

Lost Homes: Film Noir, Nostalgia, and Fascination, 1940 – 1950

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Abstract

This thesis explores the relation between film noir and home in the 1940s. I view film noir as a traumatic category of films. Within film noir, home is a traumatic and often displaced object. Through home, this thesis analyses how history is lost in noir, and engages with noir's conceptual impossibility and retroactivity. My approach is focused around a series of close readings of a selection of film noirs, including *Stranger on the Third Floor*, *Double Indemnity*, *The Killers*, *Mildred Pierce*, *The Woman in the Window*, *Gilda*, and others. These well-known films were selected due to the way in which the centrality of home is overlooked in noir criticism. Home is both completely central to understanding the ambiguity of noir, and largely absent. Complementing these readings, I explore the psychoanalytic logic of film noir — drawing on the work of Jacques Lacan, Sigmund Freud, as well as Mark Fisher and Slavoj Žižek — in order to articulate the function of 'home' in film noir. The primary goal of this thesis is to centre the films themselves and highlight their conceptual complexity in relation to broader historical and theoretical frameworks, such as the Second World War and its aftermath, as well as noir's own retroactive conception and theoretical formalisation in the 1970s.

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Introduction



Figure i.1, *Criss-Cross*, dir. by Robert Siodmak (Universal Pictures, 1949)

‘Almost Freudian’ — Approaches to Film Noir

The loss of home in film noir is as paradoxical as the loss of film noir itself. Loss permeates all of noir, and nowhere is this more visible than noir’s lost homes. Indeed, it is through home’s palpable absence which noir’s frayed and obscured edges are rendered visible. In film noir criticism it is common practice to first acknowledge the field’s own contentious origins. There is typically some variation on the idea that noir does not function as other cinematic genres, principally because there is no clear consensus as to what properties identify a film as noir, or even how noir should

be classified. Should it be conceived as a genre, a mode, a metaphor, or something else? Indeed, as Raymond Durnat inadvertently shows in his 1970 essay, 'Paint it Black: The Family Tree of Film Noir', film noir cannot be conceived as a genre.¹ Durnat offers various motifs or cycles, what he calls 'inevitably imperfect schematizations for some main lines of force in the American *film noir*', to help categorise the different aspects of crime or criminals in film noir.² Durnat views crime as the central concept which coheres film noir. The eleven motifs he offers are: 'Crime as Social Criticism', 'Gangsters', 'On the Run', 'Private Eyes and Adventurers', 'Middle Class Murder', 'Portraits and Doubles', 'Sexual Pathology', 'Psychopaths', 'Hostages to Fortune', 'Black and Reds', 'Guignol, Horror, Fantasy'.³ These disparate categories, and the tenuous connections between them, show the way in which categorising noir's constituent components is both tedious and completely ineffectual in illuminating its construction.

This, I would argue, is partly problematised by the retroactive categorisation of noir. Nino Frank first coined the term in 1947,⁴ Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton built upon the conception of noir in 1955,⁵ but it is not until the 1970s that critics identified noir as an academic object of study. There is thus a significant delay in both the identification of noir and its academic legitimisation. This delay, I will later argue, is not accidental or perfunctory. In fact, it is crucial to understanding the implications of noir's retroactive construction. It should be noted that the

¹ Raymond Durnat, 'Paint it Black: The Family Tree of Film Noir', in *Film Noir Reader*, ed. by Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight Edition, 1996 [1970]), pp. 37-51.

² *Ibid.*, p. 39, [original emphasis].

³ *Ibid.* pp. 39-51.

⁴ Nino Frank, 'A New Kind of Police Drama: The Criminal Adventure', in *Film Noir Reader 2*, ed. Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight Editions, 1999 [1945]).

⁵ Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton, 'Towards a Definition of Film Noir', in *Film Noir Reader*, ed. by Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight Edition, 1996 [1955]).

advent of film noir maps onto a broader history of film studies as a discipline. The tensions borne out of film noir criticism exist in film studies.

In my view, noir criticism did not adopt a serious and credible critical view until after the 1970s. More recent critical work on film noir includes *Shades of Noir: A Reader* in 1993,⁶ Kelly Oliver and Benigno Trigo's *Noir Anxiety* in 2003,⁷ Edward Dimmendberg's *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity* in 2004,⁸ James Naremore's *More Than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts* in 2008,⁹ and Wheeler Winston Dixon's *Film Noir the Cinema of Paranoia* in 2009.¹⁰ *Shades of Noir* is a collection essays, edited by Joan Copjec, which examines noir from a largely psychoanalytic perspective. It often engages with noir's 'original' critics, acknowledging that their contributions shaped what we commonly think of as noir. *Noir Anxiety* explores the structures of the anxious mood of noir, drawing on a detailed historical account of noir, as well as using the work of Julia Kristeva — particularly her concept of the 'abject' — and Homi K Bhabha's theory of colonial discourse, a combination which, to my mind, is rather unique in noir discourse. *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity* examines the spaces of noir, and how the historical contexts of World War Two and modernism (as well as, later, postmodernism) enact a disappearance of space in noir, which Dimendberg relates to nostalgia in modernism. *More than Night* is a wide-reaching book, which, like *Spaces of Modernity*, highlights the prevalence of modernism in noir. Naremore understands noir to be a symptom of the politics of Hollywood's censorship, as well as conceiving noir as a result of various other economic and cultural forces. *Film Noir and the Cinema of Paranoia* focuses more on the psychological aspects of noir, and how fear figures in film noir.

⁶ Joan Copjec, *Shades of Noir: A Reader* (London: Verso, 1993).

⁷ Kelly Oliver and Benigno Trigo, *Noir Anxiety* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

⁸ Edward Dimendberg, *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

⁹ James Naremore, *More Than Night: Film Noir In Its Contexts* (California: University of California Press, 2008).

¹⁰ Wheeler Winston Dixon, *Film Noir and the Cinema of Paranoia* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

Dixon's book looks at noir from the 40s and continues through to the neo-noirs of the late 90s and early 2000s.

An earlier yet instructive example can be seen in Borde and Chaumeton's 'Towards A Definition of Film Noir' in 1955. Their breezy rhetorical style expresses itself as if it were a description lifted from the films themselves. Their essay shows the difficulties in noir's conception, in particular their conclusion that the definition of noir is 'simple': 'the moral ambivalence, the criminality, the complex contradictions in motives and events, all conspire to make the viewer co-experience the anguish and insecurity which are the true emotions of contemporary *film noir*.'¹¹ Noir is apparently simple to define, but Borde and Chaumeton's definition largely operates on an *imaginative* level. Despite lacking any real specificity, it is a definition which might *feel* convincing. They gesture towards 'anguish and insecurity' without defining what they mean within the context of noir.

For early film noir critics, therefore, noir is marked by a certain instability. This instability is, I argue, both textual and critical. Noir is not strictly speaking a genre, that which excludes films that fail to meet its stringent criteria, but rather, as James Naremore argues, 'transgeneric and polyvalent [...] An ideological concept with a history all its own, it can be used to describe a period, a movement, and a recurrent style.'¹² Defining genres involves a level of abstraction, but in noir these inconsistencies cause significant textual and critical tension. In short, the tensions and ambiguities of the problems of genre are borne out in noir's anxiety. Therefore, rather than attempting to meticulously note every possible characteristic of noir, I argue that it can instead be understood as an open set. The approach of this thesis is to take the proposition of noir's instability

¹¹ Borde and Chaumeton, 'Towards a Definition of Film Noir', p. 25 [original emphasis].

¹² Naremore, *More Than Night*, p. 6.

seriously. I do not take noir's instability as a historical or rhetorical framing device, but rather as an intrinsic part of my own criticism. I define film noir, in a broad sense, to be a category of films running from the mid-1930s to the late 1950s, typically, though not necessarily, marked by a certain anxious fascination in both its internal logic and spectatorial relations. What makes a film 'noir', I will later argue, is largely that we call it 'noir.' The reason for this is not to simply bring every possible film under noir's conceptual roof, but instead to highlight the arbitrariness of defining noir in the first place.

Despite my own personal ambivalence towards critics such as Durnat, Borde, and Chaumeton, we can still learn about noir through their omissions, that which they seemingly cannot communicate. Borde and Chaumeton, for instance, argue the noir critic must remain 'as scientifically and objectively grounded as possible', and that by doing so, noir will reveal itself through the identification of all the possible key characteristics of noir.¹³ If noir is not a genre, we might better characterise it as a mood, or mode, something which flows in and out of individual films. In this sense, the moody rhetorical style of certain noir critics begins to make sense.¹⁴ It is not merely enough, I believe, to state that noir is ambivalent only to present my own critical gaze as objective and omnipresent. If it is an apparent truism that you cannot write about film noir without first calling into question the efficacy of the subject matter, then I would suggest that this impulse is textually substantiated. Later in the thesis, I will connect this truism to the hesitations around and within noir. The critical interpretation of noir is, in a sense, embedded *within* the very texture of noir. This is just one methodological strategy of the thesis.

¹³ Borde and Chaumeton, 'Towards A Definition of Film Noir', p. 19.

¹⁴ See: Borde and Chaumeton, 'Toward a Definition of Film Noir'; Charles Higham and Joel Greenberg, 'Noir Cinema'; and Paul Schrader, 'Notes on Film Noir' in *Film Noir Reader*, ed. by Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight Edition, 1996).

The thesis' primary concern, however, is the representation of home in film noir. In the broadest sense, I take 'home' to mean both a domicile of permanent residence and a metonym for an idealised, pastoral past. In noir, home is a place through which various historical, political, ideological, and psychological forces enact themselves and are made visible. The question I wish to answer is: why is home, which has been so consistently overlooked in criticism, so central to film noir and yet forgotten within the films themselves? The gap seems especially apparent considering the sizeable amount of criticism dedicated to the semiotics of space and place in noir.¹⁵ Some critics who centre the problem of home include Fred Pfeil and Vivian Sobchak. In his essay, 'Home Fires Burning: Family Noir in *Blue Velvet* and *Terminator 2*', Pfeil argues that, 'Film noir is [...] indeed centred on, home and family, even as it decentres and problematises both.'¹⁶ Sobchak instead takes a Bakhtinian approach in regard to noir's spaces, writing that,

In the decade that follows World War Two [...] both wartime and the home front together come to form a re-membered idyllic national time-space of phenomenological integrity and plenitude. A mythological construction, this chronotope [...] emerges in postwar culture itself and becomes the lost time and place of national purpose, cohesion, and fulfilment. Indeed, the chronotope of the idyllic wartime home front stands as this country's lost object of desire.¹⁷

While Pfeil and Sobchak place their emphasis on home's construction after World War Two (Pfeil's focus is on the neo-noirs of the 1980s), I would instead propose that these 'mythological'

¹⁵ See: Dimendberg, *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity*; Kelly Oliver and Beningo Trigo, *Noir Anxiety*; and, Janet Bergstrom, 'Warning Shadows: German Expressionism and American Film Noir', in *Film Noir*, ed. by Homer B. Pettey and R. Barton Palmer, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

¹⁶ Fred Pfeil, 'Home Fires Burning: Family Noir in *Blue Velvet* and *Terminator 2*', in *Shades of Noir: A Reader*, ed. by Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1993), p. 231.

¹⁷ Vivian Sobchak, 'Lounge Time: Post-war Crises and the Chronotope of Film Noir', in *Refiguring American Film Genres: Theory and History*, ed. by Nick Browne (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), p. 133.

constructions are retroactively ingrained into noirs produced before and during the war. Indeed, this thesis' focus is specifically centred on film released in the 1940s, which shows that the historicisation and mythologization of home is always already occurring within the earlier noir films themselves. It is impossible to separate film noir into neat, historical categories — the films of the 1930s echo and *are* echoed in the films of the 1940s, and so on. In this way, noir is nostalgic because it dramatizes the ways in which home, as a lost object of desire, was *always* lost to begin with.

To this end, I identify three major concerns of the construction of home in noir, all of which intertwine — political, historical, and psychological. First, home can be viewed as a political tool since it is useful in bringing together various ideological schisms during and after World War Two. The notion of 'returning home' in this political context translates into a return to the 'way things were.' The nostalgic dynamic of the political content of home is central to this thesis insofar as it considers the political utility of nostalgia, and the way in which noir's resistance to nostalgia enacts itself. To an extent, we might think of noir as ahistorical and apolitical, not because there is an absence of history and politics in noir but because both are relegated to a purely symbolic level. Noir's narratives, too, can often read as political allegories.

One prominent example is *The Blue Dahlia* (1946), in which a trio of returning war veterans, Johnny, Buzz, and George, attempt to reintegrate themselves back into society. Johnny, the film's protagonist, returns to discover his wife, Helen, is having an affair with casino owner Eddie Harwood. In addition to her infidelity, Helen confesses that her son with Johnny died in a car accident, not of illness, as Johnny previously believed. Later, Helen is murdered by Newell, a house detective, Johnny being subsequently blamed for her murder. The film ends with the rightful murderer being shot, and Johnny beginning a new relationship with Joyce, a former associate of

Eddie. Here, with the elements of noir's anxiety surrounding home clearly on show, the political argument is perhaps tempting to make. Johnny, a war veteran, returns to find his home desecrated by his masculine absence. His absence, his retreat from work, *led* to his wife's promiscuity to break up the home. Johnny's role is to exonerate himself of any social guilt, while at the same time to reconstitute the home and family with Joyce, 'as it always was.' At the end of the film, Joyce comes to represent a replacement for Helen, a purification of Helen's disruptive wartime activities. In this way, the film posits that if history and new political formations do not suit the noir protagonist, they can simply and paradoxically remember a new one, thus showing noir's problematisation of the political sphere. Later in the thesis, however, I will argue why such simple political readings are problematic in noir because of the issue of metaphor itself in noir. While the thesis primarily stresses the importance of the historical and psychological dimensions of home, due in part to how noir and noir criticism centres and problematises both, a strictly political reading of home in noir is perhaps beyond the scope of this work. An already well-explored avenue in this respect involves a focus on the impact of Jewish émigrés on film noir.¹⁸ Instead, I wish to provide political readings in the context of the historical and psychological dimensions of home and noir.

The second concern is historical, which is partly connected to the sphere of the political. I argue that there is a corollary between noir's problematised critical history (that is, the way in which noir critics continually point to its ambiguous historical construction) and the twisted historicity within the films themselves. Therefore, I contend that noir is a nostalgic category, one marked by a totalising retroactivity. As Naremore argues, film noir is 'an idea we have projected onto the past.'¹⁹ Furthermore, I would add noir does not exist within the films themselves as an

¹⁸ For example, see: Vincent Brook, *Driven to Darkness: Jewish Émigré Directors and the Rise of Film Noir* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2009).

¹⁹ Naremore, *More Than Night*, p. 11.

internal component. It is important to first recognise that noir and the interpretation of noir *obfuscates* the past rather than reveals it. When we watch noir, our imagination of it in noir's 'original' spectatorial context brings about a certain nostalgic melancholy. As Oliver Harris writes, this melancholy for a 'lost past inspired in us by film noir has to reckon with these films' historical reception via their own internal logic.'²⁰ The historical readings of noir thus stem from understanding noir's historicity as a kind of 'black hole', an impossible and impenetrable centre which we nonetheless always fail to escape.

Considering this, I argue that film noir is principally a traumatic category of films. The process by which knowledge is produced in noir follows the retroactive logic of trauma, as described by Freud's famous case of the anxiety-dream of the 'Wolf Man.' I use Freud's term of *Nachträglichkeit*, or afterwordness, to explain the way in which trauma retroactively enacts itself. As Ben Tyrer summarises, for the subject 'the past is always implicated in the present, and the future in the past. An element in the past must wait to be understood, to find its meaning in the future, and so in the present the past becomes what it will always have been.'²¹ One argument of this thesis is that it is the very process of historicisation which obscures home as a historical object. This historicisation involves both noir's narrative structures and approach to epistemological security, in addition to the procedure of critical interpretation. This process follows the investigative logic of many noir films, a logic borrowed from noir hard-boiled literature antecedents.

²⁰ Oliver Harris, 'Film Noir Fascination: Outside History, but Historically so', *Cinema Journal*, 43.1 (Autumn, 2003), p. 4.

²¹ Ben Tyrer, 'Film Noir as *Point de Caption: Double Indemnity*, Structure and Temporality', *Film-Philosophy*, 17.1 (2013), p. 99.

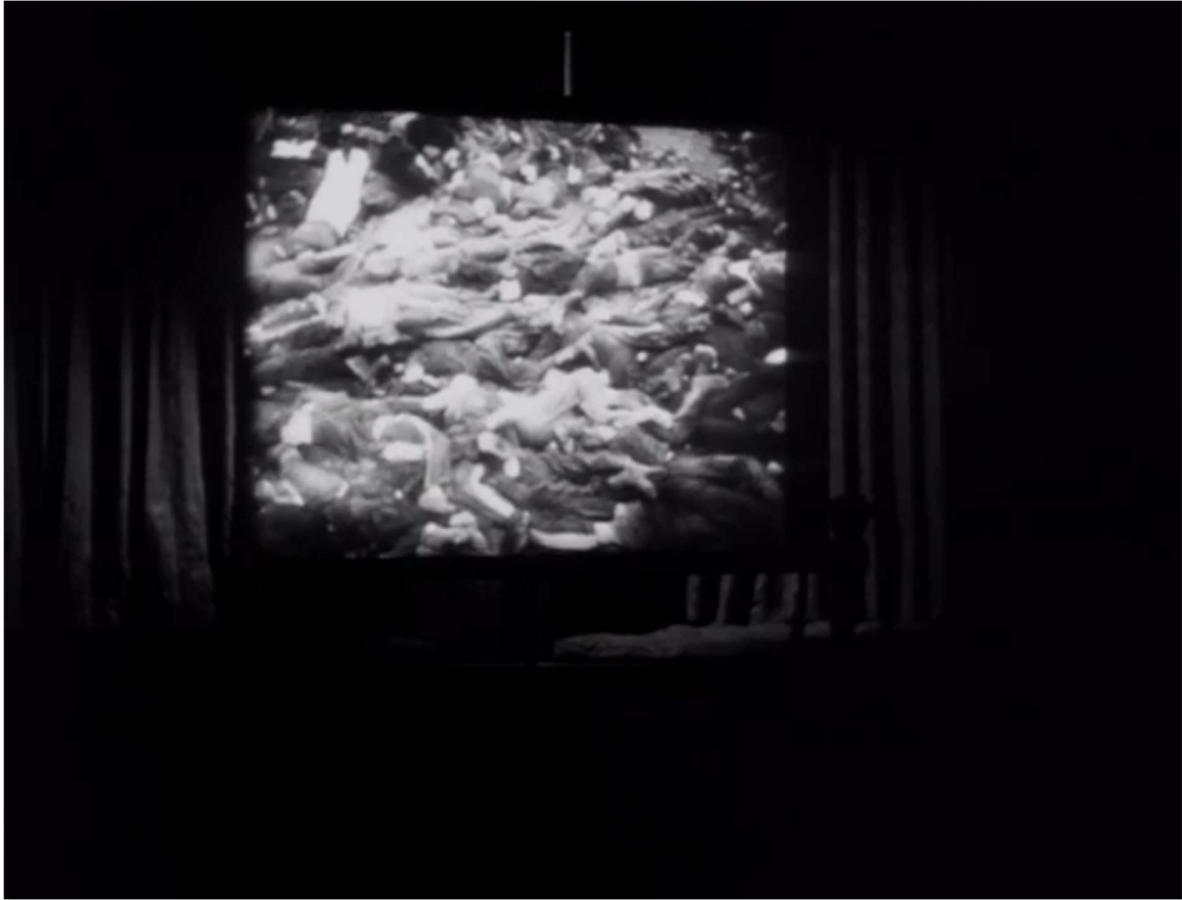


Figure i.2, *The Stranger* (1946)

My approach is to look at noir's traumatic structure through the lens of home. History, that is World War Two and its effects, is largely absent in film noir, despite noir's so-called 'realism.'²² There are some notable exceptions, however, such as Orson Welles' *The Stranger* (1946) which portrays a member of the United Nations War Crimes Commission, Mr. Wilson (Edward G. Robinson), hunting down a fleeing Nazi war criminal, Franz Kindler (Orson Welles). In the film, Wilson shows Mary, Kindler's unsuspecting wife, footage of Nazi concentration camps to uncover the truth about her husband (Figure i.2). History, as a synecdoche for the truth, is here projected as cinema, the implication being that we can only know history through the cinema. Mr Wilson

²² Schrader, 'Notes on Film Noir', p. 55.

then stands in front of the film projector, between it and Mary, as the footage is projected onto his face. Here, history *is* cinema, and cinema *is* history; it is projected onto the faces of its stars, implying that history in noir is something to be *seen* rather than understood. History, here, acts an affront to Nazism and the trauma of the Holocaust. History interjects and disrupts trauma and thus brings it into being. In the film, seeing is not enough to *believe* the truth. It is only through the personal and psychological spheres that history re-gains its meaning. At first, Mary believes that Wilson is trying to trick her into wrongfully arresting her husband and thus takes his side. It is only when she discovers that Kindler wants to murder her that she changes her mind. In this way, *The Stranger* demonstrates that restoring history to its rightful place is not enough in noir. History, again, acts an affront to the normal continuation of life; it must be reinserted into the film. The film, in this sense, is about the desecration of the idyllic town not by Kindler's subversive Nazism (already prefiguring the McCarthyite concerns), but by history itself. Home, like history, must wait to be understood. This is testament to the way in which noir's anxious mode is characterised by its various hesitations and stalling. Home's meaning and significance are typically realised at the end of a film. Yet, as I will show in films such as *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940) and *Gilda* (1946), the complexity of a noir film's ending shows the structure of home's retroactive construction. Home is thus at once central to meaning in noir's narrative — insofar as its attainment ties the narrative's loose ends — at the same time as eventually being unmasked as no more than a spectral force.

The third concern is psychological. I emphasise the psychological dimensions of noir, as opposed to the physical instances of home. What concerns this thesis is not a taxonomy of how many homes appear prominently in noir, but rather how home manifests itself as a metaphor for other psychological concerns of noir's characters. It is not only the physical manifestations of

home that are of importance, but also the traces left by home's absence. I have already indicated one of the ways in which the psychological dimension of home and of history impact each other. This thesis' principal theoretical framework is psychoanalysis, drawing specifically on the work of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. One reason for this choice is that psychoanalysis is ingrained in film noir criticism.²³ Since I am also suggesting that on some level film noir criticism is inseparable from the films themselves then, in some sense, psychoanalysis always haunts noir. The popularisation of psychoanalysis in academic film studies occurs around the 1970s, at a similar time to a new wave of writing on film noir.

Three famous examples of noir's early critical writings can all be found in Alain Silver and James Ursini's *Film Noir Reader* in 1996. First, in 1972, Paul Schrader writes his essay 'Notes on Film Noir', which is still prone to the same nebulous hesitations of earlier works on noir. He speaks, tellingly, of noir's 'almost Freudian attachment to water', gesturing to but not engaging with psychoanalytic criticism.²⁴ It is easy to criticise Schrader here — as I later do — but here, again, we must take his critical hesitations seriously, not as lapses in concentration but as revealing something about noir's air of mystique. Even though Schrader does not apply a psychoanalytic framework, or even engage in a psychoanalytic discourse, he still notes that there certainly *seems* something inherently psychoanalytically suggestive about film noir. Precisely what Schrader means here is rather unclear. Schrader argues that noir's attachment to water is 'almost Freudian', as if he is too embarrassed to admit that it really *is* Freudian.²⁵ Schrader here exhibits a certain

²³ For example, of noir criticism which explicitly use a psychoanalytic framework, see: Joan Copjec, 'The Phenomenal Nonphenomenal: Private Space in Film Noir' in *Shades of Noir: A Reader*, ed. by Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1993); Elizabeth Cowie, *Representing the Woman: Cinema and Psychoanalysis* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Janey Place, 'Women in Film Noir' in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. by E. Ann. Kaplan (London: BFI, 1980); Elizabeth Bronfen, 'Femme Fatale: Negotiations of Tragic Desire', *New Literary History*, 35.1, *Rethinking Tragedy* (Winter, 2004); and others.

²⁴ Schrader, 'Notes on Film Noir', p. 57.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

ambivalence regarding his own interpretations. Yet the ambivalence does not necessarily solely stem from Schrader's criticism, but from noir *itself*. Schrader might not believe in his own assertions, but by being 'almost Freudian', his work, perhaps inadvertently, shows us that a psychoanalytic approach is often necessary in noir criticism. Psychoanalysis, in this respect, is useful because it questions what lies beneath the surface, as well as the nature of the surface itself and the ambiguity inspired by both. In noir, we see our critical eye reflected back at us, but as we see in work such as Schrader's, often plunging our hand into the water to pull something out of noir results in a distortion of the text itself and therefore our interpretation. Noir's protagonists are similarly gripped by this ambiguity of belief. Further, Schrader emphasises that noir's attachment is *to* water. The implication here, and this is borne out in his tentativeness, is that noir is a text of competing desires and that it is a text that, in some sense, desires us. What seems to concern Schrader is not the symbolic position of water in film noir, but *why* noir is seemingly attached to water; the question concerns what noir desires. I return to Schrader's quotation in Chapter One, and what his metaphor tells us about noir's construction since water is both surface and depth. As I will explore later in the thesis, the dialectics of looking in noir is crucial in understanding its mode, and therefore precisely how home is constructed in it.

Robert G. Porfirio's 'No Way Out: Existential Motifs in the Film Noir'²⁶, published in 1976, is another instructive example, which, on the one hand, recognises the alienation and loneliness of noir, but on the other, lapses into awkward generalities:

²⁶ I must note here the inconsistent conventions of how different critics write 'film noir'. The variations are more extreme and noticeable in the earlier works of noir criticism. Porfirio here calls it 'the film noir' in the title of his essay. One of the least egregious early examples might be Borde and Chaumeton's italicised *film noir*. Charles Higham and Joel Greenberg refer to noir as 'black cinema', or as 'film noir'. James Damico, here in a field of his own, favours FN (an abbreviation of film noir) to save space. The italicisation present in some early works may be a result of the phrase being a French term, and is italicised for the same reason that, say, Latin is italicised. I opt to write film noir, without any scare quotes, italics, or abbreviations, since it is the common modern convention.

Even ostensibly happily married men become alienated from the comforts of home, usually for the sake of a beautiful woman. The homelessness of such characters as Harry Fabian in *Night and the City* or Ole Anderson in *The Killers* [...] takes on almost cosmic dimensions.²⁷

Porfirio still exhibits the same rhetorical vagueness as other early noir critics. First, there is the assumption that home necessarily provides comfort to noir's protagonists, a notion which this thesis fundamentally disputes. Noir's mood of alienation is instead *caused* by the anxieties surrounding home. Porfirio's reasoning, too, strays into rather negligent and sexist territory as he seems to lay the blame for noir's existentialism at the feet of women. In a later chapter, I will correct the popular conception that noir's troubles find their cause in the female characters, who are regularly coded as 'femme fatales'. Moreover, Porfirio's use of the word 'homelessness' is not instructive since it applies the fallacious logic that noir's protagonists have had their home erroneously taken from them and that noir, similarly, has had its home taken from it. The implicit critical task I identify here is, as is the problem of history in noir, for the critic to return the object of home *to* noir. As we see in Edgar G. Ulmer's *Detour* (1945), for instance, it is only Al who believes that he is doomed because of his involvement with Vera because all his fears and anxieties coalesce around Vera — she represents all his problems: a useful, hystericised scapegoat. Only by identifying with Al's viewpoint could we reach a conclusion like Porfirio's. Again, we can see how noir's coded obscurity is reflected in much of its early criticism. Moreover, the same hesitation, the inability to really describe noir, is present in his writing: the existential homelessness in noir possesses 'almost cosmic dimensions.' In the end, Porfirio concludes that the

²⁷ Robert G. Porfirio, 'No Way Out: Existential Motifs in the Film Noir', in *Film Noir Reader*, ed. by Alain Silver and James Urisini (New York: Limelight Edition, 1996), p. 86.

only satisfactory explanation is that ‘randomness is central to the noir world.’²⁸ I take this proposition, that there is something unknowable about noir, as a starting point, and interrogate noir’s ‘impossibility.’

Finally, James Damico, in 1978, begins to show noir criticism’s turn to self-reflection. He explicitly laments the paucity of early noir criticism in his essay, ‘Film Noir: A Modest Proposal’. Damico’s principal problem with prior film noir criticism is its emphasis on the ‘thematic and stylistic consistencies’ of noir, rather than its ‘political and social causes.’²⁹ Specifically, Damico singles out Raymond Durnat’s ‘unfortunately influential’ essay ‘Paint it Black: The Family Tree of Noir’, which attempts to create a taxonomy of noir, the elements that identify a film as noir.³⁰ Predictably, Durnat’s effort is largely underwhelming and in the first chapter of this thesis, I shall outline precisely why. Yet Damico’s criticism can still be instructive as to how the problems of noir are contingent on the problems of noir criticism. Damico’s amusing — and perhaps unprofessional — labelling of Durnat’s work as ‘Categorrhea’ demonstrates not only the inadequacy of taxonomies, but, more precisely, that the process of categorisation, of *investigation*, is doomed to fail in noir. The critic, in some sense, seems to possess (or at least be prone to possessing) the same desire as the noir protagonist. They treat noir like a crime scene, acting as the case’s lead investigator. However, assuming such a role requires the critic to first acknowledge that the mode of investigation in noir is, too, ultimately doomed to fail; we cannot perfectly reconstruct noir ‘as it always was’ because our presence alters the very substance of noir. We touch

²⁸ Porfirio, ‘No Way Out’, p. 89.

²⁹ Damico, ‘Film Noir’, p. 95.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

the water without disturbing the surface, but without touching the water we cannot know what lies beneath.

In this sense, a corollary exists between film noir and psychoanalysis. Both possess two seemingly contradictory conceptions in that their popular, cultural conception is widely known, but their academic definitions are complex. Psychoanalysis teaches us that the moment when we think we are in full possession and knowledge of our desires is precisely the point at which they take hold of us. The logic can be applied to the definition of film noir and its relation to noir's production of knowledge: the moment when we think we have finally adopted a privileged position to view noir is precisely that the point at which it eludes our grasp. As Marc Vernet puts it in 'Film Noir on the Edge of Doom',

what is completely strange in discourse on film noir is that the more elements of definition are advanced, the more objects and counter-examples are raised, the more precision is desired, the fuzzier the results become; the closer the object is approached, the more diluted it becomes.³¹

For Vernet, a critic who does grapple with noir's inescapable obscurity, noir is an object which reacts to our look, a condition which is replicated in the films themselves. One reason for this ambiguity can be found in one of the major advancements made by Freud in relation to his positioning of the unconscious as between the physical and the mental. For Freud, the unconscious is a mental process, but makes itself known through physical signals. One primary example is his notion of parapraxis, or what would be more commonly known as a 'Freudian slip'; the utterances

³¹ Marc Vernet, 'Film Noir on the Edge of Doom', in *Shades of Noir: A Reader*, ed. by Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1993), p. 4.

and signals that represent something which is repressed in the unconscious. He writes that these ‘conscious acts remain incoherent and incomprehensible if we insist that everything occurring in our psyche must also be experienced through consciousness’.³² Further, he argues, we cannot know of the unconscious *through* the conscious mind. Albert Shalom argues that the unconscious belongs to neither ‘the physical *per se*, nor to the mental *per se*’. Instead, it disrupts and shows the ‘fundamental inadequacy of the Cartesian dichotomy between “body” and “mind.”’³³ It is not enough, therefore, to simply say that noir functions on an ‘psychological level’. We might instead say that noir operates on an unconscious level, between body and mind, since the unconscious is, for Lacan, the discourse of the Other. It is in this sense that Porfirio’s mood of alienation and loneliness is best understood.

The major theorists of this thesis include Freud, Lacan, and Vernet. Other influential theorists and critics in this thesis are Slavoj Žižek, Mark Fisher, Elizabeth Cowie, and Ben Tyrer. Žižek has contributed numerous works to both noir studies (a contribution which largely consists of his criticism surrounding the films of Alfred Hitchcock) and the popularisation of psychoanalysis in cultural criticism at large, and therefore has significant influence in noir studies. Likewise, if one wishes to approach art as symptom (in the psychoanalytic sense), then Žižek must be acknowledged.³⁴ In addition, Žižek has produced numerous contributions to noir, so, as we will see, often his theoretical work arrives in the form of noir criticism, a rhetorical style which must be unpacked.³⁵ In a similar vein, Mark Fisher’s work is particularly relevant to this thesis. His

³² Sigmund Freud, ‘The Unconscious’, *The Unconscious* (London: Penguin Books, 2005 [1911]).

³³ Albert Shalom, ‘Psychoanalysis and Culture’, *Review of Metaphysics*, 39.4 (1986, June 1), p. 724.

³⁴ Yet, as Tim Dean writes, because in Žižek’s work ‘virtually anything can be considered a symptom’ which allows Žižek to ‘write about everything.’ His work, therefore, tends to be ‘variations on a single theme.’ See: Tim Dean, ‘Art as Symptom: Žižek and the Ethics of Psychoanalytic Criticism’, *Diacritics*, 32.2 (Summer 2002), p. 22.

³⁵ A prominent example, and one which appears frequently throughout this thesis, is *Looking Awry: Jacques Lacan in Pop Culture*, which perhaps more than any other Žižek book exemplifies his approach to culture, psychoanalysis, and politics.

work on hauntology (a concept borrowed from Jacques Derrida), capitalist realism and the weird and the eerie, are all used to show the disappearance of home and the ideological contestations of noir. I use Fisher's work on hauntology to discuss how the femme fatale 'haunts' noir, and what this can tell us about the related spectre of home. Capitalist realism is used to help explain the pervasive ideological function of home in noir. Finally, the weird and the eerie are used to highlight the relationship between absences and presences in accordance to our expectations in noir. The weird and the eerie question either why a presence exists when it should not, and why there is absence when something should be present.

In terms of noir specific criticism, Elizabeth Cowie, whose numerous works on feminist approaches to noir usefully refocus and disrupt the idea that noir is a typically 'masculine' category of films, are of importance. Her essay, 'Film Noir and Women' in *Shades of Noir*, confronts the problem of the 'desire of the critic' and aligns with the problematic conception of the femme fatale. She criticises several male critics for their vague and often eroticised descriptions of women in film noir and argues that their rhetoric falls into the same trap that the femme fatale sets up in the films themselves, notably, James Damico, who argues that noir's plot structure is generated by a fascination with the femme fatale. In his book *Film Noir: The Dark Side of the Screen*, Foster Hirsch identifies the noir world as 'filled with deceiving women'.³⁶ Frank Krutnik and Richard Maltby also both argue that film noir is principally a masculine genre. This is, I would argue, not to say that the femme fatale's beauty and sexuality are *real* forces but rather *fantasies*. As Cowie argues, the femme fatale 'is simply a catchphrase for the danger of sexual difference and the demands and risks desire poses for the man.'³⁷ Ben Tyrer's essays, 'Film Noir Does Not Exist: A

³⁶ Foster Hirsch, *Film Noir: The Dark Side of the Screen* (New York: A. S. Barnes), p. 13.

³⁷ Elizabeth Cowie, 'Film Noir and Women', in *Shades of Noir: A Reader*. ed. by Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1993) p. 125.

Lacanian Topology'³⁸ and 'Film Noir as *Point de Capiton*',³⁹ discuss how the retroactive construction of noir should be taken seriously as a theoretical and linguistic position. Tyrer argues that film noir does not exist in the same way that Lacan argues that the category of 'woman' does not exist, insofar as they are both defined as an open set, always open to the *possibility* of one more item being added to its set. Another key theoretical pillar of this thesis comes from Oliver Harris' essay, 'Film Noir Fascination: Outside History, but Historically So', in which he argues that the structures of fascination within film noir (alongside its historical and critical fascination) render noir a fantasmatic construction, one which, through its 'obscure coding of desire' displaces history itself.⁴⁰ I understand Harris and Tyrer's work to be working towards similar ends and thus I apply them to my own conception of home.

Why Noir, and Why Now?

The films examined in this thesis are situated within the period from 1940 to 1950. Film noir, it should be noted, 'begins' (or at least has its antecedents) before 1940 and continues long after 1950. There is no clear cut-off point in terms of when noir 'begins' or 'ends.' The details of the debate, moreover, do not particularly impact the argument of this thesis. The period has been chosen primarily because of the rapid shifting historical contexts regarding both American politics and culture and Western cinema itself. World War Two is already monolithic in noir, both a singularly dominating presence and curiously absent; it touches all of noir often without its presence being made known. The introduction of major historical postwar events such as the

³⁸ Ben Tyrer, 'Film Noir Doesn't Exist: A Lacanian Topology' in *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society*, ed. by David Henderson (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012).

³⁹ Ben Tyrer, 'Film Noir as Point de Capiton: Double Indemnity, Structure and Temporality'.

⁴⁰ Harris, Oliver, 'Outside History, but Historically so', p. 5.

advent of the Cold War and the effects of McCarthyism on cinema, America's involvement in the Korean War, Dwight Eisenhower's presidency, the landmark Brown vs Board of Education ruling, the murder of Emmet Till and the Montgomery bus boycott, for example, would require detailed and critical examination which falls outside the remit of this thesis. Methodologically, widening the historical lens would require a greater emphasis on the political dimensions of home and noir. Much attention has already been paid to the political inclinations of noir. My contribution to the field lies within the combined theoretical definitions of home and noir. I take the critical proposition that noir's definition is inseparable from, and indeed defined by, its critical appraisals, and map these theoretical concerns onto the problem of home in noir. Home is curiously absent, yet at the same is often the central, symbolic concern of noir. In order to 'find' home in noir, we must understand how our critical gaze distorts the image, and thus searching for noir's lost homes involves perceiving its absences. Moreover, while the apparent disappearance of noir is certainly intriguing, it falls outside the bounds of this thesis. Further investigations arising from it might include more careful considerations as to why noir fell out of fashion. In a sense, I approach this debate by considering the ways in which, functionally, noir is *always* disappearing. Similarly, the same logic explains why this thesis does not engage with many neo-noir films or literature. Again, neo-noir exists within its own historical and critical context. It shares commonalities with noir but fundamentally requires a different analytic and historical framework.

In the thesis, I regard the following films as key texts: *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940), *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943), *Double Indemnity* (1944), *The Woman in the Window* (1944), *The Lost Weekend* (1945), *Detour* (1945), *Scarlet Street* (1945), *Mildred Pierce* (1945), *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946), *The Big Sleep* (1946), *The Blue Dahlia* (1946), *The Killers* (1946), *Out of the Past* (1946), *Gilda* (1946), *Dark Passage* (1947), *Crossfire*

(1947), *The Secret Beyond the Door* (1947), *Criss Cross* (1949), *In a Lonely Place* (1950). I have chosen these because they represent a broad cross-section of films from the decade. The films listed above are, I would hope, relatively well-known film noirs, selected because, in part, I wish to show that even in these much-discussed films, there are still elements — particularly the centrality of home — which are overlooked. My methodology is to draw connections between films non-temporally and non-hierarchically. That is, I do not trace the development of ideas in noir, or how meaning might change over the course of time, but instead present the films as an interconnected web, able to transmit meanings between each other, regardless of the date of their release. For example, a key question posed in the first chapter is: how is *Stranger on the Third Floor* influenced by the films that came *after* it? I do this precisely in response to the earlier proposition that noir is constructed retroactively by critics, and that therefore noirness is not an inherent property of the films, but something attributed by critics.

One problem raised by this approach and this admission, is that the number of noir films increases significantly. Perhaps the most significant major omissions include: *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), *The Third Man* (1949), *The Big Heat* (1953), *The Lady From Shanghai* (1946), *Laura* (1944), *They Live By Night* (1948), *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), and *Touch of Evil* (1958), together with a number of the films of Alfred Hitchcock from the 1940s, most notably *Rebecca* (1940), *Saboteur* (1942), and *Spellbound* (1945). While some of these films receive passing mentions, they are nevertheless not the primary focus of this thesis. Films such as *The Big Heat*, *Kiss Me Deadly*, and *Touch of Evil* all lie outside the period which the thesis focuses on. As I have previously stated, the time period for this thesis is precise because otherwise it may risk becoming too historically vague. As for the other films, they often cover similar ground to the films I do examine, and I opted to use those instead because of the ways they fit into my argument. There

are, of course, other omissions, too numerous to list, but I suggest here several films which, in my opinion, can be thought of as broadly belonging in the same field: *The Red House* (1947), the gothic noir *Among the Living* (1941), the crime drama *The Enforcer* (1951), *The Seventh Victim* (1943), *Phantom Lady* (1944), *Strange Illusion* (1945), and *Lady in the Lake* (1947).

The Structure of the Thesis

What follows is a brief overview of this thesis' chapters. In the first chapter, 'The First Ending: Genre and *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940)', I confront the temporal ambiguity of both the conception of noir and noir films themselves with reference to the work of Ben Tyrer and Marc Vernet. I begin by providing a more thorough definition of film noir by asking whether *Stranger on the Third Floor* is indeed the 'first film noir'. I approach the question on a metaphorical and metatextual level in comparison to noir's traumatic retroactive construction. I use the film to show how noir's reflexive temporality renders the film both the first and last film noir, and how this is reflected in the film's ending. In addition, I confront the assumptions regarding a hypothetical 'first film noir'. With regard to the analysis of the film, I focus on its ending and how, through its very conformity, it attempts to retroactively redefine the prior events of the film, which I, in turn, read in a metatextual light. At the same time, however, it leaves excessive elements which render the ambiguity and inconsistencies visible. Thinking of the film as noir demands we reconsider our definitions and assumptions regarding noir itself.

Following on, the subsequent chapter, 'The Metaphor of Blindness', continues and develops the discussion of *Stranger on the Third Floor*, focusing on how blindness, not vision, is integral to understanding the production of meaning in noir. I discuss how blindness is enacted

through film's ideological positions, primarily through the formation of the couple. As with the ending, the formation of the couple is intended to stitch together the meaning of home in film noir. I argue that the couple is often used as a synecdoche for home but brings with it a series of inconsistencies in terms of the depiction of gender in relation to home. In this way, I argue that seeing home, in noir, involves blindness. However, the formation of the couple and the apparent acquisition of home leaves affective excesses. I examine, too, how blindness is staged as an impenetrability within the *voix*, with reference to Michel Chion's 1982 book, *The Voice in Cinema*. Finally, I discuss the political and narrative aspects of blindness and how they touch all of noir.

The third chapter forms a central theoretical pillar of the thesis, as it examines the mechanism behind noir's hesitation surrounding home. I refer to Oliver Harris' essay, 'Outside History, But Historically So' in conjunction with psychoanalytic theory concerning the *objet petit a* to argue that fascination is the central way in which meaning (and thus home) is obscured in noir. For example, Todd McGowan's work on the gaze in film theory illustrates the problem of looking in noir and how it exemplifies fascination. It is through the look that fascination moves from a scopophilic problem to a historical one. Furthermore, I argue that much of noir's critical work embodies this critical and textual fascination, an inability to properly discuss or interrogate noir without resorting to arguing that noir is, self-evidently, 'fascinating'. I then discuss the logic and structures of the investigation in noir, what I refer to as 'investigative desire'. Principally, I argue that the noir detectives (who, I would argue, constitute a majority of noir protagonists) are defined by their libidinal proximity to the crime. They do not have an objective distance to the crime, nor to their desire. This, I believe, speaks to the impossibility of desire: that to desire, one must get *too* close to the object of desire and thus render it incomprehensible. I also consider what

the crime itself represents in noir, what aberration it stands in for. Here, I discuss the falcon statuette in *The Maltese Falcon* as an object of fascination. I also examine the introduction of Phyllis Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity* and the nature of double *entendres* in the film, notably through Neff's various hesitations and linguistic slippages, whereby his assumed mastery of language (and therefore desire) expose him to the Real of desire, and of home.

The following chapter, 'A Stranger in Someone Else's House: Homesickness in Film Noir', continues the discussion of fascination in noir and how it produces anxiety. It examines how desire and agency function in the home, primarily the apartment, taking *The Lost Weekend* as a case study. The chapter begins by looking at psychoanalytic addiction theory, using an essay on drug addiction's relationship to capitalist desire by Ole Bjerg to argue that drugs allow the subject to bypass the circuit of desire and experience the Real of desire directly. I present the argument that Don's alcohol addiction in the film fulfils this function and consider the ways in which alcohol operates as a metaphor for home. In doing so, I examine the extent to which noir involves the desire for home, and how this desire is turned back against the noir observer — thus building upon the work in the previous chapter. A central question of this chapter is how does the home *desire* noir's protagonists? This relates to the broader question concerning what noir and home want from us. Here, I engage with W. J. T. Mitchell's *What Do Pictures Want?*, published in 2005, asking what noir wants from us and progressing to a discussion of the relationship between subject and object. The chapter then uses Mark Fisher's concept of capitalist realism to interrogate what is considered ideologically normative, or realist, in relation to home. I call into question the supposed 'realism' of *The Lost Weekend* and of noir to highlight the political dimension of addiction. Subsequently, I apply Fisher's definition of capitalist realism as a 'pervasive atmosphere' to the atmosphere of noir. I conclude by considering the workings of ideology and nostalgia in noir, and

how, in *Weekend* we might read the categories of ‘sober’ and ‘intoxicated’ as metaphors for ideological interpellation. I problematise the idea that addiction allows us to know our ‘true’ selves and how this revelation only shows the nothingness of desire. In this way, I argue, the desire for home is, strangely, the desire *not* to the desire.

In Chapter Five, ‘Homes in Film Noir’, I contend that noir’s fascinated anxiety derives principally from its ambiguous spaces. I begin by examining how the detached, family home is constructed in *Mildred Pierce* and what this can reveal about noir’s disposition toward home more generally. I use Mark Fisher’s concept of the weird and the eerie to help explain the cultural anxiety surrounding the family home. More specifically, I interrogate how the weird, ‘the presence of that which does not belong’, and the eerie, ‘a failure of absence, or a failure of presence’, constitute themselves in noir, thus emphasising the gothic aspects of noir.⁴¹ Then, I move to a broader discussion on how the inner-city apartment differs from the familial home. This involves a historical reading of the (re)construction of public and private space, and how trauma is heightened through the compression of space in noir. Finally, in relation to space and home, I discuss the ways in which looking and desire are affected by the urbanisation of home, using Fritz Lang’s *The Woman in the Window* (1944), comparing it to the work of Edward Hopper, particularly his painting *Nighthawks* (1942), in order show how precisely noir treats space psychologically.

The final chapter confronts the problem of the femme fatale in noir and its relation to home. Specifically, I consider the relation of the femme fatale to the conception of noir, especially the impact on home. I argue that, in a sense, femme fatales *are* film noir insofar as they are, like noir, imaginary constructions. Although there is a cultural perception about the abundance and power

⁴¹ Mark Fisher, *The Weird and The Eerie*, (London: Repeater Books, 2016) [epub ebook], 14.2.

of the femme fatale, they are largely absent from noir. In this way, we can see the relation between critics and noir; there is an instability, an excess, regarding work on the femme fatale, as if replicating the same anxiety which mobilises their affect. Their effectiveness, their power, thus exists virtually. Therefore, I argue, the femme fatale is *more* noir than noir. Considering this, I examine how the femme fatale becomes synonymous with the absence of home. Taking *Gilda* as an example, I look at the ideological position of Gilda in the film, and within the context of noir itself, evaluating the way that she embodies fear and anxiety in the abstract, rather than standing in for any specific fear or anxiety.

This thesis' originality lies largely in its focus on home. In the context of noir, I read home as a meta-textual and spectral force. I read home as a metaphor for, and the source of, noir's various anxieties and ambiguities. The project of confronting noir's resistance to criticism must involve the centring of instability itself; I read noir's instability not as an effect of some hidden force, but as central to noir's network of meanings. Indeed, in this context, the thesis acknowledges that the instability of noir is substantiated by the spectral figure of the home in film noir. The absence of home is also indicative of a *critical* blind spot which I identify in noir criticism. I see the problem of blindness and vision as central to understanding noir, so the loss of home (which is, I argue, loss itself) is not only textually substantiated, but critically so. Noir's instability is often understood as a generalisable 'mood' or is part of the hidden unconscious workings of noir. I do not use home to attempt to *resolve* noir's inherent tensions, but rather as a reification of those tensions. However, the conception of home in noir does help cohere some disparate ideas surrounding noir itself and its own conception.

We can view the home as a nostalgic object, perhaps *the* object of nostalgia. Svetlana Boym, in her book *The Future of Nostalgia*, describes nostalgia as a kind of virus, something

which spreads and infects our perception of the world and ourselves. This spread, she argues, is not only to do with ‘dislocation in space’, but also with a ‘changing conception of time’.⁴² This is a particularly useful definition for how nostalgia functions in noir. In noir, the dislocation in space is represented through the instability of home — in chapter four, for instance, I argue that Don’s alcohol addiction in *The Lost Weekend* makes the home a place of paranoia. Boym’s conception of nostalgia is particularly instructive for noir since she argues that modern ‘nostalgia is a mourning for the impossibility of mythical return, for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values.’⁴³ Nostalgia, in noir, is felt both personally and collectively. Indeed, as I argue later, the very structure and mode of noir is nostalgic. When combined with the feelings of spatial and narrative claustrophobia in noir, as well as the ‘changing conception of time’⁴⁴ brought about by noir’s retroactivity, noir’s protagonists can be said to be trapped *within* nostalgia. This, too, describes noir’s approach to home aptly. In the first chapter, I investigate the mythical dimension of home in noir. Boym argues further that one of the features of nostalgia is a desire to experience an ‘edenic unity of time space before entry into history.’⁴⁵ For noir, this experience is promised, but always denied. On one level, home is representative of the idealised version of the family and the safety the family provides. In this way, home is a space (or time) in which the subject does not have to desire; it is the absence of desire. On another, home represents ideological safety, a retreat from the messiness of the present. In noir’s narratives, the present always has difficulty sustaining itself; it cannot reconstruct its own past, nor can it even make sense of its own historicity. And, on

⁴² Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. 8.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

a final level, home thus represents history itself. It remains inaccessible, but must be constantly historicised, despite such processes only rendering it more and more obscure.

Chapter 1

The First Ending: Genre and Narrative in *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940)

Film noir does not belong to the history of cinema; it belongs as a notion to the history of film criticism, or, if one prefers, to the history of those who wanted to love the American cinema even in its middling production and to form an image of it.

Marc Vernet, 'Film Noir on the Edge of Doom'¹

The First Film Noir?

In film noir, home is an impossible object to grasp. It is, as I will demonstrate, often the central, but nonetheless impossible, object of desire for noir and its protagonists. Home cannot even be remembered or imagined properly, nor can noir's own contentious roots. The principal film analysed in this chapter is Boris Ingster's *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940).² One reason for this is the implications of the film's ending. The film ends as its two protagonists move into their home, but the unresolved question for two main characters, Michael and Jane (particularly the former), is one of cost, that something must be sacrificed for the home. It is not given to noir's protagonists, but something which is either taken from them, or upon receiving it, they realise what they have lost in order to gain it. I will argue that this sense of loss is one of the primary mechanisms by which noir's narratives are propelled. The unattainability and absence of home is therefore central to this chapter. I shall begin by considering the question of absence on a formal level: to what extent does 'noirness,' as vague as it is, affect the film's meaning? Why does there seem to be a correlation between the unattainability of noirness and home? The introduction of noirness signals a certain formal ambiguity, a questioning of desire; it leads to a kind of death, not just of the self,

¹ Vernet, 'Film Noir on the Edge of Doom', p. 26

² *Stranger on the Third Floor*, dir. by Boris Ingster (RKO Radio Pictures, 1940).

but of the very thing which was desired in the first place. If home, noir, and desire are so dangerous and deadly, then this chapter will therefore begin by considering what, by contrast, Classical Hollywood cinema considers safe. I will therefore consider the notion of ‘safety’ in Hollywood’s cinematic spaces, and how noir often disrupts this spatial safety, and how the epistemological logic of noir and its narratives disrupts narrative safety too. The chapter moves on to examine the history of noir, both its cinematic and critical history, and how the conception of noir is shaped by its critics. *Stranger on the Third Floor* will be used as a case study in how noir’s own critical and formal ambiguity is mirrored in the films themselves. Then, the chapter will show how *Stranger* reflects the problem of simple historicisation of noir and its conception of home.

Classical Hollywood cinema, a period which runs from around the 1910s to the 1960s, relies on providing spatial accessibility for the audience. Richard Maltby, for instance, claims that ‘Hollywood space rewards us for looking at it by constantly addressing and satisfying our expectation in look.’³ For Maltby, therefore, Hollywood space is marked by its allusions to safety. Noir, on the other hand, disrupts this visual safety. This disruption is felt not only visually and spatially, but also *historically*. For Hollywood cinema, establishing safety requires the camera to appear transparent and subservient to the action and movement on screen. The camera masks cuts and edits so that each sequence, both between concurrent shots and across the film’s narrative, follows a linear and understandable progression. Continuity editing is the primary way in which space is constructed in Hollywood cinema, as it enables the creation of what Maltby calls a ‘safe space for the development of the story.’⁴ Thus, according to Maltby, spatial accessibility in Hollywood cinema facilitates narrative accessibility. Conversely, as Joel Dinerstein argues, noir’s

³ Richard Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), p. 312.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 313.

retreat away from cinematic safety engenders a certain ‘nostalgia for stable spaces.’⁵ Noir’s visual spaces can therefore be characterised by their instability.

Disruption of both these kinds of accessibility can be seen in many film noirs. Firstly, the flashback structures of films such as *Out of the Past* (1947)⁶ and *The Killers* (1946)⁷ involve a restructuring of linear narrative progression. Secondly, narrative accessibility can be destabilised through noir’s troubled protagonists, who denote a loss of moral certainty and accessibility, or through figures such as the femme fatale, an object of desire whose appearance involves deceiving the spectator. Spatial accessibility is affected by these devices and the editing and framing of noir reflects this. In Orson Welles’ *The Lady From Shanghai* (1947), the editing and mise-en-scène create a sense of unrest and unpredictability during its famous final sequence in the funhouse.⁸ Another example of abnormal portrayals of space can be seen in Carol Reed’s *The Third Man* (1949), which frequently uses Dutch angles to twist and distort the image, placing our gaze in uncomfortable positions.⁹ Contrastingly, in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) the editing structurally sutures the two main characters together, by crossing between space and time to bring them together.¹⁰ The film portrays an idyllic suburban family in Santa Rosa, California. The eldest daughter, Charlie, feels trapped in her pacified environment until her well-liked and respected Uncle Charles announces he is to return home from the city for some time. Later, Uncle Charles is revealed to harbour a sinister and murderous past. The film questions the peaceful nature of the American suburb. It does not quietly foster the American spirit, but rather produces

⁵ Joel Dinerstein, ‘Emergent Noir: Film Noir and the Great Depression in *High Sierra* (1941) and *This Gun For Hire* (1942)’, *Journal of American Studies*, 42.3, *Film and Popular Culture* (Dec., 2008), p. 425.

⁶ *Out of the Past*, dir. by Jacques Tourneur (RKO Radio Pictures, 1946).

⁷ *The Killers*, dir. by Robert Siodmak (Universal Pictures, 1946).

⁸ *The Lady From Shanghai*, dir. by Orson Welles (Columbia Pictures, 1947).

⁹ *The Third Man*, dir. by Carol Reed (British Lion Film Corporation, 1949).

¹⁰ *Shadow of a Doubt*, dir. by Alfred Hitchcock (Universal Pictures, 1943).

monsters. It is less the case that Uncle Charles represents a purely aberrant threat. When he is first introduced, for instance, he lies pale and motionless, evoking the iconography of a vampire. Instead, the monster *is* the supposedly idyllic suburb. A substantial part of the narrative is dedicated to connecting young Charlie and Uncle Charles and Hitchcock's editing emphasises this horrific dimension.



Figure 1.1, *Shadow of a Doubt*, dir. By Alfred Hitchcock (Universal Pictures, 1943)

We are introduced to Uncle Charles first (Figure 1.1), then to young Charlie (Figure 1.2) as they lie in their respective beds. Through Hitchcock's cutting, then, both are spatially and narratively linked. Their fates are linked through their similar name and hidden desire for each other; the innocent girl and the villainous killer are thus equated. This equating of both characters

expresses the film's larger focus on how the American suburb, and the ideal home within it, is not a place of sanctity shielding the American citizen from other evil ideologies, but rather a place which actively fosters and protects malice. Charles is not so much an outside force of chaos seeking to disrupt the supposed cohesion of the idyllic Santa Rosa, as a product of that very environment. Young Charlie is equated with Charles because of their similarity, not because of their obvious difference.



Figure 1.2, *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943)

A similar disruption of spatial and narrative accessibility can be seen in *Stranger on the Third Floor*. The following section will examine the myriad problems in the conception and construction of film noir through questioning to what extent *Stranger on the Third Floor* can be

called ‘the first film noir’. The disruption of space and narrative exemplifies, on a metacinematic level, the troubled conception of noir. Designating the film as the ‘first noir’ is admittedly fairly arbitrary. Films such as Fritz Lang’s *M* (1931)¹¹ and Michael Curtiz’s *Private Detective 62* (1933)¹² all exhibit features of film noir and might thus be deemed early instances of noir. Similarly, gangster films of the 1930s such as *Public Enemy* (1931)¹³ and *Scarface* (1932)¹⁴ demonstrate noir’s romanticisation of the criminal hero. Indeed, an overview of film noir’s critical literature reveals a propensity for simply summarising *Stranger on the Third Floor* as the ‘first noir’ without even citing who regards it as such. One of the earliest instances is in Robert G. Porfirio’s essay ‘No Way Out: Existential Motifs in Film Noir’, where he writes that film noir is, ‘an extremely unwieldy period’, which lasted, at most, ‘no longer than twenty years: from 1940 (*Stranger on the Third Floor*) roughly to 1960 (*Odds Against Tomorrow*).’¹⁵ Ian Brookes, in his introduction to the problem of categorising film noir, identifies a turn in noir criticism which sees *Stranger on the Third Floor* replacing *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) as the first noir in the eyes of ‘many critics.’¹⁶ When and where this turn occurred is left unanswered. Similarly, Spencer Selby writes that *Stranger on the Third Floor* is ‘often referred to as the first true and total film noir.’¹⁷ I would argue that this tendency is reflective of the arbitrariness of calling a film noir the ‘first’ rather than being an instance of any kind of mass critical lacuna. As this chapter will argue, the retroactive construction of film noir renders a linear taxonomy and classification of film unnecessary, and in some instances, unhelpful. Indeed, it will further argue that noir’s very imprecision means that to designate a film, noir, introduces ambiguity rather than removing it. The

¹¹ *M*, dir. by Fritz Lang (Nero-Film A.G., 1931).

¹² *Private Detective 62*, dir. by Michael Curtiz (Warner Bros. Pictures, 1933).

¹³ *Public Enemy*, dir. by William A. Wellman (Warner Bros. Pictures, 1931).

¹⁴ *Scarface*, dir. by Howard Hawks (The Caddo Company, 1932).

¹⁵ Porfirio, ‘No Way Out’, p. 85.

¹⁶ Ian Brookes, *Film Noir: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 15.

¹⁷ Spencer Selby, *Dark City: The Film Noir* (London: St James Press, 1984), p. 183.

question which film noir is ‘first’ is not pertinent because of the arbitrary answer it yields. Instead, the posing of the question both reveals the inconsistency of the question and helps sharpen the focus of how noir is defined in the first place.

In this chapter, I will consider the unique definitional problems that face noir, how its critical and textual retroactivity intertwine, and how this affects the problem of home, using *Stranger on the Third Floor* as a case study. It is necessary to connect the often-overlooked film to later and more established noirs within the canon to exemplify not only the possibilities of noir, but also the problems facing the critic when trying to categorise noir itself. The principal problem is one of retroactivity, not simply because of the fact that film noir was named in 1946 — well into its ‘first phase’ — but the fact that this retroactivity is reflected in the films themselves. With their complex flashback structures, there is a sense that, on a formal and structural level, film noir always arrives too late to its own construction. There is always some level of excess, some element which remains unreachable. Even those films that do not use flashback narratives involve a similar approach to epistemology — things are never what they seem, and their revelations and ‘solutions’ only seem to further complicate matters rather than resolve them. *Stranger on the Third Flood* has a largely linear narrative, save for an extended dream sequence in the middle of the film, which serves to retroactively reconfigure our existing knowledge, particularly in relation to Michael’s position as an empathetic protagonist. Yet the logic of the flashback structure is not only present in flashbacks, but in the very construction of knowledge in noir.

To place the film within the historical, aesthetic, and narrative contexts of noir requires reference points, oddly, from the future, as it is somehow influenced by the film noirs that follow it. Such a proposition may sound bizarre, but its necessity, I believe, is testament to how film noir functions as a retroactive category informed by trauma. We must, however, take this proposal

seriously as it highlights the critical position in relation to noir, that films are imbued with 'noirness' by critics rather than it being an inherent property of the film. Critics arrive to noir 'too late' because their 'noirness' is not an inherent property of the film. Rather than stabilising meaning by placing the film within a specific critical and historical framework, 'noirness' is instability itself. In this sense, defining noir always produces an excess, something within the film which eludes definition, brought about both by a certain anxiety by critics to homogenise these set of films and by the ambiguity of film noir itself.

Hereafter, therefore, I use the term 'noirness' to both mean the content of film noir, as well as to suggest a general 'feeling' of noir, thus emphasising its ephemeral and spectral properties. As Maltby argues, film noir is a description which is itself a 'metaphor' because noir 'is the only major category in the American cinema designated by critics rather than industrialists.'¹⁸ The difference between 'critics' and 'industrialists' can be summarised as the difference between the films themselves willingly being produced *as* noir. There is thus always a possibility, an unresolvable tension, that a film noir is not even a 'film noir'; critics are potentially simultaneously seeing too much and too little. This, on the face of it, might not need be a major problem. For, as Tzvetan Todorov argues in his 1976 essay, 'The Origins of Genres', all genres arise through other genres and as such there is no point of origin for genre. 'The question of origins', he writes, 'cannot be disassociated, historically, from the field of the genres themselves.'¹⁹ Noir is, in part, constructed out of other genres (the detective novel, the crime film, the gothic, the melodrama and so on), but what it lacks, in Todorov's definition, is the 'models of writing', the historical schema

¹⁸ Richard Maltby, 'Film Noir: The Politics of the Maladjusted Text', *Journal of American Studies*, 18.1 (April 1984), p. 51.

¹⁹ Tzvetan Todorov, 'The Origin of Genres', *New Literary History*, 8.1, *Readers and Spectators: Some Views and Reviews* (Autumn, 1976), p. 161.

available to a text's author, the framework by which authors 'write as a function of [...] the existing generic system'.²⁰ This lack of a generic framework gives rise to a correlative lack of agency in noir. Approaching noir as if it were a genre with definable and quantifiable characteristics results in, as I will later demonstrate, a circular critical task, wherein the categorisation of noir overtakes the experience of the films themselves. Edward Dimendberg, for one, offers a succinct definition of noir, calling it a 'bricolage', an 'amalgam of diverse historical and cultural elements'.²¹ This, of course, is not without its problems — it is perhaps too vague — but understanding noir, or 'noirness', as a phenomenon which arises because of a connection between various cultural elements, historical contexts, as well as national and personal traumas, is at least a good start.

It should be acknowledged, too, that the retroactive construction of noir is not unique to noir, but rather a product of genre criticism itself. As Steve Neale points out in *Genre and Hollywood*, 'it was not until the late 1960s and 1970s that the study of genre and genres began to establish itself more fully in Britain and in the UA, in tandem with the establishment of Film Studies as a formal, academic discipline.'²² Moreover, Andrew Tudor, in his 1974 book *Theories of Film*, situates this problem in the context of the western and highlights the paradoxical nature of genre criticism. He writes, 'To take a genre such as the western, analyse it, and list its principal characteristics is to beg the question that we must first isolate the body of films that are western.'²³ Tudor, however, identifies that genre is a more of a *cultural* signifier than a textual one. To speak of 'the western' he argues, is to 'appeal to a common set of meanings in our culture'.²⁴ Genre is still, for Tudor, present in the films, but their classification depends more on 'the particular culture

²⁰ Ibid, p. 162.

²¹ Dimendberg, *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity*, p. 3.

²² Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London: Routledge, 2000), p 8.

²³ Andrew Tudor, *Theories of Film* (London: Seeker and Warburg, 1974), p. 135.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 39.

with which we are operating.²⁵ It is no secret, then, that genre criticism is a problematic area. Where noir differs, I argue, is that its very meaning in popular culture is both deeply ambiguous *and* at odds with its academic definition. There is a clear *idea* about what noir is in the cultural imagination — evidenced in myriad popular descriptions of noir, and in the influence of noir’s visual style and narrative tropes on modern cinema²⁶ — but this loose definition works to complicate any formal definition.

It was Nino Frank, an Italian born French critic, who in 1946 first identified — or first used the term — film noir, or ‘film “noirs”’.²⁷ As John Belton identifies, film noir was notable, in the eyes of French critics, for its ‘essential *difference* from earlier American films.’²⁸ In one sense, we might read Belton’s judgement as meaning that noir can be identified through its points of divergence from other, more ‘mainstream’ Hollywood films. But in another, what this perception reveals about noir is that it opens up the space *for* difference, which is the essence of ‘noirness’. With regards to Frank, 1946 occurred, of course, after many of the classics of film noir (for example, *The Maltese Falcon*,²⁹ *Double Indemnity*,³⁰ and *Murder My Sweet*³¹). The idea of ‘noir’, then, for these films (and thus potentially for the category as a whole) is something which was neither consciously nor wholly produced by the films themselves, nor was it an intended effect. As Thomas Elsaesser has suggested, ‘essentially, film noir has no essence, its most stable characteristic is its “absent-centredness.”’³² And, as Billy Wilder is credited with saying after the

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Frank Miller’s *Sin City* (1995), a series of graphic novels, is particularly illustrative example because of the way in which Miller’s art style specifically evokes and heightens noir’s high-contrast, chiaroscuro lighting.

²⁷ Frank, ‘A New Kind of Police Drama: The Criminal Adventure’, p. 14.

²⁸ John Belton, *American Cinema, American Culture* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994), p. 190.

²⁹ *The Maltese Falcon*, dir. by John Huston (Warner Bros., 1941).

³⁰ *Double Indemnity*, dir. by Billy Wilder (Paramount Pictures, 1944).

³¹ *Murder, My Sweet*, dir. by Edward Dmytryk (RKO Radio Pictures, 1944).

³² Thomas Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany’s Historical Imaginary* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 423.

production of *Double Indemnity*: ‘Film noir!...I never heard that expression in those days.’³³ If it is the case that noirness is created by the critic rather than by the film, how is it possible to produce a coherent chronology of film noir? That is, is it possible to call any film ‘the first film noir’, even an early film such as *Stranger on the Third Floor*? As Jason Holt writes in his 2007 essay ‘A Darker Shade’, *Stranger on the Third Floor* is ‘little known’ but nevertheless constitutes the ‘inception of the classic period’ of noir.³⁴ Curiously, as Gene Phillips argues in his 2011 book *Out of the Shadows: Expanding the Canon of Classic Film Noir* — an otherwise welcome exploration of the ways in which noir’s boundaries are constantly in flux — *Stranger on the Third Floor* acquiesces its position of being the ‘first’ film noir to *The Maltese Falcon* because of the latter’s larger influence on film noir. *The Maltese Falcon*, for Phillips, ‘remains the “official” beginning of the film noir cycle.’³⁵ However, noir can only be seen as ‘absent-centred,’³⁶ seen as what it lacks, or what is lost when we call a film ‘noir.’ The question of the ‘first’ film noir should not therefore be decided by which film has (or had) the most influence on the films that preceded it. Instead, the question should be understood in an ironic sense. The answer to the question does not have any real bearing on the formation of noir but attempting to answering it reveals the logic of noir’s formal and textual retroactive construction. The next section will examine film noir’s production of the visual image and its construction of narrative structures. It will consider a metatextual reading of *Stranger on the Third Floor*’s ending, and what it might tell us about the construction of noir itself. Then, I will give my own definition of noir.

³³ Charlotte Chandler, *Nobody’s Perfect: Billy Wilder, A Personal Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), p. 114.

³⁴ Jason Holt, ‘A Darker Shade: Realism in Neo-Noir’, in *The Philosophy of Film Noir*, ed. by Mark T. Conard (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2007), p. 27.

³⁵ Gene D. Phillips, *Out of the Shadows: Expanding the Canon of Classic Film Noir* (London: Scarecrow Press, 2011), p. 31.

³⁶ Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After*, p. 423.

Out of the Aftermath: The Beginning and Ending of Film Noir



Figure 1.3, *Stranger on the Third Floor*, Dir. Boris Ingster, (RKO Radio Pictures, 1940)

The ending of *Stranger on the Third Floor* is a curious moment in the film. Michael is a journalist who finds himself as the key witness in a murder trial of a local café owner, Nick. Michael lays the blame on the wrong man (a taxi driver called Briggs) instead of the real murderer, a mysterious figure known only as the Stranger. The Stranger also murders Michael's spying neighbour, Meng, for which Michael is later blamed. The Stranger seems to evade capture by Michael, and the latter's innocence depends on the existence of the Stranger. That is, until the Stranger has a chance meeting with Jane, Michael's fiancée, at a local butcher's, whereupon Jane accuses the Stranger of being

the murderer. After a brief fight between Jane and the Stranger, Jane runs across the street, and the Stranger is hit by a passing truck. As he lays dying in the street, he confesses his crimes to Jane. The next scene involves Michael and Jane at a local diner (replicating the first scene of the film), where a cheerful Michael relays the news that they are to be taken to their new house together. They are able to do so because Michael receives a raise for his involvement in the murder trial. As they step outside, they hail a taxi, and the previously accused Briggs appears, cheerfully, and offers them a ride, waiving their fare, and the film ends. While it seems as if the narrative tension has been resolved by the Stranger's death (the Stranger's confession of his crimes exonerates Michael, Michael gets his raise and can afford a home with Jane, and Briggs is proven innocent), there nonetheless remains a rushed feeling, an unexplained excess, a simplification of the answers which we expect to see.³⁷ It is the ending's very neatness which renders it unsatisfying.

Tonally, the ending appears to have arrived from a different film because it feels fictional and artificial. The Stranger's death and confession is too convenient because there is no established reason as to why he would confess, aside from a vague and implied madness. The narrative tension is resolved through an accident, in the form of the speeding truck, rather than through an investigative exploration of the condition which led to the Stranger murdering Meng and Nick. Michael's own 'investigation', which leads to his arrest as opposed to the Stranger's, is hardly conclusive or rigorous and Jane's concludes with a chance meeting with the Stranger. The reason the ending of the film feels unsatisfying is that it only resolves the tension for Michael. He is placed in an impossible situation, relying on the Stranger's existence and testimony to exonerate him. Yet narrative tension still remains in the notion the Stranger's existence can be read as a symptom of

³⁷ It should be noted that this 'rushed' feeling is borne out of the film's short running time, which is itself a product of the film's small budget. The film is therefore also rushed in a literal sense: there is no time to recover from its traumatic narrative.

Michael's desire to kill Meng. In other words, it is not necessarily the Stranger who murdered Meng, but Michael's desire.

Artificiality permeates the ending of the film. The oddness of the ending emphasises the retroactivity involved in the construction of meaning in noir, which is important in distinguishing how the idea of home is constructed and reconstructed through noir. Briggs' reappearance to offer Michael and Jane a free taxi ride acts to dislocate meaning, to make us aware of its strict adherence to Hollywood convention, which will be explored in greater detail later. It is the *attempt* to cohere and close the narrative that means it remains forever open (Figure 1.3). The last we saw of Briggs in reality — that is, outside Michael's dream — was him being dragged away from the court after his conviction. Briggs' only interaction with Michael outside of the dream was when Michael said he was guilty of murder. However, in Michael's dream, Briggs reappears as an embodiment of Michael's guilt. There is a notable distinction between real-life Briggs and the Briggs who appears in Michael's dream. If film noir were realistic, we would expect Briggs to be angry with Michael. Presumably, there is an omitted scene between the Stranger's death and the final scene. This scene would be a reappearance of Briggs in court wherein he is found innocent because of the Stranger's deathbed confession as opposed to Michael correcting his memory. In that case, Michael still has not done anything to rectify his mistake as it was merely coincidence which overturned Briggs' conviction. Yet the exclusion of such a hypothetical scene leads us to falsely consider the Stranger's death as the *cause* of the narrative resolution. The Stranger's death is presented as something around which all the narrative tension can coalesce and thus be diffused.

The uneasiness of the scene and the root of its artificiality cause it to appear as if the wrong Briggs has materialised. Indeed, there is a narrative need for a new Briggs to appear: the film no longer requires (nor is required to remember) the condemned man. Instead it simply needs

someone to deliver Michael and Jane to their new home. There is a dislocation between what we expect to see and what is shown. In other words, there is a slippage between signifier and signified. In linguistics, the signifier is a written word or sound pattern, the material form of an object, and the signified the concept of that word. The signifier for Briggs, then, is his existence in the court room. More precisely, his existence is contextualised in terms of his screams — ‘I didn’t do it!’³⁸ — that haunt the rest of the film and Michael’s unconscious. It suggests that Michael’s professional commitment to truth is imaginary, a mask for his personal desires. The outcome of the trial leading to Michael and Jane’s personal enfranchisement is coincidental only because Michael desires it. Although Briggs’ screams are an act of desperation, a plea to Michael’s conscience, Michael imagines them as piercing indictments of his desires. This version of Briggs sees right through Michael. Michael sees Briggs as the condemned man who knows Michael’s desires, perhaps better than Michael himself. The Briggs which emerges at the end of the film is totally harmless. Instead of interrogating Michael’s desires, he accepts his utterances at face value. And, as a working-class man, he is rendered inert: he no longer desires anything himself — only wishing to serve the now valiant Michael — and is reduced to a means for Michael and Jane to move into their new (and apparently deserved) home. It is, strangely, this version of Briggs, the least believable and most ‘dream-like,’ who serves to conclude the film quickly and efficiently.

Through *Stranger on the Third Floor*’s ending, we can see a microcosm of how meaning is constructed in noir, as well as how noir itself is created. The ending of the film, principally, shows three interrelated concepts which inform the construction of meaning and home in noir. The first is the instability of the ending. The formation of the couple at first appears a sensible outcome to the narrative because the tension within their relationship has been overcome. Yet because those

³⁸ *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940).

problems were identified within the Stranger himself, then their relationship's stability is undermined. The formation of the couple, as I have argued, is the primary mechanism by which the traumatic meaning is sutured in Hollywood cinema. The second, which is closely aligned with the instability, is the excessiveness. The Stranger, I would argue, represents Michael's excessive desire. Finally, the third concept is the traumatic dimension. The figure of the Stranger *is* the film itself, as represented in the confusing relation between the signifier 'Stranger' and the referent. The character of the Stranger is both the antagonist of the film *and* a totalising force on the film. The construction of plausible meaning in the film is based on a paradoxical formulation: all meaning in the film only begins to make sense once it comes into contact with the Stranger, but the Stranger himself represents the source of instability in the film.³⁹ Next, I will offer my definition of film noir in light of a metatextual reading of *Stranger on the Third Floor*. I will consider what this shows us about the conception of noir and of home, through the mythologization of history itself. Noir is also constituted by instability, excessiveness, and trauma.

With respect to the dislodgement between signifier and signified in noir, Lacan's concept of the *point de capiton* can help illuminate our understanding of Briggs and his relation to the ending of the film, as well as film noir more generally. Lacan's *point de capiton* stems from Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, or afterwardness. Afterwardness is a way of understanding the relationship between cause and effect in relation to trauma. Here, the trauma of *Stranger on the Third Floor* is located within the figure of the Stranger himself. He represents that which is repressed. On the one hand, he exposes how Michael's desire to move into a home with Jane is a

³⁹ When discussing the film, I am careful to not abbreviate the film solely to 'Stranger', so as not to confuse the reader with what I am discussing. Perhaps some extra meaning might be gleaned from a different and more ambiguous rhetorical strategy (showing my own work to embody the very instability of meaning present in noir), but here, I have opted for clarity.

destructive one. To escape Meng's incessant infantilisation of Michael through his denial of Michael's sexual desires, Meng must be killed. On the other, the Stranger's Othered position as an immigrant shows a certain cultural repression, something known of old and long forgotten.

Noir, too, is also traumatic. Firstly, its retroactive categorisation closely resembles the designation of trauma. Secondly, the historical context of World War Two hangs heavily over noir. As Sheri Chinen Biesen argues in her book *Blackout: World War II and the Origins of Film Noir* in 2005, noir's aesthetic sensibilities are partly a result of 'wartime constraints on filmmaking practices' such as the increased need to shoot films on small, enclosed sound stages.⁴⁰ The 'psychological atmosphere' in early noir films, she contends, 'marked a response to an increasingly realistic and understandable anxiety'.⁴¹ On a broad level, noir is a response to trauma: one solution to the epistemological crises raised by trauma is to use investigative narrative structures to lay out a logical response. Though, as I demonstrate in Chapter Three, the logic of the investigative structure does not systemically reveal all. Instead it conceals and hides. Although noir is a response to trauma, it is also indicative of trauma. Noir, I would argue, is a traumatic category of film.

Returning to Freud, *Nachträglichkeit* is the way in which trauma 'resurfaces' and becomes diagnosable. For example, a child may experience a traumatic event — commonly referred to as the 'primal scene' — in their childhood but may not understand the significance of it at the time it was experienced. The experience that is stored in the unconscious may manifest itself in numerous ways, such as parapraxis. Unbeknown to them, some unknown stimuli may cause the child to recall the traumatic event, causing distress and possibly psychosis. This process does not necessarily

⁴⁰ Sheri Chinen Biesen, *Blackout: World War II and the Origins of Film Noir* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2005), p. 3.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

denote a remembrance of the traumatic event as such; instead, it reveals the event to be traumatic. Ordinarily, the relationship between cause and effect is considered to constitute a linear progression, but with Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit* this relationship is reversed: the effect precedes the cause. Events are, as Ben Tyrer summarises, 'retroactively determined as traumatic.'⁴² The meaning of *Stranger on the Third Floor* is thus determined by its whimsical ending. The story was simply about a misunderstanding on Michael's part. After it has been neatly resolved, he and Jane can proceed to get married and move into their home together. Home's meaning here is bound up with the traumatic retrospection that the film's ending reflects. The trauma, up until the point is retroactively determined as such, is thus always spectral, always in the process of becoming traumatic. The traumatic event is paradoxically absent, insofar as it has yet to be realised, and it is at the same time present since it threatens to become real. A traumatic rupture, therefore, disrupts the linearity of time as the past is experienced within the present, since the presence of trauma is felt as an absence. The past is no longer safely in its place. Indeed, its very categorisation as the past is called into question.

Following on, the *point-de-capiton* is a term which attempts to understand precisely why *Nachträglichkeit* disrupts the very structure of a subject's experience of time and how the effect comes to precede its cause, as such a proposition seems counter-intuitive. Slavoj Žižek discusses the *point de capiton* in terms of a 'nodal point' which, in his words, 'quilt' signifiers without referents, or 'floating signifiers'.⁴³ A floating signifier does not point to any specific object and does not possess a universal meaning. The *point de capiton* 'fixes', or arrests, their meaning so that they 'become parts of the structured network of meaning.'⁴⁴ By introducing the *point de*

⁴² Ben Tyrer, 'Film Noir as *Point de Caption*', p. 98.

⁴³ Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 95.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p. 96.

capiton, these floating signifiers connect to other elements within the symbolic network, thus their meaning becomes fixed. The categorisation of film noir, as Ben Tyrer perceptively observes, can be understood in terms of the *point de capiton*.

Film noir differs from other styles of cinema insofar as it is a resolutely retroactive category. During their production, the films we now call noir were not known explicitly as film noir and were determined to be so after the fact. Directors and studios may have been consciously producing films which resembled a cluster of abstract ‘feelings’ which we now recognise as noir, but they were not known as ‘film noir.’ Nor, too, is there any satisfactory way to verify that, during their production, the films were knowingly noir — such an endeavour would likely be tedious and inconclusive. This is because noir is not determined by a cluster of features. The designation of films as ‘noir’ functions as the *point de capiton*, arresting the meaning of the films and their specific content by aligning them with the signifier ‘noir’. In short, what most film noirs have in common is that they are known as film noir. Tyrer acknowledges that this designation of noir as a retroactive category is a symptom of the way in which knowledge is produced within the films themselves because the *point de capiton* denotes a restructuring of cause and effect, and thus how meaning is produced. The cause is acknowledging the signifier ‘noir’ and the films are its effects rather than the other way around. In this way, noir’s meaning (both of the category as a whole and within themselves) is predicated on the sensation of not knowing.

In terms of a textual, filmic, dimension to the *point de capiton*, it is a point in which knowledge is produced *ex post facto* or retroactively. *Nachträglichkeit* demonstrates how knowledge can be produced in such a way. A common trope of noir which reinforces such a point is the flashback structure of certain films (some examples include, but are not limited to, *Double*

Indemnity (1944), *Detour* (1945)⁴⁵, and *The Killers* (1946))⁴⁶. The flashback structure often involves a restructuring of knowledge as certain signifiers are fixed into place. Yet I would not limit the logic of the flashback to films with such an explicit structure. Instead, I see the flashback structure in noir as an effect of noir's traumatic relation to knowledge and history.

Tyrer writes that 'The final point confers meaning retroactively on the elements that preceded it'⁴⁷, the final point in *Stranger on the Third Floor* being its ending. Through its very difference, the ending confers meaning back onto the rest of the film. With the introduction of the *point de capiton*, meaning can no longer be conceived of as linearly constructed but instead as something which is retroactively produced, as something which is added back in with the 'final point.' In fact, it is the only way that meaning is produced in noir. The fallacious signification of 'resolution' in the Stranger's death, as well as Briggs' incarceration, is understood as having logical contingencies rather than being a product of fortune. Further, the *point de capiton*, Žižek argues, is 'the word to which "things" themselves refer to recognise themselves in their unity.'⁴⁸ Thus, meaning in the film becomes centred around the ending. The ending-as-signifier retroactively reveals meaning in earlier parts of film, such as the Stranger's death: it escapes being an act of violent randomness because of the ending. Any discussion of meaning in the film is incomplete without reference to the ending because of its suspicious difference.

There is an additional meta-textual dimension to the *point de capiton* and *Nachträglichkeit* in relation to *Stranger on the Third Floor*'s position as the 'first film noir.' Even within the

⁴⁵ *Detour*, dir. by Edgar G. Ulmer (Producers Releasing Corporation, 1945).

⁴⁶ *The Killers*, as will be noted later, does not necessarily have flashback structure in a technical sense. However, in the general sense that the film's plot is communicated through the stories of characters within the film, it does share some resemblance to the flashback structures of the other two films.

⁴⁷ Tyrer, 'Film Noir as *Point de capiton*', p. 100.

⁴⁸ Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 105.

established canon of noir, the film finds itself somewhat of an outsider. In the broader imagination of the public, John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) is perhaps the 'first noir' proper because it is an adaptation of the hard-boiled detective novel by Dashiell Hammett. *The Maltese Falcon* exhibits many of the supposedly key characteristics of film noir: a morally grey, nihilistic detective narrative; a hard-boiled detective as the protagonist (and the inclusion of Humphrey Bogart himself, a figure who seems to represent the genre as a whole); a femme fatale; and so on. In short, it certainly *seems* as if it were a film noir, or perhaps the first 'full realised' noir. Instead, I would position *Stranger on the Third Floor* as the first film noir. I do so in an ironic sense, not to suggest that the film is the first noir, nor that it is the first film which offers a significant 'blueprint' with which we can better understand later noirs, but rather to stress the absurdity of such a proposition: there can be no first film noir, but the insistence on searching tells us something about both critical priorities and noir itself. Through its retroactivity, the ending of *Stranger on the Third Floor* acts as the *beginning* of film noir, insofar as it acts as an opening of the gate. Similarly, noir itself could be considered spectral because of the way in which, through the film, we experience the past in the present. Retroactively, the film is the first noir, or at least an early antecedent. However, there is a lingering sense that the noirness in the film is not entirely present.

Noirness is not something which can only be denoted through the identification of formal and narrative features within particular sets of films. *Stranger on the Third Floor*'s distinctive lighting, pessimistic tone, 'wrong man' narrative,⁴⁹ and so forth, do not themselves make it a noir.⁵⁰ It cannot be so definitively applied, since applying the term 'noir' to a film introduces an additional layer of ambiguity because it recontextualises other film noirs and the positions they inhabit. The

⁴⁹ Though, the film's focus on Michael as the 'wrong man' ignores the false accusation against Briggs.

⁵⁰ Brookes, *Film Noir*, p. 50.

ambiguity in *Stranger on the Third Floor* arises partly because noir itself is so ambiguous and spectral, threatening to be coherent and therefore real. Much like the figure of the Stranger himself, his threatening presence is constituted by the threat of his existence. The Stranger nevertheless reveals the lack of control noir's protagonists have over their desires; they exceed their grasp.

The position of the Stranger in the film is, I argue, particularly instructive in grappling with the problems and debate over noir's definition. What interests this thesis is less the specificities of the debate itself, but more what it tells us about noir and its depiction of home. I argue that designating *Stranger on The Third Floor* as the 'first' noir also confers its position as the 'last' noir. The attempt to impose order, to demythologise, to delimit noir's instability, excessiveness, and trauma, exposes the frayed edges of noir. Indeed, we could identify noir as only constituting a border. It limits without ever defining its own internal constituents. Like the Stranger himself, then, noir is only made visible through glimpses of its fleeting borders; we only see noir through our blindness. This aspect of the Stranger is one of my major ways in which he problematises definition within the film itself. Next, I will examine the definition of noir more generally.

As a generic or stylistic category, then, noir serves to multiply ambiguities in its texts rather than to codify them and render them coherent. On one level, the concern is that *Stranger on the Third Floor* might not be fully noir, that its noirness floats through it like a current, sporadically revealing itself, or that because of the film's chronologically early position it is simply feigning noirness, or that what we see might differ in some way to a (also spectral) 'real' noirness. We might recall Paul Schrader's declaration of noir's 'almost Freudian attachment to water'.⁵¹ Here, we can interpret Schrader's words as metaphorical. Noir's attachment to 'water' represents the

⁵¹ Schrader, 'Notes on Film Noir', p. 57.

ephemeral properties of noirness. Noir is thus not attached to ‘water’, but it is the ‘water’ itself. Or, in light of Tyrer’s observation that the only thing that binds noir together is the signifier ‘noir’, noir is thus attached to *itself*. On another level, the concern is that noir is somehow not fully itself, that its presence simultaneously suggests its absence. The sporadic nature of noirness keeps it from being fully formed; it is only caught in glimpses, never in full view. In this respect, the Stranger is a personification of noirness. His desires are difficult to grasp yet are central to the network of meaning within the film. The same applies to noir’s critics: noir is not an object in itself which can be understood; it can only be grasped through the prism of individual films, thus making its meaning malleable. Noir’s retroactivity manifests itself here within the critical reappraisal of the film. The film’s experimental techniques, such as chiaroscuro lighting, the internal monologue, and the psychological themes it addresses set a precedent which later noir continues and expands upon. In relation to *Stranger on the Third Floor* specifically, its paranoid dream sequence is highly and overtly reminiscent of the techniques used in the German Expressionist films of the 1930s. Phillips notes the influence of cinematographer Nicholas Musuraca, particularly in how the ‘strongly expressionistic dream sequence reflects the overt influence of German films like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* on Musuraca’s work.’⁵²

⁵² Phillips, *Out of the Shadows: Expanding the Canon of Classic Film Noir*, p. 30.



Figure 1.4, *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940)

Other elements, such as its gothic influence, are often overlooked.⁵³ For instance, the Stranger's first appearance, with his pointed out-stretched hand (Figure 1.4) is reminiscent of F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922)⁵⁴ and the focus on Nosferatu's hands as instruments of terror in themselves. This connection makes explicit an argument put forth by Marc Vernet that noir's distinctive lighting did not originate in noir, but can instead be found much earlier, in films from 1915 by Cecil B. DeMille and Alvin Wickoff.⁵⁵ So through a connection drawn between *Stranger*

⁵³ Vernet, 'Film Noir on the Edge of Doom', p. 9-11.

⁵⁴ *Nosferatu*, dir. by F. W. Murnau (Film Arts Guild, 1922).

⁵⁵ Vernet, 'Film Noir on the Edge of Doom', p. 9.

on the Third Floor and its antecedents, we can see that noir's distinctive and original aspects, are not distinctive and original in themselves. Nevertheless, the film's demonstration of various noir techniques can help illuminate their position within other noir films. The dream sequence in the film is reminiscent, too, of Hitchcock's *Spellbound*, which is induced by two doctors attempting to figure out John Ballatyne's, the protagonist, affliction. The dream sequence in *Stranger on the Third Floor* can be read *through* such similar sequences like *Spellbound*'s. The dream's function is to *interrogate* Michael's desires, to shift the terrain of the investigation from the material to the psychological world. I will now consider how psychoanalysis figures within *Stranger on the Third Floor* and within noir's contexts more broadly, as well as the way in which this thesis uses psychoanalysis as its conceptual framework.

Perhaps the most influential aspect of the film is the way it approaches the unconscious and psychoanalysis in general. 'The noir film', as Maureen Turim argues, 'avoids dramatizations of Freudian concepts and diagnoses; it inscribes them instead on an unconscious level for a symbolic reading.'⁵⁶ *Stranger on the Third Floor*, therefore, should be not be read simply as a dramatization of Freudian concepts, but we should recognise how psychoanalysis and the unconscious are inscribed symbolically. For example, the Stranger acting as Michael's doppelgänger is not merely an instance of the uncanny, but a sign that the way in which identity is constructed in relation to desire is itself uncanny. Moreover, there is a historical as well as textual basis for the use of psychoanalysis in film noir. The position of psychoanalysis in American culture cannot be ignored. The 1940s and 1950s, Frank Krutnik argues, marked the popularisation of Freudian psychoanalysis whereby Freud's concepts, previously considered to be too 'intellectual'

⁵⁶ Maureen Turim, *Flashbacks in Film: Memory and History* (New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 175.

and 'European' for Americans, became widely known.⁵⁷ In particular, Freud's work on the structure of psyche through the Id, Ego, and Super-ego became an example of how Freud demonstrated the instability of the self. Freud designated the mind as something which is constantly being internally torn apart. Indeed, in America, Ego psychology was the dominant school of psychoanalytic practice.⁵⁸

Freud's concept of the uncanny, a concept often associated with Gothic Studies, additionally finds its way into noir. More generally, Freud's theories opened the possibility for understanding the unconscious drives of Hollywood's characters and thus a way to see beyond the immediate and visible properties of Hollywood cinema. Psychoanalysis 'cuts' through Hollywood's visual logic, most notably the emphasis on the objectivity of camera and the idea that the camera is 'all seeing'. If the films are psychoanalytically inflected, that is they invite us to read them psychoanalytically, then how does the Hollywood camera 'see' desire or drives? In the case of *Stranger on the Third Floor*, this relationship to Hollywood is directly analogous to the plot of the film because it questions the authority of surface appearances in favour of deeper, inner desires. The psychology of the crime (and of the criminal) is more important than the actuality of the crime itself. We never actually see either of the two crimes and instead witness Michael's inner interrogation and subsequent revelation of his desire to kill Meng and to experience punishment. If the *Stranger* is read, at least by Michael, as a kind of primordial force — a supernatural conjuration of Michael's desires — rather than possessing any of his own (although, as noir often shows, are our desires ever really ours?), then the *Stranger* lacks any form of agency. Therefore, Michael's desires *lack* agency; he is not in control of his desires.

⁵⁷ Frank Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 45.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

There is, of course, a noticeable difference between popular psychoanalysis and psychoanalysis proper. Whereas the former is exaggerated and often used for ‘imagistic vicariousness’, the latter questions the solidity of appearances.⁵⁹ There is a reason psychoanalysis appears so frequently in noir criticism: the two are intrinsically bound up. It is as if psychoanalysis is embedded within the text of a noir film itself, waiting to be discovered and realised as such, yet at the same time never really there. Any criticism of film noir, such as, say, a historical examination of noir, that does not utilise or refer to psychoanalysis feels incomplete because something is literally being overlooked.

The way in which noir is conceived follows the same retroactive logic as the *point de capiton*. This is highlighted in the way that early noir critics attempted to define noir. For example, Raymond Durnat’s main error in his exhaustive categorisation of the characteristics of noir can be said to be the same as the problem of the reversal of cause and effect in Freudian trauma. Durnat’s guiding principle, one that is shared by many early noir critics,⁶⁰ is that if one conjures up a cluster of details and signifiers (comprised of narrative and aesthetic tropes) then one can articulate the ‘essence’ of noir in order to determine which films can be categorised as film noir. Borde and Chaumeton also extol the virtues of an approach like Durnat’s. They argue the method for analysing or identifying noir is ‘obvious.’ They write,

While remaining as scientifically and objectively grounded as possible, one must examine the most prominent characteristic of the films which critics have classified as *noir*. From

⁵⁹ Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street*, p. 45.

⁶⁰ See: Highham and Greenberg, ‘Noir Cinema’; Schrader ‘Notes on Film Noir’; Borde and Chaumeton, ‘Towards A Definition of Film Noir’.

these characteristics one may then derive the common denominator and define that unique expressive attitude which all these works put into play.⁶¹

Borde and Chaumeton's hope is that by relentlessly categorising the constituent components of noir, then finally noir can be 'put into play', that noir can only make sense upon the completion of such a project. As I will explore later, in Chapter Three, an apparently 'scientific' approach is perhaps one of the least illuminating approaches a critic can take precisely *because* it is 'obvious'.

One problem with a project which intends to set out all the possible configurations of noir is that it is destined to defeat itself in one way or another: the list will either be so exhaustive that most films will tenuously fit into the schema somehow, or it will be too restrictive and prohibit the inclusion of films which do not arbitrarily tick the correct number of boxes. Indeed, as James Damico comments, such a project would necessarily have 'an entirely open structure,'⁶² which seems to be the opposite of that which Dugan wishes to accomplish. The project is thus entirely paradoxical. It posits the need for a restrictive categorisation of the elements of noir to define it as such and thus to create a 'canon' for noir, a body of work which can be pointed to and understood as separate from other genres and styles of cinema. Yet to do so, the category must be so broad as to allow already established films to be inducted into its annals. What, for instance, connects films such as *The Lost Weekend* (1945),⁶³ *Mildred Pierce* (1945),⁶⁴ *The Big Sleep* (1946), *Gilda* (1946), and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1947)? Aside from the historical period, the answer is relatively little. Durnat's project — which I take to be representative of a more general desire to categorise noir as a genre — is counterproductive. For Marc Vernet, in categorising noir, the

⁶¹ Borde and Chaumeton, 'Towards A Definition of Film Noir', p. 19 [original emphasis].

⁶² Damico, 'Film Noir: A Modest Proposal', p. 98.

⁶³ *The Lost Weekend*, dir. by Billy Wilder (Paramount Pictures, 1945).

⁶⁴ *Mildred Pierce*, dir. by Michael Curtiz (Warner Bros., 1945).

addition of elements only reveals the need for more precision.⁶⁵ Film noir as an object of study is something which defies appearances. As Derrida observes in his essay 'The Law of Genre', there is an impurity at the heart of genre: '...As soon as genre announces itself, one must respect a norm, one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impurity, anomaly, or monstrosity.'⁶⁶ Derrida adds: 'As soon as the word "genre" is sounded...as soon as one attempts to conceive it, a limit is drawn...And when a limit is established, norms and interdictions are not far behind: "Do," "Do not" says "genre," the word "genre," the figure, the voice, or the law of genre.'⁶⁷ Every genre, then, is impure in some capacity: no film is simply a Western, no novel is simply Gothic, no film is simply noir. This is, of course, a more general problem pertaining to genre itself, but in noir the problem is made more acute because the relationship between the critical apparatuses and the affect of the films themselves is crucial in understanding noir.

Film noir is deceptive in form and content; the problem of defining noir is inherent in the content of the noir films themselves because of the corollary between noir's problematised categorisation and the epistemological concerns of the films themselves. This problem arises partly because noir cannot be thought of as a homogenous category. For example, noir films may indeed be linked to other individual films (the concept of, say, the femme fatale is found in many noir films, though even that contains many configurations of the femme fatale) but never to all films within the chain. The question of 'is it noir?' is strangely both perfunctory and integral. What is of interest is how the categorisation of noir is problematised specifically by its retroactivity. The underlying assumption that noir, as a concrete category, consists of some or all the details which

⁶⁵ Vernet, 'Film Noir on the Edge of Doom', p. 4.

⁶⁶ Jacques Derrida, 'The Law of Genre', *Critical Inquiry*, 7.1, *On Narrative* (The University of Chicago Press (Autumn 1990), p. 57.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

Durgnat formalised is incorrect. It is wrong to assume that noir existed in films before the creation of 'film noir' as a signifier. As modern observers, our conception of noir is problematised by the fact that we see noir in something which noir does not see in itself. 'In the context of Lacan's *point de capiton*', Tyrer concludes, 'there is nothing that links [the films] except in the signifier 'noir''⁶⁸; noir itself is the signifier which links the films together instead of a cluster of features as proposed by Durgnat. Moreover, the *point de capiton*, Žižek continues, is a word which 'on the level of the signifier itself, unifies a given field, constitutes its identity.'⁶⁹ For film noir, it is the signifier 'noir' which constitutes and unifies 'noir identity', so the ending of *Stranger on the Third Floor* is an attempt to unify the film's identity, to formalise what the film is ultimately about.

To return to *Stranger on the Third Floor*, the Stranger's death should encourage us to question the frankly absurd unfolding of events. On the contrary, the film wants us, like Michael, to forget what we have seen. Indeed, it seems as if the film itself forgets to show us the scene we previously imagined which would contain the necessary resolution. There are two reasons why the film would 'forget' to show such a scene (aside from the obvious logistical one: perhaps Ingster wanted the film to end with the Stranger's death and intentionally leave the narrative questions unanswered but was obliged by Hollywood's conventions to add a satisfactory ending). Firstly, a 'proper' resolution might have been too traumatic because it would have laid bare the inadequacies of its legal system as well as their bias towards believing Michael's faulty testimony; in short, this scene would have revealed *too* much. Secondly, perhaps this imaginary scene was not shown because it would not have revealed anything at all because the court is working as intended, not as an objective purveyor of the social world which 'corrects' its errors, but more as a managerial tool.

⁶⁸ Tyrer, 'Film Noir as *Point de capiton*', p. 105.

⁶⁹ Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 105.

The court operates like a machine for doom, not an entity which is guided by a strict code of ethics, but something which transforms corpses into bodies of evidence. More pointedly, in the context of America's entry into World War Two and its subsequent reception of European Jewish refugees, the court's role and symbolic significance is heightened in relation to the treatment of the Other.

As the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum website states, 'Although Germany had the second highest quota allotment under the act, the number of Jews trying to flee to the United States meant that immigrants had to wait, often for years, on a list.'⁷⁰ Prior to President Truman's 'Truman Directive' in December 1945, America's immigration policy was stringent because of 'security concerns' over potential German spies hidden amongst the refugees.⁷¹ In film noir, these anxieties can be seen in Hitchcock's *Saboteur* (1942), but the Stranger himself can be read, as Jonathan Auerbach observes, as a Nazi spy masquerading as a 'Wandering Jew.'⁷² The Stranger himself is an Othered figure who does not regard his actions as immoral. Thus, the motivations of the Nazis are reduced to pure chaos seeking only to disrupt the American way of life rather than possessing any sort of ideological conviction, a sort of 'anti-ideology.' Symbolically, the court represents law, order, and stability in a tumultuous time, a mechanism which can restore and maintain ideology. Yet instead of protecting its citizens, the focus of the courts, as they are depicted in the film, is to maintain an exclusive idea and image of America. If we consider the Stranger as a symbol for Jewish refugees because of his European Otherness, then we are given a glimpse into America's response to immigrants. The answers that we seek regarding this imaginary courtroom

⁷⁰ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 'United States Policy and its Impact on European Jew' <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007652> [accessed 7/8/17]

⁷¹ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 'United States Policy Toward Jewish Refugees, 1941–1952.' <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007094> [accessed 7/8/17].

⁷² Jonathan Auerbach, 'Gestapo in America', in *Dark Borders: Film Noir and American Citizenship* (Duke University: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 53.

scene would in fact contradict what the film has suggested up to this point. The imagined scene which I proposed would serve to absolve the court itself from guilt. Such a symbolic redemption for the court does not appear. The film's actual ending feels more like a joke played simultaneously on both filmgoer and Hollywood: the demand for resolution provides us with an absence of a resolution which is more revealing than what was initially asked. We expect resolution, any kind of resolution, but are actively denied it by the film. Or, more precisely, although we are given the ending we want, it is given to us in a *way* we cannot accept. It is in this precise sense that the Stranger represents the noirness within the film. As I explained earlier, the signifier 'noir' attempts to unify 'noir identity,' yet the concept of noir is inherently unstable. In a similar way, the Stranger attempts to unify the meaning of the film, yet he himself is an epistemologically unstable figure. The precise nature of the jarring ending is that the final scene signifies resolution — primarily through the formation of the couple (as in they become married and move into their home) — without offering a substantive resolution, insofar as the resolution has unified around the demise of the Stranger. For example, none of the underlying legal and social problems have been addressed.

Briggs would have been wrongfully murdered (which itself implies that the Stranger was 'rightfully' murdered) because the court believed in Michael's faulty and unreliable testimony. The real problem is not the Stranger, but the potent combination of the gullibility (as seen in the lethargy of the judges) and violence of the legal system. Yet Hollywood implicitly dictates a need for narrative closure and resolution. As Auerbach argues, 'the machinery of law is the nightmare.'⁷³ There is a sense of *déjà vu*, of historical repetition, of circularity, which undermines the scene's attempts at closure. The repetition of the image of the busy downtown diner implies a

⁷³ Auerbach, 'Gestapo in America', p. 50.

narrative looping and puts the film in a state where resolution is a structural impossibility. As Vernet writes, the act of speaking or writing about film noir itself ‘consists...in being installed in repetition.’⁷⁴ The narrative looping implies that if, and indeed when, this should happen again, then nothing will change. In this context, hermeneutic activity is more or less useless, an empty attempt to impose order in a disorderly world. The various investigations (Briggs' court case, Michael's dream, Jane's investigation) throughout the film do not reveal what they are supposed to do. On the contrary, they each produce an unintentional excess. On a critical level, our interpretation of the film as film noir follows a similar pattern. Identifying it as either the first film noir or one of the first film noirs fixes its position as the *point de capiton*, the ‘final point.’ It ‘confers meaning retroactively on the elements that preceded it.’⁷⁵ Here, what precedes the film (at least in a critical sense) is the rest of the film noir canon. The film, therefore, is perhaps paradoxically, both noir’s first and final point. This circular pattern is reflected in the film’s narrative structure. If Hollywood narratives are intended to culminate in the protagonists ‘reaching’ reality through the Hollywood narrative, often through an investigation, then the film can be recognised as disrupting that process through its narrative looping. There is a sense of eternal recurrence, of Freud’s ‘fate neurosis’, which hermetically seals the film.

Film noir is thus a retroactive category since it is determined after the fact. This retroactivity has several effects on the films and depictions of home. Most important of all, is that since the essence of noir is always obscured through its retroactivity, then the films themselves embody a kind of obscurity. There is always something being obscured: visually (the high contrast lighting on the Stranger makes him difficult to see), narratively (the Stranger’s narrative

⁷⁴ Vernet, ‘Film Noir on the Edge of Doom’, p. 2.

⁷⁵ Tyrer, ‘Film Noir as *Point de capiton*’, p. 100.

significance is difficult to understand), and structurally (the spectrality of the Stranger retroactively alters the meaning of the film). Noirness is akin to a pervasive strangeness throughout a film; a feeling that something uncanny hangs, waiting in the air. It is perforating ambiguity: from the ambiguity over the film being the ‘first’ film noir, to what noirness is, to the objects of desire which it obscures, to the ambiguous meaning of home. Home’s meaning is ambiguous in noir *because* of noir. If film noir is retroactive to the extent to which I assert, then its construction resembles a nostalgic affect. As I have already demonstrated, noir’s retroactivity and relation to the *point-de-caption* is key to defining or understanding its mode of operation. As Boym argues, nostalgia is a ‘a mourning for the impossibility of mythical return.’⁷⁶ Next, I will focus more on the role of myth in noir’s nostalgic and retroactive construction. I will use Roland Barthes’ conception of myth and how noir’s gestures towards coherence only serve to show and highlight its instability.

Noir, Myth, and Genre: The Problem of Coherence

Noir’s endings often create an appearance of naturalism, a naturalism that is mirrored by the spatial ‘safety’ of the image in Hollywood cinema. In Hollywood cinema narrative, accessibility is made possible via continuity editing. I argue that this mythmaking, rather than covering up noir’s inconsistencies, is the mechanism by which we see its inconsistencies. Richard Maltby, for instance, writes that we ‘look through’ the camera instead of viewing it as part of the action it is capturing.⁷⁷ In this sense, the Hollywood camera is one that purports to be an objective viewer of

⁷⁶ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p. 8

⁷⁷ Maltby, ‘Film Noir: The Politics of the Maladjusted Text’, p. 312.

the action, merely providing us with the facts. It gives us, in Maltby's words, 'the best view.'⁷⁸ The production and subsequent organisation of space in Hollywood cinema is meant to give the appearance of naturalism. However, Hollywood cinema operates on the assumption that we accept its form of naturalism as naturalism itself. This extends, too, to Hollywood's 'narrative naturalism.' The reason Hollywood narratives invariably end happily is to imply, through the resolution of narrative tension, a 'return' to a state of 'normalcy'. Again, what constitutes 'normal' is ideologically constructed by and through Hollywood.



Figure 1.5, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, Dir. Tay Garnett, (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1946)

⁷⁸ Ibid.

In film noir, this sense of naturalism is often subverted. When Cora is first revealed to us in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946), for example, it is through an extravagant and highly sexually charged series of shots (Figures 1.5 and 1.6).⁷⁹ Cora is objectified from the beginning as we initially only see her bare legs, after which the camera cuts back to Frank and then finally back to Cora, who we now see in profile, and can recognise that there is a person attached to those legs. The reversal and cutting up of Cora's body here invites speculation: we only see her legs and therefore wonder where the rest of her is. Cora is aesthetically introduced as a conundrum, a subversion of expectation. Yet, this conundrum frames her as a fantasy screen for the (assumed) straight, male gaze. When she is fully revealed Cora stands framed by the doorway as if she were a painting. These shots are of note because of their departure from what is considered normal and 'natural', that is, most medium shots in Hollywood focus on the waist up in order to emphasis the actor's face (which in itself acts as a kind of marketing currency).

⁷⁹ *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, dir. by Tay Garnett (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1946).



Figure 1.6, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946)

However, the shots ultimately serve to highlight the weirdness of what is 'normal'. Cora's introduction draws attention to itself and to Cora as sexual spectacle for Frank. The ideological argument made by the film's cutting up of Cora's spatial completeness is that Cora is not a *whole* person; because she cannot be seen, she cannot also be controlled. Conversely, for example, when we see a medium shot of someone from the waist up, we are not invited to speculate whether they have been horrifically mutilated from the waist down. We instead accept that this is simply the natural way in which Hollywood presents its actors. Only when something abnormal happens do we begin to question the unreality of Hollywood naturalism and the camera's goal within it.

The goal for the Hollywood camera, then, is to disentangle itself from the image it produces, and to present the image as unmediated. Hollywood proposes its images as un-ideological yet the overwhelming historical conditions (the end of the Great Depression, America's entrance into the Second World War, the dropping of the Atomic Bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Cold War and so forth) serve to charge any cultural production with political and ideological energy. In this way, Hollywood's mode of production, particularly its use of the camera to construct space, and therefore ideology, follows Roland Barthes' theorisation of myths. Myths, Barthes writes, have 'the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal', and therefore they assert their own eternity, that it is simply the way things are.⁸⁰ Hollywood's narratives function as myths because they make 'contingency', in the form of narrative coincidence, 'appear eternal.' That is, the messages they relay, and the form they are presented in, are intended to be read as 'eternal'. For example, if Hollywood is supposed to function via linear and logical narrative progression, then *Stranger on the Third Floor's* ending presents an objection to such logic. The 'historical intention' of the Stranger's death and the narrative resolution is given a 'natural justification'; the Stranger's death is presented as a natural and logical conclusion even though it is purely accidental.⁸¹

The purpose of myth is to appear as an underlying societal narrative whose meaning is not subject to 'historical intention' or circumstance, but rather 'eternal' insofar as it tells a kind of grand truth. Culture is thus tautologically justified by its own myths. As Barthes argues, myth is 'not read as a motive, but as a reason.'⁸² Myth, for Barthes, is something (an object, a story, a person) which at one point had a historical (or subjective) contingency. This contingency is ignored

⁸⁰ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. by Annette Lavers (London: Paladin, 1972), p. 142.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Barthes, *Mythologies* p. 129.

and forgotten by the myth which instead claims to be the product of ‘natural’ and ‘eternal’ processes. In this way, the Hollywood camera can be read as myth or myth maker. Although Hollywood attempts to present its films in a quasi-realistic manner, the effect can often expose such mechanisms of realism. Hollywood’s mythological operations serve to insist that their practices are merely representative of a certain reality. In Hollywood, and noir, history disappears and is replaced by myth. ‘Myth’, Barthes writes, ‘is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things: in it, things lose the memory that they once were made.’⁸³ It is history that dies in myth, and with it, all the elements that create the social world itself.

This remains doubly true for film noir, which is often read as being realistic in comparison to the glamour of Hollywood cinema, film noir being the ‘nightmare’⁸⁴ that accompanies Hollywood’s ‘dream factory’ and is, somehow, more realistic. For instance, early noir critics Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton write in their 1955 essay ‘Towards a Definition of Film Noir’ that ‘as a general rule, the perspective of film noir is realistic and each scene in isolation could pass for an excerpt from a documentary.’⁸⁵ Film noir is, I would argue, not realistic, nor could it be mistaken for being a documentary, at least by modern viewers. That which gives film noir a sense of reality is also that which undermines it. For instance, noir’s focus on the unconscious desires and drives of its characters leads to its characters becoming complex and difficult to understand through their actions and words alone, yet these unconscious desires are exaggerated for cinematic effect. Film noir’s mythic construction is thus also felt metatextually. *Stranger on the Third Floor*’s ending illustrates how noir’s construction is characterised by a traumatic instability which leaves behind excess. In fact, this excess is the only way in which we

⁸³ Ibid, p. 142.

⁸⁴ Borde and Chaumeton, ‘Towards a Definition of Film Noir’, p. 22.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

can make sense of the film's ending, and of noir's construction. The ending also shows home to be similarly created. It is forgotten through the mythologization of the *present* in noir.

History, too, is suspiciously absent from noir. References to the war are relatively infrequent and are rarely the subject of film noir. Even *The Blue Dahlia* (1946),⁸⁶ which focuses on returning veterans, does not address the conditions of the war itself. The film begins as the war ends. Borde and Chaumeton's proclamation that noir 'could pass for an excerpt from a documentary'⁸⁷ is therefore extremely dubious since documentaries are explicitly historicisations of certain past events. They 'document' the past. As Holt argues, film noir's realism can be identified neither by its 'sense of reality' nor distorted reality, but rather as '*conveyed* by expressionist techniques and convoluted plotlines.'⁸⁸ Holt continues to write that these techniques capture a 'psychological realism, if nothing else, a sense of the world as it can be and often seems.'⁸⁹ The exact definition of what the "senses of the world' are is left glaringly ambiguous.

More convincingly, Elizabeth Cowie argues that although noir distances itself from melodrama, a similar narrative logic underpins them both. 'In film noir,' she writes, 'a narrative of an external enigma, a murder or a theft, replaces the melodrama's plot of an external event of war, poverty or social circumstance.'⁹⁰ Here, noir seems to exorcise history; it is, strangely, the price paid for realism. Moreover, if a documentary is factual insofar as it builds and presents evidence to construct an argument, then noir is therefore deemed by Borde and Chaumeton to follow the same logic. Cowie, on the other hand, highlights the similarities between noir and melodrama's narrative logic. Both use fate and coincidence to propel their narratives. Fate and

⁸⁶ *The Blue Dahlia*, dir. by George Marshall (Paramount Pictures, 1946).

⁸⁷ Borde and Chaumeton, 'Towards a Definition of Film Noir', p. 22.

⁸⁸ Holt, 'A Darker Shade', p. 25.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Cowie, 'Film Noir and Women', p. 130.

coincidence produce the ‘characteristic under-motivation of events in melodrama,’ yet, this is also ‘central’ to noir.⁹¹ Cowie considers the way in which popular culture imagines and understands the noir protagonist’s motivation as compulsion ‘by forces and passions beyond their reason.’⁹² The difference between melodrama and noir, then, according to Cowie, is that the narrative obstacles, predominately for the heterosexual couple, in melodrama are ‘external forces of family and circumstances, wars or illness.’⁹³ Contrastingly, in noir, the obstacles ‘derive from the characters’ psychology or even pathology as they encounter external events.’⁹⁴ It is not that external events are not present, but that their significance is diluted in favour of the psychological turmoil the protagonist must undergo.

Hollywood’s brand of realism, then, is highly questionable. Another obstacle faced by Hollywood on the road to realism is its aesthetic and narrative conventions. One such convention is the insistence on the formation of the couple. I use the phrase ‘formation of the couple’ to emphasise the mechanical way in which the Hollywood couple is produced, and indeed exists as a marketable product. One needs only to examine the posters and advertising which place the couple at the epicentre of the drama. For example, the trailer for *Dark Passage* (1947)⁹⁵ emphasises the star power and marketability of Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall and proclaims that they are ‘the stars who were meant for a kiss like this.’ Thus the implicit promise of the marketing for *Dark Passage* is that, despite the drama, Bogart and Bacall will successfully form a couple.⁹⁶ Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, the opening of the trailer recalls the formation of

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ *Dark Passage*, dir. By Delmer Daves (Warner Bros., 1947).

⁹⁶ Movieclips Classic Trailers, *Dark Passage Official Trailer #1 — Humphrey Bogart Movie (1947) HD*, online video, YouTube, 5 October 2012, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O1ZcLFW2UvI>> [accessed 14/3/17].

Bogart and Bacall in their previous films, *To Have and Have Not* (1944)⁹⁷ and *The Big Sleep* (1946).⁹⁸ It is exactly the repeated insistence on the formation of the couple, in this case Bogart and Bacall, which is the advertising hook: come and see what you have already seen. There is a comfort, a homeliness even, in repeating certain narrative tropes. The production of a couple is not so much a natural phenomenon (which it wishes to be) but rather one that is actively manufactured to reinforce bourgeois values (patriarchal, heteronormative, capitalist, etc.); in short, these conventions, like the Hollywood camera and the Hollywood ending, function as myth.

Initially, *Stranger on the Third Floor*'s ending appears to conform to Hollywood traditions of heteronormative conformity and the 'safeness' of space for the 'family.' Here, we can see why the contradistinction between noir and melodrama breaks. On one level, the film presents the obstacle to the formation of the heterosexual couple as being an external factor: The Stranger. However, the proper obstacles are psychological and are located within Michael. It is largely the case that characters in Hollywood cinema who exhibit non-traditional masculine or heterosexual traits are coded as homosexual and subsequently their homosexuality becomes a signifier for their evilness, deviancy, and general untrustworthiness. They are contrasted with the protagonist who possesses all the masculine traits they do not. One common trait among the majority of noir protagonists is desire for the main female figure in the film. The heterosexual protagonist desires the woman and is ultimately rewarded, whereas the coded homosexual (or asexual) character does not desire the woman and is punished. Men are encouraged to be attracted to 'the right women'. Desiring a femme fatale usually ends in death for the male protagonist, for instance Walter Neff in *Double Indemnity* (1944) and Ole Anderson in *The Killers* (1946) The femme fatale is also

⁹⁷ *To Have and Have Not*, dir. by Howard Hawks (Warner Bros., 1944).

⁹⁸ *The Big Sleep*, dir. by Howard Hawks (Warner Bros., 1946).

punished for having and acting on desires of her own (Phyllis Dietrichson and Kitty Collins respectively in the aforementioned films). The Stranger does not desire Jane, as opposed to Michael. Once his lack of interest in her is revealed, he is swiftly killed, whereupon Michael can marry Jane and they can become not just a married couple but *the* married couple, the cinematically sanctioned blueprint for what a 'normal' married couple looks like. A so-called 'normal' married couple should own, or wish to own, their own home. *Stranger on the Third Floor*'s narrative is fundamentally one which charts how a couple can get married and purchase a home through the normalisation and codification of heterosexual norms.

The 'family' is additionally catered for at the end of *Stranger on the Third Floor* by way of the formation of the heterosexual couple. Michael and Jane's unification is not only intended to signify narrative cohesion and resolution, but also to signal social cohesion. In Hollywood cinema more generally, the unification of the man and the woman is meant to represent social and personal cohesion and the happy heterosexual couple is supposed to be a blueprint for the continual functioning of American society. Narratively, this is accomplished by making women the object of male desire and thus engaging and promoting a phallogocentric viewpoint. Janey Place argues, for instance, that in such a system 'women are defined in relation to men';⁹⁹ they are wives, love interests, and ultimately objects to be used to support the male's fantasy or adventure. The family can be understood in this context as a social mechanism which not only objectifies women but places them in a specific, homely context. Under capitalism, home and family are constituted as a patriarchal force. The assertion of men as labourers and providers of wealth and women as caregivers necessitates that the family unit be constructed in this way. As Sylvia Harvey writes, it is 'the representation of the institution of the family, which in so many films serves as the

⁹⁹ Place, 'Women in Film Noir', p. 54.

mechanism whereby desire is fulfilled.¹⁰⁰ Family is thus the safest place to experience desire. The internal hierarchical structure of families (father, mother, and child) offers us, Harvey writes, ‘a legitimating model...for a hierarchical or authoritarian society’¹⁰¹, a mirror image of the relations between social classes. The father acts as the head of family/society, exerting authoritarian control, the mother is subservient to his wishes and thus maintains a semblance of domestic equilibrium and the child is dependent on its parents. *Stranger on the Third Floor* adopts this phallogocentric position: Michael’s successful quest to prove himself innocent ultimately results in his being able to marry Jane and establish himself as head of the family and Jane as care-giver, thereby providing a social blueprint for the rest of society. This is predicated on the assumption that the ending of the film leaves no trace of doubt. This is not the case because of the ways in which the incompleteness of the film’s ending precludes any notion of narrative closure. Its relationship with signification and with fantasy collide to question the conclusions that the ending draws. Throughout the film there is also evidence of the (perhaps ironic) strangeness of Michael and Jane’s relationship and how it differs from what Hollywood expects as the norm.

In this chapter, although I have begun by outlining the definitional complexities of film noir, I have approached the problem by arguing that its instability should be reckoned with, rather than simply acknowledged. It is precisely in the relationship between film noir’s critical retroactivity and formal retroactivity that we can begin to understand noir’s affect, and therefore its nostalgic construction of home. Film noir was only identified decades after the informal ‘end’ of the period, as evidenced with the work of critics such as Paul Schrader. In this sense, noir is critically retroactive. Its formal retroactivity stems from noir’s temporal inversion of narrative

¹⁰⁰ Sylvia Harvey, ‘Woman’s Place: The Absent Family of Film Noir’, in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan (London: BFI, 1980), p. 36.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, p. 37.

structure,¹⁰² the way in which time is experienced non-linearly, and the way in which knowledge is only produced and understood *ex post facto*. This approach is not without its issues since it risks overidentifying noir with its criticism; the point is that the line between criticism and text is not so clear. Considering this, I took Boris Ingster's *Stranger on the Third Floor* as a case study. I took the film to be the 'first film noir' in an ironic sense and used it to illuminate how noir (and our reception of it) functions with respect to retroactivity and home. I illustrated how the muddled distinction between criticism and text allows us to read *Stranger on the Third Floor* as, in a sense, a text which speaks *about* noir as much as it represents noir. This is important in how it shows that the connections drawn between film noirs are not only comparative but in dialogue with each other. It is one thing to say that *Stranger on the Third Floor* is like, say, *Out of the Past*, but entirely another to suggest that they both inform each other. It is easier to identify the noir elements of *Out of the Past*, or to see how their edges are sharpened, through *Stranger on the Third Floor*. Likewise, there are elements in *Stranger on the Third Floor* which are illuminated by *Out of the Past*. For example, the position that the Stranger takes up in the film is similar to the spectre of Jeff's criminal past. Jeff's past is understood as traumatic, as dream-like. As I do, I read the Stranger in a similar way: he is not just the antagonist of the film, he is a *manifestation* of Michael's innermost desires, the desire he dare not (and the film dare not) admit to himself. In addition, I argued that the film represents the *point-de-caption*, and how it can not only shed light on later noirs, but that, paradoxically, later noirs have an influence on how we under the film. In the next chapter, I will build on these arguments and focus more on the ways in which noir's relation to vision (and blindness) impact on its retroactive, nostalgic construction of home, as well as the more fundamental question of how noir constructs and organises knowledge.

¹⁰² Consider, for instance, the flashback structures of *Double Indemnity* (1944), *The Killers* (1946), and *DOA* (1950).

Chapter 2

The Metaphor of Blindness

The world is all-seeing, but it is not exhibitionistic — it does not provoke our gaze. When it begins to provoke it, the feeling of strangeness begins too.

Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*.¹



Figure 2.1, *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940)

¹ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamentals of Psychoanalysis*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Vintage, 1998), p. 75.

‘Wait ‘til you see it...’ — The spectre of home and formation of the couple

This chapter examines how the notion of blindness is integral to understanding the production of meaning in film noir. In noir, visions and seeing do not correlate with either producing or understanding knowledge. As in the previous chapter, I will focus here on *Stranger on the Third Floor* and examine the way in which the pursuit of home is predicated on blindness. Home offers a cure for vision, at the same time as *obscuring* the home from us. Connected to home, too, is the expectation of the formation of the couple. Their formation supposedly signals the release of narrative tension through the acquisition of a home. This chapter will consider, in this context, how knowledge is produced in the film, and thus noir in general. Although the gaze of the camera is aligned with Michael, the masculine figure in the film, it is through Jane’s affective gaze that the investigation reaches a conclusion. She can see things which Michael cannot. I then move on to discuss the political implications of noir’s blindness: how the film’s structural staging of private fantasy and public politics foregrounds a rupturing of the boundaries between the two.

Michael, Jane, and Briggs all continue as if nothing — that is, that Michael was eager to wrongfully accuse Briggs of murder — had happened. According to Jane, Briggs’ voice would be with her forever, yet this is not the case. This final scene could be mistaken for the first. In the opening scene, Michael gleefully describes his ‘dream home’: ‘wait ‘til you see it’, he tells Jane, ‘black stove, fridge, everything...A table...A real table on four legs, so that two people can really see each other.’² The diner’s lack of homeliness is contrasted to the ideal of home. Whilst the urban diner is busy, the home is private. Whilst Michael and Jane sit adjacent to each other and can only see each other by looking in a mirror and thus seeing a mirror image of each other, home offers a

² *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940).

chance for ‘two people to really see each other.’³ Additionally, the mirror acts as another barrier to vision. When Michael tries to look at Jane, he still sees himself. There is a doubling inherent to his vision, already foreshadowing the Stranger’s intrusion. The central conundrum is in fact not the acquisition of a home, but a failure of vision: Michael admits he did not see Briggs murder Nick, but nonetheless insists otherwise. Michael's arrest also relies on the fact that nobody believes that he saw the Stranger.



Figure 2.2, *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940)

³ Ibid.

The final scene attempts to realise Michael's dream of a home by providing him with what he desires: the house with Jane in it. Yet there is a final irony to Michael's realised dream. The foreshadowed dream is not only a home and a wife, but more accurately a setting in which vision is unobscured, a chance to really *see*. Michael wants a table where he and Jane can 'really see each other'.⁴ The ending gives us verbal confirmation that Michael and Jane have purchased their new home but never shows the home; it obscures it from our view. The film ends at the precise moment when we, and Michael and Jane, should be rewarded and finally see the house which Michael so desired. Encoded within Michael's remark, 'wait 'til you see [the home],' is a delay of desire. Michael knows what he and Jane want, what the film wants, but they must wait to attain it, to see it. In this respect, desire is constituted by waiting, by delay. Here, *Stranger on the Third Floor* reverses the scopophilic logic of Hollywood. Instead of rewarding our look, as Maltby claims, the film actively denies us what we want to see. The home is spectral in the sense that, by all accounts, it must exist, but does not. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that the film does not show us Michael and Jane's home because it *cannot*, because the home, the object of desire, does not exist. On a formal level, then, the home itself *is* blindness; not only an obscured or imaginary object, but the very mechanism which drives blindness. This is because of how Michael's failure to see Jane in an *emotional* sense, as evidenced by his total failure to comprehend her response to the guilty verdict. There is a failure, a blindness, within vision.

The formation of the couple is the primary mechanism by which the film attempts to signify a complete ending. Nevertheless, even this is atypical with regard to Hollywood cinema. Instead of being disparate and separate, the couple is already formed at the beginning of the film. If they are already formed it suggests, in Hollywood's own terms, that the world is already cohesive, and

⁴ *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940).

that therefore, the Stranger acts as a destabilising force on an otherwise stable world. This, however, is not the case at the beginning of the film. Although Michael and Jane are romantically involved, they lack the supposedly crucial legal adhesive to bind them together: marriage. The formation of the couple, which is typically signified in Hollywood cinema through a final triumphant kiss or romantic embrace, is here instead reframed as a legal procedure which relies on the acquisition of a home. Marriage here becomes managerial and inevitable, where it is usually portrayed as exciting and vibrant. Just as their relationship is not recognised in legal terms, neither is it recognised by Hollywood's standards because the couple has not been through the rigours of the Hollywood narrative. Being subjected to such an ordeal entails passage through several ideological strictures. Consequently, their impending marriage reveals the gendered expectations and fissures between them. Before the resolution of the narrative they are unable to marry because neither of them earns enough to live together in their own home. However, it is Michael, the successful journalist, who appears to have the better chance of doing so. Success for Michael is securing a promotion (and to do so he must apprehend the Stranger) whereas success for Jane is purely getting married to Michael. The Stranger, if he is understood as a personification of Michael's murderous desires, must be confronted and exorcised by Michael. Yet in the end the murderous excess of the Stranger lingers.

Michael sees Jane purely in relation to him. Owning a home means also, as he puts it, 'owning' a wife who will cook him eggs. Jane's primary role, at least in the way Michael portrays her, emphasises her spectral motherhood. Once they acquire their home, then Jane can become a mother *to* Michael. This, of course, disregards the fact that Jane currently has a job and provides for herself. Her supposed dependency on Michael is his fantasy. Michael is anxious to move in

and eat his eggs whereas Jane remarks that she can ‘wait for marriage’.⁵ Michael’s anxiety, and all the events that transpire because of it, to domesticate Jane can be read in the context of the increase in the number of women entering the labour market during the 1940s and thus becoming able to define themselves *not* in relation to men. It is crucial that Jane assumes control over Michael’s labour after his incarceration. After Jane takes over the investigation, it is resolved relatively quickly, albeit in inauspicious circumstances. Michael’s desire for home and for a family ignores Jane’s economic, personal, and investigative agency, instead choosing to focus on her as a domestic object. A desire for family, and for home, is thus a desire to domesticate women and to return them home. It is a repressive process that attempts to reinstate a firmer social hierarchy. Family, Sylvia Harvey writes, ‘has served to legitimate and naturalise these values’ of patriarchy and gendered hierarchy.⁶ This is because, she argues, ‘the value of women on the market of social exchange has been to a large extent determined by the position of women within the structure of the family.’⁷ Women are exchanged as commodities on the marketplace. This can be seen in Michael’s vision of home. Included in the family home, a part of the American dream, is a wife: the home, the commodity, is incomplete without a woman to accompany it. Jane, therefore, is reduced to the level of a commodity. Michael’s imagined home is only desirable in its relation to Jane’s position within it. Within this context, this insistence on having a home where they can ‘really see’ each other begins to suggest a sinister overtone: that of a prison.⁸ The home is desirable insofar as it allows Michael to keep his eye on Jane, and therefore to contain and fix her within his gaze. Yet, the film — and film noir — destabilises the notion of seeing and knowing. Family and home are closely linked by the ideological insistence on their adherence. If a woman/mother leaves

⁵ *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940).

⁶ Harvey, ‘Woman’s Place: The Absent Family of Film Noir,’ p. 36.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940).

home to work then she is said to be neglecting her domestic duties, whereas the same imperative is not applied to men. The home could be considered an embodiment of patriarchal authority: a confinement within literal walls, with no possibility of escape.

The Deafness of the Male Gaze

The formation of the couple and the construction of home, therefore, imply one another. When a couple is formed— as is the case with *Stranger on the Third Floor* — it implies that through their successful formation, a familial home is constructed. However, the fact that this is merely an implication allows us to ask from which perspective is the causal relationship between couple and home formed? Invariably, film noir is told from a masculine perspective.⁹ In this way, then, the perception of women and their supposed roles are constructed from the male gaze. In terms of early attempts to categorise the types of female characters and the way in which they relate to the central male characters' perspectives, Janey Place identifies two main types of female characters in noir: the 'spider'¹⁰ and the 'nurturing' woman.¹¹ For Place, the spider woman is 'explicitly sexual' and is the woman who controls the man's sexuality through wielding "unnatural" phallic power.¹² The 'spider woman' is both narratively and visually active, often dominating the mise-en-scène: 'they control camera movement, seeming to direct the camera (and the hero's gaze, with our own) irresistibly with them as they move.'¹³ Place's assertion seemingly contradicts Maltby's account of how the Hollywood camera operates. Maltby suggests that the Hollywood camera

⁹ There are, of course, exceptions: Mildred Pierce in *Mildred Pierce* tells her story to a couple of detectives, and Celia Lamphere in *The Secret Beyond the Door*.

¹⁰ Some examples that Harvey provides are Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard*, Phyllis Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity* (1944), and Gilda in *Gilda* (1946).

¹¹ A quintessential example is Ann in *Out of the Past* (1946).

¹² Place, 'Women in Film Noir', p. 54.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 56.

possesses an objective gaze, or that we are to view the Hollywood camera as such. That is, it is not affected by anybody's subjectivity, but exists independently of the action. Conversely, Place's argument proposes that the introduction of the 'spider woman' — perhaps more commonly known as a femme fatale — signals her manipulation of the camera by imbuing it with her own subjectivity. In noir, the motivation for the camera's placement and movement is a key factor in its visual ambiguity. The precise nature of the relationship between the male gaze and the femme fatale will be explored in more detail in Chapter Six, but for now, Place's assertion holds a great deal of truth.

The camera, far from being objective, is primarily motivated by male desire. This does not mean, however, that the possessor of this male gaze — in this case, Michael — is responsible for the motivation of the camera. In fact, it is more the case that the desire inherent in the male gaze is controlled by external forces — typically the femme fatale — which reveals the externality of desire itself. The male figures are rarely in possession or control of their desires. Michael comprehends neither what he wants, nor why he wants it, yet is compelled to follow the desires regardless. The Stranger is, as I shall argue, understood as being *beyond* desire insofar as he assumes and carries out Michael's desires while at the same time remaining inscrutable. Briggs' desires are dismissed as a base, working class libido.

For some noir critics, such as Frank Krutnik, a common reading of the femme fatale, or 'spider woman' as Place calls them, is that they are a response to male agitation towards women demanding more social and political power.¹⁴ Under these conditions, women in Hollywood were presented as figures who appropriate male desire, or as taking something vital from men. As

¹⁴ Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street*, p. 75.

Michael Renov notes, in a wartime context the ‘internal memoranda of government agencies show that the female work force was being termed excess labour.’¹⁵ There was an effort to limit the capabilities of women — the latent surplus population — particularly with regard to the workforce. Although Renov is discussing 1944 and the impending victory of the Allied Forces in the Second World War, his observations can be traced back through depictions of women in cinema. The feeling heightened around 1944, as Sylvia Harvey argues, because ‘the ideology of national unity which was characteristic of the war period, and which tended to gloss over and conceal class divisions, began to falter and decay, to lose its credibility once the war was over’.¹⁶ In Jane, we perceive a contrast in the portrayal of women’s movement into the workforce. Whereas the films which Renov and Harvey identify (*Murder My Sweet* (1944) and *Double Indemnity* (1944)) present their women as volatile and dangerous, Jane is more explicitly a virtuous heroine. She takes over from Michael in investigating the Stranger but is not overtly punished for it. This is because after she has assumed the masculine role of Michael she duly retreats, or is coerced into retreating, back into the role of a feminine housewife. At the same time, though, Jane is not overtly sexualised, nor does she use her sexuality to control the camera. Although *Stranger on the Third Floor* was released in 1940, before America’s entry into the Second World War, many of the anxieties surrounding women in the workplace were already becoming apparent.

Place’s ‘spider woman’ further upsets this masculine logic as women’s knowledge does not come from the objective camera. Feminine knowledge is always other to the masculine experience in noir; there is an extrasensory, almost supernatural dimension to the way in which women in noir accumulate their knowledge. For example, Jane, instead of helping Michael regain

¹⁵ Michael Renov, *Hollywood’s Wartime Women: Representation and Ideology* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988), p. 47.

¹⁶ Harvey, ‘The Absent Family of Film Noir’, p. 25.

or reassert his masculinity, contradicts and undermines his masculinity and confidence. After the prosecution of Briggs, a prosecution which occurred solely due to Michael's masculine, and supposedly objective viewpoint, Jane says Briggs will 'be with us for the rest of our lives, I'll always hear his voice.'¹⁷ Jane's protestations are initially dismissed as feminine hysterics, not belonging in Michael's 'sane' masculine world, of journalism, and the legal system; yet as the narrative unfolds it becomes clear that Jane is correct in her distrust of the verdict, Michael's testimony, and the masculine (and cinematic) logic upon which they rest. Although the narrative is neatly resolved, it fails to answer the question of where Jane's knowledge originates. There is not simply an aesthetic logic that Jane defies, but rather a social and legal logic. She does not just question the logic of Hollywood cinema and its insistence on masculine and patriarchal supremacy; she questions the entire masculine basis of the legal system itself. Jane, paradoxically, sees that which cannot be seen.

Exactly what inspires Jane's reaction is Briggs' terrified voice in the courtroom. In his book, *The Voice in Cinema*, Michel Chion outlines the significance of the scream in cinema. Firstly, Chion identifies something which he calls 'the screaming point', that is, a point which films are essentially structured around.¹⁸ The 'screaming point' is not simply a scream in a vocal sense, but rather a more general explosion of tension. As Chion indicates, the screaming point can just as easily be an absence of a scream as a scream itself. The placement of the screaming point is key for Chion. It must 'explode at a precise moment, at the crossroads of converging plot lines, at the end of an often-convoluted trajectory, but calculated to give this point a maximum impact.'¹⁹

¹⁷ *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940).

¹⁸ Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, ed., and trans., by Claudia Gorbman, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999 [1982]), p, 76.

¹⁹ Ibid.

This seems to imply that the screaming point must arrive towards the end of the film, which is not the case. An example cited by Chion is Jo's scream at the orchestra in Hitchcock's *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956), however the screaming point in *Stranger on the Third Floor*, Briggs' scream, is at the beginning.²⁰ Briggs' scream is, here, just like David Kentley's opening scream in *Rope* (1948), another Hitchcock film. It acts as the catalyst for Jane's feminine, and therefore Othered, knowledge. Briggs' scream can be said to express something otherwise inexpressible.



Figure 2.3, *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940)

²⁰ *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, dir. by Alfred Hitchcock, (Paramount Pictures, 1956).

Chion argues that ‘the screaming point is a point of the unthinkable inside the thought...of unrepresentability inside representation.’²¹ The scream draws attention to itself, as well as denoting that to signify *something*. For Chion, the scream demands to be understood. Although it brings together converging affectations and plot lines, its demand for comprehension only highlights the unthinkable nature of the scream. For Chion, the screaming point is ultimately feminine. Briggs’ scream is feminised insofar as it is not a shout of power, of dominance, one that marks a territory, a ‘structuring shout’, but instead ‘the shout of a human subject of language in the face of death’.²² Chion writes: ‘The man's shout delimits territory, the woman's scream has to do with limitlessness’.²³ In Briggs’ scream Jane appears to discover something, the truth, and sees something which Michael cannot. Jane’s knowledge is left unexplained, mostly ascribed to intuition, but the point from which it originates, Briggs’ scream, remains an enigma. There is something supernatural embedded within Briggs’ scream which, by its very unrepresentability, uncovers some truth which was previously unavailable to the bureaucratic and reasonable discourse of the court. The truth is that there is something which Michael’s language dare not speak: his unconscious desire to kill Meng as well as for Briggs to be a murderer so that he, Michael, can be promoted and move into a home with Jane. His unconscious is unable to express itself in the same way in which conscious thoughts can be articulated, hence they require some non-linguistic or perhaps even, extra-linguistic trigger to reveal that truth. He cannot articulate his desires because Briggs’ scream frames and controls Michael’s desires and gaze.

From this point onwards, then, Jane has access to some knowledge which Michael is structurally incapable of receiving. Immediately after Briggs’s sentencing, Jane protests at and

²¹ Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, p. 77.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 78.

²³ *Ibid.*

questions Michael's masculine knowledge. The lighting behind them is reminiscent of the bars behind which Briggs was dragged, as well as the shadowy bars that reappear in Michael's guilty dream. Jane's protestations change the surroundings. Jane successfully resolves the case in comparison to Michael's miserable failure. She had solved the case before Michael, and she does so without having vivid guilty nightmares. Indeed, after Michael is arrested on suspicion of murdering Meng, it is left to Jane to finish much of the detective works in order to clear Michael's name. In doing so, her task is doubled in that she is not only seeking to clear Michael's name, but Briggs's too. Jane is enveloped in the masculine world of the detective genre and profession by the sheer ineptitude of the men. Michael utterly panics after his dream, threatens to leave town and then unwittingly hands himself in; the police only offer to go to the District Attorney on the condition that they can get him 'out of bed'.²⁴ The unfortunate reward for Jane's labour undertaken on Michael's incarcerated behalf is to be removed from the workplace so that Michael can take over the duty of labour. The gendered roles of Hollywood and American culture at large are here reversed: Jane is the active subject, and Michael becomes passive and subservient to Jane's investigative expertise after his own powers of sight have been nullified. This puts Michael in a similar position to Briggs, who was powerless during Michael's testimony against him.

Public Politics & Private Fantasy

Michael and Jane nonetheless rely upon the legal procedure of marriage to legitimise their relationship. The court is established to be part of the 'masculine order' of the world, that is, one which assumes its point of view is truth itself and that its words always have clarity of meaning.

²⁴ *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940).

The masculine system closes itself off and as such it is unable to comprehend the significance of the Stranger and thus, the fallibility of its position. Yet through Briggs' scream, the Stranger's resistance and indeed Jane's scream after the Stranger's death, this masculine system is questioned. There is an overlap between how the state, or the law, legitimises marriage and how the state wrongly incarcerates the innocent Briggs. Inadvertently, Michael and Jane become embroiled in a quest to rectify the ineffective judicial system and the state, so that the latter can properly acknowledge their marriage. They are not only attempting to clear Michael's name and catch the real culprit but trying to reassert the symbolic truth of the courts.

For Michael, his dream, his private fantasy, can no longer be considered as such. Instead it, too, becomes part of the world it mimics or reflects. In fantasy, symbols are more real than the objects they signify. So although the Stranger himself may be superficially read as an indiscriminate murderer, a mental hospital escapee, in the context of Michael's dream and blurring of the boundaries between private and political, the Stranger should instead be regarded as an instance of the enemy within. Jonathan Auerbach writes about how the film identifies a crossover between 'public politics and private fantasy' in the wake of wartime — and impending wartime — paranoia.²⁵ Politics is nominally considered to be a public activity, conducted by politicians or by people in the public sphere. Home, by contrast, attempts to protect the family unit from politics, though one might equally consider how home fosters and kindles ideology and politics as opposed to nullifying their effect. As Sally Bayley states, home is a 'lived manifesto of the everyday.'²⁶ For Michael, this crossover of the public and private forms the core of his dramatic troubles. Michael and Jane's potential marriage is predicated upon Michael receiving a raise as a journalist so that

²⁵ Auerbach, 'Gestapo in America', p. 28.

²⁶ Sally Bayley, *Home on the Horizon: America's Search for Space, From Emily Dickinson to Bob Dylan* (Oxford: Peter Land Ltd, 2010), p. 2.

they can afford a house together. Michael's raise is additionally reliant on his witnessing of Briggs's murder of Nick: 'no story, no raise, we wouldn't be getting married'.²⁷ The personal, political, and professional spheres are intertwined. If Briggs is convicted it will be because of Michael's expert testimony and will thus allow Michael to write a significant piece in the newspaper. In addition to the legal sphere becoming compromised by Michael's agenda, his professional vocation — journalism — is called into question. In relation to wartime paranoia, this web of interwoven biases is troubling because it redraws the boundaries of journalism and surveillance. Legal matters, such as Briggs' conviction, should be predicated upon objective fact, yet the case is resolved because of Michael's active desire for Briggs to be found guilty. Further, Michael's private dream, his fantasy, is later presented as evidence against his (and Briggs') innocence. Whereas once they may have been thought of as distinct and separate, dreams now seemingly combine to *satisfy* reality.

Michael and Jane's relationship is structured around the fantasy of home. At the beginning of the film Michael lives alone in a flat with merely a picture of Jane on his dresser because his landlady (and the spying Meng) do not allow women in the flat with him. The compactness of Michael's apartment and the prevalence of Meng's spying raise a number of issues. Firstly, the depiction of the compactness of Michael's apartment demonstrates the potential incompatibility between inner city living and the American ideal of domesticity insofar as it suggests that Meng's spying is produced by the compactness. The idea of the American home is intimately tied to notions of space and spatial expansion. Open space can be understood as something that must be parcelled up into private property. ShaunAnne Tangney writes that 'open space breeds an American character who works hard, plays fair, and achieves much so that s/he can then claim a

²⁷ *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940).

large amount of open space in which to build a house, a home, that describes his/her character.’²⁸ The home is thus not only an expression of one’s character or one’s identity, but also a representation of one’s work ethic and adherence to American values; it is a crystallisation and affirmation of those cultural values. *Stranger on the Third Floor* is about the condition of living in the city during a time when spying on your neighbour was encouraged as a patriotic act. It is also about living in a city of immigrants and the myth of a white Anglo-Saxon America. Jane talks to many immigrants living and working in the city in her search for the Stranger. The Stranger is not the only character who is coded as foreign. Meng, as Auerbach notes, ‘functions as an assimilated combination of two Axis enemies (Germany and Japan).’²⁹ First, his accent is a slight caricature of a German speaking English, and second, his appearance, with his thin moustache and name, resembles Ming the Merciless.

Throughout the film, Michael sees Meng predominantly as a castrating figure. Meng continually interrupts Michael’s privacy, both in terms of his professional career and his sexual desires. The first instance of Meng interrupting Michael takes place when he complains about Michael typing too loudly on his typewriter and therefore impinging on the freedom of the press. Alternatively, this could be read in a meta-cinematic way as representing the Hollywood screenwriter. Meng’s intrusion can therefore be read as representing the Hollywood restrictions, specifically the Motion Picture Production code, or Hays code, which came into effect in 1930. The surveillance extends its reach to Hollywood screenwriters who work in their own home. Later, Meng disrupts a potential sexual encounter between Michael and Jane, which Michael recalls as

²⁸ ShaunAnne Tangey, ‘The Dream Abides: *The Big Lebowski*, Film Noir, and the American Dream’, *Rocky Mountain Review*, Vol. 66, No. 2 (Fall 2012), p. 183.

²⁹ Auerbach, ‘Gestapo in America’, p. 45.

‘the night in the rain.’³⁰ Both infringements are of Michael’s position as a member of the press and as a private citizen and fiancée to Jane. Meng’s spying, then, is not merely limited to the private, whereby the private becomes communal, but is extended to the professional and public spheres.



Figure 2.4, *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940)

Meng is thus both personally castrating toward Michael, as he interrupts sexual intercourse with Jane, and professionally castrating because he stops Michael doing his job. For Michael, crucially, it is the same panoptic force which prevents him from attaining his sexual desire and which similarly prevents him from performing his job adequately. Moreover, the central root of

³⁰ *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940).

Michael's problems with regard to Briggs is that a successful resolution of his professional worries will lead to a resolution of his sexual frustrations surrounding Jane, who, it must be noted, is reluctant to return Michael's sexual advances. When they are in his apartment she continually defers sexual contact in favour of small talk. Michael's frustrations cannot solely be attributed to Meng's intrusions, but rather a fault in himself because he does not understand why Jane does not reciprocate his sexual desire.

Michael's conception of Meng as the singular blockade of his desire shows us the extent to which Meng is a projection of Michael's own frustrated desire. The Stranger, in this context, is an externalisation of Michael's desire to kill Meng, and thus fulfil his sexual desire. Aside from the film's Orientalism and othering of Meng, there is an additional relation he bears towards Michael. Rather than being just an Other, Meng is a projection of Michael in the future if he does not marry Jane, an ominous future to avoid. Michael would live alone in a state of permanent infancy, purchasing and drinking milk before he goes to sleep, always under the rule of a mother-figure landlady, abstaining from sexual intercourse and desire and withdrawing his position in civic life as a journalist. In this form, Meng is a manifestation of the ideology of surveillance, stripped of all other properties that Hollywood deems necessary for civic life. Much like L. B. Jefferies in Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954), all Meng can do is conduct neighbourly surveillance. There is a disavowal of public political duty because politics becomes an activity which can (and is encouraged to be) carried out privately within the context of one's home. Indeed, because of our assumed identification with Michael, it is the future which is prophesied for us all unless we obey the laws of the Hollywood narrative and experience its ending. That is, if we are not explicitly part of a successful heterosexual couple, then our fates are an infantilised Meng, a murderous Stranger, or a destitute Briggs.

Michael's Brooklyn apartment appears to be the antithesis to Frontierism: instead of expanding outward, the city space collapses in on itself. Rather than being spaces of expanse and expression, apartments are confined and repressive places. Michael's apartment is also rather disorderly, and such messiness may go some way in explaining why Michael has his paranoid flashbacks and nightmares at his apartment: 'A cluttered living space will clutter the mind, and with it, the ability to maintain a proportionate sense of reality.'³¹ Despite the ever-increasing proximity created by inner city living, people often become more alienated from each other. There is a loss of community and, subsequently a loss of self as people become alienated from each other. Michael decries Meng's invasion of privacy as immoral, but it seems more the case that voyeurism is a truism of living in New York apartments. Just as Meng is a constant surveying presence for Michael, Michael also unconsciously spies on Meng by unwittingly hearing his snoring.

³¹ Bayley, *Homes on the Horizon*, p. 43.



Figure 2.5, *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940)



Figure 2.6, *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940)

We commit the same act on Michael during the opening credits as we watch his silhouetted figure smoke a cigarette, write using his typewriter, and talk on the phone (Figures 2.5 and 2.6). Like Meng, we do not know what we are looking at or for, but nevertheless view him with suspicion. We are seeing Michael without context, without knowing anything about him. Confusingly, imposed over his smoking silhouette, the title card appears and seemingly suggests that Michael is the 'Stranger on the Third Floor'. Such a description seems appropriate because of how disconnected Michael is from the people with whom he shares his apartment, namely Meng and his landlady. Indeed, of the residents on the eponymous third floor, Michael *is* the stranger,

the one who does not quite fit. As the revelations about Michael's attitude to Meng in his dream reveal, Michael is also a stranger to himself, unable to exert control — or even be aware — of his internal desires. The paranoia surrounding the enemy within is therefore criticised: the enemy within is not 'out there' participating in public life, not a part of politics, but within oneself. One ideological message from 'the enemy within' is the suggestion that it could be *anyone*, but the question the film asks is: could it in fact be *you*, who does not realise who the enemy is? Moreover, the name of the film's screenwriter, Frank Partos, is overlaid when we see Michael typing at his typewriter, which is suggestive of the meta-cinematic dimension to Meng stopping Michael from typing: it implies that Michael is the screenwriter of the film, or that we are watching Frank Partos.

Stranger on the Third Floor marks a turning point in the conception of home in American culture insofar as the home becomes a place of suspicion and paranoia.³² While it may be tempting to attribute this phenomenon to the post war and the Cold War era, Auerbach contends that the epoch of suspicion begins in 1939. During this period, home becomes the 'chief site of cultural anxiety.'³³ Auerbach writes that 'Franklin D. Roosevelt's declaration of emergency in September 1939 marks the start of Cold War, understood as a state of exception and exceptionalism pre-occupied with national security that, some would argue, is still in effect today.'³⁴ Although one might expect such a discussion on the enforcement of political beliefs by the state to be centred around McCarthyism in the fifties, we can see how *Stranger on the Third Flood* sets a precedent (and is retroactively determined *by* the 'Red Scare') in the way in which it blends fantasy and reality, conflating what people really desire and what actually transpires.

³² Auerbach, 'Gestapo in America', p. 35.

³³ Bayley, *Homes on the Horizon*, p. 9.

³⁴ Auerbach, 'Gestapo in America', p. 35.

Auerbach examines how the establishment of the Special Committee on Un-American Activities in 1934 helped contribute to feelings of paranoia and ideas of the enemy within. The blurring of the line ‘between thought and action’ that characterises most of the paranoid period is central as Michael questions whether they can convict him on ‘just talk’.³⁵ Such probing questions have real world relevance because of the Smith Act which ‘worked to blur the line between words and deeds.’³⁶ Briefly, the Smith Act, or Alien Registration Act of 1940, made it a criminal offence to ‘wilfully’ advocate the ‘overthrowing or destroying of the government of the United States’.³⁷ To accomplish such a task it became sufficient for one to ‘just talk’ to arouse suspicion and therefore risk arrest. Thought and actions begin to function similarly. Michael is worried that he will be convicted by talking. What Auerbach misses is that it is not merely Michael’s remarks (originally understood to be flippant, and therefore ‘just talk’) about his desire to murder Meng that lead to his arrest but moreover his wilful and deliberate *silence* when faced with Meng’s murder. It is precisely the addition of Michael’s initial hesitation to his incriminating talk which marks him as guilty.

Auerbach’s political and social argument is that innocent people were unduly arrested because of the Smith Act. While true, such a simple comparison does not fit with the film because the implication made throughout the film, and in Auerbach’s own piece, is that Michael *is* guilty, if not on a legal and social level then on a psychological one. It is, after all, Michael who justifies this, saying it would be a ‘real pleasure to cut [Meng’s] throat by claiming it was simply “just talk”’.³⁸ Michael’s graphic imagery and specificity reveals his speech to be more than ‘just talk’

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Auerbach, ‘Gestapo in America’, p. 46

³⁷ Legal Information Institute, Cornell Law School, <<https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/18/2385>> [Accessed 25/11/2017].

³⁸ Auerbach, ‘Gestapo in America’, p. 46

and in fact something more sinister: cutting Meng's throat is an act that, besides killing him, serves to violently deny his speech. Michael does not simply want to kill Meng but eliminate him in such a way as to ensure that Meng cannot speak. Such a symbolically precise action thus elevates Michael's declaration from being 'just talk'.³⁹ The twin poles of thought and action can be additionally read in another way: as something that is verifiable either internally or externally. Both journalism and the legal system rely on Michael's accuracy in his reportage as well as his ability to remove his own interests from his interpretation of what he saw. Supposedly, the case rests on what Michael saw. His testimony is the crucial piece of evidence in convicting Briggs. However, it is later revealed that Briggs' conviction relies upon precisely what Michael did not or was unable to see. Michael did not actually see the crime take place; instead, the damning evidence is produced from Michael's words, his verbal and imaginative capacity, as opposed to what he saw. Michael defends his position as key witness when he says that 'it's not my word against his, but it's what I saw with my own eyes.'⁴⁰ We do not share Michael's absolute belief in his vision because we have not seen what he has supposedly seen — we, like the court, must take his word for it. In Hollywood's cinematic language, the visual never lies, predominately because it is captured by the all-seeing, omnipotent camera. The central discrepancy which upsets the idea of an all-seeing camera is between visuals and language. Language is never a completed project and its relationship to reality is sometimes tenuous.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940).

‘Some Mysterious Force’

The primacy of the visual emphasises that what we see is true by virtue of it being visual instead of verbal; in other words, seeing *is* believing. Hollywood’s continuity style is designed to minimise the visual and logical gap between two images, or cuts. If we view Briggs’s testimony cinematically, we see an incongruity between the two images presented to the court. That is, when faced with the two images of Briggs angrily shouting at Nick and Nick’s slashed throat with Briggs nearby, the logical and cinematic conclusion would be that, in his anger, Briggs murdered Nick. In this way, the logic of the court’s fallacious and retroactive gaze mirrors our own, showing us that noir’s images, as well as the way in which meaning is constructed out of them, constitute a kind of blindness. Not only do we not know by looking, but it is by looking that we are inclined to *believe* we know. To complicate the issue further, we never see these two images of Briggs, unlike the court. Moreover, Briggs returned to Nick’s shop to repay Michael for a coffee he bought him, further implicating Michael in the case. He is not an objective observer but the very reason that Briggs is initially accused.

The problem is one of hermeneutics. The investigative process reveals that the conclusion is determined by Michael’s desire; the solution is his desired answer. He saw two separate images — two separate scenes — drew a connection based on circumstance and reframed it as the only logical conclusion. However, in another sense, we can see how film noir embodies the logic of the investigation. Narratively, we understand Michael’s assumption as a misinterpretation because our distance as spectators allows us not to be caught up in Michael’s desire. Yet, in cinematic terms, this is best expressed through the Kuleshov effect, the idea that meaning is established between shots and through editing. It explains our psychological tendency to ascribe meaning to two

separate images and thus incorporate them into the same network of meaning. Here, this has occurred beyond even our vision. It is easy to criticise Michael, yet we make the same error in our spectatorship; what is more, it is one of the foundational structures of how meaning is constructed in cinema. As Maltby contends, in Hollywood cinema ‘we repeatedly see what we want to see.’⁴¹ Although we assume a position of spectatorship insofar as we can recognise the way in which Michael’s desire shapes the text (that is, the investigation of Briggs), it is this very assumption which leaves us susceptible to the same process. As I described earlier, film noir criticism involves reconstructing noir after the fact, taking individual films — often with similar themes — and attempting to group together under some unifying banner. As the ‘first’ noir, *Stranger on the Third Floor* indicates that such a list, or ‘investigation,’ is always contextual. Approaching noir as a puzzle to be solved assumes that there is a solution always available to us, that the solution lies within the puzzle object itself. Instead, I understand noir as a category which invariably shifts wherever our gaze is fixed. In some contexts, seeing noir as *predominately* a subset of the crime film, or of hard-boiled detective fiction, is useful. Equally, using noir to examine gender politics, racial politics, or historical contexts can yield fruitful results. Ultimately, though, any view which understands noir as a fixed object, where all the sides of the puzzle can remain visible at once, reduces noir to such a puzzle and misses both its intricacies and, fundamentally, its inconsistencies. Its inconsistencies are not, in my view, problems to be solved, but integral to understanding.

We never simply look at noir through a detached, objective lens — as Michael believes himself able of doing. Instead, our gaze always involves another force looking at us, what Lacan calls the big Other. In film noir, this extra gaze is noirness itself. For example, in Edgar G. Ulmer’s *Detour* (1945), Al, the film’s protagonist, bemoans his situation by saying to us in a voiceover:

⁴¹ Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema*, p. 312.

‘That's life. Whichever way you turn, Fate sticks out a foot to trip you. Yes. Fate, or some mysterious force, can put the finger on you or me for no good reason at all.’⁴² What happens in *Detour* is told as a flashback, as Al sits in a roadside diner, recounting how his chance meeting with Vera, instead of his fiancée Sue, led to him murdering Vera. Al's confession clearly shows how noir's retroactivity is complicated by the hermeneutic desire of the narrator or critic. Al believes that he was wronged by ‘some mysterious force’, a force which *demands* something from him — it ‘puts the finger’ on him. This force is therefore understood as external. The implication, therefore, is that Al's intentions were good, but he was forced to take a moral ‘detour’, which he seeks to correct in his flashback narration. However, it is *through* the narration that we see that this ‘mysterious force’ is internal, rather than external. The force is Al's desire. Specifically, it is a desire to see his past clearly, to see without the interference of his perspective, which will therefore allow him to see his own *desire* clearly.

In the film, Al hitches a ride with a rich man named Haskell. During their journey on the empty desert roads, Haskell mysteriously dies. Al, because of his paranoia that will be blamed — he is guilty of a crime he did not commit — leaves Haskell's body at the side of the road and assumes his identity. The death may have been accidental (this event is recounted in Al's untrustworthy narration after all), but because Haskell's death benefits Al, it implies that Al *wanted* to kill Haskell. Al's desire is revealed through his reaction to Haskell's death. In his effort to ‘stay’ innocent he removes the distinction between guilt and innocence. This is similar to Michael in *Stranger on the Third Floor*. Through Meng's death, we see that Michael is guilty because of his desires, rather than any action he undertook. Moreover, the revelation that the Stranger acts out

⁴² *Detour* (1945).

Michael's unconscious and murderous desires retroactively reveals the same guilty desires at work in Michael's faulty testimony regarding Briggs.

What Michael 'saw' was not external and verifiable, but internal, a realisation of his desires. Michael wants Briggs to be guilty in order to further both his career and his personal life; thus, he convinced himself that he saw it happen. In the cross-examination, Briggs's lawyer asks Michael whether he saw the murder occur or not. Briggs's lawyer is mocked for this — Michael's boss jovially says that he 'wouldn't let him defend me if I stole an apple' — but this is the correct question to ask as it draws attention to what Michael *did not* see. Whilst it may seem that the purpose of this scene is to highlight the role inefficient lawyers play in the ineffectual American court system, what is central here is exactly the throw-away remark made by Michael's boss: the court is so inept that one *would* get put to death for stealing an apple; after all, Briggs is being condemned despite being innocent.

Michael's blindness persists uninterrogated through the film; Michael's mistake during Briggs' conviction is that he extrapolates from what he saw and then ascribes to his imaginings the same level of authenticity and validity as to what he actually did see. This logic is repeated with Meng's murder by the Stranger. Again, Michael does not see the murder but assumes that because he saw a mysterious man lurking about his apartment floor and then sees a murdered Meng that the two events must be connected. Unlike other noir protagonists, notably Philip Marlowe in *The Big Sleep* (1946) and Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon* (1944) (both played by Humphrey Bogart), it is not Michael's superior powers of observation that allow him to successfully resolve the narrative but rather luck. Solving the crime and marrying Jane are two intensely connected events that result in Michael earning more money and owning his own home.

The twin poles of internal subjectivity and external objectivity are kept solidly apart prior to Briggs's verdict. Briggs's guilty conviction, however, signals a rupturing of the boundaries between the internal and external spaces. Immediately afterwards, the music reaches a loud crescendo and the camera zooms frenetically in on the scales of justice. Stylistically, this does not fit the realism that the continuity system seeks to recreate because the camera draws attention to itself. We no longer simply look through the camera but become acutely aware that the camera exists between the screen and us. The camera mediates the image and is separate from it. In this context, the camera's 'noticeable' movements impel us to concentrate on the abstract idea of 'justice' in relation to Briggs' conviction. Briggs' conviction has disrupted the normative standards of the film and removed any pretence of objectivity from the camera, thereby suggesting that the law does not act objectively. This mirrors Michael's own subjectivity. Briggs's manic shouting and protestations of his innocence instil in Michael a profound sense of guilt, provoking his paranoid internal monologue. The law is supposed to reinstate order, yet here the process of the law unsettles order. Additionally, the law attempts to establish fact by 'extracting' it from multiple, and often competing subjectivities, and then organising such facts into a linear and coherent narrative. Michael doubts his own innocence, as if unintentionally he could be the enemy within. The enemy really is within, that is, within us as opposed to out there.

One problem which the 'enemy within' conjures up is that the enemy is not who it is expected it to be; it is, as with many other problems in the film, inherently a problem of vision. Initially, Michael considers Briggs to be a villain, a criminal who murders out of spite, whereas the murderer is the Stranger, someone whose intentions are less clear. For Michael, the case is relatively simple, it is 'not my word against his, but it's what I saw with own eyes', as if vision were more connected to language than reality. Even if that were true, the articulation of one's

vision can only be accomplished through language and meaning may be lost in translation. Yet the insistence on the veracity of his vision is problematised by the film's focus on the problem of vision and of blindness. For example, there is a series of doublings within the film which blurs the lines between who each character is, particularly with regard to Michael. Meng and the Stranger are both, in some capacity, projections by Michael: Meng is what Michael may become, and the Stranger is what Michael dare not admit to himself. Later, he is doubled with Briggs because they are both innocent men who are suspected as guilty. With this doubling, there is a duplicity of the images we see. When gazed upon, objects have multiple visible and non-visible points, their image is refracted through the observer. Such a duplicity is only highlighted by Michael's insistence that what he saw with his 'own eyes' is analogous with an objective truth.

In the film, there is a rupture between the internal and the external, a rupture which continues throughout film noir and which can be seen through the splitting and doubling of the image. Michael believes his position as an observer is objective, implying that the relationship between observer and object is one way. Yet this doubling shows to us that the object can look back. Todd McGowan argues that because the object looks back at us — 'the gaze becomes something the subject encounters in the object'— the gaze should be conceived of as objective, rather than subjective.⁴³ He writes: 'the gaze is not the look of the subject at the object, but the point at which the object looks back.'⁴⁴ The externality of the object, its physical place, lies separate to the subject, is reconstituted as an internal presence within the gazing subject; the gaze is something internal to the subject instead of something which exists between subject and object. The splitting of the image results in a concurrent split between the internal and external boundaries

⁴³ Todd McGowan, 'Looking for the Gaze: Lacanian Film Theory and Its Vicissitudes', *Cinema Journal* 42, No.3 (Spring 2003), p. 28.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

of subjectivity: the world no longer exists ‘out there’, at a safe distance, but is something inside ourselves and the object of our gaze exists in two capacities, both as external object, as itself, and inside us, as fantasy. The problem can be understood precisely as a problem of vision. Michael desires a home where he can ‘really see’ Jane, implying there is something which prevents him from doing so. Jane, too, only connects the Stranger to Michael’s predicament when she sees him, not just in a visual sense, but by speaking to him, and therefore understanding him. The problem at the heart Michael and noir’s blindness is not what object interposes itself between subject and the intended object of the gaze, but rather what desire *inherent* in the subject diverts their gaze.⁴⁵

The clearest example of the rupture of internal and external boundaries occurs after Briggs’s conviction as Michael walks home alone from the courtroom and mentally recounts his concerns. It is important to distinguish the technique in this scene from voice-over narration. Voice-over usually denotes a character speaking directly to us, but Michael is unaware of our presence and speaks to himself. The inherent strangeness of this scene should not be understated. The external world of the film, the world which we are watching, disintegrates as a distinct category as we enter Michael’s internal psychological space and hear his thoughts. In the same way the gaze splits the object, we, and Michael, become split too. Michael, as merely a projection on a screen, exists for us as a distant object to be looked at. As we hear his thoughts, we become enveloped in his subjectivity. Similarly, if we reverse the situation, we cease to be an object of the film’s gaze, something distinct from it, and become part of its internal structure. There is a sense of invasion here, that we are hearing something we should not be able to; we occupy an impossible

⁴⁵ At a stretch, the meeting of the Stranger in a butcher’s shop allows Jane to see — evoking the Cockney rhyming slang ‘have a butcher’s’, which means ‘to have a look’. Nevertheless, it is the invitation to *see* the Stranger, which allows Jane to apprehend him.

auditory and visual point. Consequently, the external and the internal boundaries are redrawn; there is a collapse of space, similar to Michael's privacy concerns surrounding Meng.



Figure 2.7, *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940)

In this monologue, we hear Michael question his motivations and the completeness of his vision. The tone of Michael's self-interrogation is one of paranoia. After the boundaries between internal and external are blurred, we follow Michael from the 'external' space (the streets of Brooklyn, as well as the scene of the crime) to the 'internal' space of his home which is mirrored by our movement to the 'internal' psychological space of Michael's thoughts, from the 'external' space. The streets are made an intensely private place because despite their social and busy aspect,

we hear Michael's private thoughts. Conversely, Michael's home is transformed into a public space, not only through Meng's intrusions, but through ours. Hearing Michael's inner thoughts has this effect, making the public private, and the private public. Following Michael to his home, supposedly a place of privacy, makes the home seem uncanny. Its homely, or *heimlich* quality, is exaggerated through the rupturing of internal and external boundaries.

This rupturing of boundaries, Frank Krutnik argues, 'opens up space for the uncanny.'⁴⁶ In talking to himself, Michael doubles and alienates himself, as he is both the originator and recipient of his speech, indicating the presence of the uncanny. For Auerbach: 'Michael's inner voice serves to bind and fold together discrete shots within a tightly focused subjectivity at once persistent (it will not go away) and unstable (it does not understand itself)'.⁴⁷ Michael's interior monologue blurs the distinction between inside and outside as it creates an effect of there now being two Michaels with which to contend: the confident one who is sure of what he saw and the paranoid one who is persistent and unstable. Both versions of Michael seem to contradict one another. In his thoughts, Michael admits that he 'didn't see Briggs kill Nick', whereas previously he was adamant that he did see the murder. Michael's inner monologue largely functions as a kind of self-interrogation, a realignment of the self in relation to the external world. Michael moves from a court of law (legal), to the street (public), to his apartment (private). His self-interrogation and questioning of his own mind are mirrored by his spatial relocation to his own home. In this way, Michael's mind and home become almost interchangeable terms: his home is an externalisation of his mind. Or, perhaps more accurately, there is a process of internalisation of the home within Michael's mind.

⁴⁶ Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street*, p. 49.

⁴⁷ Auerbach, 'Gestapo in America', p. 43.



Figure 2.8, *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940)

The blurring of internal and external boundaries intensifies Michael's internal, unconscious desires and manifests them in the external world. The answer to Michael's problems, both conscious (his sudden inability to find closure with Briggs's case) and unconscious (his desire to marry Jane and to rid himself of Meng), sits on the threshold of his home — the point between public and private, or between internal subjectivity and the external social world. What is needed, for Michael, is an outlet which exists in the external world and allows him to vicariously act out his desires. For Sigmund Freud, to protect itself, the ego projects maleficent 'content outward as

something foreign to itself⁴⁸, which is how Michael perceives the Stranger: an essentially blank slate, an object who invites overdetermination. The Stranger's overdetermination leads him to be many things at once, yet nothing at all. When the Stranger emerges into the hallway, the room he comes from is enveloped in complete darkness (Figure 2.9). Similarly, Michael stands in the darkness in the hallway to conceal himself. As Auerbach argues, he is an 'evil intruder', a 'cinema director' as far as his scarf and general outfit resembles the archetypal Hollywood director when he climbs over the seats (which appear to be theatre seats instead of the seats in a courtroom) in Michael's dream. The courtroom, the site of Michael's trauma, is reimagined as a theatre and a place of spectacle. When the Stranger climbs towards Michael, he disrupts the two-dimensional space implied by the metaphor of the theatre. This splits our perspective. In the shot, we assume Michael's viewpoint, though spatially we occupy the theatre seats (assuming, of course, we are watching the film at the theatre). The Stranger comes from the audience: he is one of us. Here we are confronted by the artificiality of Michael's dream and how easy it is to disrupt. We see its director and thus we simultaneously recognise our own presence. Even in his own dream, Michael is not alone. The Stranger's coding as a cinema director serves to further complicate the central problem of Michael's desire because he cannot grasp what his desire is. Auerbach further identifies the Stranger's depiction as a 'Gestapo silencer' and 'Wandering Jew'.⁴⁹ Although the Stranger embodies these identities, he remains a void within the film, an unexplainable nothingness because of his position as outsider.

⁴⁸ Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny' in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. 426.

⁴⁹ Auerbach, 'Gestapo in America', p. 53



Figure 2.9, *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940)

The Stranger's function in the film has less to do with narrative logic (his introduction is not caused by logical events but based on luck) and more to do with his effect on certain characters, namely Michael. For Michael, the Stranger is his dark repressed desires made flesh, helping him realise his desires.⁵⁰ Freud remarks on the uncanniness of doubles and doppelgängers as he writes that they are a 'vision of terror'⁵¹ and that 'the double was originally an insurance against destruction to the ego'.⁵² Michael's guilt surrounding Briggs's case is revealed, through his

⁵⁰ Auerbach, 'Gestapo in America', p. 52.

⁵¹ Freud, 'The Uncanny', p. 426.

⁵² Ibid.

interaction with the Stranger, to instead be a manifestation of his ill feelings towards Meng. Briggs's case mirrors his own potential case. In turn, his antagonism toward Meng is propagated by Meng 'always spying' on him and intruding on his sexual desires for Jane. For Freud, the uncanny is the return of the repressed. What the Stranger represents, then, is a 'return' of Michael's forgotten desires to kill Meng; seeing the Stranger re-energises those desires and thus Michael is able and indeed willing to remember those feelings, with the benefit of retrospection.



Figure 2.10, *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940)

In this sense, the Stranger can be read as a doppelgänger for Michael, an unseemly criminal externalisation of his internal desires, committing all the acts he would and would not dream of

doing. Before chasing the Stranger downstairs, Michael aggressively confronts him with three questions. He asks: 'Looking for somebody?', then, 'What do you want?', and 'Who are you?', none of which receive an answer. These are all questions that Michael could be asking himself. He is the one who is looking for somebody, emerging from his apartment, seeking anybody besides Meng. Michael is looking for Meng, or an excuse for Meng to be dead and thus have his suspicions confirmed. He is looking for something external to himself to balance his own intense internal interrogation. What Michael finds is only himself reflected back at him. When he looks down the stairs at the Stranger, Michael's face registers horror. For him, it is an uncanny moment because he has seen himself. What makes the Stranger appear 'strange' is Michael's paranoid interior monologue. Without his paranoia, the Stranger would simply be a vagabond (that is, someone without a home) instead of something more. Moreover, when Michael says, 'Looking for somebody?' this could be a question for us. Perhaps we are looking for the Stranger, something internal to ourselves. If this question does have meta-cinematic content, then once again it collapses the boundaries between us and the film. Such a collapse can be seen in the very first instant of the film, as if this distinction was an illusion to begin with. Again, the opening credits show us Michael in his apartment but superimpose the title, '*Stranger on the Third Floor*', on top of him, thereby suggesting that Michael *is* the Stranger. If we understand the Stranger as Michael's doppelgänger and therefore grant them equivalence, then Michael's incessant questioning of the Stranger suggests that he is alienated from himself: a process potentially arising from his urban living arrangement and the opening of psychological and external spaces. His cramped apartment and its proximity to other people's private places do not grant him a space of his own; his space is always the Other's. The answer to the final question is also indicative of the collapse between self and Other which is true of the film as a whole.

To return to Michael's questions to the Stranger, when mirrored back at Michael, the question of 'What do you want?' becomes a question of interrogating desire. Fantasy, as Žižek argues, is a 'screen for the desire of the Other.'⁵³ When re-framed in psychoanalytic terminology, the question is '*Che Vuoi?*'. Usually, in Italian, this translates exactly to 'what do you want?' But its meaning exceeds a simple conversational meaning in psychoanalysis. '*Che Vuoi?*' is a question posed to the Other. It is a question of one's own desire. Žižek claims that fantasy helps provide the answer.

Fantasy appears, then, as an answer to '*Che Vuoi?*', to the unbearable enigma of the desire of the Other, of the lack in the Other, but it is at the same time fantasy itself which, so to speak, provides the co-ordinates of our desire — which constructs the frame enabling us to desire something.⁵⁴

Michael's nightmare can be understood in these terms. The enigma posed by the Stranger, that is, his desire, is 'unbearable'. It torments Michael that he saw but did not understand and it is only through the construction of a fantasy, a nightmare, whereby his distress can be resolved, and the enigma answered. Žižek continues: 'in the fantasy-scene the desire is not fulfilled, "satisfied", but constituted — through fantasy, we learn "how to desire".'⁵⁵ This is why Michael cannot catch the Stranger and never encounters him again. The Stranger is not the antagonist because he voraciously achieves his desires, but rather because he functions as a void for desire itself. The Stranger is Michael *without* the capacity for desire, as indicated by his lack of speech when Michael confronts him. What Michael secretly wants and what is revealed to him through the Stranger, is for Meng

⁵³ Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 132.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

to be dead and for himself to receive a raise and marry Jane. The same question is put to him rhetorically earlier. After Briggs' conviction, Michael sits in the press office and stares solemnly into space, wondering if he has made the correct (both moral and legal) decision with regard to Briggs. Another reporter notices Michael's sulking and asks him: 'Didn't you like the verdict? It's what you wanted, wasn't it?' The initial implication is that the verdict makes Michael feel guilty and thus it is not what he wanted after all. With the introduction of the Stranger, the implication changes: it *is* what he wanted but did not realise. Therefore, Michael struggles to get closure: he achieved his desire yet remains unsatisfied.

The male gaze dictates the production and dissemination of knowledge in film noir. Yet, it frequently fails to deliver what it promises. The male gaze's relation to history is highly nostalgic, it constructs both home and women as fantasies. We can recall Boym, as she argues that nostalgia is a 'mourning...for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values.'⁵⁶ Indeed, noir's male gazes reveal to us their very inadequacy and the hole at the centre of noir. Noir, in a sense, is only constituted through attempts to impose borders. In the first chapter, I examined how this is performed by critics, often to disappointing results. In this chapter, however, I have shown how it is also performed by noir's protagonists too, which demonstrates how noir's constitutive elements are inherently unstable. It is not only the gaze which originates from a point of blindness, but so too is the *sound* of noir. The interplay between sound and image in noir tends to prioritise the latter over the former, but what is curious is that while sound is generally distrusted (hearing is secondary to seeing in terms of constructing knowledge), the same scepticism is not extended to vision. Meng's watchful eye over Michael, Michael's blindness in relation to Briggs's case, and the Stranger's seemingly omnipotent position (insofar as he 'sees' Michael's desire for what it really

⁵⁶ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. 8.

is) are all intrusive forms of vision. The gaze, in noir, is something which constituted largely through how it is *returned*. It asks something of its protagonists, and us. Most importantly, the ambiguity of the gaze alters our perception of home. If the home is a border which seeks to contain certain ideological excesses, then we can see how noir's lack of internal consistency or substance subverts these attempts. The home, like the gaze, is something which cannot be fully grasped, but nonetheless makes demands of noir's protagonists, and us as we look at noir.

The next chapter questions the apparent unbearable nature of desire in noir and how it relates to home, as well as what precisely is the substance being contained by its borders. As we have seen, noir often dramatises the interior struggles of its characters, yet it rarely gives them what they want — or think they want. As I have explored here, in relation to home, part of the answer is concerned with the object itself. The object's impossibility renders the process of its attainment blinding in some respect. The home, here, is ambiguous because it so clearly signifies *something*, but noir finds it difficult to articulate *why* home is desirable. The subsequent chapters will address this problem of why the desired object is impossible. Rather than solely focusing on home itself, the next chapter turns its attention to underlying mechanisms of looking, desire, and narrative construction in noir through the framework of fascination.

Chapter 3

Film Noir & Fascination

'The truth is I'm not really an antique dealer. I'm sort of a...detective'

Mr. Wilson, *The Stranger* (1946)



Figure 3.1, *Kiss of Death*, dir. By Henry Hathaway (20th Century Fox, 1947)

The Greatest Trick Noir Ever Pulled...

In this chapter I discuss how Lacan's concept of fascination and its relationship to fantasy informs our understanding of film noir. Fascination is crucial in deciphering the noir mode by complicating the very process and assumptions of critical work. It is, in part, the mechanism which creates and

defines noir's affect. In the first section of this chapter, I examine how fascination enhances our understanding of noir as structurally traumatic and how such a trauma affects the portrayal of home in noir. The following section focuses on how fascination changes noir's historicity, especially in relation to the World War Two. In the subsequent section, I consider how fascination informs noir's depiction of investigative desire and how the detective gets caught up in fascination's gaze and becomes implicated in the circuits of desires he is employed to untangle. In addition, I focus on how the Lacanian *objet petit a* functions as an already lost object and how noir, in some sense, can be understood as this already lost object.

The way to access the 'impossibility'¹ of desire, the *objet petit a*, is, for Lacan, through fantasy. Fantasy is the setting of desire, not an object itself: it is a screen on to which a subject's desires are projected. The home's hierarchical familial structure — as well as how its position as a desirable commodity positioning the subject within the framework of capitalist desire — creates the conditions for a 'safe' experience of desire. A 'safe' experience here means a blindness in relation to the bottomless pit of desire. Desire itself has no content and no object. Home thus places desire within a specific fantasy framework. Film noir, as we shall see, exploits and disrupts this framework to expose the ideological function of home, and, moreover, the way in which the 'ideology of home' constitutes itself through the same circularity and contentless form as desire. As Sylvia Harvey puts it, homes are 'the representation of the institution of the family, which in so many films serve as the mechanism whereby desire is fulfilled.'² It is a place in which a subject knows its own position within the symbolic circuit. Home and family enable desire to be experienced. However, as Elizabeth Cowie argues, 'it is the fantasy itself that demands the

¹ Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 208.

² Harvey, 'The Absent Family of Film Noir', p. 36.

punishment'³ because through fantasy, 'the subject attempts to sustain the illusion of unity with the Other and ignore his or her own division'⁴ and it 'defines a subject's "impossible" relation to the *objet a*.'⁵ The *objet petit a* is thus implicated in fantasy because it represents the lack in the Other. As I showed in the previous chapters, the illusion of unity in *Stranger on the Third Floor* is the very mechanism which, in Cowie's words, defines Michael's impossible relation to the *objet a*. Fantasy's main function is to stage, or screen, desire rather than fulfilling it. The cinematic fantasy for Cowie 'is not produced by the spectator but by the filmic text itself, which must "move" the spectator to occupy his or her place within it.'⁶ In this sense, cinema does not so much screen our desires but rather presents a framework in which we are told what to desire (or even *how* to desire). Fantasy works insofar as it actively denies and punishes us our desired satisfaction. Film noir, for instance, involves denying our enjoyment, directly contrapuntal to Hollywood cinema which offers satisfaction.

In *Double Indemnity* (1944), one example is Walter Neff's insistence on reaching the 'end of the line'⁷ with respect to the convoluted plan that he concocts with Phyllis. On a structural level, such a process involves continually delaying enjoyment to the point where punishment supersedes enjoyment. We can notice the structure of desire within Neff's plan: part of Neff's 'perfectly perfect' plan is to elude Keyes and the police, to reverse engineer a crime which takes the investigative process into account.⁸ Thus, the criminal plan is radically transformed so that it incorporates a mechanism for its own failure. It is through his strained attempts to exclude his own

³ Elizabeth Cowie, 'Film Noir and Women' in *Shades of Noir: A Reader*, ed. by Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1993), p. 137.

⁴ Sean Homer, *Jacques Lacan*, Loc. 1556.

⁵ *Ibid.*, Loc. 1592.

⁶ Elizabeth Cowie, 'Film Noir and Women', p. 137.

⁷ *Double Indemnity*, dir. by Billy Wilder (Paramount Pictures, 1944).

⁸ *Ibid.*

desire from the plan that he, inadvertently, identifies himself as a suspect. Neff's incorporation of double indemnity, the actuarial term for doubling the amount of insurance money paid out in the case of accidental death, involves using the statistical anomaly of accidental death whilst on a train:

Listen, baby. There's a clause in every accident policy, a little thing called double indemnity. The insurance companies put it in as sort of a come-on for the customers. It means they pay double on certain accidents. The kind that almost never happen. Like for instance if a guy is killed on a train, they'd pay a hundred thousand instead of fifty thousand. We're hitting it for the limit, baby. That's why it's got to be the train.⁹

Neff's rationale is that the insurance company will not suspect wrongdoing because it is so unlikely. Keyes, however, reverses Neff's logic. He argues that since the odds of the accident are so low, it is essentially impossible and is therefore likely to be a fraudulent claim. Strangely, then, failure becomes built in because its avoidance is central to the plan, so that all components of the plan encounter failure until eventually such failure is not only inevitable, but the *point* of the plan in the first case: the curious incident was the absence of an incident. Indeed, the very meticulousness of his plan structures its own impossibility. As Hugh Manon observes: 'the focus on the obstacle becomes so intense as to eclipse the ostensible goal of the pursuit'.¹⁰

⁹ *Double Indemnity* (1944).

¹⁰ Hugh Manon, 'Some Like It Cold: Fetishism in Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity*', *Cinema Journal*. 44.4 (Summer, 2005), p. 31.



Figure 3.2, *Double Indemnity*, dir. by Billy Wilder (Paramount Pictures, 1944)

In relation to this, the film's retroactive narrative structure allows the spectator in a sense to side with Neff. The point at which we feel enjoyment for Neff's apparent success is simultaneously punctured by our retroactive knowledge of Neff's eventual demise. We are both rewarded *and* punished for our desire. Here, we can identify another level of impossibility in Neff's plan. It is not only impossible because of its 'perfectly perfect' construction but also because on a structural and formal level, we know the plan cannot succeed.¹¹ Investigation in noir, too, revolves around an impossible nexus of desire. The detective must solve the crime, but the central problem

¹¹ *Double Indemnity* (1944).

is not the criminal act per se but the detective's failure to uncover his or the perpetrator's desire. In *Indemnity*, this plays out through the narrative structure and our alignment with Neff. The central tension of the film is shifted from 'will Neff get caught?' to 'how will he get caught?' That is, which of Neff's desires will be exposed and what excesses will be produced? Where Keyes' investigation does indeed yield the correct result, he is nonetheless too late; Neff and Phyllis have already had their fatal altercation. As I will show, there is always some excess in the investigative process which has further implications for our critical approach to noir. What is required to 'solve' the mysteries of noir, in short, is less the adoption and assumption of an objective gaze and more an integration into the libidinal circuit of desire— on the part of the protagonist/investigator and the spectator.

Neff attempts to anticipate Keyes' investigation, yet this is precisely how Keyes is able to see the criminal intent. As Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari argue in *Anti-Oedipus*, desire is a productive force. It is productive insofar as it *does* something; there is no absence of desire, but only a *desire of absence*. Neff's goal of reaching the 'end of the line' is never met because the line only ever extends.¹² Desire and enjoyment are thus constantly deferred, replaced by punishment through the expectation of enjoyment. Indeed, film noir itself suffers the same ailment. As explored with *Stranger on the Third Floor*, there is always the possibility of one more noir: the set of films is never complete. The logic of film noir's construction is thus replicated on the level of desire, which largely reveals itself as the logic of an investigation.

Beyond individual examples, film noir embodies the eternal cycle of desire on a structural level, inherent in both the narrative structures and the visual structures that define it. The *objet a*

¹² *Double Indemnity* (1944).

features in noir narratives insofar as the narratives are usually structured around something impossible — for example, as we will later see, the falcon statuette in *The Maltese Falcon* (1941). The nature of this impossibility might range from the impossibility of investigative desire, to an impossible object, or the impossibility of reconstructing the past. Additionally, the *objet a* figures in the visual structure through a similar impossibility of the objects within noir's visual field: noir's dimly lit sets and obfuscated narratives intertwine to create scenarios in which knowledge cannot be gained simply through looking because there is always something missing or obscured. Or, perhaps more drastically, the object *is* in full view, but we cannot comprehend it. It is, in addition, precisely our position as spectators which motivates this obfuscation since film noir is instilled with a certain nostalgia. This nostalgia ultimately splits the film into our interpretation of it now and a simultaneous desire to reconstruct the film as it would have been seen by 1940s audiences. Žižek makes the point that what 'fascinates us is...the gaze of the "other"'¹³, which he classifies as a 'mythic spectator from the 1940s' who identifies with the noir universe. He concludes: 'our relation to a film noir is always divided, split between fascination and ironic distance: ironic distance toward its diegetic reality, fascination with the gaze.'¹⁴ Hence, there is a focus in noir criticism on its appearance because noir (and our nostalgic interpretation of it) is so focused on a 'fascination with the gaze.'¹⁵ Noir then, is on some level a fantasy onto which our desire for nostalgia is projected and this projection ultimately alters the film itself; film noir, because of our fascination with it, lacks an 'objective' existence insofar as we imbue the films with 'noirness' and, in so doing, obscure or destroy the 'real' object underneath.¹⁶

¹³ Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: Jacques Lacan in Popular Culture* (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1992), p. 112

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ The 'real' object of noir is not objectifiable, but rather a nostalgic critical construction.

Fascination, in psychoanalytic terms, is the compulsion to pursue the *objet petit a*. However, this compulsion will always fail to yield the intended result because of the subject's relation to the *objet petit a* — it is the Other's lack or lack itself. The subject conceives of the *objet petit a* as something which is attainable because it is considered to be something which was once held by the subject but is now lost. As Todd McGowan writes, 'the subject posits the *objet petit a* as the point of the Other's secret *jouissance*.'¹⁷ In psychoanalysis *jouissance* is sometimes translated as to a transgressive kind of pleasure: 'pleasure in pain'¹⁸, a similar formulation as to when Žižek writes of a symbolic structure embodying its 'own impossibility.'¹⁹ In *Indemnity*, our *jouissance* mirrors Neff's: there is a pleasure in constructing a plan which ostensibly is to obscure Neff's desire, only for it to become the very means by which he and the spectator are punished. For McGowan, the *objet petit a* is a point of impossibility since it is a remnant of the Real, the limit of symbolization, 'an internal point of failure.'²⁰ The *objet petit a* is like the Real insofar as it is paradoxical. It is 'an impossible object. To exist, it would have to be simultaneously part of the subject and completely alien.'²¹ The Real, as Žižek writes in response to Judith Butler, is paradoxical because it

is in fact internal/inherent to the Symbolic, not its external limit, *but for that very reason*, it cannot be symbolized. In other words, the paradox is that the Real as external, excluded

¹⁷ Todd McGowan, 'Looking for the Gaze: Lacanian Film Theory and Its Vicissitudes', in *Cinema Journal* 42.3 (Spring 2003), p. 32.

¹⁸ Homer, *Loc.* 1592.

¹⁹ Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 208.

²⁰ Glyn Daly, *Slavoj Žižek: Risking the Impossible*, 2004, available at: <http://www.lacan.com/zizek-primer.htm> [Accessed 20/10/2017].

²¹ McGowan, p. 32.

from the Symbolic, is in fact a symbolic determination — what eludes symbolization is precisely the Real as *the inherent point of failure* of symbolization.²²

An object can be fascinating in itself; it can possess some impossible point of perception. Or fascination might be *relational* and therefore a fantasmatic projection from the subject. As Oliver Harris formulates it, fascination thus involves a certain ‘staging’ of a secret which replicates the structure of secrets rather than being solvable in itself. In the process of finding, the original image is ‘always lost.’²³

Lacan uses the example of Hans Holbein’s painting *The Ambassadors* (1533). What at first appears to be a relatively straightforward portrait of two men — ostensibly in command — contains an anamorphosis of a skull, a distorted skull that does not fit the realist aesthetic and, crucially, the established viewpoint of the painting. Lacan calls *The Ambassadors* (Fig. 3.1) ‘a trap for the gaze.’²⁴ McGowan, similarly, says the skull is a ‘blank spot in the image’ since the skewed perspective forces the spectator to tilt their head in order to see the image properly, at which point the two figures become equally distorted; the spectator loses their ‘distance from the painting’²⁵, thus becoming involved in what they see. The spectator is involved in the image and thus we lose our objective distance. In fact, it is only through involving ourselves in the image that we can comprehend it.

²² Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues On The Left* (London and New York: Verso, 2000), p. 121, [original emphasis].

²³ Oliver Harris, *William Burroughs: The Secret of Fascination* (USA: Southern Illinois University), p. 10.

²⁴ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamentals of Psychoanalysis*, ed. By Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Vintage, 1998), p. 89.

²⁵ McGowan, p. 28.



Figure 3.3, Hans Holbein, *The Ambassadors*, 1533. Oil on oak, 207 x 209.5 cm, The National Gallery, London.²⁶

Lacan continues: ‘In any picture, it is precisely in seeking the gaze in each of its points that you will see it disappear.’²⁷ For Lacan, then, this skull represents the Other’s *jouissance*, the *objet petit a*. What seemed like a position of mastery — looking safely at the image — has been reversed

²⁶ Hans Holbein, *The Ambassadors*, 1533. Oil on oak, 207 x 209.5 cm, The National Gallery, UK.

²⁷ Lacan, *The Four Fundamentals of Psychoanalysis*, p. 89.

since the image *sees us*, and therefore we experience ourselves as the object of the desiring gaze. Concurrently, McGowan argues that this is how we should understand the gaze, not as ‘an experience of imaginary mastery’, but instead as a ‘site of a traumatic encounter with the Real.’²⁸ What is fascinating about *The Ambassadors* is the lost objectivity of perspective; it feels as if our viewpoint is lost through our encounter with the skull, but what is revealed by the skull’s presence is that our identification with the image was always already configured within the image itself. The painting stages this dilemma. Moreover the presence of the skull alerts us to the presence of the artist. Although the Ambassadors depicted in the painting project confidence and power, it is the artist who possess control over their representation. The painting thus stages the excessive capacity of images. The image outlasts the Ambassadors, but it will also outlast us; the skull is paradoxically, an afterimage, a representation of what happens to humans after we die, but also a symbol of life, specifically the life of the painting. In noir, however, there is no authoritative artist in control of the text. The retroactive application of noir onto film as the film’s primary signifier disintegrates authorship. Perhaps we might say that we are granted the power of authorship over the text, able to override the ‘real’ author, but I would contend the opposite. In being granted this power, we quickly realise that noir resists our attempts to reshape it. The film, and its author, are not empowered, but noir, like *The Ambassadors* stages our powerlessness.

Usefully, Lacan poses the question of fascination like this: ‘If one wishes to deceive a man, what one presents to him is the painting of a veil, that is to say, something that incites him to ask what is behind it.’²⁹ The question that persists in noir criticism is what lies behind the fantasy screen of film noir, and what is its essence? The answer, of course, is nothing at all. Nevertheless,

²⁸ McGowan, p. 28.

²⁹ Lacan, *The Four Fundamentals of Psychoanalysis*, p. 112

noir critics have long since been fascinated *with* noir's fascination — fascinated *by* fascination itself — often without acknowledging that this is the case. The word fascination appears frequently in noir criticism as cinematic fascination rose to prominence within film theory more generally. As Harris observes:

For while noir's critical history began effectively at the same moment that cinematic fascination became central to psychoanalytic film theory — the mid-1970s — when noir was called “fascinating,” the term itself passed with no more theoretical definition than in its empty, everyday use. Equally, there was no effort within the noir field to rethink fascination, either by expanding its range of cultural and philosophical references or by giving it historical specificity. As a result, fascination in noir has been at once massively overexposed and almost completely overlooked, as if playing out the very blindness at the heart of vision that defines its effect.³⁰

Harris' final point links the psychoanalytic definition of fascination to noir criticism itself, as well as something in the films themselves. He speculates about critics being bound by the same blindness that they seek to uncover in noir. If we turn to the critics themselves, it seems that, at best, the critical use of the word fascination simply gestures towards a vague sense of the identity and character of film noir. It acts as a rhetorical device, an empty one at that, which allows the author to focus on another aspect of film noir. This is the ‘empty, everyday use’³¹ to which Harris refers. Most books writing on film noir, especially introductory texts, follow the same structural pattern insofar as they highlight the definitional complexity of noir (its retroactivity, its loose definition etc.), then conclude that it is indeed a *fascinating* field of study. At worst, the use of

³⁰ Oliver Harris, ‘Film Noir Fascination: Outside History, but Historically so’, p. 3.

³¹ Ibid.

fascination indicates an over-reliance on shorthand where depth is required, and a hesitancy to properly engage with fascination in its proper psychoanalytic and historical contexts. Critical shorthand is, of course, necessary in some scenarios. However, what piques my interest is that it seems that many critics use the word fascination to describe something vague and *inherent* in film noir. Most critics seem to stress, accidentally or not, that fascination is important to understanding film noir, but rarely attempt to define precisely what they mean when they claim that noir is fascinating.

If we take a few examples from some of the most famous works on noir, we can see this ambivalent use of fascination in action. In *Hollywood in the Forties*, first published in 1967, Charles Higham and Joel Greenberg attempt to describe the typical noir scene in a section problematically called ‘Black cinema’: ‘Cocktail bars, too, exercise a special fascination: mirrors, stretching to the ceiling, reflect the stew of the faces.’³² While this style of affective writing is meant to evoke the loosely defined noir mood, it falls into fascination’s trap. In trying to write suggestively, their description of a typical noir scene obfuscates any definition of noir. Fascination is, as Harris points out, ‘massively overexposed and almost completely overlooked’³³ — used as a synonym for ‘interesting’ but intended to express something more. Again, writing about Lewis Allen's *So Evil My Love* (1948)³⁴, Higham and Greenberg argue that ‘the chief fascination of this film, full of fog, ferns and plush, drawn from a novel by Joseph Shearing, lies in its portrait of will.’³⁵ A few pages later, they discuss noir directors, notably Robert Siodmak, remarking that his ‘Germanic pessimism and fascination with cruelty and violence are not in doubt.’³⁶ Whereas in the

³² Charles Higham and Joel Greenberg, *Hollywood in the Forties* (United States: The Tantivy Press. 1967), p. 20.

³³ Harris, ‘Film Noir Fascination: Outside History, but Historically so’, p. 3.

³⁴ *So Evil My Love*, dir. by Lewis Allen, (Paramount British Pictures, 1948).

³⁵ Higham and Greenberg, p. 34.

³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 22.

first two examples, fascination is somehow connected to mirrors, doubling and an obscurity of vision ('full of fog')³⁷, in the latter example their employment of the term lapses into a non-point about European stereotypes being merely interested (for that is what 'fascination' means here) in violence and cruelty. In this way, fascination is stripped of its historical and theoretical context. Additionally, the definitional ambiguity of film noir is highlighted in this short section because Higham and Greenberg, strangely, do not consider *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) or *The Lost Weekend* (1945) film noirs, but rather 'melodrama'.

In 1972 Paul Schrader published 'Notes on Film Noir', one of the most influential essays on film noir and one which energized critics to examine noir more closely. In it, Schrader writes rather emptily of 'the fascination [that] film noir holds for today's youth'³⁸ and that film noir is 'equally interesting to critics.'³⁹ Edward Dimendberg employs fascination to emphasise the historical position of film noir in relation to the war in his 2004 book, *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity*. Film noir, Dimendberg writes, 'conveys a palpable fascination for a transitional period in American society whose seemingly transparent social structure — a world in which power relations could still be traced with relative ease by a morally irreproachable detective figure — would shortly vanish.'⁴⁰

In the twenty-first century, fascination begins to take on, as Harris argues, a more 'introspective turn' which grapples with the 'enduring appeal' of noir, its 'power to fascinate.'⁴¹ In 2008 James Naremore suggests that 'our contemporary fascination with noir may entail a sort

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Paul Schrader, 'Notes on Film Noir', p. 53.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Dimendberg, *Spaces of Modernity*, p. 4.

⁴¹ Harris, 'Film Noir Fascination: Outside History, but Historically so', p. 4.

of *Nachträglichkeit*, or method of dealing with the present by imagining a primal scene.⁴² Naremore's use of fascination in conjunction with Freud's *Nachträglichkeit* (or afterwordness) hints at a relationship between the two: that it is exactly the impossibility of imaging the primal scene which is affected by the blindness involved in fascination. Žižek, for instance, makes this connection explicit when he discusses the 'the gaze of other', of the hypothetical, mythic spectator.⁴³ Naremore cleverly shifts the focus of fascination away from the films themselves and onto the spectator and critic. In the 2013 book, *A Companion to Film Noir*, Yvonne Tasker opens her essay by asserting that film noir 'has proven to be a fascinating site of inquiry for feminist film criticism.'⁴⁴ Finally, Elizabeth Cowie states: 'What must be explained is the continuing fascination with this fantasy long after the historical period that is supposed to justify it'.⁴⁵ She concludes that 'the pleasure and fascination of the fantasy of the duplicitous woman in film noir are, no doubt, as varied — or limited — as the different forms the fantasy takes.'⁴⁶ Cowie initially deploys fascination to mean an academic interest in noir as a film genre. Yet, here, there is an admission of a more complex definition of fascination.

Unfortunately, few critics follow Cowie's more circumspect use of the term. Fascination as the default go-to term to describe noir can be found in almost every book with noir as its main focus. In Ian Brookes' 2017 book, *Film Noir: A Critical Introduction*, for example, Brookes begins his introduction by stating that his book is 'designed to provide an introduction to one of the most

⁴² Naremore, *More Than Night*, p. 4.

⁴³ Žižek. *Looking Awry*, p. 112.

⁴⁴ Yvonne Tasker, 'Women in Film Noir', *A Companion to Film Noir*, first edn. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing) p. 353.

⁴⁵ Cowie, 'Film Noir and Women', p. 123.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* p. 124.

fascinating, complex, and problematic categories of film,⁴⁷ repeating the empty definition of fascination that appears in earlier critics' work.

More than anything else, there is, as Krutnik writes, a kind of 'noir mystique'⁴⁸, something imperceptible and deceitful about noir that noir criticism can often obfuscate rather than illuminate. Harris triangulates this concern of fascination precisely between 'cinematic fascination and hermeneutic or historical activity', in which, he claims 'interpretive criticism is forced to confront the noir paradox that blindness within vision itself makes possible a kind of vision in blindness.'⁴⁹ Since we understand film noir *through* the lens of critics, how do we contend with critics' ongoing fascination with fascination itself in film noir? It is not enough simply to define fascination and apply this definition to the films themselves, since, in some part, film noir is a critical construction as well as a textual and filmic one. As Vernet observes, 'speaking about film noir consists, from the beginning, in being installed in repetition.'⁵⁰ Here, Vernet is suggesting (if only implicitly) the possibility that the films themselves will dissolve away to be wholly replaced with a critical simulacrum, as if to mirror the effect of fascination itself. Perhaps this is why critics feel compelled to gesture towards noir's complex definitional history and equally eager to move on from it as quickly as possible. To write about film noir is to always write about *writing about* film noir because criticism cannot be easily distinguished as secondary to the films themselves.

When Lacan asks us what lies behind a veil, how much attention should we pay to the veil itself, or the stage upon which the veil stands? The secret posed by fascination is that there is no secret, no wizard behind the curtain, but that fascination merely recreates the structure of secrets.

⁴⁷ Ian Brookes, *Film Noir: A Critical Introduction* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), p. 1.

⁴⁸ Krutnik, p. 28.

⁴⁹ Harris, 'Film Noir Fascination: Outside History, but Historically so', p. 4.

⁵⁰ Marc Vernet, 'Film Noir on the Edge of Doom', p. 2.

Like the curtain in Fritz Lang's *The Testament of Dr Mabuse* (1933)⁵¹, fascination does not so much conceal, but rather stages the illusion that there is something to conceal; it acts a kind of meta-secret, one which never satisfies once revealed. Since fascination revolves around the *objet petit a*, the Other's *jouissance*, and therefore not around any specific object, we can say that fascination is a *structural relation* because it describes the relationship between the subject and Other's *jouissance*. In this way, we can see how the supposedly 'special' object (for example, the Maltese Falcon) is not special at all because it can be replaced by anything else. The staging of the illusions is the illusion itself.

If we take an example from a neo-noir film, Bryan Singer's *The Usual Suspects* (1995),⁵² we can see how fascination is central to noir's narratives. The film's pivotal line, spoken by Verbal Kint, 'The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist', seems to suggest that Keyser Soze, the film's mystical antagonist, *does* exist but that he operates at the level of myth. Although he is a mythical figure, he *can* be caught. However, the film's twist ending, where Kint is revealed to be faking his injury and timidity, suggests that, perhaps, Kint is Soze. Soze's strategy to avoid the police is to hide in plain sight: the investigators cannot see what is right in front of them. What is important here, though, is the implication that Kint makes up (or at least gives different names to) certain details of the story from the cork board behind Kujan, the investigating detective, thereby introducing doubt into his whole story. Did Kint simply change the nouns in his story, or did the names on the cork board function as the skeletal structure for his fabricated story? By answering these questions, we are already caught in fascination's trap.

⁵¹ *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*, dir. by Fritz Lang (Nero-Film, 1933).

⁵² *The Usual Suspects*, dir. by Bryan Singer (Gramercy Pictures, 1995).

‘The secret’, Harris writes, ‘disappears when its meaning outside or behind the work is discovered.’⁵³ To complicate matters further there is a repetition of names beginning with the letter ‘K’ (Kint, Kujan, Kobayashi, Keyser Soze) which serves to confuse the relationship between signifier and signified so that it becomes ambiguous which ‘K’ refers to what or to whom. Part of the audience’s experience is to be confused over what we imagine we have heard. The central question ‘what/who does Keyser Soze refer to?’ is complicated by these other competing names. Instead of considering who Keyser Soze ‘empirically’ is (perhaps the central trick of the film as a whole), we are encouraged to read Kint’s rhetorical question in the opposite way: what if the greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he *did* exist? In this formulation, the law chasing Soze are chasing a myth that does not exist and since they are convinced Soze is the culprit, they will only uncover ‘the next clue’ to Soze; the answer is always deferred. Soze is not someone (or something) who can be physically apprehended because he is *criminality itself*. His symbolic texture is reduced to the level of fascinating secret, one that simply recreates the structure of a secret. As a myth that purports to exist, Keyser Soze functions as the *objet petit a* for the police, and for the audience. Soze is an object that came into being as lost and can thus never be recovered, yet nonetheless is endlessly pursued. He is the object-cause of investigative desire. The secret of Keyser Soze is that there is no secret and there is no Soze, only Verbal Kint (whose names resemble a verbal hint), who, through the police’s blind search for Soze, has already disappeared. This reversal of Kint’s original quote is a distillation of the mechanics of fascination, drawing us in, to ask: what is behind the veil? As Harris writes, ‘the fascination of the secret is itself the secret of fascination.’⁵⁴

⁵³ Harris, *William Burroughs: The Secret of Fascination*, p. 10.

⁵⁴ Harris, *William Burroughs: The Secret of Fascination*. p. 9.

Fascination marks a visual territory in which we both see too much and too little. I will look at a few key points of overlap in *Dark Passage* (1947) and *Shadow of a Doubt* to show how fascination marks a visual and narrative territory in which we both see too much and too little. In *Dark Passage*, the strange first-person perspective promises us a perfect replica of Vincent Parry's vision, but it only serves to reinforce our blindness, and indeed make us acutely aware that we cannot see. These concerns, moreover, bleed into the film's construction of the home through the couple of Bogart and Bacall. In *Shadow of a Doubt*, the focus on visual and narrative relates to the way in which Uncle Charles hides in plain sight. More specifically he hides within the home. The family home in the film is an example of home being completely central (it is the space which must be seen and understood) but also completely absent (the characters go to great lengths so as to not admit that the problems originate from within the home and the smalltown community).

In *Dark Passage*, Vincent Parry, a recently escaped convict from San Quentin who was (wrongfully) imprisoned for murdering his wife, encounters Irene Jansen during his escape. Irene, strangely, has a peculiar interest in his case and believes him to be innocent. To evade the police, Vincent visits a plastic surgeon who performs an operation to change his appearance. Vincent then becomes framed for another murder, this time of his friend George. After this, he proceeds to find out who set him up for both the murder of George and his wife, Madge. When he confronts Madge, she dies as she falls through her apartment window. Vincent is forced to leave America and retire to Peru in order to evade his arrest and after a short time, Irene joins him. The film's plot therefore concerns itself with marriage and the production of the familial home. Vincent is accused of murdering his wife and therefore breaking up a family; Irene's father was similarly falsely convicted and died in prison. When confronting a detective, Vincent says that he is hiding from

his ‘wife’, ‘friends’, ‘family’, ‘everybody.’⁵⁵ Vincent must live as a stowaway in Irene’s apartment before they end up together, forming the Hollywood couple. This formation seems fairly typical (especially so considering that the stars are Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall), yet in the context of Irene’s deceased father, this construction of the couple could indicate Irene’s desire to replace the father, or that the death of her father somehow prevented her from assuming the social role of a mother. After removing the bandages from his surgery, Vincent remarks: ‘I sure look older. That’s all right, I’m not. If it’s all right with me, it ought to be all right with you.’⁵⁶ Here, Vincent takes on the appearance of Irene’s older father. Indeed, one of the notable aspects of Bogart and Bacall’s celebrity relationship was the age gap between them — Bogart was 48 and Bacall was 23. The casting of Bogart and Bacall, too, means that there is no ‘formation’ to do because of the pair’s real-life and high-profile marriage. By proving Vincent innocent, Irene hopes to similarly exonerate her father. Vincent and Irene’s father are therefore doubles for each other. Such a connection is implied after Vincent’s surgery when he cannot look after himself — and is reduced to the level of a pre-Oedipal child — and Irene adopts the role of a mother feeding him soup.

Much like *Double Indemnity*, *Dark Passage* can be understood as principally a familial drama. Both films end with an irrevocable separation and the destruction of the family. Although Irene and Vincent do form a couple at the end of the film — unlike Neff and Phyllis in *Double Indemnity* — they can do so only in Peru, away from home. Their exile from America undercuts the social importance and ideological function of the formation of the couple because it is primarily a metaphor for the social cohesion of American society. In the context of wartime and the

⁵⁵ *Dark Passage* (1947).

⁵⁶ *Dark Passage* (1947).

reconciliation of veterans during the immediate postwar period, Vincent's conviction for wrongful incarceration can be read in terms of his rehabilitation as a 'war veteran'. In this way, the film distinguishes between American soldiers killing enemy combatants and murder within society, with the former being seen as 'accidental' and morally permissible. *Dark Passage*'s symbolic goal of attempting to reconstruct the ruined families and homes of postwar America is thwarted. As Kelly Oliver and Benigno Trigo argue, the disintegration of patriarchal authority is 'the source of the anxieties and fatalism in noir.'⁵⁷ In *Dark Passage*, patriarchal authority continually struggles to assert its dominance. Irene's father, for instance, is wrongfully convicted, as is Vincent. After his escape, Vincent cannot marry Irene in America. Vincent's anxiety and paranoia stem from his inability to restore his patriarchal power in a postwar setting. The process of returning is difficult since there is an expectation that the place, which is returned to, and the person who returns, are the same as when they 'left.' Vincent returns from 'war' (or prison) literally looking like a different person and in some sense, *is* a different person. Indeed, for us, Vincent is a new person because we are only introduced to him after his escape. While Irene and Vincent resolve their respective traumas, it is American *society* that rejects this new formulation of family and refuses to grant them a home. The home, or rather Irene's home, is primarily a place of concealment, a place in which the law is fooled and undermined.

What is particularly peculiar and noteworthy, however, is the form of *Dark Passage*, which, up until Vincent has his appearance altering surgery, mostly follows Vincent's point of view — similar, in this respect, to Robert Montgomery's *Lady in the Lake* (1947).⁵⁸ The formal oddity of restricting the audience's visual field helps the film explore the relationship between visual and

⁵⁷ Oliver Trigo, *Noir Anxiety*, xiii.

⁵⁸ *Lady in the Lake*, dir. by Robert Montgomery (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1947).

narrative blind space. The first-person perspective makes us aware of how the camera and editing constantly restricts our view and therefore, actively denies us what we — and Vincent — want to see. Fascination is here rendered visually. The staging of Vincent's blindness (through our — almost — total alignment with his vision) is achieved through the obvious blind spots such techniques foreground. Combined with Vincent's paranoia over being caught by the police and the plot's main mystery, there are two seemingly paradoxical visual fears. First, there is an incessant sense of danger beyond the frame of the cinematic image, that the view is restrictive. Second, there is the fear that nothing exists beyond the frame since it is so highly controlled and centred around Parry's first-person perspective. The narrative and visual spaces are inherently perilous since we lose our objective distance. This is the central visual and narrative paradox: by showing us precisely what a character sees, we are inevitably irritated by what we cannot see and ultimately, by what is limiting about *vision itself*. As J. P. Telotte says, the subjective camera in *Dark Passage* produces 'a distancing effect' which is 'compounded by another resulting awareness, that of an unaccounted for blind spot or absence, something that remains frustratingly just outside our field of view — the character and the space he occupied.'⁵⁹ By offering us a privileged position — the secret of Vincent's vision — we are further alienated from Vincent because we rely entirely on what he sees.

The gaze is established at the point at which the object looks back, the *objet petit a*. For Todd McGowan, the 'the subject posits the *objet petit a* as the point of the Other's secret jouissance.'⁶⁰ In *Dark Passage*, we are forced to confront this impossible problem of the Other's secret jouissance, what Telotte calls the 'blind spot of absence.'⁶¹ What is questioned on both a filmic

⁵⁹ J.P. Telotte, 'Seeing in *Dark Passage*.' *Film Criticism*, 9.2 (Winter 1984), p. 16.

⁶⁰ McGowan, 'Looking for the Gaze', p. 32.

⁶¹ Telotte, p. 16.

and psychoanalytical level are the ways in which we see and are seen.⁶² Telotte's designation of the visual 'absence' relates to an understanding of the film's visual form as innately traumatic, since trauma, in psychoanalysis, is usually defined precisely as absence. The *objet petit a*, as 'leftover of the Real,'⁶³ serves as an example of this idea because it is an impossible object and is defined, by the subject, by its absence, hence the continuing search for it. Similarly, Lacan's order of the Real is understood as an absence which continually repeats itself. As Žižek argues, quoting Lacan, 'unconscious trauma repeats itself by means of some small, contingent bit of reality.'⁶⁴ In absence, then, as with trauma, there is repetition. This understanding of the film's visual field and of noir's more generally, casts Irene and Vincent's formation as a couple in a much less favourable light. Rather than being two traumatised individuals overcoming their respective traumas in a symbolic move to restore the national trauma, it is instead simply a traumatic *repetition* borne from an inability in Vincent's vision.

In *Dark Passage*, Irene, in Vincent's eyes, takes on this fascinating, traumatic absence at the heart of his vision because she becomes the traumatic Thing. The Thing, or *das Ding* in Lacanian thought, is 'the beyond of the signified — that which is unknowable in itself [...] a lost object that must be continually refound.'⁶⁵ Like the *objet petit a*, 'it is the desire to fill the emptiness or void at the core of subjectivity and the symbolic that creates the Thing, as opposed to the loss of some original Thing creating the desire to find it.'⁶⁶ For Vincent, Irene represents an unknowable enigma. There is, first and foremost, the question of why she is helping him. The threat of betrayal is always there, always mediated by her gaze at us. Ostensibly, she is helping him because of a

⁶² Ibid. p. 15.

⁶³ Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 209.

⁶⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (London: Routledge. 1992), p. 111.

⁶⁵ Homer, *Loc.* 1518.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

shared trauma, an injustice, but the core reason is to replace the father figure. In Žižek's reading, which I agree with, 'The failure of the paternal metaphor'⁶⁷ is both the death of her father and Vincent's failure as a husband which precludes their successful ideological formation.

Žižek makes the connection between women in noir, fascination, and trauma explicit: 'The femme fatale is nothing but a lure whose fascinating presence masks the true traumatic axis of the noir universe, the relationship to the obscene father, i.e., the default of the paternal metaphor — all the usual babble about "latent homosexuality" misses completely the primordial dimension of this relationship.'⁶⁸ Such 'babble' about homosexuality can be seen in Highham and Greenberg's work, where they write of Uncle Charles in *Shadow of a Doubt*, '[Charlie]...shows himself a genuine occupant of film noir: in a café, he tells his niece that the universe is a "foul sty", and over dinner he discloses something of his neurotic, perhaps basically homosexual loathing of women.'⁶⁹ In addition to the small error about meeting in a café (it is in fact a late night bar called 'Til-Two') their argument that homosexuality involves 'basically' a loathing of women marks out *Hollywood in the Forties* as a work which should not be taken entirely seriously. As Paul Gordon claims, Charles' pathology is better described as a repressed *incestual* desire towards Charlie. He writes that Charles' 'modus operandi does make sense, however, if his real desire is not money but murder and if his hatred is really a repressed form of sexual desire.'⁷⁰

The bar scene which Highham and Greenberg refer to is more complex than simply revealing Uncle Charles to be a 'genuine occupant of film noir.'⁷¹ Immediately after Charles refers to the universe as a 'sty', he asks: 'Do you know if you ripped the fronts off houses you'd find swine?'

⁶⁷ Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, p. 159.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Highham and Greenberg, p. 22.

⁷⁰ Paul Gordon, 'Sometimes a Cigar is Not Just a Cigar', *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 19.4 (1991), p. 270.

⁷¹ Ibid.

Charles, here, indicates the ideological façade of home.⁷² For Charles, home has no coherent internal consistency, it is *just* a screen, a projection of safety instead of safety itself. Indeed, this speaks to one of the principal concerns of *Shadow of a Doubt*, that the idyllic suburban American life produces or fosters evil. In *The Stranger*, too, the home's idyllic surroundings are what allow Franz Kindler to evade arrest. When meeting his old Nazi friend, Kindler says,

Well, guess what I'll be doing at six o'clock tonight? Standing before a minister of the gospel with a woman's hand in mine, a daughter of a Justice of the United States Supreme Court, a famous liberal. The girl's even good to look at. Yes, the camouflage is perfect. Who would think to look for the notorious Franz Kindler in the sacred precincts of the Harper School surrounded by the sons of America's first families? And I'll stay hidden, until the day when we strike again.⁷³

Kindler's speech is perhaps the clearest crystallisation of the fears surrounding the 'enemy within' during the postwar period, and the home acts the 'perfect camouflage'. The home in these two instances is idyllic in the sense that it is held up as the template of American ideology working in its purest form. The detectives hunting Charles in *Shadow of a Doubt* even pose as photographers to capture a quintessential American household, only for Emma (Young Charlie's mother) to insist on using the proper recipe for a cake which takes much longer to make than the detectives would like. It is the relationship between details and the larger image, the 'concrete and the specific', which the film concentrates on.⁷⁴

⁷² *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943).

⁷³ *The Stranger* (1946).

⁷⁴ Donna Kornhaber, 'Hitchcock's Diegetic Imagination: Thornton Wilder, *Shadow of a Doubt*, and Hitchcock's *Mise-en-Scène*', *CLUES: A Journal of Detection*, 31.1, (Spring 2013), p. 74.

As Donna Kornhaber argues in her essay on the diegetic objects in *Shadow of a Doubt*, Hitchcock's obsession over the specificity of objects 'exceeds the immediate needs of the story and thereby anchors the film in the world it depicts.'⁷⁵ The specificities of the objects⁷⁶ are not there in place of the general, but rather stand on their own. As Kornhaber concludes:

As in much of Hitchcock's work, objects resonate on a number of symbolic registers, embodying in miniature, for example, the exchanges of power and authority, the imposed nostalgia, or the ruptures to established routines that Uncle Charlie's homecoming brings about. [...] These objects are part of the physical fabric of their world [...] And so it is all the more troubling when many of these rich physical details become implicated in Uncle Charlie's sinister purposes.⁷⁷

Hitchcock's treatment of objects defamiliarises them and empties them of meaning, only to fill them back with meaning in the context of the narrative. As Charles says: 'Ah, details, they're most important to me. Most important. All the little details.'⁷⁸ The most sinister application of this, as Kornhaber notes, occurs when Charles locks Charlie in the garage with the car's engine running in order to murder them.⁷⁹ Charles uses the house and the car as weapons *against* the family; homes and suburban communities are no longer safe, idyllic places, but places of irreconcilable danger. The ending of the film, for example, involves the communal mourning of Charles as Charlie and Graham (the police detective) signal their romantic involvement. The production of Charlie and

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Kornhaber's essays features an exhaustive list of specific objects which includes: Ann reading *Ivanhoe*, the telegram is specifically 'From Mrs. Henderson...[at] the Postal Office', 'Papa's paper' is circulated around the family, Uncle Charlie says that his sister looks like 'Emma Spencer Oakley of 46 Burnham Street, St. Paul, Minnesota', Emma makes a maple cake, the ring which Uncle Charlie gives to Charles is examined in detail and shown up close, along with many others.

⁷⁷ Kornhaber, p. 75.

⁷⁸ *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943).

⁷⁹ Kornhaber, p. 76.

Graham as a couple is intended to, as R. Barton Palmer argues, ‘preserve the illusions of smalltown life.’⁸⁰ Graham’s position as detective limits what conclusion he (and thus the film) is able to come to. ‘He can assist’, Palmer continues, ‘in the containment of Charlie’s madness, but he cannot re-order the society which views the criminal as saviour.’⁸¹ Home may be a façade — in Charles’s view a veil — but the surface is important because *that is all there is*. Home is therefore the *objet petit a* because the fascinating object is nothing but surface: there is no contingent reality beneath it. Nothing lies behind the veil. In noir, home is fantasy precisely because it is understood through the prism of fascination as an *objet petit a*, not an object unto itself but a screen on to which the *objet petit a* is projected. The rest, as Charles says, is just ‘peaceful, stupid dreams.’⁸²

‘Historical...but not dated’ — The Fascinating Nexus of Noir’s History

In noir, homes themselves are lacunae, unconscious gaps in memory, or, in psychoanalytic terms, an *objet petit a*, that long-lost object of nostalgia that was never even owned in the first place. As Charles’s mother, Emma Newton, says in *Shadow of a Doubt*, the house ‘owns us’.⁸³ Theorising home in this way allows us to understand and interpret instances of homes in noir and their symbolic significance, but also sheds light on the ‘homelessness’ of noir. In the opening chapter, I discussed the conceptual and definitional problems faced by noir. There is an overriding, critical homelessness in relation to noir: it is decentred, an object with no core. Noir is homeless in two senses. First, as a kind of genre scavenger, noir acquires and adapts details from other genres and styles. Even chiaroscuro lighting, one of noir’s most recognisable stylistic characteristics, can be

⁸⁰ R. Barton Palmer, ‘The Politics of Genre in Wells’ *The Stranger*’, *Film Criticism* 11.1/2, (Fall-Winter, 1986-87), p. 34.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, p. 34-5.

⁸² *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943).

⁸³ *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943).

traced back to European gothic cinema in the twenties and thirties. It is only noir's prolonged usage of such techniques which cements them as 'characteristics of film noir'. Second, home, which serves as a symbolic metaphor for safety and certainty, is unusually absent. Like the absence of history itself, this points towards a certain traumatic dimension of noir; the question is not so much what is being repressed, but *why*. Perhaps one reason film noir is considered thematically 'dark' is the absent home, which brings with it a certain precarity, a lack of safety and moral certainty.

The way film noir frequently deals with historical traumas and mysteries often clashes with the consistent historical setting of film noir. That is, the films are overwhelmingly set in an approximation of their present moment, the forties and fifties, with the intent of creating verisimilitude. It seems there is a near totalising desire to excavate the past, to bring it back from mere memory and to thus combat immobilisation in the present, a blockage which prevents a habitation of the past and traversal into the future. No matter how long narrators spend in the past, trying to discover every last detail, they are always forced to return to the static, homeless present. Film noir is thus traumatically present: the past is only memory, and the future an inaccessible dream.

In *The Architectural Uncanny*, Anthony Vidler characterises this temporal uneasiness as the 'anxiety of time'⁸⁴. 'This anxiety of time,' Vidler argues, 'as expressed in the intellectual attempts to imagine impossible futures or return to equally impossible pasts, was accompanied by a fascination with the consequence of time's errors.'⁸⁵ Although there is another unfortunate use of 'fascination' here, it does not pertain to film noir specifically. Film noir is, then, imprisoned

⁸⁴ Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (London: The MIT Press, 1992), p. 5.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

between impossible pasts and futures and this condition is imagined as an error of time, something which necessitates a solution. As Jacques Derrida writes in *Spectres of Marx*, a ‘haunting is historical, to be sure, but it is not dated.’⁸⁶ Time moves in all directions, but with nothing to mark its passage, except a simulacrum of the present. Trauma can only be represented negatively, as opposed to desire, which is a positive and productive force.

The experience of the Second World War brought about rapid changes in the conception of the American home and this is reflected in film noir’s particular approach to historicity. Principally, the dropping of the Atomic Bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki changed how the Second World War was perceived. In twentieth and twenty-first century culture and media, the Second World War, in comparison with the First World War, is understood in starkly moralistic terms: in narrative or cinematic terms, America and the Allies were the protagonists and the Nazis and the Japanese the antagonists. Such an easy and readily available distinction is unbalanced by America’s usage of nuclear weapons. This is obviously not to suggest a moralistic inversion, but rather a questioning of whether ‘good’ can include nuclear obliteration. Moral dilemmas are frequently framed as accidental or circumstantial: Al’s murder of Vera in *Detour* (1945); Vincent’s incarceration in *Dark Passage* (1947); the Swede meeting Kitty Collins in *The Killers* (1946) as a result of Swede not wanting to go the movies; in *The Woman in The Window* (1944) Wanley’s chance meeting with Alice ignites the plot and similarly, Chris in *Scarlet Street* (1945) saves Kitty as he wanders the streets at night. In these and countless other noirs, ‘good’ is only understood as an absence. ‘Good’ is what is *not* portrayed in film noir. In the absence of a primal ‘good’ object, it therefore became imperative to create one to maintain the social cohesion during the war, hence why home’s necessity is heightened. Amongst the moral uncertainty of American supremacy,

⁸⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge Classics, 2006), p. 3

home is elevated to an ideal state to which America must return. Home is romanticised as the necessary building block of American character, which is why the desire to create the family unit is so overwhelmingly strong in Hollywood cinema, and why the punishment for attempting to disrupt the family and the home is equally so overwhelming.

One of the reasons for the various antagonisms during the postwar period in relation to home was the ‘communalising promise’⁸⁷ of the war, that any socio-economic divisions (particularly after the Great Depression) might be healed if the country’s communal ideology all pointed in one direction. As Frank Krutnik argues, there was a sense that this ‘communalising promise’ was ‘betrayed’ and was instead replaced by an increased focus on consumerism.⁸⁸

Immediately following the war, the US experienced a massive increase in both the production and consumption of consumer durables, and one of the effects of this was an intensifying pressure for people to define themselves in relation to (the ownership of) mass-produced objects. The idealised home, stacked with consumer goods, separated and protected from the social space of the town or the city, became a new ‘temple’ of aspiration and conformity. The suburbs defined the horizons of the new America, and they were testimony simultaneously to material wealth and to cultural alienation.⁸⁹

For Krutnik the home becomes the principal site of this renewed relationship with capitalist consumerism. The home, which once represented a respite from the social space, represents consumerist ideology more strongly. The home is somehow illustrative of a person’s character — as Sally Bayley writes, the home is ‘a lived manifesto of the everyday’⁹⁰ — and such character is

⁸⁷ Krutnik, p. 60.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Bayley, p. 2.

built, as Krutnik argues, around a relation to consumer objects. Home, which was once seen as a respite from the speed and intensity of modern life, is no longer such a place. Instead, it is precisely because home is *marketed* as a kind of domestic rebellion against modern life that it supports consumer capitalism. Home is an inculcator for ideology, but also, more immediately, for the general temperament of an individual. Bayley writes that the American home precipitates a ‘proportionate sense of reality.’⁹¹ Political reality is thus, in some sense, contingent on the semantic and symbolic stability of home.

Home is transformed into something different, that of ‘a new “temple” of aspiration and conformity’.⁹² The American home is something unique which fosters a similarly unique American character. It is via this new configuration of home that an idealised form is also produced. Noir is sceptical of this revisionism and tackles the simultaneous production of the ‘new’ and ‘old’ by muddling the temporal distinction between the two. Home is a place which represents a new form of consumer culture, but the selling point of this ‘new’ culture is that it draws from the same well as the ‘old’ culture. The old can be found in the new, but noir’s inside out narratives question whether we can find the new *in* the old because the ‘old’ (past or history) in noir is largely a *product* of the new; the old is reconstituted in the retelling of history. Invariably, noir’s flashbacks involve a guilty protagonist recounting their sins — or having them recounted for them — to exorcise the past and forget it but in doing so they become trapped by their own history. The confessional tone of noir is rarely accompanied with a cathartic release. Although the films often give us the ‘criminal’s side of the story’, we are nearly always encouraged not to take their side.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Krutnik, p. 60.

One counter example is Robert Siodmak's *The Killers* (1946) which, partly, stages home specifically during a postwar context. Reardon, the insurance investigator assigned to the mysterious murder of Ole 'Swede' Anderson, carefully reconstructs Swede's story after the fact through talking to various of Swede's acquaintances. In this sense, Swede acts as the central, structuring, epistemological hole in the film; we hear people talk *about* Swede, but we never hear from Swede himself, only accounts of him by those who knew him and are willing to speak to Reardon. This difference is crucial. The ten 'flashback' sequences of the film are not the memories of those who share them to Reardon, but rather Reardon's imagination of them. Memory is therefore contextualised as an excess, not as the process by which history is historicised, but that which prevents history from being understood. The structure of the film, then, is not necessarily marked by flashbacks, but more by imagination, an imagination which is filled by Reardon's fascination.⁹³

Swede is mysteriously murdered at the beginning of the film, leaving behind only the cryptic phrase, 'I did something wrong — once',⁹⁴ which is misinterpreted by Reardon as 'Once, I did something wrong.'⁹⁵ After Kitty dies and the secret of Swede dies with her, Reardon thinks that he has solved the case. Yet afterwards he is told by his boss that the result of his work is an extra 'one tenth of a cent' to the basic rate for his insurance company.⁹⁶ Following this, Reardon turns and grins to the camera, as if delivering the final punchline to a comedy film. Structurally,

⁹³ Harris, on the other hand, reads *The Killers*' curious narrative structure as an allegory for the film's adaptation from the Hemingway short story. He writes, 'As the written text gives rise to a set of images, we witness an *excess*, a host of visual details not described in the verbal report that is the source of those image. In the transfer from text to screen, the spectator must always see too much.' See: Oliver Harris, 'Killing "The Killers": Hemingway, Hollywood, and Death', in *Literature and the Visual Media*, 58, ed. by David Seed (Cambridge: The English Association, 2005), p. 75.

⁹⁴ *The Killers* (1946).

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

detective narratives transport the audience or reader from a state of ignorance to one of knowledge. Yet the concluding message of *The Killers*, at least according to Harris, is to resist the production of this ‘knowledge’ in favour of Swede’s unexplained knowledge. We are encouraged to disavow Reardon’s conclusion and activity in favour of Swede’s passivity. For Harris, *The Killers* forces the audience ‘to contemplate an extraordinary reversal: that it is Swede, the *homme fasciné*, blinded by faith, who can see a truth that Reardon, the detached viewer, cannot.’⁹⁷ We are situated somewhere in between: we do not identify with Reardon insofar as we find his detached view inappropriate, unable to properly see. Swede’s final words remain fascinating for Reardon. His mistake in misinterpreting Swede’s final words is not, I would argue, an honest and negligible one, but one which highlights the problem with Reardon as an investigator and as such, the process of investigation. It is not simply a question of discovering what objective *thing* Swede did wrong, but rather understanding the guilt that wracks Swede and the affective reasons for his actions. Reardon asks the wrong question. By emphasising ‘wrong’ (‘once I did something *wrong*’ instead of ‘I did something wrong — once’), the focus of his investigation is on the fracture that Swede’s misdeeds caused.⁹⁸ Swede’s original statement, however, stresses ‘once’; the problem for Swede, is, as Vidler writes, ‘a fascination with the consequence of time’s errors.’⁹⁹ As Harris concludes: ‘memory ought to make mistakes.’¹⁰⁰

Yet our position differs from Reardon’s. Where he mishears the Swede, we hear exactly what he said. What compounds and motivates our fascination, however, is the way in which Swede’s final words are coupled with the empty stare he gives moments before his death: what

⁹⁷ Harris, ‘Film Noir Fascination: Outside History, but Historically so’, p. 20.

⁹⁸ *The Killers* (1943).

⁹⁹ Vidler, p. 5.

¹⁰⁰ Harris, ‘Film Noir Fascination: Outside History, but Historically so’, p. 20.

did Swede see that caused such passivity in the face of death? For, as Hugh Manon writes, film noir ‘is nothing if not paradoxical: as viewers, we look in only so as to recognize the impossibility of looking in.’¹⁰¹ Manon makes the important point that the structure of film noir’s detective narratives approaches the enigma as an unknowable, fascinating nexus which, when ‘resolved’, only reveals its status as enigma. He writes that noir ‘does not hermeneutically deploy the enigma as a narrative strategy; instead, it forces the issue of enigma itself, confronting the viewer with what Jack Shadoian has aptly described as ‘the paradox that one can look and look and not see what’s happening’ in real life.’¹⁰² It is in *The Killers* where the noir audience is most directly confronted with a paradoxical image of our failure to see and understand. Swede’s look condemns him not only to death — since he is murdered by the hitmen — but ensures his story is forgotten and is subtly reshaped in every telling. Our look at Swede’s look enforces the powerlessness of *our* gaze: Swede looks past us, not at us.

¹⁰¹ Hugh S. Manon, ‘Some Like It Cold: Fetishism in Billy Wilder’s *Double Indemnity*’, *Cinema Journal*, 44.4 (Summer, 2005), p. 38.

¹⁰² Manon, p. 38.



Figure 3.4, *The Killers*, Dir. Robert Siodmak, (Universal Pictures, 1946)

According to Žižek, one problem for hard-boiled detectives is that they are ‘involved’ in the libidinal circuit of desire ‘from the very beginning’¹⁰³; they undergo a loss of reality and thus fail to *really* solve the crime. However, the problem in this film is precisely the opposite: it is Reardon’s insistence on his ‘objective’ investigative position which undermines his conclusion. His assertion of distance makes him an unsuitable candidate for the investigation. He does not declare distance when there is proximity, but his distance precludes a satisfactory conclusion, hence why the film has a comedic ending. Indeed, if the film is really Reardon’s story, a story about telling a story, then the film’s focus is wrong from the very beginning. The title, and therefore focus, of the film — the ‘killers’ — might, we assume, refer to the hitmen who murder Swede at

¹⁰³ Žižek, *Looking Awry*, p. 61.

the beginning of the film. Since the film is adapted from the Hemingway short story of the same name, the way that the film is, in a sense, an imagining of what might have happened after the short story is important to consider. The film's project is to answer the question of what the hitmen wanted, to fill in their desire left by Hemingway's terse style. The historical problem faced by Reardon is reflected on a metacinematic level.

What we see is a cinematic, a fantasmatic projection, or simulation of events rather than the events proper. 'Talk mediates vision,' Harris writes, and 'interpretation is kept apart from spectating, and meaning is divorced from affect.'¹⁰⁴ It is thus not only Reardon's method of investigation that is incompetent but the very medium of *cinema*, especially its reliance on sight and vision, that is the problem. Reproducing the images of the past on the cinema screen obscures the past, diminishing its affect. However, noir's error of time causes this effect, most notably Swede's function as the temporal and epistemological black hole, the film's — and Reardon's — *objet petit a*, the lost object. In *The Killers*, the lost object, what Reardon misses, is not simply Swede, but in fact *loss itself*. History, too, is condemned to be forgotten through Reardon's resistance to memory. As Tom Conley argues in his book, *Film Hieroglyphs: Ruptures in Classical Cinema*, the dialogue's continual use of homonyms and the way in which it disconnects the sound and the image force spectators to 'believe they must "catch up" with the narrative machine that is moving ahead of them.'¹⁰⁵ I would argue this sense of narrative inertia, of always being one step behind, wanders into the realm of the historical. As an example, Conley focuses on the film's opening scene, where the two eponymous killers harass a small-town diner. First, Nick Adams, the bartender, 'blurts out, "Catch up."' For Conley, this is a homonym of 'ketchup', which makes

¹⁰⁴ Harris, 'Film Noir Fascination: Outside History, but Historically so', p. 12.

¹⁰⁵ Tom Conley, *Film Hieroglyphs: Ruptures in Classical Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2006), p. 158.

‘an implicit sign telling viewers that we must now, in the identity and the gap of sight and sound, “catch up” in the narrative where feedback or relay is no longer possible.’¹⁰⁶ I would argue, following up Conley’s observation, that the narrative ‘catching up’ is really a sign of the film’s temporally inverted narrativization; the past is always exceeding our grasp, and by trying to come to terms with it we already miss the latest revisionary detail.

Even in film noirs without such flashback structures the same temporal inversion — and the loss it represents — can be noticed in the way that their narratives hinge on a single climatic revelation which serves to reconfigure the facts of the story in real time. To illustrate this, one might note the ending of *The Woman in the Window* (1944) which reveals that the events of the film have all been Wanley’s dream. This first dispels the narrative tension built up by the film. Before the revelation, it seemed as if Wanley’s deadly fate was sealed, that he will be killed, only for the film to reveal suddenly — almost *too* suddenly — that such tensions were merely illusory. However, by pulling back the curtain of cinematic realism — our so-called willing suspension of disbelief — the film highlights our spectatorial position in relation to Wanley’s fantasy scenario. After all, does the same, all too sudden, dispersal of tension exist once the film ends and we exit the auditorium? How can a narrative have ‘stakes’, and thus have meaning at all, if a film’s meaning dissipates once we leave our seats?

The real purpose of the reveal is the opposite. Rather than suggesting that Wanley’s dream is *simply a dream* with no bearing on reality, the film suggests that the dream is symptomatic of the Real of Wanley’s desires, that impossible kernel of desire that only reveals itself in a dream. As Žižek writes: ‘the message of the film is not consoling, not “it was only a dream, in reality I

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

am a normal man like others and not a murderer!” but rather: in our unconscious, in the Real of our desire, we are all murderers.”¹⁰⁷ Wanley is at once rather pathetic (once his wife and children leave to go on holiday he immediately begins to fantasise openly about marital infidelity and being involved in a scandalous plot) and disturbing (what he really wants is murder and punishment). The film, through the twist in its ending, bizarrely enacts Wanley’s punishment on *us*; the movies are fantasies not in the sense of wish fulfilment but of continual deferral which punishes us for what we really want.

The Woman in the Window’s ending thus re-contextualises its own history (and its notion of historicity) because although we thought we were watching a relatively straightforward mystery; the true mystery is something else entirely. Certainly, the reason the twist ending is difficult to predict is that there is no discernible difference between dream and reality in terms of cinematic style. It is as if cinema has trained us *not* to see this difference. The same can be said about ideology. A cognitive conception of ideology posits that ideology is a veil which conceals the ‘true’ identity of subjects, an illusion to be dispelled. However, this view of ideology assumes that a ‘real’ identity exists beneath the one that ideology constructs for us and as such, this identity is quiescent and somehow exists *outside* of power relations. In addition, it assumes that images are an imaginary dupe, an instrument of power to coerce us. As Claire Colebrook writes: ‘images are not pale replicas or second-rate versions of a real world. Images are fully real’¹⁰⁸, a point which echoes Žižek’s reading of the film.

What is unique about *The Woman in the Window* is the way it eschews any kind of recognisable ‘dream logic’, that is, broadly, a rejection of linear cause and effect, instead

¹⁰⁷ Žižek, *Looking Awry*, p. 16.

¹⁰⁸ Claire Colebrook, *Deleuze* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 15.

embracing a more relational and symbolic approach to meaning and structure. *The Woman in the Window*, on the other hand, appears just like any other Hollywood film. In the world of film noir, there is no difference between dreams and reality and moreover, there are rarely differences between the way past and present are filmed. On a formal level, they are the same. *The Woman in the Window* rejects a linear narrative of history — of history being easy to recount — through subverting our expectations about the place of dreams in cinema. The inability to recognise the difference is emphasised further by Wanley's profession as a psychology professor, who, at the beginning, gives a lecture in front of a blackboard which reads 'Sigmund Freud'. Even expert knowledge is rendered useless. As argued earlier, *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940) creates a similar effect. The dream contains the 'true' substance of the film, raising moral questions which hang over the film even after its unsatisfactory ending.

Equally, *The Woman in the Window* uses the juxtaposition of Wanley's comfortable home life (and by extension the gentleman's club he attends) and the 'noir universe' that inhabits his dreams. On the one hand, the murderous consequences of Wanley's dream are not accidental but a consequence of his stable, yet enervated home life; the tedium of married life in some sense creates the conditions for murderers. On the other, we must consider the inverse: that Wanley's home life is the fantasy screen which hides the Real of his desire. Home, here, is not a place of comfort but a *fantasmatic construction*, a diversion for something else. For Lacan, fantasy is the mechanism by which we can safely approach the Real of our desire. Therefore, if home is a fantasy, then what is the desire being concealed?

It is not necessary to claim that home is a fantasmatic construction solely using film noir because this proposition is also historically accurate. For example, it is false to claim that before the war home was a perfect ideological and psychological construction somehow corrupted by the

war. Rather, the war revealed home to be a construction. It is in this way — the trauma of the Second World War, the unspeakable horror suffered by its combatants and the effects on the civilian population — that home is transformed into a fantasy by necessity, as a coping mechanism and as a tool for ideological interpellation. Home, therefore, is a product of trauma. Kolk and McFarlane explore the affiliation between trauma and memory. They speak of trauma as a ‘black hole’, a central impassable nexus which makes memory traumatic, refusing to let it fade away. In Freudian terms, this is the difference between ‘mourning’ — a perfectly acceptable response to loss — and ‘melancholia’, where what is mourned has been ‘lost as an object of love.’¹⁰⁹ Kolk and McFarlane further discuss Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and its effects on memory. ‘Paradoxically,’ they write, ‘the ability to transform memory is the norm, whereas in PTSD the full brunt of an experience does not fade with time.’¹¹⁰ In film noir’s numerous flashback narratives the past similarly does not fade away. As Al says in *Detour* (1945): ‘Did you ever want to cut away a piece of your memory and blot it out? You can’t, you know!’¹¹¹ It is the imperative to forget colliding so strongly with this stubborn immutability of the past that imbues noir with its traumatic elements. History in noir — as told through flashbacks and through the detective reconstruction of the crime — is simply a story, yet this ‘simple’ story is difficult to resist and therefore the past becomes, oddly, both changeable and malleable (since it exists by virtue of the speaker) and unchangeable (since it is transformed into history).

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the ideological concept of home offers itself as an antidote to this disruption to the linearity of history because of the way that home can be held

¹⁰⁹ Sigmund Freud, ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol XIV*, trans. by James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 191), p. 245.

¹¹⁰ Bessel A. van der Kolk and Alexander C. McFarlane, ‘The Black Hole of Trauma’, *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, 2nd Edn., ed. by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 492.

¹¹¹ *Detour* (1945).

to be an idea which exists *outside* of time, and is thus immutable. In 1946 Frederick C. Crawford, the board chairman of the National Association of Manufacturers, said that ‘the home is the basic American unit.’ Home finds itself, then, at the centre of a promise of togetherness which would follow the end of the war. This, Krutnik asserts, is partly responsible for the cynicism prevalent in noir. It is certainly true that the vast majority of ‘classic’ film noirs were released after the war, as if, after the war’s end the acrid nihilism of film noir resonated more with the American public, or simply perhaps the end of the war created a greater appetite for cinema and allowed greater investment in the production of such films. Indeed, in 1946 alone some of the most important film noirs were released, namely *The Big Sleep*, *The Blue Dahlia*, *The Dark Mirror*,¹¹² *Gilda*, *The Killers*, *Notorious*,¹¹³ *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, to name a few. In the following years the same trend continued. Clearly, the war had a catalysing effect on the substance of film noirs, which inevitably increased the volume of film noirs which were released. An additional factor to consider is the recognition, or designation, of film noir by Nino Frank in 1946 which undoubtedly accelerated the desire for such films because of the critical recognition of their artistic merit. This is not to say that postwar film noirs are *always* entirely distinct from earlier noirs. *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), for example, does not feel too dissimilar in tone and theme from *The Big Sleep* (1946) — both, of course, star Humphrey Bogart — yet the sheer volume and complexity of postwar noir films is worthy of consideration. The final factor to consider is not just Frank’s critical interest, but our own. Perhaps we are simply more willing to *see* noir in postwar films, since our interventions, as I have argued earlier, to some extent create or modify the category of noir. Here, encapsulated in this discussion of film noir’s popularity in relation to the war, we have a microcosm of the problem of historicity and trauma marked out by the Second World War itself.

¹¹² *The Dark Mirror*, dir. Robert Siodmak, (Universal Pictures, 1946).

¹¹³ *Notorious*, dir. by Alfred Hitchcock, (RKO Radio Pictures, 1946).

That is, the concept of history as an unbroken continuum is questioned. To describe this phenomenon, Oliver Harris uses the phrase ‘outside history, but historically so’, borrowed from Maurice Blanchot’s *The Writing of the Disaster*, a phrase which he acknowledges bears some similarity to Walter Benjamin’s notion of historicity, ‘in which there always remains a traumatic, unhistorical gap or stasis that resists the false narrative continuum of History.’¹¹⁴ At the centre of film noir there lies an impenetrable, or unspeakable core. In noir, strangely, the causes of fascination with history and historical recovery are the trauma of the Second World War and noir’s own retroactivity. Both the war and noir’s own conception involve this impenetrable core that undermines their understanding. Through noir, the war cannot be looked at directly in order to be understood, we only see its fleeting borders. Next, I will consider how the very investigative structures of noir (both textually and critically) inform the problem of historicity. Moreover, I will examine how home, notably in *Double Indemnity*, functions in relation to investigative desire and noir’s historicity.

The Impossibility of Investigative Desire

Film noir’s impenetrable core should be understood structurally. One example of a structurally impossible object is the MacGuffin, a concept popularised by Hitchcock. In Lacanian terms, the MacGuffin is an example of the *objet petit a*, since it is supposedly the plot’s central object of concern, yet the specific properties of the object are of little concern and are often rarely discussed in the film — it is less the object *of* desire than the cause of desire. Swede’s final cryptic confession could be read as the MacGuffin in *The Killers*, since it motivates the action and desires of the plot

¹¹⁴ Harris, ‘Film Noir Fascination: Outside History, but Historically so’, p. 6.

and characters but is not attainable because we can never know what Swede really meant by it, or if there is even a 'real' meaning to it. It does not matter which object finds itself as the MacGuffin, because the object could feasibly be replaced by anything else. The same is true of the *objet petit a* itself. The MacGuffin is a useful and simple device to conceive of the *objet petit a*: an empty point around which the narrative (or desire) revolves. The *objet petit a* has no 'external' consistency which is independent of the subject. It is therefore a relational object, not something that the subject ever possessed. Swede, too, is relational insofar as the narrative structure is a series of flashbacks told *about* the Swede, and not *by* him; we can only understand Swede vicariously. His story (that is, the one told by him) is the film's *objet petit a* because it is precisely its *absence* which motivates the action and prompts the stories about him — they are only there because he cannot tell them himself. The story itself, constructed in its entirety by Swede, is an impossible object.

In a famous exchange between Alfred Hitchcock and François Truffaut, Hitchcock explains the importance of the MacGuffin in his films:

You may be wondering where the term originated. It might be a Scottish name taken from a story about two men in a train. One man says, 'What's that package up there in the baggage rack?' And the other answers, 'Oh, that's a MacGuffin.' The first one asks, 'What's a MacGuffin?' 'Well,' the other man says, 'it's an apparatus for trapping lions in the Scottish Highlands.' The first man says, 'But there are no lions in the Scottish

Highlands,’ and the other answers, ‘Well, then, that’s no MacGuffin!’ So, you see that a MacGuffin is actually nothing at all.¹¹⁵

It is not terribly important what the object is (though it can be important depending on the relevance to the rest of the film) but rather what its position is within the film itself. Indeed, as Hitchcock says, it is ‘nothing at all.’¹¹⁶

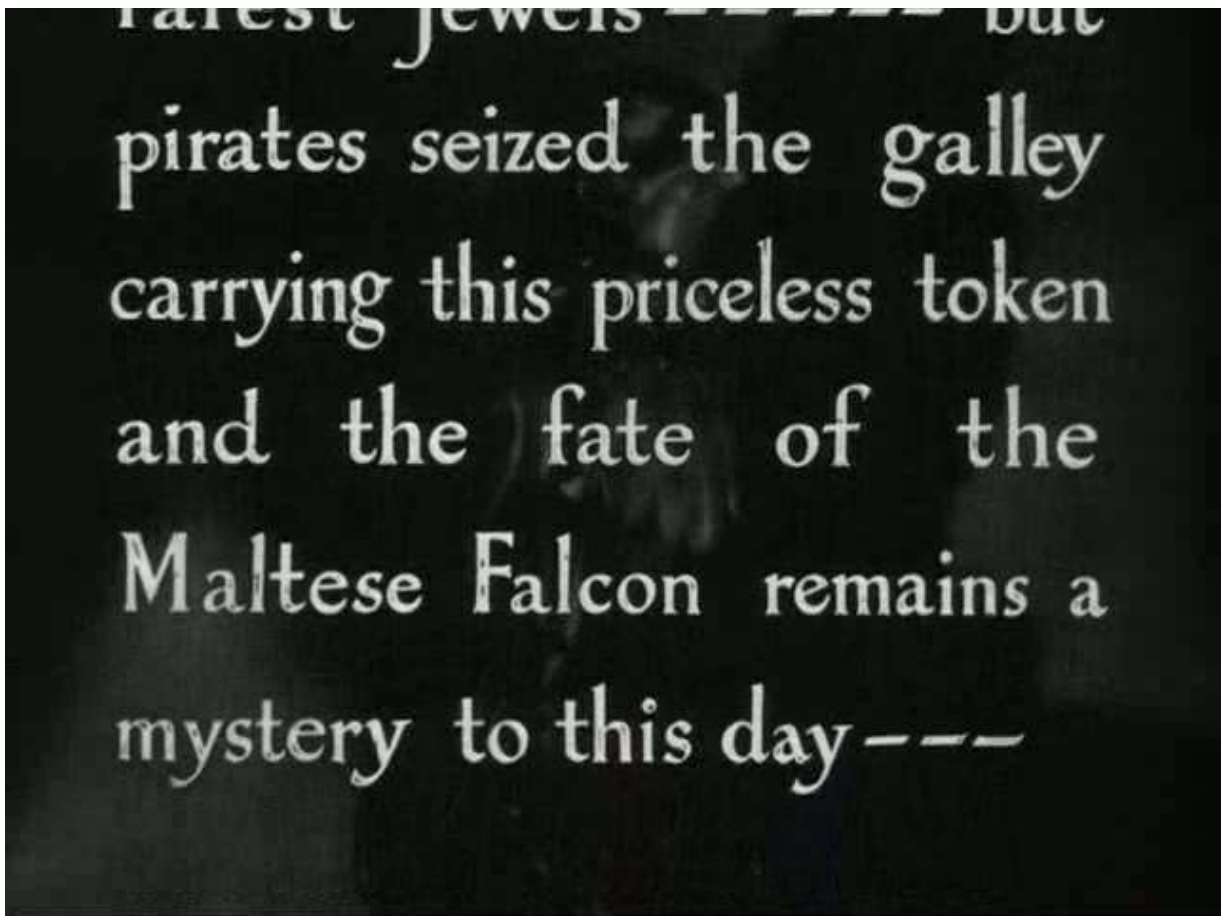


Figure 3.5, *The Maltese Falcon* (1941)

¹¹⁵ Alfred Hitchcock, ‘Production Methods Compared,’ originally published in *American Cinematographer*, 30, No. 5 (May 1949), rpt. In *Hitchcock on Hitchcock: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. Sidney Gottlieb (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 207.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

One example from film noir is the Maltese Falcon statue from the 1941 film. The statue is the central object of the film and motivates the plot, yet it quickly becomes largely irrelevant. What supersedes the Falcon is the competing desires of the criminals, the police, Brigid O'Shaughnessy, and Sam Spade himself. An important detail here is that we are never told *why* the Falcon is valued so much because *it does not matter*. As specified in the opening crawl, the Falcon itself is subject to myth insofar as its very material existence is in doubt.¹¹⁷ This indicates the irrelevance of the Falcon's materiality because the hunt for the object has superseded the object itself. Indeed, the Falcon that finds its way into Spade's hands is deemed to be a fake by Gutman, yet how are we to determine whether or not it is in fact a fake? The effect of this doubt is that the object's symbolic efficacy is detached from the object. Without a material presence to regulate it, its meaning becomes overwhelming: it embodies *desire itself*. However, as Lacan claims, desire is never fulfilled. In *Écrits*, for instance, he notes that 'man's desire is alienated in the other's desire,'¹¹⁸ and so, attaining this object will never result in the subject obtaining desire itself, since the Other's desire is a point of impossibility. 'Fulfilment' of desire is always met with disappointment. It is exactly this absence, this lack of meaning, which gives the Falcon its fascinating properties.

As Brigid O'Shaughnessy is taken away by the police, Sam Spade ends the film by saying that the Falcon is 'the stuff dreams are made of'.¹¹⁹ The Falcon by this point is of little importance because, for Spade, it represents *unattainability itself*.¹²⁰ The implication, since he has the Falcon in his hands, is that the Falcon's fascinating grip has prompted his forgetfulness. The film, then,

¹¹⁷ Additionally, the opening crawl implies a larger mythology and history for the film, as well as likening the film to serials such as *Flash Gordon* (1936) of 1930s.

¹¹⁸ Jacques Lacan, 'Variations on the Standard Treatment', in *Écrits*, trans. by Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002), p. 285.

¹¹⁹ *The Maltese Falcon* (1941).

¹²⁰ Spade is subtly misquoting Prospero in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* ('We are such stuff / As dreams are made on'), as if Spade can only half-remember the real quote.

expresses the traumatic condition of noir as outlined earlier. The *objet petit a* here may refer to the Falcon statue, but in other noirs which utilise non-linear narrative structures, the *objet petit a* could instead refer to the *narrative* impossibility of reconstructing a fragmented narrative into a linear and ‘coherent’ one. Non-linearity is not strictly necessary to argue that film noir is traumatic.



Figure 3.6, *The Maltese Falcon*, Dir. by John Huston, (Warner Bros., 1941)

In *Falcon* this is the statue; in *Double Indemnity* (1944) it is, in part, the retroactive narrative structure; in *The Killers* (1946) it is Swede’s fatal and fascinating look and his mysterious words. In the context of *The Maltese Falcon*’s investigative structure, the falcon represents the point of detective impossibility. As Spade says to O’Shaughnessy: ‘I don’t know what you want

done, I don't even know if you know what you want done.'¹²¹ The investigation hinges on Spade understanding the femme fatale's desire and internalizing it as his own. As Spencer Selby argues, Spade 'pretends to share the evil'¹²² of Gutman, Wilmer and Cairo over their obsession with the Falcon in order to outwit them. However, this pretence is cast in doubt as it is not clear whether Spade is acting or not. 'Hammett's detective hero,' Selby continues, 'is motivated by the same basic selfishness that leads the criminals he captures into evil.' So there is a double lacuna at the centre of film: first, the Falcon, and second, Spade's moral character.

¹²¹ *The Maltese Falcon* (1941).

¹²² Spencer Selby, *Dark City: The Film Noir* (London: St James Press, 1984), p. 9.



Figure 3.7, *Double Indemnity* (1944)

Investigative desire in *Falcon* and *Indemnity* is focused around impossibility. In *Indemnity* in particular, home is the object in which this impossibility is felt most strongly, through its connection to Phyllis's deception and Neff's retroactive story. The home, through Neff's retroactivity is always lost. One example of this 'always lost' property in *Double Indemnity* occurs when Neff first meets Phyllis. Both begin to engage in various conversational double entendres — which is no doubt a pun on the title of the film. On an immediate level, the double entendres are intended to evade the Hollywood censors, so that it can be established that there is a mutual sexual attraction between Neff and Phyllis without overtly alerting the Production Code. The most

obvious instance is when Phyllis says, ‘There’s a speed limit in this state, Mr. Neff. Forty-five miles an hour’, to which Neff replies, ‘How fast was I going, officer?’ The use of double entendres act as a kind of neutered parapraxis.¹²³ They assume the basic form of parapraxis but lack the truly unconscious dimension which gives it its power. The Production Code prohibited adultery which is ‘never a fit subject for comedy.’¹²⁴ To be sure, *Double Indemnity* is not a comedy, but this *badinage* is clearly intended to be humorous. However, it is not simply adultery which is the problem in itself, but rather that adultery risks damaging the ‘sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home.’¹²⁵ In *Double Indemnity*, both are threatened by Neff and Phyllis’ relationship as Neff instigates his advances within the family home. This is further highlighted by Neff noticing Phyllis’ ankle bracelet, a small sign of promiscuity.

However, their initial interaction, when Neff first sees Phyllis standing above him (Fig 3.7), is more illuminating because of the many levels of misrecognition present in the script and how the film plays with the central conceit of double entendres, the effectiveness of which derives not only from recognising their double meanings but also from the idea that some people do not catch them as double entendres. The misrecognitions show that the home is lost through the film’s retroactive structure. While it is true, for instance, that Phyllis could not have had clairvoyance regarding Neff — she did not know that Neff would turn up at her door — the retroactive structure implicitly suggests that this is the case. Details are presented and understood *in the context* that Phyllis was manipulating Neff from the beginning. The opening exchange between Neff and Phyllis is particularly illuminating:

¹²³ *Double Indemnity* (1944).

¹²⁴ Maltby, ‘The Motion Picture Production Code (as Published 31 March, 1930)’, in *Hollywood Cinema*, Appendix 1, p. 595.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

Walter Neff: How do you do Mrs. Dietrichson, I'm Walter Neff, Pacific All Risk.

Phyllis Dietrichson: Pacific All what?

Neff: The Pacific All Risk Insurance Company. It's about some renewals on the automobiles. I've been trying to contact your husband for the past two weeks but he's never in his office.

Phyllis: Is there anything I can do?

Neff: The insurance ran out on the fifteenth, I'd hate to think of you having a smashed Fender or something while you're not...fully covered.

Phyllis: Perhaps I know what you mean Mr. Neff. I've just been taking a sunbath.

Neff: No pigeons around I hope...Now about those policies Mrs. Dietrichson, I hate to take up your time, but...

When Neff initially states that he is from 'Pacific All Risk', Phyllis quickly responds by mirroring and mimicking Neff: 'Pacific All what?' Through its absence, 'risk' hangs over the conversation. It saturates their entire relationship because of the flashback structure of the film reveals the effect of Neff's actions and desires before we see the cause. Indeed, Phyllis's phantom 'risk' recontextualises the flashback structure itself. The flashback structure, Neff and Phyllis's fractured relationship, and the loss of home are all intimately connected. If the intent Neff's confession is to tell the story of *why*, not just how, he broke the law, then part of his narrative strategy is to contextualise his and Phyllis's relationship as one which degraded due to their violent desire rather than one which was doomed from the start. But what Neff's fails to mention, or fails to deem important, is that his and Phyllis's relationship is predicated on this missing 'risk'.

Phyllis's missing risk centres the question of what is missing in Neff—what desire remains unfulfilled—and therefore what is missing from his version of events.

Phyllis's subversion continues when Neff misunderstands her and gives the full name of his company ('The Pacific All Risk Insurance Company'). His correction here is done so under the guise that Neff is guiding the conversation, that he has the authority, that he is 'insured'. Later, as we shall see, Neff himself is not 'full covered' by his own insurance; his own narrative reconstruction undermines his own position. And here, in the scene, the attempt to wrest control of the situation by insisting on his metaphorical 'insurance' is what undermines him. He tells Phyllis that he's 'been trying to contact your husband for the past two weeks' only to find that he's 'never in his office.' To which Phyllis responds, 'is there anything I can do?'¹²⁶ If Mr. Dietrichson is 'never in his office', then he can only be at home instead. Yet, when Neff arrives, he does not find Mr. Dietrichson at his home. This prefigures Mr. Dietrichson's spectral position in the film, as well as the way in which such spectrality informs Neff's doomed plan. It is Mr. Dietrichson's murder which must remain undetectable, yet he himself is a non-entity at the centre of the plan. Just as with Neff's fascination with Phyllis, and our fascination with Neff's fascination, there lies a void, an abyss, at the centre of desire.

¹²⁶ Double Indemnity (1944)



Figure 3.8, *Double Indemnity* (1944). Neff's worried look after he says: 'No pigeons around I hope...

Yet, as the scene continues, we see that Neff is *not* in possession of the knowledge of desire Phyllis responds, 'Perhaps I know what you mean Mr. Neff. I've just been taking a sunbath.' To which Neff quickly and nervously responds with, 'No pigeons around I hope...Now about those policies Mrs. Dietrichson, I hate to take up your time, but...' At first, Phyllis acknowledges Neff's innuendo—thus assuring him of his masculine authority—only to undercut him. Neff stumbles and trails off ('I hate to take up your time, but...'), which undermines the sense of mastery that Neff (and implicitly, us, since we are aligned with him) thinks he has over Phyllis, and over

language itself.¹²⁷ Their relationship is predicated on misrecognition because although Neff believes that he has caught Phyllis in a state of vulnerability — of ‘nakedness’ — in reality the power dynamic is actually reversed: it is Neff who is caught in Phyllis’ gaze, and therefore, *her* plan.

This scene depicts, in fact, Neff recounting the first time he met Phyllis, and as such Neff frames it as him having power over her. Consequently, Neff presents his and Phyllis’ relationship as one in which he possessed and then lost her. Neff’s narrative revisionism is a way of *repeating* the past to make it real. However, with respect to repetition, Lacan emphasises the importance of the ‘ever avoided encounter, of the missed opportunity.’¹²⁸ Neff’s verbal slippage — ‘no pigeons’ — does not so much signify the missed opportunity, where Neff excluded himself from Phyllis’ desire, but the point at which Phyllis saw Neff as a suitable vehicle for her plan. A re-examination of this scene highlights that Phyllis emerges as an ‘already lost’ object of desire. Attention must be paid to Neff’s perspective, a perspective which the audience assumes. The reverse-shot does not inhabit Phyllis’ viewpoint, since it is slightly zoomed in on Neff’s face, suggesting that he is being interrogated. We are watching him closely, and there is nowhere to hide, whereas our view of Phyllis is obscured. Neff mistakenly believes that he has caught Phyllis off-guard, that she is in a state of vulnerability, of nakedness, an object held within his desiring male gaze. Neff’s desire, here, is not simply *for* Phyllis, but a desire to have his masculine authority (as expressed through, amongst other things, his charming confidence, his gaze, and his professional ability to assist Phyllis) recognized. His veneer of power is initially supported by his confident joke, indicative of the professional and sexual power Neff has over Phyllis.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p. 128.

This assumption, however, is untrue. Phyllis is merely using Neff and intended to do so from the beginning and so Neff's assumption of Phyllis sexual and romantic availability is misguided; Phyllis, as a sexual object, emerges as already lost and fundamentally impossible to attain. It is precisely through her staged 'nakedness' that Neff is fooled. Paradoxically, it is when the object is presented as most vulnerable, most attainable, that it slips further out of our grasp. Phyllis acts as both a screen for desires and controller of desires. Moreover, Phyllis' staging represents the home as a kind of trap for Neff. Whereas at first Phyllis' sexuality and near-nakedness in the context of her home seems to imply vulnerability and homeliness, it is later revealed to have been an attempt to coerce Neff into committing murder. The home itself is duplicitous, enticing Neff. As he approaches the house his voiceover says: 'it was one of those California Spanish houses everyone was nuts about 10 or 15 years ago, must'a cost 30,000 bucks.'¹²⁹ Neff does not desire the home as such, but rather, he desires the symbolic hierarchy of the family which is implied by the home. His plan to murder Mr. Dietrichson is really one in which he installs himself as the patriarch of the 'Dietrichson' home. As a preface to his voiceover, he claims, 'I killed [Mr. Dietrichson] 'for money - and a woman - and I didn't get the money and I didn't get the woman.'¹³⁰ Yet, the phrasing of this apparently upfront statement of his desire puts money first, with Phyllis as an afterthought. Even Keyes recognises that the money is not the central conundrum of the investigation, it is a *clue* which directs the investigative eye towards wrongdoing. 'Getting' the woman implies getting the home, but, more importantly, the home is left out of his statement of desire. Neff cannot admit that he wants to become the head of the home; despite all the nefarious

¹²⁹ *Double Indemnity* (1944).

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

and criminal acts committed throughout the film, the one which cannot be admitted is that it was done in service of consummating the family home.

Neff's blindness is further deepened by the architecture of the Dietrichson home. His fascination for Phyllis and home is thus mirrored by the film's retroactive structure and the investigative mode. The retroactivity of the narrative renders Neff's investigative distance structurally impossible. We already know that Neff became caught up in the libidinal circuit of the investigation — showcased by his 'perfectly perfect' plan and his wound which we see from the opening scene — and that he lost his objective distance. The home, however, remains fascinating. It is the *objet petit a* in the sense that Neff desires it (and the status that comes with it), yet when he enters it his desire is not satisfied. For Bruce Fink, a psychoanalyst and translator of Lacan, desire is repetitious insofar as the function of desire is not to reach its goal, but to reproduce itself *as desire*. Desire, Fink writes, has 'no object'.¹³¹ It can be thought of as duplicitous and in some ways working *against* the subject. The way Fink defines it — 'it does not seek satisfaction, but its own continuation' — makes desire sound like a kind of parasitic infestation of the subject.¹³² Instead, in the film, Neff's desire is continually deferred, as he is hopelessly trapped by Phyllis' gaze, and by his fascination for home.

The fascination with noir, therefore, is with fascination itself. Many critics, especially earlier critics who help define and develop the category of noir, seemingly fell into fascination's trap. As such, their endless descriptions of noir as 'fascinating' are both empty and incredibly instructive since they reproduce the fascination found in noir. In noir, therefore, history becomes

¹³¹ Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 91.

¹³² *Ibid.*

a troublesome issue. The investigative structures of noir mirror that of the critical approaches to noir. Investigative structures seek to retroactively organise chaotic past into a coherent present. Moreover, it is through this process by which meaning, and coherence is generated in noir. Yet, the process of reconstructing the past is what makes it so inaccessible to noir. We might recall, Mr Wilson in *The Stranger*, when he reveals himself to be an agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. ‘The truth is I’m not really an antique dealer’, he says, ‘I’m sort of a...detective.’¹³³ Here, the profession of ‘antique dealer’ relates directly to Wilson’s role as a detective — a detective who seeks retribution on a former Nazi. An antique dealer is not only someone who examines the fine details of old pieces of art, crockery, and so forth, in order to identify their authenticity, but they are someone who uses their position to designate the worth of each antique. The second function of the antique dealer is crucial in understanding the methods of the noir investigator: they are not objectively understanding and defining events, they are determining their *value* to the investigation, to history itself. They are not illuminating history; they are creating it. In noir, what is ignored or what goes unspoken is often the key understanding the films. As I argued in *The Killers*, for instance, the fact that the one story we do not hear is Swede’s tells us that there is something ungraspable, something fascinating, in his story; and Reardon’s role as ‘antique dealer’ results in him assigning value to all the wrong pieces. In *Double Indemnity*, too, Neff’s role as investigator forces him to ignore his desire for home. Home becomes a desire which the film cannot admit to itself; the home is not only desire, but *cause*. Home fits into this nexus of desire and history as an object of fascination. Home is central to many noir films, and thus crucial in interpreting their meaning, but it is both maligned in a majority of noir criticism and rarely acknowledged in the films themselves. The next chapter will examine the pathological

¹³³ *The Stranger* (1946)

implications of the fascinating desire for home in noir. Desire, as we shall see, results in various forms of homesickness, of a rejection of the home. Desire in noir is repulsive, yet still alluring.

Chapter 4

A Stranger in Someone Else's House: Homesickness in Film Noir

Like all other moments of crisis, of course, the incident had never ended. It sent its reverberations down to this very second, this very place, and all but shook the glass from his hand. Was the incident finally closed? But in a sense, it was only happening now, for the first time.

Charles Jackson, *The Lost Weekend*.¹



Fig. 4.1, *The Lost Weekend*, dir. By Billy Wilder, (Paramount Pictures: USA, 1945)

¹ Charles Jackson, *The Lost Weekend* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013 [1944]), p 89.

‘Let me work it out my way’ — Homesickness and Rehabilitation

Although home is often the central desire in film noir, it is rarely explicitly recognised as such. Its position is contradictory: it is the object of desire, yet at the same time it is displaced in other desires. Hence, it is a fascinating object in noir; the more we, and noir’s protagonists, try to locate its nexus, the more its meaning becomes displaced and fractured. In this chapter, I will examine how addiction can illuminate how desire works in relation to home in noir through Billy Wilder’s film adaptation of *The Lost Weekend* (1945). Don’s alcohol addiction in the film can help us understand the metaphorical sickness and anxiety produced by an ideology of home. The first section, therefore, will look at homesickness more broadly and the strategies employed in and by the film to rehabilitate Don. In the next section, there will be a focus on the ways in which drug addiction interacts with desire and fascination from a psychoanalytic perspective. I will examine the ways in which drug addiction reveals the Real of desire to the subject, and thus allows them to circumvent the cycle of desire. I will argue that Don’s desire for alcohol should be read as a desire for nothingness itself. The subsequent sections will explore the roles that ideology and nostalgia play in addiction, desire, and home. I will differentiate between knowledge and belief in relation to ideology. Specifically, the way in which desire is constituted through suppression and maintained through guilt is correlative to how noir’s narrative involves a level of punishment.

Fascination produces a certain anxiety surrounding the home due to how fascination foregrounds the *objet petit a*. This anxiety manifests itself in noir as a feeling of homesickness. Homesickness, as I employ the term, embodies the contradictory conceptualisation of home. It describes a longing for home in its absence — what Anthony Vidler calls a ‘nostalgia for the true, natal, home.’² Homesickness’s definition alters depending on the definition of home and its

² Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny*, p. 7.

position within a film. For instance, the difference between what home is believed to be and its actual nature both informs and induces homesickness. Noir's protagonists are sick *for* the home, which implies a certain longing for home, and therefore an absence of it. Some examples include *Stranger on the Third Floor*, where, as I have already discussed, Michael's paranoia and murderous desires are borne out of his desire for home; *Detour*, where Al's homelessness amplifies his desire for a real home; and *The Blue Dahlia*, where, upon returning from the war, Johnny finds his home in disarray and subsequently seeks to rebuild it. The implication, therefore, is that an absence of home results in a sickness. This sickness, as I will argue, is a realisation of the impossibility of desire. In one sense, the absence of home and the ensuing sickness signals the film's entrance into the noir universe. As Oliver Harris writes, in *The Killers* 'Swede's seduction into the world of crime and desire, his rendezvous with fate and fascination, takes place in Colfax's hotel suite, all because he breaks a date to go to the cinema.'³ Swede is supposed to go the cinema with Lily, but instead goes to Colfax's hotel suite and meets Kitty. The implication, therefore, is that Swede's involvement and desire for Kitty, the femme fatale, denies the acquisition of home (and of peace and security). Through the retroactive narrative structure, Lily, by contrast, is portrayed as a housewife. Swede's decision to reject a visit to the cinema stops him from going or acquiring home. Homesickness could also describe another cause for sickness. In addition to being sick for the home, noir's protagonists could be sick *of* the home. Instead of an absence of home, it could describe the intrusive presence of home. For instance, the family home in *Shadow of a Doubt*, which at first seems to offer solace to Young Charlie, becomes the primary location of antagonism. She is forbidden to make any accusation against Uncle Charles lest it desecrate the

³ Harris, 'Outside History, but Historically So', p. 16.

sanctity and imagined unity of the home. The two broad types of homesickness, it should be noted, are often interlinked.

The Lost Weekend (1945) shows us how home can inspire these seemingly contradictory types of homesickness. Don is both sick *for* the home (insofar as he wishes to live with and marry Helen) and sick *of* the home (insofar as the home isolates him by sealing him inside). In the film, Don's apartment is an antagonising and claustrophobic space. It antagonises him as far as he is trapped within it by his brother — Wick — and fiancée — Helen, both of whom deny him alcohol and the necessary funds to leave his apartment and find a bar. He is trapped in his apartment in the hope that he will be cured by the apparent medicinal — and spiritual — properties attributed to the home. The home is prescribed as the necessary treatment to cure Don's alcohol addiction, a cure for his perceived sickness. In fact, the central rewriting of Charles Jackson's novel is making Don and Helen the basis for the formation of the couple. The formation of the couple is the anchor upon which the metaphors of alcoholism, addiction, and desire all rest. Simultaneously, however, Don hides alcohol in his apartment to evade the suspicious eye of his brother and fiancée. His home, therefore, is both the cure for the sickness *and* the sickness itself. In its veneer of safety, Don's apartment gives him what he wants while also presenting itself as something to desire. The next chapter will address how the different configurations of home (detached homes, apartments, and so on) differ from one another, but for now, it is enough to say that apartments are more alienating and claustrophobic insofar as they imitate a detached home — a 'real' home — as well as blurring the boundaries between public and private space — as I argued was the case in *Stranger on the Third Floor*.

In *Weekend*, Don Birnam, a recovering alcoholic, is asked by Wick to spend the weekend away from New York in a countryside retreat. In order to delay his and Wick's train journey, Don

concocts an excuse for Helen and Wick to go and see a theatre show so that he can resume his consumption in secret. Don believes that he has cleverly hidden bottles of alcohol in various locations in his apartment: in the vacuum cleaner, under his mattress, hanging outside the window. Shortly after reeling in this hanging bottle and hiding it in Wick's suitcase, instead of his own, Wick discovers the bottle and discards it. Don's plan shares a comparable logic to Neff's plan in *Indemnity*. There is, of course, the similarity of the catching of a train, but the similarity relates more to their anticipation of investigative desire. Neff and Don's investigators are their friends (for Neff it is Keyes, for Don it is Helen and Wick) who, to an extent, *know* their desire or will recognise its traces.

Helen and Wicks' strategy for rehabilitating Don is to let him pursue his desire — after he pleads with Helen to let him recover 'his way'⁴ — and thus be disappointed when he realises it was for nothing. They hope that his desire intensifies and reveals his guilt. This can be seen by their lack of resistance to Don's suggestion that they leave him for the evening. They are either duped by his plan, or they are indulging him. Don is supposed to discover that his desire, as Fink writes, 'has no object,'⁵ in the sense that the glass is always refilled. This is because, Fink argues, desire is 'diametrically opposed to fixation' because it moves from signifier to signifier.⁶ Desire, and thus alcohol, 'merely wish to go on desiring.'⁷ For Don, however, he already knows what he desires: alcohol and intoxication. Desire, for Don, *has* an object. It is in this way that Don experiences the Real of desire, the impossibility that structures desire as such. The next section

⁴ *The Lost Weekend*, dir. By Billy Wilder, (Paramount Pictures: USA, 1945).

⁵ Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, p. 91.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

will discuss the ways in which his alcohol addiction — and drug use more general — allow access to the Real, and how this interacts with Don's desire for home.

The Rational Case for Drugs — Drug Use and the Real

In this section, I will explore the literature and critical work surrounding the use of 'hard' drugs, such as heroin, and compare its uses in literature and theory to alcohol, so as to show a more complete picture of how drug addiction can be conceived in a psychoanalytic context. Then I will examine the ways in which Don's ritualised recovery process shows how his guilt facilitates and fuels his desire. Although *The Lost Weekend* might seem an odd choice of film, I have chosen it because it does not precisely fit the model of more classic, established film noirs. As I argued in previous chapters, noir is best thought of as a mode, something which moves in and out of the films rather than being a constant point of identification. The fact that *The Lost Weekend* is not 'fully' a noir is the reason why it makes a good object for a case study, because the ambiguity around its definition (and therefore the meaning of addiction, desire, and the home in the film) is centred. In the film, understanding the nature of Don's addiction is the central problem. There are three interrelated problems surround addiction. The first is why Don is addicted in the first place, the second is what is he really addicted to, and the third is what historical contexts is addiction a response to. The missing referent in the film, the source of fascination, is history, specifically the Second World War. One significant reason Don is addicted, and why his addiction persists throughout the film, is the claustrophobia of his apartment and how it intensifies his addiction. He attempts to use various places within his apartment to hide alcohol, only to find that Wick has confiscated them.



Fig. 4.2, *The Lost Weekend* (1945)

In *Weekend's* opening scene, when Wick tries to sell the idea of a retreat to Don, he is offering a similar proposition to Renton's ritualised recovery. The retreat is supposed to act as a substitute for Don's desire for alcohol, replacing alcohol with the 'real' thing. Wick's proposal intends to disrupt Don's plans, to interject between Don and his desire for alcohol. As with *Trainspotting*, Wick tries to replace the desire for alcohol with more acceptable substances. In trying to convince Don, he says there will be 'trees, and grass, and sweet cider, and buttermilk, and water from that well that's colder than any other.'⁸ Don immediately sees through Wick's

⁸ *The Lost Weekend* (1945).

performatively cheerful demeanour, observing Wick's emphasis on 'very dull liquids.'⁹ The central question here is one of authenticity. Wick misidentifies the problem because instead of trying to understand how Don's addiction exposes the Real of desire, he simply attempts to move Don's desire from alcohol to the countryside and other 'dull' and unsatisfying liquids. For Don, alcohol offers the chance to experience desire authentically.

Likewise, Renton's ritualistic recovery process — the use of 'vitamins, mouthwash, and pornography'¹⁰ — shows how empty these supposedly desirable objects are in comparison to heroin. Renton's ritual reveals his desire to stay addicted to heroin. For Renton, becoming sober is merely a performance. He must be seen to want to become sober. Don cannot be seen to desire alcohol, but instead to actively pursue sobriety. In Fig 4.2, as Don retrieves some clothes from the dresser, Wick turns to address him about the 'trees' and 'grass' of their weekend retreat. Wick addresses Don while his back is turned — like their initial location in the room (Fig 4.3) — yet in this configuration Don can see Wick speaking to him in the mirror. In this moment, the architecture of the home is used to show how desire has no hiding place in the home. The weekend retreat, moreover, offers a distinct counterpoint to the interior trappings of the home and of inner city living. The retreat is open and unaccusatory, unlike the home. The purpose of the retreat, in these terms, is to bury desire so it cannot be seen, to dissipate it. This strategy is unpalatable for Don because his desire is constituted through his guilt. His desire must be seen and condemned.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Harold, p. 871.



Fig. 4.3, *The Lost Weekend* (1945)

To speak of desire in the home, to tell Don what he should want, involves an assumption of blindness, that Wick can speak to Don without being seen. The room in which this scene takes place is Don's bedroom. The camera views the room predominately from a corner, with the window to the outside on the left of the frame. Behind Don hangs a painting of an outdoors meadow, a window to an imaginary space. Wick stands in the doorway to the kitchen and living room, and to the right (beyond the frame in figure 4.3) is another door, presumably to a bathroom, the dresser with mirrors sat on top of it. Don's apartment is compact, but its compactness makes hiding difficult in the home. Rooms can see into each other, and the apartment is situated in a New York borough, further intensifying the sense of claustrophobia. In the film, therefore, blindness is

derived from the omnipresence of the Other's gaze. The dresser mirrors allow Don to see himself being seen by Wick. Don can therefore see that Wick is merely offering a substitute for alcohol, one where his desire will never be met. In seeing Wick's reflection in the mirror, Don is really seeing himself and his own desire *through* Wick. Don's home is a place where it is impossible to desire safely. The significance of any utterance is intensified in the home. The novel highlights Don's anxiety when seeing his own desire as the perspective shift from first to third person: 'Control was gradually slipping away...I've got to watch myself, I've certainly got to *watch* myself; no telling what undreamed-of fantastic thing [he] might catch himself doing next.'¹¹ Wick assumes he can see Don and tell him what he should want without being seen. Similarly, Don believes he can hide his bottle of whiskey without being discovered. It is through Wick's desire to cure Don that Don's desire is perpetuated: Wick is trapped *in* Don's desire. There are parallels with *Stranger on the Third Floor* in relation to the way vision is understood in the home. Michael's declaration of desire is that he wants a home because it is a place where 'two people can really see each other.'¹² This wholly imagined promise of openness in relation to desire is realised in *Weekend*. The implication of 'really' seeing is that home is not a place of safety, but one where desire is constantly interrogated. The notion of 'really' seeing has two competing dimensions. Firstly, it is where desire is invisible, where, supposedly, the object of desire has been attained. Secondly, it is where desire is constantly interrogated, which can be seen in this scene in *Weekend*. Home, therefore, is not a place to desire safely, because the Other is always looking.

The Other's gaze, the imperative to enjoy from the superego, engenders a sense of guilt in Don. To enjoy, for Don, entails also being guilty. His guilt is that he *is* experiencing enjoyment,

¹¹ Jackson, *The Lost Weekend*, p. 60.

¹² *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940).

that alcohol does indeed give him what he wants. He does not need to desire any other object. Don's addiction, therefore, questions the supposed authenticity of desire. In Jackson's novel, while Don is at a bar, the narration remarks, 'but he'd finish this drink and maybe one more and then go back to the flat where he could really enjoy himself.'¹³ Home, the apartment, is a place where Don can really enjoy himself, and where two people can 'really see each other.' There is an emphasis on *real* enjoyment, on experiencing the *real* thing. Home is presented as a cure, but instead it should be read as the sickness itself. Or, it is at least actively facilitating Don's addiction — even when removed from his apartment. Although the home contains nothing, it is that very nothingness which is so sickening to Don. He is confronted by his desire for nothing; the so-called 'real' thing is indistinguishable from a fake thing. The cycle of consumption is always repeated with no change. He consumes nothing, but that is desire's exact demand. His home, which should offer a place of solace and, ideologically speaking, *meaning*, gives him nothing. What is horrifying for Don is that home's complete absence of desire is ostensibly what he wants. It is a scenario in which he does not have to desire. The expectation laid on him by Helen and Wick is that he does not desire and should simply exist in the home. So, the home's layout in *Weekend* is representative of Don's perspective. It should be a place where he has mastery, but that mastery is consistently undermined. In this way, the home's authority is challenged by his addiction.

¹³ Jackson, *The Lost Weekend*, p. 76.



Fig. 4.6, *The Lost Weekend* (1945)

The presence of alcohol (and desire) therefore defines and contextualises our fascination to home. Since Don's fascination with alcohol is itself fascinating, the home is reconfigured to be fascinating. The hermetic space of the home — as distinct from public space — is disrupted from the beginning of the film because of the open windows and doors. The home is linked with Don's addiction to alcohol because of the way in which his addiction redefines his body's relationship to desire. As Harold writes, drugs and addiction underscore the body as 'rhetorical site' which is transformed through engagement.¹⁴ Just as alcohol provides Don with a way to experience the

¹⁴ Harold, 'Transgressive Corporeality in *Trainspotting*', pp. 866-7.

Real of desire without the need to engage in its 'symbolic loop'¹⁵, it also opens up the *home* as a 'rhetorical site'.¹⁶ Bjerg notes how heroin in particular is ingested through abnormal bodily orifices (a needle punctures the skin and thus heroin is directed ingested into the bloodstream) rather than through the mouth or the nose. In *Weekend* alcohol similarly creates new 'orifices' in the home. It creates new entryways and exits, new places to hide.

In *Weekend's* opening scene, Don attempts to hide various bottles of alcohol around his apartment, like pieces of fascination to be hidden from Wick. The film opens with Don and Wick packing their suitcases, with the camera moving from the Manhattan skyline to the open window of Don's apartment (Fig 4.6). As the camera pans past two windows, we see beneath the third a bottle of liquor tied to a piece of string (Fig 4.7). Don's window is flung open, his curtains dance in the breeze, and the camera looks in, as if we were spying on him as he packs his suitcase. Here, the window acts as an improper orifice to the home. We do not enter through the door, nor do we simply begin inside. Instead, we intrude *from* the position of the alcohol. Our gaze is fascinated and voyeuristic. The bottle further functions in a similar way to the anamorphic skull in *The Ambassadors*, since it requires the viewer, Wick in this case, to change his view of the home in order to see it. It is a distortion in the image of home, but a distortion which is written into the essence of the image.

¹⁵ Bjerg, 'Drug Addiction and Capitalism', p. 19.

¹⁶ Ibid.



Fig. 4.7, *The Lost Weekend* (1945)

The camera panning across the skyline to Don's apartment is mirrored at the end of the film. This emphasises the film's moral assertion that alcohol addiction is often invisible in compact urban space. The retroactive resolution of the ending is driven by nostalgia, the impression that the home was always safely sealed. The place of alcohol and fascination is made ambiguous by the opening up of the home. The bottle on the string calls into question its proper place. Although alcohol is a socially acceptable substance, its position on the boundary renders it an antagonising force on Don and the home. The interior of the home is supposedly an abstract fantasy space; when the windows and doors are shut, the space becomes hermeneutically sealed. Ideology is not exogenous to the home; it was always present. The open window breaks down the

barriers between exterior and interior space, between public and private space. It suggests the transgressive pleasures of voyeurism and of addiction. The bottle of alcohol, suspended outside the apartment, transgresses the boundaries between inside and outside of the home. The bottle hangs outside the apartment, but the string is tied to the window latch on the inside. It is on the boundary itself, and, in a sense, *is* the boundary.

When Don reels in the bottle from the window, bringing it into the home, he tries to hide it in Wick's suitcase, which Wick quickly discovers. The discovery of the bottle is a reminder to Wick and Helen that Don's persistent alcohol abuse is not simply a personal, moral, or ethical failure on Don's part, but is indicative of a *familial* problem. Alcohol is the primary antagonist — if Don could simply extricate himself from this unholy liquid, all the film's problems would be resolved — and a metonym for the other problems in the film (the frayed relationship between Don and Helen, between Don and Wick, the inadequacy of the home, and Don's writer's block). The familial guilt suffered by Wick is disavowed. It is not only Don who forms a fetishistic relationship with alcohol, but Helen and Wick too. They know that alcohol is not any other problem but act if it were the case regardless. For Helen specifically, her guilt is a phantom guilt. She experiences the loss of the potential and spectral family that she and Don are intended, and indeed compelled, to form. Wick finding Don's stashed bottle demonstrates the way in which the home has become a place of secrets, a hiding place for *jouissance*. The home is intended to be a safe place for Don, an antidote for his 'sickness,' yet because of this assumption, Don attempts to use the home as a cover for his addiction. The narrative trajectory, of Don rejecting his alcoholism in order to form a 'real' couple with Helen, presumes that Don must be placed under a quasi-house arrest to be cured: the home is supposed to cure Don. In this sense, the home facilitates his alcoholism, rather than curing it. However, as the film's moralising reveals — perhaps

inadvertently — it is not the home which must cure Don, but Don who must cure the home of its unsuitability for fostering the heterosexual family unit. The home, too — at least the detached home — is a place for families, yet Don’s city apartment prohibits the family due its small and claustrophobic layout. There is an absence of a family in *Weekend* and noir. A home without a family, according to the ideological implications of *Weekend*, is no home at all.



Fig. 4.4, *Notorious*, dir. By Alfred Hitchcock, (RKO Radio Pictures: USA, 1946)

The place of consumption and its relationship to production is important in understanding how alcohol interacts with home. Don’s alcohol addiction is categorised largely as an addiction to ‘hard’ liquor — whiskey, brandy and so forth — as opposed to, say, beer, wine, or gin. Although beer, wine, and gin are addictive alcoholic drinks, there is nonetheless an association with beer,

wine, or gin being social drinks. They are drinks which are to be consumed casually, and in a comfortable, homely setting. Consider, for example, an early scene (Fig. 4.4) in Hitchcock's *Notorious* (1946) where Alicia (Ingrid Bergman) is hosting a house party where she meets Devlin (Cary Grant). As the music plays and the night stretches on, Alicia fills up her friend's glass with a small dark bottle. Despite the man's protestations, Alicia remarks: 'Don't be silly, the important drinking hasn't started yet.'¹⁷ There exists a clear delineation between different types of drinking, different methods, and contexts for consumption. The man's unwillingness to consume more represents the limit that home places on alcoholic consumption and desire. That is, drinking in the home is seen as a social activity, not one in which becoming intoxicated is the primary objective. On the other hand, Alicia regards this drinking as unimportant or improper. Alcohol here is not drunk for its taste, but rather because it gets Alicia intoxicated, a release of libidinal energy.

For Don, in *Weekend*, the function of drinking to the point of intoxication is to help in accessing the *objet petit a* which he (mistakenly) thinks will finally satisfy his desire. In the novel, Don remarks that, 'Thirst — there was a misnomer. [...] It wasn't because he was thirsty that he drank, and he didn't drink because he liked the taste [...]: he drank for what it did to him. As for quenching his thirst, liquor did exactly the opposite to him.'¹⁸ Alicia and Don's drinking undermine the home since, in noir, home promises to be the end of the line for desire. Home is where its inhabitants can desire safely. Don does not drink alcohol for satisfaction or refreshment since it does not 'quench his thirst'.¹⁹ Don does not therefore consume alcohol for its perceptual qualities but because its effects (that is, the consequences of attaining the object of his desire) are predictable. The typical cycle of desire only confronts him with the Real, the abyss, of desire, thus

¹⁷ *Notorious* (1946).

¹⁸ Jackson, *The Lost Weekend*, p. 41.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

leaving him empty. Alcohol *gives* him something in return. It is this transaction which renders his addiction perverse, in Helen and Wick's eyes. In this context, therefore, Alicia and Don's crime is to bring the bar, with its seemingly endless alcohol, back home. This undermines the home as it makes desire visible in the home. Desire's 'reintroduction' in the home reveals that home is not the 'final' and satisfying object of desire. This is why the rupturing of the boundaries between private and public space act as traumatic punctures in noir; the ground beneath such apparent certainties is taken away, revealing only an abyss below. For Alicia, her drunkenness leads to her being pulled over while driving erratically. Thus, her disrespect for homely drinking predicates her subsequent involvement with Devlin in Rio de Janeiro — the punishment for disobedience, again, is finding oneself in a film noir. Her erratic driving is a metaphor for her erratic, unhomely drinking.

Next I will explore how, through a psychoanalytic lens, drug use exposes the pursuit of the *real* thing by giving the user a direct line to the Real of enjoyment. The 'real' thing in *The Lost Weekend* is the 'authentic' home, a home which allows privacy and is a space in which one can *cease* to desire. Ole Bjerg, in his essay 'Drug Addiction and Capitalism: Too Close to the Body', argues that one of the transgressive elements of drug use is the way in which it allows the user to desire in ways which circumvent the cycle of desire, specifically the mode of capitalist desire.²⁰ The cycle of desire involves the subject moving from one object to another while remaining unsatisfied which, as Fink describes, occurs because 'desire has no object.'²¹ Desire circles around the Real and the *objet petit a*. The Real is experienced as a rupture in the symbolic order, a breakdown of signification. Traumatic circumstances defy signification and thus create, as Sean

²⁰ Ole Bjerg, 'Drug Addiction and Capitalism: Too Close to the Body' *Body & Society* 14.2 (2008), pp. 1-22.

²¹ Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, p. 91.

Homer argues, ‘a permanent dislocation at the very heart of the subject.’²² Trauma and desire produce an excess, something which cannot be articulated. This excess ‘is the Real.’²³ The paradox of desire is that desire is a process which promises access to the Real, a pre-linguistic state of pure need, which was severed via our entrance into language through the symbolic order. Drugs offer to elude the cycle of desire and directly access the impossibility. Bjerg highlights, for instance that drugs are not typically consumed for their ‘perceptual taste, smell, sound, colour, etc,’ but instead for their ‘psychoactive properties.’²⁴

Drugs are consumed not to be ‘enjoyed’ in a normative sense; hence, the social condemnation of addiction is also related to how it changes the subject’s relation to desire. Both Renton and Don’s ritualization of their imagined recovery mocks this social condemnation as it simultaneously insulates them from censure (they are seen to desire to overcome their addiction) while also allowing them to continue to use heroin and drink alcohol respectively. Desire posits that something real exists at the centre of its repetitious circuit, that the next object of desire is the authentic one which will finally fulfil it. Drug use, for Bjerg, is a ‘radical way of fulfilling the imperative of enjoyment constantly thrown at us by the contemporary ideology of consuming.’²⁵ This, I believe, helps explain the transgressive nature of drug use and of Don’s addiction. His addiction is transgressive *because* it is enjoyable. To return to *Trainspotting*, Renton understands that heroin gives him what he desires instantly and continuously. He does not have to partake in the ideology of consumption, of always having his desire move to something else and therefore

²² Homer, *Jacques Lacan*, Loc, 1503.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Bjerg, ‘Drug Addiction and Capitalism’, p. 3.

²⁵ Ibid, p. 1

disavow what he previously thought he desired. His — and Don's — declaration and articulation of desire is profoundly simple. Unlike any other desire, it goes straight into the bloodstream.

In *Weekend*, Don espouses the virtue of being intoxicated because it benefits his writing process. He acknowledges that alcohol 'shrinks his liver', yet he says that intoxicated he is 'above the ordinary.'²⁶ Then, he compares his output to famous artists and people: Michelangelo, Vincent Van Gogh, Vladimir Horowitz, John Barrymore, Jesse James and 'his two brothers, all three of them', and Shakespeare.²⁷ For Don, at least alcohol enables creativity. I would argue, however, that the question of whether alcohol expands or restricts perception is the wrong question. The question assigns a moral quality to any possible expansion or restriction; it assumes a normative form of desire. Helen and Wick, as well as the film, understand addiction's solution as one concerning rationality and choice. Don's alcoholism may be irrational, in certain contexts, but that does not logically imply that the solution is a turn to rationality. I will now turn to discuss the relationship between addiction and the discourses of rationality.

Invoking rationality as a factor external to subjectivity requires an interrogation about what rationality means in the context of desire. Criticism which is grounded in the discourse of rationality assumes that the text is simply a series of gestures which hide or obscure a single, stable truth. An argument in this vein might contend that Don's drinking in *Weekend* merely gestures towards an unhappy and unfulfilled personal life. As I have already argued, however, film noir has no such interior stability. There is an inherent ambiguity to Don's desire. It is the void at the heart of the film, both fascinating and unknowable. The secret is, again, that there is no rational

²⁶ *The Lost Weekend* (1945),

²⁷ *Ibid.*

explanation for his addiction, and indeed any explanation will necessarily overlook some important dimension.

As Gerda Reith argues in her essay on consumption in late modernity, the aberration of ‘abnormal’ consumption is the perception of an increased risk. Within the ‘rational-medical discourse of modernity,’ this risk, Reith writes, is ‘something that poses a threat to self and which is also calculable and predictable, since it implies some knowledge, however partial, of potential future danger.’²⁸ For Reith, there is a contradiction here with regards to consumer culture’s response to risk. On the one hand, consumerist capitalism requires ‘sober’ and ‘rational’ consumers who ‘keep themselves informed about potential dangers and regulate their behaviour accordingly’, the logic being that the market works insofar as consumers consume ‘rationally.’²⁹ On the other, as Reith argues, consumerism relies on excessive and irrational consumption in order to sustain itself: consumption is not a finite endeavour. In other words, consumption itself has *no limit*. For Ole Bjerg, in a similar vein, the labelling of an addiction as pathological is itself ideological:

You can become addicted to almost anything and addiction in itself is not pathological. You can for instance be addicted to cigarettes or coffee without our entire subjectivity being pathological for that reason. When drug addiction may be qualified as pathology it is because it is connected to a fundamental collapse in the subject’s general economy of desire.³⁰

²⁸ Gerda Reith, ‘On the Edge: Drugs and Consumption of Risk in Late Modernity’, in Lyng S., *Edgework: The Sociology of Risk Taking* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 230.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Bjerg, ‘Drug Addiction and Capitalism’, p. 18.

Although it may appear to be the case that alcohol is the cause of the collapse of Don's 'general economy of desire,'³¹ it is worth considering the extent to which home, in noir, could be considered a pathological addiction. Bjerg uses the particular examples of drug use and addiction to help illuminate the cycles and channels of desire within capitalism. Although he focuses on drugs such as heroin and cocaine, we can see similarities between these 'hard' drugs and alcohol, at least in how alcohol in *Weekend* demonstrates the 'general economy of desire.'³² The consumption of drugs, Bjerg writes, is a 'distinct form of consumption.' One major difference between the consumption of heroin and, say, coffee or any other addictive substance, is the method of consumption. To trigger enjoyment, coffee is ingested through the mouth and digested by the body, whereas heroin is consumed by injecting it 'directly into the blood.'³³ The drug thus circumvents the 'normative' cycles of enjoyment.. In this context, 'normal' enjoyment is permitted. This is not to say that 'normal' is used as a value judgement, or that there is something ethically or morally suspect in so-called 'abnormal' enjoyment, but rather an admission that 'normal' is a fabricated category. For Bjerg, it is a category which is specifically designed to exclude the ways in which the consumption of drugs bypasses and disrupts capitalist cycles of desire.

Moreover, for Bjerg, addiction reveals the symbolic castration which governs desire. Since desire, he writes, is 'constituted only through prohibition', and prohibition is 'conditioned by its transgression,' desire only begins when lack, the *objet petit a*, is produced.³⁴ We can only desire once we realise that we lack something. Addiction, as Bjerg understands it, reveals to us that nothing lies beneath desire. Desire thus creates a paradox in the symbolic order — the discourse

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid, p. 18.

³³ Ibid. p. 2.

³⁴ Ibid. p. 4.

of the Other — since, on one level, the symbolic order allows subjects to articulate their own desires and lack; on another, it ‘founds the subject’s constitutive lack of Being, which is the very precondition for desire at all.’³⁵ Hence, the prohibition of Don’s drinking is the way in which he *experiences* desire.

Don’s addiction is clearly seen as irrational by the film, but it is not attributed to any sociological or environmental factors. Instead, it is depicted as an unexplainable (hence pathological and *illogical*) condition, an all-consuming natural disaster. However, home is neither the reward nor the cure for Don. Since home *itself* is the addiction, it is the impossible object of Don’s desire. Don must cure the home, ridding it of its addictive qualities, not the other way around. Nevertheless, the home looks back at Don, affirming his guilt. Being in the home renders him unproductive: he is unable to work, nor is he able to consummate his relationship with Helen. Although his addiction seemingly immobilises him it reveals the abyss beneath the desire for home. In other noir films, the consecration of the home often occurs at the end of the film, for instance, Michael and Jane in *Stranger on the Third Floor*; Don and Helen’s reunion in the home in *Weekend*; and Johnny and Joyce at the end of *The Blue Dahlia*. The importance of home begins as the film ends. Or, the home is presented not as a source of strength, a positive desire, but something which requires reconstituting. There is always some guilty excess in this process of reconstitution: the way in which the Stranger reveals Michael’s guilt over his murderous desire in *Stranger on the Third Floor*; Johnny and Joyce’s union which is uncelebrated and built upon the death of Helen in *The Blue Dahlia*; and in *Weekend*, Don giving up access to the Real of desire so as to pursue a perceived authenticity in his writing, his relationship, and in his home. Home is that which, symbolically speaking, upholds the symbolic order — the very system upon which signs

³⁵ Ibid.

and signifiers depend on for meaning and desire to exist — yet, upon its creation, a certain abyssal lack is produced in order to facilitate desire for the home.

Helen and Wick's mistake is in assuming that Don's addiction, his desire, is fuelled by choice; if only he were to take the 'rational' choice not to drink, then his problem would be resolved. Yet desire itself is not rational since it is unconsciously driven. If it were the case that Don must simply act rationally, then the weekend retreat would not be necessary, and indeed, the retreat is never fully taken seriously as a treatment. The retreat is only every spectral, a vague and easily avoidable threat. The pertinent question with regards to Don is not 'why does he make the choice to drink?' but rather, 'what desire does alcohol represent for Don, and why is it never seemingly satisfied?' In a psychoanalytic context, addiction can be understood as an extreme form of desire. *Weekend's* depiction of alcohol helps illuminate the inner workings of both addiction and desire. For example, the film highlights the lengths Don is willing to go to in order to keep drinking. Once he discovers the cleaner's money he goes outside and purchases two bottles of liquor. When he arrives at the bar, he proudly boasts that he bought two bottles so that Wick would find one, believe his search to be over, and thus Don would still be left with one bottle.³⁶ The presence of alcohol and addiction questions the nature of satisfaction itself. Satisfaction here being an *imagined* state whereby desire is fulfilled. If desire is never fulfilled, then the cultural perception of satisfaction is imaginary. For Don, satisfaction is a recognition of the real of desire, that desire's imperative can be ignored or circumvented. Satisfaction seems impossible if desire 'has no object'³⁷ and always replicates itself. Don seemingly desires nothing, and has nothing, yet he is still satisfied. One answer — which might possess an overly moralising tone — to the question

³⁶ Later, though, when Don returns to the bar he has already forgotten about his plan.

³⁷ Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, p. 91.

over alcohol and addiction's relationship to desire and satisfaction is that although Don believes himself to be satisfied, he is instead deeply troubled, unable to even understand what satisfaction *is*. In other words, Don must learn how to desire 'properly,' or, at least, learn to desire the 'proper' objects: a relationship with Helen and restoring the sanctity of the home. However, the moralistic answer assumes that we are aware and in control of our desires, that desire arises through choice. In this sense, Don's addiction cannot be understood from a moralistic or literal standpoint, but instead it should be read as symptomatic, especially in its relation to home. Considering this, the next section will examine the ideological dimensions of realist discourse and its relation to desire for the home in noir.

Capitalist Realism and Desire

In his seminal book *Capitalist Realism*, Mark Fisher outlines the way in which late-capitalist societies understand and treat mental health as if it were a solely a private affair; that an issue such as depression is the result of a chemical imbalance in the brain.³⁸ For Fisher, the work of theorists such as Michel Foucault, Giles Deleuze, and Felix Guattari emphasise the need for the political categorisation of 'extreme mental conditions such as schizophrenia.'³⁹ Fisher similarly calls for a 'politicisation of much more common disorders,'⁴⁰ such as addiction and depression. Viewing mental health as a chemical imbalance in need of correcting implies that the source of the condition lies within the subject. Mental illnesses, Fisher stresses, are of course 'neurological instantiated,' yet capitalist realism 'says nothing about their causation.'⁴¹ Fisher invites us to consider the role

³⁸ Fisher's work on capitalist realism need not only apply exclusively to late-capitalist society. As Fisher argues, the effects are amplified under late capitalism.

³⁹ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Wiltshire: O Books, 2009), p. 19.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid. p. 37.

of external environmental factors and the extent to which they may be responsible for any ‘mental health crisis.’ Fisher’s analysis is useful because it emphasises the need to understand the political dimension of addiction.

Returning to *Weekend*, viewing Don’s addiction solely in terms of a personal failing reduces any analysis to overt moralising. This moralisation, or, as Fisher might put it, ‘the privatisation’ of addiction, risks simply stating the blindingly obvious: Don should not be an alcoholic.⁴² A realistic discourse assumes that a ‘real’ text lies underneath, and similarly realistic discourses around mental health assume that a biological prognosis will indefinitely ‘cure’ the subject. Yet the ‘real’ text underneath *Weekend* is not one in which Don’s addiction is completely resolved, but one where the conditions of his addiction are brought to light. The *narrative* of the film is viewed as the treatment for Don’s sickness, and cinema itself acts as a vaccine against aberrative behaviour. This is not the case, however, since the cinema serves to *intensify* Don’s addiction. A similar example can be seen in *Out of the Past*. When Jeff waits to meet Kathie in Mexico, his voiceover says that the café they are supposed to meet in is ‘next to a movie house.’⁴³ ‘I used to sit there half asleep with a beer in the darkness,’ Jeff says, ‘only the music from the movie next door kept jarring me awake. And then I saw [Kathie] — coming out of the sun. And I knew why White didn’t care about that forty grand.’⁴⁴ The sound of the cinema puts Jeff in a somewhat lucid state, making him more receptive to the fascinating femme fatale. It creates the right atmosphere for Jeff to become entangled in the noir universe.

⁴² Ibid, p. 19.

⁴³ *Out of the Past* (1947).

⁴⁴ Ibid.

Capitalist realism is Fisher's term for the 'pervasive atmosphere' which conditions the production of culture, as well as the 'regulation of work and education.'⁴⁵ It is the way in which capitalist (and, for Fisher, particularly neoliberal late capitalist) ideology asserts itself as reality. Capitalist ideology is not thought of as a value, but a fact. This is similar to the way in which Barthes describes myths as not being read as 'a motive, but as a reason'.⁴⁶ Presenting a moral critique of capitalism, quite paradoxically, 'only reinforces capitalist realism'.⁴⁷ According to Fisher a moral critique can take issues such as famine, poverty, the ecological crisis, mental health, and present them as 'inevitable parts of reality.' In this sense producing a moral critique of Don's alcoholism risks assuming that such an addiction is inevitable. The 'real' Don — 'Don the writer', as Helen says — exists beneath the addict — 'Don the drunk'.⁴⁸ Moreover it also risks treating alcoholism as only alcoholism. Instead, if we read Don's alcoholism as symptomatic, it reveals that it is a symptom of the fascinating and traumatic dimension of home. Don's desire (alcohol) is analogous to a desire for nothing. The 'nothingness' of alcohol is symptomatic of the nothingness of the fascinating home. The home, to a certain extent, *inspires* Don's addiction, and his addiction replaces the need for home.

In relation to mental health, the 'privatisation' of addiction, the insistence on its eradication being dependent on the subject, relies on invocation of science as an external and objective source of verification.⁴⁹ This invocation on the objective investigator is analogous to the role of the detective in the face of fascination discussed in the previous chapter. Science, in this context, functions both as itself and as a *representation* of rationality. The invocation of 'rationality' further

⁴⁵ Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, p. 16.

⁴⁶ Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 129.

⁴⁷ Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, p. 16.

⁴⁸ *The Lost Weekend* (1945).

⁴⁹ Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, p. 19.

implies an interjection of ‘reality’ into the discourse. *Weekend*’s marketing emphasised the film’s ‘realistic’ depiction of alcohol addiction, largely through association with Jackson’s novel. The voiceover in the trailer states that Charles Jackson’s novel is ‘the most startling novel of the decade, brought to the screen with uncompromising frankness.’⁵⁰ However, just because the film — and specifically the marketing material surrounding the film — pledges to depict alcoholism in a ‘realistic’ manner, it does not do it so. In fact, because this claim must be explicitly expressed, it reveals the very artificiality of cinema. The film’s marketing, and its subject matter, does not invoke reality *itself*; instead it demands we approach it as if it were real: the ‘reality’ of the film is provided by *us*. As Fisher writes, ‘the Real is that which any “reality” must suppress; indeed, reality constitutes itself through just this repression.’⁵¹ The Real of the film is therefore that which it must suppress in order to constitute itself. It must prohibit Don’s desire (thereby establishing it⁵²) and deny that Don *enjoys* his addiction as well as softening the difference between Don’s addiction to alcohol and the sickness induced by the home. To achieve this, the production of ‘reality’ in the film is dependent on our engagement with the film’s alcoholism *qua* a fragment of reality. One way this is visible is through the film’s engagement with its source text.

⁵⁰ YouTube Movies, *The Lost Weekend — Trailer*, online video, YouTube, 14 March 2016 < <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UnFSYFTPOn8> > [accessed 27 June 2019].

⁵¹ Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* p. 18.

⁵² Bjerg, ‘Drug Addiction and Capitalism’, p. 4.



Fig. 4.5, *The Lost Weekend* (1945)

The novel's preoccupation with the author being an addict in some capacity, that addiction is somehow 'necessary' to produce a great work of art, is repeated in the film. In the novel, Don believes there is something virtuous in his drinking since it allows him to write, a view legitimised as he rifles through F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night*. Don recounts Fitzgerald saying: 'Don't write about anything you don't know anything about.'⁵³ The film, at least on the level of its marketing, accepts the logic that the efficacy of its message is dependent on its acquiescence to, and the veracity of, the novel's depiction of alcohol addiction. However, the film over-identifies

⁵³ Jackson, *The Lost Weekend*, p. 150.

its realism with the alcoholism present in Jackson's novel. Jackson's novel is concerned, at least in part, with the notion that addiction helps produce great works of art. In the film, on the other hand, the 'reality' of the novel is the addiction. Addiction in this sense is both Real (it must be suppressed) and real (it is the guarantor of reality). The film can only ever produce a 'reality principle' rather than reality; some things must be suppressed in order to depict reality.

The film's depiction of alcohol as realistic is contingent with how the film views Jackson's novel as autobiographical and, moreover, as *non-fictional* source. Take Don's monologue at the end of the film:

I'm gonna put this whole weekend down, minute by minute. The way I stood in there packing my suitcase, only my mind wasn't on the suitcase [...] My mind was hanging outside the window; it was suspended, just about eighteen inches below. I wonder how many others there are like me. Poor bedevilled guys on fire with thirst, such comical figures to the rest of the world as they stagger towards another binge, another spree.⁵⁴

This monologue demonstrates how the film treats writing as a process which encodes truth. Don must detail every 'minute', the 'whole weekend', for his recovery to be complete, verifiable, and legitimate. He must also do so triumphantly, in recognition of his epiphany. This the strongest example of the film's moralising — like *Stranger on the Third Floor*, too, its ending seems incongruous with the rest of the film — because it reworks the novel's bleaker ending into something more palatable. In the novel, Don pours himself another drink and thinks to himself 'This [weekend] was over and nothing had happened at all.'⁵⁵ However, the film ends with Don

⁵⁴ *The Lost Weekend* (1945).

⁵⁵ Jackson, *The Lost Weekend*, p. 248.

recounting and acknowledging how he has overcome his addiction — thus performing his recovery. Noir's hard edges have some limits after all. Yet we can see the traumatic dimension of the film through this omission. Don's emotional disaffection in the novel is embodied by the film's amnesia in relation to the novel. In the novel, Don can admit that his addiction and the events of the narrative are insubstantial inasmuch as they do not mean anything to him. The film, however, unsatisfactorily attempts to fill in this epistemological abyss. The weekend, both literal and metaphorical, is thus lost in numerous ways. Alcohol's effect on memory renders it impossible to retroactively construct meaning. Over the weekend, too, work and labour are lost, as are any pursuits of family and home. What is lost is not just a recollection of events during the adaptation of the novel, but the very meaning of loss. Loss *itself* is lost. It is, moreover, in the very process of remembrance that time and meaning are lost; what is lost is not simply time, but a sense of historicity itself. Historicity is lost because of the way noir insists on a certain conception of realism while at the same time suppressing ways of understanding the world. Through the metaphor alcohol provides in *Lost Weekend*, we can see that although alcohol is offered as a way of clarifying the world — it promises to show Don what is 'real' — it obscures the objects of his desire. It obscures the home, and the formation of the couple. The next section will investigate the role of alcohol and desire, and how the spectre of nostalgia hangs over the film. I will examine this proposition in relation to home and how it is an already lost object. Then, I will consider the extent to which film noir's relationship to its own history is reflected in the disavowal of historical continuity and how historicity itself disappears.

Ideology and Nostalgia

Understanding Don's alcoholism helps clarify the rationale behind his desires. In the film, alcohol should not, I believe, simply be understood as a substance which releases Don's social inhibitions and allows an 'authentic' expression of the self, or that he is able to desire 'properly'. In fact, the alcohol instead questions how desire is produced and how a desire is deemed 'abnormal' or addictive. This question, therefore, is explicitly ideological. The film supposes two abstract and distinct states in relation to Don's addiction: being sober or intoxicated. The abstract categories of 'sober' and 'intoxicated' can be understood as metaphors for ideological interpellation. In Marxist thought, ideology broadly is a series of (false) discourses borne out of cultural products, economic structures, and so forth. The Marxist concept of 'false consciousness' presupposes that a 'true' normative subject exists beneath a socially acceptable façade, and that ideology has obscured the real self, that the self has been 'intoxicated' by ideology. The 'real' self simply waits to be liberated from its own delusion. Alcohol promises to release the self from its shackles, allowing real expression. According to this theory, being intoxicated allows the subject to act and desire authentically. Yet for Don, intoxication entails a disarticulation; *any* expression is made more difficult. His speech becomes slurred and he becomes forgetful — as evidenced when Don forgets that he bought an extra bottle of liquor which he brought to the bar. Conversely, Helen and Wick believe that alcohol is what is masking Don's 'real' capacity for desire. Their response is that Don should act unideologically, that he should dispel his intoxicated self in order to become ideologically sober. For Louis Althusser, there is a strong unconscious dimension to ideology:

Those who are in ideology believe themselves by definition outside ideology: one of the effects of ideology is the practical denegation of the ideological character of ideology by ideology: ideology never says, “I am ideological”.⁵⁶

In everyday parlance, ideology is used as a pejorative: to act or think ‘ideologically’ is to mask reality with an imaginary (and therefore supposedly delusory) dimension. Again, however, this conception of ideology must presuppose that reality both exists independently from our subjectivity and that we can engage or consume it as such.⁵⁷

There is a strong sense of disavowal necessary in ideological interpellation — the process by which a subject is installed in ideological systems. Ideology only sustains itself through the Real, through the suppression of its inconsistencies. Slavoj Žižek, on the other hand, argues that the ideological ‘mask’ is not ‘simply hiding the real state of things; the ideological distortion is written into its very essence.’⁵⁸ Don’s addiction and intoxication cannot just be taken away in order to reveal the ‘real state of things’. His addiction, the way he desires, *is* the real state of things. Moreover, the addiction’s adjustment of the sanctity of home is not a perversion of the ‘true’ meaning and function of home — that is, to provide moral stability for the family — but rather that addiction is ‘written into’ the essence of home.

The political subject, Žižek contends, knows full well they are acting and thinking ideologically, that they are installed within its system. Don knows that. This lies in opposition to a traditional Marxist approach which asserts that subjects act in ignorance. Žižek writes,

⁵⁶ Louis Althusser, ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation’ in *On Ideology* (London: Verso, 2008 [1970]), p. 51.

⁵⁷ Claire Colebrook, *Deleuze* (Routledge: London, 2002), pp. 91-2.

⁵⁸ Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 25.

What [the subjects] “do not know”, what they misrecognise is the fact that in their social reality itself, in their social activity [...] they are guided by the fetishistic illusion.⁵⁹

When Žižek says ‘fetishistic’, he is describing a relationship between ideology and desire. The fetishist knows that a certain ordinary object does not possess any fantastical properties, but nonetheless they pretend otherwise for their own enjoyment. In noir, the protagonists know that home does not possess some fantastical qualities, but they proceed to desire home anyway. They act *as if* home is fantastical, and thus the noir’s protagonist’s desire is rendered perverse or destructive.

Don’s relationship to alcohol follows this pattern of fetishistic illusion. His addiction to alcohol may seem paradoxical at first glance. He drinks so that he can access his ‘real’ self, to free himself from ideology’s spell, and thus to act and desire authentically. Alcohol, though, leads to a disarticulation of his desires, yet it may seem as if this is no different from a capitalist subject’s disarticulation. The difference lies in Don’s knowledge and belief. He knows that alcohol does not fulfil his desire, but he nonetheless persists. As Bjerg argues, ‘The capitalist subject never accepts that the actual enjoyment of the consumption of a given commodity marks the limitation of the possible satisfaction of his desire.’⁶⁰ The capitalist subject — which Bjerg differentiates from the drug user — misidentifies their desire inasmuch as the object of their desire always shifts to something else; desire is always located elsewhere, it is never something which a subject possesses. For Bjerg, the drug user, the addict, does not have the same problem since the drug user and the drug become ‘fully identical’, collapsing the boundaries between subject and object.⁶¹ The

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Bjerg, ‘Drug Addiction and Capitalism’ p. 19.

⁶¹ Ibid.

collapsing of subject and object is visible on a formal level. Since Don's desire for alcohol is so total and all-consuming, it moves beyond enjoyment and into obsession: it *consumes* the film. Formally, therefore, the relationship between subject and object relative to desire is reversed. It is not Don that desires alcohol, but alcohol which desires *him*. Mitchell argues that images should be thought of as subjects, and as such, the question of what they desire is raised.⁶² I contend that alcohol's desire is rendered an enigma, an *idea* of the abyss, rather than nothingness itself since alcohol, as a liquid, is itself rather unassuming. Alcohol's mastery over Don, and of the film, serves to cover Don's lack inasmuch as curing Don of his addiction does not address the central issue of desire. The necessary political critique, therefore, is to understand how Don is enjoying, and is enjoyed by, alcohol. Moreover, the question of what alcohol *is* inevitably leads to questions surrounding the nature of desire and addiction. Nothing lies at the centre of the enjoyment that alcohol offers for Don.

For Don, alcohol is not replaced by any other object, any other commodity, it is only replaced by itself: '[t]he starting and end point of the drug addict's craving is the Real, and it is not mediated by that symbolic loop which constitutes the subject.'⁶³ Don's addiction is treated with hostility because it closes the circuit of desire. He no longer has a need to desire home or marriage because his desire is always satisfied. His desire, unlike other desires, is *predictable*. Desire typically reproduces itself through unpredictability, through a continual disruption of expectation. On the other hand, Bjerg cedes the destructive effects of heroin; he writes that 'the experience of absolute enjoyment leads to a radical de-stabilization, and perhaps even implosion, of the subject's entire economy of desire.'⁶⁴ In the film, alcohol is the substance which must be

⁶² Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, p. 11.

⁶³ *Ibid*, p. 19.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p. 20.

expelled in order for normal life to resume. Its position, however, allows us to see the ideological inconsistencies, particularly surrounding the problem of how home produces many of the same effects on the economy of desire.

Alcohol promises the opportunity to access our ‘true’ selves because it supposedly transgresses the normative cycle of desire, the ‘symbolic loop which constitutes the subject’⁶⁵: it is a chance to desire authentically. Yet Don’s alcoholism questions the way in which an addiction is labelled as such or considered ‘abnormal.’ Desire in noir is cyclical, never achieving its stated aims, and always reproduces itself as desire. One example of this, which I have already argued, is the way that alcohol functions as a metaphor for desire in *The Lost Weekend*: alcohol does not gift a kind of enlightenment or realisation of desire or need, it only serves to ensure its own consumption. However, more generally, desire in noir is cyclical in part due to the way in which investigative logic is embedded within the logic of noir itself. Many noir films (*The Maltese Falcon*, *Double Indemnity*, *The Big Sleep*, *The Killers*, and so on) explicitly involve a criminal investigation. What demarcates the territory of noir, however, is that central to the investigation is the connection between the desire and motivation of the culprit, and the desires and involvement of the investigator. As I argued in the previous chapter, the space of contestation in *Double Indemnity* is in Neff’s anticipation of Keyes’ perspective and desire. In both *Double Indemnity* and *The Lost Weekend* the tension between desire of the culprit (in the latter’s case, the culprit is alcohol, or desire itself) and desire of the investigator are borne out over a similar contestation over the home. In *Double Indemnity*, Neff not only seeks to gain control of the Dietrichson house, but also to undermine and outsmart his father figure, Keyes, to live out of his long shadow. In *Weekend*, the reward for breaking free of alcohol (of desire) is forming a couple with Helen and

⁶⁵ Bjerg, ‘Drug Addiction and Capitalism’, p. 19.

living in their home. Desire's purpose is not to lie within a specific object, but instead to act as a metonymy: intricately linked to an object, but not defined as that object. Desire's relation to ideology in *Weekend* can be understood in terms of how the object of desire is continually deferred. In relation to his artistic pursuits, Don is required to desire authentically.

The ending of the film implies that Don, strangely, needs to be sober in order to produce his novel, yet his novel's success is dependent on his alcoholism as subject matter. The novel must be written 'authentically' — that is, by a sober writer — but at the same time can only be effective if its subject matter is similarly 'authentic'. Don's drinking, however, serves a counter-factual purpose. Addiction is alluring because it allows Don to experience the Real of desire without having to continuously repeat its 'symbolic loop'.⁶⁶ His drinking allows him *not* to remember to desire 'properly'. He can disavow the fetishistic illusion regarding desire *and* home. The term 'authentic desire', too, is an oxymoronic one. Desire itself is inauthentic since its promise for satisfaction is structurally impossible. Don wishes to find something which completely satisfies his desire *to* desire; to desire authentically is to not desire at all. I will now consider why alcohol's position in the film allows Don to carry out the imperative to desire, arguing that desire for alcohol is a desire for nothingness itself.

Don's pursuit of alcohol shows that alcohol is a kind of nothingness. Alcohol's ideological position in the film is as nothingness itself; Don's desire for alcohol is a desire for the *absence of* desire. In terms of desire, Don's intoxication can be understood not as an object, but a *state*, or mood. The defining characteristic of this intoxication is its empty promises: it offers a liberation of the ego, of identity, but once you reach its oasis, another promise appears on the horizon. This

⁶⁶ Bjerg, 'Drug Addiction and Capitalism', p. 19.

mood of intoxication, moreover, is the Real of desire because it signals that desire is nothing without impossibility. However, crucially, desire is always a *positive* and *productive* force: there is no 'I not-desire,' but instead 'I desire not to.' Mitchell writes that 'Desire not to show desire is [...] still a form of desire.'⁶⁷ The only conceivable path for Don to not desire is therefore to desire nothingness itself.

In some sense, therefore, Don's desire for alcohol is a manifestation of his death drive; a desire *not* to desire. Desire can be conceptualised as a singular force because there is, ultimately, only one object of desire: the *objet petit a*. A drive is more a manifestation of desire. It is an attempt to access *jouissance*, to experience joy as suffering.⁶⁸ The concept of the death drive does not merely imply a destruction of the self, an untying of symbolic connections. Lacan places the death drive in the symbolic order, not the imaginary. The death drive is an impulse to return to a preoedipal state, to a time before the infant was inducted into the symbolic order, in other words, to be free from desire. We are severed from the Real during our entrance into language, into the symbolic order. Thus, the Real cannot only be experienced through traumatic ruptures in the symbolic order. The impulse present in the death drive involves a certain level of nostalgia. For Don, drinking is a way to experience this nostalgia, perhaps even a way for him to return to a preoedipal state, to be beyond desire, to be able to truly desire nothingness. It is, however, a nostalgia for something which never existed. A past which, through time, has been distorted into an imagined past, much in the same way that home is thought of, in film noir, in nostalgic terms.

⁶⁷ Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, p. 44.

⁶⁸ Philip Dravers, 'The Drive as a Fundamental Concept of Psychoanalysis', <<http://londonsociety-nls.org.uk/LibraryLS/Texts-from-the-the-PN/Philip-Dravers-Drive.pdf>>, p. 10.

Noir itself is a nostalgic category since understanding noir involves a nostalgic reconstruction of its historical and spectatorial contexts, as described by Žižek's 'mythic spectator'.⁶⁹ Edward Dimendberg, in his book *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity*, argues that because film noir is an 'amalgam of diverse historical and cultural elements [...] a work of *bricolage*'; its invocations of the past, and its imaginings of the future, are rendered anxious through nostalgia.⁷⁰ This anxiety, in *Weekend*, manifests itself through the film's desire to reconstruct the home as fetishistic object, since it is a (lacklustre) reward for Don for recovering from his addiction. Dimendberg argues that the 'nonsynchronous character of film noir' resides in the various tensions brought about by the transition between the 1920s and 1930s.⁷¹ Furthermore, Dimendberg observes how noir conveys a 'palpable fascination'⁷² — another unfortunate use of the term — for the transitional period from the 1940s to the 1950s, 'whose seemingly transparent social structure — a world in which power relations could still be traced with relative ease by a morally irreproachable detective figure — would shortly vanish.'⁷³ Nostalgia is therefore conveyed in part through the fascination with the 'morally irreproachable detective figure'. What Dimendberg misses is the extent to which we are fascinated by the detective figure's fascination, and that the detective need not even be a detective. The epistemological mystery in *Weekend* is not only to do with Don's drinking, but the home itself. In *Weekend*, our fascination lies with Don's fascination with alcohol *and* its effect on the home. His desire for alcohol is really a nothingness, an absence of desire which reveals the fetishistic and fantasmatic construction of home. The next chapter will define the different types of home present in noir and how the space and architecture

⁶⁹ Žižek, *Looking Awry*, p. 112.

⁷⁰ Dimendberg, *Spaces of Modernity*, p. 4.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid, p. 5

⁷³ Ibid.

of these different types, largely inner-city apartments or detached homes, particularly alter the meaning of home, as well as provide historical context for home in film noir.

Chapter 5

‘People Stopped Buying Houses’ — Inside and Outside the Family Home

‘By wandering aimlessly, all places became equal and it no longer mattered where he was. On his best walks he was able to feel that he was nowhere. And this, finally was all he ever asked of things: to be nowhere.’

Paul Auster, *City of Glass*¹



Figure 5.1, *Mildred Pierce*, dir. by Michael Curtiz (Warner Bros., USA, 1945)

¹ Paul Auster, ‘City of Glass’, in *The New York Trilogy* (London: Faber & Faber, 2011 [1987], p. 4.

The Weird, the Eerie, and the Home

In this chapter, I will consider how the different types of home depicted in film noir are integral to the drama and conflict of noir. The focus will be on how a sense of eeriness, a term used by Mark Fisher, is generated by these fascinating domestic spaces. In the first section, I will discuss how the family home is constructed in film noir, principally using *Mildred Pierce* (1945) as a case study. I will focus on how noir's structural retroactivity is replicated in the (re)construction of home through devices such as the flashback and the voiceover, and how fascination affects the investigation narratives of noir in relation to home, as well as the different ways in which labour and work is conceived in noir. The subsequent section will be a broader discussion of how the inner-city apartment differs from the familial home, using *Double Indemnity*, *The Big Sleep*, and *The Maltese Falcon*. There will be an emphasis on how urbanisation after the Depression alters the construction of public and private space in relation to home in noir, specifically how the compression of space intensifies the traumatic dimension of home in relation to the absence of history in noir and its spaces. The final section will consider how looking and desire are affected by the urbanisation of home, drawing parallels between Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks* and Fritz Lang's *The Woman in the Window*.

Film noir operates largely at an unconscious level. As Élisabeth Roudinesco writes, in the unconscious symbols are 'more real than what they symbolise'.² Readings of film noir that solely focus on a literal, surface level — such as a moral critique of Don's drinking in *The Lost Weekend* — always miss something, some unexplained, fascinating obscurity which acts as the driving force for the narrative. In these circumstances, home can be read unconsciously, not just as a physical

² Élisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan: An Outline of a Life and a History of a System of Thought*, trans. by Barbara Bray (Cambridge: Pity Press, 1999), p. 211.

place but as a centralised obscurity. This chapter will examine the ways in which the physical space of home interacts with noir's fascination. I will use Mark Fisher's concepts of the weird and the eerie to help understand the notions of presence and absence with regards to home. The psychological motivation of noir's characters is crucial in its narratives. For Elizabeth Cowie, these motivations are 'often in some way perverse or acknowledged as psychotic.'³ I would contend that the character's desire for home is rendered 'perverse' because of the ambiguities and tensions in the home. For example, as I previously showed in *The Lost Weekend*, Don's alcohol addiction is 'psychotic' inasmuch it makes the home no longer desirable. It is not only the motivations of noir's characters that are 'perverse' but home itself. An effect of noir's mode of fascination is that it reveals that home is not something which one can return to as it was (or how one imagined it to be), since home's meaning is altered *in the process* of returning. Home in noir exists as fragments of the lost object — the *objet petit a* — which are to be reconstituted. Home's meaning is altered through the relation between the imagined home and the specificity of its physical spaces.

This uncertain meaning is characteristic of the way the home functions in noir. There is not simply one archetype of home. Instead, I would identify two broad categories of home: the detached home and the apartment. The detached home, which will be the focus for the first section of this chapter, is typically the domain of the family. It is primarily a place *for* the construction and continuation of the family. The detached home is more likely to be depicted as a lost paradise, a relic, something to be rescued and excavated from noir. The apartment's meaning is, on the other hand, much more starkly ambiguous. Both are integral to noir's narratives, despite being decentred in various ways, such as by the gendered division of labour which emphasises the 'woman's place'

³ Cowie, 'Film Noir and Women', p. 126.

in the home; retroactive narratives of noir; the retroactive conception of noir; and by noir's fascination with home.

One example of an important familial home in noir is the Dietrichson house in *Double Indemnity*. The home is Neff's object of desire because it contains the family hierarchy, but it becomes secondary to evading and outthinking Keyes' investigation. Neff's fascination with Phyllis in *Indemnity* is structured by the architectural hierarchy granted to Phyllis during their meeting. Moreover, Phyllis' criminality is seen as an indictment of Mr. Dietrichson, an effect of his ineffectual patriarchal power. The home in *Mildred Pierce* — which I will discuss in greater length shortly — is an object which requires retroactive reconstruction through Mildred's testimony. Mildred assumes Veda's guilt because the murder of Monte is framed as a failure of the familial structure by way of the unholy disruption of the patriarch's apex position. In *The Big Sleep*, Geiger's home is continually returned to in the hope of discovering the secret of the fascination it inspires. The family home in *Shadow of a Doubt*, which I have already discussed, is central because it houses the murderous Uncle Charles who cannot be swiftly caught *because* of his position in the family home. In *The Secret Beyond the Door* (1947), the home itself is the fascinating mystery. Mark Lamphere's home is a labyrinth of locked doors and rooms. As I will argue in the next chapter, a central concern of *Gilda* is the location of Gilda, specifically where she is inside Ballin's home. These types of homes typically denote a hierarchal power structure through the imposition of the family and the films' narratives involve a struggle for dominion over the home. This section will now examine the ways in which home is a present and central concern of noir while is at the same time absent.

The theorist Mark Fisher identifies two distinct yet interrelated affects which aim to encapsulate a profound strangeness and ambivalence in contemporary culture. Fisher calls these

two concepts the ‘weird’ and the ‘eerie’. On the one hand, ‘the weird’, Fisher writes, ‘is constituted by a presence — the presence of that which does not belong’, and the ‘eerie by contrast, is constituted by a failure of absence or by a failure of presence.’⁴ The weird and the eerie, therefore, concern questions of existence and non-existence: the weird asks why something is present when it should not be, and the eerie asks why there is an absence when something should be there. Although Fisher’s examples primarily include horror science fiction and gothic fiction (his primary examples include H.P. Lovecraft, Daphne du Maurier, H.G. Wells, and Andrei Tarkovsky), I would like to propose that these concepts can also help explain the peculiar position that home occupies in film noir. Fisher does not directly engage with noir, but his ideas can be used to illuminate noir from a gothic perspective. To understand the incongruity of home in noir, we need to emphasise the gothic, the horrific dimension of noir.

Fisher uses Freud’s notion of the uncanny as a point of origin for his concept of the weird and the eerie. Fisher stresses Freud’s native German term — *unheimlich* — over the anglicised ‘uncanny’. *Unheimlich* roughly translates as ‘unhomely’; it is a familiar object within which the strange is found, and indeed the strangeness is only heightened by its familiarity. As Freud writes, ‘what is “uncanny” is frightening precisely because it is not known and familiar.’⁵ What concerns Fisher, and myself, is not so much Freud’s clinical diagnosis of the *unheimlich*, but rather the way in which his influential 1919 essay — ‘The Uncanny’ — is marked by a series of ‘hesitations, conjectures and rejected theses’.⁶ Freud’s final conclusion — that the *unheimlich* is characterised by castration anxiety — is less pointed as the continual circling and doubling inherent in both Freud’s essay and the *unheimlich* itself. One famous example is the uncanny appearance of the

⁴ Mark Fisher, *The Weird and The Eerie* (London: Repeater Books, 2016) [epub ebook], 14.2.

⁵ Sigmund Freud, ‘The Uncanny’

⁶ Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, 5.6.

Burns sisters in Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*: they are encountered together as Danny circles round the labyrinthian corridors of the Overlook Hotel. It is as if they appear where Danny has *already* been. There is a slippage in historical time; they have *already* been there, and they are there again. Likewise, Jack Torrance has 'always' been the caretaker. The *unheimlich* in noir is predominantly expressed through fascination. The circling of the *unheimlich* relates to a narrative circularity in relation to knowledge and truth. The flashback narratives give a sense that we have *been here before*, not just that we have already visited the same spaces, but rather that we have arrived too late. Doubling, in noir, is more of an aesthetic and visual concern, though it of course relates to narrative as well. There is the doubling of characters in the Stranger and Michael in *Stranger on the Third Floor*, and Uncle Charles and Young Charlie in *Shadow of a Doubt*, for example. The femme fatale, which I will address in the subsequent chapter, functions as a double too. Even when we look back at noir in retrospect, we notice certain similarities across disparate films: the doomed hero, the femme fatale, the foreboding sense of fate, the lack of home, and so forth.

The central ambivalence at the centre of the *unheimlich* (and in Freud's psychoanalysis) is, as Fisher argues, whether the *unheimlich* is 'about making the familiar — and the familial — strange' or is 'about returning the strange to the familiar, the familial'.⁷ This tension exists in noir insofar as the introduction of noir poses the question of whether the home is made strange by noir, or whether noir signals a return of the strange to home. Although Fisher claims that a 'sense of the eerie seldom clings to enclosed and inhabited domestic spaces', and that the eerie is 'more readily' found 'in landscapes partially emptied of the human', I would contend that homes in film noir *are*,

⁷ Fisher, *The Weird and The Eerie*, 5.9.

in a sense, ruins, made so *by virtue* of their domestic habitation.⁸ As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, Don's apartment in *The Lost Weekend* only serves to intensify his condition. In noir, the combination of the domestic habitation of home and the emptiness felt towards it opens the question of who the home is for, if it even is for anyone.

'Reason backwards' — The Case of the Missing Agency in Mildred Pierce



Figure 5.2, *Mildred Pierce* (1945)

⁸ Ibid. 5.11.

I will now examine Michael Curtiz's *Mildred Pierce* in relation to the eerie and the *unheimlich*. Specifically, I will emphasise the structural composition of the film and how it frames the eeriness of the home. This section will examine how the narrative of *Mildred Pierce* alters the meaning of the home and shows us the semiotics of the family home more broadly in noir. In film noir, the *objet petit a* is often suggested through the *point de capiton*. Flashback narrative structures purposely obfuscate details only to retroactively recontextualise them, to 'effect a metaleptic reversal' as Tyrer argues.⁹ In short, the method by which meaning is constructed is altered and this affects the construction of home's meaning. While the film might seem like a strange choice because the question over how representative it is of noir — it is typically understood as a kind of hybrid of noir and women's melodrama — I have chosen to look at *Mildred Pierce* in greater detail precisely because it highlights how noir operates in 'hybrid' films. Noir's rough edges and the ambiguity it inspires intensify because it is assumed to be marginal. Noir's effect is not limited to films which are considered strictly 'canonical'. Exactly what elements make up, say, a women's melodrama are questioned by the introduction of noir. As I will examine, two major and pertinent elements of a women's melodrama are the prominence of the female perspective via the voiceover and the importance of the home, family, and domestic work. As I will argue, the female voiceover subverts our expectations for a male voiceover, but in the context of the film the narration is conducted under the investigation of two male detectives. The 'noir influence' on Mildred's voiceover manifests itself through her self-censorship. The home, too, is a deeply disturbing place. It is not only made into the scene of a crime, but the crime itself disrupts the very order that the heteronormative family hierarchy is intended to impose. In fact, the unconscious and incestuous nature of Monte's murder by Veda undermines the logic of the family. Noir, then, permeates the

⁹ Tyrer, 'Film Noir as *Point de Capiton*', p. 109.

film to the point where it is impossible to identify where melodrama begins and noir ends, or vice versa.

One such noir element which confuses definitional (and therefore symbolic) meaning is the flashback structure. The flashback narrative structure in *Mildred Pierce* to reconstruct the murder of Monte Beragon — Mildred's second husband. The moment which acts as the investigative catalyst for the film — the cause — in *Mildred Pierce* is when Mildred meets Monte during the flashback.¹⁰ Marc Vernet calls 'the *mise-en-place* [...] a foretaste of what will be the truth: the final pleasure, the solution of the intrigue.'¹¹ The concealed corpse of Monte at the beginning of the film is the enigma, the '*pot au noir*' (Figure 5.2). More precisely, the central enigma of the film occurs when Veda shoots Monte, but we cannot see Veda. We see Monte's reflection in the mirror as he whispers his final word: 'Mildred.'¹² The film's structure reverses the set-up and enigma. The beginning of the film implies that the flashback structure is going to reveal how and why Mildred murdered Monte. As she invites Wally Fay — an old business partner of Bert Pierce, Mildred's first husband — back to her home for an illicit affair, we see that the body of Monte is close-by, but hidden from Wally (Figures 5.2, and 5.3). The suggestion is that Mildred murdered Monte and is trying to frame the oblivious Wally. This implication of this image is established as the central conundrum of the film: why did Mildred murder Monte? Yet the solution to the set-up is based on our misrecognition of where the set-up and enigma occur. This is a common formulation in noir: we are encouraged to believe that we can see (and therefore know) more than the characters on screen, but our sense of mastery is always undermined.

¹⁰ Marc Vernet, 'The Filmic Transaction' in *Film Noir Reader 2*, ed. Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight, 1999 [1983]), p. 59.

¹¹ Vernet, 'The Filmic Transition', p. 61.

¹² *Mildred Pierce*, dir. by Michael Curtiz (Warner Bros., USA, 1945).



Figure 5.3, *Mildred Pierce* (1945)

Other noirs with flashback structures often *offer* the spectator a somewhat privileged position in relation to the guilt of the protagonist. We know, for instance, that the conclusion of Neff's tale in *Indemnity* ends with him being severely wounded. We know that Swede is killed by the two hitmen in *The Killers*. The flashbacks used in these two films are, moreover, explicitly confessional, whereby we learn how events turned sour. They are explanations, and often rationalisations, of guilt. In *Mildred Pierce*, however, although the flashback is staged as a guilty confessional (Mildred recounts her story to two anonymous police investigators), it is revealed that she is confessing — albeit unknowingly — her innocence. The detectives reveal not only that they knew all along that Veda murdered Monte, but also that she confessed, thus absolving Mildred

from her guilt. The purpose of Mildred's confessional flashback is to cleanse the home of any clues pertaining to the crime, to exonerate the home itself. The revelation of Veda's arrest and confession concurrently undermine Mildred's feminine perspective by showing it to be one step behind the male investigators, what Delphine Letort calls 'the patriarchal metadiscourse'.¹³ This is the central paradox in the film: it requires Mildred's confession in order to render the home innocent, but it needs to undermine her perspective. This undermining is in service of showing that the error lies in the dissolution of her first marriage with Bert and pursuit of a career over her motherhood.

At first, Mildred draws Wally into the home under false pretences — replicating the role of the femme fatale — and attempts to frame him for Monte's death. The narrative structure, therefore, serves to reverse the typical narrative trajectory of the femme fatale whereby the once innocent woman betrays the male protagonist. She is the guilty woman shown to be innocent. Her innocence, however, is only partial: Veda's crime is recast because of Mildred's perceived failure as a mother. Joyce Nelson, in her influential 1985 essay '*Mildred Pierce* Reconsidered', calls this reversal a false suture.¹⁴ Specifically, she identifies the way the film withholds the reverse shot when Monte is shot. As Delphine Letort writes, this denial 'creates an enigma that frames the viewer's response to the film and subjects its female protagonist to the dominance of a patriarchal metadiscourse, signified by the search for truth driving the male detectives.'¹⁵ The false suture serves to undermine the control of the narrative Mildred has through her voiceover. Male voiceovers, by contrast, involve the male protagonist recontextualising events by subjecting them to the 'patriarchal metadiscourse', rather than being subjected by it.¹⁶ The eerie is here suggested

¹³ Delphine Letort, 'First Glances at *Mildred Pierce*: Adapting Hardboiled Melodrama', *Screen*, 56.2 (Summer 2015), p. 264.

¹⁴ Joyce Nelson, '*Mildred Pierce* Reconsidered', *Movies and Methods: An Anthology, Volume II*, ed. by Bill Nichols (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985).

¹⁵ Letort, 'First Glances at *Mildred Pierce*', p. 264.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

by Mildred's apparent hesitations and deliberations. If the eerie is characterised by 'a failure of absence or by a failure of presence'¹⁷ then there is, here, a failure of desire insofar as its incongruities are exposed. In noir, what Mildred *should* want as the femme fatale is central to the film's narrative. To put it crudely, what she apparently wants is the destruction of the male protagonists. Yet she does not show the familiar signs of the femme fatale. The absence of her desire can be understood as evidence of her position as the femme fatale, but it should be read as the film's failure to understand Mildred herself. Joan Crawford's performance is rigid throughout the whole scene, as if she is possessed by some other force, or that her agency has been taken away. Her lack of performativity is evidence that something is missing. Although this occurs before the flashback, her emotional blankness suggests that she is already anticipating our accusations of guilt. She cannot show that she wants to punish Wally (whether she genuinely wants to or not). Indeed, she cannot show that she wants anything at all, lest she is accused of being a femme fatale. For Fisher, the eerie is characterised by lack or ambiguity of agency. Mildred's presence in the home is eerie because, as Fisher writes, 'the central enigma at its core is the problem of agency.'¹⁸ The problem of agency is perhaps best understood as a *resistance* to narrativisation and narrative structure. On a cultural level, the organisation of discreet pieces of information into cohesive narratives is a strategy to help us make sense of the world. Conceiving of the home as eerie helps illuminate why its meaning is so difficult to pin down.

There is, of course, the additional question of Mildred's agency — what does she want with us? — which is connected to the problem of the agency of the home. What Mildred wants with Wally is equivalent to what the home wants with Wally. His, and our, desire to know is turned

¹⁷ Mark Fisher, *The Weird and The Eerie*, 14.2.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 14.6.

against us. Home is a structure in which desire has been abandoned: we look, but we do not see.¹⁹ In this sense, the function of the voiceover and the flashback later in the film is to ‘reintroduce’ desire to the film. As I will explore later, the purpose Mildred’s voiceover is a site of severe contestation in the film. It is a key debate in critical work surrounding the film as to whether Mildred’s voiceover is confessional (and therefore deferential to patriarchal forces) or whether she is assuming authorial control over the narrative. Comparatively, in *Double Indemnity*, Phyllis is first shown through the narrative retrospection as inherently villainous. It is clear through the double entendres that Phyllis’ sexual desire will lead to (and has already led to) destruction. However, since we see her through Neff’s eyes, she is understood, mistakenly, as once innocent. Neff’s narration moves to convince us that the reason he did not recognise Phyllis’ deception was because she was innocent from the beginning, rather than her always being villainous. The flashback structure and subsequent retroactive historical and epistemological reconstruction dislocates our identification with Neff and allows us to see Phyllis as always already antagonistic.

¹⁹ Fisher’s book emphasises that the eerie can easily be seen in ruins and abandoned structures, such as those depicted in post-apocalyptic literature and film (for example, *I Am Legend*), and in historical mysteries like the *Marie Celeste*.



Figure 5.4, *Mildred Pierce* (1945)

In *Mildred Pierce*, the formulation of guilt and the femme fatale seems to happen in reverse. Whichever way we look at the home, it always contains the possibility that it is something else. Mildred is first shown, by way of implication, to be murderous and later revealed to be innocent. Mildred was not guilty of Veda's crime but acted as if she was. Instead of displacing her guilt in misrecognition, as Neff does, Mildred assumes Veda's guilt over Monte's murder. At first, the supposed set-up implies the murderous capacity of the home, that the home has been defiled by criminal activity. The retroactive structure reveals the central enigma surrounding home — how it was constructed *without* the 'patriarchal metadiscourse' — because in trying to reconstitute the

home into a place of safety, its meaning is changed. In this way, the home resists simple categorisation.



Figure 5.5, *Mildred Pierce* (1945)

The home is fascinating, too, because of the way in which it is inviting and perilous. Its danger arises from the enigma of Monte's corpse. When Mildred opens the front door to invite Wally inside, the light from the lighthouse initially cloaks them in shadow before in the next moment lighting them up (Figures. 5.4 and 5.5). Although noir's chiaroscuro lighting is often used to conceal, here it is being used to *highlight* Mildred and the home. The visual discomfort is due to the rhythmic pattern of showing and concealing which prevents our gaze from adjusting totally. Although fascination always renders us 'in the dark' in relation to knowledge, it is here staged

through showing; we are made fully aware that we cannot see, and therefore that we cannot know. We are invited to interpret and speculate on the meaning of the corpse and its effect on the home. Compounding the problem of vision is the way in which Mildred stands at the threshold of the home, the place between the outside and the inside. Epistemologically speaking, the home is positioned as a site of knowledge, where meaning is stitched together through the *point de capiton*. As Fisher remarks, ‘the notion of *the between* is crucial to the weird’.²⁰ The ‘weird’ in this image is Mildred; she is the element that does not belong, even though, as a mother and a wife, she ‘should’. Mildred does not belong because of her hesitations. Her hesitations countervail Wally’s confident presentation of his desires; Mildred shows that desire is marked by hesitations, that indecision or a lack of control constitutes desire. But the weird might also constitute the home. By standing on (or in) the threshold of the home, the site of knowledge, Mildred acts as Lacan’s fascinating veil. Wally is concerned with what lies behind Mildred, and how his desire might be attained *by* the home. But the home here is a space of negation, of death itself. It is not, again, what lies behind the veil, but the veil — Mildred — itself which is fascinating. Standing in the doorway temporarily halts desire, a hesitation which reveals the circular, and thus fascinating, staging of desire in the home. Moreover, this hesitation is marked by the stoppage and stillness of the camera. It is as if the home changes *when* we look because it does not exist outside of our gaze. The cinematic screen acts as a threshold. The enigma being shown to us is therefore not what lies in the home but our relation to it and to its construction. The threshold can therefore be conceived as a narrative hole within the film. They are emblematic of the various enigmas of what Monte saw, what Mildred wants, and, crucially, what the home wants.

²⁰ Fisher, *The Weird and The Eerie*, 8.10.

W.J.T. Mitchell, in his book *What Do Pictures Want?*, argues that it is not a question of what images ‘do, but instead what they “want”’.²¹ He shifts the focus from ‘power to desire’.²² Our relation to images is not one of power, of mastery over the image inasmuch as we do not learn about images through exercising power over them. Instead, for Mitchell, our relation lies within reckoning with their desire. The relation between subject and object, between viewer and observer, is reversed when considering the desire of images, Mitchell writes,

The painting's desire, in short, is to change places with the beholder, to transfix or paralyze the beholder, turning him into an image for the gaze. [...] The power they want is manifested as lack, not as possession.²³

Moreover, Mitchell argues, mirroring Freud’s question of what women want, that the ““default” position of images is feminine’²⁴ because of the way in which spectatorship is constructed. As Norman Bryson writes, ‘around an opposition between woman as image and man as the bearer of look.’²⁵ For Mitchell, the question of what images want is ‘inseparable’ from the question of what women want.²⁶

In noir, then, what women want is what noir wants. As I will explore later, the spectre of the femme fatale is central to navigating the desire of noir yet is largely defined by its absence. The home, too, follows Mitchell’s logic. Here, in *Mildred Pierce*, Wally, the bearer of the male gaze, is drawn into the proposition of what power he can exert with his gaze over the ‘image’ of

²¹ W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 32.

²² Ibid.

²³ Mitchell, p. 36.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 35.

²⁵ Norman Bryson, ‘Introduction’, in *Visual Culture: Images and Interpretations*, ed. by Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly, and Keith Moxey (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1994), p. xxv.

²⁶ Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, p. 35.

home. It is his gaze which obscures what the home (and Mildred) want from him. In relation to the investigative narratives of noir, the reversal of the relation between viewer and image disrupts the assumption of a logical narrative progression. When Slavoj Žižek writes about the difference between the ‘classical’ and ‘hardboiled’ detectives, he argues that the ‘the greatest charm of the classical detective narrative lies in the fascinating, uncanny, dreamlike quality of the story the client tells the detective at the very beginning.’²⁷ The explanation of the problem, Žižek contends, holds a spell over us (insofar as we are swept up in ‘libidinal’ forces of the story) and the role of the detective is to offer a corrective and ‘rational’ explanation.²⁸ However, I would instead highlight how the ending of classical detective narratives retell and thus attempt to narrativize their stories. At the end of *A Study in Scarlet*, for example, Sherlock Holmes, in recounting the neat narrativized version of the story, says to Watson that ‘in solving a problem of this sort, the grand thing is to be able to reason backwards.’²⁹ Although Holmes is referring to his investigative process, it is the process of retelling the story which encodes meaning.

In terms of the investigative structure of film noir, however, the noir detective must always remain open to one more clue. As Žižek argues, ‘the hard-boiled detective is [...] “involved” from the beginning.’³⁰ The noir detective cannot narrativize the story because of how their ‘involvement defines [their] very subjective position.’³¹ In noir, because of the centrality of home, there is no external agency, no authority to which the detective can rely on in order to ‘tell the story straight.’ Noir’s detective narratives, and the mode of detection itself, do not presuppose that the investigation is an external framework through which the details of the investigation can be

²⁷ Žižek, *Looking Awry*, p. 60.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Arthur Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet*, (Project Gutenberg, 2008), [ebook], 5.65.

³⁰ Žižek, *Looking Awry*, p. 61.

³¹ Ibid, p. 61.

illuminated and observed, but rather that it is the investigation (and the investigator/spectator's involvement with) which *produces* the crime; it would not exist without the desire *of* the investigation. Clues, therefore, are *always* excessive. The excess clue in *Mildred Pierce* is the enigma of who shot Monte, who Monte *saw* in the mirror as well as the ambiguous lighting — what did the image see? And what did it desire? The mirror acts as a reflection insofar as we see Monte, but also as a screen for our investigative desire. The mirror positions the culprit not behind the mirror, but behind *us*; we, and our desire, become the very veil which obscures the answer, the narrative hole at the centre of the film.

'I was wrong' — Constructing Mildred's Voiceover

This section explores how the guilt in Mildred's voiceover reconstructs the home as ambiguous. Although the voiceover begins a few scenes into the film, we can see how the visual ambiguity surrounding home prefaces Mildred's guilt and her subsequent restoration of the 'accepted' familial composition of her and Bert. The light from the lighthouse, crashing against the home like waves from the shoreline, gives the illusion of depth in the home. It represents the excess of signifiers. Since the evidence of Mildred's guilt is her assumption of Veda's guilt rather than Monte's corpse, Mildred cannot totally hide her guilt in shadow. At the same time she cannot be open about her desires. The desire to know is contrasted with Mildred's guilt, which is manifested as an instance of the weird. She is guilty even when we expect her not to be since she is coded as a femme fatale by the way in which she seemingly lures the unsuspecting Wally into her home. Wally is not a noir hero, however. He is slightly too lecherous, too eager. He is no Walter Neff, Sam Spade, or Philip Marlowe. The guilt is a familial guilt, as Mildred takes on the burden of Veda's crimes, in part as a punishment for her failure as the maternal figure. Yet this perceived

failure is only spectral, always threatening to be realised. It is only true, supposedly, if Veda's crime comes to light. Veda's criminality and deviancy are therefore partially explained by the film through the lack of a paternal figure in her life, a lack which arises through Mildred's pursuit of a career over her family. Veda's crime, in a sense, is the home's fault since all members of the family must share the guilt. Paradoxically, then, Mildred must act as if she is guilty in order to avoid guilt.

On one level, noir's lighting is supposed to imply a level of depth in the image which thus suggests that the surfaces of noir are deceptive, and that something lies beneath them. This replication of visual depth, however, is itself a deception. As Copjec concludes, noir's visual techniques — particularly its deep-focus photograph and chiaroscuro lighting — 'are placed in the service of creating an artificial replication of depth in the image in order to make up for, to compensate for, the absence of depth in narrative spaces.'³² Copjec argues that the images in noir do not hide and conceal hidden meanings, but rather that those hidden meanings lie on the surface. Christine Gledhill, for instance, argues that the image of women in film noir is 'an artifice' which 'suggests another place behind the image where the woman might be.'³³ The image of the woman is therefore semiotically excessive; she always contains the possibility of meaning more than she appears. Gledhill is largely concerned with the femme fatale. She therefore presupposes that this artifice is constructed by the male control of the narrative.³⁴ This is a useful prism through which to analyse *Mildred Pierce* and the construction of home within it, although I do not think it is necessary to only focus on the femme fatale, which itself is constructed by the male control of the narrative.

³² Copjec, 'Private Space in Film Noir', p. 192.

³³ Christine Gledhill, 'Kluge: A contemporary Film Noir', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan (London: BFI, 1978), p. 17.

³⁴ Consider, for example, the way in which Kathie in *Out of the Past*, Phyllis in *Double Indemnity*, and Cora in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* are all constructed through the male flashback.

Mildred's voiceover is only made possible through the male investigator's control over the metadiscourse of the film; it is not her confession. She can tell her story on the condition that she relinquishes control of the discourse and reconstruct home in accordance with the patriarchal demands, thereby absolving Bert. She must then reconnect with Bert, to bring unity to her discordance. The home 'suggests another place behind the image' with the image being the open and inviting home.³⁵ It is in this way that, as Fred Pfeil argues, film noir is centred on 'home and family, even as it decentres and problematises both'³⁶ because of its 'visibly artificial existence' within the film.³⁷ The home visualises our fascination with Mildred's guilt and thus primarily becomes a psychological space, a place in which psychology is projected onto and into. In addition to the visible perception of home, there is the concern of how the home is constructed narratively.

As Wally and Mildred enter the home, the bright and illuminated interior invites inspection and thus gives the false impression that the home has nothing to hide. Although the light comes from outside the home, it matches the intensity from the interior lights. The boundaries between the two are blurred and it is left ambiguous whether Mildred's framing is to save Veda or because Mildred 'really' wants to frame Wally specifically. Wally is invited to see and inspect the home by the rhythmically pulsing light of the lighthouse. The lighthouse's gaze is partially blocked by the window shades, projecting prison-like bars of shadow across the interior walls. Wally rightly questions Mildred's behaviour and motivation, but all he sees is obscured, only visible in glimpses. Like us, he misrecognises Mildred's desire and fantasy. When Mildred leaves, excusing herself to change her clothes after she causes Wally's glass to shatter on the ground, she locks the door and

³⁵ Gledhill, 'Kluge: A contemporary Film Noir', p. 17.

³⁶ Fred Pfeil, 'Home Fires Burning: Family Noir in *Blue Velvet* and *Terminator 2*' in *Shades of Noir: A Reader*, ed. by Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1993), p. 231.

³⁷ Copjec, 'Private Space in Film Noir', p. 193.

escapes, trapping Wally in the home. Thus, Vernet's 'enigma'³⁸ is provided *by* the home. The perplexing questions (why Monte's body is in the home, why Wally is being invited inside, and why he is being invited downstairs) are all centred around the home. Home is the central lack of the film. Our misrecognition is due to way in which the retroactive structure highlights the impossibility of the *objet petit a* —the *objet petit a* is a structural relation. As Lacan writes, history is only 'the past insofar as it is historicised in the present.'³⁹ Cause and effect are reversed, the answer of fantasy comes before the posing of the question.

The home is central to noir but is consistently undermined and problematised, principally *by or for* women. Its symbolic position in noir is tightly bound with noir's depiction of gender. For example, Mildred is initially coded and mistook as a femme fatale because her solicitation of Wally is performed in the absence of her husband, Monte. Her imagined and implied adultery is made possible (and worse) by the disruption to the hierarchy. It is an affair which takes place *in* the home while the spectral husband sees the infidelity beyond his death. Symbolically, then, Monte is kept alive, in stasis, through the home. The position of women in the home is crucial to the stabilisation of home. Victoria Straughn, writing about *Mildred Pierce* and the role of women in Cold War America, notes that prominent readings of the film centre around the film being used as a piece of postwar propaganda for viewing audiences who had their own concerns about 'marriage, family life, and employment'.⁴⁰ For Straughn, all the 'nascent strains of foreign aggression and communism as cultural, moral, and familial threats' in the film serve to 'underscore the point that a woman's proper role is in the home, under the protective and watchful eye of her

³⁸ Vernet, 'The Filmic Transition', p. 62.

³⁹ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique 1953-1954*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. by John Forrester (London: Norton, 1991), p. 12.

⁴⁰ Victoria Straughn, 'Hollywood "Takes" on Domestic Subversion: The Role of Women in Cold War America', *OAH Magazine of History* 17.2 (January 2003), p. 31.

husband/patriarch.⁴¹ Mildred is the obvious example, but the same logic can be extended to Monte and Veda. Monte's desire for Veda, for instance, is a way for him to obtain Mildred's wealth, wealth that is gained at the *expense* of the family. Straughn points to Veda's sexual promiscuity as a response to her being 'fatherless'. The lack of a father, that is, the lack of masculine law, causes her destructive behaviour.

On the other hand, C. M. Gill argues that Veda's pursuit of Monte can be read in two obverse ways: first, as an 'attempt by Veda to survive outside the family system'⁴², second, as a mechanism which (perhaps inadvertently) reunites the family. 'Monte's murder', Gill writes, 'ultimately leads to [...] the reunion of formerly estranged spouses Mildred and Bert.'⁴³ The family is therefore constituted on violent and destructive grounds and a tribute must be paid in order to sustain it. As Straughn compellingly concludes: 'In the final scene of the film, with one daughter dead and the other hopelessly misguided and ruined, Mildred rejoins her husband, finally accepting her "rightful place." Her subversion has cost her the lives of her children.'⁴⁴ Her 'rightful place', as Gill observes, is with Bert, the man who gives her 'Pierce', Mildred's 'rightful' last name. For Gill and Straughn, then, the reconstitution of the 'proper' family is central to the film. Before Mildred is interrogated by the police she gives her name as 'Mildred Pierce-Beragon', signifying the unresolved familial tension.⁴⁵ In addition, I would add, it is the reconstitution of the 'proper' family *within* the 'proper' home that is central to the film since it is through the duplicity of the home that the hierarchal structure of the family is desecrated.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² C. M. Gill, 'Martyring Veda: *Mildred Pierce* and Family Systems Theory', *Style*, 44.1&2 (Spring/Summer 2010), p. 95.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 32.

⁴⁵ *Mildred Pierce* (1945).

To understand this distinction, I will now analyse the gendered assumptions of labour in the film, as well as how the film interprets labour more generally. Under the patriarchal structure of the home and the family there is a clear delineation between male and female labour: the husband goes away to work while the wife stays to maintain the home. Instead, Mildred's home collapses the boundaries between these two distinct and gendered types of labour. The home *itself* becomes a threshold for labour. The two competing discourses in the film are whether or not Mildred's acquiescence to Bert at the end of the film is a result of her perceived abandonment of her family in favour of work, or a result of the demands of the patriarchal familial structure itself. A historical reading is thus problematised by this ambiguity raised by the film. Mildred's voiceover can help illuminate the problem.

From the beginning, as Catherine Jurca observes, Mildred works and cooks in the kitchen: she is 'the picture of the dedicated suburban housewife.'⁴⁶ Yet the voiceover undermines the image and the home. Mildred begins by saying that Bert and Wally were once business partners, both owners of a real estate company. 'They built a lot of houses,' Mildred boasts, but 'suddenly, everybody stopped buying', resulting in Bert losing his job.⁴⁷ Stopping buying, in this context, refers at once to the historical reasoning behind buying houses and the breakdown of the family. Mildred's framing of Wally for Monte's murder can thus be seen another way. Wally's punishment by Mildred is principally moral: he is prepared to have an affair with Mildred in the knowledge that she is married. But the moral edge to his punishment is here rendered *historical*. The film aligns his moral willingness to desecrate the sanctity of marriage with a historical intention to desecrate the sanctity of home. The lessening demand in the housing market (expressed

⁴⁶ Catherine Jurca, 'Mildred Pierce, Warner Bros., and the Corporate Family', *Representations* 77 (Winter 2002), p. 33.

⁴⁷ *Mildred Pierce* (1945).

metaphorically in the film as ‘stopping buying houses’) is a result of the economic upheaval caused by the changes in production and labour ingrained by World War Two. The breakdown of the family can equally be read as a consequence of the war insofar as men who left the home to fight in the war returned as traumatised citizens. In addition, women leaving home to reinforce the labour market compounded the problem. With respect to returning soldiers, John Huston’s documentary *Let There Be Light* (1946) — which was unreleased until 1980 — provides an insight into the medical misunderstanding of post-traumatic stress disorder.⁴⁸ It details the medical and psychiatric attempts at reintegrating soldiers back into society. The end of the documentary, though, involves depicting the soldiers’ successful reintegration through being discharged from the various hospitals and military clinics and from military service itself. Noir’s response to these real psychological traumas is a cultural one, which represents them as *moral* traumas. However, given noir’s traumatic formal retroactivity and subject matter, such simple translations are rarely possible or wholly convincing.

For Bert, his familial failure is replicated in his economic destitution since ‘returning home from work’ fulfils the same symbolic function as returning from war. Bert, for example, does not see the value in Mildred earning money for herself. When a dress for Veda arrives, he asks where Mildred got the money from, to which she replies, ‘making cakes and pies for the neighbours. I earned it.’⁴⁹ Mildred’s income deriving from baked goods is inseparable from her position as a housewife. Mildred’s home and her business are managed from the same space. Mildred thus occupies the masculine and feminine roles of the home by herself: both mother and worker. In this context, the task of the flashback is to exorcise this initial image of the ‘dysfunctional’ family. For

⁴⁸ *Let There Be Light*, dir. by John Huston (USA: U.S. Army, 1946).

⁴⁹ *Mildred Pierce* (1945).

Bert, the reason people ‘stopped buying houses’ is that women such as Mildred were occupying the roles of mother and worker.

The confessional flashback reframes Mildred’s domestic baking *as* criminal. Mildred’s profitable baking is understood as a direct replacement of Bert’s work. If only Mildred had stuck to her domestic ‘duties’, or so the moral imperative goes, then people would have kept ‘buying houses.’ The flashback therefore stages the collapse between the domestic and commercial spaces, structuring it as Mildred’s principle crime. As Jurca argues, ‘there is no domestic space in *Mildred Pierce* inhabited outside the realm of the commercial.’⁵⁰ For Jurca, then, domesticity disappeared into the commercial; everything collapses into the logic of the market. In this way, the home as domestic space has vanished. Later in the film, Mildred’s flourishing diner empire follows a similar logic to the baking of cakes and pies because her diners are supposed to *replace* the need for a housewife to stay home and cook for their husbands and families since it is supposed to reproduce Mildred’s ‘homely’ cooking on a commercial scale. We could here reverse Jurca’s argument: it is not the domestic space which disappears into the commercial space, but the commercial which disappears into the domestic. In the film, there is no work beyond the domestic. This is not only visible through Mildred’s business, but through Monte, who does not work in the film since he inherited his fortune.

For Monte, his sexual desire for Mildred is associated with Mildred’s economic desires. As Jurca observes, when Monte and Mildred meet in the latter’s restaurant, Mildred fixes a chandelier while stood on a ladder and only her legs are visible to the camera (Figure 5.6), a moment which bears resemblance to Cora’s introduction in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*.

⁵⁰ Jurca, ‘*Mildred Pierce*’, p. 33.

Monte says he has come to ‘check in’ on his ‘investment.’⁵¹ Jurca argues that, for Monte, ‘what underwrites Mildred’s desirability is her capacity for making money.’⁵² Equally, too, ‘Mildred’s interest in Monte ebbs with his fortune.’⁵³ The domestic nature of Monte and Mildred’s business and sexual relationship highlights the centrality of the family metaphor. In the next scene, Monte attempts to seduce Mildred by inviting her to his family’s house by the beach for an afternoon swim. One notable difference here is that this scene is part of Mildred’s flashback, it is her narration, and thus she is framing herself into his way.



Figure 5.6, *Mildred Pierce* (1945)

⁵¹ *Mildred Pierce* (1945).

⁵² Jurca, ‘*Mildred Pierce*’, p. 36.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

As Jurca observes, Monte lets Mildred choose from a selection of bathing suits, all belonging to an imaginary sister. Jurca writes: ‘At first it is as though only incestuous innuendo can arouse [Mildred and Monte], but economic considerations resurface to normalize their relationship. A commercial transaction secures a more literal extension of the family’.⁵⁴ Their marriage is only made possible through Monte gaining one-third of her restaurant business, and Mildred gaining the ‘respectability’ of the Beragon name. It is a financial transaction which restores ‘the family unit.’⁵⁵ As Jurca concludes,

Just as the restaurant becomes a way for the mother to treat customers as though they were neighbors, to whom she already ministers as though they were family, the corporation makes entrepreneurs out of mothers and transforms family members into business partners and business partners into family members.⁵⁶

Moreover, Mildred’s commercial activity works as an expansion of her domestic labour. Even in its absence, the home and the domestic is central. Mildred’s punishment by the end of the film (her destitute family, her failed business, and her humiliation by the detectives) is a consequence of her blending of the domestic and commercial spheres. I would argue this is less Mildred’s personal failing than a result of the demands imposed on her by Bert, Veda, and the construction of home more generally. Bert’s failure as the patriarch is thus replicated in the loss of his labour. Bert’s labour, unlike Mildred’s domesticity, has no value.

In the film, the relationship between Mildred’s domestic labour and her commercial value is expressed structurally, through what Pamela Robertson describes as the ‘structural gap’ between

⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 38.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

Mildred's voiceover and the 'implied filmmaker's narration'.⁵⁷ It is this 'gap' which remains a point of contestation for critics of *Mildred Pierce*. As Karen Hollinger observes, the voiceover in noir is typically male and serves as a counterweight to the dominating visual presence of the femme fatale.⁵⁸ The voiceover in *Mildred Pierce*, though, according to Robertson, encourages us to 'adopt a patriarchal point of view' because of the irony and disjunction between the voiceover and the images. It acts to deny autonomy, to 'deny Mildred's "feminine" discourse'.⁵⁹ In other words, we are encouraged to see Mildred's narration as unreliable and criminal. However, the narration is Mildred's — she frames herself how she wants to be seen, she is in control of her own image. Since the flashback frames Mildred as a criminal confessing her crimes, all her actions are coded as potential evidence for her crimes. The meaning, however, is only established at the end of the film when the detectives reveal that they knew of Mildred's innocence all along. We are encouraged to conceive of Mildred as guilty, and in so doing, feel the guilt ourselves, despite it being predicated on the wrong assumption of her guilt.

Robertson notes that while male voiceovers in noir are typically tinged with irony, Mildred's is more sincere. Robertson compares Mildred's narration with Walter Neff's in *Indemnity*. In the latter, Neff says in his opening confession that he killed Mr. Dietrichson '...for money, and for a woman', and that he 'didn't get the money,' or 'the woman'.⁶⁰ Neff 'recognises the fatal irony in his story', but he does so with a 'mordant humour'.⁶¹ Neff's narration, too, reveals the doubling of money and women. His confession aligns money and women — in the same way

⁵⁷ Pamela Robertson, 'Structural Irony in *Mildred Pierce*, or How Mildred Lost Her Tongue', *Cinema Journal* 30.1 (Autumn, 1990), p. 52.

⁵⁸ Karen Hollinger, 'Film Noir, Voice Over, and the Femme Fatale', in *Film Noir Reader*, ed. by Alain Silver and James Urisini (New York: Limelight Edition, 1996).

⁵⁹ Robertson, 'Structural Irony in *Mildred Pierce*', p. 43.

⁶⁰ *Double Indemnity* (1944).

⁶¹ Robertson, 'Structural Irony in *Mildred Pierce*', p. 44.

that *Pierce* aligns the commercial and the domestic spheres — as the two reasons for his desire. The reason Neff would want money is the same as why he would want a woman, that is, in order to reassert himself at the top of the patriarchal structure, to validate his ‘masculine labour’. Mildred’s response, however, to the detective’s question (‘Why did you divorce [Bert]?’) is to begin ‘with an admission of error’⁶²: ‘I was wrong.’ Mildred says, ‘It’s taken me four years to find that out. Now I know — I was wrong.’⁶³ This shows, Robertson argues, that Mildred ‘views her story as [...] a lesson in right and wrong’.⁶⁴ There is a need for Mildred to confess that her actions were wrong so that the blame can be shifted away from the home and onto her. The task of the detectives, therefore, is to historicise the story and organise it in a linear and causal fashion by solving the enigma of Mildred’s feminine perspective. Yet in so doing, the narrative becomes fascinated with Mildred’s perspective. A reversal occurs where what she saw (the ‘objective’ truth of what happened, why Monte said ‘Mildred’ when he was shot by Veda, why she forwent her domestic obligations) is transformed into what she *felt*. Her feelings must be organised into a causal and verifiable timeline, but the construction of meaning through noir’s retroactivity renders the problems of guilt historical. History and guilt cannot merely be put back into the film as if they were forgotten or suppressed. Just as historical readings of the film risk simply supplanting one metaphor for another, Mildred’s voiceover shows the impossibility of replacing affect with meaning.

Robertson’s argument, though, seems generally true regarding the differing gendered expectations placed on noir’s male and female protagonists. However, Mildred resists these expectations. If we take an example from *The Lady From Shanghai* (1947), where Michael’s

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ *Mildred Pierce* (1945).

⁶⁴ Robertson, ‘Structural Irony in *Mildred Pierce*’, p. 44.

opening narration is characterised by a self-deprecating humour, we can see similarities to Mildred's. At the beginning of the film, Michael says,

When I start out to make a fool of myself, there's very little that can stop me. If I'd known where it would end, I'd never let anything start. If I'd been in my right mind, that is. But once I'd seen [Elsa], once I'd seen her, I was not in my right mind for quite some time.⁶⁵

The same mordant humour as Neff's in *Indemnity* is present here. Yet the humour masks Michael's lack of admission of guilt. His emphasis is not on *what* he did wrong, but rather the state of mind he was in (which was directly influenced by Elsa, the femme fatale) while something went wrong. While in the kitchen with Bert in the opening scene of the flashback, Mildred expresses a similar disposition. She says, speaking to Bert, 'you might as well get this straight right once and for all. Those kids come first in this house. Before either one of us. Maybe that's right and maybe it's wrong, but that's the way it is.'⁶⁶ Mildred places the blame on the conditions she is in, the spell she is under, rather than on what she is *doing*. This line of dialogue is, crucially, not part of the flashback narration but instead diegetic to the flashback. Mildred thus anticipates the criticisms, that is, the desire of the investigators, of what she did. Although she frames her flashback in strictly moralistic terms — 'I was wrong'⁶⁷ — the content of the flashback directly undermines this framing. She cannot be wrong because there was no decision to make; there was no autonomy in the home. The spell Michael is under is characterised by a mixture of his drunkenness and fascinated desire for Elsa, whereas the spell Mildred is under is the ongoing denial of her 'feminine discourse' which is channelled through the patriarchal and hierarchical logic of home.

⁶⁵ *The Lady From Shanghai* (1947).

⁶⁶ *Mildred Pierce* (1945).

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

Contrary to Robertson's claims, then, Mildred's feminine perspective is not wholly denied its autonomy in the structural incongruity between the voiceover and the images. Traces of irony can be detected in Mildred's voiceover. While introducing her family home, Mildred also speaks about how she feels about her position in the patriarchal hierarchy. First, she says that she 'lived on Corvallis Street, where all the houses look alike.'⁶⁸ Mildred implies that the assumption of the houses' similarity is the very façade which makes any retrospective interrogation difficult. Their consistency is reminiscent of wartime factory production; the endless conveyers containing millions of identical bullets, loaded in thousands of identical weapons, which is unremarked upon by Mildred. Second, Mildred continues, 'I was always in the kitchen. I felt as though I'd lived in a kitchen all my life...except for the few hours it took to get married.'⁶⁹ For Mildred, the kitchen is akin to a factory, since it is characterised by repetitious work. When Bert is in work (or overseas) Mildred working is not a problem for him. It is only when Bert returns home — indeed, in the film, the very moment he returns home — does Mildred's work and income become a problem. Although Robertson claims that there is a juxtaposition between Mildred's feminine discourse and the 'presumably objective, but clearly "masculine," image track', here the image and the narration coincide.⁷⁰

As Mildred says this, Bert returns home, looking dejected (Figure 5.7). In the flashback we know that Bert has lost his job, but Mildred is yet to know. The flashback thus has a level of self-awareness and irony which is so often present in the male voiceover. The crucial structural point of divergence occurs *during* this confluence between voice and image. However, Mildred's voiceover does not enable the film to move neatly from melodrama to noir. The difference between

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Robertson, 'Structural Irony in *Mildred Pierce*', p. 43.

'melodrama' and 'noir' in the film is not clear cut. For Jurca, the melodramatic aspects of the film work to create a 'coercive structure' because of the 'gendered' way Mildred's account is continually undermined by the male detectives.⁷¹



Figure 5.7, *Mildred Pierce* (1945)

It is not the case that the film can be neatly divided into melodrama (Mildred's narration) and noir (the male detective's interjections), but rather that home is reconfigured through both noir and melodrama.⁷² The melodramatic association between motherhood and commerce 'seeks to naturalize the market economy.'⁷³ For example, Mildred's home baking at the beginning of the

⁷¹ Jurca, '*Mildred Pierce*', p. 31.

⁷² *Ibid*, p. 33.

⁷³ *Ibid*, p. 31.

film is a commercial activity, as opposed to a recreational one. Whereas the ‘noirness’ of the retroactive structure restricts the film’s attempts at narrativisation. Both, therefore, begin in the home, and the noirness, it turns out, was *in* the melodrama all along.

While Robertson is correct to identify the ‘structural gap’ as an essential component of the melodramatic elements of the film, she does not emphasise the way in which Mildred ‘talks back’ to the structuring absence of the film through her self-awareness. For Linda Williams, history is the absent cause of the film.⁷⁴ As Robertson summarises the case, the film does ‘represent the specific historical conditions (the return of American GIs and the wartime employment of women) that made this representation of the problems of women possible in the first place.’⁷⁵ Instead, these historical conditions are folded into the personal and melodramatic problems of the film. People stopped ‘buying houses’ (thus making Bert redundant) in the film not because of the economic effects of World War Two, but as an *effect* of Mildred’s disruption of the hierarchy of the home through the combination of the domestic and commercial spheres. A historical reading necessitates splitting the narrative into melodramatic sequences and noir sequences. Pam Cook, for instance, argues that the melodramatic sequences are in the past, while the present is constituted by noirness.⁷⁶ Such an arrangement, however, is made impossible by the retroactivity of noir. The opening of the film, for Letort, does not conform to such neat distinctions. In Letort’s analysis, because ‘the new enigma’ created by Monte’s last word — Mildred — ‘points to Mildred’s guilt’, it actively ‘undermines the melodramatic appeal of the first flashback.’⁷⁷ This appeal is centred around the idyllic and implied history prior to the breakdown of the marriage. Indeed, the

⁷⁴ Linda Williams, ‘Feminist Film Theory: *Mildred Pierce* and the Second World War’ in *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television*, ed. by E. Deidre Pribram (New York: Verso, 1988), p. 21.

⁷⁵ Robertson, ‘Structural Irony in *Mildred Pierce*’, p. 52.

⁷⁶ Pam Cook, ‘Duplicity in *Mildred Pierce*’, in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan (London: BFI, 2001), pp. 73-75.

⁷⁷ Letort, ‘First Glances at *Mildred Pierce*’, p. 265.

breakdown is presented as having a singular cause — specifically, this scene. The retroactive structure of the film that results in the breakdown of the marriage happens both *before* and *after* Monte's accusation of Mildred. The flashback structure itself, therefore, prohibits a melodramatic reconstruction of home, both on the cinematic and critical levels. It is in yearning that home is forgotten. While the flashback structure of *Mildred Pierce* might appear to be consistent with the expectations of 'women's melodrama' (insofar as it centres Mildred's perspective) we can see how both the flashback and the narration complicates the strict categorisation of the film, and in so doing, complicates the home. Through the flashback structure, the home becomes a site of trauma. It depicts various instances of domestic detached homes: Mildred's home with Monte and her home with Bert are contrasted against each other, and neither seemingly provides the stability they promise. The next section will examine other types of home in noir, specifically the numerous ways apartments are presented. Then, it will discuss the ways in which the compression of space intensifies the traumatic dimension of home in relation to the absence of history in noir and its spaces.

The Machinery of Night — The Apartment and the City in Film Noir.

The family home is subject to forces outside of itself because it lacks a stable interiority. In noir, the cityscapes and compact urban environments pressure and decentre the home. The prevalence of the urban apartment can help to show the differing meanings of home, and how home can be understood by its negation. The urban apartment, for one, lies in direct contrast to the detached familial home. Where the detached home is open and inviting — at least, on the surface — the apartment is claustrophobic and surrounded by danger. It could be said that the distinction, in the context of epistemology, is that in the detached home questions are invited, whereas in the

apartment questions intrude from the outside. It is, for example, in his cramped apartment where Michael succumbs to his paranoid dream in *Stranger on the Third Floor*. The denouement of *The Maltese Falcon* occurs in Sam Spade's apartment. These apartments differ from each other: Michael's is more of a rented room than a 'full' home, whereas Spade's is more complete. Their function — to intensify paranoia — is similar, however.



Figure 5.8, Edward Hopper, *Night Windows*, 1928

Apartments, generally, do not distinguish themselves as separate and private spaces. These apartments, as urban technologies, suggest a divergent relationship to public space in comparison to detached homes in the suburbs, not only in their proximity to the epicentres of fast-moving urban life, but also in the relationship between apartments and public space. In cities themselves the sound of sirens — emissions of othered, indistinct and distant crises — becomes the backdrop for privation. Public space is always potentially encroaching on the boundary of private space, as

is visible in Edward Hopper's *Night Windows* (Figure 5.8). The wind blows on the curtains and through the open window as we watch the back of a woman living her, supposedly, private life. Noir, with its proclivity for urban centres such as New York and Los Angeles, uses this breakdown of boundaries to further intensify its action. As Janey Place observes, the 'urban landscape of film noir' contrasts with its depiction of a 'pastoral, idealised, remembered past.'⁷⁸ Apartments, with their transitory nature, resist such nostalgia.

Unlike the detached home, the apartment rarely contains a family; in fact, the apartment is normally characterised by an absence of family. Some examples in noir include Walter Neff's apartment in *Double Indemnity*, where the affair between Neff and Phyllis begins and the family is broken up. The family is similarly broken up in the apartments in both *The Woman in the Window* and *Scarlet Street*. Michael, in *Stranger on the Third Floor*, is prohibited from having Jane visit him in his apartment. Don's apartment in *The Lost Weekend* cannot sustain a family because of Don's addiction. In *The Blue Dahlia*, Helen's apartment is the site in which Johnny and Helen's marriage (and therefore a potential family unit) disintegrates, both from her adultery and her murder. In the apartment, they are the same thing. Irene's apartment in *Dark Passage* (1947) and Sam Spade's apartment in *The Maltese Falcon* are absent of any family. In *The Killers*, the apartment where the Swede is killed, is a place of negation and death. In truth, Swede's apartment is more of a rooming house, and as such is distinct from Irene's lavish apartment. For Swede, his living space embodies his alienation. The fact that he is not a recognised part of the community — the police chief tells Reardon that Swede 'just lived here is all'⁷⁹ — emphasises that his rooming house functions effectively as his coffin.

⁷⁸ Janey Place, 'Women in Film Noir', p. 51.

⁷⁹ *The Killers* (1946)

One of the ways in which we can see the mechanisms of the compression of space in noir and apartments is by thinking of apartments as a technology. Historically speaking, the apartment could be considered a technological solution to the economic downturn of the Depression in the 1930s. It is a technological solution because of its spatial efficiency in comparison with larger detached homes. Apartments compress time and space as well as lessening the division between work and home. Apartments were suitable for the post-depression period because they were cheaper and more affordable to build, they took up less space, and were situated close to urban work. In a historical sense, ‘people stopped buying houses’ and more people moved into apartments because the detached, family homes were unsustainable or unsuitable after the depression.⁸⁰ This ‘unsuitability’ is understood as cultural and psychological in noir.

The transition between the two types of homes is understood as traumatic in noir. We can read film noir as a way for American culture to articulate its trauma over the Great Depression, and then over World War Two. As Joel Dinerstein argues, the visual style of noir and narrative obliqueness lies in contrast to both the light screwball comedies (such as Howard Hawks’ *Bringing Up Baby* (1938)⁸¹ and Frank Capra’s *It Happened One Night* (1934)⁸²) and moralistic gangster films (such as Mervyn LeRoy’s *Little Caesar* (1931)⁸³ and Howard Hawks’ *Scarface* (1932)⁸⁴) of the 1930s. Dinerstein argues that the majority of noir criticism ‘presumes a postwar context’ to noir despite the fact that noir ‘emerges’ in 1940 and 1941.⁸⁵ This view fails to account for many of the ‘classic’ film noirs from before 1945 which were, according to Dinerstein, already ‘visually

⁸⁰ *Mildred Pierce* (1945).

⁸¹ *Bring Up Baby*, dir. by Howard Hawks (RKO Pictures, USA, 1938).

⁸² *It Happened One Night*, dir. by Frank Capra (Columbia Pictures, USA, 1934).

⁸³ *Little Caesar*, dir. by Mervyn LeRoy (Warner Bros. Pictures, USA, 1931).

⁸⁴ *Scarface*, dir. by Howard Hawks (United Artists, USA, 1932).

⁸⁵ Joel Dinerstein, “‘Emergent Noir’: Film Noir and the Great Depression in *High Sierra* (1941) and *This Gun For Hire* (1942)”, *Journal of American Studies*, 42.3, *Film and Popular Culture* (December 2008), p. 421.

and thematically fully realized.’⁸⁶ Dinerstein’s point of divergence is useful since noir embodies many competing historical contexts. It is important not to conceive of noir as simply an outgrowth of anxieties over World War Two and the postwar period. What his argument highlights and problematises, in my view, is the way in which the critical approach to noir is dependent on a retroactive viewpoint. Dinerstein is correct to identify that noir should not be viewed in only a postwar context (and that the presumption of such a context in a sense *produces* noir as a postwar category). This thesis seeks to highlight what is present but not seen in noir, while at the same time also drawing attention to what is seen but not present.⁸⁷ Moreover, I argue that the epistemological and ontological frustrations in noir are themselves a reflection of corresponding critical anxieties, and that these frustrations and anxieties coalesce around the ambiguous object of home. It is through centring home that we can understand noir’s anxieties more fully.

Charting the transition of the construction of home in film noir between two binaries — pre-war and postwar — involves a misreading of noir’s history. If the trauma of World War Two renders home a lost object — noir’s protagonists cannot ‘look back’ and recover it — then Dinerstein helps point toward the previous and unresolved trauma of the Great Depression. What draws audiences to noir is, Dinerstein argues, a ‘nostalgia for stable spaces.’⁸⁸ The primary ‘stable space’, I would argue, is home. The noir protagonist’s goal to recover the home involves recovering the family home, which is rapidly disappearing through the seismic changes brought about by the Depression and World War Two. This is another instance of how home is lost in film

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ As evidenced in critical works such as: Bronfen, ‘Femme Fatale: Negotiations of Tragic Desire’; Cowie, ‘Film Noir and Women’; Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street*; Harris, ‘Outside History, but Historically so’; Oliver and Trigo, *Noir Anxiety*; and others.

⁸⁸ Dinerstein, ‘Emergent Noir’, p. 425.

noir. Noir refuses to give us these ‘stable spaces’ and instead offers us ‘haunted cityscapes’, which consist of claustrophobic and violent urban spaces.⁸⁹

Although Dinerstein does not indicate as such, noir’s spaces are haunted because of the spectral presence of home. The home is eerie because of what Fisher calls ‘a failure of presence’.⁹⁰ The question asked by the eerie character of noir is not ‘what happened and why?’, but rather ‘the nature of *what* disappeared.’⁹¹ What disappeared, in noir, is the home *qua* its symbolic position as a stable space. For Fisher, the fascination with the eerie is brought about through the loss of the symbolic structures which reveal the Real. He writes, ‘For the symbolic structures which made sense of the monuments have rotted away, and in a sense what we witness here is the unintelligibility and the inscrutability of the Real itself.’⁹² For a cultural object to have meaning, it must have people to see it in its particular context. In noir, therefore, home is lost partly due to its lost context. It is not that the bricks and mortar have eroded away, but that the very street, the neighbours which, supposedly, gave home its meaning have vanished entirely. Noir’s ‘haunted cityscapes’ therefore reimagine home as a kind of lost relic, stripped of all its semiotic systems.⁹³ Fisher concludes that in such eerie situations we are ‘compelled to imagine our own world as a set of eerie traces.’⁹⁴

One example of this is the way in which the complex labyrinthian investigative structure of *The Big Sleep* — the endless sliding of signifiers — is manifested through the labyrinthian structure of the city itself. Film noir’s urban spaces, in addition to the breakdown between public

⁸⁹ Dinerstein, ‘Emergent Noir’, p. 425.

⁹⁰ Fisher, *The Weird and The Eerie*, 14.5.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Dinerstein, ‘Emergent Noir’, p. 425.

⁹⁴ Fisher, *The Weird and The Eerie*, 14.5.

and private space, fuel anxiety through their traumatically *present* setting. The labyrinthian structure of the city in *The Big Sleep* reflects the complexity of Philip Marlowe's investigation. Marlowe must overcome the geography and architecture of the city in order to uncover the crime: from Sternwood's mansion at the beginning of the film where he is offered this impossible investigation; to the bookshop he hides in across from Geiger's store; to Geiger's home, which Marlowe stakes out on multiple occasions; to the street he is ambushed on; to the apartment he confronts Brody in; to Eddie Mars' casino; and so on. All of these spaces render home no more distinct than any other public space. It is merely a place to be investigated, its symbolic structure lost in the web of the investigation. The complexity of the narrative is underpinned by the continuous cycle of new and disparate locations. Plot threads are rarely resolved in these new locations, and usually only serve to push Marlowe to the next location.

Noir's refusal to give us 'stable spaces' is derived from its mode of fascination.⁹⁵ The home is intended to function as a locked room, where no more signifiers of desire can be found, but the detective (in noir, I would argue that almost every protagonist is a detective of sorts) produces more signifiers because of the collapse of home as a locked room through their desire. The spatial claustrophobia in noir is mirrored by a narrative claustrophobia, which leads to the prevalence of violence in noir. This violence, for Dinerstein, is a 'cinematic language of resistance,' a resistance focused towards the 'undignified work, anonymity, and shocks of technological society' which resonated with audiences who had not come to terms with their experience of the Depression.⁹⁶ Bert's job, in *Mildred Pierce*, is supposed to offer 'dignified', or middle-class work, which insulates him from the 'shocks of technological society'.⁹⁷ However, the anonymity of people

⁹⁵ Dinerstein, 'Emergent Noir', p. 425.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

'stopping buying houses' obscures the mechanisms by which the family home is lost, making them seem coldly impersonal.

Film noir presents an opposition to new technological and spatial forms which would shift and change the American home, particularly new ways of organising urban living. It is critical both of the new changes and the idealistic revisionism of the past. The new changes are mechanisms which serve to further alienate the home's inhabitants. Rather than giving more 'free time' to noir's characters, the new technologies of home collapse time and intensify the traumatic dimensions of home. The rising prevalence of apartments resulted in a more densely packed workforce in the city. The vertical (as opposed to horizontal) expansion of work impacted the home's relation to work since the new migrating population to the larger cities (particularly coastal cities such as Los Angeles and New York) were invariably doing so in search of work after the Depression. The kind of work undertaken in noir is typically that of an investigator, or noir's protagonists are quickly thrust into that role.



Figure 5.9, *The Maltese Falcon* (1941)

In *The Maltese Falcon* the confluence between apartments and detectives is most noticeable at the end of the film. In his apartment, Spade can see through the forgery of the falcon and the deceptive motives of the other characters — Gutman, Cairo, and Wilmer — because of his apartment's spatial ambiguity. The separation between the interiority and safety of Spade's apartment and the outside world is almost non-existent. People can come and go as they please. After Spade uncovers Brigid's involvement in the Archer murder — the inciting incident of the film —and her subsequent arrest, he takes the falcon statuette, then stands and watches as Brigid is taken away by the police in the apartment lift. As the metal door to the lift closes, the shadows cover her eye in the shape of a bird's talon (Figure 5.7). Brigid's dreams and desire are thus filtered

through the fascinating object of the falcon: it is all she, and Spade, can see. The apartment is presented as a trap for desire. It is in the home that Spade's sexual desire is rendered investigative, and is thus what motivates him to turn her in. The shadow of the claw on Brigid's eye is an eerie imprint of the centrality of home, the loss of the symbolic system, inasmuch as the falcon represents desire and loss. The shadow, as a metaphor, suggests that all she can see is the falcon, while at the same time implying that the falcon has clawed out her eye, leaving her blind. The shadow, therefore, visualises the obscurity inherent in the home's fascination. A shadow, after all, is merely a guarantor of some real object which blocks the light. Although confronted with what purportedly hides behind the veil (the secret truth that the falcon is a fake and that there is possibly no such thing as the 'real' falcon), fascination's grip is still maintained. The presence of the claw-like shadow suggests something still blocks her gaze from understanding the truth. Home, again, is entirely central in the narratives of noir, while at the same time destabilised.⁹⁸ The apartment has many configurations in noir, and each requires differing considerations. However, the apartments in noir all serve to accelerate tension. In *The Maltese Falcon*, it is a site of claustrophobia, as well as one where the fascination inspired by the falcon is intensified. Indeed, the central debate surrounding the veracity of the falcon is mirrored in the apartment's own legitimacy as a domestic space. In *Stranger on the Third Floor*, Michael's apartment leads to his paranoid nightmare, which serves as the counterweight to his desire to move into a 'real' home with Jane. Michael and Jane's home is *borne from* the apartment, not the other way around. Next, I will consider the apartment's relation to the city, and how the gaze interacts.

⁹⁸ Pfeil, 'Home Fires Burning', p. 231.

‘Both Mirror and Screen’ — *Nighthawks* (1942) and *The Woman in the Window* (1944)

In this section I begin by discussing how the work of New York artist Edward Hopper anticipates and reflects noir’s eerie concerns over urban living, technology, and its relation to a decay in the American community. In addition, the section moves onto a discussion of the temporal effect of the eerie on home. Then, I look at Fritz Lang’s *The Woman in the Window* and the way in which it visualises the mode of fascination inherent in the eerie, and how this interacts with the notions of home and public space. Urban living, in both Hopper and noir, encourages paranoia and instils a nihilistic, fatalistic despair. Tina Lent, in an essay about Los Angeles in film noir, notes Hopper’s influence on noir. She calls Hopper’s work in the late twenties and thirties a ‘tougher, more hard-boiled approach to the city’, thus attempting to connect his work with the hard-boiled fiction writers whose novels were adapted into film noirs, as well as original screenplays.⁹⁹ Hopper’s work parallels film noir’s concern over urban living by anonymising its inhabitants, helping demonstrate the difference between the promise laid out by technology and its actual function. *Nighthawks* (1942), Hopper’s most famous painting, shows us a compelling depiction of the American city at night, as well as the inhabitants’ fascination with the city and their alienation from one another (Figure 5.10). The painting can help illuminate the meaning of the city in noir.

Nighthawks depicts an almost empty late-night diner on a street corner in New York. Hopper’s painting, like noir, is both instantly recognisable (insofar as they are well-known cultural objects) and fascinating. At the same time, there is something unknowable (perhaps impossible) at the heart of the painting. In relation to the painting’s depiction of urban living, Hopper’s use of light is similar to noir. Only the diner releases light onto the street. The night-time streets are empty and

⁹⁹ Tina Olsin Lent, ‘The Dark Side of the Dream: The Image of Los Angeles in Film Noir’, in *Southern California Quarterly*, 69.4, *A Centennial Salute to Hollywood, 1887-1987* (Winter 1987), p. 330.

there appear to be no streetlamps in sight. The only light is artificial and produced by the interior technology of the diner, the light originates from the street. At a basic level, light helps us see, but in a metaphorical sense, it allows us to *know*. As with the light from the lighthouse from *Mildred Pierce*, the light in *Nighthawks* only gives the illusion of depth to compensate for ‘the absence of depth in narrative spaces.’¹⁰⁰ Although the light from the lighthouse comes from outside the home, the illumination of the interior gives the impression that it originates from the home. The light disguises Mildred’s intentions and desires, as well as the desires of the home.



Fig 5.10, Edward Hopper, *Nighthawks*, 1942, Oil on canvas, 84.1 x 152.4 cm, The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago

A similar process occurs in *Nighthawks*. The painting’s ambiguous use of light, and the distance of our perspective, strips away the identity of the people in the diner, as well as the specificity of the diner itself. It is the very illumination of the diner that reveals the fascination

¹⁰⁰ Copjec, ‘Private Space in Film Noir’, p. 192.

with the diners themselves. Their identity is blurred because of the light. In her essay on *Nighthawks* and film noir, Erica Doss argues that ‘Hopper does not emphasise the human element in the painting.’¹⁰¹ Instead, she continues, Hopper chooses to capture the tedium found in the city late at night, to substitute identity (hereby understood as community) for a feeling of despair: nothing can be learnt by looking. Looking, too, only produces more questions. This feeling of despair can be seen in varying degrees in all four of the characters in the painting. The man on the left, for example, drinks while facing away from us and has only a row of empty stools for company. He looks at something in his hand, but his body obscures the object. The other two, presumably a couple, both look despondent. The bright red dress draws attention to the woman, yet she idly plays with some money to pass the time. On the right, the bartender looks to be rushed, as if caught between two different jobs. His gaze cuts across the scene, but it is not clear *where* he is looking.

The characters here, Doss argues, appear ‘complex but essentially ambiguous;’¹⁰² as a result of our distance we cannot accurately ascertain any details about them. Consider, for instance, the couple’s apparent apathy. Their disposition raises questions, but ultimately does not yield any answers. Their unhappiness might be a result of a number of things (a bad marriage, some terrible news, an unexciting first date, and so on), or it might be because Hopper (and by extension us) have merely caught them at an inopportune time, a brief lull amidst an electrifying evening. Our interpretation of the couple is therefore contingent on the effect of our gaze on the image. What we assume to know by looking colours our understanding of the painting. Our conclusion can only be speculative. What home desires, too, as Doss argues, is similarly complex but ‘essentially

¹⁰¹ Doss, Erika, ‘Edward Hopper, Nighthawks, and Film Noir’, in *Post Script: Essays in Film and the Humanities*, 2.2 (1983), p. 22.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, p. 31

ambiguous.¹⁰³ In this respect, our spectatorial position in *Nighthawks* is ambiguous in the same way that our gaze aligns with Vincent Parry's in *Dark Passage*. Like the noir investigator, we are implicated in the economy of desire, too close to discover anything useful.

In the painting, the sense of the eerie is located in the ambiguity of the patrons and the lack of activity outside the diner. Fisher notes that the sensation of the eerie occurs either 'when there is something present where there should be nothing', or when there should be something, but nothing is present.¹⁰⁴ Both sensations are present in *Nighthawks*. It is possible to read the diner as both the 'something' and the 'nothing'.¹⁰⁵ On the first sensation of the eerie, 'something present where there should be nothing', what is present is the diner itself.¹⁰⁶ Although the empty street might at first seem the disconcerting element, it is only made so *by* the way in which the diner highlights the emptiness. This is heightened by the fact that the diner itself is both inhabited and desolate: people are inside, but they are 'essentially ambiguous'.¹⁰⁷ The ambiguity of the characters in *Nighthawks* is perhaps the central gap of the painting — all eyes are drawn there — but the ambiguity itself produces additional gaps. On the second sensation of the eerie, 'nothing present when there should be something', what is missing is a sense of community. More precisely, it is a sense of coherence, a promise that the painting can and will be explained. In noir, we can understand the anxieties over home to be anxieties over coherence. In *Nighthawks*, like noir, there is no satisfactory explanation, no complete ending, and no conclusion.

A clear parallel in noir to *Nighthawks* is Fritz Lang's *The Woman in the Window* (1944), released two years after Hopper's painting. *Window*'s principal point of similarity with *Nighthawks*

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Fisher, *The Weird and The Eerie*, 14.3,

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Doss, 'Edward Hopper, Nighthawks, and Film Noir', p. 31.

lies in the acts of looking and being seen, as well as with desire and fantasy. The film concerns Richard Wanley, a psychology professor, who, after sending his wife and children away on a vacation, becomes entangled in a criminal plot involving Alice's lover, Claude Mazard, whom Wanley accidentally murders. One of the film's most scopophilic and suggestive scenes occurs early in the film. After spending an evening with his friends — a doctor and a district attorney — Wanley, himself a psychology professor, strolls outside to look at the fascinating portrait of a woman, one which he was caught looking at earlier. Moments later, he sees the reflection of Alice, the subject of the painting, materialise in the window. The camera pans to the left, revealing Alice stood in the street, present and watching Wanley. Harris notes the comedic element to the film's premise: a doctor, a district attorney, and professor stare at a painting, but 'only the expert on Freud falls for his fantasy.'¹⁰⁸ I have already discussed the role of fantasy in *Window*, namely that the fantasy element of the film involves blending the appearance of the dream (the narrative of the film) and reality (the moments immediately preceding Wanley looking at the painting). These two elements of the film are not clearly differentiated, which causes significant tension relative to the 'proper' way to desire and to look.

In this scene, Wanley sees himself looking at the image and later sees himself *in* the image itself through Alice's appearance. The Other's gaze is made real. Wanley thus loses his objective distance from the painting. This loss of objective distance causes the painting, the fantasmatic image, to appear on the side of the spectator. Harris notes that this sequence is one in which the window becomes both 'mirror and screen.'¹⁰⁹ Wanley sees himself, but at the same time he can project his fantasy of having his desire seen. The recognition of Wanley's desire seems to conjure

¹⁰⁸ Harris, 'Outside History, but Historically So,' p. 8.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

Alice, the Other, up in the dead of night. The eeriness here is that desire is made real. Desire should be relational and only exist between subject and object. Perhaps we can say that we only desire because we believe our desire to be unreal. An encounter with his own desire is deeply traumatic for Wanley. In the film's narrative, it is the very mechanism by which he fantasises over his own death as he dreams of swallowing poison to escape his fate.



Figure 5.11 *The Woman in the Window*, dir. by Fritz Lang (RKO Pictures, 1944)

The precise spectatorial fascination for Wanley is when Alice remarks that she likes to ‘watch people’s faces’ as they stare at the painting.¹¹⁰ This, too, is the same fascination for the spectators in *Nighthawks*. The objective distance between spectator and image, between subject and object,

¹¹⁰ *The Woman in the Window* (1944).

is collapsed because of the alienating public space of noir's fascinated landscapes. Alice is the embodiment of this collapse. The questions, and desire, are always dispersed and displaced. For instance, after their meeting at the painting, Alice and Wanley go to a bar and Wanley excitedly says how he is 'thinking of [his friends'] faces tomorrow when I tell them tomorrow night' of his encounter with the 'real' woman in the painting.¹¹¹

Despite already having the object of his desire, he is beginning to plan for the historicisation of their meeting. Since this meeting is part of his fantasy, we can see how desire is always conceived of retroactively. His desire in the present is already rendered nostalgic. In this way, nostalgia is the method by which we distance ourselves from our desire. His desire is always displaced because he is unable to access it in the present, even in his dream. For Wanley, the historicization of his desire is a process which attempts to let his desire be recognised as a real force, as something which produces Alice. Their meeting, according to Wanley's desire, was not a chance meeting, but a *result* of his desire. In the city, desire is always moving from one ambiguous place to another. The narrative momentum is carried by misunderstandings and chance meetings. Wanley is taken to the crime scene by his district attorney friend, Frank, as a civilian observer, and the mixing up of the poisons results in Wanley attempting to take his own life. He is always finding himself and his desire in the wrong place at the wrong time, continually having to move from one disaster to the next.

The displacement of desire continues as Alice invites Wanley back to her apartment in order to look at more 'sketches' of her.¹¹² While it may seem as if the hidden meaning of seeing her sketches is a simple sexual innuendo cleverly devised to evade censors, the real offer is that, in a

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

more symbolic sense, she will let Wanley have the 'real' thing, the object of his desire. The symbolic ambiguity of image and desires will be taken away *by* Wanley's gaze and desire. However, the twist ending of the film reveals that Wanley only really desires the illusion. The logic of the innuendo is reversed. It is not what lies behind the innuendo, what language covers up, but rather that the illusion is desirable itself. Wanley wants to see the sketches in order to fantasise because Alice's apparition makes his desire *too* real. This reversal implicates the viewer in the film's fantasy, in its desire. The spectatorial pleasure of understanding the hidden meaning of innuendos derives from a sense of mastery over the text. The spectator takes pleasure in assuming a superior position over Wanley. When the time comes for him to act on his desire, he only expresses a wish to continue his passivity, to continue to look at sketches and paintings. I would argue, though, that innuendos in noir possess a more fascinating function insofar as they not only demand an explanation with their apparent incongruity (Alice is not merely offering a chance to see some sketches, just as Phyllis and Neff are not merely discussing automobile insurance), but structurally innuendos *expose* the demand for an explanation. It is because innuendos confront us with the inexorable yet incomprehensible demand for an explanation that our desire is aligned with Wanley's inasmuch as we are shown to be as passive and pathetic as he is. His retreat into fantasy mirrors our own at the end of the film. The concluding revelation that the film was all simply Wanley's dream serves in this respect to remind the spectator of their own passivity; Wanley may have woken up, but we are still dreaming.

Alice, as is the case with many femme fatales, is therefore posed as an enigma. The question of what she wants is bound up where she arrives from, and what space she occupies in the film, what desire she fulfils. Harris identifies two versions of fascination in noir, both of which can be seen in *Window*. First, fascination as 'the inherent property of a certain object [...] or as relational

and fantasmatic, projected by certain subjects.’¹¹³ Alice is conjured up as fantasmatic projection by Wanley’s sexual desire (his impotence and innocence is a result of his supposedly cosy family life) and by the emptiness of the impersonal streets. Alice looking at Wanley, recognising his desire, is surprising because there is no one around. Time is stretched through Wanley gazing into the window at the painting. It is important to recognise that Wanley’s dream (and the dream of the film) begins when Wanley is left alone to read a book in his gentleman’s club. The camera cuts to a clock and shows the passage of time. In the temporal space of the film, time is lost, and the film must account for its absence. For Wanley, too, it is in the process ‘losing’ track of time that the fantasy is initiated and his initial meeting with Alice is a result of him being lost in the city. The lack of historicity involved in noir’s fascination renders time absent. This fascination is, in part, borne out of the lost historical context of the compression of public space.

The anxiety over the disappearance of public space is really an anxiety over the disappearance of community, of a certain kind of relating to one another. One major paradox of the ideology of home is that, in some sense, increased home ownership (at least a model similar to the construction of American suburbia) results in a *decrease* of community cohesion. In noir during the forties, this nascent strain of distrust is not found only in noir’s conception community but in the function of *narratives* to stitch disparate notions of home together.

The construction of community is facilitated by both racial and class segregationist policies. Indeed, the communities which were constructed along these lines necessitated an authoritarian style of policing its constituents. Noir, I believe, dramatises these latent struggles, not as a precursor to a supposed suburban utopia, but as the central logic upon which they were built.

¹¹³ Harris, ‘Outside History, But Historically So’, p. 8.

Acquiring a home in noir does not get rid of anxiety, it is its source. The implicit ideological questions here: who gets to own a home, and therefore who gets to participate in their community? The relation between the two is often implied, but they are separate; owning a home does not necessarily entail a participation in community. Next, I will examine the role of women in noir in relation to home. In particular, the next chapter examines the role that the femme fatale plays in constructing noir's haunted spaces, and how the meaning of home is intrinsically bound up with anxiety that the femme fatale represents. Film noir is, in a sense, defined *by* the femme fatale, despite their relative absence from noir.

Chapter 6

Gender and Genre in Film Noir

'Sure...I'm decent'

Gilda, *Gilda* (1946)



Figure 6.1, *Gilda*, dir. by Charles Vidor (Columbia Pictures, 1946)

'The Femme Fatale Does Not Exist' — The Ambiguity of the Femme Fatale

In this chapter I examine how the problematic conceptualisation of the femme fatale impacts the representation of gender and home in film noir. I also interrogate how a fascination (both formal and critical) with the femme fatale amplifies and intensifies its importance in relation to film noir, paying attention to the ways in which the femme fatale is *over*-represented in noir criticism. I will

begin by exploring the history of the term and the implications of its deployment in relation to home. While in previous chapters I have emphasised how fascination operates in relation to noir's visual style, I will now look at the interplay between image and voice — in short, how the insistence on the visual aspect of the femme fatale over the voice acts as a microcosm of film noir criticism itself and how critics overwhelmingly refer to noir as a visual style. The main film examined will be Charles Vidor's *Gilda* (1946), and I will ask whether Gilda can even be considered a femme fatale, despite the character's significance to the field of noir studies. Typically, the femme fatale is viewed an object of fear, a threat which often lies out of view, presenting a radical and dangerous possibility for the male protagonists of noir. However, I will examine the extent to which this threat or fear is imaginary and what this imagination of the centrality of the femme fatale tells us about the femme fatale and of the position of home within noir. This is because the femme fatale is often placed in opposition to women who assume and accept their place in the home.

The two most influential and problematic critical terms in film noir are the name itself, film noir, and its most prominent stylistic and narrative feature, the femme fatale. In the critical history of film noir, both terms seem conjoined. For many critics, the defining element of film noir, the one which sutures its wounded conceptualisation, is its depiction of gender and sexuality. In Ian Brookes' summary, gender and sexuality underpin film noir's 'narrative concerns and characterisations.'¹ Noir critic Frank Krutnik further argues in his book, *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity*, that film noir is primarily a 'masculine' category because of its foregrounding of fragile masculinities. Noir, he writes, is 'evidence of some kind of crisis of

¹ Brookes, *Film Noir*, p. 57.

confidence within the contemporary regimentation of male-dominated culture.’² In this sense, Krutnik shares a similar outlook to Deborah Thomas, who, in an essay on deviant males in noir, concludes that noir seems ‘to dramatise a particular crisis in masculinity.’³ According to these critics, noir reflects an anxiety surrounding masculinity during the postwar period, whereby both masculinity’s definition and purpose are called into question. In the broadest sense, for these critics, gender lies at the heart of noir’s anxiety. I would, in part, agree, but what these critics miss is how crisis-stricken masculinities are treated by noir’s narratives. For instance, it is rare that masculinity is condemned on its own terms in noir, but far more common that it is eroded, seemingly, because of an entanglement with ‘dangerous’ women.

For some critics, the figure of the femme fatale therefore seeks to enhance this masculine anxiety. As Mary Anne Doane, for instance, writes, the femme fatale represents a kind of ‘discursive unease’. Her threat, according to Doane, is not entirely legible, predictable, [or] manageable.’⁴ To an extent, femme fatales are defined by their ambiguity. Like noir itself, they have no stable interiority. Yet, as I will argue, the femme fatale is defined as such because of how she is constituted primarily through the male gaze. If masculine subjectivity is identified with an investigative, ‘objective logic’, then there is an assumption that everything which can be seen can be understood. In noir, the femme fatale presents herself as an unsolvable visual enigma. Although her looks are understood as central, they cannot be comprehended by the look. In this way, the femme fatale is presented in opposition to masculine identity, as she threatens to undermine the ‘objective logic’ of the masculine position within the film. The femme fatale does so because of

² Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street*, p. 91.

³ Deborah Thomas, ‘How Hollywood Deals with the Deviant Male’, in *Movie Book of Film Noir*, ed. by Ian Cameron (London: Studio Vista, 1992), p. 60.

⁴ Mary Anne Doane, *Femme Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 1.

the way in which her presence confronts the male protagonists of noir with fascination itself and therein exposes the inadequacy of the look. The gaze's inadequacy, in noir, is represented by its traumatic flashback structures and its retroactive construction of knowledge. In short, I argue that the problem of the gaze (in its relation to gender) should be understood as a problem with historicity and memory.

The ambiguity surrounding the figure of the femme fatale also finds a corollary in the critical work of noir. As I shall go on to discuss, although the femme fatale is considered to be an intrinsic component of film noir, she is often assumed to be present, even when she is not. In fact, the presence of the femme fatale is vastly overstated in noir. Indeed, films such as *Stranger on the Third Floor*, *Shadow of a Doubt*, and *Mildred Pierce* do not contain any trace of a femme fatale in their classical definition, yet all are important texts of the noir canon. The problem here is that the figure of the femme fatale is being used to form what Steve Neale calls a 'principal hallmark' of noir. He writes that the various (and often disparate) elements of the femme fatale 'can be related directly to contemporary social and cultural trends and factors'.⁵ Further, Neale argues that these elements 'help not only to define film noir, but also to account for its existence.'⁶ I would take my argument further than Neale does. He is correct to identify the tautological dimension to the femme fatale in relation to noir. However, I would argue that, at least symbolically, the femme fatale defines film noir, not in part, but in whole. The anxiety and masculine crises prompted by the femme fatale are more related to the femme fatale's absence. The enigma of what the femme fatale (or women in general) want in noir is typically a question of what they are not divulging to noir's male protagonists; their enigma is defined as an absence.

⁵ Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, p. 151.

⁶ *Ibid.*

For Brookes, there has been (or was) an assumption that the apparent ubiquity of the femme fatale in noir criticism led to any ‘vaguely seductive female character and ultimately...any “bad” female character’ being labelled as a femme fatale.⁷ The femme fatale should therefore be understood as an ever-present spectral force. Even in the aforementioned films, the threat of the femme fatale still lingers and threatens to make its presence known. The implied existence of the femme fatale heightens the anticipation of their arrival. Indeed, they are, as we shall see with Gilda, *all* anticipation; we always expect them to appear, and even if a femme fatale is present, their presence suggests a kind of excess. In this way, all women are distrusted in some respect in noir because of their capacity to be the femme fatale. In *The Killers*, for instance, there is a lingering sense that the inactivity of Lilly, Swede’s former partner, is partly what led to Swede to fall for Kitty Collins; Lilly could not compete with Kitty and thus, the responsibility for Swede’s demise is shared between them. This reveals a profound ambivalence to home in noir. Lilly is shown to have escaped Swede’s (and noir’s) orbit and participates in an entirely separate world. She and Sam are a perfectly happy couple — they happily accommodate the intrusive Reardon atop their well-decorated garden roof — but the film (through Reardon) does not care about Lilly’s story, but only what Lilly thought of Swede’s attraction to Kitty.

Such distrust can also be seen in *Shadow of a Doubt*. Although Uncle Charles is the film’s antagonist, he nonetheless evades the investigative eye of the neighbourhood because of his looks. His motivation for his violence toward women is that, in his view, the women of the city are different because of the way in which they steal their dead husband’s fortunes. ‘The cities are full of women,’ Charles says, ‘middle-aged widows, husbands dead. Husbands who have spent lives making fortunes, working, and working, then they die and leave their money to their wives, their

⁷ Brookes, *Film Noir*, p. 57.

silly wives.’ The supposed relationship the femme fatale has with the male figures of noir is that they wish to, in a gothic sense, leech desire, power, and wealth from the men in noir. Yet this view is the male perspective of noir. In the context of noir, Charles is villainous here only insofar as he lays bare the underlying unconscious logic of the femme fatale.

In a critical context, the centrality of the femme fatale to noir itself is something which has been retroactively identified and overrepresented. In the 1970s and 1980s, feminist film critics identified the femme fatale as a figure which challenged the patriarchal power structures of Hollywood. In the landmark essay collection, *Women in Film Noir*, published in 1978, for example, Chris Straayer argues that femme fatale is ‘the embodiment of both sexual threat and sexual difference.’⁸ A few years before this, Laura Mulvey’s influential essay, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, first appeared. Mulvey emphasises the role of psychoanalysis in gaze theory and how films produce their ideal spectators. She argues that cinema — specifically within a psychoanalytic framework — is designed for male pleasure because of the way in which voyeurism is the primary mode of looking and that in this mode of looking, women are objectified. ‘The cinema,’ Mulvey writes, ‘has structures of fascination strong enough to allow temporary loss of ego while simultaneously reinforcing the ego.’⁹ Central to Mulvey’s argument is the dialectic between women as an image, a screen for desire, and men as bearers of the all-powerful look; ‘the determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female form which is stylised accordingly.’¹⁰ Female spectators must engage with Hollywood cinema and film noir through the male gaze.

⁸ Chris Straayer, ‘Femme Fatale or Lesbian Femme: Bound in Sexual Difference’, *Women in Film Noir*, ed. by E. Ann. Kaplan (London: BFI, 1978), p. 167.

⁹ Laura Mulvey, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, in *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, ed. by Sue Thornham (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999) p. 62.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Women in film, according to Mulvey, are primarily ‘exhibitionist’ insofar as their appearance is heavily ‘coded for strong visual and erotic impact.’¹¹

The reception of Mulvey’s essays is as discussed as the essay itself. I do not wish to engage with all the critiques of ‘Visual Pleasure’, but I would highlight several, as noted by Clifford T. Manlove in his essay ‘Visual “Drive” and Cinematic Narrative: Reading Gaze Theory in Lacan, Hitchcock, and Mulvey’. The first of these is that the gaze is not always necessarily male. Noir originates from heterosexual and patriarchal perspectives. It is important to distinguish between what expectations are potentially laid out by the film and what is experienced by the spectator. It is one thing to suggest that, say, *Gilda*, positions Gilda as an object of desire, another to suggest that the spectator therefore *desires* Gilda. The argument I will make involving Gilda is that her position within Johnny and the film’s fantasies is instructive with regards to the spectral symbolic position of the femme fatale more generally, as well as the role of desire. Indeed, in *Gilda* specifically, if we accept the film’s demand that we desire Gilda then we necessarily miss the centrality of homosexuality in the film. It is in this sense that the gaze (specifically when aligned with the femme fatale) enables a kind of blindness.

The second relevant criticism of Mulvey’s essay involves her misreading of the relationship between psychoanalysis and the gaze. As Clifford T. Manlove argues, Mulvey’s use of the ‘visual drive in psychoanalysis overemphasizes the role of pleasure’.¹² Moreover, as I have already discussed, the *objet petit a* is essential in understanding the gaze. Cowie, for instance,

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Clifford T. Manlove, ‘Visual “Drive” and Cinematic Narrative: Reading Gaze Theory in Lacan, Hitchcock, and Mulvey’, *Cinema Journal*, 46.3 (Spring, 2007), p. 84.

depends the patriarchal implications of Mulvey's work, arguing the gaze is in fact the 'inverse of the omnipotent look'.¹³ As Todd McGowan summarises,

[...] the gaze is a blank spot in the subject's look that threatens the subject's sense of mastery in looking because the subject cannot see the spot directly. The subject looks for the gaze — it is the *objet petit a* of the visual drive — and yet it cannot be integrated into the image [...] Even when the subject sees a "complete" image, something remains obscure; the subject cannot see the Other at the point at which it sees the subject. The gaze of the object gazes back at the subject, but this gaze is not present in the field of the visible.¹⁴

In this sense, therefore, the gaze does not confer mastery. Mulvey's crucial misunderstanding, for McGowan, is that she is unconcerned with 'the way that fantasy marks a retreat from the gaze'.¹⁵ In contrast, Mulvey views the gaze *as* fantasy. In fact, we might view the discourse on the femme fatale as a negotiation between gaze and fantasy. Since the femme fatale is marked by their *absence*, then the desire to see is better characterised as fantasmatic.

One of the characteristics of the femme fatale is that she controls who can see her, and who she can see. The struggle over the femme fatale involves controlling her image in order to limit and stabilise her desire. Moreover, the central fascinating aspect of the femme fatale is the question of what she *genuinely* wants. In *Gilda* (1946), Gilda's strip-tease scene operates on a similar logic, since it is a strategy which allows Gilda to resume control of her own body and its representations: what her audience wants is framed and controlled by Gilda herself. This fascinating enigma, according to W.J.T. Mitchell, indicates that the power of images and women is manifested as lack

¹³ Cowie, *Representing the Woman: Cinema and Psychoanalysis*, p. 288.

¹⁴ McGowan, 'Looking for the Gaze', p. 33.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 39.

not as possession, due to both being, in Mitchell's words 'abject, mutilated, and castrated.'¹⁶ The question of what images (or films) want, is what women want. For film noir, the question of what the films 'want' is entangled with the question of what its women want. Mulvey argues that the female figure (in our case, the femme fatale) is something which the male gaze 'continually circles around but disavows' because of the woman's sexual difference: 'her lack of a penis, implying a threat of castration and hence unpleasure.'¹⁷ In film noir, women — specifically femme fatales, but often by extension all women — are turned into guilty objects, since they evoke the anxiety of sexual difference.

Janey Place, in her essay, 'Women in Film Noir', argues that noir possesses a strong 'phallogentric cultural viewpoint' insofar as 'women are defined in relation to men.'¹⁸ In Place's view, noir differs very little from other Hollywood films in its depiction of women. However, she asserts that film noir is a rare period in film history where women are 'active, not static...derive power, not weakness, from their sexuality.'¹⁹ Noir's ideal spectator, then, is a paradoxical one. For Mulvey, the male ego is 'reinforced' as well as temporarily lost, and for Place, 'men need to control women's sexuality,' but they do so in order 'not to be destroyed by it'²⁰. Place's argument is that women — specifically those having 'access to her own sexuality'²¹ — are routinely destroyed, leaving an irrepressible, almost mythic, impression on the film. I contend that the femme fatale's centrality to noir and noir criticism is emblematic of the fantasmatic construction of the femme fatale. She functions, as Harris argues, 'neither literally nor allegorically but synecdochically

¹⁶ Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, p. 36.

¹⁷ Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', p. 64.

¹⁸ Place, 'Women in Film Noir', p. 47.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 49

²¹ *Ibid.*

within noir cinema, as a screen: as both herself and the bearer of the projected image.²² In this way, the femme fatale represents the two modes of fascination, first, ‘as the inherent property of a certain object’, and second, ‘as relational and fantasmatic’.²³ Because of the femme fatale’s relation to fascination, I would argue that she does not just represent a small cluster of historical or sexual anxieties in noir — inasmuch as they are, on a cultural level, an embodiment of castration anxiety, which in turn can be read as a metaphor for the historical uncertainties surrounding World War Two and the following decade. The femme fatale, rather, represents anxiety itself.

The term femme fatale is problematic insofar as its definition relies on a limited scope of sexual desire, namely male heterosexual desire. When I use terms such as ‘we’ or ‘us,’ I intend to indicate how the spectator is produced by the film, not to imply a universal viewpoint. In some sense, the way in which certain film noirs ‘work’ is predicated on an assumption made about its preferred spectator. Greg Forster, for instance, argues that the audience’s desire for Gilda is the mechanism by which the film is allowed to produce the heterosexual couple.²⁴ Forster insists that our desire should be directed towards Johnny, for he is the ‘femme’ figure of the film. The femme fatale, in Forster’s view, need not be a woman at all. Gilda, for Forster, merely offers the illusion of a break with normativity, and it is *through* her that the film expresses its ideological heteronormative message. As Elizabeth Cowie writes, “‘femme’ is simply a catchphrase for the danger of sexual difference.”²⁵

One essential component of fantasy is that it demands to be punishable, because ‘in the punishment, the reality of the forbidden wish is acknowledged.’²⁶ Although the obvious danger

²² Harris, ‘Outside History, But Historically So’, p. 7.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Greg Forster, ‘Going Straight with Gilda’, *Qui Parle*, 4.2, *Different Subjects* (Spring 1991).

²⁵ Cowie, ‘Film Noir and Women’, p. 125.

²⁶ Ibid. p. 136.

appears to be being completely seduced and destroyed by the femme fatale's beauty, an additional danger — for Hollywood's heteronormativity — is the male hero *becoming* the femme fatale, crossing over the forbidden valley of sexual difference. For the male hero to become the femme fatale is to give up their privileged access to the phallus and thus open themselves up to the eroticised gaze. The result is a subversive one. Although the films (by being Hollywood productions) assume that desire is directed at the femme fatale from a presumed heterosexual cis-male audience, men become the object of desire. If, for example, Kathie in *Out of the Past* (1947) is considered a femme fatale and defined by the effect of her beauty on Jeff, then we can consider Jeff to be similarly erotic. In popular film criticism, Robert Mitchum's portrayal of Jeff Bailey is spoken about as being a quintessentially 'cool' performance, as if Mitchum exudes some inexhaustible quality, a fascinating detachment from his own existence.²⁷ I will argue later, in more detail, how the femme fatale is, in a sense, the very essence of noir since both are defined by ambiguity. The ambiguity of the difference between the homme and femme fatale shows us that the (popular) definition of the latter is not so clear. In a similar fashion, noir exists both as a conceptual *and* cultural category.

One reason for the femme fatale's critical ambiguity is that both 'film noir' and 'femme fatale' remain untranslated from the original French. Just as with film noir, translating the term 'femme fatale' to English — either as 'fatal woman', 'deadly woman', or some other synonym — seems to result in something which is slightly too earnest, too coldly objective, to capture the anxiety they instill in noir's fascinated male protagonists. Translating the term overlooks the anxiety produced by it. The anxiety produced by noir, its paranoia, is defined by a multiplicity of

²⁷ See, for instance, Roger Ebert, 'Out of the Past', <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-out-of-the-past-1947>. [Accessed 17/10/2018]. Ebert describes Mitchum's 'weary eyes and laconic voice' as lending him a presence of 'a violent man wrapped in indifference.'

answers, where objects are overloaded with meaning to the point of saturation. The definition of femme fatale is always contextual, always dependent on what the femme fatale wants, which remains unknown. Elisabeth Bronfen outlines the two views of Mary Ann Doane and Slavoj Žižek regarding the femme fatale.²⁸ Both authors interpret the femme fatale as a symptom. Doane writes that ‘the femme fatale is an articulation of fears surrounding the loss of stability and centrality of the self...these anxieties appear quite explicitly in the process of her representation as castration anxiety.’²⁹ For Doane, the femme fatale is a symptom of patriarchal anxiety over feminism. Žižek, on the other hand, argues that the femme fatale is a symptom ‘for the ambivalence in feeling on the part of the noir hero and his retreat from the death drive.’³⁰ Žižek, in *Looking Awry*, describes the death drive as a ‘striving for a radical self-annihilation.’³¹ It is not just a physical death, but what Lacan calls a ‘second death.’³² The second death halts the ‘regeneration of the dead body’ by halting the natural cycle of transformation.³³ One such cycle, for Lacan, is a fantasy of inflicting ‘perpetual pain’.³⁴ In both cases, Doane and Žižek implicitly instruct us to approach the femme fatale with a certain ironic distance from its literal meaning — a distance which is lost by explicitly stating the intended meaning. An ironic distance is necessary to avoid falling into the eroticised trap the films present to us; we are supposed to follow the male protagonists in their desire for the femme fatale, believing it to be our own, only for it to be revealed that we were doomed from the beginning, that our desire was manufactured and not intended for us.

²⁸ Elisabeth Bronfen, ‘Femme Fatale: Negotiations of Tragic Desire’ in *New Literary History*, 35.1, *Rethinking Tragedy* (Winter, 2004), p. 115.

²⁹ Doane, *Femme Fatales*, p. 2.

³⁰ Bronfen, ‘Negotiations of Tragic Desire’, p. 115

³¹ Žižek, *Looking Awry*, p. 64

³² Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-60*, trans. by Dennis Porter, (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 211

³³ http://nosubject.com/Death#cite_ref-5 [accessed 23/10/18]

³⁴ Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, p 295.

Even if we take a relatively conservative definition of the femme fatale — a woman who intends to destroy men by using her sexuality but has motives that lie beyond male destruction — what we find is that the femme fatale, despite figuring heavily in noir criticism, is a marginal and overrepresented narrative trope. In her essay on films which prominently feature central female characters, Angela Martin makes the case for the femme fatale's overrepresentation. In a sample of eighty film noirs which have central female characters, she argues that there are only eight films which actually feature a femme fatale.³⁵ The volume of femme fatales seems vastly overstated, since they are often viewed as an integral part of the noir mode. For example, James Damico describes what he considers to be a typical noir narrative: 'a man whose experience of life has left him sanguine and often bitter meets a not-innocent woman of similar outlook to whom he is sexually and fatally attracted'³⁶ While this is an accurate if loose description of some noir films (*The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *The Big Sleep* (1946), *Out of the Past* (1947)), it is inaccurate for a vast majority of noir films, even those which supposedly feature a femme fatale, such as, say, Kitty Collins in *The Killers* (1946). Martin's observation is not merely a statistical problem, an observation which highlights the critical overemphasis on the femme fatale, but one which demonstrates the connection between noir's affect and the critical response. The femme fatale is overrepresented in noir criticism because of her relation to the films' fascination. The femme fatale is central to noir, while at the same time overrepresented. In a sense, therefore, the femme *is* film noir precisely because she is not really *in* film noir. Thus, in the scope of film noir, the femme fatale is more defined by her absence, always spectrally haunting noir; the question of where the femme fatale is (indeed, *what* she is) is always paramount to the fascinated concerns of noir.

³⁵ Angela Martin, 'Gilda Didn't Do Any of Those Things You've Been Losing Sleep Over!': The Central Women of 40s Films Noirs,' in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan (London: BFI, 1998), pp. 209-10.

³⁶ Damico, 'Film Noir: A Modest Proposal', p. 103.

Their ambiguity of the femme fatale is similar to noir's ambiguity. As Steve Neale writes in his book *Genre and Hollywood*, the concept of film noir 'seeks to homogenise a set of distinct and heterogeneous phenomena; it thus inevitably generates contradictions, exceptions, anomalies and is doomed, in the end, to incoherence.'³⁷ The femme fatale is prone to a comparable ambiguity, while also perhaps best exemplifying noir's 'incoherence.'³⁸ The concept is not only subject to ever altering and loose definitions, but also to a confusion in relation to film noir itself. To think of film noir is to imagine, in some capacity, the fascinating femme fatale, particularly the moments in which they first appear, where their possibilities lie at their most open: from Gilda emerging from beneath the frame to theatrically flick her hair in *Gilda* (1946), to a bath-towel clad Phyllis looming over the simpering Neff in *Double Indemnity* (1944), to Kathie coming 'out of the sun' in *Out of the Past* (1947). All these moments serve to be memorable, to be the overriding visual impression of the film. If those three films were to be linked together, the central (perhaps the only legitimate) connective element would be the eroticised femme fatale. Yet in each of those films the femme fatale plays a different role. Their openness (to meaning, to desire) is what renders them fascinating. The emphasis on their appearance acts as a way for noir to 'visualise obscurity.'³⁹ In this sense, we can extend Tyrer's observation that 'film noir does not exist' — inasmuch as it is constructed retroactively by the *point-de-capiton* — to say that 'the femme fatale does not exist'. The femme fatale, through her inducing of anxiety stitches together other, disparate anxieties. At the same time, however, she is largely absent from film noir as a whole. This seems to be an oversight in Tyrer's otherwise excellent work. He aptly turns Lacan's dictum 'the woman does not exist' into a linguistic interpretation of the noir category, but in so doing it requires a

³⁷ Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, p. 154.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Harris, 'Outside History, But Historically So,' p. 5.

reinterpretation. Moreover, in broader Lacanian terms, the ‘woman does not exist’ because ‘there is no generalizable category or signifier within the Symbolic order capable of defining the set of woman.’⁴⁰ I would argue that a femme fatale is only deemed so because she is, like noir, subjected to the signifier ‘femme fatale’. The femme fatale, in this way, *is* noir because of her ambivalence and traumatically inflected structure. As a result, the anxiety inspired by home film noir is often expressed through the femme fatale, not just through her uncertain motives, but through her structural relation to the film (and to noir) itself.



Figure 6.2, *The Killers*, dir. Robert Siodmak, (Universal Pictures, 1946)

⁴⁰ Tyrer, ‘Film Noir Does Not Exist’, p. 133.

Killer Looks

One prominent example of a femme fatale's structural ambiguity exists in *The Killers*, when Kitty and Swede meet for the first time at Jim Colfax's party. Swede arrives with Lilly, his current date, but becomes enraptured when he sees Kitty, the film's femme fatale, singing by the piano. The narrative framing of this scene — it is Lilly's flashback — suggests that this was the moment that Swede was 'lost', that he was tempted by the femme fatale. There are a few key elements I will focus on. Firstly, how two similar but suggestive images of Swede looking at Kitty show the function of the femme fatale with respect to noir's construction. Secondly, how the prominence of Kitty's voice relates to her dominating visual presence. The two images (Figures 6.2 and 6.3) in question show Swede looking at Kitty as she sings. Each image creates a series of competing gazes: in Figure 6.2, Lilly looks at Swede, Swede looks at a singing Kitty, Kitty looks beyond the frame into the distance. Yet although Kitty's gaze goes beyond the cinematic — a gaze into nothingness — it also cuts across the rest of the frame and across Lilly and Swede's gazes. Kitty's gaze replicates noir's retroactivity because of the way in which her gaze retroactively modifies the other competing gazes in the frame, including our own. Structurally, too, Kitty and Swede are connected because they each hold a glass in their hand, while Lilly's remain empty. For example, the power of Swede's gaze, which is in the centre of the image, is taken from him; he is no longer able to look at Kitty from a safe position. Indeed, there is no similar point in time in which Swede was able to look safely.

Through the femme fatale, we can see how Harris's definition of the negotiation between the 'two versions of fascination' in noir operates.⁴¹ Firstly, fascination can be understood as Kitty's 'inherent property' because the trail of gazes leads to her, despite her position on the edge of the

⁴¹ Harris, 'Outside History, but Historically So', p. 8.

frame. It is Swede's fascinated look which inspires Lilly's. Kitty is the only moving object in the frame as Swede stands transfixed by her, as Lilly slowly recognises Swede's fascination. From Lilly's point of view, there must be something inherent in Kitty which inspires Swede's desire for her, yet even Lilly cannot bear to look; there must be something similarly fascinating *in* Swede, some recently animated force which must be exorcised by the look. Lilly's look in this image is aligned with her historical look — this is her flashback after all — which only serves to again show the impossibility of looking in noir. Because of the presence of Reardon, the insurance investigator, this image is turned into a crime scene, where, if only by looking, a hitherto unknown fact might be unearthed and Swede may yet be saved. The desire for historical continuity is disrupted by noir's fascination, since by displacing the various desires in this flashback (Lilly, Swede, Kitty and us) history becomes lost and obscure. Our gaze is drawn towards Kitty, but even as we adjust to look at Swede and Lilly, we are still seeing Kitty insofar as we see her effect.

Secondly, therefore, we can perceive fascination as 'relational and fantasmatic' through the competing gazes in this scene.⁴² Our fascination, for one, is complicated by the competing gazes and the space between the characters. The image implies a sense of depth (Lilly sits behind Swede, who stands some distance of Kitty), but the gazes nonetheless compress the image. The loss of home is here represented through Lilly's forlorn sense of loss; her marriage to Sam Lubinsky, the police lieutenant, is seen as a compromise which shows how history did not work out as planned. Home is lost, however, through Kitty's historical gaze, since her gaze 'looks back' across the image, and across the various gazes. Her gaze cuts through the gazes and retroactively reorients them. Lilly's gaze at Swede is one of loss because of how Kitty's look fascinates Swede. In noir's narratives, it is the process of 'looking back' into history which obscures its meaning.

⁴² Harris, 'Outside History, But Historically So', p. 8.

This is the case in *The Killers*, since the film's historicity is marked by the absence of Swede's perspective and in the inadequacy of Reardon's investigative approach which falsely records history. It is less the case that Kitty's look is ambiguous, but rather that it inspires ambiguity; fascination is introduced *through* our look. The matrixes of looks imply a hierarchy of gazes, of historical perspectives. Lilly looks at Swede and wonders what has fascinated him, what took him away from her. Swede is then fascinated by Kitty. Therefore, there must be something which fascinates Kitty. Although we imagine that Kitty must be looking at something off-screen (and is fascinated in the same way as Lilly and Swede) the object of her gaze is nothing at all. This is precisely what animates noir's male protagonists' fascination for the femme fatale: the femme fatale desires nothing, at least nothing *from* the male protagonist. In this sense, Kitty is only fascinating because we and Swede deem her so.



Figure 6.3, *The Killers* (1946)

We can see how fascination is relational in the second image of Kitty and Swede (Figure 6.3). The differences between the two images help illuminate the role of the femme fatale in noir. For one, Lilly has been removed. Her desire is deemed an unnecessary surplus. Since, too, this is Lilly's flashback, it is testament to the impossibility of historical recovery in noir. Moreover, in the present Lilly has married the police lieutenant Sam Lubinsky — an old friend of Swede and the one who arrested him — and they both live a seemingly content homely life, which lies in contrast to Swede's story. Lilly, unlike Swede, finds the right partner in Lubinsky — even their names resemble each other — and, subsequently, the right home. Although Lilly and Lubinsky offer a strong opposition to Swede's path, there is nonetheless a lingering loss which hangs over the scene, no matter how slight. Everything appears to be in its proper place — Lilly's idyllic marriage to Sam, and the criminal Swede has already received his sentence — except history. Swede is dislocated from the film's historical continuity. This has the effect of first rendering Lilly and Sam's home a lost object, or an object that is a reminder *of* loss and secondly, enables Jim Colfax's home at the end of the film to be the place in which Kitty is condemned.

In the second image, only Kitty and Swede remain, either side of a burning candle. The candle here represents the sexual desire and fascination between Kitty and Swede. On the one level, the candle acts as a simple representation of 'burning desire', but on the other, since the candle separates them, it suggests, paradoxically, that the obstacle between Swede and Kitty was their desire for each other. Or, perhaps, that Swede's desire for Kitty was impossible from the beginning. The composition of the frame further intensifies the paradoxical feeling of this critical moment in the film. What attracts Swede, what fascinates his gaze and ignites his imagination, is the back of Kitty's head. The frame, however, compresses the three-dimensional space of the scene, as if to imply that Swede's vision impossibly loops around to see Kitty from the front, as if

he stands in front of her, in other words, to see what we see. Here, Swede's fascinated look reveals his desire, the impossibility therein: he desires what he cannot see or attain. Our gaze is then composed of Swede's fascination, his fantasy; we are involved in the image from the beginning.

The second important factor aside from the change in personnel is that the direction of looks is reversed. In the first image (Figure 6.2), from left to right, the bearers of the look are Lilly, Swede, then Kitty. In the second (Figure 6.3), from right to left, the bearers of the look are Swede, the candle, then Kitty. Apart from removing Lilly from the matrixes of looks, one function of this reversal is to transform Swede's fascination into a physical object — the candle. It is 'relational' because it exists between Kitty and Swede, but it is 'fantasmatic' inasmuch as it has been conjured in place of Swede from the previous image. The candle, in this respect, *is* Swede. It both represents his desire for Kitty, but also (because of the artificial placement and camera's flattening of the image) blocks his view. However, his view is only blocked from our historical perspective. In this respect, Swede's desire is rendered as historical affect. What prevents Swede from seeing beyond the veil of fascination is his very fascinated gaze. The reversal of the images proposed by fascination is not resolved through a changing of perspective. Regardless of the position from which Swede looks at Kitty, his fascination always distorts his gaze.

In relation to our identification with Swede, our spectatorial position is somewhat complex. On the one hand, we possess a privileged viewpoint in comparison to those present in the scene itself. Unlike Swede, however, we can see Kitty's face, but in turn we sacrifice Swede's perspective. We can also see Swede's face and are thus able to see both their reactions: first, Swede's melancholic, protracted gaze and second, Kitty's performance as she realises that she is being watched. We can see what Swede cannot see and thus our gaze is a product of his fantasmatic

projections. Our gaze sees Kitty's reaction to Swede's gaze, an imagining of the Other recognising his desire. Where Swede's gaze is overtly inquisitive and speculative, ours promises the answer. Swede's gaze asks: what lies beyond what I can see? And what does Kitty think of me? We can see that Kitty *knows* that she is being watched — by Swede, by the other people in the room, by us. Her eyes glance off to the side, as if to look at Swede behind her and she cryptically sings 'the more I know of love, the less I know.'⁴³

At the same time, I would argue there is an ambiguity regarding our spectatorial and narrative position. The complex matrix of competing gazes serves to make the object of those gazes ambiguous. For example, Swede looks at Kitty in the hope that his look will reciprocate his desire. However, Kitty functions as Swede's *objet petit a*, the object of his desire; it energises him, but his look will not be returned in the way he wishes it to. Kitty, conversely, looks at nothing: not at Swede, not at us. Nor does she return our gaze. The compressed flatness of the image does not direct our gaze to either Kitty or Swede. Nor do we only look at Swede's reaction, which distances us from his perspective. Our spectatorial position's ambiguity derives, therefore, from a simultaneous desire to assume Swede's perspective and a disavowal of that perspective: we are drawn in and pushed away. In this way, our position suddenly resembles Reardon's, a desire, an inability to know.

The effect of this peculiar image is ambiguous because it gives us the comforting impression of distance and of objectivity, that our gaze is not involved in the image. There is, however, a danger that we rule out the possibility that we are already involved with the image, that it wants something from *us*. It is Kitty — the film's fascinating figure — who, with her

⁴³ *The Killers* (1946).

performative smirk, wants our gaze. We see both Swede and Kitty's faces and gazes and we are given the illusion of objectivity. Kitty's smirk is an affirmation that she *knows* that Swede is looking at her and that she recognises his desire. Because of the fantasmatic nature of fascination, our look is derived from our (or Lilly's) imagination, which fills in the gaps of the Real as Swede does. Like Swede, we want to know what Kitty thinks of Swede and his longing gaze, but even with our supposedly privileged position, we are as blind as Swede. By showing us 'everything', the camera's gaze obscures the *objet petit a* — the object from desire supposedly originates — from our gaze.

In *The Killers*, the gazes begin to refer only to themselves. Lilly's melancholic gaze looks at Swede then Swede's desirous gaze looks at Kitty. Kitty's gaze, fascinating and ambiguous as it is, looks at nothing. Like Swede's look of death and resignation, Kitty's gaze is beyond the frame and beyond us. Finally, there is Reardon's historical gaze. The historical gaze attempts to reorder these gazes and desires into a coherent and linear form. Yet such a project is impossible for Reardon. He learns this lesson when he talks to Charleston, Swede's prison cellmate and asks him what he assumes to be a straightforward question, one that establishes historical continuity: 'When was the last time you saw the Swede?' to which Charleston responds 'Mister, did you say 'when?'' Charleston emphasises that the past — at least where Swede is concerned — is not a temporal distinction; it is not a case of *when*, but of *what* was the last time. Time, and the historicisation of time, is reimagined as a physical object or a space, similar to how Swede's handkerchief — which he used as a disguise for the bank robbery in the film and which acts as the principal object of fascination for Reardon, since it is the object given to Swede by Kitty — is, in Harris's view, a

‘fetish token — the sign of Swede's fascination.’⁴⁴ Charleston’s response, therefore, indicates the futility of Reardon’s mode of historicisation.



Figure 6.4, *The Killers* (1946)

Kitty and Swede’s first meeting is echoed later by Reardon’s meeting with Kitty (Figures 6.4 and 6.5). This time, instead of at a party, they meet at a busy downtown bar. Reardon, up to this point in the film, has been following Swede’s footsteps and slowly reconstructing his life. Here, he has a chance to meet Kitty and see her for himself. Their meeting partly resembles Kitty’s initial meeting with Swede: the half-burnt candle between them and Reardon, taking the place of

⁴⁴ Harris, ‘Outside History, but Historically So’, p. 12.

Swede, wanting to know the ‘real’ Kitty Collins. Kitty herself distinguishes herself as the ‘real’ Kitty Collins when she says, ‘I have a home now...’⁴⁵ What makes this distinction confusing is that there are two ‘real’ Kitty Collins’. The first is the femme fatale, real insofar as she represents the Real, she is that which cannot be properly identified; the second as a ‘reformed’ femme fatale, no longer defined by excess, but contained *within* a home. Towards the end of their conversation, Rear reminisces about a past he will never have, ‘I’d like to have known the old Kitty Collins,’ he says, revealing his fascination for her. Reardon, in this moment, becomes Swede, as he attempts to ‘correct’ Kitty. In *The Killers*, the melancholia — the sense that loss itself is lost — enacts itself historically. The act of historical recovery (particularly a personal history such as Swede’s) is rendered impossible. As Freud writes, melancholia exceeds mourning as far as ‘it is marked by a determinant which is absent in normal mourning or which, if it is present, transforms the latter into pathological mourning.’⁴⁶ The absent determinant here — the lost object — is Kitty, the femme fatale.

Although this scene repeats the earlier scene with Kitty and Swede, there are a few details which reveal Kitty’s staging of the meeting. First, the candle. Although in the meeting with Kitty and Swede, the candle represents the desire *between* them, here, it is offset to the left of the frame, implying an imbalance of its usage. Desire is not between them, but rather Swede’s fascination that lurks on the edges of their conversation. Unlike in the earlier scene, where Swede stands behind Kitty and the three-dimensional space is compressed, Kitty and Reardon sit across from each other and the camera’s position shifts, sometimes showing one, or the other, or both. The large mirror behind Reardon distorts the reflection of the bar, stretching the patrons to absurd

⁴⁵ *The Killers* (1946)

⁴⁶ Freud, ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, p. 250.

degrees. Conversely, from Kitty's now omniscient viewpoint, she can see Reardon, the rest of the bar, and herself, whereas Reardon can only see Kitty. The mirror is aligned with Kitty's gaze, which shows us a representation of the view of the femme fatale. The reason for the shift is, again, historical. Although this scene is a repetition of Kitty and Swede's first meeting, Reardon's assumption of Swede's identity renders this both Reardon's first meeting with Kitty *and* Swede's ghostly 'final' meeting, simultaneously the first and last time. Yet what haunts the scene is not strictly Swede, but rather his fascination with Kitty. To this effect, I will now discuss 'haunting' in *The Killers* and film noir more broadly, using the concept of 'hauntology' to examine how the spectre of the femme fatale 'haunts' noir, what is involved in a 'haunting', and its relation to noir.



Figure 6.5, *The Killers* (1946)

Hauntology and Trauma

This section explores the concept of hauntology, as described by Mark Fisher and Jacques Derrida, and how it interacts with noir's traumatic narratives and the femme fatale. The introduction of the femme fatale (or even the possibility of the femme fatale) into the noir narrative introduces a temporal ambiguity in relation to desire. The desire for the femme fatale is predicated by the figures themselves: desire is not a spontaneously occurring phenomenon but predicated and assumed by the femme fatale. Flashback narratives (such as in *The Killers*) are often the result of a collision with the femme fatale. In these films, the femme fatale, despite having already been killed, or fated to be so, still, in some sense, affects the past by destabilising it. In this sense, the femme fatale — and by extension film noir as a whole — can be thought of as hauntological. Mark Fisher describes the two seemingly paradoxical directions of hauntology, a concept first coined by Jacques Derrida in his 1991 book *Spectres of Marx*. The first direction, Fisher argues, is 'that which is no longer, but which is still effective as a virtuality.'⁴⁷ The example he gives is the 'traumatic "compulsion to repeat" [...] a fatal pattern.'⁴⁸ This Freudian dimension of hauntology appears particularly useful for noir, for there is a *structure* of trauma that dominates film noir. For instance, the very reason that home (and the absence of, and paranoia surrounding it) figures so heavily in the noir narrative is that it no longer exists (it has been lost or eroded in some way) but is still 'effective as a virtuality'⁴⁹ insofar as home slowly becomes — through seismic events such as the Great Depression, World War Two, the Korean War, and the Cold War — a virtual concept less rooted in the actuality of a physical space than in the absence and remnants of those spaces. Or, to use Bronfen's argument, home *exceeds* the fantasy constructed around it. The second

⁴⁷ Mark Fisher, 'What is Hauntology?', *Film Quarterly*, 66.1 (Autumn 2012), p. 19.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

direction, Fisher writes, ‘refers to that which has not yet happened, but which is already effective in the virtual.’⁵⁰ The two coalescent directions of hauntology, therefore, are a past which has ceased to exist and a future which has not yet taken effect. Both the past and the future enact themselves on the present through their ‘virtuality.’ For Derrida, hauntology insists ‘without existing.’⁵¹ In Derrida’s terms, a haunting is ‘repetition *and* first time, but also repetition *and* last time,’⁵² it threatens to happen for the first time, while also threatening to happen *again*: it comprehends, ‘but incomprehensibly.’⁵³

Here, we can see a corollary between hauntology and the femme fatale. Firstly, her presence in the film impresses itself on the past and future as a virtuality. Secondly, leaving the term femme fatale untranslated leads to an obscurity of meaning. The femme fatale’s meaning is made ambiguous by remaining untranslated. When spoken in French, hauntology is a homophone of ‘ontology’, the study of being. As Colin Davis writes, ‘Hauntology supplants its near-homonym ontology, replacing the priority of being and presence with the figure of the ghost as that which is neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive.’⁵⁴ Hauntological concepts, therefore, require a kind of replacement, a replacement of ontology itself. The stable meaning of ontology is upset by the introduction of hauntology. Likewise, there is no ‘inaugural moment’ of the femme fatale, no true ‘first appearance’ in which her function is fully formed. For, as Peter Buse and Andrew Stott argue, ‘any attempt to isolate the origin of language will find its inaugural moment already

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid. p. 20.

⁵² Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 10.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Colin Davis, ‘*Ét at Présent*: Hauntology, Spectres and Phantoms’, *French Studies*. 59.3 (2005), p. 373.

dependent upon a system of linguistic differences that have been installed prior to the ‘originary’ moment.⁵⁵ The critical concept of the femme fatale, like noir itself, is retroactively determined.

In film noir, home can be understood as hauntological: something which is ‘no longer’ *and* ‘that which has not yet happened.’⁵⁶ Many noir narratives involve the establishment of the authority of home, which serves to emphasise both its historical importance and its future, yet untold, significance.⁵⁷ Film noir itself could be considered hauntological, neither ‘present nor absent’; it neither concretely exists in the way that other comparable genres do, but it still enacts itself as virtuality, modifying the meaning of all those films that are deemed noir. If noir, to borrow a phrase from Fisher, was always spectral, always hauntological, what does it mean now that we resurrect it? Noir is resurrected either through our critical retrospection (in a sense, revivifying it) or through noir’s ‘resurgence’, ‘rebirth’, as neo-noir. The same applies to home in noir: the historical idea of home relies on a concept of historicity which sees history as an unbroken continuum, yet film noir frequently confronts this notion of historicity, not only through its *après coup* narrative structures, but through the notion of historicity itself as being traumatic.

Building upon Freud’s work, Cathy Caruth argues that trauma is a ‘paradoxical experience’⁵⁸ insofar as a traumatic event is at once preserved in a fashion not usually associated

⁵⁵ Peter Buse and Andrew Stott, ‘Introduction: A Future for Haunting’, *Ghosts: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, History* (London: Macmillan, 1999), p. 11.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* p. 19.

⁵⁷ For example, in *Mildred Pierce*, Mildred’s journey begins when she decides to leave Bert and establish her home (and family with Veda) by herself. Ultimately, this attempt ends in failure, and the original couple (Bert and Mildred), and therefore home, are reasserted, with Mildred having ‘learned her lesson’. In this way, the film can be read as Mildred’s attempt to escape home’s patriarchal orbit only to be shown the futility of such an action. In *Shadow of a Doubt*, home’s influence and authority is similarly inescapable. Despite Uncle Charles’ actions, he cannot be condemned by the Santa Rosa residents since it would undermine the ideological underpinnings which sustains and justifies their community; the authority of the home is more important the *morality* of the home, and the community it implies.

⁵⁸ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and Memory* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 11.

with subjective memory, while at the same time rarely taking up an equal position alongside conscious memory and thought. Traumatic memories are both overwhelming in their intrusion into the present and difficult to access because often the registering of a memory *as* traumatic is perceived *après coup*. More generally, the traumatic event alters memory and the subject's understanding of the relationship between their memories and identity. In short, it alters a subject's perception of history and of historicity itself. These moments of trauma are often contradictory and aporetic. Derrida, by his own admission, focused on such historical moments of aporia. As Roger Luckhurst summarises: 'Derrida figured the aporia as a blocking of passage, a stalling or hesitation, a foot hovering on the threshold, caught between advancing and falling back, between the possible and the impossible.'⁵⁹

Moments of hesitation, such as Swede's first meeting with Kitty in *The Killers*, or Johnny's with Gilda in *Gilda*, are indicative of a kind of historical trauma: a trauma which is represented by woman's 'openness', inasmuch as openness refers to a category of woman constituting an open set of signs. In this respect, the femme fatale is hauntological because of the ways in which she is, conceptually, a hesitation. Even when present, she is never quite there, and her appearance speaks to both possibility and impossibility. For Tyrer, Lacan's maxim that 'the woman does not exist' means that there is no generalizable category or signifier within the Symbolic order capable of defining the set of woman [...] there is no signifier that could totalise it.'⁶⁰ Throughout *Gilda* Gilda's absence is constantly remarked upon and becomes an extended mystery. Her absence is regarded as presence. Large parts of the film are dedicated to perceiving and seeing her. As both a presence *and* an absence, Gilda and the femininity she represents, can be considered traumatic, or

⁵⁹ Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (New York: Routledge. 2008), p. 6.

⁶⁰ Tyrer, 'Film Noir Does Not Exist', p. 133.

an encounter with her is understood as traumatic. Gilda, too, represents the possible and the impossible. She is an impossible object insofar as understanding her desires is an impossible task and the formation of the couple requires some fundamental delimiting of her desire. On the other hand, she represents a new possibility, a possibility which reopens the space to return home to America, to begin anew in the messy aftermath of the war. In this respect, *Gilda*'s narrative resolution requires a disavowal of Gilda's desire (and therefore subjectivity) to 'return' *her* to the role of housewife. In *Gilda*, the fantasy of home can be restored to actuality, but it necessitates that women forego their newfound subjectivity to bring men like Johnny back to the 'right side of the law.'⁶¹ Whereas in other film noirs, the principal sin is desiring the *femme fatale* in *Gilda*, the absence of desire for Gilda is the crime which must be 'corrected' through the narrative.

In relation to other women in film noir, specifically *femme fatales* who are destroyed by the end of the film, they, too, are neither present nor absent. Consider, again, *Double Indemnity* (1944). Both the narrative structure and Neff's longing tone suspend Phyllis in stasis. Although Neff has killed her, he keeps her alive through the narrative retelling of events. What we see (and hear) is already determined, but Neff's tone still implies a desire for events to be changed. Thus, it feels *as if* it could, and perhaps even should, change; for all we know, Phyllis may turn up, instead of Keyes, at the end of his story. Neff's narration includes multiple moments of narrative divergence where, in another lifetime, things might have turned out differently. What at first seems like a perfectly executed plan soon becomes unstuck through what feels like an almost farcical accumulation of loose ends and unimagined consequences. The structure of Neff's story is bookended by similar scenes. Neff and Phyllis's first and last meetings occur in adjacent rooms: Neff meets Phyllis in the hallway, and they continue their conversation in the living room. They

⁶¹ Greg Forter, 'Going Straight with Gilda', p. 19.

end by shooting each other in the living room. They sit in the same seats as Neff pulls the trigger. Phyllis is neither dead nor alive; dead, of course, by the end, but alive in Neff's re-telling, constantly haunting him with what might have been. Her presence in the film, as a ghostly figure, is a paradoxical formulation. In her first appearance, she is, for Neff, returning, for the first and last time, but also making her memorable debut. Her haunting, too, is one which acts as a blockage to a coherent sense of historicity: by her deeds, the narrative's linearity is lost forever, cut up into irrational segments.

Returning to *Gilda*, Johnny is in Buenos Aires in part due to an implied previous relationship with Gilda. Yet trauma is always abrupt and difficult to understand. In relation to home, *Gilda*'s setting, Buenos Aires in 1945, is an important detail. The film takes place towards the end of World War Two, and the narrative itself is concerned with going home — the final words of the film, spoken by Gilda to Johnny are 'Johnny, let's go. Let's go home.'⁶² There is a curious narrative jolt shortly after Gilda is introduced where Johnny's voiceover says rather nonchalantly, 'anyway, it was about that time that the war ended.'⁶³ One implication is that Gilda somehow ended the war by her presence in the film. The scene of her first appearance is a kind of traumatic 'bombshell' for Johnny, a rupture in time. Yet, this line shows the way in which Hollywood films focus excessively on the personal, rather than the 'historical'. The only explanation in the film for the war ending seems to revolve around Gilda. What comes after is evidently the 'fallout' of her introduction. The ending of the war in the film is so sudden as to catch us unprepared, in a similar way to the resurfacing of traumatic memories. The abrupt ending of the war upsets the film's linear sense of historicity. The temporal, or spatial, placement of

⁶² *Gilda* (1946).

⁶³ *Ibid.*

Johnny's voiceover is never articulated: it comes from no identifiable point in time or space. It may not even be a voice from the future giving its explanation for the past.

Johnny's voiceover could be his immediate thoughts as we progress through the film, as if he were correcting himself in real time. If, as Karen Hollinger argues in her essay on the voiceover in film noir, the male voiceover's function is to 'pit the *femme fatale's* dominating visual presence against the male voice,'⁶⁴ then Johnny's voice is introduced to regulate Gilda's dominating visual presence (or, indeed, absence). If Johnny's voice is from the future, which seems most plausible, then his voice can also be considered hauntological, as taking on the affect of Gilda's voice. For Fisher, for example, 'the future is always experienced as a haunting', since the future is that which has yet to occur, or the possibility of what might occur, yet it still 'impinges on the present'⁶⁵ as a virtuality. What is mourned in this historical haunting, Fisher argues, is 'less the failure of a future to transpire —the future as actuality — than the disappearance of [an] effective virtuality.'⁶⁶ The bitterness present in Johnny's voiceover indicates a sense of a lost future, which implies that the future did not transpire the way he truly desired; that the promise of the future, its virtuality, disappeared at the sight of Gilda. The next section examines Gilda's introduction in closer detail, in particular how her voice and presence are the central hauntological concern of the film and how this impacts the film's construction of home.

⁶⁴ Karen Hollinger, 'Film Noir, Voice Over, and the Femme Fatale', p. 246.

⁶⁵ Mark Fisher, 'What is Hauntology?', p. 16.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

Gilda's Introduction

The figure of the femme fatale has no corollary in the real history of postwar America insofar as the emergence of the femme fatale as a cinematic trope does not correlate with a similar emergence of women as deadly manipulators. In fact, despite its prevalence in noir criticism, the femme fatale — that is, a woman who uses her beauty to seduce and destroy men — is not an entirely new concept. One of the earliest antecedents, for instance, could be the Sirens from Homer's *The Odyssey*. The crucial difference between noir and the Sirens is that while the femme fatale uses her physical appearance as her main fascinating tool, the Sirens use their voices to lure Odysseus' sailors into the ocean. In film noir, the Sirens' eroticised voice is translated into a male voice, which in turn eroticises the female body, as Karen Hollinger argues. Hollinger's main thesis is that the male voiceover's function is, on the one hand, to 'pit the femme fatale's dominating visual presence against the male voice,' while on the other, as Doane argues, to embed the 'figure of the femme fatale in the narrative's metadiegetic level,'⁶⁷ which thus withholds 'access to narration' and grants the 'male narrator control of both her words and image.'⁶⁸

The question for film noir, which invariably provides an ambivalent answer, is whether it is the femme fatale's visual presence or the male voiceover which is dominant. The male voiceover can mediate and regulate the woman's body, as is the case with Jeff's suggestive introduction to Kathie in *Out of the Past* ('I saw her coming out of the sun,') which allows him to reframe her in relation to fantasy. After all, the voiceover is always performed in some unspecified time in the future where the narrator tries to put history back into the past. Furthermore, the femme fatale can control

⁶⁷ Hollinger, 'Film Noir, Voice Over, and the Femme Fatale', p. 46.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

the male voiceover, disrupting and undermining it before it even begins. The additional factor involved in this dilemma is the introduction of the female voice itself.



Figure. 6.6, *Gilda* (1946)

In *Gilda*'s introductory scene, we can see how the femme fatale is marked as a hauntological absent presence in the film. Johnny is 'introduced again' (though he already has a history with her) to Gilda by Ballin, her husband. Initially, Ballin calls Johnny to the top of the staircase, remarking that he 'feels great' about something.⁶⁹ Johnny asks, 'Where's the canary?', to which Ballin responds, 'How did you know?' Johnny replies that he does not understand, and

⁶⁹ *Gilda* (1946).

Ballin says, ‘So you don’t know?’ Even before she is introduced, Gilda is shrouded in ambiguity and misunderstanding. Ballin mistakenly thinks that Johnny knows what, or who, is he is talking about, thereby accidentally revealing Johnny and Gilda’s hidden history. Here, the film bears out a central tension in the figure of the femme fatale. Her visual (and acoustic) presence is revealing, but the nature of what it reveals is unclear. She does not show desire or reveal in the (presumed) male observer their own desire, but rather the obscurity of desire. To use Lacan’s analogy, what the femme fatale ‘shows’ is the staging of the veil and the abyss it conceals. Gilda’s absence reveals the hidden history between her and Johnny as a fascinating and spectral presence. What their history amounts to is obscurity itself. She is introduced first as obscurity, then as voice, then in person. This is further reinforced through Gilda’s introduction, where her ostentatious and performative flick of her hair renders Johnny immobile and uncommunicative (Figure 6.6). Again, however, before she is visually introduced, we can hear her singing from the next room. ‘Quite a surprise to hear a woman singing in my house, eh Johnny?’ Ballin asks, to which Johnny replies, ‘Yes, quite a...surprise’ with a protracted pause before he says ‘surprise.’⁷⁰

As the camera approaches Gilda, building anticipation for her appearance, we can glimpse her inside her bedroom (Figure 6.7). The bright interior contrasts with the dark exterior covering Ballin and Johnny. The promise is that Gilda will reveal Johnny’s desire, that there is something ‘illuminating’ about her. The movement of the camera, therefore, suggests a movement into knowledge. Complicating this movement, however, is the mirror and suitcase in the room. The mirror doubles the image before it is even shown, promising to show Gilda from ‘all angles.’ It also prefigures the visual fascination with Gilda. Our anticipation is mediated by her voice, for one, but also by the fact the mirror offers new and impossible angles into the room. The suitcase

⁷⁰ *Gilda* (1946).

represents a certain transience surrounding Gilda, implying that she has only just arrived, that we are about to capture her from the very beginning, while at the same suggesting she may leave at any time.



Figure 6.7, *Gilda* (1946)

This prefigures the film's scopophilic preoccupation of continually asking 'Where is Gilda?'. The question of Gilda's location is here bound up with *who* or *what* she is. She is, as suggested by her voice, a canary in Ballin's coal mine, his gambling empire *and* his home. She is a wife to Ballin, but a former partner of Johnny's. She is, perhaps obviously, Rita Hayworth herself. She is a disembodied voice which haunts the images before her very arrival. In addition, Gilda's transience, her inability to be caught and regulated by the male gaze, can be read as a

metaphor for the *home's* transience in the film — and noir more broadly. Gilda's presence renders the home unstable. Johnny, who was previously 'making himself at home' by helping himself to some alcoholic drinks from Ballin's downstairs bar, becomes uncommunicative at the sight (and sound) of Gilda. The fundamental architectural split in Ballin's home is thus exaggerated by Gilda: the split between the bedroom (the room of comfort; of sleep, of dreams; of family) and the bar (representative of a public, and unhomely space). It is not that Gilda introduces ambiguity by disrupting the dynamics and architecture of the home, but rather that she reveals Ballin's home to be unhomely and her presence threatens to untie this *unheimlich* knot. Symbolically, too, Gilda challenges Ballin's own hauntological and uncanny presence throughout the film. Like Gilda, Ballin drifts in and out of the frame; both he and Gilda compete for Johnny's desire.

In *Gilda*, the absence of home is principally dramatized by the dichotomy of Gilda's absence or presence. When Ballin and Johnny first enter Gilda's bedroom — entering the prospect of home for the first time — Ballin asks, 'Gilda are you decent?' Gilda flicks her hair as her face fills the screen.⁷¹ We hear Gilda singing before we see her, her voice luring Johnny and Ballin up to her room. When Gilda does appear, there is another long pause where Ballin is forced to physically usher Johnny in. Gilda's voice, as indicated by Johnny's surprise, is a 'return of the repressed' because of the concealed romantic (and implicitly traumatic) history between them. It is a history which Ballin insists on hearing, but never does — a history is unseen as well as unheard, which begs the question whether it really happened at all. The suggestive dialogue in the scene continually circles around this phantom history between Johnny and Gilda. The purpose confronts Johnny with the obscurity of their history. Gilda begins the conversation by remarking that she has 'heard a lot about' Johnny, presumably from Ballin, yet Johnny 'hasn't heard a word' about

⁷¹ *Gilda* (1946).

Gilda.⁷² The confrontation with Gilda positions her as the source of knowledge, the big Other; she knows Johnny's desire, which cannot be concealed from her, whereas Johnny is positioned as the one who 'must' know.

Gilda functions as Johnny's 'lost object'. Hence her fascination is, for Johnny, historical. Their meeting here is hauntological insofar as it is both a repetition and the first time they meet. However, Gilda herself is 'lost' in the narrative because she evades the narrative's gaze by undermining the masculine mastery of the film's images. Her bedroom, for one, is a profoundly ambiguous space — evidenced by Johnny's timid crossing of the threshold. Indeed, it is, as Forter points out, the first time Johnny and Ballin are in the bedroom together. Yet a crucial transference has taken place: it is no longer Ballin's room, but Gilda's. The space of the bedroom, a previously private room in the home, is ambiguous. Gilda, at first, interrupts Johnny and Ballin's relationship, as her appearance marks the 'return' of a repressed history. Later, however, Ballin interrupts — literally walking through the space between Gilda and Johnny disrupting their gazes. If they cannot look, they cannot know. In this way, Gilda's bedroom is rendered an ambiguous metaphorical space; Gilda herself functions as the past incarnate.

As Oliver and Trigo argue, noir is ambiguous, or anxious, because of the way in which the process of identity formation is constituted 'by protecting it from the threats of ambiguous borders.'⁷³ They classify these threats as 'feminine power in men, incomprehensible language in foreigners, uncertain identity, racial mixing, and maternal sexuality.'⁷⁴ They conclude that 'the very process that builds, consolidates, and fortifies identity in film noir also drains identity of

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Oliver and Trigo, *Noir Anxiety*, p. 211.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

meaning, creates holes or vacuums at its center, and produces the anxiety that haunts film noir.⁷⁵ Noir requires its protagonists to maintain forward momentum, to work towards something, but the femme fatale's primary function is to halt this process. Johnny's predicament is that he is stuck historicising, but that this process gets him nowhere. The scene, for one, is centred around the alluring properties of Gilda's voice, which then transitions into the staging of Gilda's physical attractiveness, which is finally staged as a crisis of historicity. Gilda's haunting voice is therefore understood by Johnny *as* the past.

Gilda's voice exemplifies Michel Chion's concept of the 'acousmatic presence' because when first heard, she is hidden and afterwards, Ballin and Johnny are plagued by the question 'where is Gilda?'⁷⁶ The acousmatic presence, for Chion, is a vocal source which remains unseen; we hear the vocal sources, but their presence is merely a threat, or a lure. They are 'outside the image and at the same time *in* the image' because, in the cinema, the sound is located behind the screen and in the film itself.⁷⁷ Gilda's response to Ballin's question about whether she is decent — 'Me?' — acts as the confirmation of her presence, which up until this point had merely been a spectral, sourceless voice. Her confirmation, however, does not dispel her hauntological dimensions. Seeing Gilda only heightens her ambiguity. Just when Ballin and Johnny think they have found Gilda, her hesitation and elongated pause after answering and seeing Johnny leaves an excess. In this sense, her voice is in the image since we can finally see her speaking, but it remains outside the image because it lies outside the film's sense of history.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, p. 18.

⁷⁷ Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, p. 23.

Chion's term for this threatening auditory and narrative phenomenon is the *acousmêtre*: 'the one who is not-yet seen, but who remains liable to appear in the visual field at any moment.'⁷⁸ As such, when the *acousmêtre* appears in a film, the central goal is to bring it 'into the light.'⁷⁹ Gilda's restlessness and her absence from the frame indicates her unwillingness to be controlled, to have her body organised into the spectacle of male desire, but it also shows that Gilda, far away in Buenos Aires, is not in her 'proper place' at home in America. To bring her 'into the light' is to bring Gilda (and Johnny) home, as well as to pacify her image.⁸⁰ To do so, her perceived infidelity and history with Johnny must first be punished in order for her to be redeemed. As Greg Forster puts it, Gilda must turn out to be innocent so that she can be released from her 'Latin prison into the quotidian domestic delights of "home" and heterosexual coupling.'⁸¹ By marrying Ballin, she is imprisoned within his house and casino; she cannot return home to America. But, Forster continues, 'she must also be guilty' because the film needs to contain her within the narration; the film pretends she is guilty to satisfy a 'sadistically ocular masculine entertainment.'⁸² Neither her infidelity nor her history with Johnny are ever fully explained, but the anxiety to do so speaks to the role of the *acousmêtre*, which, according to Chion, is to invite the spectator to 'go see,' and be an 'invitation to the loss of self, to desire and fascination.'⁸³ The spectacle of Gilda is therefore a paradoxical arrangement: the film promises a certain level of pleasure, of seeing and of knowing, but at the same time it suspends its 'desire to know.'⁸⁴ The 'where' of Gilda, as well as her and Johnny's history, is constantly deferred.

⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 21.

⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 23.

⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 18.

⁸¹ Forster, 'Going Straight with Gilda', p. 11.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, p. 23.

⁸⁴ Forster, 'Going Straight with Gilda', p. 11.

The same could be said for the ‘striptease’ scene. The pleasure of the scene is similarly inherently paradoxical: it is a suspension of our desire to know. The function of the striptease is to always promise the possibility of the complete removal of all Gilda’s clothes whilst at the same time consistently denying and delaying such attainment of desire. Yet the desire and pleasure only persist if the fantasy of what lies beneath Gilda’s clothing is maintained, a fantasy which is lost at the moment she hypothetically removes her clothes. We should, however, read this scene as metaphorical — since what is important is what lies beneath Gilda’s clothes *qua* their relation to Johnny’s fantasy. As with the introductory scene, the voice and image work to combine the crowd and Johnny’s *objet petit a*, the very notion of historical loss. It is not the case that it is impossible to see Gilda’s naked body (though, in the context of the film and the Production Code, we know it is impossible), but the impossibility is rather the prospect of seeing Gilda naked *and* our fantasy remaining intact. Our desire stops short of seeing Gilda naked because *we do not want to know or see*. The pleasure is in neither knowing nor seeing.



Figure 6.8, *Gilda* (1946)

If *Gilda* is supposed to contain home within herself, then what she offers is impossible. The spectator's 'desire to know' is always suspended and the striptease will reach a point where nothing more can be revealed or else the fantasy is lost. The striptease, then, offers a scenario in which our desire is never satisfied and never disappointed, but is held in suspension. In this sense, the metaphorical function of 'Gilda's clothes' is to mask the historical loss and cultural anxiety marked by the femme fatale. Her song, 'Put the Blame on Mame', refers to the synchronous fears that coalesce around *Gilda* (and women in noir in general).⁸⁵ More generally, the role of the femme

⁸⁵ The line in the first verse, 'Mame kissed a buyer from out of town, that kiss burned Chicago down, so you can put the blame on Mame, boys' is particularly instructive insofar as it shows *Gilda* to be in a position of knowledge over her own reception and place in the network of blame in the film.

fatale, from the perspective of Hollywood studios, could be said to sustain the fantasy of subversion, to maintain desire, but ultimately be stopped. In *Gilda*, the explicit function of the striptease is to undermine Johnny's masculine authority over her, by presenting herself as a spectacle. Her intention is that Johnny disrupt the striptease and cut it short, thus demonstrating his lack of control over his desire. For Johnny, the striptease will end with Gilda completely naked.

One of the central tensions in *Gilda* is between the regulation and organisation of Gilda's body and image, and her voice. As indicated by her introduction, her singing and her striptease, Gilda's voice plays a prominent role in the production of anxiety in the male characters and audience. I now consider the relation between Gilda's voice, the anxiety she produces, and the wider historical and social context of both *Gilda* and the home. Writing about *The Lady From Shanghai* (1947), again starring Rita Hayworth, Oliver and Trigo note the 'haunting effect of the voice', specifically Hayworth's voice and how it represents 'an acoustic site of unpredictability and promise.'⁸⁶ In both *The Lady From Shanghai* and *Gilda*, the eroticisation of Hayworth equally involves her voice as well as her body. I would contend that it is the female voice which inspires noir's male anxiety over the female body. The striptease scene is not simply a visual spectacle but is accompanied by Gilda singing 'Put the Blame on Mame.' Her voice lies outside the organised male spectacle because of her literal and narrative invisibility. In her initial introduction, for example, and at the beginning of the scene where Johnny hears her sing and play the guitar, she begins by being out of sight and Johnny is required to follow the voice to its source. Narratively, the question of Gilda's location is one which seeks to bring her into the male fantasy frame.

⁸⁶ Oliver and Trigo, *Noir Anxiety*, p. 50.

Thus, the anxiety present in *Gilda* is due to the inability of the male gaze to subjugate Gilda and for her to disavow her place in the male fantasy. The anxiety is produced through the difference between the ‘unpredictability’ of her voice and the ‘promise’ of her body.⁸⁷ Frequently, too, the image of women is presented *by* their voice, as here, in the case of Gilda.⁸⁸ The same is true for Kitty in *The Killers*, where Swede is drawn to her singing voice. In her haunting auditory introduction, Gilda anticipates her multiple and questioned absences throughout the film. She is both there (we can hear her, and her male counterparts feel her presence) and not there (she is absent from the screen, and she threatens to disrupt Johnny and Ballin’s dominance over the narrative). Either the absent women were committing adultery (as is the fear with Gilda), or asserting a new economic independence. However, the femme fatale can also be recognised as an emergence of a new feminine subjectivity in cinema. The femme fatale, Elisabeth Bronfen argues, ‘gives voice to a feminine desire that may include [the male hero’s erotic ambivalence] in order to attain its aim, but also exceeds his fantasy realm.’⁸⁹ The perceived absence of the femme fatale can be attributed to exceeding the male fantasy and thus resisting symbolisation. The seemingly paradoxical movements of the femme fatale’s presence and absence are indicative of trauma, an inability to comprehend, a blockage in the process of signification. The next section focuses on Gilda’s position in the narrative in relation to the film’s construction of home. Specifically, it asks to what extent Gilda, far from being a disruptive femme fatale, acts as a ‘corrective’ to Johnny and Ballin’s implied homosexual relationship.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, p. 49.

⁸⁹ Bronfen, ‘Negotiations of Tragic Desire’, p. 106.

Gilda Sets Things Straight

To return to Gilda's introduction — the femme fatale is nothing if not a haunting, a continual point of return — Gilda asks Johnny whether it was a surprise to see her, to which Ballin replies, answering in the place of Johnny, 'It certainly was. You should have seen his face.'⁹⁰ This shows Johnny's immobilisation, but also demonstrates that the male voice and therefore male perspective, is shared between Ballin and Johnny. Gilda's introduction places her between Johnny and Ballin, disrupting their implied homosexual relationship. Greg Forter suggests that Gilda's role in the film is to act as a corrective wedge between Johnny and Ballin, in order to bring the former to the 'right side' of his sexuality.⁹¹ In this sense, at least, Gilda does not fulfil the role of a femme fatale. Instead, her function and intended effect is the opposite: to consummate and maintain the heterosexual relationship. The film ends, it should be remembered, not with Gilda's excruciating demise, but her salvation. Forter notes, too, that her introduction aligns with the first time that Johnny and Ballin are in a bedroom together — she is introduced at the precise moment where the homosexual relationship is no longer merely suggestive but becomes an explicit part of the text. Johnny's hesitancy is a realisation — shared by the audience — that Gilda is not the film's desirable object, but that Johnny is since he crosses the boundaries of sexual difference. What is at stake in the film is Johnny's capacity for reconstituting the home, not through 'saving' Gilda, but through saving himself.

The promise offered in Gilda's introductory scene lies in the answer to Ballin's question, 'Gilda, are you decent?' The question, as is so often the case in relation to women in film noir, is

⁹⁰ *Gilda* (1946).

⁹¹ Forter, 'Going Straight with Gilda', p. 19.

both physical and moral. It is physical insofar as Ballin is asking if Gilda is wearing an appropriate amount of clothes to be shown on screen, not only the cinema screen but appropriate for Johnny and Ballin's fantasies. The moral dimension to the question pertains to what role Gilda will assume in relation to Ballin and Johnny's homosexual relationship: will she destroy it (thereby doing the 'decent' thing and establishing a heterosexual relationship), or will she let it be? The answer to the question is rhetorical, yet highly interrogatory, regardless of the answer Gilda herself gives. After a brief pause, she responds 'Me? Sure, I'm decent.'⁹² The initial 'Me?' introduces a level of ambiguity when it comes to addressing Gilda, already foreshadowing her disappearances and Ballin and Johnny's reaction to them. Gilda, too, is resisting the male gaze's attempt to see and therefore subjugate her. One of Gilda's main strategies for autonomy is her ability to control her own image and how it is staged. The question, 'Are you decent?', and her reply haunt the rest of the film. What is more, 'Are you decent?' speaks to the homophonic nature of the question that follows it: 'Where is Gilda?' which not only asks for her location, but also what is she *wearing*, the answer to which sets the boundaries of the male fantasy.

As emphasised by Johnny's hesitancy, Gilda is difficult to really see. In her introduction, Gilda is very brightly lit, almost impossibly so, in contrast to both the rest of the film and of noir's apparent distinctive style. If film noir is marked, in some cases, by the arrival of the femme fatale (or even the vague threat of the femme fatale), then here this is undermined. She is presented in perfect conditions — she does not hide beneath bath towels — yet she is still indecipherable. As with many other femme fatales in film noir, Gilda's eroticism is at first embraced by the film as her desires are centred, supposedly the central mechanism by which fascination is generated. However, the film slowly punishes her for those desires while at the same time, through Johnny's

⁹² *Gilda* (1946).

eroticism, dismissing Gilda's desires. In this way, the femme fatale (I am here using the term advisedly) both stitches meaning together — Johnny's desire can only be understood *through* Gilda's — and is only effective in the virtual. She does not exist. As with the striptease scene, then, the film does not want to admit, or know, what Gilda wants. The film fetishises Gilda, visible through her introduction and her striptease scene. At the same time, the film punishes her for her desires.

Ostensibly, the film wishes to understand Gilda, but is blinded by its censorious nature and by her brightly lit introduction. This kind of fetishism, for Laura Mulvey, is 'born out of a refusal to see, a refusal to accept the difference the female body represents for the male.'⁹³ This fetishism, moreover, leaves the 'female body as an enigma and threat.'⁹⁴ Gilda's introduction is, as Mulvey indicates, both an enigma and a threat. Her presence is a 'surprise' to Johnny, but simultaneously she is a threat to the homosexual relationship between Johnny and Ballin. If the film's fetishistic gaze toward Gilda is born out of a 'refusal to accept the difference the female body represents for the male,' then her body is introduced to intervene and set a 'standard of normality,' to give Johnny an avenue to experience heterosexual desire and set the film's narrative tension and drama 'straight'.⁹⁵ The homosexual relationship, according to Greg Forter, attempts to block the woman's role as sexual 'normaliser.' To admit that Johnny is a passive male figure, one who takes 'guns from behind', requires the film to disavow that the desirable character is not Gilda, but Johnny. 'We want,' Forter argues, 'to see and master Gilda, with all the sadism and castration anxiety implied, so as not to have to look at this other, this far less gainly, exhibition.'⁹⁶ As Trigo and

⁹³ Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', p. 64.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Forter, 'Going Straight with Gilda', p. 19.

⁹⁶ Ibid, p. 18.

Oliver argue in *Noir Anxiety*, this kind of ‘femininity’ in men — that is, homosexual desire — is more ‘dangerous’ than femininity in women because it threatens the ‘very boundaries and borders’ of identity.⁹⁷



Figure 6.9, *Gilda* (1946)

For Forter, the film’s project, and Gilda’s main function, is to act as a corrective to Ballin and Johnny’s ‘ominous aberration,’ their homosexuality.⁹⁸ Gilda’s function, therefore, is to redraw the boundaries of sexual identity. Johnny and Ballin’s homosexuality is only suggested in the film, and never becomes an explicit issue, but it is still central to understanding Gilda’s role in the film.

⁹⁷ Oliver and Trigo, *Noir Anxiety*, p. 35.

⁹⁸ Forter, ‘Going Straight with Gilda’, p. 18.

Further, Elizabeth Cowie argues that the repressed homosexuality in the film ‘forms the basis for Johnny’s sadistic punishment’.⁹⁹ Cowie approaches the issue — albeit briefly — from a Freudian perspective. Gilda’s punishment is a result of her position in the film’s Oedipus complex. She is, as Cowie summarises, the ‘oedipal surrogate’¹⁰⁰ because the way in which she ‘must’ be rescued from Ballin is aligned with the mother’s apparent need for rescue from the desire of the father. As Freud writes, ‘in the rescue-phantasy [the male child] is completely identifying himself with his father. All his instincts, those of tenderness, gratitude, lustfulness, defiance and independence, find satisfaction in the single wish to be his own father.’¹⁰¹ A Freudian reading, therefore, views the film’s narrative as the process by which the family is reinstated. Since Johnny and Gilda do (re)unite at the end of the film, we can only conclude that Johnny does not simply wish to be his own father, but that he *is* his own father.

Johnny and Ballin’s chance meeting at the docks is a curious matter too. It takes place shortly after the former gambles with American sailors in Buenos Aires — spending his ‘first night in the Argentine.’ Johnny says, in his voiceover, that although he did not know much about the local population, he does ‘know about American sailors.’ The euphemistic phrasing, alongside the suggestive imagery of Johnny kneeling at waist height, is about as far as *Gilda* can go. In contrast to Gilda’s whereabouts, her position in the male fantasy, Johnny and Ballin’s meeting (and subsequent relationship) is left unresolved. Forter notes Johnny’s ‘feminisation’ — as he takes a ‘gun in the back’¹⁰² — is suggestive of his homosexual passivity; a passivity that the film must constantly disavow. Gilda, on the other hand, is intended to break apart the homosexual

⁹⁹ Cowie, ‘Film Noir and Women’, p. 124.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Sigmund Freud, ‘The Loss of Reality in Neurosis and Psychosis’, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XIX* (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), p. 173.

¹⁰² Forter, ‘Going Straight with Gilda’, p. 15.

relationship and supplant it with the formation of the heterosexual couple. Her role as desirable object is amplified by (or perhaps only exists because of) the film's denial and simultaneous suggestion of the homosexual relationship between Ballin and Johnny. On the one hand, the film denies that such a relationship is ongoing, while on the other it offers, after eighteen minutes, an 'antidote' to it, after the film deems it necessary. Thus, the assumed desire for Gilda is a desire for 'normalisation.'¹⁰³ In this sense, the question of whether Gilda is 'decent' is one which asks whether Gilda will intervene in Ballin and Johnny's relationship. Is she decent *enough* to bring about the 'correct' coupling of herself and Johnny? In this respect, Gilda cannot be considered a femme fatale if, for instance, we conceive of the femme fatale as a figure who breaks apart the family and destabilises the home. Gilda's function here is precisely the opposite, to restore the family, to reunite herself and Johnny, and prise him away from the tempestuous and criminal Ballin. The final line of the film, spoken by Gilda, is 'Johnny, let's go. Let's go home.' By assuming her role as obedient housewife (mirroring Ballin's desire for obedience), she renounces her access to her sexual strength. For Hollinger, the ending is unsatisfactory and forced because the 'character' of Gilda is 'left unresolved and uncontrolled.'¹⁰⁴ Hollinger locates the source of ambiguity in Johnny's voiceover — *Gilda* is really Johnny's story — and how the voiceover 'is tied to the conflicts that dominate the text rather than to the attempts at resolution that are made in the film's closing segments', which Hollinger identifies as Gilda's femininity and Johnny's homoerotic attraction to Ballin.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Ibid, p. 18.

¹⁰⁴ Hollinger, 'Film Noir, Voice Over, and the Femme Fatale', p. 51.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.



Figure 6.10, *Gilda* (1946)

Part of the film's method is to 'de-hystercise' Gilda's female body. For, as Forter shows, the two central questions of the film are first, 'Gilda, are you decent?', and second 'Where is Gilda?' The second question 'camouflages and serves as an alibi' for the first question, which, Forter argues, sanctions 'an interrogation into the whereabouts of the female body only in order to fix that body.'¹⁰⁶ There is a desire on the part of Johnny (and perhaps Ballin) to relentlessly punish Gilda for her imagined indiscretions: first, to find her, to subjugate her in the male gaze, and second, to 'make her decent.' Yet this role is performed by Gilda on Johnny, not the other way around. Gilda, both the film and the character, promise a certain level of scopophilic pleasure, a

¹⁰⁶ Forter, 'Going Straight with Gilda', p. 10.

pleasure which is denied at the point of its satisfaction, and infinitely suspended. Specifically, what is suspended is our desire to know the answers to the film's central questions — 'Is Gilda decent?' and 'Where is Gilda?' With respect to the moral implication of Gilda's (in)decency, the film assumes we want Gilda to be decent for the sole purpose of breaking up the homosexual relationship. If Gilda *is* decent, then the home can be reclaimed by the heterosexual couple instead. In this way, the film demands Gilda's moral 'purity' and subservience while at the same time attempting to delimit her effect. On the level of our desire, the film teases us and invites us to look to see whether Gilda is 'decent.' If we look and see Gilda is indecent, then the answer to the moral question, the answer we want, is complicated because her flirtation with Johnny (thus giving us the 'correct' narrative solution) equates to being adulterous. Our desire to see an 'indecent' Gilda is both rewarding *and* punishing. It is rewarding in the sense we see what we desire, but punishing as far as it makes us, by the film's own standards, morally culpable. Moreover, for the film to reach its intended satisfying conclusion, in some sense Gilda must have been domesticated, sculptured into an appropriate wife. Just as she must cede her desire, we must cease to desire both Gilda and Johnny.

The final moments of *Gilda* attempt to close off desire for the home. The question of Gilda's whereabouts is finally answered, given its 'proper' context. Yet it remains unsatisfactory because of Gilda's hauntological dimensions. She can only assume her position if her hauntological dimensions are disavowed. Johnny is told moments prior to his near rejection of her at the end of the film, 'Gilda didn't do any of those things you've been losing sleep over, not any of them. It was just an act, all of it, and I'll give you credit. You were a great audience, Mr. Farrell.'¹⁰⁷ The ending is therefore presented as the 'originary' moment of Gilda as a 'proper'

¹⁰⁷ *Gilda* (1946).

woman, exorcised of her fatal affect. However, it is in the exorcism that noir's hauntological demon is revealed. The real purpose of the femme fatale is explicitly hauntology (if hauntology can ever be explicit) because in revealing that Gilda was not the femme fatale she was fantasised to be, it reveals the femme fatale to be entirely *imaginary*, not located in women but as a historical relation. The appearance of the femme fatale signals a doubling, a repetition, of fantasy, and of home. When Gilda says 'Let's go home' to Johnny, home's hauntological dimension is revealed: it the place they are returning to (that is, returning to America after the war) but also as a new, undiscovered place; both the first and the last instance of home.

Afterword

We have reached home, or at least the end of the thesis. By centring home within noir discourse (in noir itself and critical approaches to noir) we can more fully understand its problematic conception and retroactive construction. The absence of home, for one, creates an instance of the eerie: a presence which should be felt, but is nonetheless absent. This is only intensified, paradoxically, by the inclusion of home in noir's narrative. For example, the unavailability of the Dietrichson home in *Double Indemnity*, a place frequently returned to in this thesis, is only *increased* by Neff's proximity to it; the closer he gets to the 'end of the line' the further away home appears. It is in this sense that home is fascinating. It acts as the centre of meaning (the *point-de-capiton*, the mechanism by which meaning is 'stitched' together *après-coup*), yet structurally it resists understanding. Indeed, home, like noir at a certain point, cannot be understood. It is a 'black hole' of meaning, absent and unknowable, that nevertheless pulls meaning toward it. The home is often positioned as a place of safety, a retreat from the overbearing presence of desire in noir, but it rarely grants such safety. As a result of its fascinating properties, home is a major site of anxiety in noir.

The critical fascination with noir, I assert, is borne out of a desire to (re)insert home in noir. Home, here, acts a metaphor for stable meaning, yet critical fascination renders noir fundamentally unstable. In this way, noir films reflect their own critical history, and thus a consistent thread in this thesis has been an examination of how noir's retrospection creates a dialogue between itself and its critics. Noir, as I have argued, is only sustained by this retroactivity. In noir, history is lost to us. Through this loss, however, the mechanisms of historical recovery are revealed to us so that, in the aftermath of noir, we are able to recognise how our own critical position changes noir, and allows us to resist the temptation to put history and coherence back into noir. By centring home

within this discourse, this thesis centres ambiguity rather than ignoring it. In noir, history is lost in the past as well as the present. There is no clear chronology of noir as a category, but neither is there a clear chronological construction of time in noir. I thus understand noir as a non-temporal and non-hierarchical category which can only be engaged retroactively. This approach of centring ambiguity does, however, come with its own problems. Principally, the twin tasks of centring the films themselves and recognising the critical lacuna at the heart of noir criticism can often be contradictory, and the balance is difficult to maintain. Centring the films constitutes the bulk of my readings, but without prominent references to the critical context surrounding the film (as well as noir more generally) can potentially lead to unsatisfactory conclusions. On the other hand, highlighting the structural ways in which critical approaches fail (or succeed) is extremely illuminating in my readings of the films. Yet it runs the risk of diminishing the films themselves. The films, potentially, are only useful insofar as they prove some theory or thesis about them. In short, maintaining the proper distance where one can examine the films from a somewhat objective position, while at the same time acknowledging the instabilities of the critical position in noir is difficult, and sometimes, this balance must be forsaken in the name of clarity. These concerns are not exclusive to noir; however, they are heightened in noir criticism.

I see the notion of blindness, both literal and metaphorical, as central to noir and our spectatorship of it. The various mysteries in noir are often predicated on what we cannot see, and therefore what we cannot know. In *Detour*, for example, Al bemoans that ‘fate, or some mysterious force, can put the finger on you or me for no good reason at all.’¹ Indeed, *Detour* culminates in Al and Vera moving into a hotel room for a short while as Vera manipulates Al into stealing a fortune for her. The last act of the film takes place in a pale imitation of home, with Al and Vera pretending

¹ *Detour* (1945).

to be husband and wife — Al's fiancée, Sue, after all wished to move to Hollywood to become an actor. What Al cannot see, despite it purportedly being in front of him, is the home he desires with Sue, his 'real' fiancée. At the centre of noir's blindness, then, lies home, the 'mysterious force' which obliges noir's protagonists to seek it out.

This compulsion for home, enabled by desire and fascination, leads to a kind of homesickness. It is a sickness both *for* and *of* the home. This sickness is seen most acutely in *The Lost Weekend*, but it is a sensation felt throughout noir. Don's alcoholism in the film acts as a lens through which we can see how home function as the 'abyss' of desire, or the Real in Lacanian terms. Desire posits that there is meaning to be found in completing its circuit, that the Real around which it circles will finally be understood and brought into the symbolic order. However, the desire for home in noir only reveals the emptiness of home as an ideological and historical concept. Home therefore only exists as an imagined and pastoral idea. Noir shows this imagination, this fantasy, as nothingness. In this way, desire for home in noir is not simply a desire to return to an imagined and nostalgic past, but instead a desire to cease desiring altogether. Noir is a similar kind of fantasmatic construction, an imagined genre projected into the past. The addiction in *The Lost Weekend* short circuits this fantasy, and instead gives us direct access to the Real of film noir. To adjust Lacan's maxim, what lies beyond the front door of home, what home's interiority consists of, is, in fact, nothing at all.

The home in noir is thus always duplicitous insofar as it never gives noir what it wants. What renders home fascinating is the way in which all noir's other problems are refracted through home, as is the case with *Mildred Pierce*. The merging of the economic and domestic spheres in the home express anxieties surrounding the changing nature of work, gender, and home in the postwar context. Home is also diffused into noir's ambiguous spaces. The alienating space of the

city and its relation to the home engenders a sense of homelessness in noir. On one level, spaces in noir are rarely comforting. There is always some unseen ‘mysterious force’ which gazes at noir’s protagonists (and us), some element which remains unaccounted for. There is a combined sense of alienation and compulsion in film noir. This sense of alienation can be seen in the work of Edward Hopper, whose paintings lie adjacent to noir’s fascination. In noir, these alienating spaces are felt narratively in the way they act as a trap for noir’s characters. It is in their promise of openness — such as Wanley’s fantasmatic, lustful gaze at the painting of Alice — that we find the paranoid atmosphere of noir.

Finally, I have analysed the problematic conception of the femme fatale, specifically how the femme fatale is always present and at the same time overrepresented in noir discourse. The femme fatale, like home, is felt through her absences. Even when she is on screen, she still represents the possibility of her non-existence. In this respect, she is both weird *and* eerie. When she is present, she points to her disappearance, the absence she represents. When she is absent, she still remains a strong presence of any particular film, and noir more broadly. The originality of my thesis is located not only in the centring of home in its various analyses of the films discussed, but also in how it takes the problem of centring home metonymically. I view home as a traumatic object in noir. The trauma surrounding home opens up its own conundrums, but it also acts as a way in which to understand trauma more generally in noir. That is that noir is a traumatic category of films. The centring of home acknowledges a key theoretical problem of critical discourses surrounding noir. Noir can only be understood if we ignore the impulse to delimit its excesses, to solve its inscrutable mysteries.

There are multiple areas which invite further research, for example the consideration of other film noirs from the selected period in relation to the broader discussion of home. An

expansion of the period backwards or forwards into either the 1930s or the 1950s could give a broader view of the conception of home in noir. Such a project would focus on charting the changes of home's conception through the decades in noir and would inevitably be more historiographical.² This, too, would fit into the methodological schema of interpreting noir films non-temporally. Aside from a simple expansion of the period, I see two major avenues which I would like to consider pursuing afterwards. Firstly, an exploration of the effects of the Cold War on noir and home, or vice versa, would complement the argument and themes of this thesis. There are many worthwhile comparisons to be drawn by situating a response in the context of the Cold War in relation to home. In particular, the issues of McCarthyism, the 'Red Scare', and explicit anti-communist propaganda all impact how home is constructed and ultimately rely on a certain nostalgic conception of home.

Secondly, increasing the historical scope would allow a greater consideration of noir's various re-makes and re-imaginings of its narratives and ideas, and how this affects the construction of noir more generally. For example, in my earlier discussions of the problem of identifying the 'first film noir', a comparison might be made between John Huston's 1941 version of *The Maltese Falcon* and Roy Del Ruth's 1931 version. The question would revolve around the specific difference between the two films but would also situate Del Ruth's version within the context of Huston's. That is, how is Del Ruth's version understood in relation to Huston's? This is a stark way in which various film noirs can be read non-temporally. Moreover, it would interrogate the theoretical and conceptual concerns of reimagination itself, the various excesses

² For an example which expands the period to look at the American city more broadly, see: Michael J. Shapiro, *The Time of the City: Politics, Philosophy and Genre* (London: Routledge, 2010), particularly the fourth chapter, 'Neo-Noir and Urban Domesticity: The Wachowski brothers' *Bound*', which compares the domestic roles of Phyllis Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity* and Violet in *Bound* (1996).

which are produced, and the relation to the falcon itself. Just as the text questions the authenticity of the falcon, and of authenticity itself, we might also wish to consider which version of the film is the 'real' version. As I have argued, noir is identified *through* its excesses. Other similar projects might include films which share similar plotlines or themes. A particularly pointed example is Fritz Lang's *The Woman in the Window* and *Scarlet Street*, which possess nearly identically (though crucially different) narratives. Another example is Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt* and Welles' *The Stranger*. The extremity of these films' narrative resemblance confronts us with the problem that, perhaps, contained within a single noir film is the entirety of the noir canon. Since noir is an open category, there is always the possibility for 'one more' noir, so every film noir must allow for this possibility. The conception of the 'noir canon', moreover, does not exist independently of noir films; the 'noir canon' already exists in the films themselves.

Another key consideration raised by the thesis is the category of neo-noir and the conception of home in contemporary noir. I am referring to films, literature, and television shows from 1970 until the present which reflect some of the themes of noir, but recontextualise noir in their own disconnected schemas. Through this, we could expand on how the network of meaning in noir is formed through connections between films. Within these contemporary contexts, the conceptualisation of noir and of home could be broadened to discuss cinematic and cultural responses to historical events and periods such as the Cold War, the Vietnam War, and 9/11. Film noir, as I have argued, reveals part of America's cultural response to the disposition of its own historical myths. Neo-noir, it should be noted, is as varied as film noir — perhaps more so. There are the crime neo-noirs of directors such as Martin Scorsese (*Taxi Driver* (1976), *Raging Bull* (1980), *Cape Fear* (1991)), David Fincher (*Se7en* (1995), *Zodiac* (2007), *Gone Girl* (2014)), and Michael Mann (*Manhunter* (1986), *Heat* (1995)). In addition, there is science fiction noir, which

developed into the subcategory of cyberpunk: *Blade Runner* (1982)³ and its sequel, *The Terminator* and its sequels, *Robocop*. In the twenty first century, the German television programme *Dark* (2017) represents both the popularity of the noir aesthetic and the complexity of its form through the way in which *Dark* turns the paradoxes of the investigative structure into a psychologically inflected time travel narrative — a world where cause and effect are not only reversed, but it is impossible to tell which is which. There are also the psychological neo-noirs of David Lynch (*Blue Velvet*, *Mulholland Dr.*, *Twin Peaks*, and so on), who consistently uses film noir as a reference point within the complex systems of signs and symbols in his work. Modern neo-noir perhaps best exhibits Naremore's claim of noir's 'transgeneric' sensibilities.⁴ The Batman films of Christopher Nolan⁵, which are themselves heavily influenced by canonical graphic novels *Batman: Year One*, and *The Dark Knight Returns*,⁶ occupy a prominent place in the popular cultural imagination.⁷ What is of theoretical interest here is how the role of nostalgia is heightened in neo-noir. Film noir is already a nostalgic category, but neo-noir often exhibits a nostalgia for noir itself. As Andrew Spicer describes in *Historical Dictionary of Film Noir*, 'neo-noirs are films that self-consciously allude to classic noir, either implicitly or explicitly, building on what had become recognized and accepted as a distinct body of films from a particular period.'⁸ While

³ The psychoanalytic framework carries over to some neo-noir films. As Alena Zupančič writes: 'One could even say that the story of Oedipus lies at the heart of the "new wave" of film noir — films such as *Angel Heart* and *Blade Runner* (the director's cut), where it emerges at the end that the hero is himself the criminal he is looking for' (Alena Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan* (London: Verso, 2000), p. 246).

⁴ Naremore, *More Than Night*, p. 6.

⁵ Particularly *Batman Begins* (2005) and *The Dark Knight* (2008).

⁶ Another consideration in the context of Batman's connection with noir is *Batman: The Animated Series*, which borrows its setting and iconography from an imagined noir past. The city is dominated by high-rise art-deco buildings, the advanced technology of Batman is contrasted with the villains as 1930s style gangsters, it is replete with fedoras, 'Tommy' guns, and ubiquitous Zeppelins. It is evocative of noir, but such works, and others like it, would be better understood if approached through a theoretically rigorous understanding of noir.

⁷ For a political reading of *Batman Begins*, see: Mark Fisher, 'Gothic Oedipus: Subjectivity and Capitalism in Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins*', in *k-punk: The Collected and Unpublished Writings of Mark Fisher* (2004-2016), ed. by Darren Ambrose (London: Repeater Books, 2018), pp. 139-146.

⁸ Andrew Spicer, *Historical Dictionary of Film Noir* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2010), p. 215.

Spicer's definition is a little scarce on detail, it is broadly correct in its assertion that what marks out neo-noir, particularly neo-noirs released after Robert Altman's *The Long Goodbye* (1973), is a formal self-reflexivity. In relation to noir, neo-noir is nostalgically self-reflexive in a way that noir often is not.

In film noir, home is a lost object. Not only does it represent the lost history of noir itself, but it also represents the ideological and historical problems in the aftermath of World War Two. Returning to home, in a metaphorical sense, is the process by which history is rendered nostalgic. The task of historical recovery falls to us, who watch and write about these films, almost eighty years after their release. The fact we are unable to put history back into noir shows us the density of noir's conception of itself and its own fluctuating world. Yet our nostalgia for stability, for home, is precisely what sustains noir. Noir requires *our* nostalgic spectatorship more than it requires a coherent sense of its own historicity. In this sense we are, to borrow a phrase from Lacan, in noir more than noir is in itself.

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