anti-*noir* in their visual strategies and themes, employing a brightly lit, semi-documentary look and depicting “slice of life” social issues rather than individual psychological torment. Instead of voice-over narration by tormented characters, such films employed an oratorical “Voice of God” narration identified with governmental agencies like the FBI. Some addressed contemporary political issues, like anti-Communism, disease control, or nuclear anxiety. And yet these films have also been categorized as *noir*.

Nearly all *films noirs* of the canonical era were set during that era. Their initial audiences would have noticed little difference between the look, dress, and behavior of the characters on the screen and those of people on the street when they exited the theater. The movies were about their “today.”

This is not the case with many neo-*noir* films. Some are “period” films like *Chinatown* (1974) set in a time noticeably earlier than that in which they were produced; neo-*noir* films that are set contemporaneously with the time of their production, like *Body Heat* (1981), evoke an earlier era, or

filmmaking practices of an earlier era. Both *Murder, My Sweet* (1944) and *Farewell, My Lovely* (1975) are based upon Raymond Chandler's 1940 novel, *Farewell, My Lovely*; both are set in Los Angeles in the early 1940s; and both have roughly similar characters and plotlines. But where *Murder, My Sweet* was set in the time in which it was made, *Farewell, My Lovely* is a "period" picture. By 1975, the early 1940s was a past era. Unlike *Murder, My Sweet*, which was about the "today" of 1944, *Farewell, My Lovely* was about "yesterday." Its costumes, hairstyles, and automobiles looked nothing like what 1975 audiences would have seen when they exited the theater. Neo-noir films are nostalgic in ways that films of the canonical era never were and have very different agendas. They employ technologies and representational strategies largely alien to canonical *films noirs*, such as color cinematography, graphic violence, profanity, nudity, explicit sexuality, and, perhaps most extreme, nostalgia. They also have different ideological stances toward gender, race, and nation.

Reinforcing the fact that neo-noir films are less about the time in which they were made than about the tension between their own "present" and other times, they are more temporally diverse than their predecessors. Some, like *Body Heat*, are set in their "present" (the 1980s); some, like *Chinatown*, in eras (the 1930s) prior to the time (the 1970s) in which they were produced; and some are futuristic science fiction films, like *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Minority Report* (2002).

Consider the pre-credit sequence from the neo-noir film *Sin City* (2005). On an apartment terrace, a young woman in an evening gown looks out at a city at night. We hear a man's voice-over: "She shivers in the wind like the last leaf on a dying tree . . ." A reverse angle shot shows the man suavely approach from behind and offer her a cigarette. The scene has a dreamlike quality. Its cinematography is primarily in black and white, with the exception of the woman's bright red dress and lips and, briefly, her green eyes. The smoke from her cigarette drifts languidly in the air. The slow, reflective tone of the man's voice-over gives the impression that, although he speaks in the present tense, he is describing events from long ago and far away, filtered through mists of memory as well as psychic tensions within the speaker. Although the couple seem to meet for the first time, they have an instant rapport. She appears inexplicably expectant as she looks in his eyes. He tells her she is everything a man could ever want. They embrace and we suddenly see them in a dramatic long shot as stark, white-on-black silhouettes (Plate 6). Rain has begun and soon falls heavily. As the couple kisses and the man's voice-over says, "I tell her I love her," we hear a muffled shot; he has shot her. An overhead shot then shows him gently holding her limp body, her red dress spread out like a



PLATE 6 *Sin City*: White-on-black silhouette of a young couple kissing in the rain. © 2005 Miramax Film Corp.

pool of blood. His voice-over says that he holds her close until she's gone, that he'll never know what she was running from, and that "I'll cash her check in the morning." Suddenly we hear pounding music and the camera rapidly flies up and whirls around the city. Blood-red letters form and announce the film's title, *Sin City*.

We never learn more about the woman. We can infer that she had somehow paid the man to kill her, and he did so with an unexplained compassion. But what is most apparent in the sequence is its aggressive stylization – its use of black and white cinematography with bold slashes of color, its moody voice-over narration and dialogue, its erotic tension, its shift from representational figures to stark silhouettes, its atmospheric use of cigarette smoke as well as falling rain, its ominous sense of mystery, of danger, of abrupt betrayal as well as of unexplained complicity. It should be apparent that, from the outset, *Sin City* is not only telling its own story but is also inviting us to recall films of the past, particularly the 1940s and 1950s – *film noir*.

This sequence is not unique. Comparable segments have appeared in hundreds of films since the 1970s and are not confined to American film. *Film noir* influenced and was influenced by many national film traditions, such as the French New Wave, the New German Cinema, Italian neorealist and *Giallo* films, Latin American *noir*, and the Hong Kong action cinema. The influence extends beyond movies. It appears in television series since the 1950s (such as *Peter Gunn*, the *CSI* series, *Crossing Jordan*, or *Dexter*), narrative radio since the 1940s (such as *Philip*

Marlowe or *Richard Diamond, Private Detective*), fiction such as the novels of Walter Mosley or James Ellroy, and the dystopian science fiction novels of Richard K. Morgan, video games, graphic novels, theater, ballet, advertising strategies, graphic design, and music.

Consequently, a central issue for a study of *film noir* is that of how to reconcile the facts that, on the one hand, it has become almost bewilderingly diverse since its inception while, on the other hand, it has, particularly since the 1970s, grown enormously as a field of critical interest and as a filmmaking tradition. A useful way to begin is with the realization that it can be divided into three separate periods since its inception and that, during each of those periods, it has meant very different things to contemporary culture. The first era came in the mid-1940s when the French critics who coined the term *film noir* were describing a new, unexpected maturity in Hollywood films. For those critics, the term indicated a promising future. When, during the second era in the 1950s, the term became widely known in Europe, it referred not to an emerging but rather to an established form in American film. By the third era, from the late 1960s to the present, *film noir* has come to mean an historical trend. It is associated neither with a promising future for American film, as in the first phase, nor with a vital, contemporaneous genre, as in the 1950s, but rather with a past, nostalgic form.

The Structure of This Book

Before we delve further into this rich and complex subject, an outline of this book's structure should provide a helpful context for the material that will follow. This Introduction has discussed major strategies of *film noir* as well as the transgressive nature of its appeal. It has explored the difficulties in defining a genre with such diverse manifestations, differentiated *film noir* from film trends that preceded it, and investigated reasons for its extraordinary longevity.

Chapter 2, the historical overview, discusses the emergence of *film noir* in the 1940s with reference to contemporaneous changes in both American society and the Hollywood film industry. The social shifts include the aftereffects of the Great Depression, the national trauma of World War II, which also thrust the United States abruptly onto the international stage, and the resultant redefinition of American identity. Some of the shifts in the American film industry included challenges to the power of industry censorship, which, since the early 1930s, had imposed a whitewashed template – detailed criteria for what could and could not be shown – upon

representations of American life. That template excluded many aspects of human experience from films and required story imperatives such as the obligatory punishment of crimes and misdeeds to be made evident in the films. *Film noir* not only challenged the template but, in its use of strategies such as ambiguity, alternate narratives, and sub-textual insinuation, often made the repression of those things a near-palpable, disturbing presence in the films.

Initially, *film noir* was identified by foreign critics who observed a new sensibility appearing in American films. However, the filmmakers who first made *films noirs* – unlike those who would make films about, say, World War II or the Iraq War, or films engaging popular new trends, like horror in the 1930s or psychedelic experiences in the 1970s – were not consciously aware that they were doing so. The form had not yet been defined. Those filmmakers felt that they were making many different types of films, but they were responding to potent imperatives of their times and their films have only subsequently been categorized as *film noir*.

By 1946, some critics recognized it as a coherent form. Such recognition also came from another direction, the fact that by 1947 the tropes of *film noir* had become so widely recognized that they were parodied in mass market films. Demonstrably, filmmakers and audiences were aware of *film noir* even before they had a term to define it. Further complicating the task of defining *film noir* is the fact that, almost as soon as it appeared, it began to mutate. From the mid-1940s, the genre continually adapted to new social anxieties, stylistic practices, and changes in Hollywood itself. During the late 1940s and 1950s, many *films noirs* assumed a social dimension and embraced semi-documentary styles, foreign aesthetic practices like those of Italian neorealism, and contemporary socio-political concerns. By 1960 its initial, canonical phase was dying out as a result of, among other things, the collapse of the Hollywood studio system from which it had emerged. *Film noir* was considered passé and no longer commercially viable. By 1970, however, a neo-*noir* era appeared that has remained potent for the past four decades.

Film noir in its many forms centers on postwar culture, and its revival as neo-*noir* is, in effect, a revival of anxieties and styles of the postwar era. In neo-*noir*, *film noir* has come to represent not the present but the past as it lives on in the present. A dominating cultural context for *film noir* is dystopian modernism. Many of the grand utopian hopes for modernism of the early twentieth century were failing by mid-century, and a major social posture pervading *film noir* and neo-*noir* is the sense of what Raymond Chandler called “a world gone wrong.” This provides one explanation for the blending of science fiction into some neo-*noir* films. Sam Spade in

The Maltese Falcon (1941), Philip Marlowe in *The Big Sleep*, Deckert in *Blade Runner*, and Chief John Anderton in *Minority Report* all see their societies as having failed. In this, it doesn't matter that some live in the World War II era and others in the future. All are coming to terms with a social structure that once held great promise but that has now betrayed that promise. Some films, like *Seven* (1995), *The Terminator* (1984), or *End of Days* (1999), present this theme within an apocalyptic context.

Chapter 3, the critical overview, traces major critical responses to *film noir* as well as the many approaches to assessing its development and influence. These approaches proliferated after the 1950s with the spread of film culture through journals, cine-clubs, and festivals as well as the institutionalization of formal film study in universities. During this expansion of film culture, *film noir* repeatedly provided fertile ground for developing aesthetic, ideological, and formal approaches. In the 1940s, critics laid groundwork for the acknowledgment of its very existence as a genre. By the 1960s, some critics began to develop formal, thematic, and generic analyses of the films, and histories of the film industry began to recognize its place within Hollywood's narrative. By the 1970s, many theoretically based approaches – including Marxist, structuralist, psycho-analytic, auteurist – made important contributions to its analysis. Soon after, in the post-structuralist era, various identity-based and/or empowerment fields – including those based on race, nation, gender, class, sexual orientation, and post-colonial identity – contributed new insights into the genre.

Chapters 4 to 9 are devoted to detailed analyses of six films, each of which exemplifies important trends of *film noir*. These analyses illustrate components of the genre in its formative stage and ways in which, over time, those components have been re-imagined, supplemented, and even discarded in response to new influences upon the film industry and upon American culture. *Film noir* has proven to be sufficiently elastic to incorporate an almost bewildering diversity of changes. Together, these six analyses provide a detailed overview of the topic.

In Chapter 4, the first film to be examined is *Murder, My Sweet* which, appearing in the same year as *Double Indemnity*, is one of the earliest, undisputed, and most influential *films noirs*. It employs major *noir* narrative strategies such as its retrospective, voice-over narration; major themes like sexual betrayal and manipulation; and foundational character types, like the hard-boiled private detective, the “black widow” or *femme fatale*, and the emasculated men she destroys. *Murder, My Sweet* was the second of three movies based upon Raymond Chandler's 1940 hard-boiled novel, *Farewell, My Lovely*. A parallel look at the three films illustrates major

historical shifts in the genre. The first adaptation, *The Falcon Takes Over* (1942), appeared two years earlier but before *film noir* had fully emerged. It employs radically different visual and thematic strategies, and draws upon Hollywood traditions that have little to do with *film noir*. *Murder, My Sweet*, appearing only two years later, embodies full-blown *film noir* stylistics and thematics. It shows how quickly and how fully the genre developed. The third adaptation, *Farewell, My Lovely* (1975), was made three decades later as a neo-*noir*. These films, based upon the same literary source, provide revealing examples of differences among a pre-*noir* film, a major *film noir*, and a neo-*noir* film.

The next film, *Out of the Past* (1947), has often been called the paradigmatic *film noir* and Chapter 5 will show why so many critics hold it in such high regard. It will also look at how Robert Mitchum, decades later used as a *noir* icon in *Farewell, My Lovely*, began to develop that image in this film, which came near the beginning of his career. In addition, this chapter will compare *Out of the Past* to *L.A. Confidential*, made half a century later, to show how representations of race, nation, and gender in the *noir* tradition had changed radically during that period.

Many have seen *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955) as signaling the end of the initial *film noir* era as well as one of the genre's crowning achievements. Chapter 6 shows how it engages themes such as apocalyptic Cold War nuclear anxiety that were not significant to earlier *films noirs*. *Films noirs* had always been known for their brutal, often savage view of humanity and their challenging of current censorship codes, but this film pushed that envelope. Like a number of *films noirs* in the 1950s, such as *Touch of Evil* (1958), it exhibits baroque stylistic tendencies in the genre as its initial era was ending.

Where late-era *films noirs* often reveal an aesthetic of excess, many neo-*noirs* demonstrate an aesthetic of nostalgia. Chapter 7 shows how *The Long Goodbye* (1973), which appeared early in the neo-*noir* era, aggressively rejects the nostalgia – for old Hollywood, for postwar masculinity and femininity, for isolationist America, among other things – that is widespread in neo-*noir*. Made during the convulsions of the Watergate era, its anti-nostalgic posture went against the grain of the newly forming neo-*noir* films and accounted for much of its initial poor reception. Its screenwriter, Leigh Brackett, one of the screenwriters of the 1946 *The Big Sleep*, commented perceptively upon the challenges of adapting two Raymond Chandler novels thirty years apart. She was acutely aware of the changes in American culture and film genres during those thirty years and of the importance of addressing those changes in the newer film. Robert Altman cast Elliot Gould against type as Marlowe (not Robert Mitchum,

an earlier possibility, whose postwar, rugged masculinity was more in line with the nostalgic approach). A central theme of the film was the danger of misplaced nostalgia for the worlds of Chandler's fiction and *film noir* that did not take cultural change into account. On the set, Altman mockingly referred to the character as "Rip van Marlowe," indicating that he was a lost soul who had simply slept through rather than adapted to the cultural changes of the previous quarter-century (*Long Goodbye* DVD, 2002).

Chapter 8 shows how *Chinatown* handled its material in a more nostalgic manner but complicated this with new approaches to racial, national, and gender themes in a *noir* context. The movie is a "period" picture, set not at the time of its production but four decades earlier. Its cynical, compromised but ultimately sympathetic detective confronts disturbing public (large-scale municipal water fraud) and personal (pedophilia and incest) perversity that he can barely comprehend. The case involves an attractive and seductive woman who initially appears to resemble the evil, manipulative *femmes fatales* widespread in *film noir*. Her resemblance to that stereotype makes the movie's ultimate revelation of her sexual victimization and brutal death a shocking inversion of genre expectations. In its characterization of a powerful white patriarch as the center of its evil, the film brings new perspectives to racial, national, and sexual injustices of the *noir* era. It shows the all-white Los Angeles Police Department largely ignoring the troubles of non-white residents of Los Angeles. When the main detective is outraged after witnessing a grotesque killing in Los Angeles's Chinatown, a white character dismissively advises him to "Forget it. ... It's Chinatown."

Chapter 9 discusses the ways in which *Seven* (aka *Se7en*) sums up and interrogates many traditions of *film noir*. Explicitly dystopian in theme and look, it is primarily set in a depressing, filthy city where it is constantly raining. The film depicts an exhausted society on the verge of collapse, without hope of renewal. The movie presents parallel approaches to crime: one using modern, rational detection methods and the other involving medieval Christian views of good versus evil in a cosmic battle. A team of detectives hunts for a serial killer of people whom the killer considers exemplary of the Christian notion of the Seven Deadly Sins. Hence, he murders a glutton by forcing the man to eat himself to death, and so on. The younger detective approaches the crimes using modern, logical investigative methods and in this the movie resembles a police procedural like many *films noirs* from the late 1940s on. The older detective, however, approaches the crimes from a philosophical and religious perspective. He feels that, since the crimes are manifestations of an eternal evil, solving them will make little difference.

In keeping with the rooting of much of *film noir* in the everyday world of the “normal,” the villain is not a fire-breathing biblical monster but “John Doe.” He is “one of us,” someone indistinguishable from “normal” humankind. In its contrasting of modern with medieval perceptions of evil, *Seven* presents evil as pervasive and eternal. No matter how it is defined and coped with, it always was and always will exist. Apocalyptic themes existed in canonical *film noir*, but often implicitly in the doomed trajectory of individual lives, or in an atmospheric sense of a failed society. Some films, however, like *White Heat* (1949) and *Kiss Me Deadly*, climax with images of apocalyptic explosions, giving them broader social implications. But not until neo-*noir* does apocalyptic imagery become a major pattern. *Seven* draws upon many conventions of *film noir* without being nostalgic and underscores their constant reinventions and recontextualizations.