

The Strange Case of Film Noir

Robert Porfirio

When I first began teaching a college course in film noir and researching it for my doctoral dissertation in the early seventies there was little on the subject in English and only one book-length study, Borde and Chaumeton's yet-to-be translated monograph. Now, over thirty years later, there are numerous courses on the subject and a voluminous amount of written material in English, French, and many other languages. While I find the acclaim presently given film noir at both academic and popular levels a bit surprising, what is even more surprising to me is that film noir is still a contestable topic. Back then I would have thought that by now all ontological and epistemological controversies would be settled, yet the debate rages on, among scholars and fans alike. It is indeed tempting to simply give up the chase and agree with Peter Wollen who quipped that film noir is whatever Borde and Chaumeton say it is. But if there is no consensus it is certainly not due to any lack of effort on the part of Alain Silver, who, from the publication of the groundbreaking first edition of *Film Noir: An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style* in 1979 through subsequent editions and revisions and a series of *Film Noir Readers*, has attempted, at the very least, to provide us with a sense of film noir if not a precise definition thereof.¹ And while that sense seems to favor film noir as a film movement, no extended case for such has found its way to publication, though it was been touched upon by others, myself included.²

In arguing for such a conception I am, understandably, restricting our attention to what of late has been termed the "classic period" of American film noir as opposed to that group of films now called neo-noir – a term coined by Todd Erickson who distinguishes them from classic film noir primarily by virtue of their use of new cinematic techniques and a self-consciousness generated by the awareness of contemporary filmmakers that they are working within an established "noir" convention.

Erickson (correctly in my estimation) makes the case that because of this self-consciousness classic film noir has generated an offspring, neo-noir, which today takes on all the auspices of a genre.³ How could it be otherwise? For once the defining “marks” of a particular cultural practice are recognized and deemed marketable there is the inevitable rush to popularize and peddle as practice becomes product, and art movements are certainly no exception (surrealism being a prime example). Indeed, it was in the 1930s that the major commercial film genres (western, romance, comedy, gangster, horror, detective/mystery, swashbuckler, etc.) were established as “Hollywood” became a global system and sought to capture and hold domestic and international markets alike through the use of formulaic practices. If anything, classic film noir represents an attempt to break with those formulaic practices as Borde and Chaumeton and other French cinéastes pointed out so early on. Yet by virtue of its own transgressive nature the noir cycle was doomed. For as the transgressive aspects of film noir became conventionalized, as the beleaguered Production Code finally gave way to the rating system, and as newer production techniques replaced the old, classic film noir disappeared until its rebirth as neo-noir in the late 1960s.⁴ Ironically, for a term that was virtually unknown in America during the classic period even among the filmmakers themselves (Robert Aldrich being the exception), in the postmodern era film noir is the driving force behind what James Naremore has termed the “noir mediascape,”⁵ just as the terms “noir” and “noired” have become popularized.

The problems inherent in trying to pin down film noir as a specific genre or style of filmmaking have been discussed at some length by Alain Silver and other critics over the years, and there is no need here to cover that ground again.⁶ Since film historians of a sociological persuasion have given us the notion of film movements – a class of phenomena typically more restricted to a given social context and temporal period – why should we not investigate film noir along those lines, especially if it is less problematic than other approaches? Film movements, of course, bear some resemblance to the more universalized aesthetic notion of art movements. Film sociologists, however, point out that film movements tend to be more tied to a specific time and culture and so they prefer to conceive of them in terms of Anthony F.C. Wallace’s notion of “revitalization movements” (“a deliberate and self-conscious attempt to provide a more satisfying culture”).⁷ So far four such phenomena have been identified: German expressionism, Soviet “expressive realism,” Italian neo-realism, and the French new wave.⁸ As a film movement, then, film noir can be conceived along the lines of a pervasive effect (rather than a restrictive genre) and located within a specific sociocultural context and temporal scheme, with the traditional stages of ascent (1940–1945), peak (1946–1950), and slow decline (1951–1960).

While there are problems inherent in treating film noir as a film movement (not the least of which is that the term itself was a post facto classification), they can, I believe, be overcome, and the advantages of such a conceptual model far outweigh the disadvantages. For one thing it allows us to isolate classic film noir as a distinct body or cluster of films where certain formal standards can be brought to bear (e.g.

closed composition, disjunctive editing, etc.), much like genre criticism. At the same time, the notion of a film movement guarantees that those formal changes associated with it be grounded in a real, material context. This grounding in turn opens us up to the subtle interplay between the micro-social level (“Hollywood” as product, praxis, and subculture) and the macro-social context, whose complex interaction with film culture can then be elaborated upon. We can then engage the “world” of film noir in an ongoing dialectic with its historical matrix, explicating every sort of cultural code (e.g. themes, iconography, or even larger patterns of meaning) to explore the complex process of mediation between a film culture and the material world.⁹

If we rethink film noir in terms of a film movement we may also be able to avoid some of the controversies that have haunted critical film theory for the last thirty or so years (e.g. auteurist vs. structuralist). For although most approaches to film noir tend to suppress stylistic differences to demonstrate the manner in which a group of films are similar, those differences which distinguish a Hitchcock-directed film noir from, say, a Lang-directed one can be handled quite nicely as personal idiolect, while those qualities which draw our attention to a rather heterogeneous group of films as noir (mood, disjunctive editing, chiaroscuro visuals, etc.) can then be identified as movement-idiolect, a term typically associated with art movements. Traditionally, art movements come into being when the quite restrictive idiolect of the individual creator (e.g. the language of *The Sound and the Fury*) is elaborated through the body of works of a given individual (as corpus-idiolect, e.g. all of Faulkner’s fiction) and further elaborated through a specific art movement. We are speaking here of the process through which innovation becomes aesthetic convention, the unconscious becomes coded and individual practice becomes social praxis.¹⁰ But as so many postmodern critics are quick to point out, no author is in complete control of his text since aesthetic texts are built from larger aesthetic “worlds” and from the materials of the real world as well. Fortunately, these larger aesthetic worlds, often identified as intertext or context, have been given a good deal of recent critical attention.¹¹ And in so far as an aesthetic movement becomes distinguished by a specific aesthetic world, idiolect becomes identified with sociolect (the language of a social group, class, or subculture), a key nexus between a restrictive aesthetic world and the more accessible social one. If anything, the proliferation of the film noir world into virtually every media and its internationalization since the late 1990s is indicative of the manner in which a movement-idiolect becomes the sociolect of a distinct subculture.¹² It is also a good example of how the cutting edge of an art movement is quickly blunted as its devices are conventionalized and disseminated, or, as Fredric Jameson would have it, culture becomes commodified.¹³

It would seem that if we are to consider the noir cycle in terms of Wallace’s revitalization movements we run into trouble right away in attempting to demonstrate that it was “deliberate and self-conscious.” Less problematic is the second half of the equation – “the attempt to provide a more satisfying culture.” Virtually every filmmaker I interviewed back in the 1970s (whether writer, director, photographer, or composer) was by degrees chafed by the studio system of the 1930s, at times rankled

by the ways it repressed personal creativity, and rather consistently anxious to push the boundaries – the Production Code being a particular *bête noire* among writers and directors.¹⁴ It seems to me that the degree to which these films noir involve audiences of all ages today, or seem more modern than their predecessors, or even play into our notions of postmodernism, is a good measure of the success of their creators. Yet there are critics who still decry the fact that those involved in the production of these films noir lacked a sense of identification with some larger phenomenon – but such lack of identification is often the case with art movements, the early impressionists being a prime example. More telling perhaps are those theorists who subsume film noir into such larger cultural movements as modernism or postmodernism or view it as little more than an American extension of French poetic realism¹⁵ or German expressionism – a confusion, it seems to me, of text with context or intertext.

More problematic is the first half of the equation since “deliberate” and “self-conscious” are attributes we normally associate with the creators of the neo-noir films of today. But if we are the least bit supple in applying these terms to the filmmakers of the classic period I believe we will find a degree of cohesiveness between the two groups of newcomers to the Hollywood system throughout the 1930s and 1940s whose talents were a prerequisite to the growth of film noir. The first group, the Germanic émigrés, came to Hollywood from Europe during this period. And while there was a degree of rivalry among them, there was also a good deal of camaraderie based on common experiences (most were of Jewish background, many fled to America through France via a virtual “underground railroad” initiated by Robert Siodmak in the 1930s). While not all were members of an American Popular Front, they understandably shared an antipathy towards fascism and likely a sensibility that was quite sensitive to the creation of the dangerous and threatening world of film noir. Unlike their fellow émigrés of the Frankfurt School, they were not hostile towards American popular culture, and most were quite responsive to it. Yet for all of their involvement in American culture and social customs they were still outsiders harboring a sense of detachment matched by that found in the hard-boiled “school” of fiction and the stance of many of its protagonists. Perhaps the Germanic predisposition toward Lorelei figures matches as well the misogynistic bias of much tough guy literature.

In addition to these Europeans there was also a group of incipient filmmakers – mostly writers but directors and actors as well – who migrated from the east coast, whom I have termed the “domestic émigrés,”¹⁶ and who were, for the most part, variously involved in the American Popular Front. The majority came to Hollywood in the late 1930s and early 1940s and most were “lefties” (to use a term popularized by Clifford Odets), veterans of one form or another of the radical theater that flourished on the east coast in the 1930s. There are too many to list here but a representative sampling would indicate their importance to film noir: Jules Dassin, Cy Endfield, John Garfield, Elia Kazan, Joseph Losey, Ben Maddow, Albert Maltz, John Paxton, Abraham Polonsky, Nicholas Ray, Robert Rossen, and Orson Welles. Together with writers such as Daniel Mainwaring, A.I. Bezzerides, and Dalton Trumbo, and emerging talents like Edward Dmytryk and Adrian Scott, the more

politically inclined among them developed an authentic esprit de corps, which of course was shattered with the advent of the Red Scare and the Hollywood blacklist.¹⁷ On the micro-social level, the combined effects of the Red Scare, the consent decree (divorcing the studios from their ownership of theaters in 1948), the advent of television, changes in the disposition of film audiences, and, finally, the rise of independent productions changed Hollywood forever. Yet these eastern “mavericks” helped nudge film noir in the direction of the social commentary/exposé with entries such as *Crossfire* (1947), *The Prowler* (1951), and *Underworld Story* (1950). Even though their ranks were broken and decimated by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and the blacklist, the ones who remained to work in Hollywood moved it in the direction of more topical genres that would appeal to new generation of filmgoers with films such as *The Wild One* (1954), *On the Waterfront* (1954), and *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955). Finally, it was noir icons Burt Lancaster and Kirk Douglas who led the fight to wrest control of the production of Hollywood films from the major studios with their own independent production companies (Hecht-Lancaster and Bryna respectively).

If Hollywood’s political “awakening” in the late 1930s made it fashionable for members of the colony to “go left” as one social analyst asserts,¹⁸ it is also true that the domestic émigrés, especially the more radical among them, devoted much of their energy to advancing the cause of trade unionism and forging a Popular Front within the film industry. They were particularly influential in securing industry recognition of the Screen Writers Guild as a bargaining agent in 1940 and the Marxist domination of this organization continued throughout much of the decade. Yet Hollywood’s Popular Front was always a heterogeneous political amalgam, including Republicans and New Deal Democrats as well as radicals, but it was its anti-fascist spirit that provided a key nexus between the Germanic and domestic émigrés. However, it is not at all surprising that the Europeans trod more quietly than their American counterparts since their status as immigrants put them in a more precarious position. Very few were inclined to beat a hasty retreat to their native lands, as Bertolt Brecht and Hanns Eisler were forced to do, though the fact that even a filmmaker with the prodigious reputation of a Fritz Lang was touched by the blacklist was sufficient cause for discretion on their part.¹⁹ And while the films noir with which they were involved are often cited as critical of American social mores most of the Germanic émigrés had a peculiar fondness for American culture despite their critical eyes²⁰ – a provocative synthesis that left them perfectly attuned to that hard-boiled tradition which provided the noir cycle with much of its content. Today we recognize that none of those who were then newcomers to Hollywood were revolutionaries. A greater irony lies in the fact that of all the émigrés, especially those whose careers touched upon the radical theater, the one who was arguably the least radical was the one most skilled at synthesizing a variety of avant-garde aesthetics, and it was Orson Welles who proved to be the greatest influence on the Hollywood cinema of the 1940s. Having established the degree to which kinship promotes a sense of self-consciousness, we can now begin to define film noir in terms of the three broad criteria which determine a film movement.

A “Radical Aesthetic Break”

Given the repressive structure of the Hollywood film industry in the 1930s, one would not expect as radical an aesthetic break as might be found in other art movements. Yet there was a definite break with the traditional studio film of the 1930s (Hollywood’s version of the classic narrative text) which valorized the smooth unfolding of the story (or in today’s critical parlance, favored story over discourse) and used every device at its disposal to place the spectator in a position of coherence: continuity cutting (i.e. *découpage classique*); optical effects such as wipes and dissolves; balanced lighting; the star system; shallow focus, etc.²¹ When “The End” title appeared audiences expected and typically got closure, if not always a happy ending. So story was king and producers such as Irving Thalberg, David O. Selznick, and Darryl F. Zanuck based their reputation (and their power) on their ability to ferret out a compelling story, thereby making the producer the most important cog in the creation of the studio film. Occasionally a writer like Preston Sturges began to experiment with this structure (e.g. *The Power and The Glory* (1933)), and when Sturges began to direct his own films in 1940 he paved the way for the emergence of other writer-directors, who in turn began to displace the producer in importance. Among the most important of these as far as the noir cycle is concerned were John Huston, Billy Wilder, and especially Orson Welles. Welles was a major contributor to the film noir but it is his role in the production of *Citizen Kane* that is significant here. A unique film standing outside the noir cycle, *Citizen Kane* remains the key proto-noir in so far as it signaled a break with the classic studio film which opened the way for the film noir. In the interests of brevity I will simply list here those aspects of *Citizen Kane* which constitute an important part of the film noir’s distinctive idiolect:

- 1 Depth staging
- 2 The sequence shot
- 3 Subjective camera positions to suggest psychological states
- 4 Anti-traditional *mise-en-scène*
- 5 Expressive montage instead of *découpage classique*
- 6 A baroque visual style characterized by mannered lighting and photography
- 7 Formative use of sound: for example, overlapping dialogue, aural bridges, modulations in the amplification of sound effects
- 8 The displacement of “wall-to-wall” romantic scores with expressive and interpretative music
- 9 The use of documentary conventions within the structure of a narrative film
- 10 A convoluted temporal structure involving the use of first person voice-over narration
- 11 Psychological or Freudian overtones
- 12 Use of an investigator who attempts to order an inherently incoherent and ambiguous world
- 13 A morally ambiguous protagonist.

Since Orson Welles was allowed to set up his own “Mercury Productions” unit at RKO (one of the most crises-ridden of the eight major studios in this period) he had more latitude than virtually any other filmmaker within the studio system – a latitude not seen again until the rise of independent productions in the 1950s. The result was *Citizen Kane*, which at its release tested the expectations of its audiences and which, more importantly for us, provided a virtual palimpsest of film noir’s intertext. From his background in radical theater, Welles brought with him a taste for experimentation, a penchant for dealing with social issues, and a troupe of actors new to Hollywood. From radio he brought to Hollywood Bernard Herrmann, who signaled the break with the romantic scores of the past; a penchant for innovative and formative uses of sound including the authoritative connotation of a stentorian narrator; and the use of actors to restage actual events.²² Finally, despite his insistence that he learned most about the cinema from viewing the films of John Ford, Welles was a great admirer of F.W. Murnau and spent a good deal of time viewing the German classics, especially those *kammerspielefilms* associated with the second phase of German expressionist film.²³

Indeed it was this second (or “compromised”) phase of German expressionism that was truly the forerunner of film noir, not the classic earlier phase whose extreme visuals and acting styles found a more conducive vehicle in the horror film (*Son of Frankenstein* (1939) is the exemplar here). It was during this second stage that the fluid visual style of Fritz Wagner and Karl Freund displaced the static, fixed camera of pure expressionism, that the expressive potential of editing was tapped by directors like Pabst and Murnau, that more subtle shades of lighting made possible the greater range of *stimmung* associated with the *kammerspielefilm*, that the popular “thriller” was given respectability by Fritz Lang, and that the artificial quality of studio sets began to give way to the sociological interest of the so-called street films. *Stimmung* (or mood, or “inner vibrations” if you will) was put to the service of “psychological realism” in the *kammerspielefilm*, and this in turn has its analog in the noir cycle where virtually every entry has a psychological dimension and where a variety of devices (visual and aural) were put to use to portray “inner states.”²⁴

If we look at but three of the major contributors to film noir, the influence of the *kammerspielefilms* becomes readily apparent. Orson Welles we have already mentioned. A less obvious figure, Alfred Hitchcock, has confessed his familiarity with the German films of Murnau and Lang and stated that the first picture he would claim as stylistically his own is *The Lodger* (1927), a film with strong roots in the “Germanic” tradition. His first entries in the noir series, *Suspicion* (1941, whose imposed “happy ending” unfortunately blunted Francis Iles’s original novel, *Before the Fact*, on which it was based), and *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) reverberate with elements of the *kammerspielefilm*. The third key figure is Fritz Lang, himself a major force in the development of this second phase of German expressionism. Of his many entries in the noir cycle, those in which he was most invested (often as one of the producers) display the greatest kinship to that earlier tradition: *Woman in the Window* (1944), *Scarlet Street* (1945), *Secret Beyond the Door* (1948), and *House by the River* (1950). Yet these are only three among scores of other Europeans with a

background in this tradition who enriched the Hollywood film industry generally while contributing to that aesthetic break which defines the film noir.²⁵ At this point, then, let us turn our attention to the second of the three determinants of a film movement.

A Distinct Cluster of Films

On first consideration this criterion would seem less problematic to demonstrate than some of our earlier assertions since we are here only dealing with classic film noir. Today most film theorists seem relatively comfortable placing the cycle within the parameters 1940 and 1960. In more theoretical terms, film noir was a movement which bridged the classic text (the story-bound studio film of the 1930s) with the postmodern one (including neo-noirs to the present). Yet for whatever consensus there is as to the noir period, the question “What constitutes a film noir?” remains; and here controversy perennially rears its ugly head. The best English-language equivalent in American journals of that era would probably be the term “psychological crime film,” and this is accurate enough since there is certainly a psychological dimension (i.e. as opposed to the environmental determinism of the crime and social problem films of the 1930s) and some sort of crime (real, imagined, or dreamt) in every film noir I have seen. It is also comprehensive – indeed so comprehensive and all-inclusive that it loses its validity as a critical criterion. This is why I believe some formal standards must be brought to bear so that film noir can be measured against those films which preceded it and those which succeeded it – with the added proviso that we do not become too doctrinaire in imposing a rigid visual style (or styles) or narrative structure(s) in assessing each candidate’s inclusion. It also seems to me that those standards (visual, aural, or narrative) can only be understood in contradistinction to the classic studio film, that is, in so far as they transgressed the standards (including the Production Code) that Hollywood established in the 1930s as requisite to a good story-film.

The noir visual style is nothing less than a shrewd combination of techniques which traditional film theory has polarized as either *expressionistic* (unusual camera angles, formative editing, mannered lighting, etc.) or *realistic* (the sequence shot, depth staging, location photography, etc.). Its narrative structure is not a set of typologies but something akin to the postmodern text by virtue of the way it disrupts a cohesive story via chronological and/or (primarily) causal disorders. This is what differentiates a noir western dealing with a family “feud,” like *Pursued* (Raoul Walsh, 1947), from a contemporaneous black-and-white western also dealing with a feud, like *My Darling Clementine*, (John Ford, 1946). It is also why early attempts to “fit” hard-boiled fiction into studio styles and formulae failed until the advent of the noir cycle with entries such as *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, 1941), *The Glass Key* (Stuart Heisler, 1942), and *Murder, My Sweet* (Edward Dmytryk, 1944).

While it is nicely symmetrical to place the noir cycle within the parameters of 1940 and 1960, its initiating date is not simply arbitrary. For it was in 1940 that

Stranger on the Third Floor, arguably the first true film noir, was released. More importantly, the film was produced at RKO, the studio where *Citizen Kane* was to be filmed shortly after and whose films noir, most critics in this field agree, were the most definitive of the noir style. *Stranger on the Third Floor* combined the talents of photographer Nicholas Musuraca, composer Roy Webb and art director Albert D'Agostino who formed the "core" of the RKO noir style. Perhaps most relevant to this style was D'Agostino who had already been exposed to the "Germanic" style when working at Universal, where the art department included Charles Hall and Herman Rosse – key figures in the development of the definitive look of the Universal horror film, beginning with *Frankenstein* (1931). Unlike earlier noir pretenders, *Stranger on the Third Floor* is sufficiently unique in the way it combines elements from a variety of classic film genres – gangster/crime, detective, horror, even social problem – to usher in the noir era, though it is a far cry from *Citizen Kane* in terms of quality and originality. While Frank Partos's story betrays its pulp sources in its illogic and incongruities, it is indebted to them as well in its depiction of an oppressive, fear-ridden world, one that we would come to associate with the fiction of Woolrich. And if we look back further, it is also beholden to the *kammerspielefilm*, as is quite evident in the expressionistic bias of Latvian-born Boris Ingster's direction (one contemporary critic noted that he was better at directing shadows than actors) and Peter Lorre's performance as the pathetic, crazed killer – reminiscent of his role in *M* (1931).

It is probably no mere coincidence that film noir found its beginnings and its most definitive style at RKO for of all the major studios RKO was the most beset with the type of "crises mentality" that opens the door for innovation, due in no small part to the rather rapid shifts in ownership (Rockefeller/Sarnoff – Floyd Odlum – Howard Hughes – General Tire) and production chiefs (George Schaefer – Charles Koerner – Dore Schary – William Dozier) that characterized it from the late 1930s till its virtual demise in 1957. If George Schaefer's emphasis on quality allowed for the production of *Citizen Kane* then Charles Koerner's insistence on mass appeal pointed in the direction of the B film where Val Lewton's "horror" unit and the Scott/Dmytryk "thriller" units flourished. Though limited by budget and genre constraints, Lewton's unit, employing several of the veterans of the old Mercury unit, was cohesive enough to imbue each film with a consistent "atmosphere," and indeed some of its entries come closer to film noir than to the horror genre (especially *The Seventh Victim* and *The Leopard Man* (both 1943)). Two of Lewton's directorial protégés, Robert Wise and Jacques Tourneur, went on to make important contributions to the noir cycle as well. Edward Dmytryk, Adrian Scott, and their leftist associates at RKO were, if not the most numerous contingent of Marxists in 1940s' Hollywood, certainly the most visible. Working with screenwriter John Paxton, Dmytryk and Scott released a version of Chandler's *Farewell, My Lovely* (*Murder, My Sweet*, 1943) that turned Hollywood in the direction of the hard-boiled private eye more assuredly than Huston's earlier version of *The Maltese Falcon*, while their version of Richard Brooks's *The Brice Foxhole* (*Crossfire*, 1947) put the social problem film well within the boundaries of film noir.²⁶ It would seem that the lower

budget B film allowed filmmakers greater latitude in terms of filmic techniques as well as narrative content.²⁷

With the acquisition of RKO by Howard Hughes in 1948 and HUAC's renewed interest in Hollywood, political winds at the studio turned severely to the Right and those films with a "liberal" social message began to disappear. Dore Schary managed to exit gracefully but many others there were caught in the political crossfire. While the Red Scare forced several key producers, directors, and writers to exit RKO, the studio maintained a number of essential personnel, especially at the technical level, so that the RKO noir series continued through the mid-1950s, aided by the arrival there of directors such as Nicholas Ray and Fritz Lang. Undercapitalized, RKO was unable to compete with the so-called "Big-Five" majors (in terms of implementing new technology such as wide screen, color, and bigger budgets), and so it fell victim to changing audience tastes and the competition of television in the 1950s (in many respects television dramas replaced the B film). In a sense, its demise paralleled that of the noir cycle and did so for some of the same reasons.

Though released through United Artists (RKO was no longer functioning as a production company), *Odds Against Tomorrow* (1959) has much of the style and texture of a RKO noir and not surprisingly since it was produced and directed by Robert Wise and has Robert Ryan in a lead role. Forward-looking though it is in its use of a cool jazz score and 1.85:1 aperture, it looks backward as well, its brilliant black-and-white photography enhancing its interiors with classic noir style (venetian blinds, shadows, lowered ceilings, etc.) and its use of deep focus on exteriors, contrasting daytime and nighttime locales. Add a narrative structure built around a heist gone wrong which intercuts the lives of its two principals (Robert Ryan and Harry Belafonte) and which plays upon the psychological and sociological implications of their tenuous relationship before they die atop a flaming oil storage tank and you have all the ingredients of a classic film noir. By my reckoning *Odds Against Tomorrow* was one of the last entries in the cycle and a fitting epitaph.

Sociocultural Trauma

This third and final criterion of film movements appears to be the most obvious. Film historians are quick to point out that because the Depression, World War II, and the Red Scare paralleled the rise and fall of film noir in chronological order they must have had a good deal to do with its ascent and descent. Yet one must be wary of such a facile explanation. For one thing, the majority of the Depression took place in the 1930s, the decade in which "Hollywood" became a global system, the major commercial genres were established, and Americans flocked to the picture palaces as a means of escape from the harsh realities of life. As discussed, the 1930s was the era during which the classic studio film reigned supreme, and if we are correct in defining the film noir in opposition to that classic text then the Depression did little to stimulate the growth of the noir cycle. But as students of American culture know, the Depression provided fertile ground for the growth of

popular culture in the United States (in the form of pulps, comic books and strips, radio shows, magazines, parlor games, etc.), and it is precisely here that the Depression influenced the noir cycle – by providing the intertext which Hollywood would (at times) be forced to assimilate in succeeding decades. Certainly hard-boiled and proletarian fiction was popular enough in the 1930s, but Hollywood's response to these writers was to bowdlerize them and force their fictions to fit pre-existing commercial genres (e.g. the best Hollywood could do with Hammett in the 1930s was *The Thin Man* series, which was more domestic comedy than hard-boiled detective story). In a more oblique way, however, the Depression did contribute to film noir in so far as it furthered the dominant position of Hollywood, which became a magnet for all those struggling artists and writers that we have dubbed the domestic émigrés. Nor can we discount the effects of the Depression in Europe, which advanced the cause of fascism and the outbreak of war there. The Germanic émigrés who departed from Europe as a result of these events not only enriched the Hollywood film industry but were an essential ingredient in the development of film noir.

As far as the effects of America's entry into World War II on film noir are concerned, critics and historians seem to take one of two approaches. The French cinéastes emphasize Hollywood's response in terms of the production of war-orientated propaganda films and the need to reinforce American values (thus, films begin to depict gangsters fighting the Nazis and other fifth-column types as opposed to the apolitical stance of Raven in *This Gun For Hire* (1942)). This they view as an impediment to the production of films noir, almost truncating the movement just as it was starting. American critics, on the other hand, while not opposed to this view, tend to focus on the effect of the war on the tastes and sensibilities of the American audience and on the presentation of certain themes within the noir cycle. Thus the wartime brutalities of the weekly newsreels seasoned audiences for the heightened violence of the film noir, just as the sadistic practices of the "enemy" in the propaganda films prepared them for its analog in the noir cycle. The displacement of men by women in the workforce and the fears of returning veterans over the fidelity of their wives (or girlfriends) are used in turn to "explain" the characteristic femme fatale of film noir (rather than the intertext, as mentioned above).

At the most mundane level, World War II drew away some of Hollywood's key personnel (particularly actors and directors), thereby opening the door to new talent. At the same time, the experience of many filmmakers "in the field" during the war helped to encourage the use of authentic locales in the post-war period.²⁸ But perhaps the most compelling force behind the growth of the noir cycle in the 1940s was the changing marketplace. For one thing, the war cut Hollywood off from an international market that had accounted for up to 40 percent of its profits at the height of the 1930s. The film industry attempted to increase domestic attendance (weekly attendance figures reached their peak in 1946) through a variety of tactics, most of them successful, at least for a while: Saturday morning/afternoon matinees and all-cartoon shows to attract the kids; door-prizes and various give-a-ways to attract the adults; longer exhibition hours; and, most

importantly for our purposes, increased use of the “double feature” at most theaters other than the prestige “first-run” houses in major markets. Double features of course meant increased production, especially of B films, and for studios like Monogram or PRC this was virtually their entire output. And the B film, the true domain of the film noir, allowed, as we have seen, for a greater degree of “experimentation.” Hollywood also attempted to attract larger numbers of adult males, less a staple of weekly attendance figures during the 1930s but an increasingly important market segment as the war veterans began to return home. And this last, perhaps, was the most compelling force leading Hollywood to assimilate the hard-boiled intertext left virtually untouched in the 1930s since males were the major consumers of pulps and tough fiction.

Of course, sociocultural trauma can as easily end a film movement as initiate it, and this seems to have been the case with film noir. If I were to pick a specific year as the start of the demise of the noir cycle it would be 1948, the year in which both the consent decree and the blacklist began to have a major effect on the film industry.²⁹ This was about the time the social problem films of the cycle began to be displaced by the semi-documentaries, and these in turn began to be formulaic as the police procedurals became dominant. Even the procedurals began to focus more on the heroics of the government agents rather than on their entrapment within the criminal demimonde (as in *T-Men* (1948)) or on the activities of fugitive criminals (as in *He Walked by Night* (1949)) before they finally succumbed to anti-Communist hysteria as America turned right (*Walk a Crooked Mile* (1948), *I Was a Communist for the FBI* (1951), *The Whip Hand* (1951)). By the early 1950s, this type of film noir was hardly transgressive. If anything, it tended to reinforce conservative American values and, not surprisingly, its format was easily assimilated by television (*Treasury Men in Action* (1950), *Dragnet* (1951), *Racket Squad* (1951), *The Lineup* (1954), *Naked City* (1958)). Television also started to draw the adult male audience away from theaters with such “attractions” as sports and crime shows. Understandably, the major studios turned away from B movies toward A films whose budgets allowed them to deploy a variety of “new” techniques (including improved color, wider and wider screens, stereophonic sound, and, briefly, 3-D) which were corrosive of the visual style of film noir (by emphasizing the film plane over the depth plane, balanced lighting over chiaroscuro, “star” over “icon”) and which once again began to valorize story over technique. The number of screens in the United States began to dwindle (until replaced by the multiplex theaters starting in the 1960s), and the double feature became a thing of the past.

If film noir became less transgressive in its declining years, by 1968 there was little to transgress (at least as far as the Production Code was concerned) as Hollywood’s older moral establishment threw in the towel and the Code was abandoned in favor of the rating system. In one sense this change represented a victory for film noir (however pyrrhic), although the commercial potential of this “moral” liberalization was not lost on the film producers who hoped to lure viewers away from their television sets and from the burgeoning art houses where foreign films were

far less concerned with moral standards. Actually, by 1968 “Hollywood” no longer existed as a distinct colony and subculture: the major studios, which had been replaced by the independent production companies that followed in the wake of Hecht-Lancaster, no longer produced films; instead, they rented their facilities to others and functioned essentially as they do today, as a major vehicle for the distribution of films worldwide. And, as the American film industry attempted to maintain world dominance, budgets and film stocks grew larger and effects more “spectacular.”

By a strange twist of fate, it was the French new wave – whose homage to American B films generally and to the film noir specifically was no secret – that helped to move American films away from bloated projects like *Cleopatra* (1963) towards smaller, more innovative films like *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967, directed by Arthur Penn, though Jean-Luc Goddard was originally considered for the role). Penn’s previous film, *Mickey One* (1965) was itself an homage to the new wave, so self-reflexive that the protagonist (played by Warren Beatty) speaks directly to the audience (as the putative night club audience becomes the film audience). In any case, by the mid-1960s film noir was a known entity in the United States.³⁰ Filmmakers were quite aware that they were working within a tradition. In *Harper* (1966), for example, Paul Newman (as Lew Harper née Archer) looks at the audience incredulously when one of his sarcastic jibes goes completely over the head of the Pamela Tiffin character and, in an even more nuanced action, allows the killer, his friend Graves (Arthur Hill) to go unpunished.³¹ *Kiss Me Deadly* (Aldrich, 1955), arguably the most self-reflexive film noir of the cycle, concludes with the two protagonists *momentarily* surviving a nuclear blast. *Point Blank* (Boorman, 1967), arguably the breakout neo-noir film, opens with its protagonist, “Walker” (Lee Marvin) being shot at point blank range in a cell on a deserted Alcatraz island. He “miraculously” survives to extract revenge from those who crossed him but ends up once again in the shadows on Alcatraz – suggesting that Walker may in fact have been dead from the beginning of the film. Here Marvin’s persona – silver-white hair and impassive features belying a penchant for instantaneous violence – matches perfectly the cold steel and glass of contemporary Los Angeles. He is a protagonist who fits well Camus’ pejorative description of the “denatured hero” of tough fiction and who is an adequate foe of the fashionable denizens of a corporate (and rather legitimized) underworld. As Borde and Chaumeton observed in updating their classic study to include neo-noir films: “color confers on the urban setting of steel and glass, which has been visually transformed over the years, a preponderant place, as if the actor were no more than the emanation of this. And this victory of color values . . . suggests a new kind of morbid toughness.”³² In such a world, a more traditional existential “anti-hero” such as James Caan’s Frank in *Thief* (Michael Mann, 1981) seems woefully out of place and appropriately disappears into the night at the end, having cut all ties with the world.³³ It is as if film noir has lost its innocence as filmmakers seek to mine the tradition for nuance (and for popular appeal) and as movement becomes genre, film becomes product, and text becomes metatext.

Notes

- 1 See, especially, Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward (eds), *Film Noir: An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style* (Woodstock: Overlook Press, 1992), pp. 1–6; Alain Silver and James Ursini, (eds), *Film Noir Reader* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1996), pp. 3–15; and Alain Silver, Elizabeth Ward, James Ursini, and Robert Porfirio (eds), *Film Noir: The Encyclopedia* (New York: Overlook Duckworth, 2010), pp. 15–22 and 349–350.
- 2 See, for example, Todd Erickson’s “Kill Me Again: Movement becomes Genre,” in Silver and Ursini (eds), *Film Noir Reader*, pp. 307–329; my “No Way Out: Existential Motifs in the Film Noir,” also in Silver and Ursini (eds), *Film Noir Reader*, pp. 77–93; and my introduction to Robert Porfirio, Alain Silver, and James Ursini (eds), *Film Noir Reader 3* (New York: Limelight Editions, 2001), especially pp. 2–3. I have, however, covered this topic extensively in my unpublished dissertation, “The Dark Age of American Film: A Study of the American Film Noir,” Vols 1 and 2, (Ann Arbor, MI.: University Microfilms, 1980).
- 3 See Erickson, “Kill Me Again.”
- 4 In a sense film noir provided a gateway for more contemporary commercial genres to emerge as many of its talents – those in particular who were not drummed out of Hollywood by the blacklist – turned to more topical material. Elia Kazan and Nicholas Ray are exemplar here.
- 5 See James Naremore, *More Than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).
- 6 The evasive nature of film noir in terms of consistent iconography or narrative patterns has fueled a good deal of the debate. For a concise but lucid overview, see Appendix C. in Silver and Ward (eds), *Film Noir*, 3rd edn, pp. 372–385. To its credit, the transgeneric nature of film noir has made it a staple of contemporary film criticism since many see there the seeds of the postmodern metatext.
- 7 A.F.C. Wallace, “Revitalization Movements,” in *American Anthropologist* 58 (1956). Terry Lovell’s article, “Sociology and the Cinema,” *Screen* 12 (1) (Spring, 1971): 15–26, a seminal application of this concept to film, indicates its usefulness in defining the French new wave.
- 8 I’m not fond of the term “expressive realism” but use it here because George Huaco labels it thus in his seminal study of the first three movements, *The Sociology of Film Art* (New York, Basic Books, 1965). Huaco’s study relies on a rather crude base-superstructure model and lacks the methodological sophistication of Terry Lovell or Andrew Tudor’s important discussion of film movements in *Image and Influence* (New York: Viking, 1974), to which I am indebted. For a more contemporary sociological approach (though one lacking in a discussion of film movements) see Graeme Turner, *Film as Social Practice* (London: Routledge, 4th edn, 2006).
- 9 James Naremore comes close to just such an analysis in *More than Night*.
- 10 For the conception of the personal idiolect as a “species” of the unconscious I am indebted to Bill Nichols’s “Style, Grammar and the Movies,” in Nichols (ed.), *Movies and Methods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 607–628 and to Gregory Bateson, to whom I was directed by Nichols’s article.
- 11 See, for example, Gene Phillips, *Creatures of Darkness: Raymond Chandler, Detective Fiction and Film Noir* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 2000); Stephen Faison, *Existentialism, Film Noir, and Hard-Boiled Fiction* (Amherst: Cambria Press, 2008); Alistair Rolls and Deborah Walker, *French and American Noir: Dark Crossings*

- (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Paula Rabinowitz, *Black & White & Noir: America's Pulp Modernism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) and James Naremore, *More Than Night*.
- 12 Since 2005 there has been a "[Film] Noir of the Week" website featuring a review/synopsis of a different classic film noir each week with its own blog link and touting "The Film Noir Foundation" for donations towards the preservation of classic films noir. Regarding the influence of film noir on comic books and strips, when I interviewed Will Eisner, creator of *The Spirit*, in 1972 he told me that among the influences on his visual style were films such as *Citizen Kane* and those "crime thrillers" of the 1940s that we now term classic film noir.
 - 13 Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991).
 - 14 Many of these interviews are contained in Silver and Ursini (eds), *Film Noir Reader 3*. This spirit of rebelliousness extended even to producers like Dore Schary, who was proud of his "smaller" black-and-white films, especially those that dealt with social issues, and had no qualms about clashing with owners such as Louis Mayer and Howard Hughes.
 - 15 Yet commentators like Jean-Pierre Chartier even in 1946 recognized the difference between the French films noir of the 1930s and the American films noir which eliminated the romantic sensibility of the French films and often replaced romance with the allure of the femme fatale. See "Americans are also Making *Noir* Films," in Alain Silver and James Ursini (eds), *Film Noir Reader 2* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1999), pp. 21–23.
 - 16 Porfirio, "Dark Age of American Film," chapter 4.
 - 17 In a series of interviews I had with Edward Dmytryk in 1976 he described the camaraderie among Hollywood's "lefties." He felt the dearth of intellectuality in the Hollywood of the 1930s was mitigated by the arrival of the European and domestic émigrés – giving the edge in that domain to the Marxists. He was quick to point out that most studio chiefs were apolitical and he demonstrated a certain disdain for liberals like Dore Schary.
 - 18 Leo C. Rosten, *Hollywood: The Movie Colony, the Movie Makers* (New York: Harcourt, 1941).
 - 19 See Lang's interview in Silver and Ursini (eds), *Film Noir Reader 3*, especially pp. 58–60.
 - 20 As Curtis Bernhardt put it, "Foreign directors who came to this country . . . have a clearer snapshot of the culture than the native who has been immersed in it all his life," in Silver and Ursini (eds), *Film Noir Reader 3*, p. 230.
 - 21 For a more comprehensive discussion of the ways film noir broke with the conventions of the classic studio film, see Porfirio, "Dark Age of American Film," especially chapters 5 and 6.
 - 22 From Welles's experience with radio's *The March of Time*, which, together with the film series of the same name, proved to be the major source of the semi-documentaries of the noir cycle.
 - 23 I was told this by David Bradley (director of the noir *Talk About a Stranger*, 1952) who knew Welles from their association with the Todd School, which they both attended.
 - 24 I read scores of film reviews of putative films noir in the trade papers of that era. Since the term "film noir" was unknown in the United States at the time, the most typical appellation was "psychological thriller."
 - 25 For a book-length study of the influence of the Germanic émigrés (among others) on Hollywood film see Larry Langman, *Destination Hollywood: The Influence of Europeans on American Filmmaking* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2000).

- 26 During a conversation Dmytryk told me that his visual style, particularly at RKO, was influenced primarily by Welles and by Murnau.
- 27 At least according to Dore Schary. See Silver and Ursini, *Film Noir Reader 3*, especially pp. 180–181.
- 28 See, for example, the interviews of Joseph Lewis and Sam Fuller in Silver and Ursini (eds), *Film Noir Reader 3*.
- 29 Most “lists” of films noir, though they may vary in terms of titles, are rather consistent in affirming 1947 as the peak of production of films noir (see, for example, the lists of films noir by year in Silver, Ward, Ursini, and Porfirio (eds), *Film Noir: The Encyclopedia*, pp. 343–345, and a comparison of such lists in Andrew Spicer, *Film Noir* (Harlow: Longmans/Pearson Education Limited, 2002), p. 28.
- 30 Higham and Greenberg’s *Hollywood in the 1940s* was published in 1968. L.A. Filmex’s “Salute to Film Noir” (the original source of Paul Schrader’s seminal “Notes . . .,” which were handed out to attendees some two years before they were published in *Film Comment*) took place in 1970.
- 31 At the film’s finale neither character can act, and as Harper echoes Graves’s “Ah, hell,” the film underscores this stasis by closing on a freeze-frame of Newman, an affirmation, perhaps, of Borde and Chaumeton’s final comment on neo-noir films in their 1979 post-face to their seminal study: “Deriving from the world of the novel, from the gratifying frisson of fear, and from a certain qualitative notion of pleasure, the noir series has, over the years, linked up with the anguish of a society that no longer knows where it is headed.” Raymonde Borde and Etienne Chaumeton, *A Panorama of American Film Noir 1941–1953*, trans. Paul Hammond (San Francisco: City Light Books, 2002), pp. 159–160.
- 32 Borde and Chaumeton, *Panorama*, p. 158.
- 33 In Jameson, *Postmodernism*, Fredric Jameson has observed that the older existential antiheroes have disappeared along with existentialism itself.