Crime, Guilt, and Subjectivity in *Film Noir*

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ABSTRACT

American *film noir* was "invented" as a genre in its own right in post-War France in an intellectual climate in which the figure of the criminal became a metaphor for "dark" dimensions of the self that remain incomprehensible. French critics thus grasped immediately what was new about *film noir*: the "enigmatic psychology" of its main characters. *Film noir* deals with crime—as does the gangster film—, but shifts the issue of crime from gangster to ordinary citizen. With this shift, questions of moral responsibility and the puzzle of criminal motivation move to the center of the *noir*-narrative. In what sense can an ordinary, often respectable citizen who has been drawn into crime by chance events, be considered "guilty" and held responsible for his deed? The essay analyzes three different types of *film noir* that provide different answers, based on different views of what it actually is that motivates and drives the subject. These *noir* theories of the subject range from the authentic self of the American outlaw and the repressed self of popular Freudianism to an "empty" self driven by desire, impulse, and mood that is subject only to the "absurd" guilt of the wrong impulse. This escalating story of self-dissolution places *film noir* in the context of a body of literary works, from Dostoievsky to Camus's *L'Étranger*, that deal with "meaningless," impulse-driven murder as supreme manifestations of the puzzle of subjectivity. It can also explain the ongoing fascination with *film noir* which, in its stylized theatricality, has found a way to transform "self-dissolution" into a "cool," pleasurable experience.

Film Noir Discourse

In contrast to many other genres of the classical Hollywood system, *film noir* has not gone out of fashion with a new generation of critics and students, although it certainly provides rich material for an unmasking of stereotypes along racial and gender lines.[1] This power of survival under critical scrutiny could already be observed in the radicalization of film studies in the 60s and 70s in which *film noir* was submitted to a

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[1] For recent analyses of *film noir* in terms of its political and racial unconscious, cf. Eric Lott's essay "The Whiteness of *Film Noir*," and the chapter "The Other Side of the Street" in James Naremore's book *More Than Night: Film Noir in Its Context*. For feminist film theory and film criticism, *film noir* has repeatedly provided a welcome point of reference. See, for example, the essay collection *Women in Film Noir*, edited by E. Ann Kaplan. Cowie's essay on "*Film Noir* and Women" in the volume *Shades of Noir*, edited by Joan Copjec, is symptomatic of the gradual changes in feminist approaches to *film noir*. While earlier analyses focus on the duplicitous woman in *film noir* as a projection of male anxiety, Cowie insists: "The fantasy of the woman's dangerous sexuality is a feminine as well as masculine fantasy, and its pleasures lie precisely in its forbiddenness" (136). Thus, a mere ideological critique "obscures the extent to which these films afforded women roles which are active, adventurous, and driven by sexual desire. ... As Janey Place has pointed out, in these films 'women are deadly but sexy, exciting, and strong.'" (135). Thus, "film noir is not exclusively a form in which a particular masculine fantasy of sexual difference is played out" (145).

series of analyses in terms of male "visual pleasure" and the gaze, but remained a privileged object of study nevertheless, even for apparatus theory and other approaches influenced by Lacan. The flow of publications setting in after a post-War generation of French cinéastes had described a particular set of American films as *film noir*, a term created in analogy to the series title of hard-boiled detective novels issued in France in the so-called *série noire*, has not subsided but gained renewed force in recent years.[2] In addition to a long, ever-growing list of books and essays in film studies, film criticism and cultural studies, a vast body of newspaper articles, program notes, film theater fliers and advance notices in city magazines has contributed to a by-now characteristic "*film noir* discourse" in which something like the common wisdom on *film noir* is circulating in endlessly repeated formulas: "Anyone familiar with the study of *film noir* . . . , can recite a list of such units or elements thought to be necessary to the definition of the genre: a femme fatale, a morally compromised detective, an urban setting, voice-over narration, convoluted plot structure, chiaroscuro lighting, skewed framing, and so on" (Copjec xi).

What is the reason for the continuing fascination with these American films of the 1940s and early 50s, many of them produced on low budget and as B-movies for smaller studios? Because so many publications on the topic exist already, one would expect it to be easy to find answers. However, the problem with most descriptions and analyses of *film noir* is that they are marred by what has motivated them: the open fascination with the object of study that gives many of these discussions an unmistakable identificatory note. Since most *film noirs* are action-packed genre movies—crime and detective stories, melodramas, or female gothic thrillers—and avoid explicit messages, not to speak of any suggestion of philosophical depth, it appears justified to immerse oneself in the evocation of a certain mood and atmosphere created with such skill by these movies.[3] Fittingly, the genre designation *film noir*, in referring to a specific atmosphere rather than a particular narrative genre, evokes a pleasurable immersion into a night-time atmosphere of dark suggestiveness.[4] Books on *film noir*, especially of more recent publication dates, mimic the atmospheric promise of the genre in their titles: *Kino der Nacht* (Heinzlmeier), *Somewhere in the Night* (Christopher), *Shades of Noir* (Copjec), *Dark Cinema* (Tuska), *Hollywood's Dark Cinema* (Palmer), *Dark City* (Selby), *Die lange Nacht der Schatten* (Steinbauer-Grötsch), *In a Lonely Street* (Krutnick) provide examples, whereas James Naremore, in one of the most recent books on *film noir*, either because he had run out of dark options or because of a rebellious itch, came up with the title *More Than Night*, thereby confirming the power of the night metaphor even in the attempt of going beyond it.

To immerse oneself in a night-time atmosphere is not always enough in today's critical climate, however. Hence, the second element of the prevailing *noir* discourse, that of the critical or subversive function of *film noir*. In its rejection of such staples of the classical Hollywood cinema as romantic love, the family romance and the happy ending, but also in its highly expressive visual style and its interest in narrative experimentation, *film noir* "has been valued by successive critics for its supposed challenges to or disruptions of the stylistic, narrative and generic norms of the 'classical' system of film-making" (Krutnick x).[5] This violation of traditional narrative and stylistic practices is usually seen as formal correlative of a critique of official America.[6] Again and again, the appeal of *film noir* is attributed to a post-War atmosphere of disillusion, distrust, alienation, loss of orientation and existential despair in which the quest for individual freedom is presented as a running around in circles or an existential trap. Why should it please us, however, especially in late-night shows, to encounter a sense of disillusion and a loss of orientation? One reason many critics imply is that the genre

opens our eyes to the "true" (= morally and politically corrupt) state of American society which classical Hollywood movies still obscure. To enjoy a *film noir* would then be a sign of maturity, a willingness to face the "reality" of American life. However, to celebrate the melodramatic fantasies of *film noir*, derived from American hard-boiled fiction and nowadays often characterized as male paranoia, as a revelation of the true state of American society means, again, to mimic the fictional material instead of analyzing it. As a form of social or political criticism, *film noir* hardly ever goes beyond the sweeping premise of a completely corrupt society and the romance of painful nonconformism, presented through highly contrived narrative constellations.

Even if we assumed for a moment that *film noir*'s analysis of American society were correct, would that in itself provide a sufficient explanation for the many reruns, revivals and retrospectives of *film noir*? How many confirmations of what critics regard as the corrupt state of American society do we actually need? There obviously is a strong gratification in being able to call American society unredeemably corrupt, as the often triumphant tone of the critics' verdict indicates. The social-criticism approach also has the advantage of making interpretation easy: all the critic has to do is to trace the fate of the main character(s) to the point of entrapment or self-destruction in order to arrive at an easy confirmation of the cruelty of the system. Still, even the pleasure of being able to criticize American society cannot, in itself, provide a sufficient explanation for why this form of social criticism should be so attractive. There are far more penetrating analyses and critiques of the American system available, but audiences hardly go back to them again and again and celebrate their "darkness." Darkness, however, provides an important cue here. Obviously, critique of the system and atmospheric dimension complement and reinforce each other, so that *film noir* can be considered an especially attractive form of social and cultural criticism for two interrelated reasons: on the one hand, it provides a critical perspective largely by atmosphere and mood, and yet the gritty, seemingly "realistic" black and white look of these movies endows this criticism with an air of realism and authenticity.

However, if a critical perspective is provided by an atmosphere of disillusionment, defeat, and despair that looks "realistic," the question still is why films pervaded by disillusionment, loneliness, self-destructive obsessions, alienation, fear, anxiety, and defeat should provide an experience which many people find highly fascinating and pleasing, so that they seek out the experience again and again? Why should it be "pleasurable" (in the larger sense of a strong aesthetic experience) to look at pictures that focus on loneliness, entrapment, or defeat?[7] Explanations are often evaded, most likely because they complicate the convenient self-deception of a hard-hitting social analysis, or, to put it differently, because critics have an emotional involvement in the fiction and thus use the claim of social criticism as a convenient screen. In the following essay, I therefore want to raise the question of *film noir*'s continuous appeal again by going beyond the night metaphor and a rhetoric of disillusion and distrust. As the

first part, in which I focus on the emergence of *film noir* out of the gangster film, attempts to demonstrate, the constitutive element of *film noir* is neither its expressionist shadow world, nor its critique of American society. Rather, the central issue of *film noir* is the question of guilt.

Both gangster film and *film noir* deal with crime. However, there is one major difference. In *film noir*, the crime is no longer committed by a "professional" criminal but by an "ordinary" citizen who is drawn—or appears to have been drawn—into crime by accident or some strange, unforeseen combination of factors. This transformation of citizen into criminal raises the question of guilt, which, in turn, raises the question of the subject's accountability for the crime he or she has committed. To take this link between crime, guilt, and subjectivity as a point of departure (and comparison between different *film noirs*) allows us to place *film noir* in the wider context of cultural history, instead of seeing it only as part of a history of the American cinema defined by artistic ups and downs. It also enables us to differentiate between various types of *film noir*. One of the unsatisfactory aspects about *film noir* criticism has been a large-scale homogenization of a rather diverse body of films.[8] Instead, it seems more productive and fitting to speak of an ongoing project in which certain hypotheses about crime, the criminal and his or her relation to society are constantly reformulated. In this essay, I want to distinguish at least three different types of *film noir*, all with their own and different definition of the *noir* project. These three kinds also represent three versions of the *noir* character: detective (investigator), "bourgeois" (ordinary but respectable citizen), and drifter.[9]

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[7] One might call this the "Edward Hopper question," because most descriptions of Hopper's paintings indulge in the evocation of a mood of loneliness and existential despair, without ever considering the question why such depictions of alienation have become so popular that they are placed on the walls of apartments, offices and restaurants or circulate in the wider culture in the form of picture post cards or calendars.

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[8] However, in *film noir* criticism, a growing awareness can be noted that there is not just one type of *film noir* but several. In his classical essay "Notes on *Film Noir*," Paul Schrader divides *film noir* into three broad phases: "The first, the wartime period, 1941-'46 approximately, was the phase of the private eye and the lone wolf . . . . The second phase was the post-war realistic period from 1945-'49 (the dates overlap and so do the films; these are all approximate phases for which there are many exceptions. These films tended more toward the problems of crime in the streets, political corruption and police routine.) . . . The third and final phase of *film noir*, from 1949-'53, was the period of psychotic action and suicidal impulse. The *noir* hero, seemingly under the weight of ten years of despair, started to go bananas" (58-59). In his study *The Dark Side of the Screen*, Foster Hirsch suggests distinguishing between three different narrative patterns, centered around the three central figures of investigator, victim, and psychopath. Frank Krutnick distinguishes between detective films and tough suspense thrillers. Walker suggests adding the category of paranoid films. In his excellent essay "Film Noir: Introduction," he distinguishes between three types: the first, influenced by Hammett and Chandler, has an investigative structure and a "seeker-hero" (10) who is repeatedly tested during the course of events; the second, relying mainly on James Cain, centers around a femme fatale and a "victim hero" (12) who lives in fear of discovery and punishment; the third, inspired, above all, by Cornell Woolrich, is called paranoid *noir*, in which the *noir* hero or heroine, often an amnesiac, "becomes a victim of a violent and hostile world and who lives in fear" (15). The basic difference between these approaches based on plot patterns and my own is that I put the question of guilt at the center of the *noir* narrative and distinguish between three different types of dealing with the issue of guilt.

[9] In the following argument, I use the terms "respectable citizen" and "bourgeois" interchangeably, depending on the ideological and rhetorical context.

From Gangster Movie to *film noir*

Contemporary film makers had no awareness that they were creating a new genre called *film noir*. Recent criticism has also questioned the defining role of a characteristic visual style, derived from German expressionism, because many of these techniques were already in use in genres like the horror or the gangster film.[10] To be sure, the distinctly expressive visual style of many *film noirs* and the impression of a hard-hitting realism many of them create cannot be ignored. Both constitute levels of meaning that contribute to the experience of watching a *film noir*. But, in the final analysis, they function as supporting cast, not as main actor. The essential source of meaning in *film noir* are certain narrative constellations, while expressive visual style and hard-hitting realism provide crucial support systems to present these stories from a specific perspective.[11]

Wherein does the *noir* narrative consist? Why are gangster or social problem films like *Scarface, You Only Live Once, The Roaring Twenties, Angels with Dirty Faces* or *High Sierra*, in which we already find many visual features of *film noir*, not considered *noir*, while *The Maltese Falcon* is? Why is the gangster film of the 1930s, already dealing with crime, passion, and sexual obsession, not yet seen as *film noir*? Sylvia Harvey notes that *film noir* offers examples of "abnormal or monstrous behavior, which defy the patterns established for human social interaction." (22) But so does the gangster film! Both, gangster film and *film noir*, are films about crime. But in *film noir*, it is now the ordinary citizen who has committed the crime, or is suspected of having committed a crime or comes dangerously close to the world of crime. This, in turn, raises the crucial question of the guilt of the citizen turned criminal.[12]

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[10] Detailed discussions of this point can be found in Marc Vernet's essay "Film Noir on the Edge of Doom" (which also contains a penetrating critique of the thesis of the central influence of German expressionism) and chapter 5 of Naremore's *More Than Night*. As Naremore points out, there are "classical" *film noirs* such as *Out of the Past* that show "almost none of the traits that Place and Peterson claim are essential to the visual atmosphere of film noir" (175). Naremore's reference is to the classical analysis of the visual level of *film noir*, the essay "Some Visual Motifs of Film Noir," published by Janey Place and Lowell Peterson in 1974. On the other side, there are quite a number of movies that have all the visual trappings of a *film noir* but are not considered *noir* by general consent: "All the stylistic features they describe can be found in pictures that have never been classified as noir" (167).

[11] Still the best and most systematic description of *film noir*'s visual style can be found in Janey Place and Lowell Peterson, "Some Visual Motifs of *Film Noir*," published first in 1974.

[12] In my emphasis on the issue of guilt as a distinguishing feature of *film noir*, I also differ from Damico's attempt to offer something like the exemplary narrative formula of *film noir*. Convincingly, Damico claims that what we consider the typical style of *film noir* is actually an iconography and suggests that the common denominator of *noir* films lies in their narrative structure, for which he provides a basic formula: "Either he is fated to do so or by chance, or because he has been hired for a job specifically associated with her, a man whose experience of life has left him sanguine and often bitter meets a not-innocent woman of similar outlook to whom he is sexually and fatally attracted. Through this attraction, either because the woman induces him to it or because it is the natural result of their relationship, the man comes to cheat, attempt to murder, or actually murder a second man to whom the woman is unhappily or unwillingly attached (generally he is her husband or lover), an act which often leads to the woman's betrayal of the protagonist, but which in any event brings about the sometimes metaphoric, but usually literal destruction of the woman, the man to whom she is attached, and frequently the protago-

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The focus on the issue of guilt explains some of the essential traits of *film noir*: 1) the "psychologization" of crime in *film noir* which was already noted by Nino Frank in 1946 when he suggested that the "new kind of detective film" would be more appropriately called "crime adventure or, even better yet, the crime psychology film" (21):

> In these films, the essential question no longer has to do with who committed the crime, but with how the protagonist handles himself. It isn't necessary that the adventures with which he becomes involved be comprehensible in any detail (I would be unable to describe with any precision the series of episodes that constitute the narratives of these films); of sole importance is the enigmatic psychology of the various characters, who are at the same time enemies and friends. (Frank 22)[13]

2) the characteristic investigative narrative structure of *film noir* which is centered around an enigma, that is, something that should not have happened or can hardly be explained; 3) the use of flashback and voice-over as crucial means of reviewing what has happened and explaining it from the subjective point of view of the character who has become guilty; 4) the "dark" and often expressive visual style which attempts to give expression to subjective states of feeling and, specifically, to the moral ambiguity in which the characters find themselves.[14]

The central role of the question of guilt in *film noir* can best be appreciated by tracing the gradual transformation of the gangster movie into *film noir*. Several of the gangster movies mentioned above feature Humphrey Bogart, for many *the* exemplary *film noir* hero,[15] in leading roles and thereby provide an interesting point of comparison for grasping the difference between gangster movie and *film noir*. In a classical

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nist himself" (103). This formula can neither explain variants of *film noir* like the detective story, nor the women's paranoia thriller. The main enigma around which *film noir* is constituted is not the crime which Damico describes but the attempt to explain it.

[13] Cf. also Elizabeth Cowie: "*Film noir* can therefore be viewed as a kind of development of melodrama so that whereas earlier the obstacles to the heterosexual couple had been external forces of family and circumstance, wars or illness, in the *film noir* the obstacles derive from the characters' psychology or even pathology as they encounter external events" (130).

[14] Steinbauer-Grötsch sees the function of the visual style of *film noir* in what she calls "die Übertragung von Emotionen und Seelenzuständen der Figuren in visuelle Zeichen" (133). Walker sees the term 'expressionism' as "convenient shorthand for the notion of the outer world expressing the inner world of the characters . . . . It is a 'heightened' form, bringing into play exaggeration, distortion, the grotesque and the nightmarish . . ." (26). He, too, emphasizes "the correlation between *noir* expressionism and inner anxieties" (30).

[15] Marc Vernet strongly emphasizes the role Bogart played in the French perception of *film noir*: "In short, until today or nearly so the actors of the 1940s and 1950s have looked natural to us because their visual form belongs to the modernity to which we still think that we belong, whereas those of the 1930s derive for us from another aesthetic that makes them look too stereotypical, overdone and thus ridiculous. Moreover there can be no doubt that the actor Bogart, in the second half of his career, did much to effect this change, and we must not try to hide from ourselves the fact that the definition of film noir owes a great deal to him, to the extent that it was clearly organized around him, around his new stardom" (23). As Naremore points out, the world-weary Bogart epitomized "the dark emotional moods favored by Continental artists or the postwar decade," especially for the French: "Bogart's persona was tough, introspective, emotionally repressed, and fond of whiskey and cigarettes; within certain limits, he suggested a liberal intellectual, and he was sometimes cast in the role of a writer or director" (27). Robert Mitchum would later say: "I came into being during the era of ugly leading men started by Humphrey Bogart . . ." (qtd. in Flinn 45).

gangster movie of the 1930s such as *Angels with Dirty Faces*, the character played by Bogart is still an entirely negative figure, a thoroughly "bad" gangster, in contrast to the "good-bad" gangster played by James Cagney. The basis for this characterization is a clear-cut moral opposition between the semantic fields "goodness" and "badness." One field is represented by Cagney's childhood friend, who has become a priest and looks after wayward boys, while the other field is represented by the gangster played by Bogart, an evil character with no redeeming features whatsoever. In a manner typical of most popular culture of the classical Hollywood period, Cagney stands between these two characters and realms. Although a gangster, he has retained a basic decency and shares a sense of responsibility with the priest for the street kids. In the end, he has to die in the electric chair but acts the role of a coward in order not to become a role model for the street kids who still waver between the two semantic fields. As Robert Warshow has pointed out, the gangster is redeemed by becoming a "tragic hero."[16] There is ambiguity, to be sure, but only temporarily, because the semantic fields of goodness and badness remain clearly distinguishable points of moral reference. This, in effect, is already indicated by the title of the film: instead of becoming gangsters, the street kids remain angels with dirty faces.

In *High Sierra*, Bogart, who had been still in a supporting role in *Angels with Dirty Faces*, now plays the main character, a "bad" gangster, called, tellingly, "Mad Dog Earle."[17] However, surprisingly and somewhat unexpectedly, the film manages to present him as a sympathetic figure, in fact, as the only sympathetic figure in the film (together with another lost soul who remains his loyal companion until the fatal end, the female outcast played by Ida Lupino). This redefinition of a "mad dog" gangster is made possible by a blurring of the stable semantic oppositions of the gangster movie. While, on the one hand, we still have a violent, "bad" gangster, the remarkable thing about *High Sierra* — considered by many a first step toward *film noir* — is that the other side has also become affected by modern times. When Bogart meets a family of farmers from the Midwest on their way to the West Coast, the tough guy with a sentimental core is so touched by the basic decency of these common people straight out of the populist cinema of the 1930s, that he finances an operation for their shy, lovely young daughter, who is handicapped by a clubfoot. However, as soon as she has recovered from the successful operation, she begins to run around with a superficial and shady set of characters in order to catch up as quickly as possible on the fun her clubfoot had prevented her from having.

In *High Sierra*, the dividing line between characters with a moral code and those without one is no longer goodness or badness but old times and modern times. The older generation, no matter whether they are gangsters or farmers, still possesses integrity in that it observes a certain code of behavior, whereas the younger generation has been corrupted by consumer society. With this "infection" of the semantic field of goodness, the figure of the gangster assumes the almost heroic dimension of a Samurai warrior from a gone-by period who is still following his own code, is therefore not corruptible, and, even as a criminal, acts on an innate sense of integrity and loyalty.

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[16] Warshow, "The Gangster as Tragic Hero."

[17] *High Sierra* and *The Maltese Falcon* were crucial stepping stones in Bogart's climb from contract player to authentic stardom.

Fittingly, his inevitable death is staged as a heroic "last stand." The gangster, in the films of the 1930s still the impatient, supremely selfish person who is driven by megalomaniac ambitions, becomes the actual hero of the film, because he is not only a man with principles but also the only one who has the guts to stand up for them. In the end, his last stand in his battle with the police may not have the redeeming features of Cagney's feigned conversion experience in *Angels with Dirty Faces*. But it turns him into a valiant warrior in the manner of the Indian of the historical novel for whom the fight until the very end is a matter of self-respect. The gangster, it turns out, has become the last of the Mohicans.

In *The Maltese Falcon*, considered by many critics to be the first genuine *film noir*,[18] the semantic field of "goodness" is no longer preserved even by a generational divide. In effect, it has dwindled down to irrelevance.[19] Everybody, it seems, including Sam Spade, is cheating and manipulating everybody else, although in the end we realize that Spade has done so partly for strategic reasons and that deep down he is still a moral and loyal person who has not forgotten that his partner was killed. In keeping with the theme of constant deception, temptation, and manipulation, the film unfolds in a series of personal encounters which function as tests of the detective's survival skills and integrity. This explains why *The Maltese Falcon*, in contrast to its image, is not an action movie but a film rich in conversational exchanges full of insinuations, indecent offers, and constant wise-cracking, in which relations to the seductive woman are presented as tests of self-control.[20] Since society is regarded as irredeemably corrupt, it can no longer provide a satisfactory source of self-respect. The good, it seems, cannot survive or they remain victims forever. In consequence, the hero is left alone to find another source of self-respect. His dilemma, which stands at the center of detective *noir* narrative, is how to adapt methods and skills from the semantic field of "badness" without becoming corrupted by them. Like Rick Blaine in *Casablanca*, the detectives played by Bogart in *film noir* thus have a bit of the outlaw, "operating outside a corrupt legal system in the name of some higher, private notion of justice" (Ray 101).[21] The "guilt" of the detective results from the fact that, in the tradition of Ameri-

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[18] Cf., for example, Maxfield: "Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) established the basic plot motifs of *film noir* – the evil seductress, the tempted hero, an atmosphere of pervasive evil" (26).

[19] Sam Spade's secretary may be the only one to qualify, but she cannot possibly represent the nucleus of a counter-world to the all-pervasive corruption of the social realm.

[20] This formula was further developed and brought to performative perfection in the popular Bogart-Bacall movies *To Have and Have Not* and *The Big Sleep*. In his essay on "John Huston and *The Maltese Falcon*," James Naremore argues that this performative dimension gives Huston's version an edge over Hammett's: "Hammett writes very well . . . , but in comparison the book seems a bit pale, without the edge of visual wit and the almost electric tension of the film" (246).

[21] In his comments on *Casablanca*, Ray places the Bogart figure of the 1940s in the tradition of the lone American hero who is set up against a corrupt system and has to rely on his own code of behavior: "While Laszlo relied on the law, Rick, like all Western heroes, took it into his own hands, replacing an insufficient, corrupt system with his individual standards of right and wrong . . ." (102). Besides *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Big Sleep*, *Dead Reckoning* with its investigative structure and Bogart's resistance to the femme fatale also fits this model, as do many other examples of the "returning veteran" plot such as *The Blue Dahlia*, scripted by Raymond Chandler. In his essay on the attraction which the American hard-boiled novel held for French

can individualism, he must take the law into his own hands, often to clear himself from false charges.[22]

The Falsely Accused Citizen

In contrast to the impression created by the popularity and high visibility of Bogart's films of the 1940s, the Bogart figure presents only one option in *film noir*. In a way, one might even say that he remains a special case, because the shady character who appears to stand outside the law is usually successful in the end in proving that he is not guilty. Perhaps this is the reason why *The Maltese Falcon, To Have and Have Not*, and *The Big Sleep* have become so popular: because, despite the rain and other evocations of an atmosphere of moral ambiguity, the challenge of self-assertion remains a playful performance in which the hero never loses control.[23] The hero masquerades as a shady character but, as it turns out in the end, only in order to make himself more effective as moral force. Chandler himself drew attention to the analogy between Marlowe and the knight of the medieval romance who rescues the damsel in distress.[24] This romantic role play may be subverted ironically, but that only increases its efficacy.[25] Bogart, however, did not always play this role in *film noir*. In *Dark Passage*, he is an escaped convict who is falsely accused of murder and has to undergo a facial operation in order to change his appearance.[26] After the operation, performed by a shady-looking surgeon who has lost his license, his face is completely enveloped by bandages while he stumbles through the city like a mummy. This powerful image of

isolation reveals the price the citizen has to pay, if he is not able to play the game as Sam Spade or Philip Marlowe do: he is falsely accused, forced to become a fugitive, to change his face and name—with the risk of losing his identity and being turned into a monster. What saves him is the "good woman," a mother-figure of noble, nurturing qualities, made bearable in this particular case only by Bacall's understated, raunchy-voiced performance.[27]

In *Dark Passage*, the respectable citizen Bogart, who was an architect before he was accused of murder and sent to prison, is blameless. Without knowing what hit him, he becomes a victim hounded by an unholy trinity of police, criminals, and an unknown murderer. In the end, he finds the murderess but is unable to prove his case, so that he will always remain a fugitive. There is no guilt on his part, only an amazing naiveté about how far other human beings are willing to go in the pursuit of their own obsessions. Innocence in moral terms is also innocence about human weaknesses. This gradually changes in later *film noirs* with Bogart. In *In a Lonely Place*, the theme of being falsely accused is repeated, but with a new twist: in his uncontrollable temper, the Bogart figure appears suspicious to the heroine (who finally deserts him), until, in the end, his "guilt" turns out to be his own creative obsession, for which he is willing to sacrifice everything else. In the development from gangster to detective to falsely accused citizen, the Bogart figure has finally become an artist whose only "guilt" lies in the guilt of being different. His "crime" (and curse) is that of being creative. Consequently, there is no need for punishment in the end. We just have to learn to live with the creative nonconformist who exists according to rules of his own.[28]

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intellectuals, Lehan also refers to the outsider status of the detective figure: "Camus also saw that the world of the detective novel was the world of the outsider. The heroes of Cain's and Hammett's novels, for example, are social malcontents who live dynamically on the fringes of society" (195).

[22] One of the first critics to place the tough-guy hero in a literary tradition of American individualism, beginning with the Leatherstocking myth, was Henry Bamford Parkes in his essay "Metamorphoses of Leatherstocking." See also the by now classical accounts of Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, John Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery and Romance*, and Richard Slotkin's *Regeneration through Violence*.

[23] On the central, often overlooked role of performance in *The Big Sleep*, see my essay on American culture of performance, "Emergence or Collapse of Cultural Hierarchy? American Popular Culture Seen from Abroad" 59-62.

[24] On "the spectacle of an idealism, already infected by neurosis and obsessive behaviour, in full retreat, though unrepentant and with nowhere to go," see my essay "'Powerful, but extremely depressing books': Raymond Chandlers Romane."

[25] Another example of the eventually victorious tough guy in *film noir* is provided by films with George Raft such as *Johnny Angel*. However, in contrast to Bogart, Raft presents the type with no self-irony whatsoever. Although creating a *noir* atmosphere, his films therefore look very dated in their heavy-handed assertion of hard-boiled masculinity and an unflappable superiority in all situations of challenge.

[26] As Wolfenstein and Leites were the first to point out, the theme of being falsely accused is a recurring narrative form of dealing with the issue of guilt in *film noir*. The usefulness of this narrative pattern lies in the possibility of linking the main character with the appearance of guilt in a temporary and tentative way. In addition to *Dark Passage*, examples are provided by *The High Wall, The Dark Corner, Fallen Angel, Mildred Pierce, Out of the Past*, and *Crack-Up*. A special variant of the falsely accused narrative is the story of the amnesiac, as, for example, in films like *Somewhere in the Night, Spellbound, D.O.A.*, or *The Crooked Way*.

[27] This raises the crucial issue of women in *film noir*. *Film noir* is not an exclusively male genre. There are films about women placed in the position of the investigator (*Phantom Lady*), about women being falsely accused (*The Blue Gardenia, Mildred Pierce*), about women who become victims of their own imaginary projections (*Sudden Fear, Possessed*), who fall victim to a "reckless" moment that leads to murder (*The Accused*) or who have to fight against a threat to their bourgeois existence (*The Reckless Moment*). There is not only male paranoia but also female paranoia, films in which the female is the focalizing figure and the male the mysterious, unknowable, enigmatic projection of sexual anxiety: "Here, the male is the dangerous enigma and the heroine's experience of him is the structural equivalent of the hero's experience of the *femme fatale* in *film noir*" (Walker 18). Examples of this type of female paranoia in the period of *film noir* are *Rebecca, Suspicion, Gaslight, Caught, Dragonwyck, The Spiral Staircase, Experiment Perilous, Sleep My Love, Sorry Wrong Number, Secret beyond the Door, The Two Mrs. Carrolls, Undercurrent, My Name Is Julia Ross, Shock, Possessed, Woman on the Beach, Whirlpool*. For a helpful comparison of *film noir* and female gothic films of the 40s, see Murray Smith's essay on "*Film Noir*, the Female Gothic and Deception," in which Smith points out "how the two forms mirror each other, *film noir* dealing with the investigation of the female, the female gothic with the investigation of the male" (64). See also Krutnick's summary of the basic narrative pattern of the genre: "These films situate the female protagonist as victim to a real or imagined conspiracy, in which her husband (usually) is seeking either to murder her or to drive her mad" (194-95). The important point in discussing *film noir* is thus not so much the dominance of one gender-perspective but the strained relations between the sexes. One of the utopian elements of traditional versions of romantic love is that it is founded on "blind" trust; its redescription in *film noir* is part of the larger project of clarifying how far the general corruption really goes and whom one can still trust. This issue has become especially complicated in relation to the other sex, because *film noirs* suggest that love may be more adequately defined as desire or obsession.

[28] This development is carried to a point close to caricature in another Bogart movie of the period, *The Two Mrs. Carrolls*, in which Bogart portrays an artist modeled after the popular im-

Subjective Camera, Flashback and Voice-Over

In *Dark Passage,* the "innocence" of the main character, his ignorance, if not denial of the "darker" recesses of the human psyche, leads to a situation of utter vulnerability and helplessness. This provides the film with a special emotional intensity; fittingly, the film begins with a typical scene of the social problem film of the 1930s, the escape from prison, which, staged by subjective camera and a voice-over narration, makes the viewer fear for the narrator's discovery, no matter whether he is guilty or not.[29] The subjective camera, applied consistently in only one other *film noir* of the period, *The Lady in the Lake,* did not become a typical feature of *film noir,* but the voice-over emerged as a standard narrational device. With it, the narrative establishes a subjective point-of-view through which the main character looks back at the unforeseen turn his life has taken and tries to explain how he became guilty or falsely accused. This use of voice-over as review of a past event is intimately linked to the issue of guilt. Seen "objectively," from the point of view of the law, his or her crime seems inexcusable; seen subjectively, we begin to understand the unfortunate set of chance events that have led to the violation of the law (or the—false—accusation of having violated it) and feel inclined to acknowledge that the question of guilt is a much more complicated one than the legal system allows.[30] In this sense, the question of justice is an important issue of *film noir. Film noir* can be seen as a genre that attempts to do justice to individuals who have become guilty (or seem to have done so).[31]

Within this larger context of a "subjectivation" of guilt, the narrative device of the voice-over can have different functions. In *Dark Passage,* its main function consists in articulating the claims of the innocent. All appearances are against the main character,

nobody seems to believe him, his situation appears hopeless. The narrative perspective, however, skilfully places us in the position of a trustworthy confidant. On the other hand, in films like *Out of the Past, Double Indemnity, The Postman Always Rings Twice* or *Detour,* the narrative devices of voice-over and flashback provide the narrative with an effective sense of inevitability and fatalism. Gundolf S. Freyermuth calls this "narrating a fait accompli." "Nichts läßt sich mehr retten, alles ist schon geschehen" (91). This, in turn, changes the perspective on guilt. Since there cannot be any doubt that the main character has committed a crime, flashback and voice-over no longer have the function of proving his innocence by telling his side of the story. Rather, the focus lies on the circumstances that drove the main character into crime and the reflection of whether, and to what extent, he must be considered guilty.[32]

Criminal and Citizen: Blurring the Boundaries

The guilt of the main character of *Dark Passage* turns out to be a case of false appearance, so that the cruel, indifferent world, which is willing to sacrifice a person on the basis of false appearance, is actually the "guilty" party. In contrast, the main character of *Out of the Past,* Jeff Bailey (Robert Mitchum), leaves no doubt that, although he did not actually commit the murder for which he is sought by the police, he has his share in the crime and only to blame himself for his fate. Films like *Double Indemnity* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* go even further. In both films, based on quintessential existentialist hard-boiled novels by James M. Cain, the main character has committed cold-blooded, premeditated murder. There cannot be any doubt about his guilt. Consequently, in all three films the voice-over and flashback narration has the function of making us understand how the main character got drawn into crime. Jeff Bailey is a private detective who, in contrast to Sam Spade or Philip Marlowe, could not resist temptation, Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) in *Double Indemnity,* is an insurance salesman, Frank Chambers (John Garfield) in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* is a carefree drifter. All three become criminals but none is a gangster. The gangster movie starts out with a gangster and, in cases like *Angels with Dirty Faces,* ends up with a redeemed citizen, *film noir* focuses on an ordinary citizen and then reveals that potentially every man or woman, under certain circumstances, can become a criminal. In *Dark Passage,* as in innumerable other stories of false appearance, the ordinary, law-abiding citizen is threatened by some mysterious, unknown force which seems intent on destroying him. His fate depends on whether the truly guilty can be found, but since society can no longer be relied upon to secure justice, he has to take

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age of the mad genius van Gogh. Thus, the main character's guilt now consists in his madness, which, in turn, needs a fitting gothic ambience such as isolated English country houses, pouring rain storms and a whole array of mysterious events. An analogous interpretation of the guilt of the main character is provided in *A Double Life,* in which Ronald Coleman plays an extraordinarily gifted actor whose greatness has its source in the fact that he literally slips into the characters he portrays on stage, until one day, in playing Othello, he can barely be prevented from choking his own wife to death. Both of these films are typically *noir* in visual style but old-fashioned in their conceptualization of guilt by drawing heavy-handedly on the romantic figure of the double and interpreting the main character as a case of split personality.

[29] In the 1950 edition of *The Novel of Violence in America 1920-1950,* which, in contrast to later editions, still contains a chapter on James Cain, Wilbur M. Frohock had pointed out one of the crucial consequences of the shift in point of view typical of hard-boiled fiction: "We have been tricked onto taking the position of potential accomplices" (98).

[30] In the film *Leave Her to Heaven,* for example, the main character's lawyer offers to tell a story that "couldn't be told in court—I was the only one who knew the whole story." Clearly, this "subjectivation" of the issue of guilt provides the ground for activating the spectator's empathy. The gangster of the typical gangster film of the 1930s does not interest us as a person, because his psychology is crude, almost "primitive." This, in fact, makes him an object of curiosity and, ultimately, a spectacle viewed from a safe distance. In contrast, the *noir* character who tells and reviews his story in voice-over engages our interest as a person because he shares his or her secrets with us.

[31] The question of whether and how justice can be achieved forms an important aspect of the denouement of *film noirs,* e.g., in court room scenes at the end of the film (*The Postman Always Rings Twice, The Accused, Scarlet Street*).

[32] Turim points out that "*Film noir* flashbacks are of two basic types. One, which I will call the investigative structure, examines the past to solve a crime. ... The second major type of noir flashback construction is the confessional flashback, characterized by the protagonist's retrospective examination of the ways he was introduced to his current criminality" (172). Since, as Chartier notes with regards to *Double Indemnity,* "the guilty party is the man who speaks, there can be no question of mystery in the proper sense of the term. As compensation, the film represents before our very eyes the psychological motives that push Walter to abandon himself to the compelling mechanism of the criminal scheme" (26).

matters into his own hand. In *Out of the Past, Double Indemnity*, and *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, but also in another classic *film noir*, *Detour*, the ordinary citizen is the guilty person. The boundary line between citizen and criminal becomes blurred. As these stories suggest, there is the possibility at any given moment that even the respectable citizen may become a criminal, given the right combination of desire and chance encounter.

Guilt and Motivation

This presents a remarkable shift in the classical Hollywood system and American culture at large. Since the citizen-turned-criminal is clearly not a gangster, that is, a professional criminal, but an—often bumbling—amateur who got drawn into crime, the issue of guilt has to be reconsidered. What exactly is it that caused the citizen to commit a crime? To what extent can he or she be considered responsible or accountable? Traditional models of explanation and judgment which still anchor the gangster movie are challenged. By emphasizing the almost accidental way in which the main character was drawn into crime, *film noir* dissolves conventional moral oppositions and conflates them; by using flashback, voice-over, and subjective camera, it places us in the roles of confidant as well as accomplice and makes us sympathize with the criminal. On what grounds, however, can we sympathize with a criminal? One important effect of the narrative flashback structure is to make us differentiate between the criminal act itself and the motivation.

Gangster films are films about the elation of not having to obey the law, the anarchic pleasure of being able to set one's own laws. *Film noirs* are films about the puzzle of criminal motivation which, in turn, is crucial for the determination of guilt, not only in legal but also in moral terms. However, in contrast to psychological realism, the question of motivation is not pursued in a psychologically complex manner in *film noir*. The main characters of *Out of the Past, Double Indemnity*, and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* are plain, thoroughly average characters who do not possess much psychological depth and, therefore, are easily hooked. Their real guilt does not consist in their crime, which is the result of an accidental combination of circumstances beyond their control. It lies in their inner weakness which brought them into this mess in the first place. This, in effect, is a basic pattern in *film noir*: the guilt of the characters who have committed a crime (or seem to have done so) consists in an inner weakness which prevents them from resisting the lure of desirable objects. The laconic confession of Walter Neff at the beginning of *Double Indemnity* sums up this "superficial" logic of desire: "I did it for money and I did it for a woman. I didn't get the money and I didn't get the woman."

Inner Weakness and the Imaginary Object

If the actual guilt of *noir* characters consists in their inner weakness, what is the source of this weakness? What exactly is it that makes him "weak"? And why is this weakness especially susceptible to money and women? Actually, the two are hardly on

an equal level in *film noir*. To be sure, money provides an important incentive. But the real trouble for the characters starts when, one day, they encounter a woman whose appearance strikes their imagination like lightning. In *film noir*, there are basically two ways to achieve this effect. One is the impact of the portrait of a beautiful, mysterious woman, as, for example in *Laura* or *The Woman in the Window*, the other an encounter with a provocative femme fatale. The form of presentation is significant here. In *Out of the Past*, Jeff Bailey (Robert Mitchum) is stranded in a Mexican town, idling his time away in a bar, when one day a beautiful woman (Jane Greer), clad entirely in white, walks out of the sun into the bar. In his description of the scene, Maxfield captures the almost magical quality of the moment: "His comment in voice-over on her appearance—'And then I saw her ... coming out of the sun'—invests her with an otherwordly, almost transcendent quality (as does his description of her second entrance: 'And then she walked in out of the moonlight—smiling')" (Maxfield 58).[33] Even at a later stage, after a string of disappointments, Bailey insists: "There was still that something about her that got me. A kind of magic, or whatever it was."[34] This magical, almost phantasmagoric quality of the object of desire is brought down to a somewhat more earthy fetishistic level in *Double Indemnity*, where the main character's first look at the woman who will lead him into crime is at a scantily clad Barbara Stanwyck and then, when she has dressed and comes down the stairs, at her legs sporting an especially alluring anklet.[35] In *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, fetish and phantasmagoria are ingeniously linked in another stunning appearance of the heroine. In the otherwise bleak setting of a roadside diner, a lipstick rolls toward the male character, who raises his eyes and looks at a woman, provocatively dressed in a white two-part bathing suit and a turban, who looks like a cross between grand lady and pin-up.[36] In all three cases there is an element of magic that explains how the main character can be captured by an image. In each case, what we have are basically pas-

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[33] Cf. also Naremore's description of the same scene: "Her light clothing makes her almost invisible on the brilliant, sun-drenched plaza, but when she steps into the room she seems to materialize out of brightness ..." (178).

[34] Another example of the "stunning entry" of the femme fatale is provided by Rita Hayworth in *Gilda*, of which Rabius gives an enthusiastic account. He, too, describes her first appearance as "magical moment" (115). One also thinks of Mary Astor's first appearance in *The Maltese Falcon* and Lauren Bacall's in *To Have and Have Not*. In other *film noirs*, the "magic" spectacle the femme fatale presents is foregrounded by the deliberately "made up," theatrical dimension of her appearance.

[35] This fetishized dimension also characterizes the first appearance of the femme fatale in *Gun Crazy* who appears as a sharpshooter in Western drag: "Given those skills and his isolated state, the sudden introduction of the beautiful, sharpshooting Laurie into his life has for Bart the force of an apparition, a dream come true" (Kitses 27).

[36] Cf. Dyer's description: "Her famous first appearance—the roll of her lipstick along the floor attracting his (and the camera's) attention, followed by a track back along the floor, up her bare legs to her white shorts and halter top—is very directly sexual, and throughout the film her brilliant white clothes are both eye-catching and a sign of the heat of the summer (with all that connotes)" (193). The deliberately unreal, "made-up" aspect of the femme fatale's appearance, characteristic of all three films but developed most effectively here, is especially obvious in comparison with Bob Rafelson's remake of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1981), which tries to remain within the realm of the realistic and plausible and therefore refuses to capture the magic of the scene.

sive characters who are led into crime by something that grasps their imagination and focuses their desire.

What exactly is this "something"? Most critics, taking their cue from the artificial, "unreal" character of the femme fatale in *film noir*, have attributed the melodramatic fantasy of temptation, seduction, and eventual destruction to a deep distrust in male-female relations and a concurrent male paranoia, reflecting a traumatic post-War situation in which men tried to recuperate their scarred self-consciousness at the expense of women.[37] It is striking indeed to what extent *film noir* is dominated by experiences of betrayal by the other sex, but, mostly, by men through women. Many *film noirs*, however, do not just reproduce that "melodrama of beset manhood" but also identify its source in the hero. They draw attention to the part the hero himself plays in the drama, for example, by emphasizing the unreal appearance of the femme fatale which foregrounds her imaginary dimension.[38] The power (and hold) of the femme fatale over the main character derives from the fact that she is an imaginary construct, so that an important part of the suspense derives from the question whether and how the main character will be able to liberate himself from the hold of his own imaginary.

Guilt and Repression

A number of *film noirs* thematize the issue of the construction of an imaginary object openly and can be distinguished by how they deal with the issue. Film titles like *Gilda*, *Laura* or *The Woman in the Window* already announce the project. Of the three films, Fritz Lang's *The Woman in the Window* is probably the most thrilling as a crime story. But it also provides the most conventional explanation of the question of guilt. Both aspects are closely interrelated. When Professor Wanley, played by Edward G. Robinson, looks at the portrait of a beautiful woman in a store window, she suddenly appears next to him. Although, as a respectable citizen and family man he is by no means out for a fling, he joins her for a drink in her apartment where a number of unfortunate coincidences lead to his murdering a man in self-defense. Without intention, by mere chance, the respectable citizen has become guilty. From then on, he has to hide his crime. The film draws considerable suspense from the fear of whether and

when the guilt of this decent citizen will be discovered and whether he will be punished for the one "weak" moment in which he was "off guard."[39] In the end, when the situation appears to become hopeless and he takes poison to escape the shame of discovery, he is "rescued" by revealing that everything, including his suicide, was only a dream. For Fritz Lang, the director of the film, this dream reflects unconscious wishes, and it is part of his characteristically ironical touch that Professor Wanley is a professor of psychology who lectures on the unconscious but considers himself beyond its grasp.[40] In true Langian fashion, the film thus teaches a lesson to the self-complacent bourgeois and reminds him how close he lives to the abyss.[41] However, because the film focuses on the melodramatic sequence of a moment "off-guard," the fear of discovery, and the need of having to hide one's guilt in order not to "fall" out of respectability, it is less interested in investigating the act of imaginary construction itself. Since the source of that imaginary construction is a hidden, repressed wish from the psychic "underworld," the main drama lies in the "break-through" of the repressed wish and the (melo)drama of failed repression.

Guilt and the Imaginary Object

The guilt of the respectable citizen in films like *Woman in the Window*, the sequel *Scarlet Street* or *The Accused* results from a repressed wish. In contrast, *Gilda* and *Laura* dramatize the dangerous, obsessive, and ultimately self-destructive dimension of the act of imaginary construction itself. In *Laura*, the trigger is again a portrait, depicting another beautiful, mysterious-looking woman who appears to have been murdered. Attracted by her image, the investigating police detective begins to turn the search for her murderer into the search for the "secret" of her personality and, in the process, begins to fall in love with her portrait. The analogies between the imaginary activity needed to solve a murder case and the imaginary construction of a desirable object are thus foregrounded. In both cases, a single clue becomes the speculative basis for a narrative that may later turn out to be false. In a fascinating scene, reminiscent of the moment in Hitchcock's *Rebecca* in which the nameless heroine visits the bedroom of the deceased Rebecca, the absence of the person becomes the nourishing

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[37] A version of this explanation, still circulating, is the "Rosie the Riveter-thesis" which claims that homecoming soldiers after the War encountered a situation in which females had begun to work in war production. They had thus gained a new independence and self-assertiveness to which male paranoia was a response. But most of the representations of the femme fatale in *film noir* derive from the hard-boiled fiction of the 1930s or continue in that tradition. The origins of *film noir* in pulp fiction help explain its distinctive attitude toward the representation of women. In effect, detective-*noir* can be seen as a continuation of the male adventure story moved to the city. It is thus linked to a long tradition of American fictions in which the flight from civilization and the woman stands at the center.

[38] Hirsch claims that "all of noir's fatal women seem to move in a dreamlike landscape" and thus speaks of their "dreamlike otherness" (157). The mysterious "woman in the window," for example, in Fritz Lang's film of the same title, is called a dream girl right at the beginning of the film. As Appel points out, the implausibility of her behavior confirms the dream metaphor. Her "isolation and ignorance, her encapsulated existence—*her* life in the dark, so to speak—also point to the illogic of dream, that disconnectedness we readily recognize" (15).

[39] As Paul Jensen reports, Fritz Lang thought the often criticized ending of the film, in which the main character "gets away," necessary, since "if I had continued the story to its logical conclusion, a man would have been caught and executed for committing a murder because he was one moment off guard" (157).

[40] The film draws attention to this Freudian frame of interpretation on several occasions. For example, when Wanley gives one of his lectures, the name Freud is written on the blackboard. Under it, "divisional constitutions of mental life" are listed: 1) Unconscious, preconscious, conscious; 2) id, ego, superego. When Wanley and his middle-aged friends see the portrait of the woman in the window for the first time, one of them calls her their "dream girl." Later, he warns about the danger of not controlling one's desire: "In the D.A.'s office we see what happens to middle aged men who try to act like colts."

[41] For a similar story of the sudden intrusion of danger into a comfortable middle-class existence from a female point of view, see Lang's own *The Blue Gardenia* and *The Accused*, in which the heroine is also drawn into a murder by a rare moment off guard and, in *The Accused*, is a professor of psychology as well.

ground for the construction of an idealized object of desire. Using the popular title song of the film with great skill, director Otto Preminger, in a long tracking shot, reveals how the imaginary, like the music, infuses everything in the room with the association of the imagined object of desire and, conversely, uses every item as confirmation of its own imaginary construction. Just when the police detective is in danger of falling prey to his own imaginary construct, however, the timely appearance of the "real," living Laura saves him. The film dramatizes the fatal consequences of an unchecked imaginary construction by duplicating the figure of the infatuated admirer of Laura (there is a third admirer who reveals that a lack of imaginary construction is equally unsatisfactory) and thereby creating a character who is so intent on transforming Laura into his own image of the perfect woman that he cannot bear the inevitable disappointment of his plan and attempts to murder her. Constructing an imaginary object can thus have two consequences. It is not automatically self-destructive, as long as it can be kept under control. On the other hand, it can split the subject and can lead even the respectable, self-controlled citizen into crime. The detective figure, embodied by Bogart, who is only guilty by appearance and whose only "guilt" consists in his non-conforming individualism, is replaced by the figure of a double that acts out the secret longings of the respectable citizen.

Gilda resembles *Laura* in that the film seems to reenact the story of a fatal infatuation with an imaginary object. Gilda's (Rita Hayworth) first appearance in the film follows the visual rhetoric of a pin-up dream. When the main character enters the room with his boss who wants to introduce him to his new wife, Gilda suddenly appears from behind the back of a sofa in a suggestive pin-up gesture, throwing back her full hair and offering her seductively smiling face to closer inspection. This first appearance seems to confirm that of an irresponsibly flirtatious woman. The impression is reinforced in the famous night club scene in which she sings the song "Put the Blame on Mame, Boys" in a suggestive pose and begins to perform a strip-tease. The song redefines the question of guilt ironically by implying that the woman is actually the guilty one. However, the film, which, at first sight, appears to reinforce familiar stereotypes of the femme fatale, gradually reveals that Gilda is only acting out an image which the main character has of her, and that she is in fact a very different person.[42] What appeared to be her guilt is actually his. In insisting self-righteously on his own paranoid love-hate image of her, he is trapping her in a role that threatens to become a self-fulfilling prophesy.[43] In *Vertigo*,

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[42] Deborah Thomas therefore speaks of "performance as retaliation" ("Psychoanalysis and *film noir*" 81).

[43] Cf. Kaufmann's description: "*Gilda* ist nicht nur eine zynische Beurteilung des Geschlechterverhältnisses und romantischer Vorstellungen von der Liebe, sondern auch eine selbstreflexive, ironische Paraphrase auf das misogynistische Geschlechterverhältnis wie es der *Film noir* konstruiert. Im Gegensatz zu dem typischen *Film noir* wird der 'hero' vollends diskreditiert. Die männliche Wahrnehmung Johnnys und seine zwanghafte Überzeugung von der Schlechtigkeit der Frau stellen sich als Trugschluß heraus" (185). Because the femme fatale is an imaginary construct, the question the narrative poses is how she "really" is and how she can be known. In many, if not most *film noirs*, this happens through a shocking revelation of her duplicitous nature, in *Gilda* through the provocative reenactment of the male's own fantasy. The film is uncompromising in its depiction of the love-hate relationship of the main characters, only to reveal in the end that this struggle for domination was actually a struggle of the hero with his own imaginary. This struggle found an uncanny reenactment in *The Lady from Shanghai*, in which Orson

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Hitchcock will later bring out into the open the logic of this entrapment and will link it with consequences from which *Gilda* still shies away. In trying obsessively to transform the mysterious woman (Kim Novak) into the image he has constructed of her, Scottie, the main character played by James Stewart, causes the death he was hired to prevent.

Theories of the Subject: Lang and Hitchcock

Hitchcock's explanation of Scottie's guilt in *Vertigo* rests on a familiar theory of development: although a grown-up in years and professional success, he has remained an adolescent psychologically and emotionally who cannot distance himself from his infatuation with an idealized image. His lack of maturity manifests itself in the fact that he is still a voyeur. *Rear Window* provides another instance of this theme (and theory), but a perhaps more interesting forerunner is Hitchcock's 1940s movie *The Paradine Case*, because it dramatizes the obsessive, self-destructive aspect of the idealizing act more forcefully than *Rear Window*. A young, idealistic and successful lawyer (played by Gregory Peck) is hired to defend a beautiful, mysterious woman (Alida Valli) who is accused of having murdered her husband. Under the spell of her mysterious, mask-like face (resembling, in effect, another portrait), he becomes convinced of her innocence, and, driven by his own image of her, begins to act the role of a knight who wants to rescue the damsel in distress. Because he refuses to acknowledge his own desire, his infatuation turns into an obsession and has entirely unforeseen consequences: motivated by jealousy and a sense of possession, he drives a falsely accused man into suicide and provokes the woman he wanted to protect into a confession of her own guilt.

This scene, acted out in the public sphere of the court trial, is devastating because it finally reveals to the public (and to him) his own secret desire and exposes him to public shame. However, in typical Hitchcockian fashion, this moment of public exposure also has a cathartic effect. Trapped in their own imaginary projections, there is no other way for Hitchcock's heroes than to act out their obsessions in order to get rid of them. Hitchcock's preference for the thriller can be explained by this theory of repression and release. Where his main characters become "guilty," their guilt is that of hiding something, often from themselves, not that of having committed a crime. In *Vertigo* or *The Paradine Case*, the guilt of the heroes lies in the single-minded irresponsibility with which they instrumentalize other people for their own imaginary needs, not in any crime itself. This is the reason why Hitchcock's films, although dealing with a crucial issue of *film noir*—the unforeseen links between citizen, crime, and the guilt resulting from imaginary projection—are not considered *film noirs*. His films are thrillers. The suspense they create derives from the question whether the falsely accused or accidentally involved citizen will be able to get out of his predicament and prove his innocence. There are analogies to films like *The Woman in the Window*,[44] but the ma-

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Welles attempted to deconstruct the glamorous image of the movie goddess Rita Hayworth had become.

[44] In *The Woman in the Window* or *The Accused*, but also in *The File on Thelma Jordan*, the major suspense derives from the question whether the guilt of the respectable citizen will be discovered and he or she will be publicly exposed. The fact that in both films the main character is

jor thrill of these *film noirs* has another source: the struggle of the respectable citizen with him- or herself. Lang's films are actually based on a kind of popularized Freud. There is a criminal in all of us, and the dilemma of bourgeois existence, described by Lang with cynical pleasure, if not actual *schadenfreude*, consists in the fact that it is dangerous to repress one's desire but also to act it out.[45] Film is an important medium for both Hitchcock and Lang, because it can help to articulate repressed impulses vicariously. The subject is split, but the split can be overcome by the cathartic release of impulses that have been bottled up.[46] This is why both directors are uncompromising and "cynical" in their depiction of human weakness. Anything but a frank look at the depths of man's hidden wishes remains a form of self-deception that will only reinforce repression. In contrast, the reenactment of one's own deepest desires and fears holds the promise of release and liberation. The dose must be strong, perhaps even shocking, for only then is there hope that the patient will recover.

Bourgeois to Drifter

The case is more complicated in films like *Out of the Past, Detour, Double Indemnity, The Postman Always Rings Twice*, or *Gun Crazy*, films often considered exemplary *film noirs*. Naremore tries to capture something of the difference between "bourgeois-*noir*" and these films by claiming that the *noir* characters inspired by Cain's novels "are swept along on currents of violent desires" (Naremore 83). However, such a description attributes an obsessive dimension to these characters which they hardly possess, because the low-life milieu of these films is a world of aimless, weakly motivated drifters, loners and losers, uprooted people who lead a life of fleet-

close to those who try to solve the crime and therefore observes from close-by how the list of suspects is gradually narrowed down, and beginning to point in his or her direction increases this fear of public shame, because it means that the main character's guilt will be revealed to those who are closest to the respectable citizen.

[45] The most cynical version of Lang's depiction of the consequences of bourgeois repression is *Scarlet Street*, his sequel to *The Woman in the Window*, which several critics consider a key *film noir* (Kaufmann 185). In the film, the main character, an aging cashier, is sexually so inexperienced ("I never saw a woman without any clothes") and repressed in his secret artistic ambitions as a painter as well as in his erotic desires ("You walk around with everything bottled up") that he is mercilessly exploited by a prostitute and her pimp. In its scenes of humiliation of the bourgeois character, the film has an unmistakable Old-World feeling and is reminiscent of *The Blue Angel*, for example, when the lazy prostitute (who poses as actress) accommodates the artist Christopher Cross (Edward G. Robinson) by letting him paint her toenails in a gesture of humiliating condescension. After he discovers her duplicity, Cross murders her on impulse. He is not caught by the police (instead, the pimp is sent to the gas chamber for a crime he did not commit), but driven to the brink of insanity by voices. He ends up as a homeless person who is sleeping on park benches.

[46] In this theory of subjectivity, artistic expression is another possible form of release. This is why the artist and the murderer are closely linked in *film noir*, as, e.g., in *A Double Life, The Two Mrs. Carrolls, Phantom Lady* and, above all, *Scarlet Street*. Both, respectable citizen and mad artist, are split subjects and illustrate the fatal consequences of frustrated creativity.

ing, changing attachments.[47] Fittingly, Richard Schickel speaks of "a population of strangers, drifting about, surrendering to heedless impulse" (30). Thus, when Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward argue that the main character in *Double Indemnity* is "less a victim of alienation than of the second key emotion in the *noir* universe: obsession" (4), one wonders about the appropriateness of their terminology. Obsession is a characteristic of the repressed, split subject. However, Walter Neff is not driven to crime by secret obsession but by his willingness to take a chance and act on impulse. His most striking characteristic is his lack of affect. When he realizes "that Phyllis wants to murder her husband, he drinks a beer in his car at a drive-in restaurant; then he goes to a bowling alley at Third and Weston, where he bowls alone in an enormous room lined with identical lanes" (Naremore 88-89).[48] Even in his relation to the femme fatale, he remains curiously detached. It has become customary to describe the relation between Neff and Phyllis Dietrichson as governed by obsession, but actually there is very little to be seen of this in the film where the representation of their relation is dominated by the challenge to outmaneuver each other. We use the term "obsession" to characterize their relation, I suspect, because we do not have another word (and concept) for Neff's passive acceptance of the dictates of impulse, even in view of impending doom.[49]

The main characters of *The Postman Always Rings Twice, Out of the Past, Detour,* and *Gun Crazy* are even more strongly marked by passivity and are easily dominated by others. They are "weak" characters not in the emphatic sense of a losing battle with self-control (as is the case, for example, with the alcoholic). In fact, there is hardly any battle because, in contrast to the respectable citizen of "bourgeois-*noir*," there is no

[47] The heroes of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *Detour* are drifters. In a way, Walter Neff in *Double Indemnity* is, too. His apartment looks like a hotel room. The heroine of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* was a waitress before she married; the main female characters of *Gun Crazy* and *Detour* were tramps. In *Out of the Past*, Jeff Bailey and Kitty Moffatt become an outlaw couple on the run and lead the nomadic life of drifters; so does the outlaw couple in *Gun Crazy*.

[48] Similarly, Frohock calls the emotional life of Frank Chambers stunted, "suffering a shortage of emotions" (95). He is a man without complex psychology: "There is certainly no complication in Frank Chambers" (92).

[49] Sex in Cain's novels has a largely behavioristic dimension. In *Double Indemnity* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, the female characters are "ordinary." Their faces, traditionally taken as expression of inner character, are non-descript and displaced by the direct stimulus of physical shape. Mrs. Nirdlinger in *Double Indemnity* "had a washed-out look" (5). But, then, Walter Huff sees something he had not noticed before: "Under those blue pajamas was a shape to set a man nuts ..." (6). Similarly, Cora in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, "wasn't any raving beauty, except for the shape" (4). Dyer, in talking about the film version, calls Cora "sex-ordinary" (194), an impression reinforced by Lana Turner's "sex-ordinary image" and her recurrent "association with ordinariness" (192). In Cain's novels, the direct, unmediated physical sensation of the encounter between the sexes finds expression in sentences like "I could smell her" or in the close connection between sexuality and violence: "I took her in my arms and mashed my mouth up against hers .... 'Bite me! Bite!'—I bit her. I sunk my teeth into her lips so deep I could feel the blood spurt into my mouth. It was running down her neck when I carried her upstairs" (*Postman* 9). See also Frohock's characterization of the main character of *The Postman Always Rings Twice*: "Frank Chambers kills merely because he has got himself in a mess. His response to stimuli is automatic and completely physical—when he wants the woman badly enough he throws up" (95).

strong, internalized sense of moral principle, only a response to shifting impulses and moods, good or bad.[50] The question which one of these impulses prevails at crucial moments of moral choice becomes a matter of chance. This explains the strong sense of fatalism pervading these films. At one point, Walter Neff, for example, uses the metaphor of a street car that goes only one way and that one must ride to the end of the line. Similarly, the main character of *Detour* begins his narrative with the laconic reference to the one false step that proved fatal: "If only I'd known what I was getting into that day in Arizona."[51]

If there are no "deep" passions or neurotic obsessions determining the actions of characters, the questions of motivation and guilt must be reconsidered. Because there is a lack of strong motivation, such as the drive of the double to break out of the prison-house of bourgeois repression, "elementary" attractions such as sex or money take their place in almost behavioristic fashion. Yet, one has to be careful and precise in the characterization of these elementary drives. When Yakir claims, for example, that "Cain equated sex with violence and allowed his characters to make a religious experience out of it" (18), he again overstates the case. Sex plays a crucial role in "drifter-*noir*," however, not as an *ersatz*-religious experience, but as an elementary, short-term excitement in a life that does not offer too many excitements in other respects.[52] Equally important, especially for the seductive women, is the plain consumerist prospect of material comforts. This is one point, in effect, of Cain's "Californian" *noir* scenarios which explains his influence on Camus's *L'Étranger*: the almost casual origin of a crime that has no deep motivation, only rather ordinary, banal impulses and moods at work. The "breakthrough" of the repressed other half of the split subject creates horror, but it also has a certain grandiose, romantic dimension.[53] The lack of such a motivation may be even more shocking, however, and radicalizes the problem of guilt. For how can a character who only passively follows his own impulses still be considered "guilty" in any meaningful sense of the word? In order to find ethical terms like 'guilt' applicable, one has to presuppose the possibility of moral choice.

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[50] Dyer provides a fine analysis of the role of impulse as a motivating force in the film version of *The Postman Always Rings Twice*: "The key to their murderous relationship is impulse. In each of the scenes in which they contemplate murder, a crash of music, where before there was none, signals the thought of murder arising from nowhere rational in their minds. ... The idea for murder arises spontaneously; music signals its impact; a kiss links it to passion" ("Four Films" 195). "Unmotivated" impulse behavior, in which crucial decisions are no longer presented as results of difficult moral choices, is a recurrent feature in hard-boiled fiction. It is the theme, for example, of the often-discussed Flitcraft episode in Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*.

[51] An angry critic, John Houseman, captured this sense of (moral) passivity when he wrote in 1947: "What is significant and repugnant about our contemporary 'tough' films is their absolute lack of moral energy, their fatalistic despair."

[52] Similarly, violence can become "normalized," because it is an "exciting" form of self-expression in an otherwise dreary everyday life.

[53] The case is somewhat different in *Gun Crazy* which has a surrealist *amour fou* dimension. But this celebration of atavistic, elementary lawlessness, which anticipates the mood of couple-on-the-run movies like *Bonnie and Clyde* or *Natural Born Killers*, also completely subverts the question of motivation and moral judgment. On the influence of French surrealism on the positive reception of American crime movies in France, see the first chapter of Naremore's study *More Than Night*.

Cain, and with him the type of *film noir* inspired by his work, did not quite have the nerve to follow this suggestion through all the way to its radical conclusion. In contrast to Camus's *L'Étranger*, there is still a tendency to provide characters with a certain amount of depth in the moment of approaching death, as, for example, in Frank Chamber's final meditation on his guilt in the death chamber (which follows in the line of Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*) or Phyllis Dietrichson's reluctance to shoot Walter Neff.[54] One fitting ending for "drifter-*noir*" therefore is the absurd fate of being caught or sentenced for the wrong murder. If moral categories do no longer determine guilt, then, ironically enough, the main characters cannot complain when they are found guilty for the wrong crime. In bringing up the question of crime and punishment to this point of ironic inversion, *film noir* effectively confronts its characters with the consequences of their own moral passivity.

Detective, Bourgeois, Drifter

Film noir, we said at the outset of this essay, shifts the issue of crime from gangster to ordinary citizen. However, the three kinds of *film noir* we have distinguished define this citizen differently. Accordingly, they also define the issue of guilt differently. In the American tradition of the self-reliant outlaw hero, the detective or investigator is defined as disillusioned (and thereby authentic) individualist whose guilt consists in a certain moral ambiguity. But, as a rule, he only masquerades as lawless tough guy and is never in any real danger of moving over to the other side. His occasional contempt for the law is actually an expression of his strong inner-directedness, or, more precisely, of his striving for autonomy. This autonomy is confirmed by his resistance to the appeal of the femme fatale. Relations between the sexes are presented as tests of social and sexual competence, a test he passes. The appearance of "guilt" results from his non-conformity, from his disregard of social rules and convention. Actually, however, it is a case of false appearance, a price one has to pay for masquerading as tough guy. However, in contrast to the respectable citizen of "bourgeois-*noir*," the detective never lacks self-knowledge and never loses control over his role-play.

The story of the respectable citizen, on the other hand, is that of an often fatal loss of self-control. The result is a split subject in which the subject's double takes over. In this melodrama of self-destruction, the guilt is that of repression, crime is a symptom of this repression and, at the same time, its—perversely creative—release from repression. Self-knowledge is thus only gained at the moment of self-destruction, just as knowledge of the duplicitous femme fatale (or male) is only gained at a point of no return. One moment "off-guard" can have disastrous results. Nevertheless, there is also a prospect of redemption. Guilt cannot be avoided, but it can be explained and forgiven. In contrast, "drifter-*noir*" redefines the ordinary citizen as a weak character acting on impulse and mood. Because there is no longer a struggle for self-control, crime loses its melodramatic connotation of moral failure. Instead, it takes on an al-

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[54] Billy Wilder had actually planned (and already filmed) a death chamber scene as ending for *Double Indemnity*, but then refrained from using it at the very last moment. Cf. Naremore, *More Than Night* 81-95.

most casual dimension and becomes part of a sequence of events with its own unpredictable eventfulness. For the detective, crime is a moral test, for the respectable citizen it is an unforeseen effect of repression, for the uprooted drifter figure it is the result of the unpredictable, accidental vagaries of impulse and mood.

The difference between the three types of *film noir* can also be clarified by the issue of chance and coincidence which, as many critics have pointed out, plays a crucial role in *film noir*. The "accidental" nature of the hard-boiled detective's investigation is often emphasized. He does not solve the case by rational procedure but by not giving up. Nevertheless, in the end we think that his success in solving the case is "deserved," because all chance events are overcome by his own inner-directed persistence. Self-control triumphs over chance after all. This is different in "bourgeois-*noir*," where one moment "off guard" can lead to disaster. Because creativity and desire are bottled up, any unfortunate coincidence can release them. In this world, "anyone, male or female, has the potential to be subjected to a drastic reversal—a sudden transformation into one's opposite or mirror image or double—when they least expect it and have done almost nothing to deserve it" (Bergstrom 111). Most respectable citizens are lucky enough not to be confronted with a "woman in the window" or a woman on "scarlet street" or an evening invitation by a suave seducer, but occasionally one has the bad fortune to do so and is then in danger of being destroyed by these chance encounters. In "drifter-*noir*," too, chance can lead the main character to ruin, but for different reasons. There is no struggle for self-control on the part of the "ordinary," uprooted people of the Southern California landscape. The potentially destructive aspect about their milieu is not that the subject's double will be released but that weak characters acting on impulse are subject to which way the wind blows.

The "guilt" of the detective consists in his masquerade as outlaw, that of the respectable citizen in his or her own inner doubleness, that of the drifter in his inner weakness and "emptiness." These three versions of guilt are based on three different ideas of the subject. Investigative "detective-*noir*" (including the detective, the returning veteran and the falsely accused) is still informed by a notion of the authentic self. These *noir* characters appear guilty, and in order to redeem themselves they have to give the authentic self a chance to assert itself. The encounter with crime can thus lead to successful regeneration. The subject of "detective-*noir*" may be battered, beaten, and embattled, but the whole point of the narrative is the possibility of successful self-assertion even in extreme situations. In the end, the dangers that threaten to split the subject can be successfully contained; in fact, they provide the basis for a scenario of heroic rebirth. This romance of individual regeneration is radically undermined by "bourgeois-*noir*'s" redefinition of the *noir*-character as split subject. Repression splits the self; the "other," repressed half, which has been bottled up for so long, finally takes over and erupts in crime. Thus, crime is an expression of inner conflict or even an attempt to solve it. However, because of the violent form the breakthrough takes, that which is to rescue the subject prevents it from ever achieving a unitary state again. This self-implosion has one positive effect, because self-destruction leads to a state of self-knowledge—which cannot save the individual but provides his or her downfall with a certain existential dignity.

The Absurd Guilt of the Wrong Impulse

Finally, in "drifter-*noir*" there is no longer any authentic self or even an unconscious. There are desires, impulses, and moods that drive the self in unforeseen, highly accidental ways and, if chance has it that way, can lead to crimes that are incomprehensible and monstrous in their affect-less, cold-blooded matter-of-factness. Self-knowledge is no longer the issue here, because self-knowledge presupposes a unified subject that can act on the basis of his or her knowledge. The characters of this world know their state and inner weakness quite well, but it does not help them, because they have no control over their own weakness,[55] their own inner lack of "character," and do not know where the next drive or mood will carry them.[56] There is no heroic struggle here because there is no "subject" left. Consequently, there cannot be any guilt of repression and thus no inner conflict, only the "absurd" guilt of the wrong impulse. There is no unconscious source of motivation, so that crime could be seen as resolution of a deeper unconscious conflict. The "core" of the subject is an inaccessible, irretrievable lack that takes the place of the unconscious. The mystery of criminal behavior remains unsolvable, and the question of guilt takes on absurd dimensions, because, in a sequence of impulses and moods, which one of these is one to take as the basis for determining questions of responsibility and guilt? Without engaging in any of the philosophical, psychological, and cultural issues that are linked with the problem, *film noir*, in its own, indirect way, and to varying degrees, participates in a cultural history of self-dissolution. In a modernist film like *Citizen Kane*, the subject dissolves into multiple fragments; in Cain's Californian world of uprooted drifters, we witness the dissolution of the subject into the Californian sun and supermarket.

In her intellectual history of the French origins of the theory of the decentered subject, Carolyn Dean has pointed out that the criminal played a crucial role in the years between the wars as a metaphor for an other self that remains incomprehensible and irretrievable. The figure of the criminal raised the question of the moral responsibility of the subject, especially since, from a psychological and psychoanalytical point of view, criminal responsibility should be determined according to the mode and degree of the ego's participation in the criminal act. Without being in any way linked to this debate, *film noir* addressed similar issues in different ways, continuing a tradition in Western thought that started with Dostoievsky's dramatization of a seemingly "meaningless

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[55] As Schickel characterizes Walter Neff, "this is a man who, as he drives away from his first encounter with Phyllis, acknowledges not only his fatal sexual attraction, but his knowledge that, hopeless in its thrall, he will aid and abet her dark scheme" (44). In her essay on "How Hollywood Deals with the Deviant Male," Thomas stresses that the "hero's dividedness and his lack of self-knowledge are staples of the genre" of *film noir*. But then, in discussing *Out of the Past*, she has to admit that "this film is in some ways atypical in that the hero, Jeff (Robert Mitchum), seems to have an unusual degree of knowledge" (66). This is not an exception in "drifter-*noir*," however, where the main characters run into their doom open-eyed.

[56] A radical illustration of this almost behavioristic view of the subject can be found in Cain's *Double Indemnity*, where the main character feels differently toward the femme fatale even in the face of what should actually be an inseparable bond of guilt: "I had killed a man to get a woman—but I never wanted to see her again" (54). His mood has changed. See also Frohock's characterization of Frank Chambers in *The Postman Always Rings Twice:* "He is capable of a very real attachment for Cora, although it will not hold up when she is not physically present" (95).

murder" in *Crime and Punishment*, reached a new stage of impulse-driven behavior in Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* which, in turn, influenced Cain who, in turn, inspired *film noir* and influenced Camus's *L'Étranger*.[57] By shifting murder from gangster to ordinary citizen, *film noir* posed the question of motivation in a radicalized way and, at the same time, redefined the issue of guilt. In what sense can a plain citizen who has been drawn into crime by circumstance and chance, actually be considered "guilty"? In order to arrive at an answer, one has to have a tacit premise of what constitutes the subject. *Film noir* does not address the issue openly but implies, as we have seen, not only one but several competing theories of the subject. None is "explicit" in the sense that it is based on a model of ego or identity formation (so that all attempts to read these films as Freudian or Lacanian allegories are doomed to failure in my opinion), but all imply a view of what it actually is that motivates, drives, and decenters the subject.

The Pleasures of Self-Dissolution

This brings us back to the question with which this essay began, that of the puzzling continuing appeal of *film noir*. In fact, the question can now be put into a larger context and rephrased accordingly: Why should dramatizations of self-dissolution be so appealing and gratifying? The appeal of *film noir* reflects a value change in which traditional theories of the subject are replaced by a jubilant rhetoric of disintegration, because the older concepts are experienced as oppressive. In the transition from economic to expressive individualism, *film noir* presents one of the cases—of which we have many in American culture; in effect, this may be one of the main reasons for the strong postmodern appeal of American culture—in which "vulgar" low art such as the pulps is appropriated by other media and taste cultures and thereby elevated to an artistically more ambitious and artful form.[58] One reason for this appeal of the "low" may be sought in the fact that it permits the articulation of impulses that may still be considered "extreme" but are nevertheless "tempting." In order to be acceptable beyond its low milieu target group, however, a way of expression has to be found in which the associations of vulgarity connected with that transgression are softened. In its characteristic visual style and narrative forms, *film noir* found a way to represent murder with almost modernist detachment and, occasionally, even irony. Moreover, in its highly stylized elements, from night-time atmosphere through expressive camera angle to the styl-

ized appearance of the detective or the femme fatale, *film noir* has a highly performative dimension that invites pleasure in imaginary participation without actual emotional involvement.

Film noir is not yet dated because it may present self-dissolution as melodrama, but one that is so obviously staged that it aestheticizes its own analysis of the subject. And the more historical the genre becomes and the more *film noir* has become a discourse, the more this mode of "self-dissolution" as pleasurable performance without repentance dominates the reception of *film noir*. There has, in fact, been a moment, roughly equivalent with the arrival of postmodern culture in the 1960s, that this playful *film noir* 2 replaced the earlier existentialist form of reception that was still governed by a heroic mode. And this transition from *film noir* 1 to *film noir* 2 is the basis for solving a crucial problem of effect. If a film is based on a theory of the split subject, for example, then the question arises how the spectator can be released from the same fate, that is, from his own repression. But the "theatralization" of *film noir* has made it possible to cite this option without having to enter it. In this, *film noir* is a fitting genre for postmodern times. It moves along a small borderline between the pulps and modernism, between thriller and art movie. It has a little bit of both and presents the successful marriage of mass culture and modernism. As *film noir* 2, it has become a cinema without depth, so that self-dissolution becomes pleasurable entertainment, just as loneliness can be a pleasurable sensuous experience in Hopper's paintings. It is as if the spectator as nomadic drifter looks at his older brother, the spectator as bourgeois.

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[57] Cf. Richard Lehan's essay "Camus's *L'Étranger* and American Neo-Realism." In addition to biographical information, Lehan points out a number of parallels between *L'Étranger* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice*.

[58] Frohock calls Cain a trash writer (87), specializing in tabloid tragedies. But Naremore may be closer to the truth when he describes Cain as a writer who is already part of the chain of a high-culture appropriation of low art, because Cain avoided the pulps and did not write detective fiction. Instead, "he specialized in Dostoievskyan narratives of criminal psychology, transposed into lower-class America and strongly influenced by the naturalism of Theodore Dreiser, the modernism of Ring Lardner, and the cultural criticism of H. L. Mencken. He was therefore discussed along-side such 'serious' writers as John O' Hara, William Saroyan, and Nathanael West, whom Edmund Wilson dubbed 'poets of the tabloid murder.' Cain himself described his novels as a type of American tragedy, dealing with the 'force of circumstance' that drives an individual to the 'commission of a dreadful act'" (83).

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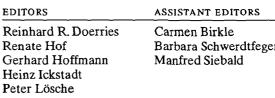Steinbauer-Grötsch, Barbara. *Die lange Nacht der Schatten:* Film Noir *und Filmexil*. Berlin: Bertz, 1997.

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