Towards a Definition of *Film Noir*

Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton (1955)

[The following is excerpted from the book *Panorama du Film Noir Américain*[1]]

It was during the summer of 1946 that French moviegoers discovered a new type of American film. In the course of a few weeks, from mid-July to the end of August, five movies flashed one after the other across Parisian screens, movies which shared a strange and violent tone, tinged with a unique kind of eroticism: John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon*, Otto Preminger's *Laura*, Edward Dmytryk's *Murder, My Sweet*, Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity*, and Fritz Lang's *The Woman in the Window*.

Long cut off from the United States, with little news of Hollywood production during the war, living on the memory of Wyler, of Ford and Capra, ignorant even of the newest luminaries in the directorial ranks, French critics could not fully absorb this sudden revelation. Nino Frank, who was among the first to speak of "dark film" and who seemed to discern from the first the basic traits of the *noir* style, nonetheless wrote of *The Maltese Falcon* and *Double Indemnity* that "[these films] belong to what we used to call the police genre but that we should more appropriately describe from now on by the term 're criminal adventure' or, better still, 're criminal psychology'."[2] This was also the reaction of genre critics who, it must be said, failed to grasp the full impact of these releases.

But a few months later Frank Tuttle's *This Gun for Hire*, Robert Siodmak's *The Killers*, Robert Montgomery's *The Lady in the Lake*, Charles Vidor's *Gilda*, and Howard Hawks' *The Big Sleep* imposed the concept of *film noir* on moviegoers. A new "series" had emerged in the history of film.

A series can be defined as a group of motion pictures from one country sharing certain traits (style, atmosphere, subject matter...) strongly enough to mark them unequivocally and to give them, over time, an unmistakable character. Series persist for differing amounts of time: sometimes two years, sometimes ten. To some extent, the viewer decides on this. From the point of view of "filmic evolution," series spring from certain older features, from long-ago titles. Moreover they all reach a peak, that is, a moment of purest expression. Afterwards they slowly fade and disappear leaving traces and informal sequels in other genres.

The history of film is, in large part, a history of film cycles. There are, of course, certain titles that resist classification: Welles' *Citizen Kane* or Clifford Odets' *None but the Lonely Heart* are among these. Often a remarkable film cannot be classified because it is the first in a new movement and the observer lacks the necessary perspective. *Caligari* was unclassifiable before it engendered "Caligarism."

Since the start of talkies, one could cite many examples: in the United States, social realism, gangster films; in Germany, the farces from 1930 to 1933 which inspired a like movement in American comedy; in the USSR, films dedicated to the October Revolution; in France, the realism of Carné, Renoir, and Duvivier.

More recently, we have seen British comedies, a French series dealing with mythic evasions (from *L'éternal Retour* to *Singoalle* and *Juliette*), the social documentaries of Daquin, Rouquier and Nicole Védrès. From the USSR come paeans to the glory of collective labor and the Kolkhoz cycle. In the United States: the crime documentary (Hathaway, Kazan, Dassin), the psychological melodrama, and the new school of the Western—so many types of films, each having its particular locales, traditions, and even fans.

The existence over the last few years of a "*série noir*" in Hollywood is obvious. Defining its essential traits is another matter.

One could simplify the problem by assigning to *film noir* qualities such as nightmarish, weird, erotic, ambivalent, and cruel. All these exist in the series; but at one moment, reverie may dominate and the result is *Shanghai Gesture*, at another, eroticism comes to the fore in *Gilda*. In still other titles, the cruelty of some bizarre behavior is preeminent. Often the *noir* aspect of a film is linked to a character, a scene, a setting. *The Set-up* is a good documentary on boxing: it becomes a *film noir* in the sequence when scores are settled by a savage beating in a blind alley. *Rope* is a psychological melodrama which attaches itself to *film noir* through its intriguing sadism. Alternately, *The Big Sleep*, *This Gun for Hire*, and *The Lady in the Lake* seem to be typical "thrillers." We will begin by addressing the problem of definition by discussing the pictures which critics have most often dubbed "*films noirs*."

One last note: by convention we will deem films to be created by their directors. This is a convention because one can never know with regard to American productions whether the director is really the ultimate creator of a work. Sternberg himself said "I work on assignment, that is to say by the job. And each job order, just like those given to a cabinet maker, bookbinder, or cobbler, is for a specific piece of work."[3] What is the contribution of the producer, the screenwriter, the editor? Is it coincidental that the late Mark Hellinger produced three such distinctive pictures as *The Killers*, *Brute Force*, and *The Naked City*? Who can say, other than those who were there, whether Hellinger put his own mark on these films or gave Dassin and Siodmak free rein?

In reality, while there may be few instances of a director who has the final word in Hollywood, his role is certainly a significant one; and his degree of independence will logically enough increase with his commercial success. This could explain the persistence of vision in a given director's work: the theme of failure and adventure in John Huston, the theme of violence with Raoul Walsh, the theme of urban realism with Dassin, and even Sternberg, who has never strayed far from exotic sensuality. By all accounts, this convention of authorship is entirely apt.

> The bloody paths down which we drive logic into dread.[4]

The noir film is black *for us*, that is, specifically for the Western and American moviegoers of the 1950s. It exists in response to a certain mood at large in this particular time and place. Accordingly one who seeks the root of this "style" must think in terms of an affected and possibly ephemeral reaction to a moment in history. This is what links productions as diverse as *The Shanghai Gesture* and *The Asphalt Jungle*.

From this vantage, the method is obvious: while remaining as scientifically and objectively grounded as possible, one must examine the most prominent characteristics of the films which critics have classed as *noir*. From these characteristics one may then derive the common denominator and define that unique expressive attitude which all these works put into play.

It is the presence of crime which gives *film noir* its most constant characteristic. "The dynamism of violent death," is how Nino Frank evoked it, and the point is well taken. Blackmail, accusation, theft, or drug trafficking set the stage for a narrative where life and death are at stake. Few cycles in the entire history of film have put together in seven or eight years such a mix of foul play and murder. Sordidly or bizarrely, death always comes at the end of a tortured journey. In every sense of the word a *noir* film is a film of death.

But *film noir* has no monopoly on death, and an essential distinction must be overlaid. In principle, *film noir* is not a "crime documentary." We know that since 1946 Hollywood has exported a score of films to France which have as their main themes criminal inquiries supposedly based on actual cases. In fact, a title card or a narrator often alert the viewer at the start of the film that this is a true story which took place in such and such a time at such and such a place. The shots on the screen faithfully reconstruct the start of the process: a call to the homicide bureau, the discovery of a body. Sometimes it may be a seemingly inconsequential incident or some report from a neighborhood police station that sets events in motion. Then comes the tedious "leg" work by the cops: the careful but fruitless searches, ineffective surveillance, and futile decoys. Finally there is a glimmer, some object found, a witness, which leads to a climactic chase and uncovering a den of cutthroats. This series, which has produced interesting pictures (Henry Hathaway's *Call Northside 777* and *The House on 92nd Street*, Elia Kazan's *Boomer-*

Above, the realistic detail of the precinct station in the "police documentary," *House on 92nd Street*.

ang and *Panic in the Streets*, Laslo Benedek's *Port of New York*, Jules Dassin's *Naked City*, and, testing the limits of the genre, Bretaigne Windust's *The Enforcer*), shares several characteristics with *film noir*: realistic settings, well developed supporting roles, scenes of violence, and exciting pursuits. In fact, these documentary-style films often have typically *noir* elements: we won't soon forget the repellent aspect of the head of Murder Inc. in *The Enforcer* or the laconic gangster in *Panic in the Streets*. It sometimes happens that a given director will alternate between the genres. Jules Dassin is credited with *Naked City* and also with *Night and the City*. Joseph H. Lewis produced a classic *noir* work in 1950 with *Gun Crazy*, while a year earlier he had detailed the work of treasury agents in *The Undercover Man*.

Still there are differences between the two series. To begin with there is a difference in focus. The documentary-style picture examines a murder from without, from the point of view of the police official; the *film noir* is from within, from the point of view of the criminals. In features such as *The Naked City*, the action begins after the criminal act, and the murderers, their minions, and other accomplices move across the screen only to be followed, marked, interrogated, chased, and killed. If some flashback depicts a scene between gangsters it is to illustrate a disclosure or some testimony, a transcript of which is already in the police file. The police are always present, to act or to overhear. Nothing of this sort occurs in *film noir*, which situates itself within the very criminal milieu and describes it, sometimes in broad strokes (*The Big Sleep* or *Dark Passage*), sometimes in depth with correlative subtlety (*The Asphalt Jungle*). In any case, *film noir* posits a criminal

psychology which recalls, from another discipline, the popular psychology in vogue at the end of the last century; both delve into forbidden milieus.

The second difference between the series is one of moral determinism, and this may be even more essential. In the police documentary investigators are traditionally portrayed as righteous men, brave and incorruptible. The naval medical officer in *Panic in the Streets* is a hero. So is, if less obviously so, the diminutive Irish detective of *The Naked City*, who believes in God and works on his own time to see justice done. As message film, the American "police documentary" is more accurately a glorification of the police, much as is the French production *Identité Judiciare* or the British *The Blue Lamp*.

This is not the case for the *noir* series. If police are featured, they are rotten—like the inspector in *The Asphalt Jungle* or the corrupt hard case portrayed by Lloyd Nolan in *The Lady in the Lake*—sometimes even murderers themselves (as in Otto Preminger's *Fallen Angel* or *Where the Sidewalk Ends*). At minimum, they let themselves get sucked into the criminal mechanism, like the attorney in *The File on Thelma Jordon*. As a result of this, it is not haphazardly that screenwriters have frequently fallen back on the private detective. It would have been too controversial always to impugn American police officials. The private detective is midway between lawful society and the underworld, walking on the brink, sometimes unscrupulous but putting only himself at risk, fulfilling the requirements of his own code and of the genre as well. As if to counterbalance all this, the actual law breakers are more or less sympathetic figures. Of course, the old motto of the pre-War shorts from MGM, "Crime does not pay," is still the order of the day, and there must be moral retribution. But the narrative is manipulated so that at times the moviegoer sympathizes, identifies with the criminals. Remember the suspenseful scene of the jewel theft in *The Asphalt Jungle*. What viewer failed to identify with the thieves? And *Gun Crazy*, we dare say, brought an exceptionally attractive but murderous couple to the screen.

As to the unstable alliances between individuals in the heart of the underworld, few films have described them as well as *The Big Sleep* and, in its *noir* sequence (Rico's testimony), *The Enforcer*. We perceive in this rogue's gallery of suspects and convicts, a complex and shifting pecking order based on bribery, blackmail, organized crime and the code of silence. Who will kill and who will be killed? The criminal milieu is an ambiguous one, where a position of strength can be quickly eroded.

This uncertainty is also manifest in the ambivalence of the characters themselves. The integral protagonist, the elemental figure of the *Scarface* type, has disappeared from *film noir* and given way to a crowd of sanctified killers, neurotic gangsters, megalomaniac crime bosses, and their perplexing or tainted cronies. Notable examples are the solitary and scientific serial killer in *He Walked by Night*, the self-destructive loser in *Night and the City*, or the hyperactive gang boss so at-

tached to his mother in *White Heat*. Just as twisted are the vicious, drunken, grub-like henchmen in *The Enforcer*.

There is ambiguity, too, with regard to the victims, who usually are under some suspicion as well. Their ties to the unsavory milieu are what attract the attention of their executioners. Often, they are victims precisely because they cannot be executioners. The decadent partner in *The Lady from Shanghai* is such a type, a man who finds death when he tries to simulate his own murder and who will long remain a prototype of the sham victim. One could also cite the terrorized woman, who seems destined to be killed before the end of Jacques Tourneur's *Out of the Past* but who had already set up her would-be assassin for a fall. This tough guy had no more chance than a steer consigned to the slaughterhouse.

As for the ambiguous protagonist, he is often more mature, almost old, and not too handsome. Humphrey Bogart typifies him. He is also an inglorious victim who may suffer, before the happy ending, appalling abuse. He is often enough masochistic, even self-immolating, one who makes his own trouble, who may throw himself into peril neither for the sake of justice nor from avarice but simply out of morbid curiosity. At times, he is a passive hero who allows himself to dragged across the line into the gray area between legal and criminal behavior, such as Orson Welles in *The Lady from Shanghai*. As such, he is far from the "superman" of adventure films.

Finally, there is ambiguity surrounding the woman: the *femme fatale* who is fatal for herself. Frustrated and deviant, half predator, half prey, detached yet ensnared, she falls victim to her own traps. While the inconstancy of Lauren Bacall in *The Big Sleep* may not cost her her life, Barbara Stanwyck cannot escape the consequences of her murderous intrigues in *The File on Thelma Jordon*. This new type of woman, manipulative and evasive, as hard bitten as her environment, ready to shake down or to trade shots with anyone—and probably frigid—has put her mark on "*noir*" eroticism, which may be at times nothing more that violence eroticized. We are a long way from the chaste heroines of the traditional Western or historical drama.

Film noir has renovated the theme of violence. To begin with, it abandoned the adventure film convention of the fair fight. A sporting chance has given way to settling scores, beatings, and cold-blooded murders. Bodyguards kick a powerless victim back and forth like football then toss his bloody body on a common thoroughfare (*Ride the Pink Horse*), in a back alley (*The Set-up*), or with the garbage (*I Walk Alone*). Crime itself is performed by the numbers, professionally, by a contract killer who does his job "without anger or hate." The opening of Robert Siodmak's *The Killers*, the celebrated scene in a roadhouse, where two men searching for their victim terrify the other patrons with their callous confidence, will remain one of the most gripping moments in American film, an unforgettable slice of life. Twitching and stigmatized, an unknown breed of men rose up before us. Their lot

includes mild-mannered hit men (Alan Ladd in *This Gun for Hire*), indiscriminate brutes (William Bendix), and the clear-eyed menacing organizers (Everett Sloane in *The Enforcer*). It also includes the twisted, corpulent killers, sweating in fear, humiliated by their cronies, who suddenly boil over (Laird Cregar and Raymond Burr).

As for the ceremony of execution itself, *film noir* has the widest array of examples. Random samplings are the offhanded gesture of a wealthy publisher who sends a bothersome witness who was washing windows down an elevator shaft; all that was needed was to tip over the stool with the handle of his cane while idly chatting (*The High Wall*)—or the atrocious death by razor in *The Enforcer*—or a kick to a car jack (*Red Light*). In other films, a paralyzed woman is tied to her wheelchair and hurled down a stairway (*Kiss of Death*); an informer is locked inside a Turkish bath and the steam valve is opened [(*T-Men*)]; a convict is impelled under a pile driver by the threat of red-hot irons (*Brute Force*); one man is crushed by a tractor, another drowned in slime (*Border Incident*)... An unparalleled range of cruelties and torments are paraded before the viewer in *film noir*.

The anxiety in *film noir* possibly derives more from its strange plot twists than from its violence. A private detective takes on a dubious assignment: find a

Below, "the ambiguous protagonist... Humphrey Bogart typifies him" and "ambiguity surrounding the woman: the *femme fatale* [typified by] the inconstancy of Lauren Bacall in *The Big Sleep*."

woman, eliminate a blackmail threat, throw someone off track, and suddenly corpses are scattered across his path. He is followed, beaten, arrested. He asks for some information and finds himself trussed up and bloodied on the floor of a cellar. Men glimpsed in the night shoot at him and run off. There is something of the dream in this incoherent and brutal atmosphere, the atmosphere common to most *noir* films: *The Big Sleep, Ride the Pink Horse, The Lady in the Lake, Chicago Deadline*. Georges Sadoul remarked in this regard that "The plot is murky, like a nightmare or the ramblings of a drunkard."[5] In fact, one of the rare parodies of the genre, Elliott Nugent's *My Favorite Brunette*, begins exactly this way. Bob Hope wants to play detective and Dorothy Lamour gives him a retainer to tackle one of these vague assignments that only Americans understand, such as "Find my brother" or "Find my sister." Immediately a hail of daggers menaces him, bodies pile up by the roadside, and inexorable gears of mischance drag him towards the electric chair by way of a hospital that doubles as a gangland hide-out.

Usually the mystery is a bit more realistic: an amnesiac tries to discover his past and flushes a crime out of its den. This theme was explored by Robert Florey in *The Crooked Way* and by Joseph Mankiewicz in *Somewhere in the Night*. But in these instances, the context of the narrative dilemma is such that the viewer expects confusion. In a true *film noir*, the bizarre is inseparable from what might be called the *uncertainty of motivations*. For instance, what are Bannister and his partner hoping to accomplish with their shadowy intrigues in *The Lady from Shanghai*? All the weirdness of the movie is focused on this: in these mysterious and metamorphosing creatures who tip their hands only in death. Elsewhere does a fleeting figure in a nightclub indicate a possible ally or an enemy? The enigmatic killer, will he be an executioner or a victim? Honor among thieves, an extortion network, unexplained motives, all this verges on madness.

In our opinion, this resounding confusion is at the core of *film noir*'s peculiar oneirism. It is simple to find several titles the action of which is deliberately associated with dreams, such as Fritz Lang's *The Woman in the Window*. The same is true of pictures where the artifice focuses on the symbolic and the imaginary, as with Sternberg's *Shanghai*. But, as a general rule, the perspective of *film noir* is realistic and each scene in isolation could pass for an excerpt from a documentary. It is the sum total of these realistic snapshots of a weird theme which creates the atmosphere of the nightmare.

As we might have guessed, all the components of *film noir* yield the same result: disorienting the spectator, who can no longer find the familiar reference points. The moviegoer is accustomed to certain conventions: a logical development of the action, a clear distinction between good and evil, well-defined characters, sharp motives, scenes more showy then authentically violent, a beautiful heroine and an honest hero. At least, these were the conventions of American adventure films before the War.

Now the moviegoer is being presented a less severe version of the underworld, with likable killers and corrupt cops. Good and evil go hand in hand to the point of being indistinguishable. Robbers become ordinary guys: they have kids, love young women, and just want to go home again (*The Asphalt Jungle*). The victim seems as guilty as the hit man, who is just doing his job. The primary reference point of earlier days, the moral center, is completely skewed.

The heroine is depraved, murderous, doped-up or drunk. The hero is under the gun or, as they say in boxing, he absorbs a lot of punishment when accounts are settled up. So the secondary reference point, the myth of Superman and his chaste fiancée, also fades.

The action is confused, the motives are unclear. There is nothing resembling classic dramas or the moral tales from a realistic era: criminals vie against each other (*The Big Sleep*), a policeman arrives on the scene, reveals his criminal intent, and does nothing but enhance the viewer's apprehension (*The Lady in the Lake*); the sober process by which a man's fate is determined concludes in a fun house (*The Lady from Shanghai*). A film takes on the characteristics of a dream and the viewer searches in vain for some old-fashioned logic.

In the end, the chaos goes "beyond all limits." Gratuitous violence, the overweening rewards for murder, all this adds to the feeling of alienation. A sense of dread persists until the final images.

The conclusion is simple: the moral ambivalence, the criminality, the complex contradictions in motives and events, all conspire to make the viewer co-experience the anguish and insecurity which are the true emotions of contemporary *film noir*. All the films of this cycle create a similar emotional effect: *that state of tension instilled in the spectator when the psychological reference points are removed*. The aim of *film noir* was to create *a specific alienation*.

Translated from the French by Alain Silver

Notes

1. The Authors wish to thank Mr. Freddy Buache, secretary-general of the Cinématheque of Lausanne, who agreed to publish this Introduction in the review *Carreau*.
2. *Écran Français*, No. 61, August 28, 1946.
3. *Le Figaro*, May 8, 1951.
4. Editors' Note: the quote is from Isidore Ducasse, Count Lautréamont, 19th Century pre-surrealistic writer. The French reads: "Les filières sanglantes par oú l'on fait passer la logique aux abois."
5. Review of *The Big Sleep* in *Les Lettres Françaises*.