

Andrew Dickos,
Street with No Name

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WOMEN AS SEEN IN THE FILM NOIR

Sexual power is defined most clearly in the context of gender conflict, and noir cinema illustrates this in all its creative tension and tragic consequences as few other film genres do. Bracketing the treatment of women in noir cinema is a dubious and faintly rewarding exercise, for women are an essential part of the noir world; their depiction as harbingers of destructive passions or heartless self-interest combines all too well with the weaknesses of their male counterparts to form an explosive and often corrosive dynamic. Women in the film noir are created and seen through the eyes of men, and the perception of them stems, as has often been written, through the power they wield in disorienting the male object.¹ There is misogynic intent, to be sure, in many portrayals of such women: the *femme fatale* is cinema's destructive force sine qua non, offering her men mystery and temptation predicated upon sexual desire. But the search for female identity in the noir extends beyond simply this type or force, and it delineates the emerging female character as she struggles to hear her voice in a rupture of the role women have conventionally played in screen melodrama. Here, bad women, desperate women, determined women, or women blind to the destructive passions that motivate them are, much like their male counterparts, consciousnesses accruing the individuality and power to command recognition on their own terms. The *femme fatale* may indeed be wicked, but she is also fascinating, because she does not (or does not easily) acquiesce or suffer the traditionally imposed travails of her subordinated function in a male-dominated society.

The handiest image among many is Phyllis Dietrichson in Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity*. An encounter with such a character in the

noir world can promise nothing but a fatal demise. Yet Phyllis presumes to reveal that the mystery behind her motive to rid herself of her husband and have his money is much more than murderous and greedy, and we are left with the image of a bullet-stricken blond falling into Walter Neff's arms, not quite sure whether she loved him unto death despite all that drove them apart out of mutual suspicion. This striking image of her belies any easy answer, and it is precisely her opaqueness that defines the inadequacy of our attempt to dismiss her as merely a cold-blooded murderer. Christine Gledhill noted it with remarkable acuity:

The generic features of the *noir* thriller which locate strong women in image-producing roles—night-club singers, hostesses, models, etc.—encourage the creation of heroines whose means of struggle is precisely the manipulation of the image which centuries of female representations have provided.

Thus, though the heroines of *film noir*, by virtue of male control of the voice-over, flashback structure, are rarely accorded the full subjectivity and fully expressed point of view of psychologically realist fiction . . . their *performance* of the roles accorded them in this form of male storytelling foregrounds the fact of their image as an artifice and suggests another place behind the image where the woman might be.²

Performance is indeed the key here, in tandem with the role performed, since Barbara Stanwyck's signature role as Phyllis Dietrichson is not her only foray into the world of noir heroines. Martha Ivers (in *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers*) and Thelma Jordon (in *The File on Thelma Jordon*) are both women who inflict pain on their men and families precisely because of their ambiguous identities and torn self-images. Neither can freely commit to love, yet neither can live without its validation. Gledhill goes on to note that "in the *noir* thriller, where the male voice-over is not in control of the plot, and on the contrary represents a hero on a quest for truth, not only is the hero frequently not sure whether the woman is honest or a deceiver, but the heroine's characterization is itself fractured so that it is not evident to the audience whether she fills the stereotype or not" (18).

What the film noir has done, as perhaps no other genre has done, is



Double Indemnity (1944). Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) is slowly seduced by Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck).

to show the remonstrations of the female image filtered so completely through the male imagination. This has been the locus of our fascination with the noir *femme fatale*: the constant struggle between the female consciousness suppressed and that consciousness heard only through the destructive consequences to which she leads her male cohort. Hence Anna Thompson Dundee in *Criss Cross* is at the pivotal center of a battle between Steve Thompson and Slim Dundee that ends in a double killing—in her name, really; she and Steve are left shot dead in the crossfire of possessive male egos. In Tay Garnett's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946), Cora cannot be allowed to have the passion she so intensely feels for Frank because it crosses the boundaries of marriage, fidelity, and, really, safe sex. That her needs are expressed with intense desire is a rebellious act that can only be punished by her death and that of her lover.

The latter example brings us to the treatment of James Cain's women in noir cinema, for in many ways they are the most challenging female roles of the classical period. Phyllis Dietrichson, Cora Smith,

and Mildred Pierce form a trio of protagonists who breathe the mythic rages of trapped women and consequently respond in radical denial of their social destiny. Phyllis is the avaricious but romantic cipher; we know only what we see of her in the moment—of her plotting against Mr. Dietrichson, of her presumed desire for Walter, of her possession of a gun at the end. Cora is determined to have financial security. Calculating and smart, yet disoriented by her lust for Frank Chambers, she is the dichotomous projection of male desire and female possessiveness: she will give herself, but only if she gets what she wants in return. Mildred Pierce has emerged as one of the most emblematic modern women characters in American movies, and she has been excavated for feminist study many times.³ As portrayed by Joan Crawford, she has become an icon of the melodramatic heroine of the last fifty years, for she has run the length of the race, experienced every facet of modern womanhood, and triumphed as a tragic example of the born gender victim who survives her victimhood. Critics who have tried to level Mildred as the self-sacrificing mother of all time who has cruelly paid for her misguided



Mildred Pierce (1945). Mildred (Joan Crawford) and Veda (Ann Blyth) Pierce: noir mother and daughter.

maternal devotion have missed the point of Cain's heroine. Surely he would have seen the deficiency in such a skewed creation.⁴ Mildred Pierce emerges in noir cinema, above all, as an anxious figure alone in the world, who faces the responsibility of supporting and rearing two children. Her strength is hard won and her resourcefulness admirable. No male character in the history of American cinema has ever faced such domestic challenges; it is her very success in meeting them that blinds her to the yearning heart that needs tending. That she is the "good" woman in the story, counterpointed by her daughter Veda, the emerging *femme fatale*, is the cruelest irony found in any film noir, and its underlying implication becomes all too clear: what every mother nurtures to emerge as the best expression of herself becomes the nightmare of all that can go wrong. Mildred finds in Veda her competitor, her opposite, and the very reason to repudiate all her best efforts to do well for herself and her children.

But the idea here is greater than that of self-sacrifice: Mildred, in Cain's novel and in the screen adaptation of it, was doomed not to "have it all" because, consistent with the noir universe, the passionate need for Monty Beragon corrupted her and dulled her decent impulses. (After all, in the movie she attempts to set up Wally Fay, her one consistent supporter, for Monty's murder, something Mildred would never have considered doing in the past.) Desperation wrought the confused sense, the dazed moment, of a woman who lost her lover to the arms of her daughter in an entirely sinister turn of human desire infecting an otherwise misguided mother's love. The murder of Monty Beragon was added to the film version, and quite aptly for the proper noir environment. Cain's novel is an astute depiction of a burgeoning southern California suburban culture that would flourish after the war, but Curtiz's film has taken Mildred out of that milieu and placed her in a more urban business setting, less reminiscent of southern California than of the noir city. In this context, parental regard and fealty for loved ones are notoriously underrepresented and expressed in extreme terms when they are shown. We need only think, for example, of Lucia Harper in *The Reckless Moment* or Gino Monetti and his sons in *House of Strangers*. Throughout most of this story, Mildred's failing is her vulnerability to Veda's cruel taunts that she is nothing more than a "business woman" (with its implication here of being little more than a glorified waitress), a point some critics have used against her construction, saying it shows her shackled to the bonds of motherhood complete with the unrequited love of a brut-

ish child. In this vulnerability, however, Mildred never *fails* her responsibilities as a mother. Willfully blind as she may be, she succeeds on her own terms as an enterprising breadwinner, a caring parent, and an increasingly attractive woman. Wally Fay sees this, and in his notable transformation (largely through the marvelous, underrecognized performance of Jack Carson) from sexual wolf to supportive friend, encourages her. In the end it is precisely this commitment to responsibility, this need to summon one's best survival instincts and show ingenuity, that defines Mildred Pierce as a courageous figure in the face of genuine heartbreak and tragedy. Joan Crawford, incapable of giving her greatest role anything less than the Metro gloss of nobility she carried over to Warner's with her, could justly indulge in its comportment. Mildred is indeed heroic.

Several descriptions apply to the females characterized in the film noir through the mid-1960s and intermittently thereafter, descriptions that lend themselves to analysis and argument but in themselves remain indisputable:

1. The leading female character, although not necessarily a *femme fatale*, creates a sexual tension by almost always being a woman in her most sexually active years—roughly between twenty and forty-five. (It makes no difference what the age of the actress portraying the role is. Indeed, Stanwyck and Crawford played leading roles until the age of almost fifty.)

2. The leading female character, whether or not she is a *femme fatale*, has an independent or rebellious will. If she does not defy her man, then she betrays his dishonesty out of the greater need to save him from himself and to love him. If the betrayal is not selfless, it is done to protect herself against his villainy. It is done after a thorough rebuke of his life and her infection by it and often, too, out of a reformative impulse appealing to a moral/legal principle of righteousness and its awakening in her. (Leonora Ohlrig in *Caught* [Max Ophüls, 1949], Lorna Hanson Forbes in *The Damned Don't Cry* [Vincent Sherman, 1950], Kathleen in *The Dark Corner*, June Mills in *Fallen Angel* [Otto Preminger, 1946], Thelma in *The File on Thelma Jordan*, Lane in *Flamingo Road* [Michael Curtiz, 1949], Peg Dobbs in *He Ran All the Way*, Mildred in *Mildred Pierce*, Kansas Richman in *Phantom Lady*, both Pat and Ann in *Raw Deal*, Lily in *Road House*, and both Cuddles and Sandy in *Underworld U.S.A.* are examples.)

3. If she is not the *femme fatale* or the devoted lover, she is the ingenious and clever conservative wife or girlfriend. (Peg Born in *Body and Soul* [1947], Lorna in *The Damned Don't Cry*, Kathleen in *The Dark Corner*, Irene Jansen in *Dark Passage* [Delmer Daves, 1947], June in *Fallen Angel*, Lane in *Flamingo Road*, Laurel Gray in *In a Lonely Place*, Mildred in *Mildred Pierce*, Kansas in *Phantom Lady*, Sue Forbes in *Pitfall*, both Pat and Ann in *Raw Deal*, Susie [as the girlfriend wannabe] in *Road House*, Rica in *Thieves' Highway*, and Lucia Harper in *The Reckless Moment* are examples. Sally Lord as the former girlfriend in *Sorry, Wrong Number* [Anatole Litvak, 1948] also functions this way. Irene Bennett in *House of Strangers* starts out as a *femme fatale* and then turns into a romantic interest.)

On a destructive note:

4. Three things motivate the *femme fatale*: a lust for exciting sex, a desire for wealth and the power it brings, and a need to control everything and everyone around her. (Diane Tremayne in *Angel Face*, Helen Brent in *Born to Kill* [Robert Wise, 1947], Vera in *Detour* [Edgar G. Ulmer, 1945], Phyllis Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity*, Stella in *Fallen Angel*, Thelma in *The File on Thelma Jordon*, Annie Laurie Starr in *Gun Crazy*, Lilah Gustafson in *Johnny Angel* [Edwin L. Marin, 1945], Kitty Collins in *The Killers* [1946], Sheila Farr in *The Killers* [1964], Sherry Peatty in *The Killing* [Stanley Kubrick, 1956], Elsa Bannister in *The Lady from Shanghai*, Brigid O'Shaughnessy in *The Maltese Falcon*, Veda Pierce in *Mildred Pierce*, Kathie Moffet in *Out of the Past*, Mona Stevens in *Pitfall*, Cora Smith in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* [1946], Kitty March in *Scarlet Street*, Martha in *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers*, Claire Quimby in *Tension* [John Berry, 1950], and Jane Palmer in *Too Late for Tears* [Byron Haskin, 1949] are examples. Lucia Harper, as the homemaker intriguing Martin Donnelly through her ruthless control of the circumstances following her daughter's crime in *The Reckless Moment*, and Leona Stephenson, as the controlling hypochondriac wife in *Sorry, Wrong Number*, also function in this manner.)

5. The opacity of the *femme fatale* is a projection of the male desire to retain her in the role of the mystery woman—an enigma that satisfies as it arouses the unknowability of her hidden destructive powers (the mythic Circe). (Evelyn Mulwray in *Chinatown*, Anna in *Criss Cross*, Phyllis in *Double Indemnity*, Kitty in *The Killers* [1946], Sheila in *The Killers* [1964], Elsa in *The Lady from Shanghai*, Laura Hunt [when assumed deceased, and then later when discovered alive] in *Laura* [Otto

Preminger, 1944], Kathie in *Out of the Past*, and Martha in *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* are examples of this. *Secret beyond the Door* . . . creates this enigma through the description of Mark Lamphere's deceased first wife.)

6. The *femme fatale* must inevitably die—or, at the very least, be mortally injured or be arrested for her crimes. The implication in her arrest is a moral one as much as a legal one: she has committed a crime against the healthy image of society's female, and she must be punished for it. (Examples include Diane in *Angel Face*, Norah Larkin in *The Blue Gardenia*, Helen in *Born to Kill*, Evelyn in *Chinatown*, Anna in *Criss Cross*, Vera in *Detour*, Phyllis in *Double Indemnity*, Stella in *Fallen Angel*, Thelma in *The File on Thelma Jordon*, Annie Laurie in *Gun Crazy*, Lilah in *Johnny Angel*, Kitty in *The Killers* [1946], Sheila in *The Killers* [1964], Elsa in *The Lady from Shanghai*, Veda in *Mildred Pierce*, Kathie in *Out of the Past*, Cora in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* [1946], Leona in *Sorry, Wrong Number*, and Martha in *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers*. In *The Big Heat*, Debbie Marsh's death reaches a dimension of near-sanctification for having made the conversion from bad girl to good woman.)

The different perceptions of women in the noir have one common denominator: these women are radical disrupters of the status quo or, in the case of Lucia Harper in *The Reckless Moment*, an extreme defender of it. Mildred Pierce's disruption of the conventional order in pursuit of independence and security arises from an impulse born, ironically, out of conservation, in defense of family and survival. But these radical disruptions, for whatever social and psychological reasons, are consistent with the concept of the great "no" that underlies all noir stories, and the extent to which they are expressions of negation is seen in these women's extreme actions that end in destruction. Lilly Dillon in Stephen Frear's 1990 film of Jim Thompson's *Grifters* crystallizes the image of the opaque yet haunted noir *femme fatale*. When she kills her son Roy for the very money she needs to escape, her malevolence and instinct to survive merge into the problematic definition of the evil woman. It is a disturbing moment in noir cinema, one never before extended to quite this degree. After she kills Roy, Lilly stands back from the act she has just committed and wails. Then after a dazed moment, she summons her composure to quickly collect the scattered and bloodied money. Her emotions retreat, and in a horrible scene of wordless gestures, she packs the loot and other possessions of her son's and goes to drive away in her



The Grifters (1990). The power of women: Roy (John Cusack) caught between Myra (Annette Bening) and Lilly (Anjelica Huston).

car. Lilly continues to drive into the night, her eyes focused on the road and her face rigid with lost emotion, perhaps never to be recovered. No ending in a film noir has ever unsettled the viewer quite like this one, for it deprives us of any familiar consolation. In its radical pronouncement that every mother's son can now no longer retreat to the maternal womb for the protection too trusted to have ever been questioned before, Lilly Dillon redefines herself as a kind of asphalt Medea-cum-Jocasta whose fatal charm even she might not have imagined before.

OTTO PREMINGER (1906–1986)

Laura (1944)
Fallen Angel (1946)
Where the Sidewalk Ends (1950)
Angel Face (1953)
Bunny Lake Is Missing (1965)

Otto Preminger's noir films are studies in the ambiguous nature of appearance. A cool, expressionist-styled realism generates a tension be-

tween the appearance of his characters and their inner reality, which is often at odds with it. As a result, Preminger's perspective on their destructive actions often emerges in some of the more perversely forgiving gestures he makes toward his fallen angels. The exception—and a distinctive one at that—is found in *Angel Face*, where Diane Tremayne commits sudden suicide in the driver's seat of her sports car, an action taken without expectation or fanfare. His great films noirs—*Laura*, *Fallen Angel*, and *Where the Sidewalk Ends*—show us curious, half-known characters that arouse interest in those around them. Columnist Waldo Lydecker in *Laura* illustrates the type well. He has fashioned Laura Hunt with the touching arrogance of someone who demands to be loved by his creation. And Laura, assumed murdered throughout half the film, mesmerizes Detective Mark McPherson as only a living embodiment can. The critic Eugene Archer many years ago observed McPherson's perverse attraction to Laura Hunt as “a sadistic study in necrophilia, on the illusion-and-reality theme the director has pursued throughout the remainder of his career.”⁵



Laura (1944). Fantasy meets reality: Detective Mark McPherson (Dana Andrews) meets Laura Hunt (Gene Tierney).

Dana Andrews, who plays McPherson, became the archetypal Preminger protagonist in three of the director's films noirs—*Laura*, *Fallen Angel*, and *Where the Sidewalk Ends*—in each embodying the confused state of a man compromised by his weaknesses. If Detective Mark Dixon is the detective who crosses the line of duty in rage in *Sidewalk*, then Detective Mark McPherson has crossed the boundary of desire in *Laura*. No Preminger noir displays the elusive nature of existence quite like this one: Preminger shows that existence is essentially distorted by ego and desire. It is interesting that we do not see the living Laura Hunt for almost half the film, and when we finally do, the descriptions of her by Waldo Lydecker, Ann Treadwell, and even her maid Bessie, have achieved two narrative developments. First, they have defined Laura in psychological and moral terms, as well as in terms of her physical beauty and grace. David Raksin's haunting theme evokes not Laura, but an aura of her, a captivating, ineffable entity that has already ensured its appeal. And second, Laura's appearance disturbs the sphere of reality in which the narrative seeks to clear up a mystery with, essentially, another mystery. For Laura Hunt is known to be alive only by Shelby Carpenter and, of course, Waldo Lydecker. Mark McPherson has wrestled with his growing attraction for a phantom and now faces the upsetting reality of investigating a young woman. Waldo is correct in telling him that he has fallen in love with a corpse. The appeal to hallucination in *Laura* not only disorients us but also underlies the accompanying deception. McPherson must now reconcile his feelings for Laura Hunt, and he must do so while uncovering a narrative of deceit that he hopes has not involved her in murder.

His polar opposite, Waldo Lydecker, has also loved Laura, and the distinctions between vulgar cop and effete critic so often cited with regard to them are less compelling than the nature of their mutual attraction to her. The Lydecker character has always been assumed to be homosexual, or at least asexual, with Laura's attention to him like that of an acolyte to a mentor. However, in his desire to have Laura as a possession, Waldo Lydecker is not that distant from McPherson. In his desire to own his creation of her image—the very image McPherson desires to possess in the flesh—Lydecker lusts. It is not a sexual arousal as such, but nonetheless an aesthetic one, erotically charged, that causes Waldo to recoil when he thinks of Laura in the arms of another man. It is the focus and obsession of the fastidious and controlled Waldo Lydecker that brings *Laura*, with its intoxicating fusion of love, desire, and de-

struction, into the noir realm. For if the passion in creating the image of Laura Hunt can no longer be sustained, then the subject/object of that image must be destroyed.

Joseph La Shelle's cinematography for Preminger's noirs is an exquisite display of studio chiaroscuro lighting design. In *Laura* it displays the ambiguity of Laura Hunt as an object of thrall, as in the scene where she wears an elegantly striped dress in the kitchen of her apartment, superimposed by another striped pattern created by the light rays filtering through the venetian blinds.⁶ In *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, La Shelle's camera work restates the classic neon-lighted urban scenes of Mark Dixon's world that foment his growing sense of guilt. In *Fallen Angel*, La Shelle lighted Preminger's most austere film noir, a rigorous study in appearances and guilt and the transformative power of love, by designing precise rays of light and darkness emanating from venetian blinds and highlighting the blinking neon sign of the hotel where Eric and June stay on the run to an uncertain future. Its lighting pattern is more emphatic and precise than the one he used in *Laura*. Preminger



Fallen Angel (1946). Eric Stanton (Dana Andrews) is redeemed by June Mills's (Alice Faye) love.

tracks beautifully in this setting, especially when Eric must perform his con artistry on June, her sister Clara, and the townspeople by presenting Dr. Madley's phony spiritualist act; when June and Eric walk through this small town with its white-painted church; and in the café where Eric and June arrange a date. His interior tracking is equally impressive through the sisters' Victorian house and in the diner, where Stella exhibits the sullenness of a cynical waitress who has found few rewards in a life of selfish mediocrity.

June Mills (Alice Faye in her finest screen performance) falls in love with grifter Eric Stanton (Andrews), marries him, and in the process of learning about his plan to bilk her after their marriage, she persists in defending his honor when accused of murder; she does so out of the noblest desire: love. June's total commitment to Eric not only redeems him but inevitably awakens him to the capacity for love that he has been unable to share. *Fallen Angel* is probably the most Bressonian film noir ever made. True to its mission, the narrative transforms Eric from an *homme fatal* to a man redeemed by love through the impossibility of escape. Stanton is presumed guilty of Stella's murder and would be the likeliest victim of such misjudgment to be sent up for it. "Even when I was a kid," he confesses to June, "I was beaten up for things I didn't do." Here Preminger develops the relationship between Eric and June by persistently denying June a condemnatory voice. The dynamic that changes their phony marriage into the beginning of a love affair stems from her silence and patience. In this, June, assumed gullible by Eric, understands him far better than he understands himself, and her strength overcomes his weakness. She is smart and good and the anchor that redeems his self-esteem.

Preminger's noir characters challenge us with the moral question of motive and imply in the process a dubious if not sinister guilt. He frames this most strikingly in such close shots as those of Diane Tremayne in *Angel Face*; as either the ultimate *femme fatale* or the ultimate romantic, she gazes into the camera challenging the viewer to decipher whether she is remorseful about killing her father and stepmother or manipulative in disguising her muted rapacity for love, money, and control. That she is ultimately capable of taking Frank Jessup's life and her own does not answer the question; rather it only reinforces the mystery of motive and the ambiguity of character. *Angel Face* is one of Preminger's most fascinating dissections of these concerns. Shot languorously and with hardly any musical soundtrack, it is a curious study

in murky morality. For if Diane Tremayne does not quite damn herself after her crime—displaying an odd remorse of sorts at the awareness of pain in death—the ease of killing accommodates her well. She is indeed better defined as a creature than as a human being.

In a similar manner, but with a less ambiguous and much more morally satisfying resolution, Detective Mark Dixon anguishes over the accidental killing of Ken Paine in *Where the Sidewalk Ends*. Living in muted rage over his policeman father's criminal past, he has tried to vindicate himself from the legacy of being "Sandy Dixon's son" by channeling his rage through law enforcement in pursuit of those hoods his father consorted with for profit. Hostility leads to the blow that kills Paine, an honored war vet with a steel plate in his head and implicated in a murder carried out by Scalisi and his mob—the same Scalisi who bought off his father. Mark Dixon now faces his dilemma and does so in close shot, in the face of the camera: Preminger shows Dixon to be a man of weak honor, a man who works to put "a lot of nickel rats" behind bars and now finds himself having committed a crime with no motive. When



Where the Sidewalk Ends (1950). Dana Andrews's Mark Dixon: guilt, commitment, and a badge.

Mark Dixon looks into the camera, how is he to be judged? Preminger posits no answer at this point. Ben Hecht's screenplay of *Where the Sidewalk Ends* is a judicious construct of *policier* and psychodrama—far more effective than Wyler's *Detective Story*, for example, precisely because the main character's personality is at issue not in itself but because of the crime involved that gives it moral consequence.

The film is visually beautiful and displays the studio elements of classic noir filmmaking, with the low-key lighting of a gorgeous neon-lighted urban setting accompanied by the refrain of Alfred Newman's "Street Scene" composition. There is no music except for this, and the credit shots to its strains are among the most emblematic in all of noir cinema. The opening credits end literally where the sidewalk ends: refuse is being washed into a street-corner gutter, and the credit titles are written as chalk graffiti. It is the final destination in reaching the truth—a place compromised by "nickel rats" and the violence of a detective whose zeal exceeds the law in pursuit of them.

On the surface, *Bunny Lake Is Missing* appears to be a version of the absent subject/object of narrative concern. The child Bunny Lake is never seen until the end of the film, yet the story is an exposé of the characters encountered in search of her, including her mother and her uncle. Bunny Lake's absence serves two narrative functions: to promote the search for answers surrounding her disappearance and thereby establish the characters in the story, and to establish the very existence of the child, whose identity, much like Laura Hunt's, is rendered by what others say about her. *Bunny Lake* becomes a noir experience in the terror it arouses of the unknown as a provocative animus of control and malevolence—by Stephen over Ann and by the strange, unsettling eccentrics she encounters in her moments of panic. The movie suggests Hitchcock in design and evokes Woolrich in fear.

The question of illusion over reality hinges on the emotional understanding of Ann and her brother Stephen. The superintendent must find proof of Bunny's existence in this environment of psychological disturbance—this environment that renders Ann and Stephen as two involved in an emotionally incestuous relationship where ambiguity stems from that which is fantasized (the role of Bunny as an imaginary childhood friend of Ann's and as the intrusive entity in Stephen's relationship with her that has to be killed and buried) and reality, the missing daughter and niece of whom no evidence can be found. The extraordinary scene in the doll hospital, with its abstractly composed shots and fren-

zied chiaroscuro tracking as it burns, underscores the terror: for the broken bodies and smashed faces and necks of the dolls in disrepair are a noir nightmare of the only images we can presume to identify as the emotional objectifications of the missing Bunny Lake.

The linchpin of all of Preminger's noir films is located in our need to decipher the enigmatic persona. The mystery of human motivation is rarely recognized in isolation from the mystery of the story told, but in Preminger's cinema it is just this that is the ultimate mystery, one against which no actions can ever be fully understood.