

cally disappointed women who have been abandoned by their men too often to hope for any lasting love.

Finally, the ritual act of all Melville noir protagonists is the salutary gaze underscoring their self-awareness, which functions both as an existential gaze and a cinematic referent. Bob looks at himself in the mirror and knows that his best years are behind him. In *Le Doulos*, after he is shot, Silien poses in front of a mirror to adjust his hat and contemplate his image before dropping dead. Jeff Costello strikes a similar pose in his trench coat and hat in *Le Samourai* before he leaves his flat to pursue his employers. Shades of Michel Poiccard in *À bout de souffle*, one may ask? Perhaps. But then who did Michel attempt to emulate, down to the very utterance of his name, except Bogart?

Dickos, Andrew

Street with No Name

Epilogue

COMMENTS ON THE CLASSIC FILM NOIR AND THE NEO-NOIR

Like errant children, films noirs have changed, subsumed by their history and turning into self-referential creatures not always beholden to their parents. What is it that makes one film made in the nineties a great noir (*The Grifters*), whereas another made almost twenty years ago (*Body Heat*) is a decided offshoot of the classic film noir? A new variant of an old look with a new, yet not unfamiliar, feel? At the beginning of this millennium, critics and historians are still refiguring the scope and boundaries of the film noir, taking into account the cultural and political changes in the strain as well as its aesthetic modifications. Discussing such a subject—like the topic of the neo-noir itself—is a whole different show, albeit one that cannot stand without reference to the rich mother lode of noir history. However, more than twenty years after a film like Walter Hill's *Driver* (1978), and twenty years since Lawrence Kasdan's *Body Heat* (1981), a number of films have come into existence that have drawn on the stylistics of the film noir as they have been appropriated by mass culture for everything marketable, including film history and scholarship.¹

The classic noir has been pronounced dead so often that the humor of it equals that of the long-awaited announcement of a terribly aged and mean relative's passing that simply fails to arrive: it just never comes. I maintain that the film noir in its original appeal does not have bracketed self-consciousness and self-referencing. Despite the changes in production (almost always wide-screen color) and exhibition (Dolby sound), filmmaking has achieved a remarkable degree of democracy in style, and what was once considered dated always seems to return anew. The

film noir, in its original fascination, still thrives in recent works like Alan Parker's *Angel Heart* (1987), Alan Rudolph's *Mortal Thoughts* (1991), Bryan Singer's *Usual Suspects* (1995), and Carl Franklin's *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1995).

When people are in trouble, they need to talk.

—Christina Bailey, *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955)

People say I talk too much.

—Verbal Kint, *The Usual Suspects* (1995)

"*Neo noir*, qu'est que c'est?" B. Ruby Rich asked rather flippantly in her 1995 essay on the subject; she then proceeded to answer rather seriously and quite aptly that "its power stems from those end-of-the-line dramas in which nobody could be trusted and not even the final frame held any explanation: films like *Gun Crazy*, *Kiss Me Deadly*, *The Big Combo* and *Touch of Evil* . . . *Neo noir* picks up on the irrational universe embedded in these demonic narratives as fertile ground for the post-modern cultivation of our own *fin-de-siècle* nightmares."² Rich is correct in these remarks (albeit questionable in her essay as a whole), for neo-noir arrives very much as the product of a new variant of genre narrative created to speak for us and to us. It is interesting that Rich sees its antecedents as demonic. Nicholas Christopher, in his long meditation on the film noir and the American city, also refers to the "satan" now visible in our mythologized urban landscape, and he illustrates this in his discussions of *Angel Heart* and *The Usual Suspects*.³ Both of these films are structured as inquiries in the familiar sense of unraveling a noir mystery while exposing the iniquitous characters surrounding it. However, Christopher reiterates the central narrative strategy in all films noirs in his impressive analysis of *The Usual Suspects*; he does so by exposing what he sees of the Devil now visible in noir territory. He writes:

[O]n its deepest level, *The Usual Suspects* is a story about the implication of telling stories, and about the inherent ambiguities of the storyteller's role, especially when his motives may be a story unto themselves, with myriad roots: to convey a putative reality, to refashion events or make sense of them, to purge himself, to deceive. As with any



The Usual Suspects (1995). . . . And what of Kaiser Soze?: complex noir storytelling.

narrator, what he amplifies or diminishes, includes or omits, and the infinite variations therein, are what make the story what it is. Thus in the best of film, as in literature, there is always the story behind the story, the word within the word, the revelations that come not only from content, but from seeing how and why a story is being told, and with what particular fusion of those disparate essential elements: memory and fantasy, truth and lies. (250–51)

Verbal Kint, one of the two survivors who witnessed the mass murder of a crew on a ship purportedly carrying drugs, weaves a tale of horror and mystery of the arch criminal Kaiser Soze, and he does so with incredible finesse—until we realize who Kaiser Soze really is. Christopher speaks of the Devil, of a previously spiritual manifestation *within* unregenerate noir characters now being permitted an appearance of his own in the furthest extension of noir yet. He refers to *Alias Nick Beal* (John Farrow, 1949) with Ray Milland as a sinister Mephistopheles in modern dress as a precedent. But now there is no doubt that Louis Cyphre (Lucifer) in *Angel Heart*, in the person of Robert De Niro, who crushes a hard-cooked egg with his hand and then devours it, is the Devil incarnate. Or that Kaiser Soze is an invisible devil around us. The Devil, so concrete be-

fore us visually in these contemporary noirs, emerges as the symbol for the very horror of our capacity to unwittingly be his servant, to be complicit in the corruption around us. In *Angel Heart*, private eye Harold Love learns that his soul was fatefully bartered in a transaction of evil. Verbal Kint in *Suspects* says with mocking innocence, "The greatest trick the Devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist."

But the "story behind the story, the word within the word" is—regrettably perhaps—that there is no Devil. The unsettling narratives of Alan Parker and Bryan Singer provoke us because these filmmakers have found new escape hatches through which to cunningly reveal—or shall we say speak?—their noir tales and in the process implicate us in their noir vision. True films noirs invariably confront this idea of the need to communicate visually and verbally the inchoate, the helpless, the terror-stricken, just as they need to confess, lie, and reveal. Neo-noirs often mimic these qualities. Yet like, but very much unlike, the aesthetic self-consciousness of the French New Wave-inspired cinema of the 1960s and 1970s, the neo-noir exists alongside the classic film noir in mutated form and has among others these four prominent characteristics:

1. The neo-noir is generally more violent, and more graphically violent at that, than the classic film noir ever was. Such violence is almost always stylized and often less disturbing, but it is also shown more. David Fincher's *Seven* (1995) literally extracts a pound of flesh carved from one of the victims as his serial murderer attempts to illustrate the punishment to be paid for each of the "seven deadly sins." Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), one of the first films to lay claim to the title of "future-noir," spatters blood like cherry pie filling throughout the fog-filled gloomy alleyways of this unfortunate new world. Certainly none of the Quentin Tarantino films—*Reservoir Dogs* (1992), *Pulp Fiction* (1994), or even his greatest appeal to the traditional noir, *Jackie Brown* (1997)—could have been made before the midseventies. How audiences respond to this violence is really incalculable, but it is violence that appears more suddenly and often inflected by comedy and brutal wit. In *Pulp Fiction*, Jules Winfield delivers an eloquent sermon on the nature of fate as a taunt to the three young men—all seemingly middle-class and all but one white—who stole drugs from Marcellus. He turns to leave, then turns around again, and with his partner Vincent showers the room with bullets.

Martin Scorsese's *GoodFellas* (1990), a bitter homage to the classic gangster noir as well as a meditation on the cultural use of the mob-



Jackie Brown (1997). Mordant and violent Tarantino: Louis (Robert De Niro) and Ordell (Samuel L. Jackson) catch up.

ster figure, has two scenes of violence that show how the filmmaker straddles the neo-noir and the classic noir. In the scene where all the wise guys end up at the home of Tommy De Vito's mother (played by Scorsese's mother, Catherine) for a late-night dinner, Tommy nervously admires one of her kitchen knives and asks to borrow it, ostensibly to cut off the appendage of a deer that ran into his vehicle. He excuses himself for a moment to go out back and open the trunk door of this car; it seems that the muffled banging from inside the trunk has become annoying. He raises the trunk door and quickly stabs Billy Batts three or four times to make certain that he is good and dead and then closes the trunk door. Murder here is abstracted into a comic moment, perhaps horrible to contemplate but palatable—even amusing—to watch, since we see only De Vito's difficulty in silencing a troublesome rival who has been beaten to within an inch of his life and stuffed in the trunk for future disposal but who refuses to shut up and die. However, in a later scene, a young neighborhood bar boy whom Tommy harassed and carelessly shot in the foot now hobbles past him in his cast and tells Tommy to go fuck himself. Kicked by a fellow wise guy for being soft in taking

such backtalk, Tommy shoots the boy dead this time. It is a silencing moment—no one can laugh here—and it is essentially what Scorsese's film is finally about.

Violence in the film noir has always been predicated upon the entrapment that engendered it, its sociopathology part of the larger scheme of spiritual and cultural ills. A work like Lewis's 1950 *Gun Crazy* is a singularly fascinating exception to watch precisely because it appeals to the possibility of the irrational overtaking us, of violence providing an excitement that no substitute can. But killing for the most part satisfied the narrative requirement to eliminate someone, often impulsively and sometimes brutally, in tangent with the killer's or killers' other, selfish, goals. After all, in the noir world, maiming and killing are rarely intelligent and expedient actions, but detours taken out of necessity. In the neo-noir, one glories in the aesthetics of violence, pirouettes killing with a canny grin, and this necessitates a new recognition of such violence and its value.

2. The period accoutrements of classic noir cinema are almost always contemporary. Any deviation from this modifies the spatial/historical style (urban/contemporary) essential to this modern genre. However, a film like Curtis Hanson's *L.A. Confidential* that glories in postwar forties period style to the inevitable expectation of human rottenness nonetheless loses its noir authority. James Cromwell's crooked police chief is hardly a surprising villain in a story that awaits his exposure. Its atmosphere, unlike, say, that of Polanski's *Chinatown*, comes bracketed in the audience's knowledge of what has been clearly marketed in 1997 as a film noir. *Chinatown*, in contrast, is a period film—given the time in which it is set, the late 1930s—and strongly evokes the Chandlerian world it comments on, but it does so with the truth of genuine horror over Noah Cross's monstrous incest, the shooting of Evelyn Mulwray, and—and this is most important—the creepiness of Cross's benevolence. Neo-noirs, which may certainly address an array of cinematic and cultural concerns, do so around quotation marks and from the position of premeditated sensationalism. Hence, Cromwell is expectedly corrupt, but in Noah Cross John Huston is taking corruption to a new and unexpected depth of evil in familiar terrain.

3. The neo-noir, in keeping with its time, has become racially variegated and sexually complex. The Don Cheadles, Ving Rhameses, and Samuel L. Jacksons of the contemporary crime scene would not only have been invisible in the 1940s and for most of the 1950s but also

would not have been convincingly utilized in the 1960s either. Tokenism would have prevented any such viciousness from being shown by any of the very few black screen actors of that time. The very presence of Samuel L. Jackson in any crime film today induces uneasiness in the thought of the pain he may inflict; he wields menace much like a cross between Lawrence Tierney and Richard Widmark of the 1940s. Likewise, Morgan Freeman (*Seven*) and Denzel Washington (Phillip Noyce's *Bone Collector* [1999]) exercise the kind of sage authority as police detectives that would not have been possible in an earlier era when African Americans and non-European Americans were not seen in positions of power.

The film noir has always suggested a sexual democracy between the lines. Sexual arousal stimulated by the various taboos of the studio system had been hinted at, suggested, punished, and, indeed, persecuted in characters who stood apart from the rest because of their desires. A film like Larry and Andy Wachowski's *Bound* (1996) would have been impossible to make a generation earlier, not only because the thieves in it become instantly attracted to each other in a lesbian bar but also because they get away with stealing money from the husband of one of them, *and* do so with the audience's sympathy. Moreover, their independence from conformity and conventional ties puts them in a kind of noir fantasy that allows them the freedom to direct the story's action: together they are the brainpower and the force that execute the scam. No men allowed. Corky (Gina Gershon) and Violet (Jennifer Tilly), a fascinating duo, mirror the two sides of the *femme fatale*, a figure here that has been melded of two protagonists to become a summation of all that she could possibly represent—the independent and resourceful woman who is attractive (Gershon) and the sexually alluring female who is shrewd (Tilly).

4. However, *Bound* is an exceptional film. The arousal of the *femme fatale* in the film noir was a radical departure from the suffering or glorification of women traditionally seen in screen melodrama. She startled precisely because she exercised an independent spirit—however culturally defined her rapacious image may have been—to the discomfort of a conventional patriarchal society. She existed in a position of defiance and was most often punished for it. In the neo-noir, wickedness achieves emancipation (one might even say, celebration) and with it, ironically, a subjugation of character and purpose. In *Body Heat*, Kathleen Turner is calculatingly evil, and Linda Fiorentino is determinedly so in *The Last Seduction*, but there is very little in either role that allows these actresses



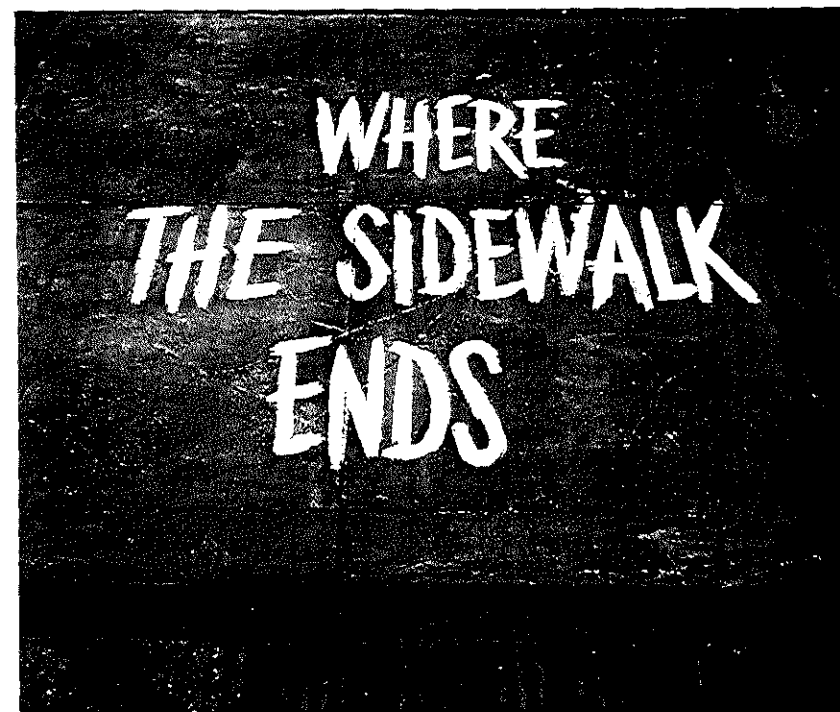
Bound (1996). Corky (Gina Gershon) and Violet (Jennifer Tilly): neo-noir's answer to the *femme fatale*.

to discover their position as *femmes fatales* with the daring of an Anjelica Huston playing Lily Dillon in *The Grifters*.⁴ In an unexpected yet decisive gesture of brutal infanticide, we are taken into new territory, found having to settle a new score over what female wickedness in a screen genre can be.

In this family context, both *Chinatown* and *The Grifters*, like James Foley's 1986 *At Close Range*, emerge as true films noirs in the originality with which they restate or expand the boundaries of the genre. There is a silencing moment of grim family perversion in *At Close Range*, when Brad Whitewood stares at his drunken, killer dad in astonished rage at the suggestion that he kill his younger brother for money. Having wrested his father's weapon, he shouts plaintively, "What is this?! *The family gun?!?*" Interestingly, these three films take evil and cleave it to the family; it is almost as if, incapable of arousing pity and horror in the social world, these conflicts are best left contained within the ancient arena of family agony.

Neo-noirs such as *Body Heat*, *Blood Simple* (Joel Coen, 1984), *Blue Velvet* (David Lynch, 1986), *Stormy Monday* (Mike Figgis, 1988), *Basic*

Instinct (Paul Verhoeven, 1992), *Lost Highway* (David Lynch, 1997), and others claim a historical reference to noir cinema in ways that mutate the genre to reveal it more culturally ingrained than we may have recognized. And these changes are not just in the conventions of the genre or these movies' mimicry of them; the stylistics of noir filmmaking may all be present, but at one remove from the narrative authenticity of true noir cinema. Rather, it is a matter of tone and mood, of the very ineffable qualities that emanated from technique more than sixty years ago when the film noir first appeared in this country. The reinvention of the film noir necessarily becomes neo because it has become something else. The historicity of noir cinema is challenged here, and the whole idea of screen genres and their evolution and exhaustion is revived yet again for consideration in the context of a largely commercial filmmaking enterprise. The new émigré influence of the neo-noir will not be central Europe, but perhaps central L.A. or film school (Richard Rodriguez, the Coen brothers). The misogyny of the neo-noir will no



Where the Sidewalk Ends, title credit

longer be the exclusive product of a male sensibility but now of a female mind as well (as in Kathryn Bigelow's vicious *Blue Steel* [1990]). Such films may no longer speak to familiar taboos and fears, now recognized and even dramatized on nightly television, but to new unseen forces that will require their own images to inflict their own terrors.

Appendix

CREDITS OF SELECTED FILMS NOIRS

The following are the credits for those American films most frequently discussed in the text that I believe have attained particular importance in the noir canon. These credits are taken directly from the screen, with some of the names of bit characters and players in the cast listings taken from Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward's *Film Noir: An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style*. The *Motion Picture Guide*, compiled by Jay Robert Nash and Stanley Ralph Ross, was also consulted. Running times, always a contentious issue, were taken mostly from the prerelease reviews that appeared in *Variety*. Silver and Ward, *Film Noir*, and Leonard Maltin's *Movie Video Guide* were also consulted for running times.

99 River Street (United Artists, 1953)

Director: Phil Karlson

Producer: Edward Small (World Films, Inc.)

Screenplay: Robert Smith, based upon an unpublished story by George Zuckerman

Cinematography: Franz Planer

Editing: Buddy Small

Sound: Lambert Day

Music Score: Emil Newman, Arthur Lange

Art Direction: Frank Sylos

Assistant Director: Ralph Black

Cast: John Payne (*Ernie Driscoll*), Evelyn Keyes (*Linda James*), Brad Dexter (*Victor Rawlins*), Frank Faylen (*Stan Hogan*), Peggie Castle (*Pauline Driscoll*), Jay Adler (*Christopher*), Jack Lambert (*Mickey*), Eddie Waller (*Pop Dudkee*), Glen Langan (*Lloyd Morgan*), John Day (*Bud*), Ian Wolfe (*Waldo Daggett*), Peter Leeds (*Nat Finley*), William Tannen (*Director*), Gene Reynolds (*Chuck*)

Running time: 83 minutes