Film Noir: The Politics of the Maladjusted Text

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How are we to situate a movie in history? By now there must be few practitioners of American Studies who would not acknowledge that the products of Hollywood provide a rich seam waiting to be mined by social and cultural historians. As in most mining projects, the difficulty lies in developing the equipment needed to extract the ore. To treat film as a source of cultural history is by no means as simple as that old-fashioned literary approach by which an author's biography could be interwoven with a summary political or social history. The cinema has no author whose individuality can be used to gloss over the absence of method in such a procedure. Or rather, any movie has such a plethora of authors that the attempt to establish evidence of authorial intent is bound to fail, as auteurist criticism has repeatedly demonstrated. The "authors" of an entertainment commodity are not simply its director, writer, producer and studio head of production. They include front office personnel, New York executives and the advertising staff, distributors and theatre managers who "author" the product at the point of its sale to the public. In any case, the historian concerned with popular rather than elite culture is at least as interested in reception as in production, and his or her sphere of interest must extend beyond the limits of the text and its intended meaning to a concern with context and with how the movie was received and understood by its primary audience.

It is, however, evidence of audience reception that is most conspicuously unavailable. The very crudest measures of popularity, box-office income figures, are notoriously inaccurate, and say nothing about the received meaning of the text. Market research data are largely unobtainable, and tends to ask questions more revealing of the ideology of the market researcher than of the movie and its audience. The paucity of contextual evidence leads us in a circular route back to the text itself, and generally

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we arrive at the destination without reluctance, since most writers in film studies – academics or otherwise – are critics rather than historians. Books and articles on the cinema as cultural history tend to follow a regular pattern: an introductory bow in the direction of methodological problems; a selective account of the period under discussion; and then the main body of the project, a textual analysis demonstrating how accurately and/or obliquely the movie-as-analysed reflects the history of its period.[1] Given the absence of other research material this slide into textual analysis is an inevitable and necessary tactic, but that is not to say that it is a satisfactory one.

Textual analysis from a vantage point some distance (chronologically) from that of the text itself is always vulnerable to ahistoricism, and all the more so when it seeks to establish a causal link between a movie and external events without a satisfactory analysis of Hollywood's industrial mediations, which most textual analyses simply exclude.[2] Textual analysis is an important instrument in the pursuit of cultural history, but its usefulness is paradoxically increased if its limitations are recognized. It provides an ideological decoding of the movie, revealing a range of available meanings. *Films noirs*, for example, have been interpreted as divergently as being existential statements of alienation[3] or instruments for the repression of an independent female sexuality.[4] Textual analysis can only identify inherent meanings, it cannot propose which reading of the text is to be preferred by the cultural historian as most accurately embodying the movie's position within the culture for which it was produced. The information necessary to such an activity has to come from an assessment of the text as an industrial commodity and an object of consumption. Even so, the information gleaned from an analysis of a movies's finances, production history, release pattern and reception, as well as of it as a text, will at best provide only a basis for speculation, juxtaposing movies as cultural objects against a broader framework of social history, rather than integrating them into it.

Cultural history is too diffuse to allow of clear causal relationships; the

[1] See, for example, Andrew Bergman, *We're in the Money: Depression America and its Films* (New York University Press, 1971); Andrew Dowdy, *The Films of the Fifties: The American State of Mind* (New York: William Morrow, 1973).

[2] See *Cahiers du Cinéma* editors, "John Ford's *Young Mr Lincoln*," *Screen*, **13**, 3 (1972), 5–44.

[3] Robert G. Porfiro, "No Way Out: Existential Motifs in the Film Noir," *Sight & Sound* **45**, 4 (1976), 212–17.

[4] Claire Johnston, "*Double Indemnity*," in E. Ann Kaplan, ed., *Women in Film Noir* (London: British Film Institute, 1978).

most it can attempt is to establish a chain of plausibility, to suggest that one explanation for a particular representation is the extistence of a particular set of circumstances. We can establish that psychiatric knowledge was being diffused through a broad spectrum of American culture in the 1940s, but to discover that particular screenwriters were undergoing psychoanalysis is not to discover a cause for the persistence of that motif in movies, merely a partial, speculative explanation. A cultural history of the cinema can do no more than examine a set of synchronic events, and propose a relationship between movies and their historical moments which, however plausibly supported by the empirical evidence of production and consumption, remains essentially metaphorical.

I

We can now approach the immediate postwar period as an uncharted landscape of metaphor and coincidence. These are terms particularly appropriate to that group of movies loosely identified as *film noir*, a description which is itself, of course, metaphorical. As importantly, it is the only major category in the American cinema designated by critics rather than industrialists. While critics may debate what "the Western" or "the horror film" is about and argue over what method to use to best identify them, they generally know one when they see one. Critical opinion on the nature of *film noir* is nowhere near so stable. There is an abundance of articles discussing whether the movies so labelled constitute a genre, a cycle or a movement, whether they should be recognized by their narrative structure, their iconography or their visual style, and whether this or that movie (*Mildred Pierce*? *Crossfire*? *Gentlemen's Agreement*? *White Heat*? *Point Blank*?) truly belongs to the category.[5] The usefulness of such questions depends in large part on what the critic is seeking to establish: a textual comparison of *The Big Sleep* (1946) and *Taxi Driver* (1976) will make a good deal more sense if one is comparing the act of narration than if one is seeking to locate the texts in their historical contexts. Conversely, if one is examining the film industry's response to political and social conditions in a given period, it will probably turn out to be more useful to take a less prescriptive attitude towards divisions between genres, and a corre-

[5] See Amir M. Karimi, *Towards a Definition of the American Film Noir: 1941–1949* (New York: Arno Press, 1976); Jack Shadoian, *Dreams and Dead Ends: The American Gangster/Crime Film* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1977); Raymond Durgnat, "Paint It Black: The Family Tree of Film Noir," *Cinema* (U.K.) **6/7** (1970); J. A. Place and L. S. Petersen, "Some Visual Motifs of Film Noir," *Film Comment* **10**, 1 (1974); Paul Schrader, "Notes on Film Noir," *Film Comment*, **8**, 1 (1972).

spondingly more rigorous attitude towards chronology. This article aims to explore the relations of metaphor and coincidence between a group of films released between 1946 and 1949 (dubbed by the industry variously as "Detective-Mystery Melodramas," "Social Problem Crime Films" and "Psychological Dramas,"[6] and including, but not exclusively, those movies now commonly identified as *films noirs*), the postwar disillusionment of liberal intellectuals concerned with the mass media, and the development of Cold War sentiments in American domestic politics in the same period. Since its plot will be as convoluted as those of the movies it discusses, it should perhaps imitate its subject by beginning (we might regard what has gone before as an extended credit sequence) with the kind of coincidental encounter that determines narrative development.

Out of the Past (whatever *film noir* is, *Out of the Past* is undoubtedly *film noir*) opened its New York run at the Palace Theatre on Broadway on Tuesday, 25 November 1947, a few blocks away from the Waldorf Astoria Hotel where, a couple of hours earlier, the Association of Motion Picture Producers had concluded a two-day meeting by releasing the first document of the entertainment industry blacklist, the Waldorf Statement.[7] It announced that the industry would forthwith discharge from its employment the ten "unfriendly" witnesses who had refused to answer the House Un-American Activities Committee's questions about their membership of the Communist Party.

The plot of *Out of the Past* might be metaphorically reconstructed as a sympathetic portrayal of Robert Mitchum as an ex-Communist witness before HUAC – Whittaker Chambers, perhaps, or Elizabeth Bentley. A man with a shady past, trying to live a normal life as a well-adjusted American, is propelled by a combination of circumstance and conscience to justify his citizenship not on the basis of his present activities, but by accounting for his past dubious connections and allegiances with people and organizations working against the social order. The account he produces is not in itself sufficient expiation. He has also to perform an act of exorcism, to demonstrate his independence from those past allegiances and redress the social imbalance his earlier conduct created. That act, although providing a somewhat ambiguous moral redemption, may not be sufficient to permit his re-integration back into the society he originally betrayed. Everything he does takes place in the framework of the knowledge that, at the end, his social permit may remain withdrawn.

Two features, at least, of this metaphor fit fairly convincingly. The first

[6] "Feature-Length Films, 1944, 1945 and 1946," *Hollywood Quarterly*, **2**, 3 (1947), 306–7.

[7] Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund, *The Inquisition in Hollywood* (New York, Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1980), p. 445.

is the requirement placed upon the central male protagonist to account for his past, a past containing dark and menacing secrets that can no longer remain hidden, but must surface and find resolution. The second is the narrative form in which that explanation takes place. "I think I'm in a frame," declares Mitchum at one point, "I'm going in there to look at the picture." The investigative narrative dominates the crime film of the 1940s, in both *films noirs* and the stylistically and thematically related private eye and semi-documentary films, and it was virtually a new form for the decade. Where previous crime films had relied on a conventional linear structure, depicting, for example, the chronological rise and fall of a gangster figure or the equally linear deductive process of the Thin Man or Charlie Chan, the investigative narrative provided a much more intricate and less stable surface, looking back into the past of the film to an event whose explanation would provide a motor or a resolution for the narrative.

The hero of these films, who was not always the central protagonist, was the investigator, the man assigned the task of making sense of the web of coincidence, flashback and unexplained circumstance that comprised the plot. Uncertainly adrift in a world of treachery and shifting loyalties, the investigator of the *noir* movie was himself less than perfect, frequently neurotic, sometimes paranoid, and often managed to re-establish a stable world in the film only by imposing an arbitrary resolution on the other characters. At the end of *The Big Sleep*, Bogart as Marlowe presents three explanations of the plot to the gambler Eddie Mars, and imposes his own preferred solution by shooting Mars three times. If it seems too large an imaginative step from Bogart to Robert Stripling, chief investigator for HUAC, it may perhaps be mediated through the semi-documentary films of the immediate postwar period, such as *The House on 92nd Street* (1945), which presented a largely anonymous, corporate hero in the form of FBI agents investigating Nazi atom spies, "photographed, wherever possible, in the actual place where the original incident occured,"[8] and featuring real FBI agents playing themselves. Hollywood's wartime obsession with spies and sabotage had been no less rampant than HUAC's. Of the 64 movies dealing with the enemy released in 1942, all but two were stories of espionage and sabotage.[9] As I have argued elsewhere,[10] Hollywood's production of melodramatic fictions where the villains were enemy agents

[8] Opening credits, *The House on 92nd Street*, Twentieth Century-Fox, prod. Louis de Rochemont, dir. Henry Hathaway, 1945.

[9] Dorothy B. Jones, "The Hollywood War Film: 1942–1944," *Hollywood Quarterly*, 1, 1 (1945), 5.

[10] Richard Maltby, "Made For Each Other: the Melodrama of Hollywood and the House Committee on Un-American Activities, 1947," in Philip Davies and Brian Neve, eds., *Cinema, Politics and Society in America* (Manchester University Press, 1981), pp. 82–4.

and the heroes were investigators at least provided an ideological soil in which the Committee's melodramatic fantasies could take root.

II

By coincidence, Hollywood itself was the subject of much investigation in late 1947. The Supreme Court was preparing to hear the Department of Justice's nine-year-old anti-trust suit against the eight major companies, and two other House Committees had recently completed inquiries into the jurisdictional disputes among Hollywood unions and local recommendations for a censorship plan for the District of Columbia.[11] A wide assortment of other bodies were also investigating Hollywood in November 1947. The Institute of Industrial Relations at UCLA was undertaking an extensive study of motion picture economics.[12] The Commission on Freedom of the Press had just published Ruth Inglis' *Freedom of the Movies*, an examination of Hollywood's practices of self-regulation.[13] Hortense Powdermaker was then conducting the second major anthropological inquiry into the mores and products of Hollywood.[14] Martha Wolfenstein and Nathan Leites had begun their psychological study of the movies in the Columbia University Research in Contemporary Cultures.[15] Paul Lazarsfeld's Bureau of Applied Social Research was conducting a number of investigations into the effects of motion pictures on audience attitudes,[16] while separate research projects were being carried out at the University of Pittsburgh and New York University into the impact on public opinion of two films dealing with anti-Semitism, *Gentleman's Agreement* and *Crossfire*.[17] Reports from some of these inquiries appeared in the November 1947 volume of the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, which was devoted to a study of the motion picture industry.[18]

[11] *Motion Picture Herald*, 28 June 1947, p. 13.

[12] Anthony H. Dawson, "Motion Picture Economics," *Hollywood Quarterly*, **3**, 3 (1948), 217–40.

[13] Ruth A. Inglis, *Freedom of the Movies: A Report on Self-Regulation from the Commission on Freedom of the Press* (University of Chicago Press, 1947).

[14] Hortense Powdermaker, *Hollywood the Dream Factory: An Anthropologist Looks at Hollywood* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1950).

[15] Martha Wolfenstein and Nathan Leites, *Movies: A Psychological Study* (Glencoe, Ill.; The Free Press, 1950).

[16] Paul F. Lazarsfeld, "Audience Research in the Movie Field," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, **254** (1947), 160–8.

[17] Irwin C. Rosen, "The Effect of the Motion Picture *Gentleman's Agreement* on Attitudes towards Jews," *The Journal of Psychology*, **26** (1948), 525–36; Louis E. Raths and Frank N. Trager, "Public Opinion and *Crossfire*," *Journal of Educational Sociology*, **21** (1948), 345–68.

[18] *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, **254** (November 1947), hereafter referred to as *Annals*.

There was, then, a climate of concern about the effects of movies on their audiences, and about the social responsibility of the industry in representing America to itself and to the rest of the world. Although Terry Ramsaye, conservative editor of the *Motion Picture Herald*, the most influential exhibition trade paper, maintained that the movie audience had no interest in these controversies,[19] concern was not limited to legislators and academics. It had percolated down at least to the readership of mass-circulation periodicals in a spate of articles about the extent of the motion picture's harmful influence.[20] It is, however, important to note that the nature of this concern was no longer primarily directed against the movies' overtly dubious moral content, as the Legion of Decency's campaign in 1934 had been. It seemed to be generally agreed that in that department the Hays Code had done its job. The *Woman's Home Companion* in 1947 found that only 8% of its readership felt there should be a campaign for cleaner motion pictures.[21]

The main concern was rather with what Franklin Fearing described as "the question of the cultural values in our society which films express and the extent to which films communicate these values."[22] Even Martin Quigley, co-author of the Hays Code and perhaps the supreme proponent of the "pure entertainment" movie with no message,[23] would not have been out of sympathy with Hortense Powdermaker's suggestion that the issues now under discussion required different considerations.

> Part of the problem has been so oversimplified as to lose validity. Would-be reformers, looking for easy solutions, regard the movies as a prime cause of delinquency, crime and drunkenness. But these are symptoms of social and individual pathology, with a complex history. As anthropologists, we are more interested in the normal than the pathological. What is the effect of the movies on the vast audience who are not criminals, delinquents, or drunkards? How do movies influence their concepts of human relations, their value systems, their notions of reality?[24]

Whether Quigley would have been quite so happy with the way Powdermaker developed her argument is another matter.

[19] Terry Ramsaye, "The Rise and Place of the Motion Picture," *Annals*, p. 9.
[20] See, for example, Siegfried Kracauer, "Those Movies with a Message," *Harper's* **196** (June 1948), 567–72; Gordon Kahn, "One Psychological Moment, Please," *Atlantic Monthly* **178**, 4 (October 1946), 135–7; John Houseman, *Vogue*, 15 January 1947.
[21] Geoffrey Shurlock, "The Motion Picture Production Code," *Annals*, p. 145.
[22] Franklin Fearing, "Influence of the Movies on Attitudes and Behavior," *Annals*, p. 71.
[23] Martin Quigley, "Importance of the Entertainment Film," *Annals*, pp. 65–9.
[24] Hortense Powdermaker, "An Anthropologist Looks at the Movies," *Annals*, p. 81.

Movies have a number of functions. They are one of several forms of mass communication, functioning primarily through their production of daydreams. They are entertainment, which of course, in any form, is never "pure," but always has hidden or open psychological and educational subfunctions.[25]

Her "hidden psychological and educational subfunctions" were not very far away from HUAC's concern with subversive Communist propaganda, slipped undetectably, according to Chairman J. Parnell Thomas, into at least 20 or 25 movies by the legions of Communist scriptwriters working to undermine democracy and the American way from their comfortable sanctuary in Hollywood.[26] The liberal producer John Houseman expressed comparable reservations about a new kind of postwar crime film he described as the "tough" movie, taking as his examples *The Big Sleep* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946).

What is significant and repugnant about our contemporary "tough" films is their absolute lack of moral energy, their listless, fatalistic despair...[27]

One wonders what impression people will get of contemporary life if *The Postman Always Rings Twice* is run in a projection room twenty years hence. They will deduce, I believe, that the United States of America in the year following the end of the Second World War was a land of enervated, frightened people with spasms of high vitality but a low moral sense – a hung-over people with confused objectives groping their way through a twilight of insecurity and corruption.[28]

And that, indeed, is very much what critics have done with the movies. From Borde and Chaumeton[29] to Foster Hirsch,[30] they have identified a *noir* sensibility, traced it across a body of films, and then sought to attach it to a general American cultural condition of "postwar malaise."

The unstable universe depicted in so many *noir* films is a continual reflection of the tremendous cultural apprehension focused on both the "Red menace" and the chances of nuclear devastation.[31]

Such statements, and such criticism, articulate a Zeitgeist theory of film as cultural history, which is based more on critical ingenuity in textual interpretation than on any precise location of movies within the historical

[25] Ibid.
[26] *Motion Picture Herald*, 1 November 1947, p. 13.
[27] John Houseman, "Today's Hero: A Review," *Hollywood Quarterly*, **2**, 2 (1947), 163.
[28] John Houseman, *Vogue*, 15 January 1947, quoted in Lester Asheim, "The Film and the Zeitgeist," *Hollywood Quarterly*, **2**, 4 (1947), 416.
[29] Raymonde Borde and Etienne Chaumeton, *Panorama du Film Noir Américain, 1941–1953* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1955).
[30] Foster Hirsch, *The Dark Side of the Screen* (New York: Barnes, 1981).
[31] Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward, eds., *Film Noir: An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style* (New York: The Overlook Press, 1979), p. 2.

circumstances of their production and consumption. Its method, essentially, is first to establish correlations among texts through the identification of recurrent pictorial and thematic motifs, and then to find ways of reading these motifs as metaphors for what Siegfried Kracauer called "psychological dispositions – those deep layers of collective mentality which extend more or less below the dimensions of consciousness."[32] It deals in generalizations made convincing by their critical neatness, and as criticism it is often highly revealing. As history, however, it is notoriously difficult to substantiate, since it is inevitably dependent on the selective presentation of its evidence. For example, in the same two months that saw the release of *Out of the Past* (November and December, 1947), its producers, RKO, also released *Magic Town*, a Robert Riskin–James Stewart comedy about a small town which is discovered to reflect exactly the opinions of the entire nation, *The Bishop's Wife*, a Sam Goldwyn production featuring the unlikely combination of Cary Grant as an angel and David Niven as a bishop, a three-hour version of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, a Tim Holt western called *Wild Horse Mesa* and a John Wayne box-office disaster called *Tycoon*.[33] To my knowledge not a word has been written about any of these movies' relation to the Zeitgeist, nor have those critics who have written of *film noir*'s depiction of a postwar malaise, suggested why *Out of the Past* should be seen as more *zeitgeistig* than the rest. What is involved in such criticism is a process of historical distortion which comes about from the practice of generic identification, and has the effect of imposing an artifical ideological homogeneity on Hollywood production.

In a rebuttal of Houseman's argument, Lester Asheim noted that the most popular movies of 1946, according to *Variety* and Dr. Gallup, had been *The Bells of St. Mary's*, *Leave Her to Heaven*, *Blue Skies*, *Road to Utopia*, *Spellbound*, *The Green Years*, *Easy to Wed*, *State Fair*, *Night and Day*, *Anna and the King of Siam*, *Rhapsody in Blue* and *Love Letters*.[34] Questioning the selective sampling that Houseman was using as a method, and which the Zeitgeist critics have followed, he suggested that if an audience in twenty years' time

> see *The Razor's Edge*, they will deduce that our generation was an intensely earnest group of mystical philosophers who gladly renounced the usual pleasures of this world in order to find spiritual peace. From *State Fair* they can conjure up a nation

[32] Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton University Press, 1947), p. 6.

[33] *Motion Picture Herald*, 22 November 1947, p. 3942. Richard B. Jewell and Vernon Harbin, *The RKO Story* (London: Octopus Books, 1982).

[34] Lester Asheim, "The Film and the Zeitgeist," *Hollywood Quarterly*, **2**, 4 (1947), 415.

of simple agrarians whose major problems centred around the prize hog and spiked mincemeat. And what would they make of a generation reflected in *Road to Utopia*?[35]

What was at issue was a divergence between two approaches to the analysis of the movies, and the social and cultural significance of mass communication. When Houseman replied to Asheim, he suggested that the latter's proposal for an analysis of the whole body of Hollywood production "might be sociologically valuable, but critically it would be negligible."[36] Kracauer, whose "psychological study of the German film under Weimar," *From Caligari to Hitler*, was published in 1947, shared Houseman's concern with the psychological veracity of what he was arguing rather than with its quantification.

> What counts is not so much the statistically measurable popularity of films as the popularity of their pictorial and narrative motifs. Persistent reiteration of these motifs marks them as outward projections of inner urges.[37]

At the same time that these writers were arguing for a distinction between critical and sociological approaches to the cinema they were, in their claim that the "tough" movies of the period embodied a particularly virulent form of postwar malaise, establishing a tradition within which *film noir* has continued to be interpreted. The less mythological and more answerable question is not whether these films did by some unexplained osmosis embody a Zeitgeist, but why they were taken to do so by liberal critics of the period. It is with the liberal imagination of a postwar malaise, rather than with any such condition that there might have been, that we are concerned. Houseman and Kracauer's analyses of the "tough" movies are evidence of that imagination, which has proved crucial to the critical history of *film noir*. Their arguments, reinforced by Wolfenstein and Leites and Barbara Deming,[38] gave rise to the traditional mode of interpreting *film noir* as particularly revealing of its historical moment – whatever that interpretation might be. The reasons for this are partly to be found in the nature of the movies as texts, and partly in the directions academic and critical investigations of the cinema were taking in the postwar period.

Like German Expressionism, *film noir* has always been prone to what Parker Tyler called "psychoanalytic-mythological" criticism,[39] because of

[35] Ibid., p. 416.
[36] John Houseman, "Houseman Replies to Asheim," *Hollywood Quarterly*, **3**, 1, 89.
[37] Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, p. 8.
[38] Barbara Deming, *Running Away from Myself: A Dream Portrait of America Drawn from the Films of the Forties* (New York, Grossman Publishers, 1969). (The book was written in 1950, and portions of it were published in the magazine *City Lights*, 1953–55.)
[39] Parker Tyler, *Magic and Myth of the Movies* (London, Secker & Warburg, 1971), p. 31.

the nature of its narratives and its evident use of visual motifs, lighting codes and camera techniques to signify individual emotional states. Such movies provided ideal material for those students of mass communication who wished to use the metaphor of movie as dream as the basis for a psychoanalytic interpretation of American culture through its shared daydreams. Texts which made themselves available to such an analysis achieved a greater critical prominence than their industrial status merited precisely because of that availability. They have maintained that prominence because film criticism has historically paid more attention to revising the opinions of earlier critics about a relatively small number of texts than it has to the commercial considerations of Hollywood.

If Houseman and Kracauer were representative of a critical movement which sought to employ psychoanalytic and anthropological insights into the study of culture, Asheim's dissenting position reflected the attitudes of another group of academics. At the same time that Kracauer, Wolfenstein and Leites were exploring the cinema as a fertile field for the psychological study of culture, more statistically oriented sociologists were gradually coming to the conclusion that their earlier assumptions about the pervasive effects of mass communication had been much exaggerated. Asheim's rebuttal of Houseman's claims reflected that attitude, but in the clash of their approaches there was more at stake than Houseman's oversimplified split between sociology and criticism. In order to elucidate the fundamental disagreement over methods of studying the media which emerged in the postwar period, the investigative narrative I am constructing requires a flashback to the 1930s.

III

What William Henry Chamberlain referred to as "the American 'Discovery' of European Totalitarianism"[40] in the second half of the 1930s provided the impetus for the rapid development of empirical inquiries into the effects of mass communications. America became, in Hans Gerth's phrase, "propaganda-conscious,"[41] and an academic discipline came into existence concerned with research into the effects of the mass media, in which the principal establishments were the Institute for Propaganda Analysis and Paul Lazarsfeld's Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia. In tandem with these academic activities an industry was developing in

[40] William Henry Chamberlain, "The American 'Discovery' of European Totalitarianism," in Robert Allen Skotheim and Michael McGiffert, eds., *American Social Thought: Sources and Interpretations* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley), **2**, 318.

[41] Hans Gerth, "Public Opinion and Propaganda," in Joseph Bensman, Arthur J. Vidich and Nabuko Gerth, eds., *Politics, Character and Culture: Perspectives from Hans Gerth* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982), p. 63.

opinion testing, poll taking and market research, providing services for politicians, manufacturers and advertisers, whose leading light was Dr. George Gallup. What the academic and commercial practices shared was a belief in the measurability of public opinion, and the efficacy of their quantitative methods. The war expanded this research with the Army's inquiries into the effectiveness of films as instruments for training and indoctrination,[42] and in the circumstances it was hardly surprising that Hollywood was duly recruited into the war effort.[43]

It was in large part the belief in the cinema's potential propaganda value that had caused the industry so scrupulously to avoid political subjects during the 1930s. The self-denying ordinance that was the Hays Code was designed to produce an anodyne product that would offend as few as possible as little as possible, disguising corporate self-interest as civic responsibility.[44] The war, however, changed that obligation, and the movies, under the direction of the Office of War Information, joined the propaganda effort.[45]

But by the outbreak of war, in part as a result of the widespread diffusion of psychiatric practice in the second half of the 1930s, another dimension was added, one which suggested that the study of media effects might need a more complex methodological apparatus than that provided by content analysis and questionnaire. Hans Gerth told his students at Madison:

> We have devised methods of measuring attitudes towards newspaper content and methods of measuring the content of radio programs, films and newsreels... Yet we realize more and more that rational consciousness is only one factor in determining human behaviour and that reason is not always, in fact is seldom, the strongest factor. The development of psychology, especially the psychology of unconscious motivations coupled with social psychology, makes it possible to understand more of the mechanisms of attitude formation.[46]

Such ideas had penetrated Hollywood, too. Walter Wanger called in 1943 for the establishment of an advisory "board of theoretical psychologists"[47] to assess Hollywood's output and suggest ways of enhancing its propaganda effectiveness. Although that never came about, it was at least an indication of an atmosphere which would encourage the

[42] Garth Jowett, *Film; The Democratic Art* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), p. 321.

[43] "Hollywood in Uniform," *Fortune*, **25** (April 1942), 92–5, 130–8. Herman Lowe, "Washington Discovers Hollywood," *American Mercury* (April 1945), pp. 407–14.

[44] Richard Maltby, *Harmless Entertainment: Hollywood and the Ideology of Consensus* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1983), pp. 102–5.

[45] Cedric Larsen, "The Domestic Motion Picture Work of the Office of War Information," *Hollywood Quarterly*, **3**, 4 (1948), 434–43.

[46] Hans Gerth, p. 66.

[47] Walter Wanger, "OWI and Motion Pictures," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, **7**, 1 (1943), 108.

studios to turn to market research techniques as a normal mechanism for pretesting their product. For their benefit Dr. Gallup constructed such strange devices as the "preview profile," the "penetration index" and the "want-to-see graph," devices which became increasingly important to the industry's decision-making, on every level from plot development to release pattern, during the 1940s.[48]

The American discovery of European totalitarianism provided the impetus for other investigations besides those of Lazarsfeld and Leo Lowenthal. In 1938 it led Congressman Samuel Dickstein to propose the establishment of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, and it prompted other Americans, perhaps more positively, to try to define what Americanism might be. The onset of war made the articulation of an American ideology even more urgent, and one formulation involved the recourse to a revised theory of national character as a way of explaining social behaviour. The phrenology and scientific racism of previous approaches was discarded in favour of a broadly anthropological method which borrowed creatively from psychoanalysis. This new sociological entity, which Geoffrey Gorer called "psycho-cultural" study,[49] was a child reared by Margaret Mead, and both its claims to science and its ideological intention were made explicit in its first important text, her 1942 book *And Keep Your Powder Dry*.[50]

> Here, we are going to discuss what are the strengths and weaknesses of the American character – the psychological equipment with which we can win the war. To do this we have got to get clearly in mind just what that American character is. The clearest way I know of to do that, is to describe how it is made.[51]

What Mead and her followers – Gorer, Riesman, Wolfenstein and Leites – were seeking to do was to identify what she called "a consistent and specific American inconsistency."[52] Crucial to her project was a wartime rhetoric of liberal internationalism. The penultimate chapter of her book was called "Building the World New," and the world in question was Wendell Wilkie's One World.

> The lesson that the world is now one...must be held clearly before us. When we talk of policing the world, this is meant to be a transition from armies to police,

[48] Leo A. Handel, *Hollywood Looks at its Audience: A Report of Film Audience Research* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1950).

[49] Geoffrey Gorer, *The Americans: A Study in National Character* (London: The Cresset Press, 1948), p. 8.

[50] Margaret Mead, *The American Character* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1944: originally published in the U.S.A. under the title *And Keep Your Powder Dry*, 1942).

[51] Ibid., p. 25.

[52] Ibid., p. 53.

from seeing the world as a set of warring national entities to seeing it as one civic unity.[53]

She was echoing the liberal spirit of the OWI's propaganda, which saw the war as an opportunity to unify America as well as the world. As one internal OWI memo put it, "By making this a people's war for freedom, we can help clear up the alien problem, the negro problem, the anti-Semitic problem."[54]

IV

An element in the propaganda rhetoric of common purpose, and also an underlying assumption in the writings of Mead and her followers, was the idea of the normal. A notion of the norm was inherent in the source of much of their statistical information, which came both from the polling procedures of Gallup and his ilk and from the empirical and quantitative tradition of American social science. Statistics produced norms, but the idea of the normal was intensified by the psychoanalytic dimension the cultural anthropologists added to it. Mead's account of the American character, with its claim that "We Are All Third Generation,"[55] depends strongly on the argument that the heterogeneous and rapidly changing society she describes produces in its people a strong desire to conform. "Outward conformity made possible by economic success – these are the marks that one is a good American."[56] In Mead's analysis, but even more clearly in Gorer's, the drive to outward conformity is motivated by a neurotic anxiety, initially communicated from mother to child and resulting, according to Gorer, "in psychological symptoms which are technically known as compulsive,"[57] as variable as breast fetishism in popular culture and the "quite excessive anxiety induced by an unbalanced national budget."[58] Gorer's account of the normal as neurotic, which extended as far as to describe loneliness as "intolerable to well-adjusted Americans,"[59] was of course only one contribution among many to the pervasive growth of psychiatric and psychoanalytic writing intended for a popular audience, but it is a significant one in the way that it applies a psychoanalytic procedure to the analysis of the culture as a whole. It is itself both a

[53] Ibid., p. 155.
[54] Quoted in Richard Polenberg, *One Nation Divisible: Class, Race and Ethnicity in the United States since 1938* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1980), p. 47.
[55] Margaret Mead, p. 27.
[56] Ibid., p. 126.
[57] Geoffrey Gorer, p. 53.
[58] Ibid., p. 56.
[59] Ibid., p. 80.

description and a symptom of that culture's discovery and pursuit of neurosis, a pursuit which proceeded with some rapidity in the war and immediate postwar period, fuelled not only by Mead and her followers, but also by the publication of material derived from the large-scale psychiatric and psychological testing programmes carried out by the armed services on recruits.[60] Those programmes were designed to discover the well-adjusted recruit and weed out the maladjusted, and the statistics derived from this research provided psychological definitions of normality and abnormality. In their popularization,[61] the academic niceties of the notion that neurosis could be normal tended to get lost, and were replaced by an increasingly anxious concern about problems of what was defined as the psychological readjustment of returning veterans.

Psychiatric studies represented the war as a traumatic experience for its participants. That description, no less than the idea of "the people's war," was an ideological necessity to the liberal internationalists who wanted to police Wilkie's postwar One World. It proposed that the normal soldier would undoubtedly return from the war maladjusted and confronted with an array of psychological problems in relocating himself in a peacetime society. Newspapers and popular magazines inundated families with advice about how to deal with readjustment, a problem they presented as being of at least equal magnitude to the difficulties of economic reorganization the country would face.[62] The solution arrived at dealt with both the psychological and the economic aspects of readjustment; normality would be re-established by reversing a number of wartime social trends. Women war-workers should give their jobs back to the returning soldiers, marry and buy the plethora of consumer durables which would replace the war matériel, abandoning their economic independence for a role as provider of a well-adjusted home for their husbands and children – the Levittown ideal of conformist suburban living. It was a solution reiterated in the half-dozen movies which dealt explicitly with the situation of the returning veteran in 1945 and 1946. Their archetype was *Pride of the Marines* (Warner Bros., 1945), in which an embittered and blinded John Garfield is gradually cured of his neurotic disillusionment by the love of a good domesticated woman (Eleanor Parker), whose powers of healing seem to extend, at the end of the film, to miraculously restoring Garfield's sight.

[60] See, for example, Roy R. Grinker and John P. Spiegel, *Men Under Stress* (Blakiston, Philadelphia, 1945).

[61] See Edward R. Strecker, *Their Mothers' Sons* (New York: Lippincott, 1946).

[62] William Manchester, *The Glory and the Dream: A Narrative History of America, 1932–1972* (London: Michael Joseph, 1973), p. 425.

V

Hollywood's ostensible acquisition from its wartime involvement with the government propaganda machine was an apparently changed attitude to what the movies should be doing for their public. The press releases of the Motion Picutre Association and the studio heads bristled with statements of high postwar intentions to consolidate their wartime image of social responsibility. Even Louis B. Mayer was proclaiming in July 1947,

> The screen, in common with the newspapers and radio, fights the battle for freedom of speech... A motion picture should not only afford entertainment, but be of educational value. It can portray fairly and honestly the American way of life and can be a powerful influence in the lives of millions in other countries who are either denied access to our way of life, or who have never had the opportunity of experiencing it.[63]

That statement, one of many such comments, made its subtext rather clearer than most. When Mayer talked of education, he was clearly thinking of the education of foreigners, and the continued use of the movies as an instrument of propaganda abroad, not the production of social reformist liberal texts for home consumption. Hollywood's postwar interest in the ideologically underprivileged was not entirely altruistic, either. In 1945 the industry established the Motion Picture Export Association to operate as a legally empowered cartel acting as the sole negotiating body for the industry in all its dealings with foreign governments.[64] The doubling of production costs during the 1940s made the industry increasingly dependent for its profitability on foreign sales, and it wanted State Department assistance in negotiating favourable arrangments over quotas and tariffs in foreign markets in exchange for their good works in selling the American Way of Life, and American goods, abroad.[65]

In many respects this foreign responsibility was a hindrance to Hollywood's development of a social conscience, for the primary obligation it imposed was one of providing an optimistic portrayal of the American way of life. Newspapers carried reports that the Russians had been showing *The Grapes of Wrath* as a documentary account of what ordinary life in the United States was like, and the MPEA determined that movies such as

[63] *Motion Picture Herald*, 12 July 1947, p. 27.
[64] Richard Maltby, *Harmless Entertainment*, p. 78.
[65] Thomas Guback, *The International Film Industry: Western Europe and America since 1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), pp. 121–41.

The Grapes of Wrath and *Tobacco Road* were not suitable material for export.[66] A lack of access to foreign markets inevitably discouraged the production of such "controversial" movies, since it impaired their profitability. As early as September 1945 American exhibitors were expressing their lack of enthusiasm for movies dealing with any aspect of the war. E. C. Rhoden, of the Fox Midwest Amusement Corporation in Kansas City, told the *Motion Picture Herald*,

> The first function of the screen is to entertain, no matter what the period. Comedy, romance, action and adventure should be emphasized in fictional films, leaving sociological problems and the promotion of various ideologies to other mediums.[67]

The inclination to avoid any examination of social problems was widespread. Sam Goldwyn met considerable resistance from his bankers when he announced his intention of making *The Best Years of Our Lives*, and Darryl Zanuck had to face a deputation from Hollywood's Jewish elite who tried to dissuade him from making *Gentlemen's Agreement*.[68] Objections came from less likely sources, too. The American Jewish Association were highly critical of Dore Schary's plans to make *Crossfire*, on the grounds that it might very well have the opposite effect to that intended. The AJA's criticism, orchestrated by Elliot Cohen, editor of *Commentary*, centred on the fact that the anti-Semite in the movie was a psychopath. An effective cinematic critique of anti-Semitism, he argued, would need to show "a normal anti-Semite and a normal Jew."[69] If that remark makes little sense, it does at least indicate the pervasiveness of a vocabulary of normality, as well as the widespread concern about both how Hollywood did, and how Hollywood should, represent a postwar America which had so conspicuously failed to realize the liberals' domestic dreams. Race riots and the wave of postwar strikes seemed to indicate that wartime unity had been no more than a temporary illusion, and the 1946 Wanna-Go-Home riots in Germany, Paris and Manila[70] suggested that there was, indeed, a maladjusted Army about to return, which just might be full of psychopaths like Robert Ryan in *Crossfire*.

According to Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward's encyclopaedia of *film noir*,[71] *Crossfire* is a *film noir*, whereas the other anti-anti-Semitic movie of

[66] Leo C. Rosten, "Movies and Propaganda," *Annals*, p. 119.
[67] *Motion Picture Herald*, 1 September 1945, p. 14.
[68] K. R. M. Short, "Hollywood Fights Anti-Semitism," in K. R. M. Short, ed., *Feature Films as History* (London: Croom Helm, 1981), p. 174.
[69] Ibid., p. 173.
[70] William Manchester, pp. 405–9.
[71] Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward, p. 73.

1947, *Gentleman's Agreement*, is not. *Gentleman's Agreement* won three Oscars at the 1947 ceremonies, while *Crossfire*, although it received five nominations, won none.[72] That may well have had something to do with the fact that its producer and director, Adrian Scott and Edward Dmytryk, were both members of the Hollywood Ten, awaiting trial for contempt of Congress, but it is also the case that no *film noir* catalogued by Silver and Ward won any of the major Academy Awards in the period under discussion.[73] That had principally to do with their relative status as Hollywood products, something designated by their trade description as melodramas rather than dramas, and largely determined by the size of their budgets and the audiences at which they were directed. Describing different kinds of movie theatres in a 1947 article on "The Exhibitor," Charles P. Skouras mentions, as his last category, "the grind house, a small theater along a busy downtown street catering to transients, [which] does its biggest business with action melodramas like *The Killers*."[74] The *film noir*, in other words, was a low status product, playing to the bottom end predominantly of the urban market, to exactly that part of the market which reformers, liberal or otherwise, always worried about most. Conservatives were concerned with the question of "Communist infiltration of the motion picture industry"; disillusioned liberals like Houseman were directing their concern elsewhere, at the "tough" movie and the horror film. What they seemed to see in *film noir* in particular was their own worst nightmare enacted on the screen for the casual titillation of the urban transient audience: the maladjusted veteran in full, paranoid flight from the broken wartime dream of liberal rationalism, the movies' equivalent of the contemporary newspaper sensation stories headlined "Crazed Vet Runs Amok."[75]

VI

The central male protagonist in *films noirs* of 1946–48 is almost invariably marked as a veteran by one means or another. Frequently, he is actually identified as such in the plot – in *Dead Reckoning* (1947) and *Boomerang!* (1947), for example. Elsewhere, he is regularly played by an actor whose career at that stage was firmly identified with military roles. Mitchum's career, for instance, had taken off with his nomination for Best Supporting

[72] Roy Pickard, *The Oscar Movies from A–Z* (London: Hamlyn, 1978), p. 55.

[73] Joan Crawford's Best Actress Award in 1945 for her performance in *Mildred Pierce* might be regarded as an exception; it does not, however, fall strictly within the period I am discussing, and the movie's status as a *film noir* is at least debatable.

[74] Charles P. Skouras, "The Exhibitor," *Annals*, p. 29.

[75] William Manchester, p. 426.

Actor for his part in *The Story of G.I. Joe* (1945), and since then he had played veterans in *Till the End of Time* (1946) and *Crossfire*. Important as this persistent source of identification for audiences is, the narrative structure common to the majority of *films noirs* of this period is one in which the protagonist has to account for a missing period of his life, when he was outside the world in which the film is set, and in which things happened to him which set him at a distance from that world and its inhabitants. It is possible to see *Out of the Past* as providing a narrative metaphor for the veteran, Mitchum, seeking readjustment to a normal America by settling down with an ordinary job and the domestic idyll of Virginia Huston, but prevented from doing so by the guilt and the obsessive neuroses he has acquired during his period of absence from society.

In *films noirs* and the related crime melodramas of the postwar period the trajectory of the central male figure is either towards recuperation or death, either towards a re-integration back into a normal society with the demonstration of his innocence (*The Big Clock*), or towards a fatal retribution for past guilt (*Out of the Past*). No place is provided in these fictions for the survival of the separate heroic figure, the embodiment of the American individualist heroic tradition. The central protagonist of these movies is not marked as a figure of difference by the conventional signs of heroism – the possession of exceptional abilities or a dynamic moral certainty. Rather, he is average, conventional particularly in his ambitions, and his capacity to survive the fiction is above all determined by whether he can manage to re-establish a normality which has been disrupted at the start of the movie. That disruption invariably has a psychological dimension; the protagonist of these movies is Hollywood's neurotic personality par excellence, afflicted with one or another form of compulsive behaviour, psychosis, identity crisis, guilt complex, amnesia, or general paranoia.

He is the unstable occupant of a paranoid world, in which objects are not what they appear to be, people are likely to change their identities, and the plot is capable of going off at an unexpected tangent in a world thrown out of joint. He occupies a position of neurosis in the plot, where his place is commonly pervaded by guilt, either through an accusation of which he is innocent, or through his sense of an obligation to atone for some guilty event in his past. His attitude to the past takes one of two forms: either a resigned fatalism like that of Burt Lancaster in *The Killers*, who waits unresisting for his assassins because, he says, "I did something wrong, once"; or the investigator's obligation to explain the past, and to

reveal why and how it is the source of his psychoneuroses. This process often takes the form of a narration, telling a story to a largely silent witness, who is intermittently referred to during the narration and who is also commonly the figure of redemption in the narrative. The telling of the story is a form of psychotherapy, and the place of the analyst is taken not only by a character in the story but also by the audience. We are watching a character whose emotional stability is in question, a male figure who for the first time in the American cinema can no longer occupy frame centre with assurance, who provides us with no guarantees of his reliability either as a narrator or as an ethical being. Our only hope of understanding him is through the psychoanalytic investigation that the movie's narrative conducts.

What differentiates *film noir* from other psychological crime and social problem films of this period is that through the use of flashbacks, subjective camera and other visual and narrative analogues for his disturbed mental state, the controlling perception in *films noirs* is that of the maladjusted protagonist, whose world we enter in the often forlorn hope that he will find a way to leave it. These movies are about maladjustment, but more than that, they are themselves maladjusted texts, what David Riesman called "Tales of Abnorm,"[76] representing the failure of readjustment where Hollywood's musicals, comedies and romances of the period represented its own return to normality and, indeed, its proselytizing for the re-establishment of the ideology of pure and harmless entertainment in a conformist society. Given their existence as psychological narrative investigations, it is hardly surprising that the films have themselves come in for so much psychoanalytically based criticism. The appearance of such texts at the same time as the apparatus for a psychoanalytic cultural criticism was being developed may be coincidence or synchronicity, but it has certainly had a determining effect on the way the movies have subsequently been understood and analysed. The interpretation initially made of them is also revealing of a cultural climate, at least among liberal intellectuals. The fact that they paid any attention at all to such low-rent material as *The Killers* and *Dark Corner* (1946) was noteworthy in itself,[77] and is at least partly (and speculatively) explained by the way in which the liberal critics took the movies as being symptomatic of a social condition they themselves were desperately in need

[76] David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd, A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), p. 87.

[77] Siegfried Kracauer, "Hollywood's Terror Films: Do They Reflect an American State of Mind?," *Commentary*, **2** (1946), 132–6.

of discovering. The movies themselves are excessive representations of the normal as neurotic, providing confirmation, for anyone seeking it, that maladjustment was a normal response to postwar America.

VII

Very little in the postwar world went as the liberal intellectuals had planned. Even the psychological problems of readjustment did not appear as they had been expected, and that, in its own way, was as disillusioning to their construction of the American character as the closing of the Iron Curtain was to Wilkie's One World or, in a different arena, Hollywood's enthusiastic return to escapist fantasy by the end of the war. In November 1947 Irving Pichel, one of the Hollywood Nineteen, complained,

> Today we find ourselves limited in the use of our great medium for the depiction, even in the most objective terms, of those sources of strain and conflict which have the greatest contemporary interest for us.[78]

While Pichel, not surprisingly, laid the blame for this at the feet of HUAC and its ilk, the failure of Hollywood's wartime liberal vision had set in two or more years earlier. Another of the Hollywood Nineteen, Abraham Polonsky, expressed the disillusionment most pointedly in his critique of *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946) for failing adequately to depict the social problems of the returning soldiers and for sentimentalizing them. "Here at home," he concluded, "we have returned to cynicism from our betters, sharpened social conflicts, and a mood of vulgar despair among the artists."[79] One aspect of that "vulgar despair" was *film noir*'s abnormal tales of a maladjustment that hadn't happened, on which many of Hollywood's younger generation of radicals and liberals, including Polonsky himself, worked. Another aspect was the liberal acceptance of the defeat of reason, as prevalent in Hollywood as it was elsewhere.

Kracauer, in an analysis of "Those Movies with a Message"[80] such as *Crossfire*, *Gentleman's Agreement* and *Boomerang!*, saw them as revealing "the profound weakness of the very cause for which they try to enlist sympathy." Their liberal spokesmen, he suggested, seemed "to be overwhelmed by a mood of resignation, as though [they] had discovered

[78] Irving Pichel, "Areas of Silence," *Hollywood Quarterly*, **3**, 1 (1947), 52.
[79] Abraham Polonsky, "The Best Years of Our Lives: A Review," *Hollywood Quarterly*, **2**, 3 (1947), 260.
[80] Siegfried Kracauer, "Those Movies with a Message," *Harper's*, **196** (June 1948), 567–72.

that the struggle for enlightenment is a Sisyphean task."[81] And they also featured as:

> the recipient of the liberal gospel...an ex-G.I. in a state of complete bewilderment....Visionless, at the mercy of any wind, benumbed even in their love-making, they drift about in a state bordering on stupor....Significantly, these characters place little confidence in reason. They are not only impervious to ideas but instinctively shun them as sources of suffering rather than as means of redemption....In sum, our postwar films present a common man reluctant to heed the voice of reason and a liberal spokesman unable to run the emotional blockade around him.[82]

His description of the ex-G.I. common man could also stand as a description of Mitchum in *Out of the Past*, whose performance James Agee described as having "a curious languor, which suggests Bing Crosby supersaturated with barbiturates."[83]

With a weariness that echoed his subjects, Kracauer continued,

> The world has become one world indeed. In it the average individual feels completely at sea. Situations that seemed controllable in prewar days now seem confused by developments beyond his reach. Unable to orient himself, he instinctively shuts his eyes, like a man overwhelmed by dizziness on the edge of an abyss....The apathy of this country today might be called ideological fatigue, a fatigue which in part accounts for the present vogue of psychiatry, with its emphasis on psychological relations rather than social meanings.[84]

Yet while Kracauer was criticizing the retreat into psychiatry as an escape from the political, he was himself encouraging it by pursuing his psychoanalytically based critical method. The movies' preoccupation with psychoanalysis was readily enough explained in conventional, commercial terms, as a topical ingredient which could be readily incorporated into the standardized structures of Hollywood's individualist narratives. By dwelling on the alienated individual, psychoanalytical criticism tended to obscure the ideological drift of Hollywood's postwar productions at the same time that it observed the movies' failure to endorse wartime liberal dreams.

As documents in a cultural history, it is difficult to regard the postwar *films noirs* as expressions of a liberal existentialism. Their rhetoric of paranoia, however much their liberal critics psychoanalysed it, was more closely attached to an alternative political tendency. The beneficiaries of the apathy that Kracauer described and the disillusionment with rationality that accompanied it were the anti-Communists, with their rhetoric of a new

[81] Ibid., p. 569.
[82] Ibid., pp. 570–1.
[83] James Agee, review of *Out of the Past*, *Time*, 15 December 1947.
[84] Siegfried Kracauer, "Those Movies with a Message," p. 572.

melodramatic politics of emotion. Norman Woelfel, in an article on "The American Mind and the Motion Picture," asked,

> Can America lift itself by its bootstraps and overcome the inertia of things as they are? Where can the necessary spiritual might and the necessary will and energy to achieve socially and culturally in peacetime be obtained? Quite obviously, if these things are to come they must come by way of popular leaders who can express what the masses of Americans deep in their hearts really feel.[85]

The masses of Americans got, at least, a new definition of their national character. "McCarthyism," the man himself said in 1950, "is Americanism with its sleeves rolled."[86] From Hollywood, in 1948, they got the first of a wave of anti-Communist movies, the majority of which employed the mannerisms of *film noir*, fixing a positive political charge to a style whose previous ideological meaning had only been defined by negatives. The femme fatale revealed herself, at last, as a Commie Sex Trap, and the protagonist's neurosis, in *My Son John* (1952) or *I Was A Communist for the FBI* (1951), could now be seen to have been induced by the Communist Conspiracy. But it was not Joe McCarthy, but Geoffrey Gorer who had explained that "The lure of Soviet power has an insidious appeal for those who are humiliated by their own weakness or frustrated by their own insecurities."[87]

Gorer had described at length an American condition he called the "panic–fear of homosexuality."[88] Its symptoms were replicated in the anti-Communist persecutions which revealed a similar need not merely to ostracize its victims as unclean but to expose them as maladjusted and sick. In many respects Truman's Federal Loyalty Program, designed to eliminate subversives from the Government, was a displaced extension of the Army's psychological testing procedures designed, at least according to Gorer,[89] to eliminate homosexuals from the armed forces. Not for the first time in American cultural history, a tool of liberal analysis found itself displaced and perverted into an instrument of political repression. If liberal concern with the ideological implications of *film noir* turned out, in the event, to be well placed if somewhat misdirected, the convoluted mechanisms which led to their disillusioned anxieties, and indeed to the movies' psychological representation of a maladjusted postwar world, were in large part creatures of their own devising.

[85] Norman Woelfel, "The American Mind and the Motion Picture," *Annals*, p. 91.
[86] Quoted in Colin Shindler, *Hollywood Goes to War: Films and American Society, 1939–1952* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), p. 127.
[87] Geoffrey Gorer, *The Americans*, p. 187.
[88] Ibid., p. 95.
[89] Ibid., p. 96.