

## THIS IS WHERE I CAME IN

When I was “at the cinema age” (it should be recognized that this age exists in life—and that it passes) I never began by consulting the amusement pages to find out what film might chance to be the best, nor did I find out the time the film was to begin.

ANDRÉ BRETON, “As in a Wood,” 1951

For most people, the term *film noir* conjures up a series of generic, stylistic, or fashionable traits from certain Hollywood pictures of the 1940s and 1950s. There are, for example, noir characters and stories (drifters attracted to beautiful women, private eyes hired by femmes fatales, criminal gangs attempting to pull off heists); noir plot structures (flashbacks, subjective narration); noir sets (urban diners, shabby offices, swank nightclubs); noir decorations (venetian blinds, neon lights, “modern” art); noir costumes (snap-brim hats, trenchcoats, shoulder pads); and noir accessories (cigarettes, cocktails, snub-nosed revolvers). There are also noir performances, often associated with the “radio voices” of actors like Alan Ladd and Dick Powell; noir musical styles, consisting not only of orchestral scores by Max Steiner, Bernard Herrmann, and David Raksin, but also of mournful jazz tunes, the essence of which have been captured on two retro albums made in the late 1980s and early 1990s by the Charlie Haden Quartet; and noir language, derived mainly from the hard-boiled speech in Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. (“Is there any way to win?” Jane Greer asks Robert Mitchum in *Out of the Past*. “There’s a way to lose more slowly,” he replies.) To the informed tourist,

there are even real places, especially in Los Angeles, that seem bathed in the aura of noir: the Alto Nido residence hotel at Franklin and Ivar, just up the street from where Nathanael West wrote *Day of the Locust*; the Bradbury Building, featured in several movies and later chosen as the site of a P.E.N. ceremony honoring Billy Wilder; and most of all, the Glendale train station at night, looking much more colorful and charming than in *Double Indemnity*, where it was blacked out by wartime restrictions on lights.

These signs of film noir have influenced countless Hollywood directors of the poststudio era, who often recycle them or use them as a lexicon for parody and pastiche. Meanwhile, in the literature on movies, a slightly more complicated discourse on noir has grown steadily over the past three decades. Numerous books and essays have been written on the topic, usually analyzing thrillers or crime pictures of the 1940s and 1950s in terms of their cynical treatment of the American Dream, their complicated play with gender and sexuality, and their foregrounding of cinematic style. We might say, in fact, that film noir has become one of the dominant intellectual categories of the late twentieth century, operating across the entire cultural arena of art, popular memory, and criticism.

In the following book, I do not deny the importance or relevance of our culture's pervasive ideas about "noirness," but I treat the central term as a kind of mythology, problematizing it by placing the films, the memories, and the critical literature in a series of historical frames or contexts. One of the most important of these contexts, about which I say rather little in the book proper, is undoubtedly my own personal history, and I should perhaps acknowledge that determinant here at the beginning, before proceeding with my critical and scholarly concerns. The best place to start is in the mid to late 1950s, shortly before and during my adolescence, when the movies were still a relatively cheap form of entertainment. Television had not yet come to every household (my father purchased our first set around 1955), and most neighborhoods had second-run or rerelease theaters where the films changed every few days. At such places, moviegoing involved a feeling of circularity and flow; one often entered in the middle of a feature and then stayed to see the short subjects, the previews, and the opening one had missed. Even in the first-run venues at the heart of the city, it was not unusual to watch the show in a nonlinear or flashback style. Hence the popular expression, "This is where I came in."

I always liked the pictures about urban adventure. As a child at the Saturday matinees, I preferred *The Bowery Boys* or *Boston Blackie* to

Roy Rogers. At the most visceral level, I was less a connoisseur of city movies than a lover of the air-conditioned darkness and quicksilver imagery of the theaters themselves, which offered temporary release from the humid southern towns where I lived. In my early adolescence, I often assumed a semifetal position, knees against the seat in front of me, absorbed not so much in the stories as in the photography, performance, and sound. What I remember best are the fetishized details—Elizabeth Scott’s unreal blondness and husky voice in *Dark City*, or Edmond O’Brien’s rumpled suit as he runs desperately down the crowded street in *D.O.A.*

Later in the decade, after I began to acquire an artistic interest in movies, my imagination was fired by black-and-white photography and melodramatic danger. This was the age of Elvis and Cinemascope, but I was stunned by *Killer’s Kiss*, a cheap thriller about which I had heard nothing. (I can recall exiting the theater and searching the poster outside to find that the name of the director was Stanley Kubrick.) I especially liked such films when they offered nonconformist philosophical or social criticism and when their endings seemed a bit less than happy. Among my favorites were the rereleases of *Detective Story* (a police procedural about a violent cop who learns that his wife once had an abortion), *The Asphalt Jungle* (a blow-by-blow account of an attempted robbery, in which the criminals are the most sympathetic characters), and *Ruthless* (a rise-to-success narrative that depicts the hero as a heel). I was equally affected by first-run showings of *The Wrong Man* (a true story about an innocent man accused of a crime), *End as a Man* (a frightening portrait of a charismatic young sadist in a southern military school), *Sweet Smell of Success* (a dark satire about an influential Broadway columnist and a sleazy press agent), and *Attack!* (an antiwar movie in which most of the officers are either insane or corrupt). For similar reasons, I was delighted by the blending of menace and iconoclasm in a couple of escapist pictures about romance and suspense: *His Kind of Woman* and *Strangers on a Train*. During those years, I bought a paperback reprint of Raymond Chandler’s *Simple Art of Murder* and virtually memorized the tough-guy cadences of the title essay. I also saw part of an Orson Welles picture for the first time—the grotesquely sinister opening sequence of *Journey into Fear*, which I glimpsed late at night on a snowy television set.

How intriguing to discover, long afterward, that I had been living through the last decade of historical film noir. I say “historical” because the basic term can refer both to the present-day cinema and to an extinct

genre. The temporal distinction seems important, and yet it is also simplistic or misleading. Most contemporary writing and filmmaking associated with noir provokes a mourning and melancholy for the past, made all the more poignant because the objects being mourned are still with us on TV. To use a specifically Freudian language (which many of the old films themselves seem to elicit), our contemporary fascination with noir may entail a sort of *Nachträglichkeit*, or a method of dealing with the present by imagining a primal scene. The memories I have just recorded are no exception; they are influenced by things that happened afterward, and they omit many features of the complex popular culture I once experienced.

The term *film noir* was barely known in America when I went through what André Breton calls “the cinema age.” But it was not completely unknown. In a recent anthology of writings on the subject, Alain Silver and James Ursini have published a 1956 photograph of director Robert Aldrich, standing on the set of *Attack!* and holding a copy of Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton’s *Panorama du film noir américain*. Perhaps Aldrich was trying to tell us something about his work—or perhaps he was merely acknowledging the fact that Borde and Chaumeton greatly admired his previous picture, *Kiss Me Deadly*. At any rate, during the years before the classic Hollywood studios were completely reorganized, before a wave of innovative European cinema began to enter the American market, and before I myself had ever heard of film noir, several pictures that today’s critics often describe as noir cohered in my own mind and helped to give me a sense of movies as an art.

*More than Night* pays these and other movies like them an indirect tribute, offering a wide-ranging and synoptic discussion of American film noir between 1941 and the present. My topic is large, and in covering such an extensive time period I inevitably fail to mention some important titles. For example, I decided to keep influential directors such as Alfred Hitchcock and Orson Welles, about whom I have written elsewhere, slightly at the margins of my study—this despite the fact that the burning “R” at the end of *Rebecca* and the burning “Rosebud” at the end of *Citizen Kane* echo one another, and despite the fact that both films are crucial to the way we think about Hollywood in the 1940s. I nevertheless discuss European and British pictures that influenced Hollywood, and I pay a good deal of attention to the French intellectual context in which the idea of noir was first articulated. I also nominate neglected titles as films noirs, or at least question their absence in previous writings, and I explore the noir elements of the other media in some detail.

In order to do justice to the paradoxes of history, I shuttle back and

forth in time. The reader will find that my early chapters have more to do with classic Hollywood and that my later ones are increasingly concerned with the present day. Even so, the book is not strictly chronological, and (somewhat like the old Hollywood moguls) I do not expect that everyone will consume what I have produced in linear fashion. I can only suggest that those who want to understand my general assumptions should go directly to the first chapter, which is my true introduction and touches upon most of my themes. In chapter 1, I contend that film noir has no essential characteristics and that it is not a specifically American form. I also try to confirm the truth of a recent observation by J. P. Telotte, who says that all arguments about the nature of noir have “as much to do with criticism itself, especially with the varying ways that we define film genres,” as they do with our putative objects of study.<sup>1</sup> Telotte’s point was reinforced for me shortly after the first draft of my chapter was written, when I saw Quentin Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction*. At the beginning of that movie, two gangsters talk about the difference between cheeseburgers in Paris and cheeseburgers in the United States. One of them notes that “Cheese Royale” sounds better than “Big Mac.” Along similar lines, I would suggest that because “film noir” sounds better than a good many American terms that might be used, it has affected the way we view certain mass-produced items.

Like almost every other critic, I begin by calling attention to the fact that film noir is an unusually baggy concept, elaborated largely after the fact of the films themselves. I suspect, however, that the often-expressed critical concern over the term’s meaning and utility may arise out of a misunderstanding of how generic or historical concepts are formed. The logic of genre construction has not been my primary interest, but it may help to note in passing that much can be learned about such matters from cognitive scientist George Lakoff’s *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things* (1987), which sounds rather like a film noir. (Interestingly, the 1932 adaptation of *The Maltese Falcon* was called *Dangerous Female*, and the working title for the Billy Wilder–Raymond Chandler adaptation of *Double Indemnity* was *Incendiary Blonde*.) Lakoff is a powerful critic of the Aristotelian notion that categories are made up of items with common properties—a notion also rejected by empirical research and by such diverse theorists as Ludwig Wittgenstein, J. R. Austin, and Jacques Derrida. Virtually all contemporary language philosophers agree that people do not form concepts by placing similar things together. Instead, they create networks of relationship, using metaphor, metonymy, and forms of imaginative association that develop over time. As a result, every im-

portant term in art criticism indicates something like the “family tree” that British critic Raymond Durnat once used to describe film noir.

Cognitive science prefers to avoid Durnat’s organic imagery; it argues that categories form complex radial structures, with vague boundaries and a core of influential members at the center. But neither tree diagrams nor radial structures are employed by most film historians, who operate within the realm of what Lakoff calls “objective semantics” and hope to classify movies according to their necessary and sufficient characteristics. Perhaps the very word *genre*, with its etymological links to biology and birth, promotes a kind of essentialism; but even when writers about film noir claim to be speaking of something other than a genre, they keep trying to list its definitive traits. To avoid troubling anomalies, they sometimes argue that the noir form is “transgeneric.” The problem here is that such an argument also applies to the ostensibly stable genres: there are western musicals (*Oklahoma*), western melodramas (*Duel in the Sun*), western science-fiction pictures (*Westworld*), and western noirs (*Pursued*). The fact is, every movie is transgeneric or polyvalent. Neither the film industry nor the audience follows structuralist rules, and movie conventions have always blended together in mongrelized ways. By the same token, every important category is shaped by what Lakoff describes as a “chaining” technique that develops historically and socially. Certain items along the chain will be connected in different ways and will be utterly unlike others. (*Clash by Night* has nothing specific in common with *Laura*, even though both movies have been called noir.) Thus, no matter what modifier we attach to a category, we can never establish clear boundaries and uniform traits. Nor can we have a “right” definition—only a series of more or less interesting uses.

As will be seen, my own approach has less to do with cognitive theory than with cultural and social history. It may seem odd, however, that after questioning most of the usual generalizations about film noir in my first chapter, I go on to use the term in a familiar way and to employ a more or less conventional historiography. I would explain the apparent contradiction by pointing out that *film noir* functions rather like big words such as *romantic* or *classic*. An ideological concept with a history all its own, it can be used to describe a period, a movement, and a recurrent style. Like all critical terminology, it tends to be reductive, and it sometimes works on behalf of unstated agendas. For these reasons, and because its meaning changes over time, it ought to be examined as a discursive construct. It nevertheless has heuristic value, mobilizing specific themes that are worth further consideration.

The subsequent chapters of my book explore these themes, but I often qualify or challenge what is normally said about them. In chapter 2, I consider the literary basis of dark thrillers in the early 1940s, arguing that our typical view of pulp fiction is oversimplified and that the “original” films noirs can be explained in terms of a tense, contradictory assimilation of high modernism into the American culture industry as a whole. Chapter 3 deals with the related problem of noir’s so-called resistance to Hollywood norms. Although I claim that film noir as a whole has no essential politics, in this chapter I concentrate on a specific set of noirlike movies from the years immediately after World War II and show how a political movement or cultural formation within Hollywood struggled against censorship and political repression by using dark thrillers for critical ends.

The remaining parts of the book are increasingly devoted to the relationship between historical film noir and the present-day cinema. In chapter 4, I discuss the economic determinants of Hollywood movies and the widespread critical tendency to canonize certain types of B pictures. I argue that many classics of so-called low-budget film noir were actually intermediate-level productions, designed to cross over into respectable areas of the market during a period when the B movie itself was dying off. I nevertheless try to illustrate the charms of specific B movies and to show how a tradition of low-budget crime melodrama carries over into made-for-TV films and video-store “erotic thrillers.”

Chapter 5 deals with motion-picture style, but I do not attempt to discuss this theme in a comprehensive way. Such a task would probably be impossible; as I indicate early in the chapter, there has never been a single noir style—only a complicated series of unrelated motifs and practices. Even so, noir is commonly identified with certain visual and narrative traits. I am interested in the way several of these traits have been used to support an ongoing tradition of neo-noir, and I have analyzed the problem under two of its aspects: first, the historical shift from an industry dominated by black and white to an industry dominated by color; and second, the increasing role played by parody, pastiche, and fashion in the development of a self-consciously postmodern genre.

In chapter 6, I discuss the central metaphor of darkness in the term *film noir*, arguing that one of its many implications is racial. As many critics have remarked, the classic films noirs are preoccupied with eroticism and decadence, often showing encounters between straight white males and homosexuals or sexually independent women; but many of these films also involve encounters with racial “others.” In order to call

attention to the racial theme, I offer a brief history of the ways in which films noirs have depicted Asian Americans, Latin Americans, and African Americans. Much of the chapter consists of little more than a survey, but it ends by giving special attention to recent pictures directed by African Americans, on the grounds that black social-protest literature has always had an important connection with noir.

My seventh and final chapter is also a survey, but it has an even broader scope and a more loosely discursive organization. Here I discuss noir in the largest possible context, showing how our conception of the term is shaped not only by films and critical writing, but also by all the media that constitute the information age. This chapter concludes by offering a map of the contemporary theatrical marketplace and calling attention to the different market niches that film noir tends to fill. Its major purpose, however, is to indicate how pervasive and adaptable the idea of noir has become and to provide examples of how noir affects things other than movies.

Perhaps an alternate subtitle for the project might have been "Seven Ways of Looking at American Film Noir," because each of my chapters takes up a slightly different viewpoint. In each case, I try to achieve comprehensiveness; yet the individual chapters could have been elaborated into separate books, and I have no illusions that they are the last word on the issues they discuss. At least I have been able to include historical data that cannot be found elsewhere, and I offer new interpretations of several familiar films. I hope that my indebtedness to other writers will be evident and that I have opened paths for subsequent critics to explore. Certainly there will be more writing on the topic. As we shall discover almost immediately, film noir is both a thing of the past, extending to a time before I came in, and a symptom of the media-obsessed present. It began in Europe, but it has now become a persistent feature of American culture and will remain so into the future.