

CHAPTER 1

Noir Narration

The deep of night is crept upon our talk,
And nature must obey necessity.
—Shakespeare

In the darkened movie theater, it is understood, we are supposed to be silent. Sometimes reminders appear on the screen to prompt us, and there are always the irritated looks of fellow filmgoers to reinforce the custom. If for some reason we have to speak, we know not to raise our voices above a whisper, for here it is the *movie's* role to talk and ours to listen. Most popular American films seem to take this injunction a bit further; that is, they seldom appear to speak above a whisper about the problems that weigh most heavily upon us. Instead, they usually talk in what we might term a *conventional* way: encoding our concerns within patterns of generic conventions, reducing them to a kind of sign language, and thereby resolving them for us in an imaginary, almost silent way. Such quiet "speech," however, has generally proved quite useful for a culture like ours, propelled as it is by such varied and contradictory dreams that their unmuffled or shrill expression might well create problems rather than resolve them.

Violations, of course, always occur; in the theater someone invariably talks and spoils our concentration. The same thing happens in our film. For from time to time, despite a possibility of disturbing viewers, our films will speak directly and even forcefully about our cultural and human problems. They do so not only because, as Walker Percy warns, "silence prolonged can induce terror," but also because talk, even when it addresses those "unspeakable feelings" that "nobody wants to hear about," can serve a therapeutic function of sorts.¹ "Through its re-presenting," Percy explains, our alienation, fear, or cultural anxiety can undergo "an aesthetic reversal," producing a measure of comfort in the very "speakability" of our problems.² Seen in this context, the violation of a customary silence, or the raising of popular film's narrative voice, seems a natural response to a kind of

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need. It is a need whose satisfaction points up the basic contradictions that, in the modern world, seem to structure both our speech and our silences.

When we look at the group of films we call *film noir*, we find both a notable instance of such violation and a revealing articulation of the sort of tensions that shape our film narratives. This large body of films, flourishing in America in the period 1941–58,³ generally focuses on urban crime and corruption, and on sudden upwellings of violence in a culture whose fabric seems to be unraveling. Because of these typical concerns, the *film noir* seems fundamentally *about* violations: vice, corruption, unrestrained desire, and, most fundamental of all, abrogation of the American dream's most basic promises—of hope, prosperity, and safety from persecution. Taken as a whole, the *noir* films are noteworthy neither for their subtlety of expression nor their muting of our cultural problems; to the contrary, they deploy the darkest imagery to sketch starkly disconcerting assessments of the human and social condition. In their vision, crime and corruption seem almost a matter of decor, dark trappings of a world suddenly shown in a new and most revealing light.

Admittedly, American films have periodically focused on such violations. D. W. Griffith's *Musketeers of Pig Alley* (1912), for example, with its naturalistic detailing of urban crime, already looks toward the gangster cycle of the 1930s, as well as to such typical *films noir* as *Kiss of Death* (1947), *Cry of the City* (1948), and *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950). But what makes the *noir* voice so distinctive is that the patterns of violation it speaks of also appear to be the patterns of our cultural and human order. That identity, of course, forestalls any easy or conventional imaginary resolution. Moreover, it adds a special inflection to the narrative voice that drives these films, which talks not simply about crime and corruption but about how we understand and give formulation to self and society; it asks how we see ourselves, individually and culturally. If that voice at times seems a bit loud, even coarse, directly addressing us in ways we are not accustomed to in the cinema, it is also generally a therapeutic voice. For by speaking forthrightly, it helps us to recognize, understand, and perhaps better cope with the problems it so starkly describes.

To continue in what might seem an uncinematic analogy, I would suggest that what makes *noir*'s social commentary both possible and distinctive is this different manner of speech, the form's narrative voice. One aspect of that difference is the form's ambiguous posture on the borders of genre. As critics have often noted, at times the films seem to adopt what we might term a generic voice, following the

conventions and stylistic characteristics that usually mark our popular narrative formulas; yet at other times they defy formula and even capitalize on the disrupting of our narrative expectations.⁴ Is *noir*, then, simply a cycle of films that flourished in the backwash of World War II and the early cold war days, borrowing its markings from a variety of established genres; or is it a genre in its own right, simply appearing, disappearing, and then reappearing, in keeping with the usual principles of audience popularity and *need*? Those who see it as a unique and time-bound phenomenon argue the former, while those who find the *noir* spirit repeatedly resurfacing, notably in such more recent films as *Chinatown* (1974), *Body Heat* (1981), *Blood Simple* (1985), and *D.O.A.* (1988), hold to the latter. It is an argument that finally has as much to do with criticism itself, especially with the varying ways that we define film genres, as it does with the *film noir*, and thus one that we probably cannot fully resolve here.

What we can quickly note, though, is that a similar ambiguity marks the *film noir*'s relationship to the dominant style of its period, what we term classical film narrative. This conventional voice is characterized by a seemingly objective point of view, adherence to a cause-effect logic, use of goal-oriented characters to direct our attention and elicit our sympathies, and a progression toward narrative closure.⁵ In the *noir* family we find many films that seem by turns to contravene and to support these classical conventions. In fact, this form may be most remarkable not just for the subjects it addresses but for its efforts at finding an adequate voice for those subjects, as if the normal manner of film narrative had come to be perceived as unsuitable, inadequate, or, like the various structures of daily life it examines, even suspect. It is, after all, the *film noir* that, energized by some singular literary models of the pre- and postwar era, popularized the voice-over and flashback devices which implicitly challenge conventionally linear narratives, while it also developed the extended subjective camera sequence and brought into vogue a variety of documentary techniques that influenced our whole sense of film realism.

Ultimately, I want to argue, these are not just isolated violations of conventional styles but telling indicators of a curious phenomenon: when viewed as a group, these films demonstrate a remarkable pattern of narrative experimentation, certainly one that is unique for a particular cycle or, if you will, genre of films. In fact, not since the days of film pioneers like Griffith, Thomas Ince, and William DeMille had the American cinema experienced such a fascination with the mechanics and the *possibilities* of storytelling. In this consistent pattern of narrative experimentation, violation, and development, then, we can

see both one of the form's most distinctive characteristics (one that could argue for its generic status), and the extent of its departure from a tradition of American films depicting cultural violation.

The *film noir*'s historical context, that is, its appearance in the closing years of World War II and its flourishing in the immediate postwar era, obviously has much to do with this curious mixture of violations. For example, one of the war's immediate effects was to radically curtail the export market for American films, even as home attendance saw a steady rise. Reacting to this shift in audience, Hollywood apparently intensified its focus on the specific concerns of American moviegoers. Of course, this focus was partly prompted by government calls to support the war effort and avoid any potentially divisive subject matter. But as Colin Shindler notes, it was also generally true that "What Hollywood feared above all else was deep division in the country that would cloud the image of America that the majority of film-makers tried to reflect."⁶ As the war began to wind down and those governmental and ideological pressures eased, however, the culture gradually came into a more critical focus. American life was viewed not simply as the subject of some outrageous violation by an outside force—Japanese or Germans—but as the very locus of various long disguised, almost invisible violations of our individual and cultural dreams. And in the unsatisfying return to normalcy that the war's conclusion brought to America—a return punctuated by rampant inflation, unemployment, labor strife, shifting social patterns, and the rapidly growing anxieties of the cold war⁷—this pattern of self-examination and self-critique seemed increasingly justified.

As if inspiring a voice of violation, then, the calamitous troubles that had convulsed the world became internalized by postwar American culture and, as we might expect, were reflected in its films. Fittingly, it is the German critic Siegfried Kracauer who, recalling his experience of Nazi Germany, noted this trend, observing an almost obsessive concern with crime and the criminal mind in our postwar films. In them he saw an image of "the weird, veiled insecurity of life under the Nazis," now "transferred to the American scene. Sinister conspiracies incubate next door, within the world considered normal—any trusted neighbor may turn into a demon."⁸ But why this transference and the almost ritualistic mirroring of the world's violations it implies? Kracauer believes these films reflect both a cultural and human failing that the American cinema had, intentionally or not, previously overlooked. On the one hand, he felt, they show the "uncertainties" Americans had begun to feel about their own system and its ability to cope

with problems the war had uncovered; on the other, they evoke a larger sense of fear and anxiety that increasingly seemed to be "accepted as inevitable and almost inscrutable."⁹

While he is mainly trying to describe Fascism's destructive lure of order and simplicity, laying bare its potential attraction for a disillusioned America, Kracauer also points to a deeper, almost semantic significance in these films. Drawing on his interpretation, we might see them as signs of a disturbing lack of adequate models or terms for dealing with a broken, seemingly deranged world: as emblems of a failure not just in our culture but in its conventional genres, in its narrative techniques—by which we try to make imaginary sense of our world—in effect, in the very voice with which it spoke. Seen in this context, the *film noir* seems most remarkable for the various ways in which it copes with and casts into relief these different failings. What I want to suggest is that these films served a significant liberating function for the American cinema that merits more careful examination. For not only did they manage to voice violation, to articulate what the classical cinema might normally have muted or stifled, but they also called attention—and at times fell prey—to the very power of our cultural discourse to permit speech and to impose silence.

That same function had already been taken up by our literature—or at least by a significant subset of the literary canon, the hard-boiled and mystery fiction of the 1930s. And that example not only helped clear the narrative ground for the *film noir*, through the work of writers like Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Cornell Woolrich, and James M. Cain, but it also continued in the vein of the cinema, developing into a kind of *noir* literary genre in the works of such novelists as Jim Thompson, David Goodis, and Dorothy B. Hughes, among others. In fact, the strongest argument for *noir* as a genre might ultimately be based on this point, that it is a narrative form with specific conventions and concerns which bulk beyond the cinema's limited confines, in much the way that, say, the melodrama does.

In their pioneering overview of *noir*, the French critics Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton made much of this literary influence. The *film noir*'s "immediate source," they asserted, "is clearly the American or English detective thriller novel," exemplified by the work of Hammett, Chandler, Cain, W. R. Burnett, and Graham Greene, and they noted that early *noirs* seem marked by "a total submission by the cinema to literature" as a source.¹⁰ Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward's "encyclopedic reference" book on the *film noir* largely bears out that assessment. For of thirty-six *noirs* listed from the early period of 1940–

45, twenty-seven are based on previously published works—novels, short stories, or plays—while seven derive from unpublished stories, and only two are original film scripts.¹¹

Hammett and Chandler are the two figures who most often surface in discussions of these literary origins, in part because of the kind of characters and world they depicted, but also because of their approach to those depictions. Hammett's protagonists, such as the anonymous Continental Op of what may be the prototype *noir* story, *Red Harvest*, and the more well known Sam Spade of *The Maltese Falcon*, move through a dark and corrupt world (Poisonville, the nickname for the city in *Red Harvest*, would fit any of Hammett's locales). Whether his protagonist narrates the tale or is only its focal point, though, he provides a kind of measure of that world through his ability to remain apart from its corruption; as Terry Curtis Fox notes, "The Op's voice is never neutral . . . every descriptive sentence carries an emotional and moral judgment on the matter at hand."¹² What results is a constant tension between the lure of that corrupt world and his characters' stance—one that at times seems nearly pointless, given the pervasive criminality, and at other times self-destructive, because of the dangers it involves. But that stance is finally crucial to the attraction of these tales, for the moral center it fashions reassures us that, individually, man can cling to some human values, even as he is faced by corruption on all sides.

Raymond Chandler's oft-quoted prescription for the detective, "down these mean streets a man must go,"¹³ clearly suggests his link to Hammett. His characters, especially the detective Philip Marlowe, move through a world with which they are odds. They are like knights in a realm where, as Marlowe notes in *The Big Sleep*, "knights had no meaning."¹⁴ But that figure with no "meaning" controls both our perspective and our sympathies for, thanks to Chandler's first-person narration, all that we see in the Marlowe novels is what the detective himself sees; his experiences—and his thoughts—are ours. This outer-directedness ultimately proves just as important as Marlowe's moral stance (style an equivalent of theme), since it equally defines our relationship to the world he inhabits. Through Marlowe we become different from, and in many ways stronger than, that world. We perceive its truth, understand its ways, and avoid its pitfalls as no one else in the novels can. What this singular experience produces, in effect, is a new vantage on the relation of psyche and surface, as *how* we perceive becomes our one sure proof against *what* awaits on those "mean streets."

For James Cain, author of such *noir* source novels as *Double Indem-*

nity, *Mildred Pierce*, and *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, the question of narrative technique was a fundamental issue, and his solution was akin to Chandler's. He has confessed that he initially found the novel form "hopeless," because "I didn't seem to have the least idea where I was going with it, or even which paragraph should follow which. But my short stories, which were put into the mouth of some character, marched right along, for if I in the third person faltered and stumbled, my characters in the first person knew perfectly well what they had to say. . . . I began to wonder if *that* wouldn't be the medium I could use to write novels."¹⁵ Of course, the first-person, pointedly retrospective format became the key to Cain's best work, providing him with both a narrative pattern and a way of organizing all that occurs in the narrative. Cain's characters look back at a series of events that have led up to their present situation, like the impending execution of Frank Chambers in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, and what they recollect is just what they could have seen, experienced, or heard about. It is, moreover, constantly being weighed, often for ironic effect, against all that they know *now*.

More than simply a narrative formula, then, that retrospective approach, which was retained for the screen versions of the novels mentioned above, contributed to a complex vision of the individual in modern society. Like Chandler's, Cain's approach clearly foregrounds the consciousness, gives center stage to reason as it attempts to sort out a welter of past events. But Cain's protagonists hardly rival Marlowe in the ability to puzzle out their world; as one critic puts it, "reason doesn't stand a chance" in his novels.¹⁶ Whether his characters are trying to manipulate others or simply hoping to figure out how their plans went wrong, they invariably find that things do not make sense, or that, as Frank Chambers bluntly puts it, "When I start to figure, it all goes blooey."¹⁷ What Cain has done is to fashion a disturbing dialectic between the passions that led his characters to their current pass and a mind that, in the present, must sort out and make sense of all that has transpired. While his first-person narrators thus give order and reason to their narratives, much as Chandler's do, the very things of which they speak—the passions and pathological acts that defy all reason—give us pause, call into question their ability ever to sort out or explain their lives.

That paradox becomes the driving force behind the fiction of Jim Thompson, whose work appears at the height of the *film noir*'s popularity and continues beyond its day, and who contributed to the script of Stanley Kubrick's *noir* film, *The Killing* (1956). Besides a reporter's eye for detail—at various times he wrote for the *New York Daily News*

and *Los Angeles Times Mirror*—that ranks his work alongside Chandler's and Hammett's for effective and telling description, Thompson also brought to the hard-boiled/crime novel a fascination with exploring various narrative approaches that gives his work a distinctly modernist stamp. In addition to straightforward first-person narratives much in the Chandler and Cain mold, we find in his works multiple-narrator novels like *The Criminal*; narratives that break into alternate versions, like *A Hell of a Woman's* final chapter, which tells two stories in alternate lines of type, one the story the narrator consciously wishes to relate and the other the truth which he simply cannot escape or ignore any longer; and narrators who seem to be dying or, in the pattern of one of the most famous *noir* films, *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), already dead as they speak (*Savage Night's* narrator describes his reactions as his girl hacks him to death with an axe). In such a character, who is being physically reduced even as he recounts events, Thompson seems to be playing at the very margins of narration, exploring, in much the way that the *film noir* as a form did, the limits of conventional storytelling practice.

In describing *Savage Night's* conclusion, Geoffrey O'Brien notes how "being itself erodes, right in front of us."¹⁸ It is, though, not just being but Thompson's narrative that typically "erodes" or, perhaps, deconstructs itself, reminding us that we have simply been attending to a voice in a void that has sought to construct its own version of reality, and thereby to stay a tendency for erosion, for the gradual eating away of whatever we fashion. What Thompson does, in the best *film noir* fashion, is lure us into a seemingly unified narrative, only to violate our expectations, revealing finally how illusory that unity is. Having drawn us into a human consciousness—or several consciousnesses—he then springs a narrative trap of sorts that leaves us in a hallucinatory realm—the realm of the human psyche deprived of all the customary supports that normal experience leads us to expect.

In this pattern, I believe, Thompson models or reflects the narrative developments found in the *films noir* more than he influences them. While several of his novels have been successfully adapted to the screen—and we might particularly note *The Getaway* (1972) and the later *Coupe de Torchon* (1981), based on Thompson's *Pop. 1280*—most of those adaptations appeared long after the period of *film noir's* greatest appeal.¹⁹ His importance for this study, though, lies in the way his fiction mirrors the patterns we find repeatedly worked out in the *noir* mainstream, as his narrators set about providing us privileged access to a world, only to find that the path they have staked out is full of obstacles and pitfalls, in fact that, like truth itself, it seems virtually

to disappear before us. Thus even as he narrates his fast-eroding situation, *Savage Night's* Charlie Bigger notes how language itself has become almost empty and meaningless: "after a while everything was said that we could say and it would have been like talking to yourself. So we talked less and less, and pretty soon we were hardly talking at all. And then we *weren't* talking at all. Just grunting and gesturing and pointing at things. It was like we'd never known how to talk."²⁰ Not only is the fragile order of his life rapidly disappearing, but even the means of describing that situation, of accounting for the mystery, seems to have vanished. Still, he goes on speaking, the narrative itself a kind of straw at which he clutches, as a last desperate hope or human gesture against a world marked by an inhuman violence and cruelty.

Most other studies of the *film noir* examine this literary background in far more depth than the brief sketch offered here. And in doing so they follow the lead of the French critic Nino Frank, who in 1946 drew the very term *film noir* from the similarity of these works to the novels then being published in Gallimard's *Serie Noire*.²¹ But that linkage never answers the real question, never tells us what the *film noir* is, only what it is *like*. It resembles, in both themes and narrative patterns, a variety of popular literature that appears prior to the *film noir* and that continues beyond its heyday. This material helps cast into relief several of *noir's* most distinctive narrative developments, but that literary perspective alone does not let us see the form's larger scheme. To do so, we have to turn to the films themselves.

The primary difficulty facing most inquiries into the *film noir* is its very amorphous nature. It simply does not sit still for an accurate or conventional portrait. While many historians describe it as a discrete genre with its own conventions, others see it as nothing more than a limited cycle, a strange outgrowth of various social factors at a special time in our history. Certainly, *noir* seems to push at the normal bounds of genre designation, its varied settings, subjects, and actions confounding the sort of easy classification that samples of the Western, musical, or science fiction genres allow. More often, a *noir* film seems related to other, established genres, for example, to the gangster or detective formulas,²² or to straddle generic lines, drawing simultaneously on a variety of conventions and expectations. The historical limits often cited for the form, the period from 1941 to 1958, further block thinking of *noir* as we do of other, seemingly longer-lived genres with their implicitly mythic appeal. For such reasons, Paul Schrader flatly asserts that "*film noir* is not a genre": "It is not defined, as are the western and gangster genres, by conventions of setting and conflict,

but rather by the most subtle qualities of tone and mood.”²³ And following this lead, J. A. Place and L. S. Peterson argue that “visual style” alone proves the “consistent thread that unites the very diverse films that together comprise this phenomenon,” as they then attempt to describe precisely what constitutes this peculiar “*film noir* style.”²⁴

The question of style, however, only broadens the debate about what the *film noir* is. After all, a number of distinct “looks,” as well as various combinations of them, mark the *noir* canon. Thus we might take *style* to mean the baroque play of light and dark, of line and volume that *noir* drew from its roots in German expressionist films of the 1920s. But it could also refer to the stark realism and urban locations that Schrader and others link to the influence of Italian neorealist films in the postwar period. Then too the documentary look of films like *Boomerang* (1947), *The Naked City* (1948), and *Panic in the Streets* (1950) owes much to the impact of war documentaries and newsreels on American audiences, as well as to various technical advances that made location shooting commonplace. Seldom, though, do we find the documentary style combined with the surrealistic imagery and distorted perspectives of yet another, more fantastic offshoot of the *noir* style, glimpsed in the Dali-designed dream sequences of *Spellbound* (1945), as well as those of *Murder, My Sweet* (1944) or *The Dark Past* (1949). The *noir* “style,” I would suggest, ultimately seems as curiously diverse as its subject matter, and equally as inadequate for accurately defining the form.

The very disagreement underlying practically every discussion of *film noir* is significant, though. For despite a lack of consensus, critics generally agree on which films merit a *noir* classification. The *noir* filmographies published by John S. Whitney, Foster Hirsch, and Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward,²⁵ for example, differ mainly in two respects. First, they disagree about which *modern* films to put in their groupings as inheritors of the *noir* tradition. And we might read into this a hint of their common bias toward seeing the form not as a singular, time-bound cycle but as a true genre, recurring through time as cultural conditions dictate. Second, they differ in terms of the minor or “B” films which, because of their elusiveness and limited distribution, may have been seen by one compiler and not by another. As James Damico suggests, therefore, it might seem “self-evident that the foremost task of any inquiry into the category ought to be the identification of exactly what it is that causes films intuitively classed as FN [*film noir*] to appear to share affinities.”²⁶ In effect, we must consider how to account for the general agreement in classifying these films when the definitions that might justify such classification seem so elusive.

In exploring Western culture’s changing perceptions of “madness,” Michel Foucault faced a similar difficulty. Judging from the “multiplicity of objects” that supposedly constituted madness and the variety of commentaries that made up “a discourse, concerning madness,”²⁷ he found coming to any universally acceptable definition of the condition almost impossible. As a result, he adopted a broadly inclusive strategy, concluding that “mental illness” has been “constituted by all that was said in all the statements that named it, divided it up, described it, explained it, traced its developments, indicated its various correlations, judged it, and possibly gave it speech by articulating, in its name, discourses that were to be taken as its own.”²⁸ One approach he initially entertained recalls that of Schrader, Place, and Peterson, namely an effort to examine his subject from a vantage determined “not so much by its objects or concepts as by a certain *style*, a certain constant manner of statement.”²⁹ However, aware that such “descriptions could not, in any case, be abstracted from the hypotheses” about his subject, in effect that “style” depended upon a prior select group, he rejected such a stance.³⁰ In its place, he tried to isolate certain “discursive formations” or regularities that marked our identification of the objects and events of madness, as well as the various ways in which we speak of them. With this approach, he began to isolate and analyze “small islands of coherence,”³¹ and then examine the various strategies that embrace the disparate objects, shifting styles of description, and changing contexts of his study.

This approach might well serve our thinking about the *film noir*, since it lets us account for both the play of difference noted by most commentaries on the form and the “intuitive” perception of unifying factors Damico describes. By trying to describe *noir*’s primary discursive formations, we might obviate—or at least postpone—the question of its generic status, while also avoiding the simplistic notion of “style” as the determining factor—especially since it only hides an unexplained predetermination of what films are truly *noir*. This study thus takes a broadly inclusive focus, accepting for the purposes of a discursive description all that is usually grouped within the time-bound or traditional *noir* canon. Thereafter, regardless of whether we think of *noir* as a discrete genre (with an unnaturally restricted life span or irregular cycle of recurrence), or as a congealing of forces and attitudes operating in various genres in a specific era, our vantage on those formations can remain stable, our analysis securely anchored in the works themselves.

When viewed from this perspective, the *film noir* seems to mirror both the large cultural forces and the immediate human impulses that shape our lives and that seem to generate their own discourse. On the

one hand, then, we shall see *noir* in a *reactive* context, as a response or resistance to the dominations of power in society, and thus as a generic effort at revealing, examining, and, as far as possible, gaining some freedom from the forces that both structure and violate our daily lives. In this sense it is a social myth, one evoked by the particular conditions of postwar America. On the other hand, we shall see it as a symptom, a distortion that cuts across generic lines and that is caused by the same desires and powers that propel our culture and our lives. But whether viewed as a response to distortion or as itself a stylistic and thematic distortion that infects our prevailing cultural myths—thereby producing, for example, *noir* Westerns like *Rancho Notorious* (1952) and *Johnny Guitar* (1954)—the *film noir* can designate a field of deviation that mirrors the problems of modern America in particular and modern man in general. And this field is characterized by a remarkable variety of discursive formations, as Foucault would term them, through which the form manages to articulate a rising awareness of the limitations and paradoxes that shape our culture, our lives, and the stories we tell of them both.

A survey of the large body of films usually classed as *noir* suggests that one of its most distinctive yet often overlooked features is its singular concern with or awareness of the nature of narration. For more than any other body of popular films, and certainly more so than its near relative, the gangster genre, *film noir* pushes at the very boundaries of classical narrative, particularly with its frequent use of voice-over narrators, flashbacks (even flashbacks within flashbacks, as in *Sorry, Wrong Number* [1948] and *The Enforcer* [1951]), convoluted time schemes, and subjective camera techniques. Schrader and others basically pass these varied approaches off as further examples of *noir* stylistics, seeing them as evidence of “a love of romantic narration” that mainly serves to establish “a mood of *temps perdu*: an irretrievable past, a predetermined fate and an all-enveloping hopelessness.”³² Foster Hirsch, however, distinguishes between two complementary elements of the typical *noir* narrative, noting that “*noir* tells its stories in a particular way, and in a particular visual style.”³³ While he neither explores nor identifies this range of *noir* narrative patterns, he does point us in a valuable direction by recognizing that the form’s curious rhetoric is as remarkable as its look and tone. This observation is, I believe, crucial to understanding the *film noir*.

My survey of the *noir* form, based on a sampling of more than 130 films,³⁴ isolates four dominant narrative strategies or discursive formations: (1) the classical, third-person narrative, (2) the voice-over/flashback style, (3) the subjective camera technique, and (4) the documentary mode. Because they emerge from an industry dominated by

the classical pattern, we should expect that a majority of *noir* films largely follow this first approach, with its linear unfolding of events from a third-person or “objective” vantage. Certainly some of the best-known *noirs*, such as *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *In a Lonely Place* (1950), and *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), work in this way, using a traditional narrative approach to counterbalance the disturbing or unconventional events they depict. Most *noir* critics, though, find the combination of voice-over and flashback, with its implicit suggestion that the viewer has privileged access to a mind meditating on the past, to be more symptomatic of the form. In describing the typical *noir* film, Robert Porfirio, for instance, takes this view, noting that “instead of writing his story, the hero tells it to us directly, and the combined techniques of first person narration and flashback enhance the aura of doom. It is almost as if the narrator takes a perverse pleasure in relating the events leading up to his current crisis.”³⁵ While not quite the “typical” style critics would have it, this basically subjective approach surfaces often, and it occurs in one of the earlier and most influential of *films noir*, *Double Indemnity* (1944). Following its successful application in this film, more than forty other *noirs* would use the same narrative approach.

It remained for a third strategy to explore more fully the possibility of subjective narration. A subjective camera, used either with a voice-over or as a separate narrative device, promised viewers a far more radical sense of shared consciousness, by literally giving them a character’s vantage on events for large portions of the narrative. Robert Montgomery’s experiment with almost completely subjective narration, *The Lady in the Lake* (1947), is the most famous instance of this briefly popular style. A fourth discursive formation, that of the documentary-style *noir*, worked a compromise between the first two strategies we have described. Films like *Boomerang* and *The Naked City* use the camera as an objective recorder of events, but they also yoke it to a voice-over commentary that guides our point of view and testifies to the truth of what we see. Transported into the streets, among the people and locales where the factually based events occurred, we were supposed to gain in these films a new view of reality, of our world stripped of its veneer of custom and habit. Of course, we were also supposed to overlook the irony implicit in this approach: the notion that through the natural, by evoking film’s mimetic capacity, these documentary-style works sought much the same sort of revisioning of the commonplace that other *films noir* pursued in more fantastic ways, through expressionistic imagery, distorted camera angles, and chiar-oscuro lighting.

What this variety of discursive formations quickly points up is the

extent to which the *film noir* reflects a new openness toward narrative experimentation and development. That this exploration occurs in a period still dominated by the practices of classical film narrative and, for the most part, in an industry that was historically reluctant to alter or challenge any proven profitable procedure, seems equally significant. Certainly it suggests the sort of tensions and contradictions that we typically find in *noir* narratives—tensions that, Foucault would offer, ultimately mark all forms of discourse. Even more significantly, though, this exploration points to a deeper identifying characteristic of the form: a compelling urge to understand, formulate, and articulate the human situation at a time when our old formulations, as well as the means of expression underlying them, no longer seemed adequate. That urge, I feel, drives the *film noir*, and gives reason to the basic commitment to expression it evidences even in the face of the obvious limitations and conventions that condition all cinematic speech. The following overview of *noir*'s primary discursive formations will sketch the shape of this narrative thrust and describe some of those tensions that inform it.

The Voice-Over/Flashback

The voice-over, usually introducing and accompanying a flashback to some prior action or event, is often seen as the most characteristic *noir* narrative strategy. One reason for this assumption is that this approach seems only to have reached its real potential in *noir*, as if the form's themes and concerns, especially its fascination with the workings of the human psyche, naturally complemented such a narrative. Of course, the voice-over and flashback were both established cinematic techniques prior to *noir*'s heyday. The former traces its ancestry back to the commentative "voice-of-god" narration of the newsreels, while the latter finds its origins in the earliest manipulations of narrative time. While popular films like *The Power and the Glory* (1933), *Judge Priest* (1934), and *Rebecca* (1940) had already employed the voice-over/flashback combination with great effect, it is *Citizen Kane* (1941), itself often seen as one of *noir*'s sires,³⁶ that seems to bring this strategy to full development and to anticipate the *noir* usage. As the later discussion of *Sorry, Wrong Number* will show, Orson Welles's use of multiple voices and vantages on the life of his subject, Charles Foster Kane, illuminates a fundamental variance and tension between the individual point of view and reality that would prove a *noir* hallmark. In essence, Welles's approach calls attention to the relativity of perspective that characterizes all cinematic seeing, as well as to the

limitations that attend such relativity, marking every point of view as potentially detached, distanced, alienated.

As the *film noir* canon shows, the voice-over/flashback strategy lent itself to a variety of uses. Most commonly, a voice in present time introduces and then comments on a scene from the past, so that we see as if through the narrator's mind's eye.³⁷ In this way, the narrative can insert some significant information from the past or set up a context for present events, as in the case of *Double Indemnity*, *Out of the Past* (1947), and *The Big Clock* (1948). Embedded within a larger narrative structure, such sequences invariably seem to violate diegetic normalcy, to suggest an eruption of the subjective in a world that we initially see in a conventional, objective manner. However, as a kind of partially glimpsed truth, that eruption qualifies and even raises questions about the larger narrative context, in the process suggesting other possibilities for truth and a sense of this world's complexity.

Following *Kane*'s lead, a number of *noir* films compound this pattern with a variety of narrators and flashbacks. Films like *The Killers* (1946) and *Sorry, Wrong Number* use so many subjective viewpoints that they ultimately seem to abandon all notion of an objective vantage or the possibility of ever synthesizing their multiple perspectives. Christine Gledhill's description of "the plot of the typical film noir . . . as a struggle between different voices for control over the telling of the story"³⁸ seems especially fitting for these films. For in their often contradictory multiplicity, those narrative voices seem to fight for the right to speak. And in so doing, they point up not only truth's elusiveness but also the very contentiousness of what often passes for truth, how much it depends on its own ability to argue for its acceptance.

In contrast to this disturbing multiplicity is the all-embracing voice-over of films like *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946) and *Lady from Shanghai* (1948). The sole voice we hear in such films, usually beginning its tale as the very first images appear, functions as the source of all that we see, although not, as one critic suggests, because the entire film is "a sort of linguistic event, as the narrator's speech even when there is none."³⁹ Rather, the words we hear and the images that seem to spring from them mark our privileged access to a consciousness, to a world of memory and thought that is far more detailed and vivid—if potentially more colored by the imagination—than any simple linguistic utterance. What this technique offers, then, is telling access to a person's inner world, especially to that level of the self where desire and repression interact and seek formulation. It is the level not so much of utterance but of linguistic formation, where we try to formalize, conceptualize, and even disguise evidence of our inner turmoil.

Where these different approaches to the voice-over/flashback strategy find common ground is in their basic function. As Bruce Kavin in his analysis of first-person techniques explains, "the question of voice becomes, finally, the question of mind, and both are inseparable from the question of meaning."⁴⁰ In fact, the "question of mind" implied by this strategy is very near the meaning itself for this type of *film noir*. For whether it uses an embedded voice-over, multiple ones, or a single, all-embracing voice with the flashback, the film testifies to a subjectivity at work, an "I" whose most basic purpose is to provide us with a privileged and personal "eye" on the world. In the process, it reminds us that seeing and understanding are always someone's, and that every view comes from a single, invariably limited perspective. While classical film narrative usually tries to conceal its point of view—to cover over relativity—these films reveal theirs, and in that revelation lies their true strength. For what impels them and forges their strongest appeal is an abiding desire to assert their own view of truth, their private vision as a rival and alternative to a public, supposedly objective one.

In *noir's* primary literary sources, as we have noted, this effect is both obvious and crucial. The fiction of Cain and Chandler, for example, typically uses a first-person, retrospective narration which, Terry Curtis Fox believes, "may be the key to Hollywood's uneasy relationship with the hard-boiled story."⁴¹ The voice-over/flashback strategy used in the adaptations of such Cain and Chandler novels as *Double Indemnity*, *Mildred Pierce* (1945), *Murder, My Sweet*, and *The Brasher Doubloon* (1947) clearly seems an effort to approximate this narrative style. In these works, especially the latter two with their private eye protagonist, the narrating voices represent an alternative knowledge, an individual, nearly alienated perspective on the world that challenges, through its implicitly greater access to truth, a prevailing view of things. It is precisely this emergence of a "private I," defined by its opposition to the reality perceived by the public eye, that seems to escape the typical estimation of *noir's* voice-over technique as a kind of "romantic narration."⁴² Certainly a film like *Sunset Boulevard*, with its cynical retrospection emanating from the corpse of writer Joe Gillis, challenges this interpretation. In Gillis's voice we sense no nostalgia for the past—indeed, for a life already gone, even wasted—but a persistent, even paradoxical desire to speak when the very possibility for speech has long been denied or overlooked. Having harnessed his writer's talents to the past in the person of faded film star Norma Desmond, in effect having silenced his own voice by selling himself to a silent screen actress, Joe finally, belatedly—in the sort of

black joke that increasingly marked Billy Wilder's films—has his say, as if to an audience of fellow ghosts. The resulting narrative stands witness to the self's impelling desire for a voice even in death, for a say in and about the truth of the world, despite a prevalent, even deadly power for silence or for submission to a popular discourse and its given truth.

As testimony to a growing awareness of the repressive force of mass culture in the postwar era, this technique's emergence seems especially noteworthy. For in championing the personal voice and the consciousness it denotes, in privileging such evidence of individuality, these narratives fundamentally underscore the individual's function as a mirror and measure of his culture. Through their human narrators, such films privilege the impressionistic as an alternative to the objectivity we implicitly attribute to classical narrative. And in so doing, they speak a nagging concern with the place of the self in modern American society and with the ability of the individual voice to be heard in this world. On a more optimistic level, they also suggest the self's felt need to sound out other, normally stilled voices, to test whether his is simply a solitary, dissenting voice within the cacophony of mass culture.

The Subjective Camera

With the films that use a subjective camera as a narrative device, the emphasis on a "private I"—on its longings and its limitations—becomes even more pronounced. Far more than the voice-over/flashback mechanism, the subjective camera emphasizes point of view, but in a radical way that challenges our normal perspective by forcibly aligning our vantage with another's. It is an approach that reminds us of the expressionist influence, since it is rooted in the aesthetic brought to Hollywood by various German directors, writers, and technicians in the 1920s and 1930s, who would eventually find a channel for their avant-garde stylistics and psychological focus in *noir's* budget-mandated economies of expression. During the expressionist period, filmmakers like Fritz Lang, F. W. Murnau, and G. W. Pabst had sought a language of heightened expression, one that would let them give external shape and substance to inner, subjective experiences, feelings, and attitudes, in effect turning the psyche inside out.⁴³ The pictorial techniques used to achieve this end—foregrounded oblique objects, unbalanced compositions, irregular spatial arrangements, chiaroscuro lighting with a heavy play of shadows, an emphasis on oblique and vertical lines over the horizontal, and a

fascination with reflection and reflective surfaces—eventually contributed to a *noir* style that suggests far more than just an atmosphere of instability and confusion. It punches a hole in the conventional picture we have of reality, at least of reality as classical film narrative typically portrays it, and challenges us to see our world, as it is presented on screen and encountered outside the theater, in a radically different manner.

While a subjective camera narration seems a logical extension of this aesthetic, its full development could only come with specific technical advances made during the war years. For example, the appearance of lightweight, highly mobile cameras, like the German Arriflex and American Cunningham Combat Camera, gave cinematographers a new range of motion and an ability to shoot from what before would have been considered impossible positions.⁴⁴ Similarly, the development of the “crab dolly,” a device that, as Barry Salt explains, could “instantaneously be turned from a straight forwards track to a sideways movement . . . at 90 degrees to the original path,”⁴⁵ increased camera mobility and made possible the longer takes that would be necessary to approximate the normal human experience of movement. By permitting the camera more accurately to imitate natural human movements in space and time, these and other technological developments transformed what had been largely a narrative punctuation—the subjective shot—into a viable narrative device—a sequence shot.

Also favoring this technique was a calculated promise of commercial viability. The increasing popularity of the detective genre, for instance, marked by an economic shift at the major studios from producing series of B-films in this vein—such as the Falcon and Saint series—to big-budget productions like *The Maltese Falcon*, *Laura* (1944), and *Murder, My Sweet*, spurred an interest in finding a cinematic correlative for the detective novel’s style, as well as for the very nature of the detective experience. The subjective camera could address both concerns, since its vantage could approximate the prying eye of the private eye, particularly as it had come to be formulated in Chandler’s first-person narratives. Moreover, letting the audience see as the detective does might produce a new level of narrative engagement, involving viewers in a pattern of discovery and solution similar to that enjoyed in the most successful popular fiction. Thus *Lady in the Lake* begins with its detective protagonist telling us that we shall visually relive his own experience: “You’ll meet the people; you’ll find the clues—and maybe you’ll solve it quick and maybe you won’t.” He is inviting us, just as in popular detective fiction, to join in a game of

detection, the subjective vantage promising to give us equal access to the clues and a chance to compete, with the detective and with each other, in solving the mystery. As we shall see, the success of the limited application of such techniques in *Murder, My Sweet*, an adaptation of Chandler’s *Farewell, My Lovely*, seemed to bear out this potential.

The technique’s vogue proved to be short-lived, however. Closely following on *Lady in the Lake*’s experiment with an almost totally subjective narration, *Possessed* and *Dark Passage*, both using the technique in lengthy but isolated sequences, and *The High Wall*, which employed it several times to suggest a drugged state (as in *Murder, My Sweet*) all appeared in quick succession in 1947. But thereafter the extended subjective narrative practically disappeared from *film noir*, making one of its few appearances years later to add a surrealist effect to *The Dark Past*’s dream sequences. The brief popularity of the extended subjective sequence does leave its mark, though, in the way it affected filmmakers’ notions of what point-of-view shots might do. For example, when point-of-view scenes are used in Hitchcock’s later work, like *Psycho* (1960) and *Frenzy* (1972), they are more than just extensions of the subjective shot as punctuation that we often encounter in his earlier British films; rather, they are usually linked to a voyeuristically tracking camera that implicates the audience in on-screen events in much the way that the *film noir*’s extended subjective sequences do. That combination has become a kind of *noir* legacy—one that today finds major application in the horror/slasher films of the *Halloween* (1978) and *Friday the Thirteenth* (1980) ilk.

While this technique’s relatively short life suggests a lukewarm box-office reception and a faddish vogue at best—particularly with so many of its appearances clustered in a single year—it also speaks to the device’s implications for film narrative in general, and for the classical style in particular. In letting viewers see as the film’s protagonist does, whether for an isolated sequence, as in *Possessed*’s catatonic scenes, or for nearly the entire story, as in *Lady in the Lake*, the individual or private perspective becomes privileged as an alternative to classical narrative’s cultural vantage. How we usually perceive our world, and at least the way it was normally seen through the window of conventional narrative, was radically challenged. By distorting our perspective, or rather by channeling it unexpectedly through a specific character’s point of view, this technique forcefully calls attention to the fact that the film image is always a product of directed attention.

In making us aware of point of view in this way, the subjective camera has a doubly subversive effect. One of the fictions fostered by classical narrative, after all, is its illusion of objectivity, which implies

that what we see represents a kind of privileged vantage on truth itself. But as Julio Moreno explains, the subjective camera shatters this illusion by revealing "the only reality which is truly real: the living reality of perception"; and through this awareness it vanquishes "the dictatorship of impersonal vision—false because it is impersonal—which has been up to now the vision of the camera."⁴⁶ With this shift in perspective there also potentially comes a new and more truthful vision for the viewer, who is no longer, as Nick Browne describes the normal spectator situation, "entrapped in an ideological (social) machine in order to insure the reproduction of the social order."⁴⁷ Rather, he gains a perspective on the cinematic mechanism itself, in the process being transformed from a simple consumer to an evaluator of the images that our culture provides us with.

This approach also undermines classical narrative's reliance on character and with equally disturbing effect. Traditionally, character provides the narrative with a kind of social construct with which we are encouraged to identify; it securely "places" us in the narrative world, which becomes an extension of our own world. While the subjective camera may have been perceived by some as a radical and innovative way of fostering such identification, as what might be termed a "special effects" method of achieving classical narrative's usual end, that spectator projection or identification never quite comes off. As a reviewer remarked about *Lady in the Lake*, the effect was as if "the spectator was standing beside the hero rather than existing within him."⁴⁸

The problem, of course, was not simply a technical one, that the subjective camera could not actually put us in the character's place. Rather, it results from the very nature of cinematic narrative which, as Pascal Bonitzer explains, involves a constant "dialectic" between "two fields": "on-screen space and off-screen space; we could say, between specular space and blind space."⁴⁹ Because it places the character who is the source of our perspective in a kind of blind space, the subjective camera has, as we shall see, a mystifying residue: it "can only make enigmatic a character who, in the story, is not enigmatic."⁵⁰ And with this problem of identification, there also comes an unsettling effect that undercuts the usual stabilizing influence of character, with its psychological motivations and goal-oriented actions. For it is not just the figure in the narrative, but our spectator position, our inscribed *characterization*, that comes to seem enigmatic, more a cultural construct or the product of an apparatus than a given entity, having a unique, inherent, and self-determining nature. In effect, our sense of self seems to slip into this "labyrinth," as Bonitzer so accurately styles

it. By implication, the place from which we are to see and understand, our consciousness, comes to seem estranged and foreign, our very identity undermined by that *other* identity which we are supposed to embrace.

Such effects might well prod us to question how both our culture and the narratives we normally tell of it are structured. But we should note that even the darkest *noir* visions of American culture usually reserve a stable position from which to speak. Even when it seems to strike at the very foundation of popular film, to lay bare its ideological operations, the *film noir* typically exempted the *spectator's* position from direct scrutiny. After all, in pointing out that what we see is always subjectively, not objectively, given and that the individual himself is partly fashioned by the movies' discourse, working through what Stephen Heath terms a process of "subject address,"⁵¹ the subjective technique could jeopardize a profitable practice and a traditionally comforting experience, inserting a wedge of distrust or suspicion between Hollywood and its audience.

Moreover, besides this increased awareness of how film fashions a cultural identity for its viewers, this technique also produces an ancillary sense of instability that strikes not just at classical narrative but at the whole fictional film experience. The unanchored, vaguely identified subjective view, after all, potentially speaks in a most disturbing way about our own identities, suggesting a level on which we too are enigmatic, unknowns who wear the mask of culture as solace and a way of forestalling a darker confrontation—with the disturbing questions that nag at us, not just about our place in society, but about our very natures. In opening up the problem of the self as a cultural—or cinematic—construct, subjective narration risks posing these more unsettling questions, positing a possibility of the self as *unconstructed*, unthought, perhaps even meaningless. Any effort to tell a truth about the individual in society, therefore, implicitly risks speaking a larger and more debilitating truth, in the face of which both film as a project of entertainment and film as an ideological reassessment pale in significance.

In reaching for a new way of seeing, the subjective narration of films like *Lady in the Lake* and *Dark Passage* indeed privileged the spectator in an unprecedented way. On the one hand, it offered viewers a new cinematic experience, even a kind of thrill, while promising some freedom from classical narrative's usual manipulations of the spectator position. But on the other hand, that new perspective opened up a potentially disturbing vision. It revealed how much of our lives always remains unseen, particularly how much of the self persistently eludes

our vantage or understanding, remaining elusively within the “blind space” of life itself.

The Documentary Style

Those efforts to see more clearly and in ways normally closed off to Hollywood narrative met with more critical and popular success in the films that turned to the strategies of documentary film in a kind of end run around conventional narrative. In the cultural and technological climate surrounding World War II, the semidocumentary *noir* finds its roots. For during this period the documentary itself gained a new degree of sophistication and popular acceptance, mainly because it proved so important to every aspect of the war effort, especially its home-front publicity. As Lewis Jacobs explains, “not since the documentary form was developed had it been used on such a gigantic scale, or employed so deliberately to serve a single purpose.”⁵² That purpose was the effort by every warring nation to record the war’s events and, more important, to *interpret* them effectively for the home audience.

In this effort, Hollywood proved a particularly valuable resource, providing both patriotic narratives for home consumption and skilled technicians to support the armed forces’ own efforts at documentation, information, and propaganda. In fact, many of the industry’s most skilled storytellers—Frank Capra, John Ford, John Huston, William Wyler—signed up for the duration. While with the exception of Huston none of these figures is usually associated with the *noir* form, the narrative approach and fictionalizing techniques they successfully married to the documentary during the war years would have an immediate and lasting impact. In fact, a number of directors who had, during the war, worked largely in conventional popular forms found a new impetus in this stylistic turn. We might note Henry Hathaway in particular, who had been known mainly for his romances and formulaic adventure films—such as *Trail of the Lonesome Pine* (1936), *The Shepherd of the Hills* (1941), or *A Wing and a Prayer* (1944). After the war, his career took a marked upswing, as he embraced the documentary-style narrative and, in films like *The House on 92nd Street* (1945), *13 Rue Madeleine* (1946), and *Call Northside 777* (1948), helped develop a new brand of film realism.

I do not want to suggest, though, that Hathaway and others like him were simply pursuing a new aesthetic. Whatever formal possibilities they saw were certainly matched by commercial considerations. They were, after all, also catering to an audience of millions of Americans

who, by the war’s end, were used to seeing both the news of the conflict and its stark ideological issues—see especially Capra’s “Why We Fight” series—set forth in an informative and entertaining style that owed far less to the social problem documentaries of the 1930s than to classical narrative traditions. Together with the period’s popular newsreels, particularly Fox’s pacesetter *The March of Time*, with its mix of documentary footage, archival material, and reenactments of key events, the war documentaries helped create an audience for a new kind of fictional film, one that Hollywood readily supplied in the postwar period.

Besides the creation of an audience and certain narrative expectations, the semidocumentary *noir*’s emergence owes much to technological developments in this era. Writing in the period, Parker Tyler noted that “the infiltration of documentary into film fiction, whatever the artistic worth of its results, must be gauged as part of the overpowering forces of a technological era.”⁵³ As we have already noted, a major result of the war and the unprecedented efforts by all sides to document its events visually was a series of significant technical developments. Besides the lightweight cameras previously mentioned, the conditions of combat and nonstudio shooting led to the introduction of safety-base film stock for use in 16mm combat cameras, faster stocks for shooting in limited or uncontrolled light, portable lighting equipment for such conditions, and magnetic sound for higher fidelity recording. The developments in cameras and lenses in this period also brought the introduction in 1947 of the zoom lens. By allowing filmmakers to vary their vantage on a subject while at some distance and without actually moving the camera, it offered not only a new kind of observational technique but also the potential for more economic shooting by limiting the need for tracking shots and multiple camera setups.⁵⁴ Technology was simply moving in the direction of reality, toward devising more effective—and economical—ways of telling the story of actuality.

Ensuring that these developments would play a shaping role in postwar film narrative was a series of equally important economic factors that undercut traditional studio-shooting practices. The war’s end had brought price decontrols and, as an immediate result, soaring studio production costs, especially those involving film stocks and labor. In 1946, for example, the two major film suppliers, DuPont and Eastman Kodak, raised their prices to the studios by 13 and 18 percent respectively. As a consequence of growing union power and a series of labor disputes that followed, the costs of set construction and decoration followed suit with their own drastic gains.⁵⁵ Such rapid cost

increases, along with the appearance of numerous independent production companies rapidly formed to take advantage of income tax laws, led to more and more films being shot beyond the confines—and thus away from the supervision—of the Hollywood studios. Given the proper technology, filmmakers simply found the streets of America's cities and the nonunion labor available outside of Hollywood economically advantageous and invitingly free from interference. As William Lafferty sums up these factors, "Rather than a stylistic attribute of the semi-documentary alone, the emphasis upon location shooting of features seems to have arisen out of economic necessity during the mid- to late-1940s."⁵⁶

The narrative technique that emerged from these various cultural, economic, and technological influences, though, shows a basic kinship to other *films noir*. Basically, the semidocumentary is concerned with perspective—with how we see our world and how we tell of it. Its documentary-style footage, location shooting, use of non-actors, and traditional narrative sequences conspire to create the sense of an objective reality, dramatized and attested to by the sort of certifying voice-over audiences had become accustomed to hearing in *The March of Time* and similar news series—a voice-of-god narrator, as it was known.⁵⁷ In films of this sort, most notably *The House on 92nd Street*, *Boomerang*, *The Naked City*, *T-Men* (1947), and *Call Northside 777*, the main concern seems to be not just telling an interesting tale but fashioning a realistic context for the narrative, so as to suggest its relevance to the spectators and to assure them that they are indeed gaining a new and revealing perspective on the world they inhabit.

This trend is hardly surprising, though, for as Paul Schrader notes, in the immediate postwar era "every film-producing country had a resurgence of realism."⁵⁸ It almost seems as if the war had wiped away much of our susceptibility to illusion, and with it our ability to sustain the aesthetic world of classical narrative. One of the most influential shapes this trend took was Italian neorealism, exemplified by films like *Open City* (1945) and *Paisan* (1946). These films, with their mix of non-actors, location shooting, real stories, high-grain film stock, and concern with capturing what André Bazin termed "the continuum of reality,"⁵⁹ impressed American audiences and critics alike. What they suggested was an immediately unfolding reality, a world not bound by traditional narrative conventions or filtered through the elaborate apparatus of Hollywood technology—in sum, life directly and truthfully perceived.

Of course, that impression was itself a kind of cinematic illusion, crafted from a compromise between reality and aesthetics. As Bazin

explains, neorealism's realistic look could "only be achieved in one way—through artifice,"⁶⁰ that is, through selection, organization, and careful staging. And the documentary *noirs* followed much the same tactics. While they tried to shape a realistic context for their actions through location shooting, while they sought to evoke a sense of real human rhythms by enlisting non-actors, even people involved in the true events on which the films were often based, and while they employed a stentorian, authoritative voice to certify the truth they offered for public consumption, these films still basically catered to what Schrader describes as "the public's desire for a more honest and harsh view of America"⁶¹ with a calculated artifice. If it was one that at times disarmed viewers by admitting even the reality of its mechanism—*The Naked City's* voice-of-god narrator, after all, is its producer, Mark Hellinger, who tells us as much as the film opens—that artifice nonetheless hints of a level of control and unreality, of directed perceptions, allowed insights, and melodramatic shaping, that continued to characterize our film experience. As a result, these films, with their alternate vision of American culture put in a narrative context, may be the ones that most clearly point up the rhetorical bind that seems to mark the entire *noir* project.

What eventually eludes and in part confounds this impulse is the cinematic mechanism itself, both insofar as it partakes of the double nature of all discourse and as it functions ideologically. As we noted in discussing the voice-over/flashback mechanism, which is often part of the semidocumentary technique, a pattern of contradiction or paradox marks all human discourse. As Foucault explains it, all "relationships of communication . . . produce effects of power," which work to disguise or deny the power they wield.⁶² We might be tempted to think of the truths the semidocumentaries offered—of hidden corruption in *House on 92nd Street*, of the judicial system's failure in *Call Northside 777*, of a harsh economic determinism in *City across the River* (1949)—as affording a kind of release from the sway of these powerful cultural forces, a release because they have been rendered visible and spoken of. But Foucault asks the disturbing and often overlooked question of "whether critical discourse about repression" serves as a "block" to these powers "or a part of the power mechanism it denounced."⁶³ In this context, we should recall the film industry's implicit function as an ideological voice. In this capacity it is always partly powered by the desire, as Bill Nichols puts it, "to persuade us that how things are is how they ought to be and that the place provided for us is the place we ought to have."⁶⁴ Then, too, the film industry has a prior interest in affirming the apparent truth of what it offers, in suggesting its privi-

leged position as a reliable access to actuality, even when the world it depicts is admittedly a fabric of fictions. So a pattern of contradiction seems invariably woven into the texture of truth these films produced.

This pattern may help explain why the semidocumentary's popularity lasts only from 1945 to the early 1950s. I hesitate to cite a specific end point, though, since the form never quite disappears; it simply goes through a kind of transformation enabling it to merge with the *noir* mainstream and even become a primary tributary for its realistic developments. After jettisoning its most obtrusive documentary trappings, especially the prologue and the voice-of-god narrator, while continuing to emphasize location shooting and objective camera style, the semidocumentary became a stylistic model for realistic examinations of American urban culture. Elia Kazan's *Panic in the Streets* (1950), for example, shot on the streets and docks of New Orleans with several local officials in supporting roles, seems directly descended from his earlier film *Boomerang*, and it might be viewed as a kind of watershed film in this development of the *noir* style. Contrary to Foster Hirsch's belief that the emphasis on "documentation" in the semidocumentary *noirs* "leads to a dramatic dead end,"⁶⁵ this film and others like it show how this technique opens onto a successful synthesis of reality and artifice that marks later *noirs*. In fact, once the documentary style's more obvious elements begin to drop out or, through custom, to become almost invisible, the dramatic potential of locale clearly becomes apparent, as evidence the evocative use of urban landscapes in films like *Night and the City* (1950), *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950), and *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955). In that environment a more naturalistic acting style, as well as a more realistic sense of the individuals inhabiting the modern American cityscape, was not only possible but narratively necessary.

The Classical Narrative

As we have noted, a majority of *films noir* generally follow the classical narrative model. But that adherence too holds a potential for paradox, for while traditional narrative implies a kind of common cultural discourse, a conventional manner of seeing and understanding, the *film noir*, because of its disconcerting look and equally disturbing events, plunges viewers into a world that seems anything but conventional. Uncontrolled passions, corruption, murder, and plottings of every sort are woven into its fabric, suggesting threatening eruptions in the normal, or what we might term the larger cultural narrative: the "story" society typically tells about itself through its

various channels of speech. Of course, given such perceived disruptions and challenges to the way we usually see our world and talk about—or narrate—it, we might expect classical narrative to remain dominant, even as it at times embraced *noir*'s darker "look." The reason is not just that familiar conventions can serve, as Stephen Heath offers, "as an obliteration or covering over of divisions" in the culture, but that they can balance the disturbing, and in the process even help us to see that problem as a function, or to be more precise, a malfunction, of the norm. Furthermore, the classical perspective can hold the *noir* world's disturbing elements at an aesthetic distance and thus place them in a context that ultimately seems far less threatening or subversive.

Even the many *films noir* that adhere to classical narrative conventions, though, betray a fundamental dis-ease with the nature of discourse in the modern world. And this anxiety links these more conventional films to those we have been discussing, echoes the impulse behind the various narrative developments outlined here, and points up what may be the *noir* film's most consistent generic marking. For even as this large body of films works mainly within a traditional discursive form, it also reveals a preoccupation with the conditions and problems of discourse—including that of the movies. A brief survey shows that *noir* works focus on and examine practically every mode of public and private discourse: newspapers (*The Big Carnival* [1951], *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* [1956]), radio (*Nightmare Alley* [1947]), popular magazines (*The Big Clock* [1948]), the postal system (*Appointment with Danger* [1950]), the telephone system (*The Blue Gardenia* [1952]), the Broadway stage (*Sweet Smell of Success* [1957]), television (*The Glass Web* [1953]), and, of course, the movies themselves (*In a Lonely Place* [1950], *The Big Knife* [1955]). And even when such mediated discourse slips far into the background, we find a focus on the various contrived and crippling stories we commonly tell of each other and all too eagerly embrace (*Notorious* [1946], *Framed* [1947]). Despite a more conventional narrative styling, then, these films show no less concern with how we see and speak, with how our culture can be accurately viewed and its truth might be conveyed, than do the less conventional *noirs* we have previously described.

As a narrative backdrop, these films usually sketch a world that seems keyed to the various forms of our media and the patterns of human discourse. Given this context, they then explore not only the flaws and falsehoods pervading that discourse but also the state of human isolation that has almost paradoxically followed. While inhabiting a society that seems practically wired together by multiple media

forms, a world in which every manner of discourse is readily available, the characters in these films seem singularly distanced from each other and unable to achieve any kind of intimate or meaningful communication. As a result, this world seems largely populated by isolates, and the ability to reverse that situation or to communicate any vital truths at all appears increasingly unlikely.

Seen in this light, the more conventional *films noir* become almost case studies in the mechanism of repression. For while they speak in a manner that asks us to accept their own form of discourse, their commentary on the conditions that shape our discourse reflexively points to the limitations under which they too work. Jacques Lacan's notion that "the unconscious of the subject is the discourse of the other"⁶⁶ reflects tellingly here on how these films mirror the modern psyche. Although their stories proceed in a largely conventional manner that suggests a certain perspective of normalcy, they also betray a widespread distrust of the prevailing channels of public discourse, register a level of anxiety that attaches to all discourse, including the film industry's, and signal a sense of *other-ness* that weighs upon us, individually and collectively. In sum, this "discourse of the other," this sense of the problematic or conditioned nature of human communication that seems to render us strangers even from ourselves, reflects a nagging anxiety over how much we are controlled, spoken, or simply reduced to silence, in effect, by the "other" disturbingly glimpsed in us. This fundamental concern with the very conditions of our discourse might be said to constitute the secret structure and distinctive narrative pattern of these more conventional *films noir*.

What this deep structure speaks of, in the films cited above and in many other works, is more than just an awareness of cultural limitation or repression, though. Rather, it is a sense of the paradox that inhabits our discourse and, through it, ourselves. Speech, as I have suggested, can by turns mark a violation of the status quo—an eruption in a realm of silence—or its affirmation; it can be a call for help or a way of disguising a desperate situation. As Foucault explains, though, this paradox traces the trajectory of cultural discourse, which is "the path from one contradiction to another: if it gives rise to those that can be seen, it is because it obeys that which it hides."⁶⁷

The movement along a path "from one contradiction to another" describes a pattern easily observable in the *film noir*. Repeatedly, these films detail the power and pervasiveness of our various patterns of cultural discourse, even describing characters who seem well versed in these powers and who, at the urging of their culture or self, try to turn that knowledge to profit. But while exercising that seemingly privi-

leged knowledge or ability, these figures, like the protagonists of ancient Greek drama, eventually find themselves trapped in the realm of which they thought themselves master. Caught in a labyrinth of discourse, they wander its mazelike paths of contradictions and falsehoods, of mysteries and lies, until exhausted and destroyed by the powers they hoped to control or turn to profit. In following out such a pattern, these films effectively lead from one level of contradiction to another, while they also model the cultural conditions that give their analyses immediacy. What they thereby show most clearly is how the individual in modern society, even as he tries to forge a meaningful link to others or to society as a whole—or to what the public discourse of radio, newspaper, television, and film seems to view society as—constantly finds the self denied and isolated, reduced to a permanent other in a world of others.

The more disturbing portent, and perhaps the greater value of these films, lies in this resulting perspective, one that goes beyond a simple ideological reassessment. For more than just a vision of American culture, these works depict *cultured* man, the modern individual bound by the world he inhabits and the sense of self he has constructed for that world. In fact, the self-image that the *film noir* describes is of an individual perpetually bound by his own desires. What these films emphasize is how those desires seem to gain a new and forbidding force in the moment of their articulation, as they are translated into the common stock of discourse. Not only do our most threatening impulses thus reveal an origin in the self, but their patterns of operation show up as self-ordained too.

In its reporter protagonist Tom Garrett, Fritz Lang's *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* provides a clear paradigm of this dark design. Garrett and his newspaper's editor contrive to frame the reporter for a murder, have him convicted, and then reveal the frame—all in order to get a sensational story on the weaknesses of the justice system. But when his editor suddenly dies, Garrett finds himself without an alibi and condemned by his own carefully contrived circumstantial evidence. In a subsequent doubling of the film's ironic thrust—and weak denial of its darker implications—he is eventually shown to be guilty, having cleverly planned to use the "story" stratagem to cover up a murder he intended all along to commit. However, this twist dispels little of the narrative's larger paradoxical thrust; it only doubly underscores the incessant play of contradiction that characterizes our discourse and repeatedly mocks our dreams of sovereignty and control.

While it has mainly an ironic effect in *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt*, this play of contradiction more often traces the strangely asocial dimen-

sion of much modern discourse. What we repeatedly find in the *film noir* is a concern with our compelling desire, even a felt need to communicate to others, as if only by talking to another could we deter an impending threat or maintain what we have come to recognize as a most fragile sense of order and of self. Thus Christina in *Kiss Me Deadly* warns detective Mike Hammer, "When people are in trouble, they need to talk." But like many other *noir* protagonists, Hammer pays little attention to this desperate "talk," dismissing it as the ramblings of a "loony"; as a result, numerous deaths and a cultural calamity follow. Such missed connections, though, are common in the *noir* world, as are communications that have quite the opposite of their intention, distancing people all the more from each other rather than bringing them together, reinforcing a sense of otherness instead of community. The *noir* world, consequently, always seems pulled in two contrary directions, to talk and to silence, toward community—like the war-era community of common cause and united will—and toward the isolation of a universal otherness—another war legacy, along with widespread feelings of disillusionment and alienation. Of course, this is hardly a specifically American dichotomy, but a modern *human* predicament that simply shows all the more glaringly in the wake of the war and the disappearance of the sense of community it had so easily generated in our far-from-homogeneous culture.

In those films that bring a conventional style to an analysis of the modes and conditions of modern discourse, we thus see almost a paradigm of the *noir* form. While not looking for a narrative voice free from the traps and entanglements to which the classical form seemed prey, they too, often in more subtle ways—see, for example, *The Big Sleep*'s concern with pornography and IOUs, *Phantom Lady*'s (1944) series of perjured testimonies that wrongly condemn a man, or *Fallen Angel*'s (1945) phony spiritualist who taps the voices of the dead—explore the conditions and consequences of discourse in modern society. In these films how we talk to each other and about our cultural situations becomes the central concern, and that manner points to what Sylvia Harvey terms "a series of radical and irresolvable contradictions buried deep within the total system of economic and social interaction that constitute the known world."⁶⁸ Through a thematic focus on our discourse, these films show how fundamentally our communications, even the movies themselves, carry a certain estranging force, one that renders all discourse precarious and every effort at human communication a risky wager against misunderstanding and alienation.

This overview of *film noir*'s main narrative techniques should come with a warning: like the films themselves, this taxonomy provides but a partial, although valuable, view of their workings, while it points toward, if it never quite satisfactorily resolves, the question of *noir*'s generic status. As I have tried to suggest, the *film noir* is a remarkably large, varied, and complex body of films. Due to the size of the canon, the ensuing discussion invariably omits films that some readers might see as paradigmatic. In some cases, it is because those films are so frequently discussed; in others, it is because a "classic" film is not always the best example of a particular narrative style—hence, *Double Indemnity* rather than, say, *Out of the Past* (1947). Then too, because of their variety and narrative complexity, *noir* films trouble easy classification, their narratives often mixing the various practices discussed here. So as much as possible, I have tried to pick out "pure" or highly representative types of films.

These same characteristics join with the knotty question of precisely what constitutes a *film* genre to leave that question, I am afraid, still unresolved.⁶⁹ An argument for *noir*'s generic status based on its discursive focus does begin to resolve the problem seen by Schrader and others by showing that it is marked by far more than just "subtle qualities of tone and mood."⁷⁰ By noting that these films are fundamentally about the problems of seeing and speaking truth, about perceiving and conveying a sense of our culture's and our own reality, we might at least clarify the debate, shifting it from whether the *film noir* represents a cycle or a genre to whether it is generically distinct from the melodrama, with which it shares so many characteristics. The problem, finally, is with our concept of film genre, which remains a rather loose and convenient, yet certainly telling, means of classification. It is for this reason, though, that Schrader can, as Barry Grant observes, begin his stylistic description of the *film noir* "by asserting that film noir is actually not a genre," only to have his analysis suggest "that it may indeed be considered one."⁷¹

At least I hope to bring together what have proven to be the two major approaches to the form. Previous analyses have generally focused on either questions of style, that is, the characteristic *noir* "look" and manner, or, ideologically, its level of "truth," that is, how it mirrors our culture's darker elements. But we often simplify or even overlook how closely these two perspectives are linked. To assert simply that our films were dark because a dark and despairing sense had crept upon the land seems reductive and simply stops discussion. It does not shed much light, at any rate, on the continued popularity of these films into

the more prosperous 1950s.⁷² An examination of *noir's* efforts at locating an appropriate and satisfying narrative voice, though, adds a revealing perspective. As a complement to its visual estrangements—the unbalanced compositions, strange angles, and shadowy images that represent its expressionist heritage—*noir's* varied narrative techniques seem especially appropriate, as if an outgrowth of visual style. And for viewers accustomed to the patterns of classical narrative, *noir's* structural manipulations might have just as subversive an effect as its dark, expressionistic look. But besides scandalizing our normal point of view, the narrative forms discussed here suggest an unusual awareness of film rhetoric at this time, a mindfulness of the nature of film storytelling that underscores the form's paradoxical manner.

Again Walker Percy, novelist and language theorist, offers a useful touchstone, describing the existential predicament of modern man: "In the very age when communication theory and technique reached its peak," he offers, it has become increasingly apparent "that men were in fact isolated and no longer communicated with each other."⁷³ While our ability to transfer information has increased, real communication seems far more problematic, as if our symbols simply carried less meaning or bore an increasing level of ambiguity about what was said or meant. Usually we look for new ways of expression either as a rhetorical flourish or out of need; either we want to show our mastery of language and its richness, or we recognize that the old expressions are no longer adequate to convey our meanings or to account for what we perceive. In its exploring of new narrative forms and its concern with the very nature of modern discourse, the *film noir* hints of both impulses, but predominantly the second. While no *film noir* seems impelled by purely aesthetic concerns, the talent that gravitated to the form, led by such German émigrés as Fritz Lang, Robert Siodmak, and Otto Preminger, possessed a remarkable level of technical and artistic ability. At the same time, it must be clear that neither the expressionist look nor the frequent voice-over/flashback narratives are just a stylistic flourish. The *film noir* shows a singular awareness of a general failing in our discourse and of a particular inadequacy in our received cinematic language that would frustrate efforts to accurately describe the reality of modern life.

Of course no narrative form, no special language ever truly overcomes the basic limitations of our discourse. A paradox always haunts even our efforts at revealing paradox. In fact, it may be for this reason that a majority of *noir* films retain classical narrative's broad outlines. They simply accept a frame of limitation, mirror its workings thematically, and thereby produce a reflective surface in which we can

more clearly see the mechanisms of individual and cultural limitation at work. In the protagonist of one of the most famous *noirs*, *Out of the Past's* Jeff Bailey, this pattern has a clear model. Before walking into a situation he knows is a trap, Bailey tells a friend, "I think I'm in a frame [but] all I can see is the frame. I'm going in there now to look at the picture." For the *film noir* the operant "frame" is in part the system of film production itself, that of Hollywood and its customary narrative forms. Sensing this frame, as well as its analogous bounds of discourse and culture, the *film noir* seems to take a stance akin to Bailey's. It points to the picture contained therein, offering us a vision of the individual and his world equally constrained by forces beyond their control or full understanding.

It is in this context that the ideological question of "truth" usually surfaces in *noir* discussions. Working from Althusser's explanation of how ideological structures represent "the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence,"⁷⁴ critics have profitably looked at these films as articulations of our culture's powerful voice, as it tries to reconcile our real situation with the "imaginary" conditions of existence in society. Such analyses try to reveal those contradictions that ideology normally works to disguise. The recurring image of the "black widow," the treacherous and destructive female who figures in so many *films noir*, well illustrates this approach. As Janey Place explains, this figure might be read as a "male fantasy," springing from a pervasive anxiety about the changing roles of women in postwar society.⁷⁵ In the repeated, almost ritualistic punishment and destruction of this figure, she sees reflected a male "need to control women's sexuality in order not to be destroyed by it."⁷⁶ This critique of woman's place in the *noir* world, explaining how she must suffer because she threatens or has usurped male dominance, typifies how *film noir* has been deconstructed to reveal a significant and previously repressed cultural truth.

However, this perspective is limited, as is evident when we consider how these films already carry out a persistent and even sweeping cultural critique, in effect how they often already deconstruct our cultural images. Ultimately, no institution or set of human relationships—not the government, the family, or the movies—is immune to their questioning. Nor do they usually settle for a cultural scapegoat of some sort, such as corruption in office, delinquency, or poverty, to bear the full burden of our various afflictions, while the larger social structure remains inviolate, as was the case in the social problem films of the 1930s, like *Wild Boys of the Road* (1933). Rather, in the *noir* world the criminals and the law usually seem equally culpable, both the self and

society at fault. For this reason, Robert Porfirio describes its typical character as one who finds himself "set down in a violent and incoherent world" that he must deal with "in the best way he can, attempting to create some order out of chaos, to make some sense of his world."⁷⁷ Such conditions are not the stuff that ideal or even very effective "imaginary relations" are usually built of; rather, they would seem to leave audiences feeling less assured that right and justice would prevail than disturbed and challenged in a most fundamental way—in terms of their individual desires and interests, the cultural order, even the human condition.

Basically, the *film noir* advances a sort of ideological criticism in itself, laying bare the systemic contradictions that our films usually cover up. In this way, it *reverses* how ideological structures like the genre film usually work, by embracing rather than disguising paradoxes, even talking about them structurally and thematically. This principle shows most clearly in *noir* discussions of the manipulative and destructive powers of the film industry, for example, in *Sunset Boulevard*, *In a Lonely Place*, and *The Big Knife*. Part of the *film noir*'s coloring could even derive from its focus on the seams or cultural contradictions that our genre narratives normally cancel out. In this singular capacity for turning a critical eye on both the self and the culture that engenders it, Marc Vernet sees a paradoxical play of narrative patterns at work, which he describes as a Freudian effort "to overturn and reinforce defensive structures at one and the same time."⁷⁸ If this characteristic helps explain why the form's "truth" often seems so elusive, it also seems a natural outgrowth of *noir*'s deep fascination with our equally paradoxical discursive practices.

While these stylistic and ideological approaches have both proved quite valuable, then, they also lead back to our concern here with the problems and potentials of discourse. Even as they point beyond the everyday world of appearances, *noir*'s expressionist stylizations, for example, suggest that to live an authentic life we need to see beyond the simple surfaces of reality. And a similar attitude propels the ideological vantage, as Bill Nichols offers: "how we see ourselves and the world around us is often how we believe ourselves and the world to be. Images generally present views; films present particular kinds of views . . . and how we see them has everything to do with how we see ourselves."⁷⁹ But what these films say about ourselves and our world depends not only on their ability to point beyond; it is implicit in their impulse, indeed, in their *struggle* to point, reveal, and articulate. Their basic truth, I would argue, resides in that desire to speak despite the limitations on our speech and to lay bare the rules of silence and

concealment. In fact, what makes *noir* films *noir* or truly disconcerting, even today, is how they strike to this fundamental level, revealing the disturbing contradictions that mark the modern human experience.

Of course, the *film noir*'s subjects are disturbing enough, but the fact that their focus on crime, corruption, psychosis, and desire channels into an unprecedented concern with *how* we see, understand, and describe our world doubly imprints the anxiety, leaving viewers to wonder if there is any reliable posture from which to gauge truth. In this respect, *noir* might most accurately be described as being about our cultural stories: about the apprehension of reality, about its fabulation, and about our too-easy or too-frequent embrace of that fabulation simply to suit our desires or needs. *Noir*, after all, not only confronts us with the images and events that possess us as cultural beings, that weave us into their narrative; in the process, it also casts in relief the discursive practices that lead us to see ourselves as the creators, possessors, and narrators of these things. One result is that it reveals us as figures within the very fabric—of self and society—that we commonly weave. Another, more important one is that it warns us to take better care in that weaving, giving thought to the limitations of our loom.

What we should also see in these effects is a trace of the positive force that energizes even the darkest *films noir*. The moment of darkness or misfortune, Foucault theorizes, "marks the point where language begins," for it is at this juncture that man usually turns to his discursive powers as a last resort against his troubles: "The gods send disasters to mortals so that they can tell of them, but men speak of them so that misfortunes will never be fully realized, so that their fulfillment will be averted in the negation of their nature."⁸⁰ Even *noir*'s dire articulations of personal and cultural decay thus show a paradoxical side, its disturbing images hinting of an effort to forestall disaster. They imply that by speaking of—or filming—these things we might hold them at a safe, rational distance, perhaps even find agreement on how to cope with their threat. And beyond this hope there lies a kind of talismanic potential based in the form's repeated emphasis on how we speak in such circumstances. For discourse can grant a temporary sanctuary from disaster, hollow out a safe place from which to think and plan. As Foucault notes, it can turn "back upon itself" where "it encounters something like a mirror; and to stop this death which would stop it, it possesses but a single power: that of giving birth to its own image in a play of mirrors that has no limits."⁸¹

If the *film noir*, in its emphasis on modes of human discourse, often generates what seems like an image of its own operation, it is as a

version of this mirror play Foucault describes. For in this way *noir* turns discourse's paradoxical nature to its own ends in a manner unequaled by prior American films. It finds in our narrative practices a way to hollow out in the present a shelter against corruption, manipulation, and destruction—to create a mirror that might reflect light into the darkness of our *noir* world. So long as we gaze steadily at those dark images, the individual and cultural forces stand at bay, their chaotic potential halted by our narratives' ordering force. Thus, even as the *film noir* reveals discourse's nature, and particularly the manner in which it often frustrates our desires for truth and understanding, it also speaks about our communications in a way that reminds us of our human longing and even need for an effective language—filmic and otherwise. As eminently effective cinematic communications, the best of these films manage to turn life's *noir* aspect against itself, thereby reminding us how necessary it is to look into and speak against the darkness.

NOTES

1. See Percy's novel *Love in the Ruins*, p. 184, and his essay "The Delta Factor," in *Message in the Bottle*, p. 26.
2. Percy, "Man on the Train," in *Message in the Bottle*, p. 83.
3. If pressed to name bracketing films for the genre/cycle, I would choose such titles as *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil* (1958).
4. For opposite positions in this debate, see Damico's "Film Noir: A Modest Proposal," pp. 48–57, and Schrader's "Notes on *Film Noir*," pp. 278–90.
5. For a discussion of classical film narrative and its distinction from modernist styles and structures, see Bordwell, "Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice," and Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, *Classical Hollywood Cinema*.
6. Shindler, *Hollywood Goes to War*, p. 10.
7. For background on the changing social patterns and production practices in this period, see Cook, *History of Narrative Film*, pp. 398–411, Hirsch, *Dark Side of the Screen*, and Lafferty, "Reappraisal of the Semi-Documentary in Hollywood."
8. Kracauer, "Hollywood's Terror Films," p. 132.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 133.
10. Borde and Chaumeton, "Sources of Film Noir," pp. 58, 59. This selection is excerpted from their *Panorama du Film Noir Américain*.
11. Silver and Ward, *Film Noir*, pp. 333–34.
12. Fox, "City Knights," p. 30.
13. Chandler, "Simple Art of Murder," from *Simple Art of Murder*, p. 15.
14. Chandler, *Big Sleep*, p. 146.

15. Cain, *Three of a Kind*, p. viii.
16. Fox, "City Knights," p. 34.
17. Cain, *Postman Always Rings Twice*, p. 119.
18. O'Brien, "Afterword: Jim Thompson, Dimestore Dostoevsky," in Jim Thompson, *Savage Night*, p. 152.
19. In addition to the two adaptations mentioned, we might also note Burt Kennedy's *The Killer inside Me* (1975), and Alain Corneau's *Série Noir* (1979), taken from Thompson's *Hell of a Woman*.
20. Thompson, *Savage Night*, p. 144.
21. See Frank's "Un Nouveau Genre 'Policier': L'aventure Criminelle."
22. As examples of this approach, see Shadoian, *Dreams and Dead-Ends*, and McArthur, *Underworld USA*. Both of these scholarly works treat the *film noir* as simply a variant of a larger genre of gangster or crime films.
23. Schrader, "Notes on *Film Noir*," p. 279.
24. Place and Peterson, "Some Visual Motifs of *Film Noir*," p. 30.
25. See Whitney, "Filmography of Film Noir"; Hirsch in his *Dark Side of the Screen*; and Silver and Ward's *Film Noir*.
26. Damico, "Film Noir: A Modest Proposal," p. 50. Damico calls for "a complete restructuring of critical approach and methodology" for thinking about *film noir*: "a new attack on the subject which would be specific rather than general, inductive rather than deductive, and investigatory rather than conclusive; in short, an examination of FN which is interested in working from the objects of study outward rather than in imposing assumptions upon those which suit such assumptions" (p. 51). This study is intended generally to follow these guidelines.
27. See Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* and his *Archeology of Knowledge*, p. 32.
28. Foucault, *Archeology of Knowledge*, p. 32.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
32. Schrader, "Notes on *Film Noir*," p. 284.
33. Hirsch, *Dark Side of the Screen*, p. 72.
34. See the Appendix for a title list of the films consulted for this study.
35. Porfirio, "No Way Out: Existential Motifs in the Film Noir," p. 216.
36. See, for example, Whitney's "Filmography of Film Noir," which includes an entry on *Kane*.
37. Bruce Kawin has introduced a term that seems particularly applicable to this sort of *noir* narrative. He terms all such visualizations of a character's perspective "mindcreens." See his *Mindscreen*.
38. Gledhill, "Klute 1: A Contemporary Film Noir and Feminist Criticism," in Kaplan, *Women in Film Noir*, p. 16.
39. See Smoodin's discussion of voice-over narration in "Image and the Voice in the Film with Spoken Narration," p. 29.
40. Kawin, *Mindscreen*, p. 22.

41. Fox, "City Knights," p. 30.
42. Schrader, "Notes on *Film Noir*," p. 284.
43. For a discussion of the expressionist film style, see Eisner, *Haunted Screen*. For background on the expressionist aesthetic, I have also relied on Furness, *Expressionism*.
44. Kerr's "Out of What Past? Notes on the B Film Noir" describes the effects of the technological advances made during the war years on the development of *noir* style. The most detailed discussion of these technological developments and their influence on film style can be found in Salt, *Film Style and Technology*.
45. Salt, *Film Style and Technology*, p. 292.
46. Moreno, "Subjective Camera: And the Problem of Film in the First Person," pp. 351–52.
47. Browne, "Introduction: Point of View," p. 106.
48. Brinton, "Subjective Camera or Subjective Audience?" p. 360.
49. Bonitzer, "Partial Vision: Film and the Labyrinth," p. 58.
50. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
51. See Heath's *Questions of Cinema*, p. 94. According to Heath, the subject is in a constant state of "address" in film, for "the subject is an effect of the signifier in which it is represented, stood in for, taken place (the signifier is the narration of the subject)" (p. 52).
52. Jacobs, "Military Experience and After," in Jacobs, *Documentary Tradition*, p. 184.
53. Tyler, "Documentary Technique in Film Fiction," in Jacobs, *Documentary Tradition*, p. 265.
54. See Lafferty's "Reappraisal of the Semi-Documentary in Hollywood."
55. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
56. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
57. This technique was described as voice-of-god because of the seemingly divine sense of detachment, distance, and omniscience that attached to the narrator. For a discussion of the characteristics of this narrative device, see Kozloff, "Humanizing 'The Voice of God.'"
58. Schrader, "Notes on *Film Noir*," p. 281.
59. Bazin, *What Is Cinema?* 1.37.
60. *Ibid.*, II.26.
61. Schrader, "Notes on *Film Noir*," p. 281.
62. Foucault, "The Subject and Power," Afterword to Dreyfus and Rabinow, *Michel Foucault*, p. 218.
63. This is a point paraphrased by Dreyfus and Rabinow in *Michel Foucault*, p. 142, drawing on Foucault's *History of Sexuality*. In that work he notes the sort of paradox I have tried to trace out in the *noir* films, "the paradox of a society which . . . has created so many technologies of power that are foreign to the concept of the law: it fears the effects and proliferations of those technologies and attempts to recode them in forms of law" (p. 109).

64. Nichols, *Ideology and the Image*, p. 1.
65. Hirsch, *Dark Side of the Screen*, p. 173.
66. Lacan, *Écrits*, p. 55.
67. Foucault, *Archeology of Knowledge*, p. 151.
68. Harvey, "Woman's Place: The Absent Family of Film Noir," in Kaplan, *Women in Film Noir*, p. 22.
69. See Williams's review of recent genre criticism, "Is a Radical Genre Criticism Possible?" Asserting that genre criticism has so far produced only "loose groupings of works"—groupings that are, to his thinking, of questionable value—he suggests that we might see the various formula films "more profitably as subcategories of one type," and that perhaps "film narrative" in itself "is the real genre" (p. 120).
70. Schrader, "Notes on *Film Noir*," p. 279.
71. Grant, Introduction to *Film Genre Reader*, p. xv.
72. According to Silver and Ward's *Film Noir*, the peak of *noir* production occurs in 1950, when they identify thirty-one such releases.
73. Percy, *Message in the Bottle*, p. 25.
74. Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, p. 53.
75. Place, "Women in Film Noir," in Kaplan, *Women in Film Noir*, p. 35.
76. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
77. Porfirio, "No Way Out: Existential Motifs in the Film Noir," p. 217.
78. Vernet, "Filmic Transaction," p. 8. With this pattern, Vernet suggests, the *film noir* essentially carries out a "fictional destruction" of our normal cinematic expectations, although it then "hastens to re-establish its structuring oppositions, to straighten out its situations, to reinstate, as it were, the cinematic institution which it threatens" (p. 9). In this way, the *film noir* comes to represent a kind of "limit-text" that speaks of the very boundaries of longing and repression that describe the human state.
79. Nichols, *Ideology and the Image*, p. 5.
80. Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, p. 54.
81. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

CHAPTER 5

Effacement and Subjectivity:
Murder, My Sweet's Troubled Vision

No doubt, it is not entirely my body that perceives; I know only that it can prevent me from perceiving, that I cannot perceive without its permission; the moment perception comes my body effaces itself before it and never does the perception grasp the body in the act of perceiving.

—Maurice Merleau-Ponty¹

That's all I know on account of I don't see so well with my eyeballs scorched.

—*Murder, My Sweet*

The *film noir's* various developments of the voice-over also point toward one of its most notable narrative experiments, with the subjective camera. As we have noted, the voice-over usually works as a kind of trope of consciousness, indicating that all we see and hear is, as Bruce Kavin puts it, "mentally presentational."² That "mental" aspect was developed primarily as a way of more forcefully involving viewers in the narrative; but as a side effect it also suggested an alternative to the way we usually see things, showing the relative as a possible route to truth. Besides the stylistic emphasis on shadows, unbalanced compositions, and strange camera angles, this concern shows up thematically in a focus on the reliability of perception and a responsibility we have to see our world and ourselves clearly, as films like *The Woman in the Window* (1944), *The Dark Mirror* (1946), and *The Window* (1949) illustrate. In light of these efforts, a *noir* attempt to turn seeing itself into a sustained narrative device seems a natural development—one whose first stirrings trace to an early *noir*, *Murder, My Sweet* (1944).

Despite its landmark status as a film in which, Carlos Clarens argues, "the fully realized *noir* look first appears,"³ and in which Raymond Chandler's detective Philip Marlowe finds his first official screen incarnation,⁴ *Murder, My Sweet* has received little attention. What makes this

omission significant is that the film also maps out the potential and the limitations of subjective narration that later *noirs* would follow. On the one hand, it crafts a privileged vision that at times calls attention to how we see in classical narrative; however, it also qualifies that vision with a sense of effacement that recalls Merleau-Ponty's description of our seeing. Initially, it promises to let us see like its detective protagonist, but it ends up in a "scorched" or blinded vision that hints of a threat in seeing too much and that gives reason to the film's efforts to pull back from the subjective. These poles already suggest the sort of ambivalence that would attach to *noir's* efforts at subjective narrative. As it shifts between these poles, *Murder, My Sweet* explores a growing *noir* concern with how we see, and it begins to trace out how the subjective might be used to describe what Michael Wood, in his discussion of *noir*, refers to as "the ordinary places of modern life."⁵

Merleau-Ponty's comments imply that a paradox informs our seeing and haunts the very place of vision—our sense of self, our location in the world, and our placement in a cinematic narrative. While our physical presence lets us see, grants a vantage on and knowledge of our world, it also limits seeing, since our placement—our self—is the source of a frustrating effacement. Because of this nexus of what we see and what always escapes the gaze, he explains, we form "a deep-seated set of mute 'opinions'" about our lives.⁶ And since we never really see *the self*, our efforts to articulate those "mute opinions" usually lead to "a labyrinth of difficulties" in terms of our involvement in what we see and, indeed, of our sense of self. Haunted by something that always escapes or effaces itself before our gaze, we constantly struggle to confront and understand our real selves and the world in which we seem to be meaningful figures.

Modernist narrative has explored various strategies for expressing this struggle and, in effect, overcoming it. The multiple narrators of Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, for example, win a kind of freedom over the limitations of individual perspective—and even over death—giving us a collective view, including the dead's vantage, on a single tragic event in a family's history. Jorge Luis Borges repeatedly fashions self-conscious narrators who describe their explorations of the "labyrinths" of narrative—labyrinths in which, as the narrator of his story "Funes the Memorious" illustrates, we can easily become quite lost. And in his many crime novels appearing roughly parallel to the *film noir*, Jim Thompson employs first-person and multiple narrators whose voices drone on, even when they are dying, to dramatize our human and narrational limitations as they seek some reprieve from them. What

the self-awareness of such works accomplishes, as Kawin puts it, is to express their own "haunted" nature,⁷ especially a sense of their very limits. In that struggle to express the ineffable, to acknowledge that it "is a limited system," the form confronts its own reality and triumphs over limitation. Kawin even suggests that such "systemic self-consciousness" is a key to the emergence of new genres, which spring from efforts at "dramatizing the limits of the old from *within* those . . . existing structures, so that the new genre appears to create itself out of the old."⁸

As an early *film noir*, *Murder, My Sweet* hints at this process, at a form in the process of emerging, and some of the terms of that emergence show up in its subjective techniques. By linking a subjective camera to its voice-over/flashback narration, the film fashions an intense awareness of point of view—one that verges on the kind of systemic self-consciousness Kawin describes. In foregrounding how we see in the movies and revealing the limitations of that vision, the film thus hints at a radical potential in *noir*. By bracketing and drawing attention to classical narrative's seemingly detached, objective, and stable perspective, rooted in a tradition of the ideal spectator and proper consumer of a dominant ideology, its subjective narration could well give us an insider's vantage on what usually seems outside and thus undermine the classical tradition. In this way, its subjective elements hold out a promise of much more than just greater audience involvement; it offers to take us beyond the normal borders of both classical narrative and the detective genre.

One way in which *Murder, My Sweet*'s subjective elements promise to move beyond these customary borders is by foregrounding how the cinema ideologically "places" us—that is, in our given political, sexual, and racial "opinions"—and thus opening up to our scrutiny the effects of cinematic "positioning." But while the subjective camera initially seems to make us more aware of our own place in the narrative, it also ultimately complicates the issue. For even as a subjective camera calls attention to our point of view, it also attaches a human burden to that vantage, the persona whose view we share and whose various characteristics and concerns that vantage illustrates. Consequently, the subjective view never simply or neatly exposes a narrative ideology, what has been called the fiction of the viewer, since it already portrays a fictional viewer, the figure through whom we see. And if the subjective camera suggests a dark labyrinth in which our seeing always seems to land us, we must remember that it is first of all that character's labyrinthine experience.

The character whose identity we temporarily assume, though, provides a comforting anchor for the subjective. In *Murder, My Sweet*'s case, the detective Philip Marlowe offers an appealing identification, since he is by profession someone who can *see* especially well—a private eye—and who is skilled in maneuvering the dark world he inhabits. The various effects that here accompany our visual identification—looks of outward regard, partial glimpses of our "inhabited" body—thus reaffirm that identity and our involvement in the world of the narrative. However, that subjective vantage also "looks" false. As Kawin notes, most close shots produce an unnatural distortion and "leave out those portions of the face and body one's own eye normally sees," while subjective camera movements are usually "slower than eye movements (so the image can remain clear) and of a completely different nature: more akin to movements of the head, complicated by a neckbrace."⁹ Moreover, the visual absence of the character whose view we share adds a further effacement, akin to that which marks our seeing. With our vision inscribed in an enigmatic position, in a persona who is obviously not us, and thus in an otherness that remains a mystery of sorts, what we can see becomes defined by a correlative sense of what we cannot see, adequately understand, or even control. In effect, our point of view points to an effacement or focal slippage that undercuts any certainty about our place here or its implications. The result is a tension between absence and presence, between effacement and seeing, that stubbornly resists the resolution we desire and that a subjective camera seemingly promises.

The bracketed perception the subjective *noirs* offer thus never quite breaks free from the hold of classical narrative, especially its protagonist-oriented perspective, nor does it grant us full access to the position from which our "mute opinions" originate. Instead, it makes us aware of an effacement or frustration that attends even such a radical cinematic seeing. As Merleau-Ponty's remarks imply and as our subsequent readings of subjective camera films will show, the *noir* experiments with subjectivity produced no simple revelation of truth, and only a fleeting glimpse of what Bill Nichols terms "the image a society gives of itself in order to perpetuate itself."¹⁰ Rather, they fashioned a disconcerting sense of the labyrinth in which seeing and knowing are entangled, in effect, pushing toward, while never quite achieving the sort of systemic self-consciousness Kawin describes. While *noir*'s subjective camera developments point to an awareness of cinematic seeing, then, it is the nature of the seeing self that these films most clearly explore, and appropriately in a mystery format.

In light of its potentially challenging nature, we should expect that *Murder, My Sweet* would follow the typical pattern of possibly disturbing Hollywood films. Far from fragile, the classical narrative is quite flexible, able to cope with a wide range of what we might term transgressive elements. It could recuperate them in various ways: by closing them within a dream, as in *The Woman in the Window*; attaching them to a rationalizing voice-over or frame, as in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946); or even making them the subject of documentary-style exposés, as in *Boomerang* (1947). In fact, *Murder, My Sweet* employs several such recuperative strategies to balance its potentially disturbing effects. For example, like *Double Indemnity* it has an embedded flashback in which Philip Marlowe narrates his encounter with Moose Malloy and his girl Velma Valento, so the frame in which Marlowe talks to the police serves to motivate his flashback and to hold its disconcerting elements at a temporal remove. The film's humorous content—as Dick Powell plays him, Marlowe is constantly wisecracking—also helps convert the disturbing into the stable, particularly when the menacing Moose Malloy appears. Its subjective elements similarly operate within a nexus of subversive and recuperative strategies, by turns embodying and denying effacement, evoking what cannot be seen but then turning it into the specular. These elements link the problem of the film subject—the detective and his dark view of events—to the general and potentially more disturbing problem of subject placement—the audience's vantage on the cinematic and real worlds—while at the same time deflecting the subjective's more unsettling possibilities, particularly the sense that the self is a kind of haunting mystery with no solution. In sum, *Murder, My Sweet's* treatment of subjectivity illustrates much of the complexity and potential of a technique that later films, most notably *Lady in the Lake* (1947) and *Dark Passage* (1947), would use to make the everyday look strange, our own perspective seem unstable, and seeing and understanding appear to operate at some variance.

The first-person narration of *Farewell, My Lovely*, the Chandler novel on which *Murder, My Sweet* is based, clearly emphasizes the subjective. But as William Luhr notes, it is a “unique and idiosyncratic” sort of narration, since Philip Marlowe's point of view filters and comments on the characters, settings, and events.¹¹ Re-creating this effect, suggesting “that the way the film's events are perceived is as significant as what they are,”¹² posed a challenge for anyone trying to adapt Chandler's work, particularly since classical narrative's perspective was essentially a given, implicitly a third-person, objective point of view. As a result, *Murder, My Sweet's* voice-over must do multiple duty,

not only motivating the flashbacks and various subjective effects but also conveying the interpretive nature of the protagonist's consciousness through verbal descriptions that amplify or qualify what we see, subjectively reworking them, as if things were being presented in both an objective and subjective light. By pushing at the normal bounds of visual detachment in this way, this approach does hint at classical narrative's limits. It suggests that the entire narrative represents a mind at work, and is thus bound by the same limitations and potentially opens onto the same labyrinths as the mind.

Murder, My Sweet's subjective effects depicting Marlowe's driftings into and out of consciousness, as he is knocked senseless, choked, drugged, and shot, dramatically point up the film's challenge to normal perspective, as well as its efforts to disguise the gaps in our understanding that might thus be disclosed. A qualifying note may be needed, though, for there are actually few extended subjective shots of the sort that we find in several later *noirs*. While it freely uses the common visual formula of subjective shot-reaction shot, the film also manifests a kind of stylistic schizophrenia. Whenever the subjective begins to dominate a scene, its effect is pointedly qualified. Thus instead of simply showing events through Marlowe's eyes, identifying our point of view with the detective's, *Murder, My Sweet* uses two shot types that demonstrate the curious combination of subversive and recuperative impulses at work here.

The first of these types, and one for which the film is most noted, is usually described as a link to *noir's* expressionist background. These are the shots that represent Marlowe's lapses from consciousness, such as when he is blackjacked while accompanying Lindsey Marriott. Marlowe's voice-over notes how “a black pool opened up at my feet. I dived in. It had no bottom,” while at the same time an inklike stain gradually engulfs the image, effectively fading out the scene and disguising the ensuing narrative gap of several hours.¹³ When, in a later sequence, he awakens from a drug-induced stupor in Dr. Sonderborg's “clinic,” Marlowe comments on the smoke and the “gray web woven by a thousand spiders” that cloud his vision, while we see him through a smoked and etched glass that simulates his visual disorientation and distortion. While such scenes let us see as Marlowe supposedly does, though, we also, if illogically, see *him*, for he remains the central focus of the frame, even as we seem placed in his motivating point of view. Harking back to expressionism's efforts to objectify internal states, this peculiar combination of subjective and objective vantages in the same field of vision points to *Murder, My Sweet's* peculiar strategy: its effort to evoke but control subjectivity, to deploy it but

without the disturbing sense of effacement that might follow and point up the limitations on our cinematic seeing.

In a second shot type that resembles a purely subjective view, this strategy works more subtly. Reaction shots introduce several scenes and seem to motivate extended point-of-view shots. This vantage, in each instance, becomes an elaborate tracking shot, as if suggesting Marlowe's exploratory movements. When inspecting the Grayle beach house, for example, Marlowe first turns on his flashlight, and a cut shows the beam of light focused on a far wall, as if seen from his vantage. As the beam explores the room's dark recesses, the camera follows, suggesting the detective's slow, deliberate inspection of the place. However, without a cut to disturb its continuity, this long tracking shot eventually ends on a shot of Marlowe himself—the object of a shot that initially seemed to represent his point of view. As a result of several such scenes, a highly qualified kind of subjectivity emerges here. More than just an illusion or near approximation of subjective vision, these subtle shifts in perspective reveal the truly indeterminate point of view that characterizes the film, while they also point toward an abiding anxiety or distrust of that sense of effacement which would inform later, more extensive *noir* use of the subjective camera.

It is in trying to have it both ways, showing what Marlowe sees while also keeping him in focus, that this film evokes what Merleau-Ponty terms the "labyrinth of difficulties and contradictions" that impinges on our point of view. Of course, that effect is in many ways suitable for a *noir* detective film, since we expect a detective to be able to see and understand in ways that others cannot. But unlike more conventional film detectives, such as Sherlock Holmes, Nick Charles, or Charlie Chan, who mainly examine external events, the *noir* detective is typically involved in an investigation that brings his own concerns into focus. For instance, we might consider the cases involving *The Maltese Falcon's* (1941) Sam Spade, *The Big Sleep's* (1946) Philip Marlowe, *The Big Heat's* (1953) Dave Bannion, and *Kiss Me Deadly's* (1955) Mike Hammer. Each of these investigations turns into a case of self-exploration and discovery, as the detective gradually shifts focus from the outside world to the internal, to the self, as he discovers his need for love, his questionable morality, or perhaps his inclination to an almost antisocial violence. We could easily read *Murder, My Sweet's* stylistic complexity in just this context, as aiming for such a dual focus on the world and on the self that would become a hallmark of the *noir* detective tale.

But perhaps more telling, especially since *noir* is often defined by its stylistic effects, is the way *Murder, My Sweet* thematically develops this

concern with shifting perspectives. Since the film's intricate web of events originates in a search for a missing person, Malloy's girl Velma, effacement, or a haunting sense of an elusive figure, becomes a key concern here. The narrative's opening quickly sounds this chord, as Marlowe recalls how his involvement with Malloy started with an interrupted relationship, his own missed date with "soft shoulders," as he terms an anonymous girlfriend. This case of romantic caesura, observed as Marlowe gazes out at the dark, alienating city, strikes a subjective note—of a need for another—that, we surmise, often goes ignored because of the detective's professional commitment to an objective world that dominates his attention. By quickly repressing and replacing Marlowe's desire with Malloy's *case* of absent love, though, the narrative both sustains a subjective interest and objectifies that concern by transforming it into the case under investigation. Even as a kind of internal enigma appears, then, it is externalized, rendered as another's puzzle to be solved rather than a personal mystery that might too closely resemble our own deferred desires.

During Marlowe's subsequent narration, this fabric of objective and subjective concerns translates into an interplay between those who look and those who are objects of attention in a way that creates another challenge to recuperation here. As Marlowe's flashback begins, for instance, a ghostly image appears that suggests the potential blind spots in his vision, the limitations on a normal point of view. Alone in his office, Marlowe gazes out at the dark city skyline. The flashing neon lights, however, turn the window into a reflective surface that suddenly reveals the previously unnoticed and menacing Malloy. In subtending Marlowe's gaze, causing him to shift focus to the near surface, this reflection not only points up a blind space in the detective's perspective but also shows that the watcher is himself watched, the object of a gaze that seeks to appropriate—or in this case employ—him.

The sudden shift from seer to seen thereafter becomes a key motif, reminding us that no seeing is totally privileged or free from the impingements of the viewed world and casting a revealing light on the private eye as one whose gaze is never fully his own. It is a light that obviously plays on the film/viewer relationship as well, suggesting a reflexive impulse at work. Marlowe is hired by Malloy to see in a way that he cannot and thus locate the lost Velma. As Malloy's symbolic extension, then, he is constantly reminded that "private eye" means not *for the self* but *for another*. For this reason Marlowe always seems subject to another's possessive gaze. For example, when he encounters Ann Grayle at the Coconut Beach Club and learns that she has been

watching him, he casually surveys the room and notices that Malloy is there too, observing him and Ann. When he excuses himself to see what Moose wants, Marlowe is treated like an acquired object, as Moose spirits him off, first to Jules Amthor's apartment, where he is beaten and questioned, and then to Dr. Sonderborg's clinic, where he is drugged and placed under observation. The effect of having the watcher persistently watched and reduced to an object for another is especially disconcerting, because it suggests the potential for a labyrinth of watchers and, ideologically, a level on which we are all possessed, our gaze subtended, appropriated, even permitted by a constantly effacing other—society, the movies, our psyches—that remains just beyond our view or understanding.

In developing this pattern, then, the narrative points to the impossibility of a single, stable point of view, and thus the limits to all seeing and knowing. Early in his tale Marlowe recalls how his role as watcher is reversed when he accompanies Lindsey Marriott to a rendezvous with some thieves. Initially, Marlowe had adopted a detached and amused perspective on his effeminate client, but on arriving at the meeting place he finds this vantage giving way to a feeling of complicity, a sense of his inclusion with Marriott in another's visual field: "We were watched. I didn't see anything; I felt it." When he is later knocked unconscious by some unseen figure, this unsettling shift from viewer to viewed recurs, as his subjectified reaction—a darkening screen and voice-over comment that "a black pool opened up at my feet"—fades into a shot in which Ann Grayle scrutinizes him. When Marlowe investigates Marriott's death by interviewing Helen Grayle, for whom the dead man had been acting, this pattern repeats. As a brief subjective shot-reaction shot series implies, Marlowe resumes his former perspective: we watch him reduce Helen to an object of visual pleasure, see his pleased look, and then view her tugging at her skirt to cover an exposed thigh. When Helen later comes to Marlowe's apartment, though, the play between seer and seen reverses. Finding him in his undershirt, she studies him and offers an objectifying appraisal, "You've got a nice build for a private detective." Her stance and remark bring both Marlowe and the viewers up short, for they repay the detective for his earlier view, while also subverting the privileged vantage from which he and the audience had previously appraised her.

At the same time, this reversal paints Helen's threatening nature in a new light for classical narrative. It defines her menace in terms of a reluctance to accept her status as an object of visual pleasure for an effacing audience, and thus in terms of a challenge she poses to the

sort of privileged, voyeuristic vantage that film usually offers. A subsequent scene in which Marlowe and Ann search the Grayle beach house for Helen reinforces this effect. Finding no one, Marlowe turns his attentions to Ann, kissing her after the fashion which Hollywood tradition dictates for such dark and romantic settings. However, their embrace is interrupted—and our narrative expectations subverted—by laughter, as Helen emerges from a dark corner where she has been secretly observing the couple. Her entrance and observation point are from a position that, in the classical tradition, is treated as practically nonexistent, because it marks our own normally invisible vantage and could call attention to the voyeuristic implications of all cinematic seeing.

That Helen Grayle reveals this problem is appropriate, though, for it obliquely hints at her true identity. She is the missing Velma Valento, the former *showgirl* whose very identity was defined by her status as a specular object. She has tried to cast off that identity, to become a spectator rather than a spectacle, thus moving into a normally effaced realm. In the fashion of so many *noir* threatening females or spider women, she represents what Janey Place terms a disruptive "desire for freedom, wealth, or independence."¹⁴ Significantly, that "desire" takes the shape here of a longing for "freedom" from being *seen* in the conventional way and from being "placed" in society by that view. No longer a dancer and gangster's moll, Helen has become a respected member of society through her marriage to a rich recluse with "a morbid fear of any kind of publicity." In effect, she has become a new person by successfully reshaping the way she is seen. But if her success in effacing her previous role signals her threatening status, it is a threat that *Murder, My Sweet* eventually qualifies. For she finds herself trapped in a web of blackmailers—Mrs. Florian, Marriott, Amthor—who make it seem unlikely that she could ever finally escape from this world's constant interplay of seers and seen.

This is just one more way in which *Murder, My Sweet* pursues its stylistic and thematic compromise with effacement, a compromise that also shows up when Marlowe recognizes a similarity between himself and Helen. As we have noted, the subject's persistent disappearance marks most of the narrative and gives it a labyrinthine quality that points to the larger problem of seeing. While Helen has tried to vacate her identity as Velma, so too has Marlowe tried to omit the self from his investigation. This dance of effacement, however, only leads to murder after murder and plunges Marlowe into what his narration describes as a series of "black pits," each one "blackier than the others, and deeper." What Marlowe only belatedly recognizes is that *he* is a

clue to the various mysteries under investigation, the only thread connecting these cases and leading through the labyrinth they form. Rather than a detached, external point of view, he is part of the field to be surveyed. And it is a mark of what he learns here that he finally adopts a new vantage, not just *from* the self but *of* the self; in effect, he learns to see himself anew. This new point of view admits his involvement in this world and, perhaps with the anti-isolationist attitude of the war still firmly in mind, cautions against a moral equivalent of effacement.

Preceding and clarifying the terms of this recognition is an unconventional use of the voice-over that accompanies Marlowe's drugged stupor at Dr. Sonderborg's clinic. Upon awakening to a vision of smoke and spider webs, Marlowe senses a kind of effacement, as if his body had become foreign, thinglike. Reaching for his sore throat, he notes that his "fingers didn't feel anything," in fact, that they seemed more like "a bunch of bananas that looked like fingers." More than a Sartrean "nausea," this feeling, along with the distorted, wide-angle view of his fingers we get, reinterprets the pattern of effacement that runs through the film. What halts this unsettling transformation and slipping away of the self is Marlowe's determination, an act of will he summons up in response to the smoke and spider webs that cloud his vision at this point. Marlowe recalls how he took command of his slipping consciousness, ordering it: "Okay, Marlowe . . . Okay, you cuckoo. Walk . . . and talk." It is an objectification of the self in the midst of this subjective sequence that matches the film's visual technique. It is also one that effectively saves his life by enabling him to escape from the clinic. At the same time, it shows the difficulty of achieving and maintaining an objective perspective, like that which the camera seems to adopt here. That view is, we recognize, a construct, but one that does not deny subjectivity or involvement; moreover, it is clearly useful for surviving in the world and coping with its mystery. By implication, that objective vantage seems a construct that the movies too adopt out of necessity, as a way of making their own mechanism more effective and unobtrusive, even of making narrative, in its root sense, as an *act of knowing*, possible.

This paradox, of an objectification of the self that captures a sense of the self's involvement, is also modeled in the narrative's frame. The opening and closing scenes of Marlowe sitting in a police station, his eyes covered by bandages as he explains what has happened, iconically present this paradox. The image of the blinded detective, his "eyeballs scorched," suggests a danger in subjectivity, in leading with the eyes or, in this instance, of getting too close to a gun's muzzle flash. Anal-

gously, it also hints at a danger in looking too closely at the cinematic mechanism. However, even as he suggests an inevitable level of effacement, the blind detective, we should recall, represents a source of truth as well. If his experience with this labyrinthine world and its "black pits" has blinded him, it has also, in the best questing tradition, made him singularly able to "see" the truth, helped him to navigate the labyrinth. By enclosing sight within a frame of blindness in this way, *Murder, My Sweet* crafts a telling image of the sort of compromise that marks cinematic seeing and that subsequent *films noir* working in the subjective vein would explore in more ambitious ways.

The introduction of Marlowe's voice-over in the opening and closing frame scenes hints at this compromise. Each scene begins with the image of a bright light, metaphorically suggesting the possibility of revelations or enlightenment to follow, coming from Marlowe's voice. As the camera tracks back, though, we see that this image is but a reflection of an overhead light in the polished surface of the table where Marlowe sits. More than just an optical trick, a disorientation to mirror Marlowe's confusion, this deceptive image points to the limits that attend all seeing and insinuates how our desire for a certain *insight*—a privileged understanding of another or of the world itself—might well depend on what remains *out of sight*, offscreen, beyond our normal point of view.

Marlowe's subsequent discovery of Ann's presence at the police station, and with it of his love for her, thematically builds upon this simultaneous problematizing and recuperating of vision. In the tradition of classical narrative, Ann is the solution to Marlowe's most pressing "mystery." She is the girl he needs to be complete, a replacement for the "soft shoulders" mentioned at the start of his account. Throughout the narrative she has been presented, like "soft shoulders," as a kind of effacing figure. In the scene following Marriott's death, she shines a light on Marlowe and then runs into the dark as he awakes; later, in the Coconut Beach Club, she again disappears while Marlowe talks to Malloy. But in the film's final scene, Ann only seems absent; although she conceals her presence, Ann is with the police, listening as Marlowe talks about her. In effect, she objectifies and vanquishes the problem of effacement, recalls it but then recuperates the detachment and invisibility it seems to imply, just as Marlowe's blindness balances his subjectivity. Occupying a blind space that is not really blind, she appropriately sparks the narrative's return to the norms of classical cinema, which is marked as well by the film's romantic conclusion. In the final taxi scene, Marlowe smells the perfume on "Nulty," his supposed police escort, recognizes who is beside him, and

asks for a kiss—from Ann. With their closing embrace and kiss, with an achieved love relationship that is the traditional measure of success, the film manages a satisfyingly romantic conclusion.

Murder, My Sweet does more than simply recuperate and stabilize what was a basically unstable perspective, though. In the development of *noir* narrative it is especially noteworthy both for the interaction it demonstrates between the seen and the unseen and for working out a thematic correlative to this interaction in its detective protagonist, who tries to efface his involvement in the world and assume a detached, objective vantage—paralleling the sort of effacement that traditionally marked the movies—only to discover the problems of such a stance. As we shall see, these developments surface more spectacularly in later *noir* subjective efforts, such as *Lady in the Lake* and *Dark Passage*. The former film, also adapted from a Chandler novel, uses a subjective camera to tie our perspective to Marlowe's for almost the entire film, so that, as the detective tells us, everything he sees we shall see. The result is a sense of immense but unsettling possibility, since every camera movement opens onto a blind space and doubles the labyrinthine sense by making our vision that of a constantly effacing figure. The film thus locates a disturbing instability and uncertainty in the character who must navigate the world and disclose its mysterious truths. The latter film uses subjectivity both as a tool of convenience, that is, to hide Humphrey Bogart's face until after his character undergoes plastic surgery, and to dramatize the plight of an individual forced into effacement, made to inhabit the unseen space that we and the movies typically ignore or deny existence to—the underworld, the offscreen, the subcultural. Because his actions are consistently misinterpreted, this character has to abandon his identity and his culture, totally efface the self, although it is a hard and unsatisfactory choice. But it is a choice that also implies how little choice we ultimately have, and in the best *noir* tradition emphasizes the unsatisfying conditions that the culture, the movies, and even our own natures impose on our seeing.

If it has received less attention than these later films, this is perhaps because *Murder, My Sweet* tries hard to be conventional. For example, Marlowe's easy humor clearly links him to earlier Hollywood detectives, like *The Thin Man*'s Nick Charles. And its frame device ultimately works to bind, qualify, and in some ways normalize the tale and its subjective elements. Like the police observing and interrogating the blind Marlowe, we adopt a vantage for seeing and questioning that never really loses its sense of authority, that never quite abandons the classical spectator position. While it successfully points to the difficult

nature of all seeing by evoking the problems of effacement and blindness, then, *Murder, My Sweet* also maneuvers around these problems through its compositions, shifting perspectives, and frame-tale structure, and finally by erecting at the very source of all subjective vision here the image of the blinded detective. From our vantage we know that what he cannot see—Ann, for instance—is nonetheless there; and what he does not know for sure, he can easily surmise. Blindness is simply not a real issue, as Marlowe transforms the disturbing potential of the unseen into little more than an individual and temporary physiological problem, making the problem of effacement seem more apparent than real.

At the same time, though, the film traces a tension that signals its important place in the *noir* canon as a pioneer of later subjective narratives. Hardly just “an ambitiously arty misfire,” as some claim,¹⁵ *Murder, My Sweet* works at a compromise between the subjective and objective points of view that implicitly speaks to a concern with the problem of perception—a concern that became a *noir* hallmark. As we shall see, later works explored the problems and potentials of cinematic subjectivity in more extreme ways, in the process revealing, like the punches aimed at the camera in *Lady in the Lake*, the blind spots in our vision and film's tendency to efface the spectator, to place him or her at an unseen, privileged vantage that promises an objective truth. Within its limits, *Murder, My Sweet* questions this strategy by the very tensions it evokes and the problems of perspective it never fully recuperates. It is in those tensions, no less than in its models of recuperative activity, that this film contributed to the development of *noir* narrative and especially to its concern with how we perceive both the real and the cinematic worlds we commonly inhabit.

NOTES

1. Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and the Invisible*, p. 9.
2. Kawin, *Mindscreen*, p. 192.
3. Clarens, *Crime Movies*, p. 195.
4. For a history of film adaptations of Chandler's private eye, see Luhr's *Raymond Chandler and Film*.
5. Wood, *America in the Movies*, p. 100.
6. Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and the Invisible*, p. 3.
7. Kawin, *Mind of the Novel*, p. 14.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 16, 285.
9. Kawin, *Mindscreen*, p. 8.
10. Nichols, *Ideology and the Image*, p. 1.
11. Luhr, *Raymond Chandler and Film*, p. 10.

2. Ibid., p. 13.
3. Motivating such gaps is crucial to an effective subjective narrative, for the unrelenting subjective vision invariably limits the shaping power of the narrative and results in many purely functional scenes, there simply because they are the context of the protagonist's experience and field of vision. A loss of consciousness, whether through violence or sleep, can thus allow for narrative elisions that move the story along more efficiently, and it can permit more meaningful juxtapositions of events. Perhaps just as important, it allows us some breathing space, a momentary relaxation of that constant, forced identification of our eyes and our bodies with the film's narrator.
4. Place, "Women in Film Noir," in Kaplan, *Women in Film Noir*, p. 46.
5. Higham and Greenberg, *Hollywood in the Forties*, p. 38.

CHAPTER 6

"The Real Thing Is Something Else": Truth and Subjectivity in *The Lady in the Lake*

Most film histories describe Robert Montgomery's *The Lady in the Lake* (1947) as a curiosity piece, an interesting but ultimately wrong-headed attempt at creating a totally subjective narrative. As we saw in *Murder, My Sweet*, that effort partly traces to a desire to imitate the interpretive first-person narration of the Raymond Chandler novel on which the film is based. However, as the protagonist Philip Marlowe notes in the prologue, the subjective approach also has a more radical function here. Fastening us with a look of outward regard that already departs from normal film practice, he describes a disparity found in most popular narratives: "What you've read and what you've heard is one thing. The real thing is something else." Through the subjective, Marlowe promises to correct this disparity by letting us see things as he saw them, sharing the private eye's singular view of "the real thing." The result is indeed "something else," a film that challenges how we normally see in the movies, but without ever quite correcting that imbalance of which it spoke. In falling short in this way, the film probably assured its eventual status as a stylistic curiosity, but it also managed to suggest the full potential of a subjective camera narration.

Marlowe's opening claim implies that our normal *narrative* way of seeing—that is, how we see in most film narratives—leaves something to be desired. It is a shortcoming, I have already suggested, that the *film noir* tried to address in various ways. Its chiaroscuro lighting, dutch angles, and unbalanced compositions, for example, point to a stance like Marlowe's, and thus signal a level on which his comment speaks for the whole *noir* project; for these effects too challenge how we see our world—or at least how it appears through the window of classical Hollywood narrative. By disrupting our normal vantage,