Above: "I'm nobody's friend." Robert Montgomery as Gagin, "the man with no place," speaks with government agent Retz (Art Smith) in *Ride the Pink Horse*.

No Way Out: Existential Motifs in the *Film Noir*

Robert G. Porfirio (1976)

The *film noir*, a Hollywood staple of the 1940s and 1950s, has come into its own as a topic of critical investigation. By now both its foreign and domestic roots (German expressionism, French poetic realism; the gangster film and the hard-boiled novel) have been clearly established. The mordant sensibilities of the "Germanic" emigrés and their penchant for a visual style which emphasised mannered lighting and startling camera angles provided a rich resource for a film industry newly attuned to the commercial possibilities of that hard-boiled fiction so popular in the 1930s. It was a style and sensibility quite compatible with a literature dealing with private eyes and middle-class crime, one bent on taking a tough approach towards American life. Following the success of *Double Indemnity* and *Murder, My Sweet*, both made in 1944, this "Germanic" tradition was quickly assimilated by others and the era of *film noir* was in full bloom. The one major domestic contribution to the style, the post-war semi-documentary, moved the *film noir* out of the "studio" period into new directions. The police documentaries (*T-Men, Street with No Name*), the exposés (*Captive City, The Enforcer*) and the socially oriented thrillers (*Crossfire, The Sound of Fury*) in turn gave way to films which could no longer be placed within the *noir* tradition (*The Line-Up, Murder, Incorporated, On the Waterfront*). It is as if the *film noir* tradition fragmented as its initial energies dissipated along new lines, and all but disappeared in the 1950s when audiences dwindled and Hollywood resorted to new styles, subjects and techniques.

I have refrained for a number of reasons from referring to *film noir* as a genre. To treat it as a genre is certainly tempting, since it simplifies the way in which it can be handled, even though it may never place the *film noir* within a specific semantical locus. Yet we must ground the term in some sort of adequate working definition if it is to warrant serious consideration as an object of either film or cultural history. While it sidesteps the semantical problem, a genetic definition creates a host of new ones. For one thing, the *film noir* cuts across many of the traditional genres: the gangster film (*White Heat*), the Western (*Pursued*), the comedy (*Unfaithfully Yours*); and this means we must create a genre out of pre-existing categories.

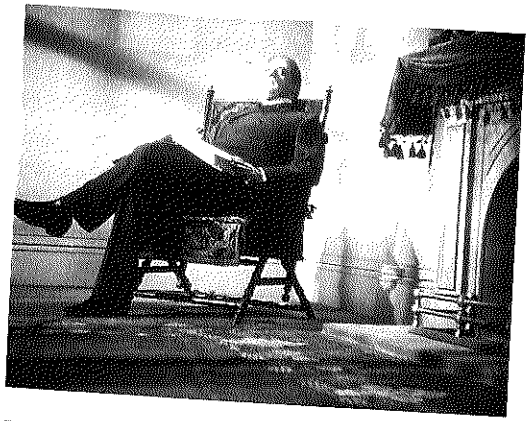
Though the classic gangster film preceded the *film noir*, there remain gangster films of this period that are quite clearly *noir* (*The Gangster*, 1947) and others that are clearly not (*Dillinger*, 1945). The same could be said for the suspense thriller (*Strangers on a Train* is, while *I Confess* is not). And this is equally true for the private eye, mystery or crime film—some are and some aren't. As a matter of fact, if one looks at the descriptions of these films in the trade journals of the period or speaks with some of the people involved in their production, one discovers rather quickly that the term *film noir* was then unknown in America and that the closest equivalent was "psychological melodrama (or thriller)." And perhaps this is the appropriate English term, since there is a psychological dimension and at least some aspect of crime (real or imagined) in every *film noir* that I have seen.

In his article, "The Family Tree of Film Noir," Raymond Durgnat perceptively attacks generic definition by demonstrating that *film noir*, unlike other genres, "takes us into the realms of classification by motif and tone." Durgnat then hastily arranges the *film noir* into eleven thematic categories, including over 300 titles as diverse as *King Kong* and *2001: A Space Odyssey*. From the standpoint of critical justification, however, his conception resolves nothing and creates more problems than it answers. Paul Schrader, in his "Notes on *Film Noir*," provides a way out by suggesting that *film noir* be conceived of as a specific period or cycle of films, analogous to the French new wave or Italian neo-realism: "In general, *film noir* refers to those Hollywood films of the 40s and early 50s which portrayed the world of dark, slick city streets, crime and corruption. *Film noir* is an extremely unwieldy period. It harks back to many previous periods..."

It is a period which at most lasted no longer than twenty years: from 1940 (*Stranger on the Third Floor*) roughly to 1960 (*Odds Against Tomorrow*). It is an unwieldy period because it was less self-conscious and articulated than, say, Italian neo-realism and because of the lack of precision with which it has been treated. Its extreme commerciality, particularly in the 1940s before theatre audiences dried up, meant that the *film noir* included large numbers of "B" films, which most scholars have refused to take seriously.

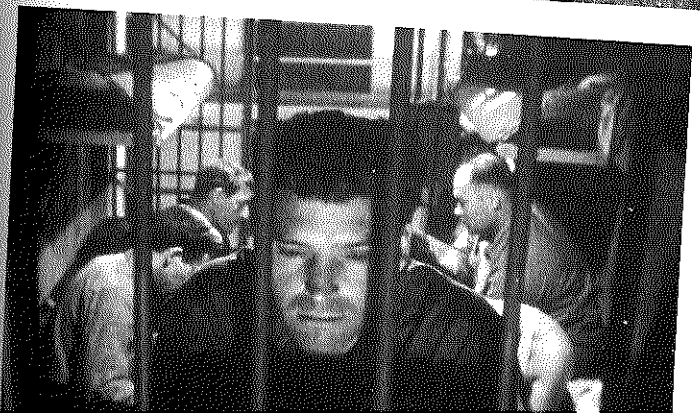
Film Noir is by nature time-bound, and it is this that makes modern "revivals," whether done in period (*Chinatown*) or not (*The Long Goodbye*), something other than what they pretend to be. But to place these films within a specific time period is not enough. Schrader was right in insisting upon both visual style and mood as criteria. Their so-called "expressionistic" style was quite literally a combination of impressionistic (i.e. technical effects) and expressionistic (i.e. mise-en-scene) techniques, which can be traced back to the period of German Expressionism. The infusion of this style into Hollywood film-making was due partly to the talents of the European emigrés and partly to the growth of the classic gangster and horror genres of the 1930s which called for such a style. But the unique development of this style in the film noir was most immediately due to *Citizen Kane*. Welles' film not only invigorated a baroque visual style which was later to characterise the pe-

Left, "The streets were dark with something more than night..." Edward G. Robinson in *Woman in the Window*



Right and below right: Gemanic angles and moods of *film noir*: Laird Cregar in John Brahm's *The Lodger*; Joan Crawford in *Possessed*.

Below, the prison as microcosm: Burt Lancaster in *Brute Force*.



riod, but also provided a new psychological dimension, a morally ambiguous hero, a convoluted time structure and the use of flashback and first person narration—all of which became film noir conventions. It is no surprise that Welles later made some classic films noirs (*The Stranger, Lady from Shanghai, Touch of Evil*) and some near misses (*Journey into Fear, Mr. Arkadin*) and provided a permanent blueprint for what might now be termed RKO noir. (Edward Dmytryk, who made *Farewell, My Lovely*, has reaffirmed the influence of Welles on the RKO "look"; appropriately, both he and Welles have acknowledged a debt to Murnau.)

Visual style rescued many an otherwise pedestrian film from oblivion. But it was not everything; nor was the presence of crime, in some guise, the fundamental defining motif. The 1940s saw the production of many routine thrillers which contained the requisite visual style yet fail as *film noir*. What keeps the *film noir* alive for us today is something more than a spurious nostalgia. It is the underlying mood of pessimism which undercuts any attempted happy endings and prevents the films from being the typical Hollywood escapist fare many were originally intended to be. More than lighting or photography, it is this sensibility which makes the black film black for us.

As Alfred Appel has noted in his book *Nabokov's Dark Cinema*: "What unites the seemingly disparate kinds of *films noirs*, then, is their dark visual style and their black vision of despair, loneliness and dread—a vision that touches an audience most intimately because it assures that their suppressed impulses and fears are shared human responses." This "black vision" is nothing less than an existential attitude towards life, and as Appel has indicated it is what unifies films as diverse as *The Maltese Falcon* (private eye), *Detour* (crime), *The Lodger* (period piece), *Brute Force* (prison film), *Woman in the Window* (psychological melodrama) and *Pursued* (Western).

In attempting to discuss some of the existential motifs in American *film noir*, I do not wish to tie myself too closely to the specific philosophy which evolved through the writings of successive generations of thinkers. Indeed, existentialism as a philosophical movement was largely unknown in America until after World War II, when the French variety was popularised by the writings and personal fame of two of its greatest exponents, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. William Barrett, in his excellent book *Irrational Man* (1962), argues that initially existentialism went against the positivist bias of Anglo-American culture: "The American has not yet assimilated psychologically the disappearance of his own geographical frontier, his spiritual horizon is still the limitless play of human possibilities, and as yet he has not lived through the crucial experience of human finitude." If existentialism did gain a foothold in post-war America, it was only after this optimism had been successively challenged by the Depression; the rise of totalitarianism; the fear of Communism; the loss of insular security; and, finally, the tarnishing of the ideal of individual initiative with the growth of the technocratic state. Even French existentialism, so closely tied to the underground Resistance and prison camps,

represented an earlier response to many of the same challenges of the integrity of self.

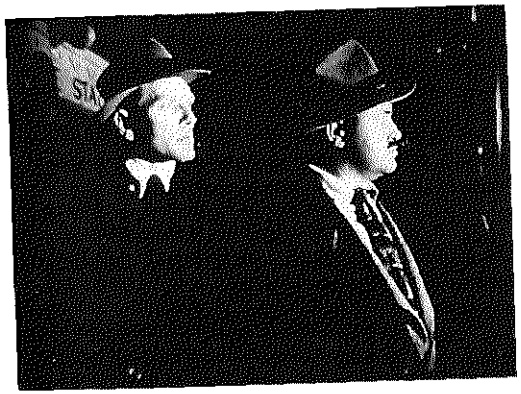
Existentialism is another term which defies exact definition. As a philosophical school of thought it has included both Christian and atheist, conservative and Marxist. For our purposes, it is best to view it as an attitude characteristic of the modern spirit, a powerful and complex cultural movement erupting somewhere on the edges of the Romantic tradition, and therefore a result of some of the same cultural energies which led to surrealism, expressionism and literary naturalism. Existentialism is an outlook which begins with a disoriented individual facing a confused world that he cannot accept. It places its emphasis on man's contingency in a world where there are no transcendental values or moral absolutes, a world devoid of any meaning but the one man himself creates. Its more positive aspect is captured in such key phrases as "freedom," "authenticity," "responsibility" and "the leap into faith (or the absurd)." Its negative side, the side to which its literary exponents are most closely drawn, emphasises life's meaninglessness and man's alienation; its catch-words include "nothingness," "sickness," "loneliness," "dread," "nausea." The special affinity of the *film noir* for this aspect of existentialism is nowhere better evidenced than in a random sampling of some of its most suggestive titles: *Cornered, One Way Street, No Way Out, Caged, The Dark Corner, In a Lonely Place*.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus recognised that the confrontation of life's emptiness made suicide a dangerous and tempting escape. To withstand this temptation, Camus and Sartre offered a few alternatives: a stubborn perseverance despite the absurdity of existence; a recognition of the community of men; an obsession with social justice; a commitment to Marxism. In an early *film noir, I Wake Up Screaming* (1941), the ostensible heavy, police Lieutenant Ed Cornell, demonstrates just this sort of perseverance. While interrogating the sister (Betty Grable) of the murdered girl he worshipped from afar, he responds to her question ("What's the use of living without hope?") with the telling reply, "It can be done." Sensitively portrayed by Laird Cregar, Cornell is no lout but a skilled detective, a man of some taste and intelligence. He becomes the ironic victim of the perfidy of a girl unworthy of his love (Carole Landis) and of the unyielding demand for professional perfection placed upon him by the police department. Unlike most of Camus' heroes, Cornell yields to the temptation of suicide, but remains a pathetic figure capable of engaging our sympathies.

It would be untenable to assert that the American *film noir* was directly affected by the writings of the European existentialists, although after the end of the war there were a few films like *Brute Force*, which in its use of a prison as microcosm and in the fascist nature of its major antagonist indicates a familiarity with French existential novels. In any case, such attempts on the part of Hollywood to borrow directly from that European tradition would have been rare indeed, particularly in the 1940s. It is more likely that this existential bias was drawn from a source

Right, detachment: Bogart's Sam Spade sending Brigid (Mary Astor) "over" in *The Maltese Falcon.*

Left, passivity and neurosis: Robert Mitchum and Robert Ryan in *The Racket.*



Left, Hemingway's tough guys: Charles McGraw and William Conrad in *The Killers.*

Below, "Some day fate can put the finger on you...": Tom Neal in *Detour.*

much nearer at hand—the hard-boiled school of fiction without which quite possibly there would have been no *film noir*. Unfortunately, "hard-boiled" is but one more example of a popular term used rather ambiguously. It includes not only the writers of the *Black Mask* school, but also an extremely diverse group of major and minor talents: Hemingway, whom many consider to be the real father of the tradition; the pure "tough" writers like James M. Cain and Horace McCoy; and even the radical proletarian writers like B. Traven, Albert Maltz and Daniel Fuchs.[1] Scant critical attention has been paid to the literary rough guys, who have been forced to join the other "boys in the back room" (as Edmund Wilson once pejoratively termed some of them). Since they worked within narrow genres, set themselves limited goals and wrote fiction geared for a mass market, they lacked the elitist respectability of their famous Jazz Age predecessors. Although a few have recently come into their own, that they were taken seriously at all in the past was largely due to their association with the much brighter light of Hemingway's reputation and to the unique and almost symbiotic relationship which they had with the French existential writers. The very term *film noir* was coined in 1946 by the cinéaste Nino Frank from Marcel Duhamel's famous "Série Noire" book series.

Perhaps André Gide was not being completely candid when he surprised some American dignitaries at a party held during World War II by telling them that Dashiell Hammett was the one contemporary American novelist worthy of serious consideration, because he was the only one who kept his work free of the pollution of moral judgments. In any case, the virtue that Gide attributed to Hammett is present in his fiction, and the American intellectual community is no longer quite so willing to write off the adulation of their counterparts in France for such writers as some sort of foreign aberration.

It is not necessary to go further here in establishing connections between European existentialism and the hard-boiled literary tradition. If, as William Barrett suggests, existentialism is foreign to the generally optimistic and confident outlook of American society, then the vast popularity of the hard-boiled writers of the 1930s went far to "soften" this confidence and prepare audiences for a new sort of pessimistic film which would surface in the 1940s. Keeping in mind the debt to this literary tradition, here then are some of the major existential motifs of the *film noir*.

The Non-heroic Hero

The word "hero" never seems to fit the *noir* protagonist, for his world is devoid of the moral framework necessary to produce the traditional hero. He has been wrenched from familiar moorings, and is a hero only in the modern sense in which that word has been progressively redefined to fit the existential bias of contemporary fiction. For the past fifty years we have groped for some term that

would more aptly describe such a protagonist: the Hemingway hero; the anti-hero; the rebel hero; the non-hero.

In one respect the Sam Spade of Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), as portrayed by Humphrey Bogart, is the least typical *noir* hero since he is the least vulnerable. Unlike Warner Brothers' first two attempts at the novel (1931 and 1936), this third is quite faithful to both the letter and the spirit of the Hammett original. The film's one unfortunate omission is the Flitcraft parable Spade tells Brigid O'Shaughnessy, for this is our only chance to peep into Spade's interior life. And what it reveals is that Spade is by nature an existentialist, with a strong conception of the randomness of existence. Robert Edenbaum sees Spade as representative of Hammett's "daemonic" tough guy: "...He is free of sentiment, of the fear of death, of the temptations of money and sex. He is what Albert Camus calls 'a man without memory,' free of the burden of the past. He is capable of any action, without regard to conventional morality, and thus is apparently as amoral...as his antagonists. His refusal to submit to the trammels which limit ordinary mortals results in a godlike immunity and independence, beyond the power of his enemies...[but] the price he pays for his power is to be cut off behind his own self-imposed masks, in an isolation that no criminal, in a community of crime, has to face."[2]

If the film's conclusion mitigates a little the bleak isolation of Hammett's Spade, it maintains the "daemonic" qualities of his nature through the sinister aspect of Bogart's persona, so apparent in his final confrontation with Brigid (Mary Astor). In Huston's ending, Spade's ability to dismiss the falcon, the one object of "faith" in the story, as "the stuff that dreams are made of" shows him to be more detached than almost any Hemingway hero. This stoic stance would be emulated, but seldom equalled, by many of the actors who dominated the period: by Bogart himself (*Dead Reckoning, Dark Passage*), followed in rapid succession by Alan Ladd (*This Gun for Hire, The Glass Key*) and a veritable army of tough guys—Edmond O'Brien, Robert Mitchum, Robert Ryan, Richard Widmark, Burt Lancaster, Kirk Douglas. By their physical make-up, their vocal qualities and their dress, as well as by the dialogue given them, these actors defined the tough guy regardless of whether they played detective or criminal. They also suggested varying degrees of vulnerability.

Critics have reminded us that the Hemingway hero is a person "to whom something has been done"; that most central to this hero is the loss, and an awareness of it, of all the fixed ties that bind a man to a community. This is an apt description of the *film noir* hero as well, and a real strength of Hollywood's studio system was to cast to type. Vulnerability and a sense of loss were suggested in Humphrey Bogart's lined face and slightly bent posture; in Alan Ladd's short stature and a certain feminine quality about his face; in the passivity and the heavy-lidded eyes of Robert Mitchum; in the thinly veiled hysteria that lay behind many of Richard Widmark's performances; in Robert Ryan's nervous manner. But this vulnerability was perhaps best embodied in the early screen persona of Burt Lancaster, whose powerful physique ironically dominated the cinematic frame. Unlike the expansive and exaggerated characterisations of later years, the Lancaster of the *film noir* kept his energy levels under rigid control, rarely extending himself and then only to withdraw quickly like a hunted animal. Fittingly, his first screen role was in the Robert Siodmak version of *The Killers* (1946) as the Hemingway character Ole Anderson who passively awaits death at the hands of the hired assassins. Throughout the 1940s Lancaster was adept at capturing the pathos of a character victimised by society (*Brute Force; Kiss the Blood Off My Hands*) or by a woman (*The Killers; Sorry, Wrong Number; Criss Cross*).

As the period progressed, *film noir* heroes seemed to become increasingly vulnerable and subject to pressures beyond their control. Bogart's roles moved from the lonely but impervious Sam Spade to the equally lonely but much less stable Dixon Steele of *In a Lonely Place*. The role of the detective shows the same sort of degeneration, and some succumbed to the corrupt world, becoming criminals themselves (Fred MacMurray in *Pushover*). This malaise is best seen in *The Dark Corner* (1946), whose detective Bradford Galt (Mark Stevens) strives to maintain personal integrity and hard-nosed style by mouthing the obligatory tough dialogue ("I'm as clean as a hard-boiled egg"). But it's not really enough, and Galt's angst is reflected in this cry: "I feel all dead inside...I'm backed up in a dark corner and I don't know who's hitting me!" Yet the typical *noir* protagonist wearily goes on living, seldom engaging in the kind of self-pity displayed by Dana Andrews' con man in *Fallen Angel* (1945) or his wayward cop in *Where the Sidewalk Ends* (1950).

The *mise en scène* of the *film noir* reinforced the vulnerability of its heroes. Although the habitat of the 1930s gangster was "the dark, sad city of the imagination," the gangster hero himself was generally well illuminated by a bright key-light, though his surroundings may have fallen off into darkness. Not so in the *film noir*. The hero moved in and out of shadows so dark as at times to obscure him completely; diagonal and horizontal lines "pierced" his body; small, enclosed spaces (a detective's office, a lonely apartment, a hoodlum's hotel bedroom), well modulated with some sort of "bar" motif (prison bars, shadows, bed posts and other furniture), visually echoed his entrapment. Small wonder that he found it hard to maintain any degree of rational control.

Alienation and Loneliness

The concept of alienation is crucial to most existentialists from Kierkegaard to Sartre. For them, man stands alone, alienated from any social or intellectual order, and is therefore totally self-dependent. We have seen how this alienation "works" for the private detective. By keeping emotional involvement to a minimum, the detective gains a degree of power over others but pays the price in terms of loneliness.

To a large degree, every *noir* hero is an alienated man. Even members of the police for or F.B.I. in the semi-documentary films are cut off from the camaraderie of their colleagues and forced to work undercover. The *noir* hero is most often "a stranger in a hostile world." In *Ride the Pink Horse*, the disillusioned veteran Gagin (Robert Montgomery) is referred to as "the man with no place," and he tells a local villager: "I'm nobody's friend." Even ostensibly happily married men (Edward G. Robinson in *Woman in the Window*, Dick Powell in *Pitfall*) become alienated from the comforts of home, usually for the sake of a beautiful woman. The homelessness of such characters as Harry Fabian (Richard Widmark) of *Night and the City* or Ole Anderson of *The Killers*, like that of an inhabitant of one of Robert Frost's bleakest winter landscapes, takes on almost cosmic dimensions. This estrangement is recapitulated in the *mise en scène*: bare rooms, dimly lit bars, dark, rain-soaked streets. In the shocking last sequence of *Scarlet Street*, the utter isolation of Chris Cross (Robinson) is underscored by means of an optical trick—all the people in the crowded street disappear from view, and we realise that for him they do not exist.

Sometimes the estrangement of the hero moves to even darker rhythms. Shubunka (Barry Sullivan), the title character of *The Gangster*, is reminiscent of Dostoevsky's underground man in his bitterness and the contempt he holds for his fellow men. In the prologue he tells the audience: "I knew everything I did was low and rotten. What did I care what people thought of me. I despised them." In the course of the film we find he despises himself almost as much; and at the end, betrayed by the one person he loved (Belita), he allows the syndicate figure who has wrested control of his rackets from him to shoot him down in the rain-soaked street. But before he dies, Shubunka delivers one of the most vitriolic speeches in the annals of *film noir*: "My sins are that I wasn't tough enough. I should have trusted no one; never loved a girl. I should have smashed [the others] first. That's the way the world is."

Even more misanthropic is Roy Martin (Richard Basehart), the elusive killer of *He Walked By Night*. A master of technology which rivals the police department's, Martin remains little more than a cipher and his motives for becoming a thief and a killer are unclear. Basehart's laconic performance contributed to this ambiguity (as, perhaps, do deficiencies of script and budget). Living alone in a darkened room in a typical Hollywood court, his only companion a small dog, he is literally the underground man, using the sewers as a means of travel and escape. Intelligent men like Shubunka and Martin are no mere victims of a slum environment; their criminality is rather the result of a conscious choice made sensible by the world they inhabit. For them, as for Sartre's characters in *No Exit*, "Hell is other people."

The major female protagonists of the *film noir* were no more socially inclined than the men. The "femme noire" was usually also a *femme fatale*, and a host of domineering women, castrating bitches, unfaithful wives and black widows

seemed to personify the worst of male sexual fantasies. They were played with an aura of unreality by such actresses as Ava Gardner, Rita Hayworth or Gene Tierney, but perhaps most typically by Barbara Stanwyck and Claire Trevor. Even when the heroine was sweet and good (Ida Lupino in *On Dangerous Ground*, Joan Bennett in *The Reckless Moment*), she was for the most part a monad, unwilling or unable to avail herself of the benefits of society.

Existential Choice

The precipitous slide of existentialism toward nihilism is only halted by its heavy emphasis on man's freedom. In exchange for this benefit, the individual must be willing to cast aside the weight of outmoded beliefs in a tough recognition of the meaninglessness of existence. He must choose, in other words, between "being and nothingness," between the "authentic" and "inauthentic" life. The inauthentic life is the unquestioned one which derives its rationale from a facile acceptance of those values external to the self. To live authentically, one must reject these assurances and therein discover the ability to create one's own values; in so doing each individual assumes responsibility for his life through the act of choosing between two alternatives. And since man is his own arbiter, he literally creates good and evil.

For the most viable of the *noir* heroes this element of choice is readily apparent. The private eye exercises this choice in his willingness to face death,

Below: "Hell is other people..." James Mason in Max Ophuls' *The Reckless Moment*, a film in which *mise en scène* characteristically creates environment.

prompted only by a sense of duty towards rather dubious clients and a somewhat battered concept of integrity and professionalism. But what of the innocent victims, the fugitives from the law, and the criminals who often function as central protagonists? Existential freedom for them is much less apparent. Yet even the most victimised among them (like Edmond O'Brien in *D.O.A.* or Tom Neal in *Detour*) have some opportune moments to make choices which will affect their lives. With respect to the fugitives (John Dall and Peggy Cummins in *Gun Crazy*) and middle-class criminals (MacMurray in *Double Indemnity*), their choices appear more mundane than metaphysical and their acts less clearly rebellious against established conventions. Yet all are aware of these conventions, and their decision to disregard them indicates their willingness to live lives untrammelled by moral norms. They exist in a fluid world whose freedom is rather concretely embodied in sex, money, power and the promise of adventure. Thus, one may be motivated by the exhilaration of living dangerously (*Gun Crazy*), another by a desire to "beat the system" (*Double Indemnity*), others by a desire to break out of pedestrian daily routine and boredom (Robinson in *Woman in the Window*, Dick Powell in *Pitfall*, Van Heflin in *The Prowler*). Like Spade's Flitcraft, they can either fall back into the security of their former roles or make the leap into the absurd, take the gamble in which the stakes are their very lives.

Man Under Sentence of Death

Although many existentialists affirm that every act and attitude of man must be considered a choice, the existential attitude itself is not so much chosen as arrived at. Perhaps this is why the heroes of existential fiction are so perennially faced with the threat of imminent death; certainly such a threat forces the individual to re-examine his life. "The fable of the man under the sentence of death, writing to us from his prison cell or from the cell of his isolated self, is one of the great literary traditions." In a perceptive essay in *Tough Guy Writers of the 30s*, Joyce Carol Oates goes on to demonstrate the relevance of this undeniably existential situation to the fiction of James M. Cain, but its relevance to the *film noir* is equally apparent. 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, his romanticisation of it heightened by his particular surroundings; a wounded man dictating in a darkened office (*Double Indemnity*); an ex-private detective in a dimly lit car telling his fiancée about his sordid past (Robert Mitchum in *Out of the Past*); a prisoner in a cell about to be executed (John Garfield in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*); an accountant dying from the irreversible effects of an exotic poison, trying to explain his "murder" and the vengeance he has exacted for it to a police captain (Edmond O'Brien in *D.O.A.*). One hero, Joe Gillis (William Holden) of *Sunset Boulevard*, is even able to look back upon a life that has been completed, like a character out of Sartre's *No Exit*, beginning his story as a corpse floating face-downwards in a swimming pool.

Like the Hemingway hero, most *film noir* protagonists fear death but are not themselves afraid to die; indeed a good deal of what dignity they possess is derived from the way they react to the threat of death. That the way one dies is important is seen in Philip Marlowe's special admiration for Harry Jones (Elisha Cook, Jr.), the frightened little crook who takes the poison offered him with grim laughter rather than betray his girl friend (*The Big Sleep*). It is seen in the manner in which Cody Jarrett (James Cagney) in *White Heat* spits out: "I made it, Ma. Top of the world!" just before he ignites the gasoline tank on which he is perched. It is seen in the way the Swede spends those last lonely moments in his hotel room after his refusal to run (*The Killers*). The boxer in *Body and Soul* (John Garfield) puts it best when he tells the racketeer he has just crossed: "So what are you going to do kill me? Everybody dies."

Meaninglessness, Purposelessness, the Absurd

The meaninglessness of man's existence flows naturally from existentialism's emphasis on individual consciousness and its key denial of any sort of cosmic design or moral purpose. For Camus it involved a recognition of the "benign indifference" of the world, and ultimately a reclamation of a measure of dignity through the sheer persistence of living on despite life's absurdity. This sense of meaninglessness is also present in *film noir*, but there it is not the result of any sort of discursive reasoning. Rather it is an attitude which is worked out through *mise en scène* and plotting. The characters confined to the hermetic world of the films move to a scenario whose driving force is not the result of the inexorable workings of tragic fate or powerful natural forces, but of a kind of pure, Heraclitean flux. Look at the plot of almost any *film noir* and you become aware of the significant role played by blind chance: a car parked on a manhole cover prevents the protagonist's escape and he is shot down by police in the sewers (*He Walked By Night*); an accountant notarises a bill of sale and is poisoned for this innocent act (*D.O.A.*); a feckless youth is hypnotised into becoming the instrument of a murderer's devious plans simply because he accepted a cough drop in a crowded elevator (*Fear in the Night*, 1947; also *Nightmare*, 1956); a spinsterish psychology professor agrees to have dinner with one of her students and ends up killing him (*The Accused*). Such a list could go on endlessly, but these examples should indicate that such randomness is central to the *noir* world. The hero of *Detour* (Tom Neal) tells us: "Some day fate, or some mysterious force, can put the finger on you or me for no reason at all."

Chaos, Violence, Paranoia

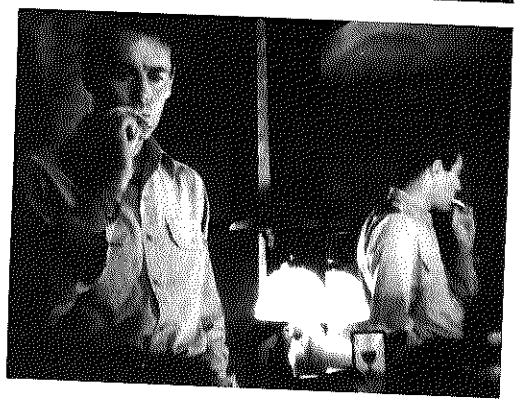
The pre-existential world of the classical detective was ordered and meaningful; social aberrations were temporary and quickly righted through the detective's superior powers of deductive reasoning. A product of a rather smug Western society, such a world reflected a Victorian sense of order and a belief in the supremacy of science. The hard-boiled writers replaced this with a corrupt, chaotic world where the detective's greatest asset was the sheer ability to survive with a shred of dignity. Raymond Chandler described this world as a "wet emptiness" whose "streets were dark with something more than night." For most existentialists, the real world was equally inchoate and senseless. Sartre himself found the physical world, the world of things-in-themselves,[3] slightly disgusting and he associated it with images of softness, stickiness, viscosity, flabbiness. When, for example, Roquentin discovers existence in the experience of disgust in *Nausea*, it is a disgust engendered by the excessiveness of the physical world, represented by a chestnut tree with thick, tangled roots. For Sartre this world was disgusting precisely because it was too rich, too soft, too effusive; behind it lay the Jungian archetype of nature, the fertile female.

The *film noir* best expressed this effusiveness visually through a variety of techniques, the most important of which is the use of deep focus or depth-staging (here, perhaps, the primary influence of Orson Welles). As André Bazin pointed out, the use of this technique (as opposed to the shallow focus and "invisible" editing of Hollywood films of the 1930s) permitted the cinema more nearly to approximate the "real" world by allowing the spectator to pick and choose from a wealth of stimuli. Deep focus was an important element of the *noir* visual style until changing conditions and production techniques in the 1950s brought the *film noir* period to a close. In conjunction with chiaroscuro and other expressionistic touches, deep focus helped to create a cinematic world which in its own way embodied those very qualities—decadence, corpulence, viscosity—that Sartre found so disgusting in the physical world. It was a cinematic world that was dark, oppressive, cluttered and corrupt; characterised by wet city streets, dingy apartments and over-furnished mansions, but above all by an atmosphere thick with the potential for violence. In *T-Men*, for example, an undercover agent (Dennis O'Keefe) shares a nondescript hotel room with a couple of thugs, their virtual prisoner. In one scene, deep focus allows us to keep in view the threatening, brutal figure of Moxy (Charles McGraw) in the background shaving, while the agent is in another room in the extreme foreground, trying to read unobserved a note warning him to flee for his life. In this one sequence, the whole unstable and menacing world of the *film noir* is brilliantly caught.

Camus said that "at any street corner the absurd may strike a man in the face." Given the special ambience of *film noir*, the absurd often takes the form of an undercurrent of violence which could literally strike a man at any moment: a trench-

Left, "Everybody dies...": Burt Lancaster in *The Killers*.

Right, Edward G. Robinson in Scarlet Street: visual "echoes of entrapment" in the shadows and bars of the setting



Right, a Man under Sentence of Death: Henry Fonda as the self-imprisoned killer in *The Long Night*

Below, Mark Stevens in *The Dark Corner*: "...I'm backed up in a dark corner and I don't know who's hitting me."

coated figure beneath a street lamp; a car parked on a dark side street; a shadow hiding behind a curtain. The atmosphere is one in which the familiar is fraught with danger and the existential tonalities of "fear" and "trembling" are not out of place; even less that sense of "dread" which is taken to mean a pervasive fear of something hauntingly indeterminate. And just as existentialism itself was partly a response to a war-torn Europe, so too was the disquietude of post-war America (the Communist threat, the Bomb) reflected in the films' fear-ridden atmosphere. Finally, if the Jungian archetype of the female lurks behind Sartre's conception of the natural world, she is equally present in the image of the city conveyed in these films—the city, that is, which Jung himself characterised as a "harlot." For the *film noir* protagonist the city is both mother and whore, and the stylised location photography of such semi-documentaries as *Cry of the City* or *The Naked City* adeptly captures its essential corruption and oppressiveness.

Sanctuary, Ritual and Order

Set down in a violent and incoherent world, the *film noir* hero tries to deal with it in the best way he can, attempting to create some order out of chaos, to make some sense of his world. For the detective, of course, this goes with the territory, but it is attempted with an equal sense of urgency by the amnesiac (*Somewhere in the Night*), the falsely accused (*The Blue Dahlia*), the innocent victim (*D.O.A.*), or the loyal wife or girl friend (*Woman on the Run, Phantom Lady*). Given the nature of the *noir* world, the attempt is seldom totally successful, and convoluted time structures, flashbacks and plots that emphasise action over rational development do nothing to help.

The Hemingway hero may withdraw to the sanctuary of the country or a café; or he may lean heavily on the ritualistic aspects of sport or art as a way of assuaging his pain and finding some order in his life. The *noir* hero does likewise, but he has far fewer resources to work with. There is no "country" left,[4] only the modern wasteland of such cities as New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles. And art is no longer redemptive: it is a measure of the decadence and avariciousness of the rich (*Laura, The Dark Corner*), or an affectation of refinement on the part of syndicate chiefs (*The Chase, The Big Heat*) or the criminally insane (*The Unsuspected, Crack Up*). In any case, its healing powers are lost to artist (*Phantom Lady, The Two Mrs. Carrolls*) and detective (*The Big Sleep, Kiss Me Deadly*) alike. There are still a few restorative rituals remaining to the *film noir* hero, in particular the private eye: sometimes they are little things like rolling a cigarette (Spade) or pouring and downing a drink (Marlowe); sometimes bigger, like taking a beating or facing death. And in the hands of actors endowed with a special grace (a Humphrey Bogart or Dick Powell), such ceremonies as smoking or drinking take on sacramental overtones.

The only sanctuary left for the hero is his Spartan office or apartment room, and he goes back there for spiritual renewal just as surely as Nick Adams goes back to the country. This is why Sam Spade almost loses control when the police confront him in his own living quarters. When doomed men like Walter Neff in *Double Indemnity* (Fred MacMurray) or Al Roberts in *Detour* (Tom Neal) withdraw to a darkened office or a small diner, they are reminiscent of the older waiter in Hemingway's "A Clean, Well-lighted Place." They can use the quiet and solitude to try to order their lives (and note that Roberts does not want to talk or listen to the juke box); they are like artists trying to carve an aesthetic order out of the diffuse materials of existence. And what they have created is quite temporary, no more than a "momentary stay against confusion."

Given a rather broad range of heroes and situations in the *film noir*, it is of course always dangerous to generalise. I have tried in this article to avoid the facile generalisation, to take note of exceptions where they exist, and above all to remain faithful to the essence of the *film noir*. The period of the *film noir* was an extremely important one in American film history and had a profound effect on the later evolution of American cinema. It is of course impossible to do it justice in an article of this length. My rather narrow intention here has been to indicate the necessity of a critical reappraisal, following a lead established some years ago by Paul Schrader in the hope of opening up an approach to the subject which would free us of some of the semantical entanglements of the past.

Notes

1. Together with the "tough" writers, like Hammett, Chandler, McCoy and Cain, "proletarian" authors Fuchs, Bezzerides, Maltz and others were part of the literary exodus to Hollywood in the 1930s and 1940s. Many became friends or part of a radical colony there, but by and large the *films noirs* they were associated with exhibit more of an existential than a radical outlook (*Thieves' Highway* is a good example); a result no doubt of the political climate in America at the time.
2. "The Poetics of the Private Eyes," in *Tough Guy Writers of the Thirties*, edited by David Madden. (Carbondale, Illinois, 1968).
3. Sartre's particular dualistic system divides the world into two spheres: the objective, which exists quite apart from our minds, he termed "Being-in-itself"; the subjective, which is co-extensive with the realm of consciousness, he termed "Being-for-itself." It is the first that he found slightly repellent.
4. There are a few instances in which *films noirs* were not set in a city. But even here the setting does not prove to be any more redemptive: it is a swamp in *Gun Crazy*, a French province seething with repressed passions in *So Dark the Night*, unregenerate or oppressive Mexican towns in *Ride the Pink Horse* and *Touch of Evil*.