

“The Psychology and History of Film Noir: Film Noir as Genre to the Present Day”

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The Psychology and History of Film Noir

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Introduction

Noir is one of the most compelling film forms in the cinematic repertoire. Part of its allure lies in the darkness of the image, both subject and lighting. Additionally, Noir is rich in symbolism and meaning, one of the best styles for the application of psychoanalytic theories, Noir reveals the *mind* of the time it is made in and the minds of those who made and still make these types of film, including the culture and people associated with the filmmakers. To put it simply, once the surface is scratched, Noir offers a deep well of thought provoking possibilities.

Theorists who appreciate the importance of those films considered illustrative of Film Noir find a vast and rich landscape to explore. However, there is a struggle that remains to this day in defining just what Noir is. The lack of definition has become a hallmark of this film form. Many theorists agree with James Naremore who stated: “nobody is sure whether the films in question constitute a period, a genre, a cycle, a style, or simply a *phenomenon*” (Naremore, 12). Marc Vernet explains the difficulty in nailing down a set definition, “The closer the object is approached, the more diluted it becomes,” echoing the psychoanalytic concept of the beloved object (Copjec, 4).

For some Noir is not a definable genre, but an anti-genre, mirroring the quintessential anti-hero that populates its shadowy scenes (Naremore, 20). Wrought with “doomed characters who become obsessed with bewitching women,” (Hirsch, 2) Noir was born sometime during the early 1940s. The period before and during World War II is remembered as “a complex, ambiguous, even contradictory world, but most of all, as a troubled world,” (Kleinegger, 129). These turbulent times were ripe fruit for inspiration that allowed Noir to come into existence. For example, Wheeler Winston Dixon describes Noir as reflecting a new perspective or sentiment symptomatic of the period: “Defiant fatalism was something new...a sense that there was a point

where even bothering to continue to exist was more of a problem than it was worth” (Dixon, 25). Dixon’s statement is depressing, but reveals a great deal of what the filmmakers and members of the American culture faced at the time. Art is often an exhibit of cultural mood, or attitude. The emotions and stories contained in Film Noir features are sophisticated compared to this simple summary, often jumbled and knotted up inside of the narrative (Hirsch, 17, 74-75). To say that the American public was depressed barely describes the tones of the age.

The 1940s were “a period when psychoanalysis was just coming into vogue” for Western culture (Dixon, 30). It was a period that produced a great many new ideas, all products of the decade’s turbulence, and former decade’s lessons. Film of the period can be seen as an evolution of styles, a response to cultural shifts and the expanding knowledge of the populace. For instance, “the public’s distrust of conventional authority figures...coupled with a fear of their own internal mental landscape” made Noir a prominent cultural discourse (Dixon, 31). The decade of the 1940s was full of people who survived the Great Depression and the Great World War nearly two decades before. In the United States, cynicism toward authority and the American Dream was the result. Just as the emotional temperature of the nation was made by multiple facets of experience, Film Noir crossed genres and styles. The ability of Noir styled films to cross genres was important to the business of Hollywood, and though they did not consider it a genre, they knew of the potential of such films to bring in the desired box office take (Copjec, 131). Banking on the historically burdened mindset of the American consumer paid off.

In the following pages, a closer definition of Film Noir will be attempted, and the struggle with this elusive form will be explored. An examination of those details particular to the Film Noir will be undertaken in an effort to decide if Noir is a style or genre from a long gone

time period, or one that continues in current film. History (both political and cinematic) and psychology will play an integral part in making these determinations. History inevitably sets the cultural backdrop, often cluing the viewer of film into the attitudes and ideas flowing through the period in which a film is made. In addition, psychology provides the means to interpret the Noir images on screen, and to seek out the similarities among them to determine that they do create a genre and also exist to this day.

Set the Backdrop, the History that Made Noir

Film Noir has origins in post-World War I Germany, the expressionist film movement of the same era, the horror and gangster genres, Italian realism and in French “poetic realism,” (Biesen, 15-16; Hirsch, 23, 53-54, 60, 67). Expressionism manifests in the distinct lighting and camera work of the newer American style. “Asymmetry, angularity, verticality are important compositional elements for Noir,” as well as “recurrent visual patterns” which are remnants of the German influence (Hirsch, 89-90). The style also evolved out of technical and budget constraints (cheap productions utilizing less light and less set) of the period following the Great Depression and during the Second World War, and evolving into a full genre (Biesen, 35).

The European forebears of Noir reached toward more realistic depictions in Germany and France after World War I, but were hemmed in by financial concerns and government censors, in the form of state controlled production of all entertainments. The rise of the Nazi party in Germany made such limitations greater, causing German filmmakers to flee to France and other countries, including the United States. The persecution of Jewish peoples also caused a mass immigration of people to more friendly territories. It is arguable that the impact of these political

changes created a psychological response among the filmmakers that was reflected in their collective work (Biesen, 16-18). This psychology of fear and the unknown was reflected in horror tropes that provided many of the parameters of the Film Noir: darkness, the shadow and the night (Biesen, 17).

Likewise, Sheri Chinen Biesen cites the American gangster films of the 1930s as a source of material for the Noir film, as the criminal became the acceptable scape goat for fear of the system and the epitome of distrust for the failed promise of America (19). Out of the gangster era came the Femme Fatale, who has her roots in the “tough moll” (19). In *The Lady from Shanghai*, the fun house sequence “epitomizes the visual as well as psychological extravagance of the Noir set-piece,” reflecting the tension of crime drama and horror (Hirsch, 86). In addition to the gangsters and molls, the Great Depression caused restrictive budget cuts that produced the general mise-en-scene attributes of the typical noir. It meant that filmmakers had to be smarter about how they used their funds. Despite the decreased funding, “among American film genres, Noir has the most consistently high standards of visual design” (Hirsch, 94). This suggests that despite the lack of funding, the filmmakers were still very serious about the films they produced. They chose stories that hit a chord with audiences and relied on actor portrayals more than grand vistas and soundtracks. It may be argued that they put their best foot forward hoping to garner some of the budget to their pockets, but it is just as likely that the filmmakers refused to let their art suffer and had learned how to deal with such inconveniences in their art form.

The period that had the greatest impact on the design of Film Noir was World War II and the post war era. The psychological impact of the war on the American culture and psyche created a noticeable shift in the presentation of all films and what was put on film. Following the Second World War, statistics regarding damages and losses created a bleak picture, which may

explain the turn toward Noir and the more serious tones in film, which had previously insisted on sunny outlooks and lightheartedness (Lingeman, 59, 205). Some 405,000 personnel (both male and female) were counted as dead. This left an estimated “four grieving people for each”, in addition to the 607,000 wounded, “some of them permanently disabled”, while over 200,000 of those suffered mental trauma. 78,000 soldiers were listed missing and “183,000 American children lost their fathers” (Lingeman, 42-49). Currently, the “remains of 21,286 have not been located” (Lingeman, 50). According to Richard Lingeman, these facts had the effect of turning the American public emotionally cold (Lingeman, 53). This coldness may have been an outward mask, a reaction to the trauma the public collectively suffered being required to deal with such realities, due to the limited outlets for such emotions. Psychology was still a young and growing field that had yet to deal effectively with individual mass trauma or identify Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), labeling it shell shock and hiding the sufferers from main street (Lingeman, 126). The move to disguise the nationwide trauma is reflected in how memorials erected for World War II celebrated “military preparedness” instead of recognizing the toll as in years past. There was an aggressive campaign to hide the real face of war with the guts and glory portrait found in a great deal of the cultural expressions of the time (Film, stage, propaganda posters, statuary, monuments, etc) (Lingeman, 51).

This idea of collective trauma is supported by the fact that “the Office of War information’s Bureau of Motion Pictures urged studios to slip into films a lesson on how to cope with loss” (Lingeman, 44). Loss of a family member was not the only price that the American public paid. Citizens questioned their faith in the nation, faced with the violent and unflattering images on newsreels and that this war was the third time their nation had let them down (the manipulation of the administration to involve Americans in World War I and the failure to

regulate commerce effectively resulting in the Great Depression). The struggle in the public's mind was balancing the notion that they felt their "country exceptional, more decent and high-minded than the rest of the world" with the reality of the savagery accomplished overseas in the name of the "higher-minded" American citizenry (Lingeman, 52). As Lingeman says, they suffered from "faded *victory dreams*" due to contrasting images and ideals (Lingeman, 60). In light of the personal cost and years of violence, the American people were aware more than ever of the transience of life (Neumann, 276-277). An entire generation had painfully learned that life could change permanently or end abruptly. "From Pearl Harbor to the Holocaust to Hiroshima, the war undermined previously held moral absolutes, beliefs about human nature, and the very notion that life was predictable or logical...Americans suffered an identity crisis, producing a rootless, fragmented sense of self," (Kleinegger, 131). The cynicism and hard bite of Noir was a perfect fit to express such sentiments.

In addition, "1 in 6 [veterans] needed treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder" (PTSD), a condition hardly understood at the time formerly known as Shell Shock (Lingeman compiles this number out of both World War II and the Korean War) (Lingeman, 126). The lay public was only aware that returning soldiers were not the same as before the war. Some bore visible wounds, but far more had scars that did not show. People saw marriages frequently end in divorce, and blamed the changed role of women (women served in World War II either on the front or at the home front working jobs previously held by the men) for the new strange and sometimes disturbed face of America. A campaign to return women back to the home and free up the jobs was mostly effective, making use of shame tactics and propaganda of the idealized woman. Alongside this, the United States became a land of prefab housing, shelves upon shelves of goods and gadgets, the nuclear family with its stay at home mom and workaholic dad, framed

by the context of new opportunity through the GI Bill and the economy that ground along to a boom time (88-113, 133). Conflicting moods and attitudes converged into a general cultural “sense of gloom and pessimism” (Lingeman, 61). The old film formulas, “phony heroics of the propagandistic war movies,” no longer brought in the box office receipts of years past (Lingeman, 59). Americans had seen the reality, and Hollywood was no longer as appealing as it once had been.

The “psychological shocks” of World War II and Korea “reverberated through the popular culture, most prominently in the films Noir” (Lingeman, 60). Most common among these was the “*no exit conclusion* as a recurring motif” (Lingeman, 60). For returning soldiers, and even civilians, there was no return, no going back to the way things had been. American “belief in human progress fell on hard times in the wake of a second world war, the Holocaust, and the realization that the world could now be blown up at any time,” (Kleinegger, 132).

The decade following World War II is also considered a Noir age. The 1950’s were full “of crisis and contestation, in which all the values of the preceding decades were called into question and found wanting” (Dixon, 79). A new ideology came to root in American soil and some “sensed a different spirit in the air: everyone for himself, greed in the saddle” (Lingeman, 82). The refusal of corporations to give up government contracts and take lower profits is an example of what Richard Lingeman alludes to. Corporations focused on keeping the contracts and subsequently created a military industrial complex in the United States, which has survived and grown through the present era. They often sought to campaign for the next war, in order to keep those contracts so vital to their profit margin (Lingeman, 67-86).

The alteration of the American cultural landscape did not stop there. An active and successful attempt to move America away from New Deal *socialism* toward mass consumerism

capitalism, helped cause” mass alienation, loneliness, rootlessness and superflousness” through its main tenant of rugged individuality, self-reliance that manifested in hard work and amassing wealth through material items (Lingeman, 66-68, 91, 98). James Naremore writes, “It would be naive to assume that the classic films Noirs were ever free of show business and the consumer economy” (Naremore, 25). They can often be interpreted as warning against defying the status quo, especially in the case of the *Femme Fatale*.

The business called Hollywood saw America trend toward the cultural issues of the day, and they banked on them, as taught by years of marketing experience. In addition, the government saw a media form that effectively produced opinion. The War Department used it during the Second World War and saw its potential as they moved on toward a new era. Thus, “*Red Scare* Noir films appeared in droves,” satisfying government agencies, corporations seeking government contracts, and censor groups (Dixon, 85). America was now the antithesis of their former Soviet allies, who chose communism as their answer to political and economic issues. It appears that those in power found a need to designate the next nemesis. The Secretary of the Navy pushed an anti-communist agenda, hoping for the next war, “so that Americans did not get too complacent” (Lingeman, 241). The Cold War was the intense “US commitment to oppose the spread of Communism” (Lingeman, 243). What followed was a slew of political events and catastrophes, including HUAC (House Un-American Activities Committee), the build-up and abuses of the FBI, Soviet atomic research, Truman’s reelection campaign, the Marshall Plan, Anti-labor movements and the rise in mistrust for NATO (Lingeman, 241-265).

In this Red Scare milieu, “movies became a propaganda organ of the national security state” (Lingeman, 283). Some critics would contend that this is also what ended the period of the Noir. Instead, it is better to see the period as a bottle neck where expression was narrowed into

carefully coded discourses, having the appearance of an end as it slipped under the radar. Noir may have shifted focus, becoming subtle in its critique of the American Government, but it did not disappear, showing up in such films like *Kansas City Confidential* (1952) and *Touch of Evil* (1958). The creators of Noir simply waited for a time when Noir could openly express the dark subjects or turned to a variant language to continue.

Noir is marked by an ability to explore and discuss darker subjects (Copjec, 159). 1940s film Production Code required that any criminal or deviant behavior be punished by the close of the film, making it necessary to code meanings or lose the impact of the message. So coding meaning was not a new necessity for these filmmakers. Eventually, codes laxed, such as the more sexually explicit image, or the increase in graphic violence (see *Touch of Evil*, *The Lady From Shanghai* (1948), *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) or *The Killing* (1952) for examples). Changes in the 1950s gave way to images of men and women “getting away with murder, and the fabric of society frayed beyond recognition” in the following decades (Dixon, 23). Noir is “the truest picture of the dark side of the American dream,” rather it is the American nightmare (Dixon, 70-71). The experience of World War II and the reminders brought back by the Korean War all brought this dark side to the fore of American culture, a shadow to be faced. However, war and suffering because of war were not the only events to shape the idea of Noir. Paranoia took root in the American mind, having experienced the eruption of peace and the horrors that humanity was capable of in the daily coverage of crime. Gangsters and other criminals were as familiar to the American public as celebrities. The actions of HUAC also served to make Americans mistrustful of their fellow citizens. The fear of the other, the shadow, a specter of what might come, took over the American psyche and Noir expressed this in its paranoiacs and seamy deals (Dixon, 31-32).

Periodizing Noir

Critics like Marc Vernet and Foster Hirsch attempt to define Noir by locking it down to a specific time bracket (such as years, months or days), which is called periodizing the genre (Scruggs, 676). When reviewing the criticism and films, it should be kept in mind that “periodizing cultural history by decade is controversial, and may very well be arbitrary,” (Kleinegger, 134). Marc Vernet, in his contribution to Joan Copjec’s compilation, states that Noir does have a set period, which he calls the “perfect decade (1945-1955)” (Copjec, 1). Some other suggested periods are: 1-1930s-1950s, 2-1941-1959, 3-1944-1950, or 4-indeterminable and continuing (Scruggs, 676-677). 1946 is generally considered the date of Noir’s inception, because that is the same year that French criticism became preoccupied by the films that fill the lists of the genre and the time that critic Nino Frank coined the term (Lingeman, 59). This is one justification for the French nomenclature (Naremore, 15). 1955-1959 is cited as an end point for Noir because critics and filmmakers felt the stories had become cliché, and Boris Vian, an influential French novelist and musician, who Naremore cites as the father of Film Noir, passed away in 1959 (Naremore, 14-15, 24). Naremore also writes that the French critics ignored British and German influence on the genre, and cited the phenomena as uniquely American (Naremore, 17). Claire Gorrara intriguingly posits:

In his study of French intellectuals and their relationship to America during the twentieth century, Jean-Philippe Mathy points to the predominance of a 'paradigm of discontinuity', a set of textual constructs which posit America as a site of rupture with the cultural, political,

economic, and social structures of Europe...They present American society and culture as anti-intellectual, spiritually void, and predicated on rampant consumerism. (590)

Gorrara's statement reflects the resentment felt by European cultural elites, but also truths, such as the consumerism that was being hyped throughout America.

The history between the United States and France clarifies the cause for this sentiment. World War II and the post-war era was a boon for the United States, while France struggled forward with shame (i.e., their surrender to Germany in World War II and subsequent rescue by the United States). The result "forced French writers and intellectuals to ponder their own country's place in a new Cold War world order," (Gorrara, 591). Despite the resentment, French critics still felt that the American culture had produced something unique and compelling, challenging the belief that the United States was low culture. Because of this the French critics needed to label this new genre with a French term to give it credence before another group stepped in to do so and effectively put their cultural stamp upon it, because they loved it, but also because it could not just be American, just as it could not be German or English. The French sought redemption on the cultural stage, after the disaster of World War II.

"French writers...were fascinated with the Noir metaphor... its dynamism, its cruelty, and its irrationality," (Naremore, 17). Also, these writers perceived that the *spiritually voidedness* of America fed into the idea of dark film for the French critics. These factors suggest that perhaps the French critics were obsessed with the shadow they saw. They may have seen it as similar to their own, resisting a similarity with British or German creations, possibly because they wanted to claim it as their own creation to bolster a wounded pride. Aiding in the French claim to the genre, critics were not interested in translating the term to reflect the American

roots, because it sounded better in the foreign tongue. Therefore, the term ‘Film Noir’ was not translated from the French. The term remaining as it was had connotations that validated it, making it sound important and keeping it from triggering aggressive notions. For instance, the subtexts that *Black Cinema* creates. If the genre were labeled as Black Cinema, there would be confusion in the meaning of the term, and the mask of American exceptionalism be questioned by the racism exposed in doing so. Thus, this is further evidence of the multiple intertexts driving the formation of the genre Film Noir.

Evidence of further French assimilation can be found in how “the American hard-boiled detective” stories, such as the works of Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett, were adapted by French writers for French markets, addressing their anxieties in the new world order post World War II. For American writers, the American Dream had failed to materialize, leaving a bitter aftertaste, something the French well understood (Gorrara, 591). The publication of hard-boiled detective novels was a “socio-political critique,” that both nations could undertake, despite tensions between them (Gorrara, 593, 601). These novels fed the Noir cinema. However, not everyone thought that such pieces of American culture should be absorbed by the French. Negative critique of the American detective novel by French reviewers “demonstrates a fear of American technological production and the forces of rampant capitalism,” (Gorrara, 599). This was clearly a reaction to the production of the Atomic Bomb, and the United States display of industrial power during and after the war.

Vernet writes that his dates, 1945-1955, are troublesome mainly because they are “ones that concern French critical reception and not American production” (Copjec, 5). It is ironic that this is an accepted period by any critic, considering how the French school looked down on American culture (Copjec, 5). It is ironic that critics pick the same year that writing began on

these particular films, as if nothing of the like existed prior to that moment, and simply struggled for definition. There must have been something that captured the attention of French critics until they were forced to speak. Vernet suggests that despite this irony, “Film Noir thus finds itself to be literally...a critical object: invented by French criticism” (Copjec, 6). In its current treatment by the majority of critics, Copjec is correct. However, Film Noir has the potential to be much more. It little matters who articulated the realization first when attempting to define what Noir is.

As mentioned above, refugees from the European theater of war immigrated to the United States. Thus, Copjec writes “Film Noir was the Europeanized form of American cinema,” a melting pot cultural pastiche (25). In the very least, this fact makes use of a French term to explain a very American cinematic form perfectly, even if it yet fails to set a period for its existence. In theory, America is viewed as a place of assimilation, where many cultures, due to mass immigration from all lands, have converged and created unique products.

Film historian and critic Marc Vernet also cites critical agreement on the genre’s origins in German expressionism and psychoanalysis, but quickly dismisses the former as a source of the genre due to temporal gaps (Copjec, 1, 7). The gap comes in where the filmmaker has left the influence of the German culture and immigrated to the United States or other territory, but does not produce an expressionist piece until much later. Vernet seems to forget that temporal gaps do not negate the influence of one’s experience on the product they produce. The theory of intertextuality argues that films made by a specific artist contain relics of all experiences in that artist’s lifetime, conscious or not. So regardless of his argument that there was ‘x’ many years between this director’s production of an expressionist piece, his or her leaving Germany, arrival in France or America, and the first production of a Noir-esque film, it is arguable that this was simply the time it took for them to put what they had learned to use. Theories of intertextuality

deny the linearity that Vernet seeks in dismissing the influence of German expressionism (Allen, 112)

Characteristics of German expressionism include “the monumental aspect, crushing and isolating or imprisoning the human figure,” such as the vistas of *Metropolis* (1927) and the awkward shooting angles of the camera (Copjec, 8; Hirsch, 53). Other characteristics are in the chiaroscuro (high contrast between light and dark), brilliantly executed in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) (Copjec, 9). These techniques were not new to the American film industry, which used them frequently in their “gothic films” (Copjec, 9-10). It is likely that filmmakers in America were exposed to such techniques, not living in a sealed off bubble, despite an ocean and/or vast stretch of land between them and Europe. “Much has been made of Noir's debts to German Expressionist filmmaking,” and it should not be ignored because of temporal or locational hindrances (Harris, 19). This is especially true when German filmmakers like Fritz Lang, Robert Siodmak, Billy Wilder, and Otto Preminger, produced work in the United States regularly (Hirsch 116).

Vernet argues that the characteristics of Noir developed out of technical and budgetary constraints, which included the transition to color and aesthetic differences in mise-en-scene (to name a few: lighting, distances of shots, and quality of sets) (Copjec, 11). Due to the Depression and budget limits brought on by rationing in the following decade, the film industry found its funding stretched a bit thin. Smaller designated productions needed to be made on smaller budgets. This led to the use of limited lighting and tight shots due to smaller, cheaper sets (Copjec, 11, 22). Marc Vernet and Elizabeth Cowie both include melodrama as an influence on the Noir style (Copjec, 4, 137-145). Cowie explores the idea of Noir as “crime melodrama” and “male melodrama” but quickly uncovers the bias in criticism that ignores female characters who

were in leading roles of these films (Copjec 129-135), for example, Barbara Stanwyck's Phyllis in *Double Indemnity* (1944). There is no mistaking that Phyllis is the subject of the film, as the story revolves around her and her actions. It is too easy to cite Walter as the center of the film as he narrates the story, because there would be no story without Phyllis. Therefore, Noir may be an incarnation of melodrama grown serious in its treatment on film. Regardless of what Noir is as a genre, reducing it to a set period disengages it from the entirety of what created it and thus makes it impossible to define. In other words, locking the genre into a set number of years takes it away from art, cultural and historical developments and realities that fed into the creation of the film form.

What is Film Noir?

“Noir is an extreme example” of “narrative suspense in the classic American film” asserts Copjec (122). Copjec is making two statements here. First, she asserts that Noir is at an extreme end of the thriller and suspense genre. Second, and more subtly, she writes that there is a time period that defines the genre, limiting it to the classic era. These two statements reflect arguments and barriers in trying to define exactly what Film Noir is. Most critics try to apply it to an existing genre while also restricting it to a set period of time. But, it can be argued that this is not all Film Noir is, because such an effort ends in a fruitless result.

The attraction to dating Film Noir is that some feel it helps to define what Noir is. Those who want a set period ask if one cannot be agreed upon for Film Noir, can the details that make up the style be hammered out to decide it as a genre? Charles Scruggs asks if Noir is a genre unto itself, a sub category of another genre (crime film), or if it is simply a style that is applied across

genres (Scruggs, 676-677, 680-681)? Is it possible that Noir is a genre that happens to draw on crime stories and other dark subjects to open a discourse on the darker side of human nature?

Keeping in mind that Noir “was named by critics rather than film-makers, who did not speak of Film Noir until well after it was established as a feature of academic writing,” reminds the viewer that Noir was also labeled by these critics once the aesthetics of it were in wide use, but it also should clue newer critics that they were watching a phenomena, possibly the creation of a genre (Naremore, 14). Was Drama, for instance, coined by the writers or the critics? How about horror or any other genre? Andre Bazin, in 1957, asserted that “if there wasn't exactly a genre there was a style” (Naremore 18). Foster Hirsch designates Film Noir as a subdivision of the crime film genre (Hirsch, 10). However, other critics don't agree with Hirsch. For example, Lee Horsley “fleshes out...the Noir model as an organizing principle for a whole range of concepts and genres that far exceeds the annals of crime fiction,” (Gorrara, 592-3). Mikhail Bakhtin would most likely agree with him, as he put forth the idea of *speech genres* and gives a basis for critically examining Noir similar to vocal genres (Bakhtin, 60-61). Just as interestingly, Naremore suggests that Noir is an anti-genre, (Naremore, 20). Noir goes beyond the surface show of criminality. It critiques the dark shadows of American society, and if it doesn't critique them, it certainly shines a light in the dark corners and asks the viewer to take a long look. It utters what has been masked or hidden away. Noir isn't simply a flashy mystery or crime fiction. The narratives of the films collected under the Noir umbrella show:

an urban jungle where social, political, and economic interests conspired
to defeat the small man, where organized crime was routinely found
pulling the strings of elected city officials, and where each murder was the

tip of the iceberg, destroying the fragile illusion that the rule of law sustained the social order. (592)

Noirs often contained coded references to HUAC and the type who personified the committee's victim. Sometimes they included a thread that exposed the fear of atomic annihilation or invasion by communists. Always, they hold a sense of distrust for every person, and most definitely fellow citizens believed to be subversives (Dixon, 90). In this way, Noir "did more than passively reflect their times. They were often a critical engagement with the institutions and power structures that regulated Western societies," (Gorrara, 597). They simultaneously exposed the trap of individualism and reliance on the group. They also suggested that the power structure was being closely watched in return.

Charles Scruggs quotes Hollywood writer, Billy Wilder, as saying "I think the dark outlook is an American one," when talking about the creation of Film Noir (Scruggs, 675). At the start of the war, "authorities felt that such films presented an anti-social and unpatriotic image of the United States" and worked to have such films halted (593). However, the anti-genre persisted. Political pressure suppressed the Noir through censors, but did not succeed in ending it, as many critics would lead their readers to believe.

The look, the feel of Noir

The vision of a Noir film is dark. Dixon describes the scenes of a typical Noir as a "harrowing vision of suburban life...this is the real world of the 1950s; instant *communities*, empty, fearful, always on a knife edge," the creeping indefinable specter, the shadow (Dixon, 71). The 1950s was a post-nightmare period for the world, while the nations of Europe and Asia

struggled to rebuild on economies that struggled. Despite a boom-time in America, the lingering effects of disillusionment and pockets of privation were reflected in the lighting, narration, and atypical points-of-view (Copjec, 261). Lighting, “noticeable more by its absence than its presence” was the embodiment of an obscure specter who gave a desolate tone to the stories (Dixon, 11). Such films were preoccupied with “the grotesque” (Copjec, 261) and exhibited “high levels of violence” (Dixon, 89), including “murders...with a pathological twist” (Lingeman, 55). “Boris Ingster’s *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940) is often cited as one of the first unadulterated Film Noirs...shot on a shoestring budget” (Dixon, 9). Small budgets and short schedules appear to only add to the mystique of Noir, because it helped to ensure the dark lighting and tight camera shots (Dixon, 12). The cheap look added a “downbeat and depressing” mood perfect for the typical Noir story line (Dixon, 21). Copjec cites Manthia Diawara’s discussion of these formalist and content based elements of the Noir (Copjec, 261). Diawara mentions that these *modes* tend to be limited. If this is the case, it should be much simpler to categorize the Noir as either genre or style. In addition, when the Noir crosses genres, it may be cluing the existence of its genre. For instance, westerns were adapted during the period to include Noir elements (Dixon, 64-66). If Noir were simply a style, wouldn’t Westerns have become noir in style, instead of just taking pieces?

Literary and linguistic theory may hold the key to enshrining Noir as genre. Analyzing the literary or linguistic aspect of film (the film script, the story, and the structure) supplies critics with ready semantics for a discourse on Noir. Yet, this approach is problematic as literary genres have been studied at the level of difference, and “not as specific types of utterances distinct from other types” (Bakhtin, 61). What Bakhtin refers to are *speech genres*. Speech genres are the groups which define the “specific nature and particular sphere of communication

...[and] each sphere in which language is used develops its own relatively stable types” (Bakhtin, 60). What Hirsch and other critics find to be the barrier to defining Noir was discussed by Bakhtin well before them in regards to linguistics. It applies here: “It might seem that speech genres are so heterogeneous that they do not have and cannot have a single level at which they can be studied” (Bakhtin, 61). Bakhtin addressed this barrier, alleviating the tension and giving further direction to an in-depth study of Noir.

The films categorized as noir, are parts of an utterance (speech), perhaps incomplete in their individual examples, but together creating a heterogeneous oneness. Bakhtin advises critics that “to ignore the nature of the utterance or fail to consider the peculiarities of generic subcategories of speech in any area of linguistic study leads to...excessive abstractness” (Bakhtin, 63). Hirsch directly mentioned this in his study of Noir as a reason why he and no one else could either clearly study Noir or name it a genre. What these critics may be forgetting is that, “any style is inseparably related to the utterance” (Bakhtin, 63). The issue with nailing film noir down may be in the failure to recognize the individual movies as separate utterances, pieces of a sentence, with varying tones. (Bakhtin, 79-81). Critics are not seeking the connectedness between them that will complete the sentence, as Bakhtin would say, and clarify the utterance that was being spoken through these films.

For instance, many critics prefer to explore the images and themes of the film. These are important, but not on their own. Scruggs states that “Film Noir is characterized by its fractured narrative, its characters caught in a downward spiral, its sense of a mysterious past that cannot be explained, its *surrealistic atmosphere of violent confusion, ambiguity, or disequilibrium* (Scruggs, 677). Fractured narratives exist in the use of flashback to tell the story or switching between scenes to cause confusion (Dixon, 18). In addition, the populations of such narratives

tend to be “the mildest-seeming people [who] are capable of fierce crimes of passion” (Hirsch, 4). Hirsch adds, “the characters have no place of refuge in this cruel naturalistic world, this life-as-a-jungle setting,” (Hirsch, 4). They stand in direct contrast to the usual cinematic narrative’s population of bright smiling faces. In Noir, it is almost guaranteed that the heroes are “crooked rather than straight, devious rather than forthright,” (Hirsch, 74). “Characters in Noir often assume several identities,” making the audience work to unmask the secrets, if they can or will (Hirsch, 72). This unmasking is where the shadow and the heart of Film Noir reside.

The quintessential male protagonist of Film Noir is often “consumed by guilt” and “faces a crisis of conscience,” making him an anti-hero, like Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and E.G. Robinson’s characters in *The Woman in the Window* (1944) or *Scarlet Street* (1945) (Biesen, 23). These characters sit on opposite ends of the spectrum, questioning the validity or strengthening the idealism of the typical hero. Above all, Noir “critiques the American Dream to suggest it is an unpredictable urban nightmare of gloom and futility” (Biesen, 26). This is never more evident than in *The Killing* (1956), *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), *This Gun for Hire* (1942), or *Kansas City Confidential* (1952). The dream was now corrupt, but there is no solution but acceptance, evident in how these stories “end in a downbeat note” (Biesen, 35, 44). “The hard-boiled detective lives by his own personal code of honor and seeks his own brand of justice,” like the jaded Sam Spade or Captain Quinlan in *Touch of Evil* (1958) (Biesen, 44). Such characterization truly reveals the loss of American innocence and a realization that the dream is not accessible for all. It reveals how members of society seek a means to cling to their ideology, such as *American individualism*, in the face of reality. The Noir antihero “is never really part of the world he exists in,” because he is too awake to believe the dream, such as Johnny Morrison

in *The Blue Dahlia* (1946), *Ed Beaumont* in *The Glass Key* (1942), or Scott Henderson in *The Phantom Lady* (1944) (Dixon, 73).

These anti-heroes have their genesis in literature. Most source material for the American Film Noir came from the “hard-boiled detective novel” (Copjec, 18). Consistent themes of Film Noir include: “the isolated policeman who fights alone against all” or “the victim who has to make his own way out of the trap in which he has got himself caught” (Copjec, 20). The very odd Detective Quinlan in *Touch of Evil* (1958), suffers from alcoholism and exceeding arrogance, which drives him to resolve the crime to bolster his reputation, regardless of finding the right man. The male ensemble of *Gangster Squad* (2013) illustrates each Noir anti-hero or the early years: “Hard-boiled toughness was indicated by appearance, by occupation, by personal habits, and by manner of speech” (Hirsch, 24).

Such a description is found in literary precursors as far back as the detective stories of Edgar Allan Poe (Hirsch, 24). If the root of the Noir anti-hero can be found as far back as Poe, setting it into a rigid period such as 1946-1956 would be very wrong (which I have shown above with the inclusion of *Gangster Squad* that insinuates its presence in the current era). Is it possible then, with his favor of the grotesque, that Poe is the father of a Noir, and not Vian? Poe was a gothic writer and much of Noir borrows from the gothic genre (Scruggs, 683). Other authors, such as Arthur Conan Doyle, contributed to the crime genre with quirky detectives like Mr. Holmes (Hirsch, 25). Quirks like Sherlock’s, (drug abuse, flashes of genius, arrogance, and odd eloquence) also find manifestation in Noir films. A consistent theme of Film Noir is: a

corrupt and ineffectual criminal justice system...the system shows that justice does not prevail and provides no hope that the miserable state of affairs will ever change...[a] ruthless place where bureaucratic law-and-

order institutions have broken down and will inhumanely bring about the demise of, rather than protect, its individual inhabitants. (Biesen, 24)

So here again, the idea of a set period can be discarded, as Sherlock Holmes would be just as at home as Charlie Chan. In addition, *The Raven* (2012) is a film that exposes Poe's influence on the genre. The intersection of these genres, horror, gothic and noir, does not negate any one of the genres. Instead, the combination of the gothic and the horrific, in part, form Noir.

Often centering on the criminal exploits of likeable scoundrels, the American Noir "put crime back where it belonged—in the mean streets of the real world" (Hirsch, 25, 67). Noir also borrowed from the literary philosophy of naturalism, which is defined by a "hard view of the consequences of the capitalist system." Naturalism was "grandiose," and highlighted a "portrait of economic and psychological collapse" (Hirsch, 49). It was the "tabloid-style story," such as *Double Indemnity* (1944), where a cheating wife used a sucker to kill off her husband and planned to run off with the insurance money (Lingeman, 54). *Double Indemnity* is considered a prime example of the "Noir style" by many critics (Hirsch, 2, 8). The film is an artful mix of German expressionism, realism (Italian) and the gangster film, making use of naturalistic elements (Hirsch, 23, 53-54, 60, 67). In addition to the structural points, Phyllis and Walter are victims of a consumer culture where the capitalists have taught them the way to take what they want, usually by subtle manipulations and playing at being a friend. Realism is not to be confused with naturalism. The first is a literary technique to portray the elements on screen in a realistic manner, while the latter is based on philosophy (exampled above). Copjec writes that the realism of Noir came from "a sense of pessimism, a light cast on the dark background created by the Depression: 'It is traumatic for an individual to lose a set of beliefs'" (Copjec, 262). It's interesting to note that the film was released in "1944 , The bloodiest year" of World War II

(Lingeman, 54). Noir expressed the trauma of lost beliefs and the struggle to keep up in the consumer economy that, despite pretenses to the opposite, was drowning everyday people (Lingeman, 88-113).

The relationships of the characters also provide a point of critical examination for the Film Noir, usually in the form of the triangle (Copjec 122). The anti-hero often must choose between the love of a tragic woman or the Femme Fatale who has seduced him off track. Either way, the anti-hero would make a flawed choice. Sometimes, the triangle takes on the form of a Femme Fatale whose strings are supposedly pulled by a second man behind the scenes. Usually, it's revealed that she is manipulating both the men in a play to win the top spot and her place in the world, such as Rita Hayworth's character in *The Lady from Shanghai*.

The triangle is not limited to love interests. For instance, the film *This Gun For Hire* explores several triangle relationships. The struggle with what is known, what is believed and the reality that is created in the struggle between the two. It can be formed between past and future with the hero Phillip Raven and his childhood and his crimes. It can form between the hero, his past actions and where he wants to end up and where he actually ends up: Raven coming to terms with his childhood abuse and wanting to go straight for Ellen who recognizes the good in him, but the inevitable is that Raven must die. The triangle may also be between the three aspects of the human psyche: ego, id and super ego. It can be found in the individual facing what is acceptable in his or her mind and the shadow of those things that the individual tries to keep hidden. Such as Orson Welles in *The Stranger* (1946). Professor Rankin forms a triangle with his adopted personality and the truth of who he is, an escaped Nazi war criminal.

The overarching theme or element of Noir is the darkness or blackness, often the unknown or unknowable. Such an element hints that these films dealt with an underlying theme

of racial assimilation, in addition to the nightmares of wartime. Assimilation does not mean that the assimilated group becomes overwhelmed by the dominant culture. They are absorbed, but almost always to the effect of changing the dominant culture. The adoption of the term Film Noir is an example of assimilation of this nature. Overall, these films are an example of how blackness and its connotations and denotations affected the dominant white culture and how they prepared to assimilate it into the larger encompassing group culture. “Good and evil is blurred and it is the collapse of these boundaries that causes the characters to partake of the attributes of blackness,” (Copjec 262). These films disclose the coded racism of the United States. Black culture was viewed as low in the post war era with white culture celebrated as refined. That dynamic is on full display in the early Noir films, through lighting, characterization and themes. Dark and light compete for the hearts and minds of the Noir characters, and the audience.

Charlie Chan and the Chinese Cat (1944) attempts to approach this darkness with humor. The use of comedy does not negate the film as a Noir. It is definitely a manifestation of the mystery genre, but there are many dark attributes that mirror noir, including the intense scenes in which Chan and his friends must fight to escape with their lives (his son and the cab driver). Crossing-genre, as such, the film provides a good example of what Bakhtin was attempting to explain in his essay on Speech Genres. Though the Chan film belongs to detective and comedy genres, the *utterance* of the film is still very much noir.

Whatever the theme, it is striking that each film exhibits a drive toward telling serious subjects, all but barred from earlier films by developing shooting techniques, censors or a misjudged audience taste (Copjec, 21). For Noir, an adjustment in storytelling was vital. The traditional “happy ending...undermines the Noirish despair,” as does the happy-go-lucky stage-like shooting style of cinema. Old formulas and techniques no longer pertained to the new

subject (Dixon, 58). Noir needed less light, less whimsy and less day-dream. It is arguable that the Film Noir signaled a beginning of human introspection in American culture through the cinema, seeking to heal traumas and come to terms with reality and its dark side (Hirsch, 21).

The above aspects of Noir fill the thematic content of the films themselves. They are indeed important but, Bakhtin tells his readers that “the expression of an utterance can never be fully understood or explained if its thematic content is all that is taken into account” (Bakhtin, 92). This is where the critics are failing in making a good and complete study of Film Noir. The context of each film supplies additional meaning, which is the reason of reviewing the history that created the noir, or solidified the genre (Bakhtin, 83-84). Bakhtin believed this because he felt that “some kind of finalization is necessary to be able to react to an utterance...an absolutely understood and completed sentence” (Bakhtin, 76). When selecting words to fill an utterance, “we usually take them from other utterances...kindred to ours in genre...theme, composition, or style” (Bakhtin, 87). Here, Bakhtin explains the failure of critics to make a sufficient list of Noir films, which Hirsch and others find impossible to do, based on the fact that it crosses genre or style or has meaning elsewhere. In addition, the meaning of an utterance is dependent on who the recipient or “addressee” is (99). The key to defining film noir may be found in who the films were intended to send a message to (not necessarily the message). Therefore, understanding the psychology and even the psychological studies of the time is another key in finalizing the utterance.

Psychology of Film and C.G. Jung

Hirsch reminds his reader that the Noir films usually dealt with paranoia and neuroses that were particular to the post World War II period, when the screen was “a thin shield against churning inner dissatisfaction” the masses experienced (Hirsch, 12-13). “French cineastes felt, after all, that the very qualities which gave the style its name reflected the impact of the war on American society” (Hirsch 17, 200). For one, women experienced a changed role in society, while simultaneously being forced to readapt to the old one (Hirsch, 19, 200).

Furthermore, “the 1940s saw the adoption of so-called vulgar Freudianism by Hollywood” (Copjec, 130). American’s adapted the Freudian theory to fit their assessment of what went on in the private lives of people. Copjec calls it vulgar because the theory was bastardized by amateur theorists and the general public who saw merit in Freud’s work, but really had no idea how to apply and also had minimal understanding of the theories in their entirety. Basically, Americans became obsessed with psychoanalyzing just about everything. It was a means to explain bad behavior, blaming it on an incurable affliction of the mind, and asserting that everyone suffered to some extent. Noir stories were no different. Much of the classic period for Noir seems to be “in thrall to the inevitable and complicated corruptibility of the human psyche above all other considerations” (Dixon, 65).

Another source for psychoanalysis is Freud’s student Carl G. Jung. Jung broke with Freud’s teachings, centering on the idea of a collective human unconscious. The collective unconscious is inherited ways of thinking, viewing the world, such as myths that transcend generations, in a *socially-genetic* manner. According to Jung, these passages make it possible to share similar myths and notions of the world space. For example, the shared idea of a god or gods, which crops up in most societies and share similar attributes (Jung and Dell, 418; Overholser, 469).

Jung was a “provocative writer of psychoanalysis,” (Overholser, 469). The reviews of his work all say that Jung speculated more than provided proof, but he did speak about this in his work, claiming to only put forth a theory, and perhaps seeing himself as more of a philosopher than a researcher (Drake 321-322). Still, his critics balk or dismiss the theory for being the conjecture of a single limited perspective. For instance, one critic “contextualizes Jung's theory in the formative relationships of his mother, father, and Freud, who shaped his complementarity theories,” (Willems, 573). This is obviously true, as any individual is the sum of his or her experiences and perceptions of those experiences. Yet, Jung spoke to something that stretched beyond that. Jung saw his theories as evolving, since he would revisit and modify them during the course of his life. Jung died in 1961, leaving his unfinished theories to critics and students (Drake, 321). Oddly, this corresponds with a similar end date of the Noir cycle, where some theorists see it as ending in the 1960s. This suggests that Noir was a result of a preoccupation with psychoanalysis, the human psyche and the shadow self (see below for more on the shadow). It is possible that like the preoccupation which left the mainstream arena, Noir has been just hidden from plain view. After all, the study of Jungian theory did not die with Jung.

Dr. Jung contributes a great deal to psychoanalytic theory and is still considered a great thinker on the subject today. By making use of Jungian theory, a critic can achieve greater clarity rather than relying on Freud’s perspective alone. Though Jung was ‘hated’ by Freudian theorists, apparently for breaking away from their leader, his theories should be examined because they are a critique of his teacher (Drake, 321). By utilizing competing theories, it may be more possible to overcome the “psychological dispositions of the human psyche” that prevent objective work, and obtain a more resounding theory of Film Noir or any other study that makes use of the

psychological (Henderson, 131). For instance, through introspective analysis, a toll used by both Freud and Jung, Jung's "final conclusion may be expressed thus:

While our intellect has been achieving colossal things our spiritual dwelling has fallen to pieces. (Dell and Jung, 418)

By way of introspection, this quote reveals a similar sentiment held by Noir. It echoes the story line: the hero who returns from the war, but is shattered by the world he returns to. Jung also stated that:

As scientific understanding has grown, so our world has become de-humanized. Man feels himself isolated in the cosmos, because he is no longer involved in nature and has lost his emotional unconscious *identity* with natural phenomena. (Gras, 480)

During the course of the war, as illustrated in the devastation listed at the start of this work, humanity came to the realization that they were capable of terrible acts against nature and each other. The culmination of this was in the development of the Atomic bomb, whereby atoms were split apart and used to devastate the environment and human settlements. Now, humans were living at odds with their world. Noir served as a means to reflect on these events and achievements, often questioning their merit or the American memory regarding them. Vernon W. Gras writes that such reflection is often limited by personal prejudices, "but must itself be included in the ongoing dialogue of the present with the past out of which comes the future," (Gras, 484). Noir served as a medium to address the past that had left so many psychologically scarred, or in the least, forever changed. Because of Jung's idea that the human psyche was always in flux, I think his is a better vantage point from which to view Noir. (This part of his theory is called Individuation, and is a continuing process of self-development that includes a

person's psychological make-up, the symbols and signs that make meaning to the individual, Jung, 160). Freud is often too rigid in his theories on human mental development, asserting that the mind is formed by developments early in life and there is little that can change it.

There are further differences between Freud and his pupil such as their "conception of the unconscious," (Drake, 331). Jung believed that the unconscious was a space of the mind populated by both ready installed unconscious memories and unconsciously created symbolism and ideas (Jung, 37). Freud believed the unconscious was more individualistic, consisting of a collection of forgotten or repressed memories (Jung, 75-76), showing the symbolic operations of the human, that meaning existed in symbols and deeper meaning could be found other than what was readily apparent. The collective unconscious was one of Jung's greatest contributions to the theories of psychic structure. It refers to the existence and persistence of a collection of ideas and thoughts that cannot be "ascribed to individual acquisition," but are exhibited throughout the population of a culture (Gras 471-472). Because of this difference, Jung "was the first to develop a working concept of intuition within the framework of psychology," (McDermott, 218). If the unconscious was set up with ready-made ideas, this would explain instinctual or intuition based behavior (Jung, 64). Dana Sue McDermott describes Jung's idea of intuition thus:

A function separate from thinking, feeling, and sensation which was characterized by the ability to see connections between things and find the potential inherent within a situation. (218)

Jung did agree that the unconscious was also the site of repressed memories and thoughts. Jung explains: "forgotten ideas have not ceased to exist. Although they cannot be reproduced at will, they are present in a subliminal state...they can rise again spontaneously" (34). In regards

to Noir, this is especially interesting. When Jung states, “suppressed and wounded instincts are the dangers threatening civilized man,” the theme of Noir is also uttered succinctly (Jung, 239).

Another important aspect of Jung is his examination of signs and symbols in his attempt to interpret his mind, as well as, the minds of his patients. Jung coined the term *archetypes* in 1919 (Drake, 322). (Aion is the collection of archetypes, Gras, 474). The premise was that “a given mythological pattern, the so-called archetype, possesses a certain meaning,” (Gras, 471). Archetypes are not to be confused with “elaborate images,” they represent them, (Drake, 330). Likewise, symbols can stand for archetypes, but has an element of the indefinable, (Drake 331-332). Archetypes are commonly held characters throughout human culture, but they are “pre-cultural,” (Drake 327, 329). Further elaboration tells the student of Jung that the “archetypes reverberate in the given conventions of a particular culture, not as harmonies of a universal mind” (Gras, 483). Much like Noir, the archetype is known. It can be identified, but remains largely elusive, and vaguely definable. (Jung might have benefitted from Bakhtin’s speech genres.)

It is helpful to think of the archetype like a myth. Drake writes:

The relation Jung makes between motifs, primordial images, mythological components, and archetypes is one of equivalency; in this context, they mean approximately the same thing. Thus to define archetype as a mythological component, for example is to define a ball by calling it a sphere. (325)

Many critics of Jung see his theory as problematic. They see Jung as “retreat[ing] into the clouds of mysticism” because they feel that “life is mysterious and cannot be adequately explained in terms of conditioned reflexes and behaviorism” (Dell and Jung, 418). “Claude Levi-Strauss in

his *The Structural Study of Myth* (1955) attacked Jung's interpretation of myths as pre-scientific,” (Gras, 471). However, stating that man creates myths to give meaning and focus to his life, is hardly arguable as mystic and pre-scientific, considering the continuance of religious faiths to the present (Jung, 88-90, 92). The use of myths and symbols is a historical one, explaining many cultural phenomena (Gras, 473). Myths obviously persist for some reason, and Jung attempts to explain that reason through his theories and lectures. Many in the scientific community still regard psychology as a philosophy or theory, but it often does attempt to use scientific means to prove a theory. In this, it is certain that Jung is delinquent. His case studies, and those of his followers are analytical conjecture (right or wrong). This does not negate the usefulness of the theory presented, especially in attempting to define Film Noir as a genre or style, where it exists today and what caused it (Bennet, 1484). For instance, Jung wrote on archetypes:

The primordial image or archetype is a figure, whether it be a daemon, man or process, that repeats itself in the course of history whenever creative phantasy is freely manifested. Essentially, therefore, it is a mythological figure. If we subject these images to a closer investigation, we discover them to be the formulated resultants of countless typical experiences of our ancestors. (Henderson, 130)

Here, Jung is talking about such examples as the Mayan creation of the snake god, or even a period of tribulation symbolized by crocodiles. The Mayan calendar that so many believed marked the end of the world also held examples of the archetypes. The proof of the Mayan Calendar as archetype can be found in how it immediately and irrationally spread fear in the minds of those confronted by its symbolism, and yet had no real explanation of what it meant.

Ironically, “Both Jung and Levi-Strauss assert meaning-giving as the essential human function, and they both use mythology to illustrate how this function operates unconsciously within the psyche,” (Gras, 478). It is a shame that Levi-Strauss could not see that his attacks on Jung essentially undermine his own arguments. Gras tells his readers that, “both Jung and Levi-Strauss are guilty of wanting to establish an Archimedean point outside history, in Derrida's terms, to establish a Presence or Origin which will legitimize *their* system” (Gras, 483). This is why the statement regarding competing theory was made at the start of this section. For critics or theorists who require an all-or-nothing adherence to their conjecture, they often end with nothing or a stunted result.

Humanity has long struggled to make sense of the world. Symbols are the language of the mind, loved for their economy and precision, and the tools used to create meaning and sense. The human mind is in constant process of individuation, to reconcile the opposing forces within the mind while meaning is being created, altered or broken during a lifetime (475). A symbol is a word or image that provides meaning beyond initial ideas, often reaching into more vague notions and concepts (Jung, 21). Gras writes that “it is this psychic energy or tension of opposites that underlies the attempted mediation of all symbolism and mythology,” (Gras, 479). Essentially, this is to say that “myths are...symbolic conventions” (Gras, 483). Thus,

man, with his symbol-making propensity, unconsciously transforms objects or forms into symbols (thereby endowing them with great psychological importance) and expresses them in both his religion and visual art. (Jung, 232)

This shows that psychologists see a person's reaction to a set of stimuli as based in the entirety of their psychological (and I would add sociological) development. Therefore, Noir was a result of

a long history that produced a certain set of associations (such as the dark, the seedy, and the uncertain). For instance, “*Cultural symbols*...become collective images accepted by civilized societies” (Jung, 93). When looking at a Noir film, the city becomes an archetype, the Mandala. Some of its meaning can be found in symbolism, but most is found in mental sensation. Jung writes that “the circle is a symbol of the psyche” and most cities are envisioned as circles (Jung, 249). This is because the city is symbolic of the mandala (the layout of streets and such), or a “the psychic center” (Jung, 293-294). Thus in Noir, the city emerges as a shadowy circular mind trap. The hero must go around the circle, often suffering a symbolic death, in order for him to realize the change that has come over his own psyche, usually the point of accepting or rejecting his cage (the city) (Jung, 295).

Jung made great use of the symbolic, employing a method of association in his analysis of patients (Jung, 219). Jung theorized that “the association experiments” revealed “the entire psychological past,” of the individual tested (Jung, 223). Jung explains that the method uses “certain stimulus words which denote actions, situations, or things, about which the test person cannot think quickly and surely,” (Jung, 225). The ambiguity produced, such as Jung describes, can cause anxiety. Jung found that the association of words corresponded to personal symbols and meaning, which were essential to his other treatment through dream interpretation. Jung also discovered there was not “a very great diversity and lawlessness of associations,” (Jung, 245). He found that patients consistently held similar symbols in similar meanings. Though Jung’s association experiment quoted herein deals with a specific family and cites a series of notable differences, the differences he calculated bear out that a given social strata and culture associate similarly. For instance, Mothers thought like mothers, and daughters like daughters, and so on.

Jung discovered in his association method that patients thought via “analogy which belongs to the stratum lying immediately below consciousness. Dreams bring the analogies to the surface,” (Jung, 264). With their rich content of symbols, dreams were of special interest to Jung (Overholser, 469). In his last work, *Man and His Symbols*, Jung and his followers speak at length on the human dream. They use history, mythology and culture to overcome the meaning barrier they experienced in attempting to help patients make sense of their dreams (McDermott, 215). For Jung, dreams were the free workings of the unconscious mind: “We should understand that dream symbols are for the most part manifestations of a psyche that is beyond the control of the conscious mind” (Jung, 64).

Film as Dream

Cinema has long been connected with the stuff of dreams. This is because of the “the condition of the medium's dedication to the production of *illusion*” (Baker, 95). Much like a dream, the viewer experiences “the false pleasures of cinematic illusion” as if really experiencing the event (Baker, 110). Similar to dreams is the illusion of space. The cinematic screen is flat, but the film played on it gives the illusion of depth and reality (Baker, 103). Some critics, deny this connection, citing the apparatus as negating the possibility. John A. Walker reminds them:

At the outset it may be objected that dream-work is an unconscious process involving internal mental operations while artistic labor is a conscious mental process controlling the manual manipulation of physical materials and implements. These differences exist but the unconscious also plays a role in art-work and...there are parallels between the

unconscious operations of dream-work and the physical transformations
typical of artistic production. (109)

As an art form, cinema has much in common with dreams. They both use signs and symbols to communicate meaning. For instance, “surrealism sought to release dream images into the conscious mind” and was thus closely linked with psychoanalytic theory (Lingeman, 210). To unlock the potential meaning of surreal images, the viewer must be articulate in symbolism. For instance, the dark images of the *Phantom Museums* (2003) series from the Brothers Quay seem like disjointed nonsense. However, upon closer inspection the viewer may note their emotions toward the images, recognition of anatomy parts, the play of light, the sway of metallic fibers undulating like grass in the wind. It takes multiple viewings to access the images of this series, just like a dream takes several examinations before meaning can be made to the satisfaction of the dreamer. Film and dream work in the same parameters, flashing images before the eyes, sometimes creating a narrative and other times making statements the mind refuses to access. Noir is seated somewhere between, with its accessible over story and the narrative the viewer ignores in order to rescue themselves from the shadow self. For the psyche, the shadow can quickly coalesce into a nightmare. Noir is quite possibly the turn from a dream into the nightmare.

The American psyche

The 1940s Film Noir was the first wave of a change from classical Hollywood to modern film in the United States. Up to this point, American cinema had “radiated sweetness and light” (Lingeman, 205). Darryl F. Zanuck, a successful producer of the time, gave a speech in which he

said that film “should portray *the grim and pressing realities before us in the world*” (Lingeman, 205). It had previously expressed the highest ideal of human potential, and was intended to distract the average moviegoer from drudgery and reality. Zanuck’s dream of performing life as it was instead of as it should be was delayed due to outcries from women’s and church decency leagues, and even the Motion Picture Association (MPA) (Lingeman, 221, 224). These groups worked hard to shame the tough subjects off the screen in the name of preserving decency and American exceptionalism. The shame campaign was effective, as “the American people, turning from the anxiety and shock of war, were afraid to face their personal problems and painful situations” in public (Lingeman, 222). The eventual lower receipts for Noir-esque or tough film could be linked directly to the efforts of decency groups. These groups created an air of indignity around dark topics that resulted in what appeared to be Americans not caring for such film. In truth, it may be that individuals avoided being labeled perverts who dabbled in pornographies, forced to carry the stigma decency groups attached to the viewership of dark films. In addition, these groups had plagued the film industry to the point that they were often crippled in their free speech, putting out watered down stories that did not appeal to the public. Conformity and paranoia became the creed of the times.

The desire or need to conform and paranoia of being watched or threatened were deeply seated emotions in the American psyche of the classic Noir period (1940s-1950s). The war itself is not the only tear in the fabric of American innocence that caused this reaction. The period was populated by the children of The Great Depression and the generation who had lived before the Stockmarket Crash of 1929 (Lingeman, 139). Conforming to the dominant group was a way of asserting that one belonged, and this was a huge issue for the influx of immigrants in the early part of the twentieth-century. The paranoia they felt, wondering if their neighbors judged them

and would turn them in to the authorities for being communists grew in strength. Some of these immigrants had come from nations that had tight controls on non-conformists. The shattering effects of the war were just another strike slowly crippling American outlook (Corber, 196; Ross, 195, 198). Although the United States:

had been through a horrible war and won it, our enemies were vanquished, order was being restored...it still wasn't enough. Something was missing. Everyone seemed to be on the take and the world was effectively split into two groups; suckers, and those who fleeced them. No one could be trusted, nothing was secure. It was as if the moorings of society had been permanently shaken by the conflict; America, in short, had lost whatever delusions of innocence it had ever had. Life was rough and tumble, and if you didn't watch your step, or expected something for nothing, or aimed too high too fast, you'd wind up in the gutter or in extreme circumstances, the death house. (Dixon, 15)

Dixon is discussing the widespread traumatic response that was experienced by the population of the United States. From his words, it can be surmised that the events left Americans emotionally vulnerable, seeking either truth or a fill-in for the truth to replace the understanding they held in years past. Dell and Jung state that this reach for understanding is "an indestructible human need" (Dell and Jung, 418). Noir was timely, because "in the paranoid world of postwar Film Noir, even innocence is no defense against the misguided judgments of society" and these films reflected that realization (Dixon, 32). However, even today "there is no defense" against the deterioration and danger of society, the Vietnam War and the attacks on 9/11 are just two

examples (Dixon, 33). To cite the social struggles of the 1940s and 1950s as a reason to limit Film Noir to that period is misguided.

In the post war period, the decency groups began to lose their power over the film industry. Scruggs cites the “general sense of malaise felt by Americans” as the cause of “Film Noir’s popularity” (Scruggs, 676). In addition, the war was over and the population turned to indulgence, “businesses became more stripped down and predatory, [and] one thing seemed certain; there was no possibility of returning to the past” (Dixon, 35). In this murky climate, people struggled to keep up with the changes overcoming their society, quite similar to the rapid progress of the Industrial Revolution. Tangible possessions became the focus of the nation, providing something seemingly fixed in a world of fluctuation (Dixon, 35). The struggle was for an acceptable and stable truth after finding the truth that had been known was no more than traditions and folktales. Newer generations fought for less restriction on their freedoms and a reality not buttressed with tall-tales. Perhaps they believed that an experience of life as it was would hurt less when you knew what you really faced. In the meantime, older generations fought to return things to the way they perceived them prior to the war. Both groups sought reliable authority figures for guidance and protection (Dell and Jung, 418). “History, in Professor Jung’s opinion, takes on a new aspect when considered from the standpoint of the phenomena due to the unconscious processes which accompany the changes, often sudden, of conscious reason,” (Bennet, 1484). Jung was attempting to explain the forgetting of history for mental survival. This explains why some individuals, despite the lessons learned, sought to return society back to days that never really were or those that caused the crisis to begin with.

The “tale of big city dreams shattered by the realities of daily existence” had increasing resonance with the American population (Dixon, 10). Another effect of the war was the

suspicion that combat veterans would explode in unpredictable and deadly rages, a fear peddled in Hollywood, popular novels, the daily newspapers and especially tabloids (113-124). Film had always reached to the headlines and literature of the past and present for subject matter. This period was no different as some of the films produced revolved around “troubled heroes who are set right by psychotherapy” (Lingeman, 125). Psychoanalysis put mental illness into grand sounding terms that were thrown around by the population like talismans of protection against the reality they defined. The permeation of the American mind with “the psychiatry vogue was one aspect of the greater realism of films released during the first postwar year” and continues into current era films such as *Requiem for a Dream* (2000), where the cure is found wanting because psychotherapy was unable to cure mental illness (Lingeman, 229).

Gender Roles:

Central to the American psyche of the classical Noir period was a definite idea about gender roles. The characters of Noir may be what particularly defines it from other film types. A great deal of what is found in the Noir is fables of conformity, warning against the desire to break out of predesigned roles of gender. For instance, the hypermasculine male at the center of the Noir film, “through storms and high seas, bears the moral law within himself,” (Copjec, 17). Noir is often thought of as a man’s film genre, “centered on male problems, ignoring that women could be the center of such film and experience the same issues” (Copjec, 122-132). This male centered perspective fed a homosocial idealism and often hid an undercurrent of homoeroticism. As one could anticipate, the homosocial bonds of such film reflect the male experience of military life. This mono-gender experience of military life also creates an atmosphere in which

encounters can lead to a “homosexual panic” (Dixon, 23, 30-31, 35). World War II was cited as the largest event to bring about the realization of homosexuality among humans at that point in the American twentieth-century. Both men and women were not prepared to deal with conflicting notions of gender roles and most who identified as homosexual had never met another person identifying in such a way. American society had taught that homosexuality was an untenable behavior to be avoided or repressed by conforming to heterosexual gender norms (Benshoff, 287, 336).

To balance the hypermasculine figures of Noir, the genre created what has been called the femme fatale. The interaction between the male and female in Noir reveals mistrust, if not outright fear, of the feminine on the male figure. The femme fatale rose out of the phenomena that “women had no place in the postwar culture of the whole, in ideology or reality,” (Kleinegger, 132). This was the period of *feminine mystique*, where women were returned to pre-war roles and more rigidly defined social roles (132). Thus, the function of the “femme fatale... [was to] appear out of nowhere to disrupt middle-class life,” and reassert traditional gender roles (Scruggs, 678).

Both *hyper-* versions of men and women exist as a fantasy that explores their threats to *traditional* gender roles when they refuse to conform (Copjec, 123). Throughout Noir, a femme fatale represents an idea of rootlessness that has negative connotations. For instance, rootlessness shows how place shapes meaning. There are two types of women who can be described in such a manner, and both have opposing meaning. They are the disenfranchised mother, usually a rural white woman, who has lost her home through hardship, and thusly can still garner respect from the public. The other is the femme fatale, or the single woman who has no discernible home. She is often symbolized by darkness (dress, skin, features, even ethnicity) and an essence of

criminality and therefore has the derision of the public (Scruggs, 678-679). In a time when home represented the acceptable sphere of womanhood, rootlessness was problematic, raising analogies of stray cats and prostitutes.

Feminist critics view the femme fatale archetype “as a lioness of empowerment and sexual freedom...apolitical rebels against the traditional female role... [who] used their sexual wiles to undermine patriarchal power” (Lingeman, 201). This Amazonian woman, “reflected male ambivalence and anxiety about” the new role women had found in war time (Lingeman, 201-202). To feminists she recalls Homer’s *Odyssey*, in which Ulysses encounters Circe and the fatality of loving her. The “duplicitous woman” has been a theme throughout time, and used for just as long to control women who reach for power (Copjec, 125). In reality, can one really blame Circe, who is obviously a victim of abuse and misuse by the men who have come before Ulysses, and Ulysses himself? The femme fatale is a fable that tells women who reach for power that they will meet bad ends as a punishment for having done wrong.

There are several explanations for the development of the feminine mystique, including the push to return women to their pre-war house-bound roles. Another may be the preoccupation with psychology since World War II. It is no secret to those who study the political and cultural history of the period that “psychoanalysts frequently blamed women for veterans’ readjustment problems, or their own adjustment, on the grounds they were not performing their traditional woman’s role of comforting their spouse” (Lingeman, 137). Exploring the theoretical devastation that might occur when people ignored their expected roles “allows the fundamental values of the nation to be recalled” (Copjec, 19). At least, that is the idea behind creating the feminine mystique. Women were inundated throughout the 1950s with images of the femme fatale, the

woman who didn't know her place, nor cared and was thus dangerous to America (Copjec, 123-125).

Fear of the feminine has been a topic of psychological research for decades. Erich Neumann poses "patriarchal normality" as a manifestation of the fear of the feminine (Neumann, 261). He also states that "the devaluation of the feminine is to be understood as an attempt at overcoming the fear of the feminine" (Neumann, 263). This is similar to a child claiming they will *beat up 'so-and-so' if they defy them again*. The femme fatale is an embodiment of the trauma mirrored inside of the Noir films. She is symbolic of the anxieties and fears experienced by the American cultural inhabitants who sought to regain a past that never existed, but has become fantasized (Harris, 8). The history remembered was a culture created to accommodate male ideology. World War II deconstructed the fantasy, leaving the male psyche suspicious of the female, hence the creation of the femme fatale. In this way, the femme fatale becomes the dream gone wrong, the negation of the myth: "This other world of the image quickly ceases to be enchanting and turns terrifying," (Harris, 8).

Applying Jungian philosophy (psychology) is an interesting way to reveal the institutionalized patriarchy that limits the understanding of the gender roles contained in Film Noir. Naomi Goldenberg reviews Jung's adherents and Jung himself, finding that despite assertions that Jung was far more pro-feminine than critics realize, his thoughts and writings on the female gender are still greatly flawed. They tend to fall into the assumption that men are from Mars and women are from Venus. Jung struggled quite a bit with gender certainties, a direct result of his culture and perspective (Goldenberg, 445).

Regardless, Jungian gender theory reveals that Masculine and feminine form a still undissolved unity" (Neumann, 228). Jung believed that each male psyche contained a contrary,

female part (anima), which was typically denied; likewise for woman (animus) (Goldenberg, 446). The Anima/Animus archetype is defined by the sex of the individual, taking on the opposite personification in mental image (Gras, 476). Demaris S. Wehr “believes Jung's archetypes can liberate feminists and they, in turn, can liberate Jung's archetypes,” (Willems, 572). Therefore they should not be thrown in the waste heap because they don’t reflect a modern sense of gender roles and society. It is true that “archetypes perpetuate dominance of the male ego through androcentrism, and Jung's concept of the feminine does not adequately address women's reality and identity,” (Willems, 572). However, one must remember that Jung worked from his understanding of psyche through his own cultural and mental perspective, which was patriarchal dominated thinking. Jung was a man of his times, in other words. Wehr does find that “the animus does not square with women's lived experience but rather matches Jung's descriptions from a man's perspective,” (Willems, 573). That reveals that a man, steeped in patriarchal society, formed the theory. Jung was flawed, but his theories can be worked with, as he himself struggled to find a better way of saying what he thought, experienced and determined in his analysis.

Neumann discusses the psychological development of both men and women in his work *Fear of the Feminine*. To understand human fear, “relies on a knowledge of the initial stage of development specific to humans, the primal relationship to the mother” (Neumann, 229). Neumann is not just discussing the fear of women, but of the world and the things in it. His premise is that the mother (or mother figure) sets up the human psyche’s perception of the world and thus the perception of all women. Neumann states that “normally the child’s fundamental experience is that of protection and security as a small creature in a togetherness with the sheltering Great Mother upon whom it is completely dependent” (Neumann, 233). In male

psychological development, the female becomes the “foreign other,” while she is the mirror for female children (Neumann, 252). Neumann proposes that fixation with the feminine “corresponds to an exaggerated fear of the feminine as fear of woman and fear of the world” (Neumann, 257). According to his theory, the male psyche identifies “the unconscious, instinct, sex...to the *negative Feminine*,” and also revenge (Neumann, 263). Neumann avoids describing the fear of the feminine as a manifestation of male guilt. However, through his theory it can be interpreted that men fear women because they perceive them as having animosity toward males for their subjugation, because that is how men would feel if they were in that position. Thus, suspicion perpetuates itself.

Much of what Neumann and Jung would say on the matter is reflected in the perception of the characters in a Noir film. If the dominant male “character fails in his enterprise, he nevertheless keeps his pride in having remained faithful to his ideal and having refused compromise” (Copjec, 17). His opposite, the femme fatale, is viewed as getting what she deserved (usually death, sometimes jail time), a come-uppance. For instance, the film *Double Indemnity* leaves the viewer with the anti-hero confessing his sins, but still loved by his friends. For Noir femme fatales, like Phyllis, “sex is only a means to an end” and her death is usually hoped for, so that the hero can get back on track (Hirsch, 3). Hirsch writes that “Phyllis is a figure of Machiavellian evil” (Hirsch, 4). She resembles Circe of *The Odyssey*, in her willingness to murder or torment those “who get in her way,” but the film and *The Odyssey* forgets the character’s history and the reality of their ambition and autonomy (Hirsch, 4). Lastly, “never before in American film had a female character been presented so devoid of softening, feminine touches, and never before had death and sex been linked so explicitly and powerfully” (Hirsch, 7). Not much is said of the insurance salesman, other than he falls prey to her siren lure, a

helpless tool for her murderous plot. “The film’s tangled, ambiguous, loaded sexual currents, at any rate, are typical of Noir thrillers,” if the male weakness is not (Hirsch, 3). The undercurrent left unspoken is the fear that the subjugated will rise violently to gain a piece of the world.

Noir also touches on gender-bending and homosexual themes. The femme fatale is a gender-bending character. She adopts the power and control usually reserved for men, and attempts to retain it with masculine ruthlessness, all while maintaining an idealized feminine appearance. It is possible that Film Noir is anti-woman, but it is more likely that it is pro-anarchy. Noir seeks to break down social preconceptions and ultimately challenges conformity, highlighting the danger there is in staying within the lines or crossing them. In addition, it celebrates the bonds between men, putting homosocial bonds in higher esteem than heterosexual bonds, which such films construe as untrustworthy, if not deadly. In addition, many villains are portrayed in non-gender normative ways, like the killing team in *Rope* (1948) and *Strangers on a Train* (1951).

The shadow

Following gender, the individual mind should be addressed, especially in psychoanalytic reviews of Film Noir. The self-archetype, Jung defines as having two sides: that which the individual reveals to the world and that which is repressed or shadowed (Gras, 474). The shadow plays an intricate part in Film Noir. From the lighting to the mood and even in the darker story lines, the viewer senses the presence of the shadow. Settings in Film Noir are limited and usually at night (Hirsch, 4). *Double Indemnity* takes place during the daytime, but the scenes are murky, often taking place behind closed doors (Hirsch, 5). *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940) and

similar Noirs take place in dark cities. Filmmakers make good use of “the image of the city as a place of terror and seduction, as a modern wasteland, an environment indifferent to people” (Hirsch, 82). The structure of the city creates shadowy vistas, nooks and alleys that veil and conceal. Jung described it as:

A theme that occurs frequently in dreams...the *shadow*...cast by the conscious mind of the individual contains the hidden, repressed, and unfavorable (nefarious) aspects of the personality...[in] the struggle of primitive man to achieve consciousness, this conflict is expressed by the contest between the archetypal hero and the cosmic powers of evil. (118)

Essentially, the fight with the shadow is a struggle against regression and repression (Jung, 119). Often in Film Noir the hero struggles to escape an economic trap or lifestyle that is stifling him or her, or something in the past. The stories follow the old tale of “the hero [who] goes into darkness, which represents a kind of death,” but also the great trial, and either is defeated or becomes stronger (Jung, 119-120). Noir can be seen as the failure to master the shadow (death) or assimilating it (continuing as flawed) (Jung, 120). Unlike the anima/animus, the shadow is the same sex as the individual, and represents the personal unknown and hidden, the unconscious (Gras, 476). Jung described the shadow as “the overwhelming power of irresistible impulse,” equating it with the primal aspects of human psyche (Jung, 173). For a comparable though inexact Freudian analysis, one could label this the Id. An example of the shadow can be found in instances where an individual goes ahead with a dangerous action simply for the thrill, the satisfaction or personal gain. Despite the exoneration this might infer, people do really know right from wrong, and are not victims of irrational and uncontrollable impulses (176). There is a constant dance of repression and submission with the shadow part of the mind, mirroring a

struggle for supremacy such as an addicts struggle with addiction (Jung, 173-175). Jung goes into greater detail, stating that:

When dark figures turn up in our dreams and seem to want something, we cannot be sure whether they personify merely a shadowy part of ourselves, or the self, or both at the same time. Divining in advance whether our dark partner symbolizes a shortcoming that we should overcome or a meaningful bit of life that we should accept—this is one of the most difficult problems we encounter on the way to individuation (175-176).

Not to mention the resistance to acknowledging the darkness. However, the shadow also has good qualities: “normal instincts and creative impulses” (Jung, 118). The shadow is the unknown, part of the personality and unconscious that the individual represses or is ignorant of, and is not a de facto murderous or gluttonous brute (Jung, 168).

Film Noir, its essence being defined in darkness, may suggest that Noir is not only a way to come to terms with history, but issues of the present that are racially based. Film Noir is heavily marked by racial stereotypes, jazz music and loose women, crime and poverty, heat and sex (Naremore, 15). For example, the struggle for equality between the dominant group and those groups which are marginalized (race and/or gender). These struggles have taken years to evolve, often developing in contradictory social constructs like the defense of slavery in the United States Constitution which was meant to retain freedom for all. It is exposed in America’s refusal “of a collective past that [holds] them together as a people” (Scruggs, 683-686). It may also be read that despite the lack of non-white characters in Film Noir, that it is especially preoccupied with the white notion of what it means to be *black*, quite similarly to the notion of

what woman is from the male perspective. Therefore, Noir is not only about darkness, but of the struggle for and retention of social dominance.

When critics view Noir as a representation of “an *alternative tradition*, a *fallen world*, in which *crime is not the exception but the rule*,” they are myth building through the use of archetypes (heroes, monsters, etc.) (Scruggs, 680). Part of that myth necessarily includes the shadow self, either in shadowy characters or settings. The Noir milieu is preoccupied with the idea of “battered characters” who have their “equivalent in the photographic records of city life found in” documentary photographs of the period” (Hirsch, 83). It seeks realist techniques to weave an intricate pattern of light and dark, power and weakness. Therefore, Noir is a discourse on the disagreeable perceptions of society.

Film Noir and its “*great power of blackness*, its theme that beneath the optimistic myths of the new republic lies the terror of history that always threatens to erupt into the present,” is a genre that exposes the human psyche and its blemishes (Scruggs, 682). Charles Scruggs is alluding to a fear that competing histories can terrorize the psyche that has bought into *optimistic myths*. Scruggs goes on to discuss other views of human nature that gave rise to the anxiety reflected in Film Noir. For example, the Enlightenment belief that humanity is inherently “benevolent and reasonable” contrasted against the Puritan belief that humans are burdened with “*Innate Depravity*,” (Scruggs, 682). Film Noir is a genre that challenges both notions, creating a view of humanity that is ultimately human and therefore shadowed.

Is there such a thing as Neo-Noir?

Some critics argue that Film Noir is a product of the time that spawned it, and that what current generations like to call neo-Noir is simply nostalgia. This could not be further from the truth. Noir has continued to have “influence on American film-making” and such films as neo-Noir do still exist (Hirsch, 205). The problem in determining this for some, is the perpetuated myth that Noir cannot be defined. If Noir were so undefinable, critics like Miklittsch would not be able to say: “The history of Noir as a genre—from its origins in the horror film, German Expressionism, and the gothic romance to its present state as a platform for stylish, self-reflexive improvisations,” (Miklittsch, 68). Yet, they do.

James Naremore asks, “whether a category developed by critics to influence...[the] *American public of the 1950s* can function in the same way for us,” (Naremore, 24). Other critics don’t using the following as a defense: in “the sixties and seventies the genre was clearly a self-consciously resurrected form. Thrillers made in *the Noir style* became a nostalgic exercise” (Hirsch, 202-203). Critics like Hirsch cite the obvious films, such as *Chinatown* (1975) to beat down the idea that Noir has persisted, citing their historical perspective. Hirsch insists *Touch of Evil* is the last Noir, something he is not alone on, but defends poorly when asserting a set period (Hirsch, 199). Returning to Kleinegger’s statement: “periodizing cultural history by decade is controversial, and may very well be arbitrary,” (Kleinegger, 134). To further rebuff critics who limit Film Noir to the war and post war period, “Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward's *Film Noir: An Encyclopedia of the American Style*, begins in 1927 and ends in the present, listing over 500 motion pictures of various stylistic and generic descriptions,” (Naremore, 12). Miklittsch lists just a few, saying, “a number of recent films, *Memento* (2000), *Mulholland Drive* (2001), and *The Man Who Wasn't There* (2001), among others, testifies that Noir as a genre is arguably more robust than ever,” (Miklittsch, 66). The genre has in fact persisted, growing and changing just

like any other genre in accepted existence. Noir was nearly stifled at the end of the 1950s due to production code and decency projects, in addition to film becoming a propaganda tool for social management.

Films such as *The Black Dahlia* (2006) *Chinatown*, *Gangster Squad* (2013) *Kansas City* (1996), *L.A. Confidential* (1997), *Last Exit to Brooklyn* (1989), *The Man Who Wasn't There* (2001), try to recreate the period of noir, the latter even filming in black and white. This attribute is neither here nor there, simply serving as one thread in a continuance of the utterance. All of these films deal with seamy and criminal aspects of life. They make use of disjointed stories, odd camera angles and generally unhappy endings. Whoever survives the film, survives with scars.

The difficulty in imagining a continuing Noir genre, may be found in the cultural “loss of *fantasy*,” making the images on the screen “absurd and irrelevant” (Kleinegger, 133). Film fundamentally changed in the 1960s. Linear time became questioned (133). There was increased introspection instead of seeking answers from without, because the world had failed to provide progress or challenged the notions of progress previously held (133). Theorists shied from exploring the period more deeply, perhaps scared off by the experiences of the war which gave an image of man that was horrifying (133). Did they really want to know? Did they want to face their shadow?

A Clockwork Orange (1971), *Memento* (2000), *Mulholland Dr.* (2001), *Requiem for a Dream* (2000), and *Videodrome* (1988) explore the horrifying possibilities of facing the shadow. Each of these films goes deep into the human psyche and faces the viewer with a grotesque image of the mind. From Alex to Max, the characters spiral into the dark, dabbling with excess and the limits of their desires. Sara Goldfarb and Marion Silver in *Requiem* provide an interesting play on the Femme Fatale. Both Sara and Marion enable Harry to destroy himself, as

they fight to maintain the places they have eked out of life. Though the spots appear to be anything but desirable, for Marion drugs are what make her happy. The drug of television and the illusion was what Sara hoped for. Harry pays the ultimate price by the end, losing his mother, Marion and a limb in his battle to attain happiness.

Mullholland Dr. is the most interesting of this list. The tragic hero of the story is a woman, in a usually male perspective. Betty (Or Diane) is the lover of Rita (Camilla), who is using her until something better comes along. For Betty the love is real and she cannot come to terms with losing Rita to someone else, being betrayed in her affections. As the film unfolds, it is revealed to be a dream that erodes into a nightmare as Betty pieces together the truth of her relationship with Rita. Once Betty realizes that she has hired someone to kill Rita and that killing has been successful, she cannot face herself and creates a new narrative for her life. *Mullholland Dr.* echoes the exploration of a new life similarly to *Videodrome* and another of Cronenberg's films *A History of Violence* (2003). *A History of Violence* is the story of a man who attempts to kill himself and his past by adopting a new identity. Eventually, the shadow finds him in his quiet rural life. What happens throughout the film is quintessentially Noir. *History* contains all of the stereotypical Noir characters, from gangsters to innocent bystanders and the anti-hero. In addition, by the close of the film, after Tom has faced his shadow, the viewer is left uncertain of what will come next. The lives of Tom's family are forever changed, shadowed by his past and the events it precipitated onto the moment.

Similar to the classic films, many of the recent, or Neo-Noir films took place during conflicts for the United States, including Vietnam, Grenada and a rise in terrorism and technology, The Gulf War, The Afghanistan War, and The Iraq War. In addition, these times reflected economic instability or instability in the trust of Americans for their government. Much

like earlier film, the history surrounding Neo-Noir should also be examined, to reveal how it shaped the films and the genre. For example, Naremore outlines parameters for just such a study that would include cultural shifts from the 1950s-1970s:

A complete history of Noir in America would take into account such things as New York film culture in the East Village during the late 1950s, or the Bogart cult that developed at the Brattle Theater in Cambridge, Mass. in the early 1960s. It would look closely at the role of alternative criticism and college film societies in the late 1960s and early 1970s. (24)

The exploration of history is important because it can also reveal temporal limitations in the production of film during a certain era. It will uncover developments in film production and culture, such as the use of color film. Noir may have become more coded and ‘underground’ instead of extinct. It may have become grittier or discussed different subject matters than crime or nuclear holocaust, changing with the shifting fears of the times (Harris, 4). A shift in the cultural mood and laws does not negate the fact that a genre continues, perhaps in secret and reveals itself once there is more laxity in production.

In addition, “analyzing a number of films made in the same era, between 1944 and 1947...they were symptomatic representations of a larger historical crisis,” (Harris, 7). This may support Hirsch’s assertion on the surface, but intertextuality studies negate his insistence on a restriction. History is not necessarily viewed linearly when psychologically processed by the individual or culture. Henderson supports this assertion, writing that:

Historical moments, the manifest content of which, can be shown to have direct bearing on his contemporary context. The meeting between the two takes place on the diagonal of consciousness. *If we cannot deny the*

archetypes or otherwise neutralize them, we are confronted at every new stage in the differentiation of consciousness, to which civilization attains, with the task of finding a new interpretation appropriate to this stage, in order to connect the life of the past that still exists in us with the life of the present which threatens to slip away from it. (138)

Henderson has quoted Jung and simultaneously made an argument for intertextual studies, which disregards temporal limitations, such as those Hirsch tries to apply to Film Noir. Noir is a symptom of traumatic history, and there is yet to be a period of time that does not come with its traumas (Harris 6-7). In addition, the traumas inflicted by learning about tumultuous historical events are often left unexplored. This is a mistake, considering how they may be reinforced by more current events. So when Hirsch limits noir to a decade, he in turn declares that the Vietnam era and even the current Iraq/Afghan Wars did not create similar nightmares for newer generations of Americans compared to those living through World War II, the Korean War or the Atomic age. This simply is not the case. The form of their expression on film may have changed, but not the sentiment. Likewise, newer generations of filmmakers adapt styles and genres to express their stories along with developments in apparatus and production.

Film Noir is only made up of a set of films that are difficult to completely list out because of disagreements among the critics, mostly dealing with untenable time constraints (Hirsch, 199). Bakhtin's essay easily rids of these constraints. The Noirs are "unified by a dominant tone and sensibility...operate within a set of narrative and visual conventions" and also "represent the American film industry in its most neurotic, subversive, and visually provocative phase" (Hirsch, 72, 209). Because Hirsch ignores Bakhtin's advice from *Speech Genres*, which are in contrast to Hirsch's statements, he cannot list the films that are Noir and this makes his theory of the

temporality of noir suspect. It fails to produce, just as Bakhtin said it would. The individual utterances (parts of grammar of the genre, along with the cultural realities) converge to create the genre and specific dates that ignore the intertexts of other times and events are simply not enough to precipitate a concise theory of Noir or meaning.

Hirsch further misses the fact that the American film industry is still quite neurotic, subversive and highly provocative. For instance, “Noir’s emphasis on sex and violence or a certain eroticization of death” was limited by conventions of the Hays Code which are no longer in place and have substantially altered the material on film across all genres (Miklittsch, 67). This should be evident in films like *Requiem for a Dream*, *Videodrome* and *A History of Violence* (in fact, all of those listed in this section benefit from relaxed censorship). Films like *Inception* (2010), the *Batman* films by Tim Burton and Christopher Nolan, *American Psycho* (2000), *Equilibrium* (2005) and *Watchmen* (2009) all fit the description of Noir, centering on dystopian settings, the loss of balance in the face of sociopathic urges, and the city as a labyrinthine trap or giant cage match with the shadow. Batman, it may be argued, is a product of the classic-Noir era, but the films made during the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s are products of their time as much as they are products of the 1930s and 1940s comic hero. *Watchmen* is an exact match for the Dark Knight productions as well as classic noirs like *The Maltese Falcon*, filled with many anti-heroes. Patrick Bateman is also the perfect modern anti-hero, as he daydreams of murdering everyone he knows in a cathartic orgy of violence and sex, intended to help him cope with his highly feminized modern world (Patrick is preoccupied by personal appearances to the point of losing his masculinity). *Inception* explores the outer limits of the human psyche, facing the lengths some will go to achieve a goal, even destroying one they love, or consuming them

whole. It is a dark flight with the shadow that Jung would be sure to appreciate and the French critics who coined Noir would be delighted in.

Conclusion:

Once the many utterances of Classic Film Noir are understood, theorists can then examine its continuance in earnest. Film Noir will either fall away as “the continuing fascination with this fantasy long after the historical period that is supposed to justify it,” or it will be raised to the heights of respect that having a set genre will bolster it with, and be shown to continue to the present day (Harris, 4). As Naremore writes,

Depending on how it is used, it can describe a dead period, a nostalgia for something that never existed, or perhaps even a vital tradition. One thing is clear: the last Film Noir is no easier to name than the first. A fully historicized account of the category would range across the twentieth-century imagination, and would require a more nimble analysis than anyone has attempted. (25)

In reviewing the material written on Film Noir, it appears that the trouble with claiming the film form a genre lies in the definition the critics hold onto. More explicitly, the definition or approach to the definition is lacking. It is either a matter of semantics for some, or a deeply rooted and unapproachable symbol that is too strongly revered. Through Bakhtin, it is apparent why this does not bring up problems for other established genres in their reviews. The utterance is understood in the established and well explored genres. It can be understood in the Film Noir genre as well. To the critics who believe that Film Noir does not stand for a genre, Copjec makes a definitive response, “a major aspect of genre” and also the study of it:

Is the extent to which any particular work exceeds its genre, how it reworks and transforms it, rather than how it fits certain generic expectations. The theorist constructs an ideal type in order to show not only how any particular work fulfills its criteria of the ideals, but also how it deviates from it. (128-129)

From these words, and Bakhtin's lessons on speech genres, it can be understood that Film Noir is a genre and has continued to the present time, and for all the reasons that those who oppose the idea Film Noir as genre have given. Copjec has additionally reassured the doubtful critics that they should not fear the films that don't fit neatly into the definition of Film Noir, because those films are simply pushing the limits of the genre and testing boundaries, as any good art does.

Furthermore, Bakhtin alleviates the stress a definitive study may cause by focusing critics on the utterance (discourse) instead of simply theme and surface detail. The critics who fear stretching the meaning of individual genres should be reminded that this fluidity is a constant throughout all genre studies, and has been for generations. Genres mix and match continually. For instance, cross-genres have been listed as historical-thriller, dark-comedy, or the dramedy. The list is extensive, and proves that labeling Noir as sub-genre or genre-crossing is a specter of avoidance. Theorists either simply avoid labeling or naming these films because they feel there is no end to writing such a list, that concretizing a list somehow limits their study, or that the work involved in a good study of Noir is too grand in scope. If labeling genres were an impossible task, the current listing of accepted genres would not exist. Concretizing anything in theory is an aberration and fleeting, as all existing studies of genres has already proven. As for the effort entailed in a study, the number of readings from any text is truly limitless if it is allowed to be. Critics should embrace troublesome Film Noir, dig in using Bakhtin's suggestions and set

parameters so they may enhance the study of genre. In the end, it will only open up new discourses in cinematic, literary and linguistic theory. If theorists and critics were to at last define Film Noir, they would likely find that it is exactly what it calls itself: dark film, the shadow, the paranoiac's nightmare.

Noir is the dark shadows of film and promises a view of society and the individual that may be disturbingly honest. What all of these films have in common is the grotesque, or darkness. The power that Noir will gain when enshrined as a genre is frightening as an unknown, but worth the endeavor in light of what can be learned. Studying Noir and at last cataloging it, labeling it and really defining it will open up information about the culture from so many perspectives. The cultural psychology, semiology, and intertextuality facets of Noir offer an insight into, social psychology, filmmaking and filmmakers, the time periods, the audiences and especially critical theory and the idea of cultural meaning through myths and narratives. The distinctive mood and message of Noir is essentially what prevents it from being named. Let it be named, that theory can move beyond the discussion of 'if Film Noir is genre' or even 'if it exists,' because such a study stifles the potential of what can be found.

Films Reviewed:

American Psycho (2000)

Batman Begins (2005)

The Black Dahlia (2006)

The Blue Dahlia (1946)

The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1920)

Charlie Chan and the Chinese Cat (1944)

Chinatown (1974)

A Clockwork Orange (1971)

The Dark Knight (2008)

The Dark Knight Rises (2012)

Double Indemnity (1944)

Equilibrium (2002)

Gangster Squad (2013)

The Glass Key (1942)

A History of Violence (2003)

Inception (2010)

Kansas City (1996)

Kansas City Confidential (1952)

The Killing (1956)

L.A. Confidential (1997)

The Lady from Shanghai (1948)

Last Exit to Brooklyn (1989)

The Maltese Falcon (1941)

The Man Who Wasn't There (2001)

Memento (2000)

Metropolis (1927)

Mulholland Dr. (2001)

Phantom Lady (1944)

Phantom Museums (2003)

Requiem for a Dream (2000)

Rope (1948)

Scarlet Street (1945)

The Stranger (1946)

The Stranger on the Third Floor (1940)

Strangers on a Train (1951)

Sunset Boulevard (1950)

The Third Man (1949)

This Gun for Hire (1942)

Touch of Evil (1958)

VideoDrome (1988)

Watchmen (2009)

The Woman in the Window (1944)

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