

ties: "We'll use the ABC method. I'm B." "I'm C." "I'm A." Walsh plays the scene straight, cutting from one car to another with the same dull precision exhibited by the agents. When Ma spots the autos, however, the camera assumes her subjective viewpoint. The cutting pace increases, and the narrative recovers its visual and emotional intensity. Throughout Walsh portrays the prosocial forces as objectively, as straightforwardly, as "stylelessly" as possible, reserving his technical and narrative flourishes for the gang.

The ultimate flourish, of course, is the film's climactic inferno. O'Brien informs the local police of the intended payroll heist at a chemical plant. When the gang is intercepted, the members disperse throughout the plant's maze of pipelines, steel walkways, and chemical storage containers. One by one, they are killed or surrender in their flight through this surreal garden of modern technology. Finally only Cody is still at large, and with night about to fall, he climbs to the top of a huge storage tank. During an exchange of gunfire with his pursuers, he lapses into his final seizure, and one of his own bullets sets off a tremendous blast, illuminating the night sky and bidding the antihero an appropriate farewell.

The deaths of Robinson/Rocco in *Key Largo* and Cagney/Jarrett in *White Heat* mark the figurative demise of the classic gangster-hero, that irrational, aggressive social animal who had been born and bred on Hollywood lots and who had so effectively conveyed the darker side of America's city life. The coincidental relaxation of censorship and the audience's increasing sophistication about organized crime worked to sustain much of the gangster genre's original narrative and thematic appeal throughout the 1950s and '60s. But these later films lack the visual and emotional appeal as well as the dynamic individual performances of the classic gangster films. In retrospect, the gangster genre is one of the few Hollywood formulas that did not grow old gracefully, that did not become richer and more complex with age. This may have been at least partially due to the genre's "unnatural" evolution after the Production Code redirected its development.

Unlike the vast majority of the prosocial urban crime films that they spawned, the classic gangster sagas display an intuitive, spontaneous, and highly expressive vision of the American Dream gone berserk. The gangster and his bleak urban milieu brutally exposed the contradictory values, the confused sensibilities, and the existential angst of contemporary American life. During the 1930s, however, Hollywood was only beginning to examine these issues. The years during and following the war, with the concurrent rise of *film noir* and the hardboiled detective film, proved to be a fertile period for extending both Hollywood and the audience's general concern for the quality of America's urban-industrial lifestyle.

*From Thomas Schatz, Hollywood
Genres*

The Hardboiled- Detective Film

5

Film noir, *Citizen Kane*, and the rise of American Expressionism

Whoever went to the movies with any regularity during 1946 was caught in the midst of Hollywood's profound postwar affection for morbid drama. From January through December deep shadows, clutching hands, exploding revolvers, sadistic villains and heroines tormented with deeply rooted diseases of the mind flashed across the screen in a panting display of psychoneuroses, unsublimated sex and murder most foul.

—D. Marsham, *Life* magazine (August 25, 1947)

The emergence of *film noir*

Throughout the 1940s, a stylistic and thematic trend was developing in Hollywood which by the end of the decade determined the look and the feel of the industry's most popular and significant productions. *Film noir*, as the style was dubbed by French critics, so dominated late '40s and early '50s films—principally those shot in black and white and involving the issue of urban

order—that it came to identify both the narrative-cinematic style of those films and also the historical period during which they were produced.

Generally speaking, *film noir* ("black film") refers to two interrelated aspects: visually, these films were darker and compositionally more abstract than most Hollywood films; thematically, they were considerably more pessimistic and brutal in their presentation of contemporary American life than even the gangster films of the early 1930s had been.

This trend was evident as early as 1941 in films like *Citizen Kane*, *The Maltese Falcon*, and *High Sierra*, but not until the postwar era did it develop to maturity. As Marsham suggests in his review of Robert Siodmak's *The Killers*, 1946 seems to have been a significant year in the development of *film noir*. It marked an onslaught of films as dark in theme as they were in visual style: *The Big Sleep*, *Notorious*, *The Stranger*, *Gilda*, *The Blue Dahlia*, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, *Lady in the Lake*, *Cornered*, *So Dark the Night*, *The Razor's Edge*, *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers*, and others. Even optimistic, culturally reinforcing romances such as Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* and William Wyler's *The Best Years of Our Lives* derive much of their dramatic impact from the countercurrent of anxiety and alienation which lurks just beneath the surface—and which is apparent in their ironic titles.

In retrospect, the mid-'40s emerges as a period of remarkable growth for Hollywood filmmaking. This period is all the more astonishing when we consider the ensuing events—the HUAC hearings, the Paramount case, the growth of television, and so on—which restricted and redirected that growth. Hollywood's formal and cultural concerns would change radically by the mid-1950s, but not until Hollywood filmmakers had refined *film noir* and created what may well be the "expressionist cinema" par excellence.

The clearest manifestation of American Expressionism—and I believe the films of this period collectively merit that term—is found in the successful marriage of the *film noir* style and the widely popular hardboiled detective story. These two factors—one stylistic and the other generic—are closely interrelated but are not equivalent. The majority of '40s and '50s detective films reflect the *noir* style visually and thematically, but so do films of other genres: melodramas (*Mildred Pierce*, *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers*); Westerns (*I Shot Jesse James*, *The Gunfighter*, *High Noon*); gangster films (*They Drive by Night*, *Key Largo*, *White Heat*); and Hitchcock's psychological thrillers (especially *Notorious* and *Strangers on a Train*). Non-genre films like *The Lost Weekend* and *Sunset Boulevard* (both directed by Billy Wilder) and even Olivier's *Hamlet* exhibit distinct *noir* influences, so it is evident that the style developed great range and flexibility in postwar filmmaking.

Film noir was itself a system of visual and thematic conventions which were not associated with any specific genre or story formula, but rather with a distinctive cinematic style and a particular historical period. The conventions of the *noir* style were based on a variety of technical, narrative, and ideological developments which took place throughout the 1930s and early '40s. The gangster and urban crime films of the Depression era, along with the widely popular horror films, certainly anticipated the darker vision of *noir* films a decade later. The style of Ger-

man Expressionism, refined at the Ufa studios during the 1920s, undoubtedly influenced Hollywood's later development of *film noir*, due especially to the number of German filmmakers who, whether for political or economic reasons, left that country for America before and during World War II. Directors like Ernst Lubitsch, F. W. Murnau, Fritz Lang, Billy Wilder, Douglas Sirk, and E. A. Dupont, along with countless technicians, scriptwriters, and performers, participated in Hollywood's own expressionist period.

Coincidentally, German expatriate film theorist Siegfried Kracauer (whose critical history of Ufa in the 1920s, *From Caligari to Hitler*, traced the cycle of German Expressionism) later suggested that the essence of cinema lies in its paradoxical capacity to "cling to the surface" of objects and events and thereby to "reveal" their true nature¹ (Kracauer, 1960, p. x). This viewpoint seems to have been shared by many of the German expatriate filmmakers who complemented Hollywood's traditional obsession with plot and dialogue with a heightened concern for set design, composition, lighting, and camerawork. This narrative technique made not only a film's characters but also its individual world, its *mise-en-scène*, to speak for itself.

A number of technological advancements during the 1920s and '30s also contributed to Hollywood's *noir* style. The evolution of "faster" Panchromatic film stock and camera lenses allowed for greater light sensitivity, so filmmakers had considerably more flexibility in their manipulation of lighting and depth of field (i.e., how much of the visual field is lit and in sharp focus). This development generated increased concern for visual contrast (the relationship between light and dark) and the frequent use of *chiaroscuro* lighting, in which only a portion of the screen is lit and the remainder is in total or semi-darkness. When these lighting techniques were used to depict crime, intrigue, and mental anxiety, especially within a heavily shadowed urban milieu, they gradually assumed narrative and thematic connotations of their own. The generally flat lighting and facile optimism that seemed to dominate 1930s Hollywood cinema gradually gave way to a bleaker vision of the world, which was more psychologically "realistic" and yet more visually abstract.

Film noir and the American Dream

One of the more significant aspects of this changing visual portrayal of the world, of course, is that it reflected the progressively darkening cultural attitudes during and after the war. Hollywood's *noir* films documented the growing disillusionment with certain traditional American values in the face of complex and often contradictory social, political, scientific, and economic developments. On the one hand, big business and widespread urban growth offered Americans increased socioeconomic opportunity but on the other, it left them with a feeling of deepening alienation. Changing views of sexuality and marriage were generated by the millions of men overseas and by the millions of women pressed into the work force. The postwar "return to normalcy" never really materialized—the GI's triumphant home-

coming only seemed to complicate matters and to bring out issues of urban anonymity and sexual confusion. Two fashionable intellectual and literary trends of the period were existentialism and Freudian psychology, both formally articulating the individual, familial, and mass-cultural concerns which were troubling postwar America.

These concerns tinged Hollywood's traditional macho-redeemer hero and domesticating heroine with a certain ambiguity and brought two other character types into the midst of the Hollywood constellation: the brutally violent, sexually confused psychopath and the aptly named *femme noire*, that sultry seductress who preys upon the hero and whose motives and allegiance generally are in doubt until the film's closing moments.

The sexual psychopath had made his debut in horror films and in the classic gangster films, but not even Paul Muni's Scarface could compare with Robert Ryan's murderous anti-Semite in *Crossfire* (1947) or Lee Marvin's scalding hoodlum in *The Big Heat* (1953). Or consider Jimmy Cagney's Cody Jarrett in *White Heat*, who is considerably more menacing and brutal than was his Tommy Powers some two decades earlier. The more overtly psychopathic types in *noir* films generally appeared in supporting roles and eventually were disposed of by the male leads, who were slightly more stable but equally threatened and insecure agents of the social order.

Les femmes noires, conversely, often had leading roles and functioned to manipulate—to double-cross or occasionally to domesticate—the male lead. Many Hollywood actresses, in fact, reached star status in the '40s with their portrayals of either good-bad sirens (Veronica Lake, Lauren Bacall, Gloria Grahame), betraying temptresses (Rita Hayworth, Ava Gardner), or outright black widows (Joan Crawford and Barbara Stanwyck, the last two having achieved stardom in the '30s playing straight roles).

The postwar concentration on individual alienation and sexual confusion was intensified by certain international issues, primarily the Cold War and the Bomb, carrying with them the threat of nuclear holocaust. In an essay on Hollywood sirens, Michael Wood writes: "The symbolism is enough to frighten off any but the most intrepid Freudians: the bomb dropped on Bikini was called Gilda and had a picture of Rita Hayworth painted on it. The phallic agent of destruction underwent a sex change, and the delight and terror of our new power were channeled into an old and familiar story: our fear and love of women" (Wood, 1975, p. 51). In essence, the technicians at Bikini were simply extending the process of Hollywood filmmaking and American mythmaking by "channeling" cultural (or even global) concerns into a variety of "old and familiar" stories. Alluring women, petty criminals, fascistic police, even interplanetary invaders—all of these postwar stereotypes expressed our preoccupations with issues of international ideology (communism being the ultimate state of alienation and dehumanization) and atomic-age technology (with global suicide now possible through nuclear destruction).

Certain components of the *noir* style (sexual insecurity, destructive brutality,

and a degree of moral complacency) flowed together as a sort of thematic subcurrent in the earlier *noir* narratives. Occasionally they would seep to the surface through some minor character or in an oblique, darkened visual style which consistently undercut the homespun American values being espoused in the plot. Can Frank Capra convince us that it is, indeed, such a "wonderful life" after painting so bleak a picture of it? Will Mildred Pierce find happiness returning to the pathetic husband she earlier had demolished and apparently forgotten? Don't we remember—and relate to—Spencer Tracy's "father of the bride" primarily because of his bizarre nightmare about the upcoming wedding and the dimension it adds to his character? It is ultimately this dream sequence that so clearly distinguishes Vincente Minnelli's *Father of the Bride* from domestic comedy-dramas of other periods and other styles. *Noir* ingredients abound in it: impressionistic lighting, an environment rendered surreal through set design and camerawork, the general feeling of the character's inadequacy and alienation—all of the horror stemming from the impending wedding of Tracy's daughter (Elizabeth Taylor).

But this film represented *film noir*'s brighter side. By 1950 the style had technically and thematically overrun Hollywood's output of black-and-white urban-based films (including "urban Westerns" like *High Noon*). The American urban environment was no longer merely a context for examining sociocultural problems; it now emerged as a highly expressionistic visual arena for filmmakers whose concerns were aesthetic as well as sociological.

Consider a representative sampling of Hollywood's productions in 1950: *The Asphalt Jungle*, *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, *Steel Helmet*, *Sunset Boulevard*, *The Gunfighter*, *Lawless*, *Union Station*, *Dark City*, *Winchester 73*, *The Furies*, *All About Eve*, *No Way Out*, *Panic in the Streets*, *Night and the City*, *Breaking Point*, *Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye*, *Caged*, and on and on in an endless procession of dark visions and disturbed dreams. These films may have been motivated by many issues—urban decadence, a subliminal "answer" to HUAC, a delayed response to the forced optimism of the Depression and the war—but the cinematic style of presentation consistently overshadowed social concern in *noir* films. As the style became increasingly familiar to both filmmakers and audiences, the tenets of American Expressionism became evident: style determines substance, mood overwhelms plot, narrativity (the process of storytelling) emerges as narrative, emphasis is shifted from the *what* to the *how*, form becomes inseparable from content.

Paul Schrader suggests that "*film noir* attacked and interpreted its sociological conditions, and, by the close of the *noir* period, created a new artistic world which went beyond a simple sociological reflection, a nightmarish world of American mannerism which was by far more a creation than a reflection. Because *film noir* was first of all a style, because it worked out its conflicts visually rather than thematically, because it was aware of its own identity, it was able to create artistic solutions to sociological problems" (Schrader, 1972, p. 13). Implicit in Schrader's thought is the notion that Hollywood filmmaking itself had been undergoing a formal evolution. The thematically naive, formally transparent linear narratives of

the early sound era were steadily giving way to more complex, convoluted, and formally self-conscious films. Hollywood movies became visually and thematically more stylized, more opaque.

This process of evolutionary development seems to be an almost natural feature in the history of any form—whether that of a single genre or of Hollywood cinema as a whole. As a form is varied and refined, it is bound to become more stylized, more conscious of its own rules of construction and expression. We cannot designate the precise point at which Hollywood moved into this stage of formal refinement, its expressionist period, because the shift in social and aesthetic priorities was gradual and uneven. Schrader does point to John Huston's 1941 film, *The Maltese Falcon*, as the birth of *film noir*, and suggests that "most every dramatic Hollywood film from 1941 to 1953 contains some *noir* elements" (Schrader, 1972, p. 13). Schrader's time frame and his indication of the pervasiveness of *noir* techniques seem accurate enough, but I tend to disagree with his assigning so much importance to *The Maltese Falcon*. Huston's film did introduce the hardboiled-detective story and its persona (Bogart as Sam Spade) to the screen, as it did the archetypal *femme noire* (Mary Astor as Brigid O'Shaughnessy), but the *noir* characterization and private-eye framework are not supported stylistically. Despite its cynical tone, *The Maltese Falcon* employs a relatively uncomplicated linear narrative and conventional well-lit visual arena. It does little more than anticipate the visual and narrative-thematic extremes of films produced only a few years later. A much more significant work in the evolution of the *noir* tendencies is Orson Welles' 1941 opus, *Citizen Kane*.

Noir techniques in *Citizen Kane*

Welles' contribution to American Expressionism is substantial, extending well beyond the influential *Kane*. In fact, Welles later directed, scripted, and performed in films which mark its peak (*Lady from Shanghai*, 1948) and its dénouement (*Touch of Evil*, 1958). These two later films refine the *noir* techniques and themes which distinguish them from the prosocial '30s films. It was *Kane*, though, that provided viewers and filmmakers with the narrative prototype for 1940s Expressionism. We might begin our discussion of this film by noting how well *Kane* accommodates Schrader's seven "recurring techniques" which characterize *film noir*:

1. the majority of scenes are lit for night,
2. as in German Expressionism, oblique and vertical lines are preferred to horizontal,
3. the actors and setting are often given equal lighting emphasis,
4. compositional tension is preferred to physical action,
5. there is an almost Freudian attachment to water (and also to mirrors, windows, and other reflective surfaces),

6. there is a love of romantic narration, and
7. the complex chronological order reinforces the feelings of hopelessness and lost time.

Only a very few films incorporated all of these techniques, of course, and *Citizen Kane* was one of them.

Even a casual recollection of *Kane* should call to mind its wealth of *noir* stylistics, realized primarily through set design, lighting, and camera placement. Except for the pseudodocumentary "News on the March" early in the film, Welles gives us a dark, claustrophobic environment (especially through deep-focus, low-angle interior shots), which seems oppressive to its inhabitants as well as to viewers of the film. Many of the most memorable sequences—Kane's death, Thompson receiving his "Rosebud" assignment in the projection room, Kane firing Jed Leland—are shot in such a way that not only the principal characters' faces but also large portions of the set are obscured. Because Welles uses low-angle, slightly tilted shots the world he conveys through his camera is one of slashing diagonals and oblique shadows, of hidden truths and skewed visions. This strategy is intensified by the fact that the story is filtered through the personal impressions of the reporter

Perhaps the most evocative visual sequence in *Citizen Kane* is the projection-room sequence (shown here in frame enlargement), in which Thompson is given his "Rosebud" assignment. (Private Collection)



Thompson and the various individuals he interviews. We never see Thompson's face during the film, which enhances our identification with his journalistic enterprise—to "get the story"—and also necessitates his investigation and interviews being shot in semi-darkness or from a predominantly subjective point of view.

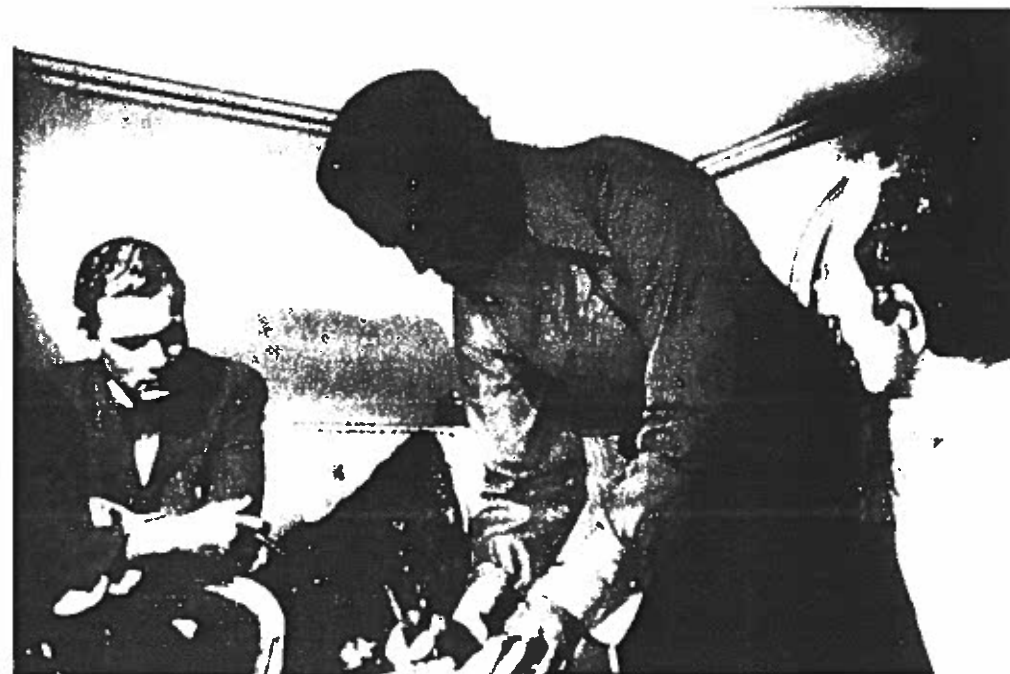
If ever there were a film which denied the form-content distinction (and most truly great films do) it was *Citizen Kane*. Welles' story and his technique, his narrative and style of storytelling, consistently cooperate in addressing complex thematic issues: the tension between subjective and objective impressions of reality; the limitations of any historical process, whether on film or in human memory, to reveal the truth; and ultimately the inability of anyone (including the filmmaker-narrator) to ever really "know" another human being.

As various critics have suggested, one of the more fascinating formal dimensions of *Kane* is that its union of form and content is used to investigate the nature of human and cinematic perception. Consider the opening moments of the film, when we are shown Xanadu ("No Trespassing") and Kane's death. The "News on the March" documentary and Thompson's assignment to solve the "Rosebud" riddle follow immediately after. These sequences establish Kane's character and indicate the inadequacy of an objective historical accounting to reveal anything but the most superficial aspects of a man's life—hence the "Rosebud" assignment. But these opening sequences also convey the filmmaker's related investigation of the film medium's range of expression and its necessary relationship to knowledge, memory, imagination, and finally, to human history itself.

The impressionistic introduction of Xanadu in *Kane*'s opening shots initiates our surreal journey into the gothic mansion (the single light source from Kane's bedroom maintains its exact location within the frame in each successive shot) and ultimately into the psyche of Kane himself. A reverse-angle shot of the window takes us inside Kane's room. The camera then cuts to an extreme close-up which locates us inside the glass ball Kane is holding. Inside the ball is a miniature cottage and an eternal snowfall suspended in clear liquid.

Welles then cuts to another extreme close-up—Kane's lips mouthing his dying epithet—although the "snow" from inside the glass ball now fills the entire visual field. We realize, of course, that it's not snowing in Kane's room but in his memory, and this realization emphasizes the importance of illusory reality over the logic of objective visible reality. With Kane's dying word, the camera follows the glass ball as it rolls from his hand across the bed and shatters on the floor. Another tight close-up focuses on the broken glass, and in its distorted, wide-angle reflection we see the nurse enter the room. (As Pauline Kael and others have pointed out, there apparently was no one in the room to hear Kane whisper "Rosebud" just before he died. Far from undermining the film's credibility, this actually reinforces the primacy of the film's internal narrative logic and also of the camera-viewer's privileged perspective.)

Kane's death scene is immediately followed by one of the most jarring audio and visual cuts in cinematic history—we are literally torn from this somber,



The lighting in this sequence carries a sense of foreboding: a frame enlargement of the young Kane leaning into darkness as he signs his idealistic "Declaration of Principles." (Private Collection)

other-worldly experience by the "News on the March" report of Kane's death and his personal history. The cinematic strategy of this sequence is diametrically opposed to that of the impressionistic opening. Now we are presented with "history," an objective, superficial documentation of Kane's life. No longer does a probing camera move freely with an apparent will of its own into the darkest reaches of Kane's environment and his mind; instead it is restricted physically and films Kane from a proper journalistic "distance." No longer is the *mise-en-scène* an expressive extension of Kane's psyche; instead, we are in the familiar, well-lit "real world." No longer are we privileged observers with access to a dying man's innermost thoughts; instead, we must view Kane as the rest of the world does. No longer do the filmmakers create a distinct separate reality; they simply record the immediate surface reality of sociohistorical events.

It is significant that the newsreel provides us with nearly all of the information we will receive about Kane. But as those in the projection room watching the newsreel (with us) later observe, this journalistic accounting does not penetrate the surface of Kane's character. Their frustration with the information they have initiates the "Rosebud" search and thus provides the film with something resembling a traditional plot and character motivation even though it is the most visually abstract sequence in the film. The room is in total darkness except for a shaft of light pouring in from the projection booth which back-lights the characters, throwing them into eerie silhouette as they move into and out of the shaft of light. The producer of the documentary laments the cold, detached, calculated quality of the newsreel, suggesting that Thompson humanize Kane by learning the meaning of his dying word. Thompson's quest is, of course, hopeless. Even if he had learned the apparent meaning of "Rosebud" (as we do at the film's end) and it had provided a human interest story, the solution to the riddle would scarcely have affected his own conclusion that a single word can never sum up a man's life. Welles' conclusion, like Thompson's, seems to be that all perception, whether human or filmic, is observation qualified by imagination; it is documentation informed by interpretation.

Citizen Kane as a detective film

In its narrative strategy and plot structure, *Citizen Kane* is a detective film: Thompson's investigation motivates the reconstruction of Kane's history. Because of the particular sequence of Thompson's interviews, we learn about Kane's life in a linear chronology. After we have seen the newsreel's history, we are told essentially the same story in the same linear progression by the various figures interviewed by Thompson. This enforced narrative line is made to appear arbitrary—for example, Susan's initial interview is postponed because she's drunk—but the effect is of a chronological reconstruction. Even the significant time lapses in Kane's biography are handled *within* the flashbacks rather than between them, so each flashback has a narrative coherence unto itself.

Thus *Kane*, like many other noir classics (most notably *Double Indemnity*, *Mildred Pierce*, *The Killers*, *Out of the Past*, *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, and *Sunset Boulevard*), employs a circular dual-time structure. The cinema-present investigation is set in motion by an enigma—generally a crime but in this instance, a single word—initiating the reconstruction of events in cinema past. The end result of this narrative strategy is not simply to explain or demystify the enigma, but also to set a tone of fatalism which will underscore the inexorable destiny of the principal characters. No one, especially the detective-observer who eventually reconstructs the past, can affect that destiny.

The detective-observer is clearly a surrogate for the viewer and functions as an organizing sensibility both visually and conceptually. This situation is complicated

in *Kane* by two significant factors. First, we in the audience have privileged information that no one inside the narrative is privy to: Thompson does not see Kane's death, the broken globe, the burning sled. (Actually, Thompson physically "sees" nothing in the flashbacks whereas we in the audience do, which gives us an even stronger position as collective observer-investigator.) Second, because each of the flashbacks, including the newsreel, employs a different narrator, Thompson's viewpoint is diffused. The issue of point of view becomes more complex as the investigation progresses and as the subjective recollections accumulate. Thatcher, Bernstein, Leland, Susan, Raymond, even the newsreel commentator, have all interpreted Kane's life somewhat differently, and as each interpretation is piled on top of the preceding one, the "facts" of Kane's life as presented in the newsreel are further confused.

During Raymond's flashback, which recalls Susan's flight from Xanadu and the aging Kane's rage, Welles presents us with our final image of the decadent Ameri-

With his face again hidden in darkness, Kane is confronted by his wife (Ruth Warrick) and a political rival (Ray Collins) in his "love nest" with mistress Dorothy Comingore. As this low-angle shot indicates, camera position can enhance the effect of noir lighting. (Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive)



can demigod. Kane has torn apart Susan's deserted bedroom and is now pacing zombielike through the shadowy hallways of his mansion. He passes between two gigantic mirrors and his image is reflected into infinity. This shot visually reinforces the film's central theme: Charles Foster Kane, and the American Dream he had come to represent, cannot be reduced to a single coherent image but instead must be interpreted subjectively by those who have known him. As the various viewpoints coalesce to depict the "real"—and ultimately unknowable—Kane, we gradually realize that the emptiness at the core of the man, a spoiled, willful tyrant obsessed with his loss of innocence and the inhuman isolation of wealth and power, represents our own uneasiness with the American Dream.

The birth of Expressionism and the death of Hollywood

Such cultural misgivings—and herein lies the basis for American Expressionism—were articulated more clearly in terms of narrative style and characterization than in terms of plot. Although most *noir* films incorporate Hollywood's requisite "happy ending" to take care of superficial plot conflicts, the bleak, fatalistic depiction of the American urban milieu qualified—if it did not totally deny—that resolution. Throughout the 1940s, Hollywood's problem-solving function was shifting away from its predominantly sociological impulse and giving more attention to cinematic artistry. Social problems would continue to motivate and provide a narrative context for *noir* films during this decade, of course, but the solutions to these problems became increasingly artificial, formalized, stylized to the point where, as Schrader suggests, narrative resolution was as significant aesthetically as it was sociologically.

The reasons for these shifting priorities are numerous. They involved the evolution of film technology and narrative technique, complicated by a variety of industrial, ideological, and socioeconomic pressures. By the early 1950s television already had begun to co-opt Hollywood's mass audience—moviegoing was no longer the cultural ritual it had been for the past quarter-century, and this new development also encouraged filmmakers to reconsider the medium's social and aesthetic functions. The effects of this development were evident in Hollywood's rites of order, in those urban crime and Western films whose cultural concerns were to rationalize and celebrate social order. Furthermore, the genres involving social integration which came into prominence during the 1950s, especially family melodrama and science fiction, took their narrative and thematic appeal from a heavily stylized rendition of their milieu and characters.

Thus, three seemingly unrelated issues—*noir* techniques, a collective cultural angst, and the cinema's reconstituted and dwindling mass audience—coalesced after the war into a period of self-consciousness and self-criticism. This unprecedented formalism and aestheticism generally escaped American viewers because it evolved so naturally from Hollywood's formally transparent and prosocial narra-

tive tradition. But consider how filmmakers from other cultures recognized and exploited the formal and aesthetic properties of American Expressionism—as in the French New Wave's obsession with the hardboiled detective, or the New German cinema's infatuation with '50s family melodramas. The ultimate irony is that the American mass audience, whose participation in the development of the Hollywood film industry had generated the world's foremost national cinema, began leaving the theaters just when their economic and spiritual investment promised its greatest returns. Thus, those *noir* films of the late 1940s and early 1950s have attained dual historical status: they represent the height of Hollywood's narrative sophistication and visual expression, but they also signal an era of formalism and self-indulgence, a confused social conscience, and a vanishing audience. In short, the American expressionist cinema foreshadowed the death of the Hollywood studio system and of America's national cinema.

The hardboiled-detective genre

Down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. The detective in this kind of story must be such a man. He is the hero; he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honor—by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it. He must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world.

—Raymond Chandler, "The Simple Art of Murder"⁴

In the early 1940s, the evolving gangster/urban crime formula and the burgeoning film *noir* style coalesced with other cultural factors to generate the most significant product of American expressionist cinema: the hardboiled-detective film. Distinct both from the classic gangster film, which focused on the criminal and his underworld milieu, and from the urban crime film, which traced the peace-keeping efforts of law-and-order agencies, the hardboiled-detective film assumed the viewpoint of the isolated, self-reliant "private eye." Like the classic Westerner, the hardboiled detective is a cultural middle-man. His individual talents and street-wise savvy enable him to survive within a sordid, crime-infested city, but his moral sensibilities and deep-rooted idealism align him with the forces of social order and the promise of a utopian urban community.

By the time the hardboiled detective appeared on the screen in John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), its narrative formula already had been established on the radio and in popular magazines and pulp novels. Huston's film, which he both scripted and directed, lifts a great deal of its dialogue and most of its story line

from Dashiell Hammett's 1929 novel, *The Maltese Falcon*. There had been earlier attempts to adapt *The Maltese Falcon* to the screen—in Roy del Ruth's 1931 *The Maltese Falcon* and William Dieterle's 1936 *Satan Was a Lady*—but neither met with much success. The detective duo of Nick and Nora Charles in the Thin Man series did provide '30s audiences with a glimpse of the formula, in that these films interjected a tone of black humor and social commentary into the classical detective tradition.

The Thin Man series, from Hammett's novel of the same title, was initiated in 1934 and it launched William Powell and Myrna Loy on a six-film, twelve-year jaunt as one of Hollywood's more popular couples of the era. (Actually, the "Thin Man" himself was a murder victim in the initial story, but the description became associated with Powell's detective character.) The hardboiled dimension of Hammett's initial conception, however, was neutralized by W. S. van Dyke's straightforward direction of the first four in the series and by his willingness to let the witty Powell-Loy repartee dominate the films. Although the last of the Powell-Loy films was made in 1946 at the height of the hardboiled-detective genre's popularity, this now-conventional detective couple was scarcely affected by *noir* stylistics.

The development of the detective formula is closely related to certain developments in American literature—in fact, the birth of detective fiction (Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and "The Purloined Letter" in the 1840s) also marks the birth of the short story. Poe's detective-protagonist, Dupin, was the prototype for the classical detective: highly cultured, aristocratic, eccentric, scientific, and capable of complex deductive reasoning. Like his offspring—most notably Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes and Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot—his primary motivation was a personal delight in puzzle-solving, and his cases involved the assigning of individual guilt to anyone who upset what was, in the final analysis, an orderly and benevolent universe. The classical detective's cases generally were related to the reader by an observant but intellectually inferior sidekick or acquaintance who managed to keep the reader one step behind the detective. Perhaps the most significant aspect of the classical detective formula is the "solution" itself. "Crime" in these stories is usually an isolated act of moral and social aberration. The detective's solution identifies the criminal and thereby recovers the social equilibrium which had been temporarily disturbed by the criminal's misdeeds. In effect, crime in the classical detective film is an individual responsibility, not a social one, and its solution is simply a flexing of the cerebral muscles, which serves to reestablish and thus reaffirm the social and moral status quo.

On the screen, too, the differences are apparent between the hardboiled detective and his "classical" predecessor—principally we can see this in the Sherlock Holmes series, as well as those films featuring Charlie Chan, Mr. Moto, the Thin Man, and others. The classical detective (not to be confused with the classic stage of the films in which he appeared) had a cultivated wit and used scientific methods of deduction—especially as characterized by Basil Rathbone's Holmes, Warner Oland's Chan (Oland was replaced in 1938 by Sidney Toler), and Peter Lorre's

Moto. The classical detective was evidently part of a generally well-ordered society whose occasional problems could be solved with deductive reasoning. In contrast, the hardboiled detective, like the *noir* style which provided the visual and psychological tone of his films, displayed a world view considerably less optimistic in its vision of modern society. His vision reflected the alienation, anxiety, and moral confusion of wartime and postwar America.

The hardboiled writers of the 1920s and '30s paved the way for these films. Their detective fiction subverted the classical tradition in a number of significant ways. The earliest practitioners of the hardboiled formula were Carroll John Daly and Dashiell Hammett (Hammett initially published under the name of Peter Collinson), who wrote stories for the popular pulp magazines. Among these was *Black Mask*, which had been founded in 1920 by H. L. Mencken and George Jean Nathan, and which by the mid-'20s was publishing hardboiled-detective stories almost exclusively. Daly's Race Williams and Hammett's "Continental Op," like Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe a decade later, certainly were far removed from their classical counterparts. They operated more by instinct than by intellect; they submerged themselves inside a sordid, malevolent urban milieu and generally resorted to violence in order to survive. Whatever solutions they presented to crimes were at best tentative and incomplete, revealing only a single thread in the complex fabric of contemporary social corruption.

One of the basic tenets of the earliest hardboiled writing was that it recognized criminality as an ugly activity involving brutal, unthinking types. Raymond Chandler once observed, "Hammett gave murder back to the people who commit it for reasons and with tools at hand. . . . He dropped murder back into the alley" (Chandler, 1944, p. 58). Crime for these writers was not a mere plot device which led to a complex battle of wits between upper-crust society types; it was a pervasive social farce which permeated the urban environment and virtually all of its inhabitants. Interestingly enough, Chandler himself went on to take his Philip Marlowe novels to the suburbs and the mansions of the seemingly well-to-do. In these novels, however, as opposed to those of the classical detective writers, the upper crust were as morally corrupt as the inhabitants of Hammett's alleys.

Chandler's image of Los Angeles, told from Marlowe's witty, cynical first-person viewpoint, is that of a paradise thoroughly perverted by the community's shared lust for wealth and power. Marlowe and the other hardboiled detectives attempted to isolate themselves from their decadent milieu, as did their classical counterparts. The hardboiled detective's isolation, however, is not a function of intellect and breeding, but instead represents his outright rejection of a society whose values and attitudes he cannot accept or even understand. A self-styled existentialist, he has refined his own personal, pragmatic code based on traditional, outmoded values like rugged individualism and fair play. If the classic Westerner had donned a wrinkled trenchcoat and passed through a time warp, he might strike a similar pose.

Because hardboiled-detective fiction relies so heavily upon a basic conflict between the hero's value system and that of his corrupt social environment, it seems

to be most effective when it emphasizes the detective's perspective. Either the detective relates his own story via first-person narration, or else an omniscient narrator who shares the hero's outlook tells the story. Although the detective formula was ideal for pulp literature and radio, where it flourished in the 1930s, it presented a rather difficult problem for those who wanted to adapt the medium to a movie screen (where the narrator's "voice" is the camera rather than an individual participant in the narrative). By the 1940s, however, Hollywood's increased sophistication in both technical and narrative capabilities, along with the mass audience's deepening moral and sociopolitical anxiety, enabled the hardboiled detective to emerge as a dominant film hero.

The hardboiled prototype: Huston's *The Maltese Falcon*

I would like to focus on three key films which heralded the birth and development of the hardboiled-detective genre in American movies: Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944), and Edward Dmytryk's *Murder, My Sweet* (produced in 1944, released in 1945). These were three of Hollywood's finest wartime productions, and they involve adaptations of works by the leading hard-boiled American writers: Dashiell Hammett (*The Maltese Falcon*), James M. Cain (*Double Indemnity*), and Raymond Chandler (whose *Farewell, My Lovely* underwent a title change for its first film version). Chandler, in fact, was perhaps the single most significant writer—both as a novelist and screenwriter—to participate in the genre's evolution. He provided either script or story for *Murder, My Sweet*; *Double Indemnity*; *Lady in the Lake*; *The Blue Dahlia*; *The Falcon Takes Over*; *The Big Sleep*; *Strangers on a Train*; and more recently *Marlowe*; *Farewell, My Lovely*; and *The Long Goodbye*. As Chandler wrote to another mystery writer in 1948:

I did not invent the hard boiled murder story and I have never made any secret of my opinion that Hammett deserves most or all of the credit. Everybody imitates in the beginning. . . . Since Hammett has not written for publication since 1932 I have been picked out by some people as a leading representative of the school. This is very likely due to the fact that *The Maltese Falcon* did not start the high budget mystery picture trend, although it ought to have. *Double Indemnity* and *Murder, My Sweet* did, and I was associated with both of them.⁶ (Gardiner and Walker, 1977, p. 52)

Actually, *The Maltese Falcon* did establish the basic plot line and constellation of characters for Hollywood's "hardboiled" formula, while the two later films introduced distinctive *noir* stylistics into the formula to provide a narrative and visual strategy which complemented the basic structure. As effective as Hammett's story and characterization are in *The Maltese Falcon* story, director Huston's linear plotting and transparent narrative-visual style lack the expressive qualities of the later *noir*-influenced detective films. Consider, though, the cast of characters in Huston's



The Maltese Falcon, John Huston's influential 1941 private-eye film, set the narrative standards for the hardboiled formula. Here, the principals (Humphrey Bogart as Sam Spade, along with Peter Lorre, Mary Astor, and Sidney Greenstreet) examine the film's namesake. (Hoblitzelle Theatre Arts Collection)

adaptation of Hammett's novel: Humphrey Bogart as Sam Spade, the prototype for Hollywood's urban private eye; Mary Astor as Brigid O'Shaughnessy, the seductive and treacherous *femme noire*; Lee Patrick as Effie Perrine, the attractive and dedicated secretary with whom the detective maintains an honorable, almost familial, rapport; Sidney Greenstreet as Kasper Gutman, the well-bred, amoral heavy; Peter Lorre as Joel Cairo, the squeamish, effeminate, double-dealing crook; Elisha Cooke, Jr., as Wilmer, Gutman's witless but obedient "gunsel"; and Ward Bond and Barton MacLaine as local police detectives who maintain a difficult but vital relationship with the detective-hero. They hound him incessantly while he does most of their work for them.

These characters—and in many cases the actors who played them—compose the essential constellation within the genre. Sam Spade, of course, is the narrative and perceptual center of the film, the organizing sensibility who observes, influences, and ultimately defines the seamy urban world he inhabits. In *The Maltese*

Falcon, that world is characterized more through Spade's words, actions, and attitude than by Huston's lighting, camerawork, or *mise-en-scène*. There is a degree of visual stylization here which anticipates later hardboiled-detective films: exterior sequences generally occur at night, interiors are crowded and often shot from below eye level to suggest a feeling of oppressive enclosure, the light source occasionally is situated within the frame to heighten the contrast and create a darker, more threatening atmosphere than that of earlier detective and urban crime films. *Falcon* was of great cinematic interest, but Huston had not yet developed the eye for expressive lighting and camerawork that would distinguish such later works as *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, *Key Largo* (both 1948), *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950), and his delightful parody of noir intrigue, *Beat the Devil* (1954).

These later Huston films represent the ultimate accomplishment of Hollywood's expressionist period: a wedding of bleak visual style with a cynical thematic perspective. Whereas *The Maltese Falcon* lacks that level of visual sophistication, its plot and characters do project the dark thematic vision which would later typify the genre. The plot involves a single episode in an ongoing search for the "Falcon," a jewel-encrusted statuette which had been painted black and had thereby eluded its pursuers for centuries. The coveted Falcon, like the American Dream of instant wealth and the power that it represents, finally is discovered to be a counterfeit. Unlike Spade, whose hardboiled exterior hides a vulnerable moralist and a man of uncompromising integrity, the Falcon and those who covet it are caught up in a perpetual drama of duplicity, greed, and false appearance. Spade, of course, is the thematic "answer" to this world of avarice and superficial elegance, but he has become this way only by isolating himself from the outside world. Physically, he inhabits a seedy, spartan office which seems to be his only habitat; occupationally, he is engaged in a pursuit of truth as opposed to financial reward; emotionally, he maintains a lifestyle which resists prolonged human interaction or commitment (except to his secretary, with whom he has developed a wonderful platonic rapport); morally, he is dependent on an outdated value system which continually places him at the mercy of manipulative women and cynical, greedy villains.

In a certain sense, the detective's very occupation—and by extension his isolated, moralistic world view—implies that he must be at the mercy of external social forces. Like the Westerner, the hardboiled detective is not only a man apart, but he is a *social mediator*: his capacity for violence and streetwise savvy ally him with the outlaw element, although his values and attitude commit him to the promise of a well-ordered community. The detective is too familiar with legitimate society to trust its values and motives—in fact, the detective-hero in these films usually has left the force or the D.A.'s office because of institutional restrictions or corruption.

Thus his role is that of a cultural go-between, of an individual willing to bridge the ideological chasm between the civilized and the criminal for whoever can pay his "twenty-five bucks a day and expenses." The classic Westerner's historical context gives the promise of civilization an essentially positive, optimistic tone. For the detective, conversely, the ideal of social order is denied by the urban reality

around him. This ideal represents not simply a promise, but a broken promise. The detective isolates himself from both the civilized and the savage because, in his contemporary urban milieu, he cannot distinguish between them. The civilized and the savage now inhabit the same world and speak the same language in characters like Kasper Gutman and Brigid O'Shaughnessy.

Sam Spade lives from one case to the next and constructs his own value system in the process of his work. If society is corrupt, as Spade's investigations would seem to indicate, then we must look within ourselves for guidance and meaning. In *The Maltese Falcon*, Spade's primary motive for becoming involved in the search for the coveted Falcon is the death of his partner, Miles Archer, a man Spade couldn't stand and whose name he removed from the office door immediately after the killing. Spade eventually discovers that Brigid, who had initiated the investigation, was in fact Archer's murderer.

Brigid is the archetypal hardboiled heroine: beautiful, apparently helpless and victimized, drawing the detective into the intrigue and then exploiting his particular talents—and his naive romanticism—in her perverse quest for wealth and power. Spade, after he has become Brigid's lover, realizes that he is simply another of her victims, and none of her entreaties is effective at the end of the film. Spade turns her over to the police along with Gutman and his coterie of villains. With stoic detachment, Spade informs his lover that it is "bad business" to let the murderer of one's partner go unpunished, and, more importantly, that he refuses "to play the sucker for anyone." Bogart's portrayal of a man torn between love and duty reinforces the detective-hero's ongoing but futile search for truth and genuine human contact. "Sure I love you, but that's beside the point," Spade tells Brigid before sending her away. "I'll have some rotten nights after I've sent you over, but that will pass."

Typical of much hardboiled-detective fiction, Gutman's overt villainy and Brigid's sexual manipulation provide separate but interrelated plot developments which merge at the film's climax. The witty, aristocratic, self-indulgent Gutman poses a tangible and engaging threat to Spade, although Brigid emerges at the film's end as the more menacing villain. In playing the role of victim so effectively, Brigid had victimized Spade, Gutman, Cairo, and the various other men searching for the Falcon. Her own pursuit of the Falcon, which had precipitated a series of murders and other misdeeds, is considerably more difficult to comprehend than is the behavior of Gutman, Cairo, or even Spade himself. We are familiar with brutal, unethical men pursuing wealth and power, but here we are confronted with the image of an avaricious, utterly self-serving woman, and the effect is fascinating and disturbing.

The resolution in *The Maltese Falcon* finally identifies those responsible for Archer's death, but the "real" Falcon is still very much at large. In the detective's inability to "solve" anything more than a single isolated incident in an endless quest for power and material wealth, the character's narrative function becomes clear. Like the Westerner, the detective-hero activates the cultural conflicts inherent within his social milieu. His actions may resolve some immediate social con-

flict, but the community itself remains basically unchanged. The hero's inability either to effect real change or to find solace in the ideal of romantic love reaffirms his isolation and his commitment to apparently outmoded values. Once the case is closed, the detective recedes into the oblivion of his seedy office, a contemporary version of the Westerner's sunset. The difference between the office and the prairie beyond—between the enclosed and infinitely open, between the vertical and the horizontal—exemplifies the differences between the two heroes and their cultural contexts. The Westerner's horizon is virtually limitless, and he can keep the advance of civilization at his back; the detective's horizon is all but invisible through the smog and darkness beyond his drawn venetian blinds. The "natural" world is alien to him, and all the detective can do is follow his instincts for survival and allow time to run its inevitable course.

The noir influence: *Murder, My Sweet* and *Double Indemnity*

What *The Maltese Falcon* contributed to Hollywood's hardboiled-detective formula in characterization, plot, and theme, *Murder, My Sweet* reinforced through narrative and visual technique. This 1944 adaptation of Chandler's *Farewell, My Lovely*,



Dmytryk's *Murder, My Sweet* is the first successful marriage of stylistics and the hardboiled-story. Here, Philip Marlowe (Dick Powell) is manhandled by client Malloy (Mike Mazurki). (Culver Pic.)

directed by Edward Dmytryk (perhaps the most underrated stylist of Hollywood's expressionist period), depicts the urban milieu as a bleak cityscape in which shadows are as expressive as the characters they envelop. The plot, a typical morass of duplicity and false appearances, is related in flashback by Chandler's stock detective-hero, Philip Marlowe. Dick Powell, cast against his usual musical and romantic lead roles, played Marlowe; there would be later Marlowe incarnations by Bogart, Robert Montgomery, James Garner, Elliot Gould, and Robert Mitchum, among others. The flashback framework in Dmytryk's film is a brilliant stroke, allowing the detective's voice-over, first-person narration to advance the action and at the same time provide an ironic counterpoint to the visuals. Furthermore, the dual time structure, in which the detective (in the present) describes the events of the past, enhances the mood of futility and fatalism. This is a world of victims, entrapped by social circumstances or by their own greed and lust in an ongoing tale of violence and deceit.

Murder, My Sweet opens with Marlowe being grilled by police about a murder in which he is implicated. The sole light source—or so Dmytryk's lighting leads us to believe—is a desk lamp in the center of the frame, casting the set in semi-darkness and obliterating the features of the interrogating cops. Marlowe begins his flashback verbally, relating his initial involvement with the case. As the camera pulls in slowly on the light's reflection on the desk top, the scene dissolves to Marlowe's darkened office, where the detective-hero sits alone. The camera is situated over Marlowe's shoulder (an essential convention in the genre, encouraging viewer identification with the detective's vision), and as the lights of the city flash on and off, Marlowe's reflection appears, vanishes, and reappears in the window glass. Then suddenly, another face appears reflected in the glass—that of Moose Malloy (played by the gigantic, menacing Mike Mazurki), whose disembodied visage is suspended above the lights and shadowed silhouettes of Los Angeles. With these initial images, Dmytryk literally *realizes* the detective's isolation and attitude while seeming merely to introduce the film's narrative.

In this sequence and throughout *Murder, My Sweet*, Dmytryk's camerawork, lighting, and *mise-en-scène* function to draw the viewer ever deeper into Marlowe's bleak netherworld. After the initial flashback sequence, Marlowe and Malloy walk to a sleazy downtown bar looking for a woman who had befriended Malloy before the prison term he has just completed. As we learn later, that woman is now the wealthy Mrs. Grayle (Claire Trevor), who had seduced and betrayed Malloy years before and now will attempt to do the same to Marlowe. In one of the film's most evocative visual passages, the two men climb a narrow, dimly lit stairway which seems to swallow them up with each step. Dmytryk had the walls and ceiling of this set slanted inward to distort the visual perspective and emphasize the hero's metaphoric journey into the urban maelstrom.

The intensity of this journey is visualized even more dramatically in the film's bizarre dream sequences. Marlowe is knocked out repeatedly in the course of his investigation, and Dmytryk treats the hero's loss of consciousness with techniques such as blurring of focus, fading to black, and so on. The most effective sequence

of this type occurs when Marlowe is trapped inside a dark, seemingly deserted house and given an injection. Marlowe's drug-induced visions and his subsequent efforts to regain consciousness are shown from his subjective viewpoint, and effectively convey his mental and physical isolation within a nightmare world.

His viewpoint is countered throughout by the lavish, expensive world of the film's *femme noire*, Mrs. Grayle, who combines the Gutman and Brigid O'Shaughnessy roles from *The Maltese Falcon*. By the time Marlowe meets her, Mrs. Grayle has graduated from exploiting small-time hoods like Malloy and is into big-time corruption. She spins a seductive web which ensnares her emasculated husband, pathetic playboys, jewel thieves, and even Marlowe himself. Like Spade in the earlier film, Marlowe accepts money from manipulative clients who assume that he can be bought, although his own moral code eventually prevails. Unlike Spade, however, the detective-hero in *Murder, My Sweet* is not left alone in the end. Mrs. Grayle's "good" stepdaughter, Ann Grayle (Anne Shirley), is essentially opposed to the *femme noire*: she is unselfish, kind, devoted to her father despite his weakness and thus to the values of hearth and home, and she is genuinely concerned for the detective's well-being.

Once Marlowe completes the flashback story and the police are convinced of his innocence, he is allowed to leave the police station with Ann. His eyes are bandaged when he leaves the station (due to a burst of gunfire too near his face during a climactic shootout), and he initially is unaware of Ann's presence. The bandaged eyes serve a dual narrative function: they visually reaffirm the social and moral "blindness" associated with the hero's naive romanticism, and they also provide a pretext for bringing Marlowe and Ann together.

Their closing embrace presents us with a narrative epilogue quite different from that of *The Maltese Falcon*. In *Murder, My Sweet* the detective realizes some solace, some kind of reprieve from a world otherwise devoid of human contact and concern. However, we realize that the reprieve is only temporary; regardless of the hero's physical debility or emotional attachment at the conclusion of a case, when we meet him again he will be on his own, ready to immerse himself once again in what Chandler once termed "a world gone wrong."

In retrospect, the script and characterization in *Murder, My Sweet* are not quite on a par with those of *The Maltese Falcon*. Dmytryk's direction and camerawork, nevertheless, do anticipate the wedding of story and style which would distinguish later hardboiled-detective films like *The Big Sleep*, *The Killers*, *The Third Man*, *The Big Heat*, and *Touch of Evil*. Another 1944 production vital to the development of the genre is *Double Indemnity*, directed by Billy Wilder and co-scripted (from a novel by James M. Cain) by Wilder and Chandler. Theirs was a stormy collaboration. (Chandler: "Working with Billy Wilder on *Double Indemnity* was an agonizing experience and has probably shortened my life, but I learned from it about as much about screenwriting as I am capable of learning, which is not very much." Wilder: "He [Chandler] gave me more aggravation than any other writer I ever worked with.") (Henley, 1978). Despite their squabbles, the two writers created one of the decade's most dramatic screenplays and three of its strongest characters: Phyllis



Hardboiled hero and the femme noire: two different incarnations of Marlowe—Powell in *Murder, My Sweet* and Bogart in *The Big Sleep*—enjoy an intimate moment with women whose motives and allegiance are very much in doubt. *Murder, My Sweet* [Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research]; *The Big Sleep* [Culver Pictures]

Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck), Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray), and Barton Keyes (Edward G. Robinson).

James M. Cain's original story and narrative style certainly would qualify as "hardboiled," even though a detective is not the central character. The story focuses upon a personable but essentially weak and amoral insurance agent (Neff) who is convinced by a seductive suburban siren (Phyllis) to murder her boorish bourgeois husband and bilk the insurance company on a double-indemnity, accidental-death clause. All of this is observed from a distance by Barton Keyes, a close friend of Neff's and chief claims investigator for the insurance company. The story is related from Neff's perspective and not from Keyes', although the authors' narrative strategy does transform the film into a detective story. Cain's original story, which followed Neff through his relationship with Phyllis, had a simple linear plot, but the screenwriters decided to use the flashback time frame that Dmytryk and his screenwriter, John Paxton, had used in *Murder, My Sweet*. This narrative device again provided a context for voice-over narration, only this time the implicit theme of fatalism is given a new and significant slant: The narrator, Neff, identifies himself at the very outset of the film, even before the flashback begins, as the victim of Phyllis' ploys and as her husband's killer.

Double Indemnity opens with a car careening through dark, rain-soaked city streets and eventually stopping in front of an office building. A lone figure staggers out and makes his way into the building and enters an office. It is Walter Neff, who sits at a desk, turns on the lamp (the only visible light source in the frame), and begins speaking into a dictaphone as blood begins to saturate his coat. Neff is addressing Keyes, and tells him: "I killed Dietrichson. . . . I killed him for the money—and for a woman. [Pause to inhale on a cigarette, his face barely visible in the shadows.] I didn't get the money, and I didn't get the woman. It all started. . . ."

With that Wilder cuts to Neff's first meeting with Phyllis, and the cinema-past plot line is set into motion. Not only does this opening sequence engage our curiosity and sympathy for Neff, but it also encourages us to cast ourselves, along with the as-yet unidentified "Keyes," in the role of investigator-observer. This perspective is enhanced by the fact that Neff seems so detached from his cinema-past self. As we learn through his narrative, Neff's involvement with Phyllis has enabled him to enter the world of moral and social evil. He now recounts his experience with the objective, fatalistic air of a dying man who finally has realized the error of his ways and is able to investigate his own tragic fall.

In a *Time* magazine review of *Double Indemnity*, James Agee wrote that the film "is to a fair extent soaked and shot through with money and the coolly intricate amorality of money; you can even supply the idea, without being contradicted by the film, that among these somewhat representative Americans money and sex and a readiness to murder are as inseparably interdependent as the Holy Trinity"⁸ (Agee, 1958, p. 119). In Neff's inability to distinguish between his lust for Phyllis and his lust for easy wealth and intrigue, he is drawn into a chain of events—instigated by Phyllis—which had begun long before they met. (She already had murdered her husband's first wife; she now intends to use Neff to kill her husband and

later use her stepdaughter's boyfriend to dispose of Neff.) From the moment when Neff first glimpses Phyllis at the top of a stairway wearing only a towel and gold anklet, he begins a ride that takes them both, in his own prophetic words, "to the end of the line."

Their courtship begins predictably enough, with the two exchanging sexual banter. Later there is a torrid affair and eventually a murder plot is hatched between them. Phyllis' alluring sensuality leads the unwitting Neff into the conspiracy, but once the murder has been committed, their sexual relationship steadily disintegrates and with it the perverse attraction they initially had for one another. In what is perhaps the darkest and most intense sequence in any '40s film, Neff and Phyllis consummate their physical relationship in a brilliantly understated dance of death, which culminates in a symbolic embrace. The traditional values of romantic love, monogamy, and procreative sexual fulfillment have been turned inside out: love has turned to greed and lust, the bond of marriage has been shattered, and the climactic "sex act" is performed with a gun. In almost total darkness (for most of the sequence we can see only portions of their faces), Phyllis shoots Neff from several feet away but is unable to fire again, confessing, "I never loved you . . . until a minute ago, when I couldn't fire that second shot." For the first time in her black-widow career, Phyllis has felt something for her victim ("I never thought that could happen to me"), but now it is too late, as it was for Neff the minute he first saw her. With Neff's parting words to Phyllis—"I'm sorry, baby, I'm not buying"—the confusion of sexual and material lust is reaffirmed, and as they embrace, he fires twice.

This deadly coupling returns us to the film's opening moments. Neff's descent into the heart of darkness is complete, but he stops to record it for Keyes—and for us—before fleeing.

Neff has come to understand his own weakness, and as narrator he is virtually doubled with his former cinema-past self. He has arrived at the truth; he understands Phyllis' capacity for evil and his own as well, but unlike the hardboiled-detective-hero he has learned this only through self-destructive human experience. Walter Neff is, finally, one of us. He has gone to his office not to await another case and to hold the evil temporarily at bay like Marlowe, but to acknowledge that it has enveloped and destroyed him. It's worth noting here that Wilder initially ended the film with Walter's execution in the gas chamber, but he later opted for the film's existing conclusion depicting a confrontation between Keyes and the dying Walter Neff in the office.

Robinson's portrayal of the betrayed but still devoted colleague and father figure makes this ending pay off. Keyes is a nine-to-five detective, a claims investigator privy to volumes of statistics but finally getting his information from the "little man" in his gut. His paternal rapport with Neff silences his inner suspicions and enables Neff to dupe the company, although Neff's final confession absolves the killer of his betrayal. As Keyes lights one last cigarette for his dying friend, Neff mutters the now-familiar salutation: "I love you too, Keyes." This gesture of love between two men, whose relationship throughout the film served to counterpoint

Walter's perverse obsession with Phyllis, provides the single trace of hope in an otherwise dark and nihilistic world, but this trace dies with Walter.

The genre's postwar development

In adapting *Double Indemnity* to the screen and adding the flashback framework, Chandler was able to test one of his own fundamental hypotheses about quality detective fiction: "The best mystery story is one you would read even if the last chapter were torn out" (Gardiner and Walker, 1977, p. 130). Chandler and Wilder didn't exactly tear out the last chapter—instead they put it at the beginning. The fact that they let the audience in on the solution underscores the fact that detective fiction of this type is engaging primarily because of the world it depicts and the world view of its principal characters. The "problem" confronted in this and other noir films is the necessary alienation, misdirected ambition, and sexual confusion of contemporary urban life. The answer it proposes, in essence, is a stoic detachment which enables one to survive and maintain one's self-respect. Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe survive with their instinctive savvy and sensitivity; Walter Neff is absolved when he realizes his guilt. In all these cases, the message is clear: the only solution to the crime of modern existence is personal integrity and self-sufficiency, which are, in the last analysis, their own reward. What these and later hardboiled-detective films celebrate is not the value of law and order or the power of deductive reasoning, but rather the individual style of the isolated hero. This is a man who can deal with the chaos of urban society and still walk away with a shrug.

The industry's predictable response to the success of *Murder, My Sweet* and *Double Indemnity* was an onslaught of noir mysteries, many of which hit the screen in 1946. Included in the group were *The Lady in the Lake*, *The Killers*, *The Blue Dahlia*, *Cornered*, *The Dark Corner*, *The Dark Mirror*, *Dark Alibi*, *So Dark the Night*, *Gilda*, *Fallen Angel*, *Notorious*, and *The Big Sleep*. This latter film was directed by Howard Hawks and scripted by Leigh Brackett, Jules Furthman, and William Faulkner and cast Bogart as Philip Marlowe and Lauren Bacall as the *femme noire*.

Bogart and Bacall were a natural matchup for *The Big Sleep*, as they were for *Dark Passage* in 1947 and *Key Largo* in 1948. Bacall's screen debut in 1944 (at age 19) in Hawks' *To Have and Have Not* and her instant connection with Bogart—both on and off screen—had distinguished that otherwise mediocre film. By 1946, their impending marriage and tangible on-screen rapport, along with Bogart's established "hardboiled" persona, heavily contributed to the success of *The Big Sleep*. The Bogart-Bacall chemistry was not lost on director Hawks, who was by this time well versed in the conventions of screwball comedy (*Twentieth Century*, 1934; *Bringing Up Baby*, 1938; *His Girl Friday*, 1940). Hawks managed to alternate—depending upon whether Bogart/Marlowe was on screen alone or sharing a scene with Bacall/Vivian—between visually and dramatically intense sequences of action and

violence and sequences between Bogart and Bacall of comic banter and bold sexual innuendo.

The film opens as Marlowe arrives at the Sternwood mansion in response to a request from the family patriarch. The old man, seated in his hothouse surrounded by orchids, assigns Marlowe to dispose discreetly of his daughter Carmen's gambling debts. Marlowe serves as Sternwood's emissary to the outside world—which is not simply the criminal milieu but the world at large. Marlowe agrees to take the case, and upon leaving the Sternwood mansion he meets Vivian, Carmen's older sister. Their initial verbal parrying shows off the film's shifting priorities as well as Hawks' capacity to redirect his stylistic and dramatic emphases. Unlike *The Maltese Falcon*, in which Brigid feigns helplessness to secure Spade's commitment, or *Double Indemnity*, in which Phyllis' control over the weak-willed Walter is never in doubt, in *The Big Sleep* Marlowe and Vivian are portrayed as equals. Their jousting ostensibly concerns sister Carmen and Marlowe's assignment, but its real significance lies in the sexual subcurrent which culminates later in a remarkable discussion of horse racing and in Vivian's assertion that "it all depends on who's in the saddle."

The Vivian-Marlowe relationship, like the Ann-Marlowe relationship in *Murder, My Sweet*, poses an interesting complication of the hardboiled-detective formula. Not only does it distract our attention from the detection process, it also interjects a tone of optimism into an essentially nihilistic and angst-ridden environment. Hawks maintains a delicate balance between Marlowe's existential isolation (as detective) and the promise of human contact and fulfillment (as lover-spouse), through two narrative devices: at certain opportune moments, he emphasizes Vivian's relationship with gangster Eddie Mars, thereby keeping her commitment to Marlowe continually in doubt, and he qualifies the optimism of romantic love with allusions to pornography (Geiger and Mars' "book" racket), to Carmen's promiscuity and drug addiction, and to Geiger and Carroll's homosexual relationship. We actually wonder near the end of the film whether Vivian will help Marlowe to escape from and execute Mars' henchmen. Because we are unsure of her commitment to him until late in the film, their genuine—and unconventional—relationship dominates neither the film nor our image of the detective-hero; the romance emerges as a rare oasis in a wasteland of anxiety and alienation.

Other filmmakers were not so careful about maintaining a balance between romance and mystery, and their films suffered as a result. In *The Blue Dahlia* (1946) and *Dark Passage* (1947), for instance, the relationship between the detective-hero and the mysterious woman (Alan Ladd and Veronica Lake in the former, Bogart and Bacall in the latter) blossoms into a romance which finally displaces the initial hardboiled-mystery plot and atmosphere. This narrative displacement is especially disappointing in *Dark Passage*, which might have been one of the most distinctive and engaging detective films of the period.

The opening sequences in *Dark Passage*, tracing the prison escape and ensuing flight of the hero, are shot from the protagonist's first-person perspective. This subjective point-of-view strategy is sustained through the hero's coincidental

meeting with and befriending of the heroine (Bacall) and culminates in a bizarre rendezvous with an unlicensed plastic surgeon who miraculously transforms the escaped convict into Humphrey Bogart. The transition from this camera-eye technique to a more conventional narrative style is bridged with a surreal dream sequence much like that in *Murder, My Sweet*, which is initiated by the surgeon's anesthetic. Just before the surgeon administers the drug, he leans into the camera-subject and asks, "Ever see a botched plastic job?" The horrific dream which ensues takes us into the mind of the protagonist, but once the dream ends, we finally can "see" the hero and are thereafter disengaged from the first-person camera technique.

Once the protagonist receives his new identity, he begins his search for those who wrongfully sent him to prison and also cultivates his relationship with Bacall. Just when it seems that the evidence implicating him in a number of murders is too damaging to refute, he and Bacall escape with her riches to South America. As Bogart and Bacall dance serenely on a moonlit shore in the film's closing sequence and we realize that the murders will never be solved, expectations generated by the detective plot dissolve. This incredible romantic resolution is especially disturbing in light of the film's dynamic opening and its consistent manipulation of the detective-hero's viewpoint.

Director Delmer Daves was not the first Hollywood director to attempt this camera-as-character strategy to enhance the viewer's identification with the detective. Robert Montgomery's 1946 adaptation of Chandler's *The Lady in the Lake* is certainly the most notable example. After an opening sequence in which actor-director Montgomery (who plays Philip Marlowe) directly addresses the camera to establish the flashback-narrative context, the remainder of the film is shot entirely from Montgomery/Marlowe's physical perspective. The detective-hero speaking directly into the camera lens itself violates the implicit codes of Hollywood filmmaking, rupturing the filmic world's enclosed autonomy. But this initial rupture doesn't begin to prepare us for the sustained first-person camera technique.

While this technique clearly is designed to draw the viewer into the closest possible identification with the detective-hero and his attitude, its ultimate effect is essentially the opposite. Instead of strengthening our empathy for the hero, it serves to further distance us from him, repeatedly reminding us that his perceptions are radically different from ours. The detective-hero is still our avenue of narrative access and his is the organizing sensibility, but as Montgomery's dizzying experiment indicates, narrative filmmaking is most effective when we weigh our own perceptions against those of the hero. It is not enough for us to observe the detective's milieu through his eyes; we must also watch the detective observing his own milieu.

As the more effective hardboiled-detective films demonstrate, viewer identification can be realized adequately through conventional point-of-view and shot/reverse-shot strategies. Generally, a master shot establishes the spatial context and the central character's position within it, and is followed by a close-up or medium-close-up of that character, and then a reverse-angle shot of what the charac-

ter (now the camera-as-character) actually "sees." Thus a filmmaker initially might establish an omniscient viewpoint to open a sequence and move in and out of the central character's perspective as the sequence demands. The various narrative devices—particularly the flashback framework and also the manipulation of lighting and camerawork to represent the detective's isolated view—more than compensate for the cinema's inability to replicate detective literature's subjective, first-person narrator.

Actually, by the late 1940s the possibility of drawing the viewer into a direct relationship with the detective-hero became increasingly remote as the genre and its central character were subtly altered. Following a historical pattern similar to that of the sound Western, the hardboiled-detective genre began with an essentially naive protagonist of epic-heroic stature, but he lost his invincibility during the postwar years. The early hardboiled-detective film, like the classical Western with its mediator-hero, was naive in its assumption that a hero could hold his corrupt world at bay and survive through his adherence to a self-styled value system. And just as the Westerner eventually began to buckle under the physical, moral, and historical expectations we had placed on his character, so too did the stoic, upright detective. The Westerner, as it happened, could handle the strain and adapt to changes in the audience and the industry, whereas the hardboiled detective could not. By the late 1940s the Spade-Marlowe prototype already had become something of an anachronism.

Perhaps the Western community's historical and physical distance from contemporary audiences enabled its filmmakers to assume an increasingly negative view of the hero and of American urbanization. Another factor which contributed to the genre's postwar success was the industry's technological development. The more frequent use of Technicolor and the innovation of widescreen formats during the early 1950s heightened the Western's visual appeal but were basically incompatible with the hardboiled-detective genre and its *noir* stylistics. Furthermore, the sociohistorical immediacy of the "hardboiled" community, milieu, and plot conventions could not be adjusted to the Cold War anxieties over urban order and still maintain its distinctive narrative framework. In an era of HUAC and blacklisting, when it was considered "un-American" to subvert or even to challenge the ideological status quo, the hardboiled private eye and his decadent milieu faded from American movie screens. The Western effectively confronted topical issues during the Cold War, usually by adjusting the character and role of the Westerner: Wayne as the psychotic capitalist-rancher in *Red River* (1948), Gregory Peck as the conscience-plagued killer in *The Gunfighter* (1950), Jimmy Stewart as the crazed, womanized bounty hunter in *The Naked Spur* (1953), Joan Crawford as the gun-toting saloon owner whose "guilt by association" with local outlaws nearly gets her lynched in *Johnny Guitar* (1954). These and scores of other Cold War Westerns called into question, albeit indirectly, such basic American values as capitalism, democracy, rugged individualism, isolationism, marriage, romantic love, and the nuclear family—and they were able to do so within the genre's traditional narrative framework.

When compared with the remarkably flexible Western formula, the detective genre seems particularly limited. As filmmakers reworked the private eye's essentially antisocial lifestyle to accommodate the political climate—often with a change in occupation to police detective or insurance investigator—he lost his moral and attitudinal edge. The “twenty-five bucks a day and expenses” which had sustained the self-employed detective simply could not be replaced by a weekly paycheck and a commitment to some “legitimate” agency of social order. Unlike the Westerner, who was never quite one of us, the private eye could not be given a prosocial role without radically compromising his and the genre's distinctive thematic appeal.

The genre was also technically inflexible. The emphasis on “street realism” and location shooting in postwar filmmaking meant that the romantic detective in his office retreat would be replaced by a hard-nosed cop on the beat in such “police documentaries” as *The House on 92nd Street* (1945), *The Naked City* (1948), *Call Northside 777* (1948), and *Where the Sidewalk Ends* (1950). Removing the private eye from the controlled environment of the Hollywood studio and placing him in the “real” world—besides giving him a real occupation—further emasculated the detective genre.

Two of the films which come closest to surviving the genre's alteration are Robert Siodmak's *The Killers* (1946) and Rudolph Mate's *D.O.A.* (1949). The former ostensibly is based on a Hemingway short story in which a gas station attendant learns that two hoodlums are in town to murder him, and he inexplicably waits in his room for the killers to arrive. Hemingway's story merely provides the narrative point of departure in Siodmak's film, however; the remainder of the film follows the efforts of an insurance investigator (Edmund O'Brien as Riordan) to identify the killers. The investigation, in which a host of minor characters provide information in a dozen flashbacks, gradually reveals the character of the dead man, Swede (Burt Lancaster in his screen debut). Swede, it seems, was a washed-up prize fighter turned small-time hood, whose troubles were caused not by his commitment to a life of crime but rather to *femme noire* Kitty Collins (Ava Gardner). Swede laments just before he is killed that he “did something wrong, once.” This dying epithet (shades of “Rosebud”) seems to involve a huge payroll robbery that was covered by Riordan's company, but we eventually realize through Riordan's sleuthing that Swede's tragic error was a more archetypal and fundamental one: he had been seduced and betrayed by the sultry black widow, Kitty.

Riordan's obsession with the case, which his boss insists is a waste of company time, brings him into Swede's world, where eventually he meets Kitty. Riordan avoids her efforts to use him, recovers the payroll, and in the words of his boss, brings “next year's premiums down one tenth of a cent.” While Riordan's personal fascination with the case emphasizes his commitment to some higher moral code, his ultimate allegiance to the insurance company and thus to the socioeconomic status quo sets him distinctly apart from the hardboiled, unaffiliated detective. Swede's existential plight, however, and Riordan's growing identification with the dead man tend to offset this resolution. The film's prosocial implications are



“I did something wrong, once.” It turns out that what Swede (Burt Lancaster in his screen debut) did wrong was not falling in with gangsters, but falling for the wrong woman (Ava Gardner, right). (Culver Pictures)

qualified even more severely by Siodmak's visual stylization: the initial killing is shot in varying degrees of darkness (we never even see Swede's face until later in the flashbacks), and the investigation process itself takes Riordan deep into Swede's dark past.

Darkness in *The Killers* is an artificial, studio-produced effect, though, and considerably different from the bleak atmosphere of Rudolph Mate's location-noir thriller, *D.O.A.* This incredible film may be Hollywood's ultimate articulation of urban angst and Cold War paranoia. In the film's opening sequence, Edmund O'Brien, again portraying an insurance agent/investigator, stumbles into a police station to describe a murder—his own. He was spending a few days in the Big City (San Francisco) to escape his small-town agency and his domesticating secretary-fiancée, when he was poisoned for no apparent reason with a lethal dose of a mysterious, radium-derived drug which was slipped into his drink. The following day, O'Brien, realizing that his physical discomfort was too severe to ascribe to a hang-

over, went to a hospital emergency room and learned there that he had only a few days to live.

Mate's dynamic, energetic camera follows him as he runs in panicked desperation through the streets of San Francisco. With his imminent death a foregone conclusion, the condemned man conducts his final investigation, the results of which he relates to the local police with his dying breath. The investigation takes us through the city's back streets, its cheap dives, and abandoned warehouses, all captured in realistic detail. The film's flashback structure and the hero's existential plight are reminiscent of earlier *noir* detective films, but Mate's documentary techniques, especially his use of natural, available light in the exterior location work, enhances the theme of urban isolation. This style works well in *D.O.A.*, but it does mark a significant departure from earlier urban detective films with their visual intensity and dramatic preoccupations.

The police-detective variation

The hardboiled detective also survived in the guise of the displaced cop. Examples of this hybrid—an amalgam of the detective and gangster-as-cop formulas—can be traced back into the 1940s in Preminger's *Laura* (1944) and Dmytryk's *Crossfire* (1947) and culminate in Welles' brilliant *Touch of Evil* (1958). In these films, the cop's disillusionment and individual isolation arise out of the very ideals that had motivated Spade and Marlowe to opt for private practice rather than institutional police work. Like their "hardboiled" counterparts, these cops are committed to the utopian ideal of urban order, but their agencies have been corrupted either by ineptitude or avarice—if not both, as in Fritz Lang's *The Big Heat* (1953)—and thus idealism has turned into cynicism. The cop functions by his own self-styled moral code, but his ultimate allegiance to the force undercuts his initial isolation as well as his mediating function. In the '40s variations, however, allegiance to the force often seems to be a gratuitous plot device, and consequently the hero's narrative function and attitude seem closely aligned with those of the hardboiled detective. Most '50s variations involve a cop-crusader out to "clean up the force," legitimizing his own prosocial function and individual idealism within a traditional agency.

In Fritz Lang's *The Big Heat*, for example, police detective Dave Bannion (Glenn Ford) quits his job when the gangster-politico who controls the force's commanding officers kills Bannion's wife with a bomb meant for him. Lang's graphic depiction of Bannion's psychopathic desire for personal and social retribution effectively makes the point that urban order can be achieved only at the price of human life and mental stability. Bannion's character is mirrored throughout by Lee Marvin's mindless, maniacal hood, Vince Stone, who both reflects and opposes Bannion's attitudes and behavior.

The hero eventually cleans up the force and returns the urban community to a

state of equilibrium, but not until we have been shown that urban order is merely temporary and gratuitous. Like so many '50s crime films, especially those steeped like this one in *noir* stylistics, the prosocial resolution is distinctly at odds with the narrative. Corruption is seen not as a function of individual criminality but of the urban socioeconomic system itself. Bannion confronts this corruption only after his wife is dead; once he has resigned from his job, he has virtually nothing left to lose. His eventual return to the force after he has sent the gangster chieftain to prison resolves the superficial plot complications, but it cannot offset the film's deeper and more lasting impressions: the bleak urban wasteland "out there" beyond the secure, well-lit police station, the scalding coffee Marvin throws in the face of a betraying siren (Gloria Grahame), the death and/or mutilation of every significant female character in the film, and so on.

This familiar tension between the initial statement of the narrative "problem" and its eventual resolution represents a recurring dilemma for the genre analyst. That is, assuming that the basis for a genre's appeal is its formal articulation of some basic cultural contradiction, and assuming that as the genre develops it

In Fritz Lang's manic detective thriller The Big Heat, Dave Bannion (Glenn Ford, pictured here with Lee Marvin) strikes out on his own to clean up the corruption both on the police force and in the streets. (Penguin Photos)



learns to articulate that contradiction more directly, then it necessarily follows that its "solution" to the problem will become increasingly forced, stylized, artificial. Lang, like many of his contemporaries in Hollywood, became a master of the requisite happy ending, and resolved immediate social conflicts with a forced optimism that only emphasized the contradictory nature of the values involved in his films. The last line of dialogue in *The Big Heat*, for instance—in which a grinning, reinstated Bannion, about to leave the station on another case, turns and says, "By the way, don't forget the coffee"—would seem to be Lang's knowing wink about the forced optimism of the prosocial outcome to an audience still numb from the coffee-flinging incident earlier in the film.

Certain filmmakers, though, did not transform the genre film's happy ending into an ironic thematic counterpoint. Many of Hollywood's finest directors, like John Ford and Orson Welles, used the resolution as a way of lamenting the price which society must pay when it confronts its own contradictory value system. In Ford's later Westerns, just as in Welles' 1958 film, *Touch of Evil*, the ending deals with the death of the traditional hero, whose rugged self-reliance and violent demeanor finally are at odds with the community he had served to promote and protect.

Touch of Evil traces the efforts of special investigator Mike Vargas (Charlton Heston) to clean up the narcotics traffic and also the corrupt police force in a sleazy Mexican-American border town. As the film's complex narrative unwinds, however, this surface plot gradually dissolves to reveal the film's primary concerns: the nature and process of police justice and the exploration of a new type of hero, the technocratic supercop. Heston's macho hero is juxtaposed with Hank Quinlan (played by Welles, who also directed and scripted the film), a seedy, obese, intimidating cop with a remarkable track record for solving difficult cases. The reason for his success, Vargas discovers, is Quinlan's talent for planting bogus evidence and using third-degree tactics to extract confessions. Welles' portrayal of the aging, corrupt cop finally victimized by one of his own schemes is so effective that Quinlan emerges as the film's most sympathetic character. During the course of the action, Vargas uncovers the truth about Quinlan's police procedures, even winning Quinlan's long-time friend and partner (Joseph Calleia as Sergeant Pete Menzes) to his cause. As this occurs, Quinlan self-destructs before our eyes. He works with and then murders one of the dope-runners Vargas has been investigating and desperately tries to frame Vargas for this crime and so divert attention from his own misdeeds. His end is foretold by the fading madam of a Mexican brothel (Marlene Dietrich) whom he turned to for solace. When he asks her to read his fortune, she gently tells him, "You haven't got any. Your future is all used up."

Meanwhile, in order to record Quinlan's confession, Vargas convinces Menzes to help him carry an electronic eavesdropping device. But even though he is drunk, Quinlan detects Vargas' scheme and is able to gain momentary control over his nemesis. It is at this point that Quinlan shoots Menzes; then, just as he is about to execute Vargas, the dying Menzes shoots his old partner in the back. As Quinlan



*Hardboiled baroque: Orson Welles not only played detective Hank Quinlan in *Touch of Evil* (1958), but he directed the film and adapted the screenplay as well. In this shot, Welles' framing, lighting, and characterization coalesce into an image of a world as stylized as it is corrupt. (Culver Pictures)*

floats face down in the garbage-strewn Rio Grande at film's end, the various characters gather on the bank to mourn his death. We are now informed that the suspect Quinlan has tried to frame has confessed to the very murder which had initiated the Vargas-Quinlan confrontation. When one of the mourners suggests, "Well, Hank [Quinlan] was one hell of a detective," Dietrich replies caustically, "And a lousy cop."

As this informal eulogy suggests, Welles created in the character of Hank Quinlan the necessary culmination of the hardboiled-detective figure. Here the detective's self-styled relativism has hardened into moral absolutism, his sense of integrity and fair play has given way to the demand for self-preservation, and perhaps most significantly, his spiritual isolation and self-indulgence have affected his physical form—he has grown old and disgustingly fat.

Welles' (and cameraman Russell Metty's) cinematic vision of this dark, surreal, urban environment also emphasizes the institutional decay that has infected it. Although the film was shot on location in Venice, California, the lighting and use of distorting wide-angle lenses create a baroque, disorienting, and threatening atmosphere. The visual distortion is offset by Welles' penchant for long takes—most notably in the film's opening sequence and later when Quinlan plants the evidence in the suspect's apartment—these give a sense of spatial integrity to the milieu which at the same time the camera lens distorts. Thus the filmic world is both real and artificial, both familiar and abstract, much like the hardboiled hero himself. In humanizing the previously romanticized hero—even to the point of his advancing age and death—while situating him in a distorted urban milieu, Welles effectively articulates both the social immediacy and the mythic abstraction inherent within the genre. Such qualities are concentrated in a central character whose death signals the passing of the traditional hardboiled detective and his world. *Touch of Evil* stands as one of the genuine masterpieces of detective fiction and of Hollywood expressionist cinema.

Quinlan's death notwithstanding, the hardboiled detective did survive the 1950s—although he was more prevalent in popular literature than in the cinema. Spade and Marlowe gradually made way for a less heroic, more brutal private eye, best typified by Mike Hammer in the widely popular Mickey Spillane novels (*I, the Jury*, *Kiss Me Deadly*, etc.). Spillane's talent for exploiting mindless cruelty and sexual titillation drew literally millions of readers into Hammer's world—a much wider market than for the Hammett and Chandler books.

Despite Spillane's success, however, only Robert Aldrich's 1955 film, *Kiss Me Deadly*, brought Hammer to the screen with any real flavor. Ralph Meeker portrays Hammer, a character whom Aldrich himself described (in an interview with François Truffaut) as "an antidemocrat, a fascist"¹⁰ (Sadoul, 1972, p. 178). No longer an isolated moralist, Hammer's detective assumes a more assertive, overtly ideological role in his self-assigned mission to rid society of corruption. Unlike his romantic predecessors, at odds with both the criminal elements and the insensitive prosocial forces, Hammer is a hard-bitten pragmatist whose values are based firmly in the paranoid absolutism of Cold War America. Hammer's pragmatism also leads him to take divorce cases—the "real-life" bread and butter of private detectives—which his generic forefathers had steadfastly disdained. In *Kiss Me Deadly*, Hammer lives in an art-deco pad (decorated with checkerboard linoleum, tacky statuettes, and pop paintings), drives a sportscar, hunts down smuggled radioactive materials, and pursues his secretary, with whom he has more than a platonic rapport. Professionally, her primary function is to lure decadent married men into bed so that her boss can strong-arm them. Hammer finally gets the girl and the materials, only to be destroyed in the film's final moments by an apparent atomic holocaust. (Aldrich: "I made the ending ambiguous to avoid police interference"¹⁰ [Sadoul, 1972, p. 178].)

Hammer is ultimately no further removed from his heroic predecessors than, say, Jimmy Stewart's maniacal Westerner is from his own classic predecessors in

'50s films such as *The Naked Spur* and *The Man from Laramie*. But while the self-reflexive "psychological Westerns" were popular throughout the 1950s, Aldrich's "psychological detective film" stands virtually alone. Hammer's obvious commitment to '50s Americanism and the ideological status quo—what Aldrich termed his "fascism"—actually places him closer to the disillusioned cops of that era than to the hardboiled detectives of the previous decade. The new hero fulfills the detective's traditional mediating function by having sole access to both the prosocial and anarchic forces, but his allegiance to the prosocial is never in doubt. Hammer's detective is at bottom a self-appointed cop who disdains police procedure and legal loopholes and metes out justice on his own terms without fear of bureaucratic or judicial interference. The ironic effect of *Kiss Me Deadly* is that Hammer's very refusal to question the value system he blindly supports encourages the viewer to take the opposite stance. The man is all action and no angst, a pathetic extension of the hardboiled hero into an era of moral and political absolutism. Ultimately, the only difference between Hammer and the cops he continually derides is that he doesn't have to follow the rules.

Regeneration in the New Hollywood

The classic hardboiled-detective formula and its romantic knight-errant hero disappeared from the screen after the 1940s and lay dormant until the New Hollywood of the 1960s and '70s unearthed them. The revival seems to have begun in 1966-67 with a handful of interesting but generally uninspired private-eye sagas: Jack Smight's *Harper* (1966) and Blake Edwards' *Tony Rome* and John Boorman's muddled but occasionally brilliant *Point Blank* (both 1967), to name a few. Philip Marlowe himself returned to the screen in *Marlowe* (1969), based on Chandler's *The Little Sister*. Marlowe is consistently true to the "hardboiled" formula and style, even within its '60s-hip milieu and bright Technicolor photography. Much of the film's modest success is due to James Garner's relaxed, understated portrayal of the hero and also to Los Angeles' continuing reputation as the center of urban American decadence. (Garner's success with his "Maverick" television role is an apt indication of the resemblance between the Westerner and his contemporary hardboiled counterpart.)

This return to the hardboiled-detective formula reached a peak in the 1970s with such films as Robert Altman's *The Long Goodbye*, Arthur Penn's *Night Moves*, and Roman Polanski's *Chinatown*. Actually, these films represent the cream of a fairly substantial crop of detective films (including *Farewell, My Lovely*; *The Big Sleep*; *The Late Show*; and *The Big Fix*), as well as a number of parodies (*Gumshoe*, *Pulp*, *Shamus*, *The Cheap Detective*), and also some interesting variations on the private-eye formula (*The Conversation*, *Three Days of the Condor*, *Marathon Man*, *Kluge*). The displaced cop or police detective enjoyed a new vitality during this period due to the resurgence of the private-eye genre, most notably in *Bullitt*, *Madigan*, and *Dirty Harry*.

Television was also well into the hardboiled formula during the 1970s, producing such hardboiled series as *City of Angels*, *Harry O*, and *The Rockford Files*, in addition to a number of sanitized, softboiled detectives (*Mannix*, *Barnaby Jones*, *Cannon*, et al.) and streetwise cops (*Baretta*, *Kojak*, *Starsky and Hutch*, et al.). Ironically, television's heaviest contribution to the formula was during the '50s and early '60s, when Hollywood's hardboiled output was virtually nil. Consider some of the more popular series of the '50s: *Martin Kane*, *Private Eye*, *Ellery Queen*, *The Third Man*, *Peter Gunn*, *Richard Diamond*, *Private Detective*, *Mr. Lucky*, *77 Sunset Strip*, and *Man with a Camera*. The private eye in these series was a watered-down version of his cinematic ancestor, and the cinema's noir stylistics were difficult to achieve on the television screen. "Shooting for the box" demanded a style of flat, low-contrast



Chinatown was the best of the 1970s crop of detective thrillers, flashing back to '30s Los Angeles but seen through the eyes of a distinctly contemporary hero (Jack Nicholson as Jake Gittes). Here, director Roman Polanski (at left with his back to the camera) assumes the bit part of a gangster trying to temper Gittes' professional enthusiasm. (Culver Pictures)

lighting and unobtrusive camerawork during those black-and-white years. But even in this diluted format, it was evident that the detective-hero was waiting in the wings, eager for a change in cultural climate that once again would require him to seek out the conflicts and contradictions within his environment.

The weather certainly changed in the 1960s, and cynicism, alienation, and frustrated romanticism reappeared, along with a nostalgic longing for the supposed simplicity of pre-'60s America. The detective's world was a more complex place now than it had been: instead of a "just" world war, there was Vietnam; instead of women waiting at home for their guys, there was the Women's Movement; urban blight had intensified to spawn ghettos and race riots; and development of the bomb was responsible for estimations of "overkill" and "nuclear parity."

These and other cultural realities indicated a substantial revaluation of American ideology, and the detective-hero necessarily reflected the change in values. As did his '40s prototype, the screen detective of the 1970s accepted social corruption as a given and tried to remain isolated from it, still the naive idealist beneath the cynical surface. But the new detective of the '70s inhabited a milieu he was unable to understand or to control—even in a period film like *Chinatown* where that milieu is depicted as late-'30s Los Angeles. No longer a hero-protector, the detective in more recent films is himself the ultimate victim. His inability to control his milieu and his destiny may result in his death, as in *Night Moves*, or in a final act of uncharacteristic anger, as when Marlowe cold-bloodedly assassinates his own double-crossing client at the end of *The Long Goodbye*.

Perhaps the clearest image of the contemporary hardboiled detective's ineffectuality appears in the closing moments of *Chinatown*. In the course of Polanski's film (scripted by Robert Towne), L.A.'s Chinatown emerges as the metaphoric center of urban duplicity and corruption. The detective (Jack Nicholson as Jake Gittes) had once worked the Chinatown beat for the D.A.'s office but had resigned under mysterious circumstances. The film's plot eventually leads Gittes back to Chinatown, where his client-lover (Faye Dunaway as the *femme noire*) finally is killed and the villain (John Huston, director of *The Maltese Falcon*) gains control over the community. As Gittes walks away from the dead woman's car and from the apparently unassailable villain, his partner delivers the film's closing line, a fitting epitaph for the hardboiled-detective genre itself: "Forget it, Jake, it's Chinatown."