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THE NOIR OF NOIR: A CERTAIN TENDENCY IN AMERICAN FILM

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Introduction

“It was during the summer of 1946 that French moviegoers discovered a new type of American film,” write Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton, “movies which shared a strange and violent tone, tinged with a unique kind of eroticism.”¹ Observing a new pattern of “cynicism, pessimism and darkness, which had crept into the American cinema,”² the French began to realise that there was a highly important and stylised movement happening in cinema. They “recognised the change in form and content and brought it to critical attention, calling it film noir.”³ “Hollywood lighting grew darker, characters more corrupt, themes more fatalistic and the tone more hopeless,”⁴ Paul Schrader elucidates, three years later, film noir was in “the throes of [its] deepest and most creative funk.”⁵

Film noir was a response to “mediating influences, of social, economic, technical, and even aesthetic developments,”⁶ that allowed filmmakers to explore new themes, an evolution in procedures and the versatility of actors. Borde and Chaumeton describe it as an answer to “a certain mood,” to be discussed “in terms of an affected and possibly ephemeral reaction to a moment in history.”⁷ Film noir is understood to be a movement that contains a number “of essential traits,” that are consistently featured in the films of that period. While Paul Schrader examines each of these traits throughout Notes on Film Noir, he outlines a series of fundamentals that are “the distinctly noir tonality,” found in the films. These “catalytic elements,” range from, “War and Post-war disillusionments,” to “post-war realism,” to the influence of the “influx of German expatriates.”⁸ For Roger Ebert, film noir can be aesthetically defined by, “locations… cigarettes… [And] women who would just as soon kill you as love you.”⁹ There are numerous ways to understand and interpret the definition of film noir. As “a cache of excellent, little-known films,” it was a time where directors, writers and actors could experiment with “newer questions of classification and trans-directorial style.”¹⁰

With film noir, there was an exploration into new themes that would have previously been avoided. In his essay, Paint It Black: The Family Tree of Film Noir, Raymond Durgnat outlines a list of themes in an “imperfect schematizations for some main lines of force in the American film noir,”¹¹ discussing the “dominant cycles,” and recurring “motifs”¹² that define the film noir style. In Robert Kolker’s A Cinema of Loneliness, he discusses the mechanic of film noir, writing:
“Film noir played on basic themes of aloneness, oppression, claustrophobia, and emotional and physical brutality, manifested in weak mean, various gangsters and detectives, and devouring women who lived –or cringed- in an urban landscape that defied clear perception and safe habitation.”

Through intricate plotlines, murderous femme fatales, hard-boiled detectives and ominous scores, there are a number of aspects of the style that are constantly associated with the movement.

In this dissertation, I will not attempt to put Film Noir into a genre, but discuss it as a pivotal movement in cinema’s history. I will incorporate a number of arguments in an effort to define and understand the film movement by focusing on the film *The Big Sleep*, the stardom of Barbara Stanwyck and the controversial noir director Orson Welles.

My first chapter will discuss the celebrated 1946 film, *The Big Sleep*. Filled with the common factors in film noir, it is a film that has become immortal in the minds of cinephiles since its release. Often recognised as the epitome of film noir, it features the vital traits that define it as a film noir, from the hard boiled private eye, Philip Marlowe, who “became the archetype against whom all succeeding film detectives were measured,” to the enigmatically elusive beauty of Vivian Sternwood, “an elegant charmer,” to the infamously complex plot, a “web of utter bafflement” as described by Bosley Crowther, that “is still difficult to figure out who committed one of the murders.” The film is “not particularly flashy and the noir stylisation is much subtler” than in other noir productions. This however does not detract from its position as one of the most iconic film noirs. *The Big Sleep* is a unique film noir. While it contains the fundamentals of film noir, it avoids and creates a new ending for its protagonists. Vivian is able to avoid the traditional fate of the femme fatale, and avoids the destructive fate faced by her fellow femme fatales. She meets Marlowe, engages in explicit innuendoes with him, and eventually achieves a happy ending. It is “a black and white symphony that exactly reproduces Chandler’s” novel. It has “a tone of voice that keeps its distance and yet is wry and humorous and cares.” It is an incredibly important film to include in the discussion of film noir.
because of the “witty interplay between characters, the excellence of the black and white cinematography and the… high level of acting.”21 Roger Ebert comments that “the whole idea of film noir was to live through unspeakable experiences and keep your cool,”22 something which each of the characters maintain throughout the film. This chapter will examine the film and how it adheres to the film noir standards, paying particular attention to the respective character roles of the lone, private detective, his romantic interest Vivian and their inevitably gravitation towards one another throughout the film. In addition to this, the significance of the Los Angeles setting to emphasise the mystery of film noir and its characters will be discussed.

The second chapter concentrates on one of film noir’s most famous stars- Barbara Stanwyck- and her astounding contribution to the noir style. After a hard childhood of “an unending blur of poverty, disappointment and pain… the invincible nature of this talented beauty led her to become one of the most highly acclaimed actresses in the history of movies.”23 In his article, That Old Feeling: Ruby in the Rough, Richard Corliss asserts that “young performers” should “forget the actors studio,”24 and should attend the school of Stanwyck. “By watching the work of a movie star who never had an acting lesson, they’d learn bow to carry themselves and a film.”25 Stanwyck’s acting abilities are unmatched. Her first foray into film noir “set the mould for the Freon-cool killer femmes of film noir.”26 She seduces the audience as Phyllis Dietrichson. The audience plays witness to her ruthless manipulation of “insurance agent, Walter Neff.” “The black widow played by Stanwyck is an archetypal construction,”27 she “started to define the modern woman.”28 She entices her audiences in her portrayal of Dietrichson, leading to her longstanding association with film noir. She followed up on her success with a number of film noirs such as, Sorry Wrong Number and Crime of Passion. While these films do not follow in the same manipulative style as Double Indemnity, each of the characters she plays allowed Stanwyck to portray other aspects of the ruthless femme fatale role. Sorry Wrong Number sees a neurotic Stanwyck confined to her bedroom, manipulating controlling her husband from her over-stuffed bed. Crime of Passion, her final adventure into film noir, depicts Stanwyck as a bored, calculating femme fatale, who is willing to go to any lengths to further her husband’s career.
“In the melodramas from ‘Double Indemnity’ through the end of the 1940s, Hollywood turned her strengths into sickness. Now we could see how the strong Stanwyck woman appeared to the men she dominated: bitter, belittling, demeaning, deaf to reason or his pleas.”

The third and final chapter will discuss Orson Welles and his immeasurable contribution to the film noir movement. Present from the very beginning of film noir with the quintessential film Citizen Kane to the end of the cycle with the 1958 film Touch of Evil, Welles’s influence on the style is paramount. Throughout his career, Welles established himself as a rule breaker who sought to change and redefine the way films were made and enjoyed. His highly stylistic film led to some extreme changes in filmmaking. Citizen Kane was the first of its kind. Welles was unknowingly contributing to the creation of “a new form” of cinema. Throughout “the shadowed and deeply focused space in Citizen Kane, Orson Welles and Greg Toland created “the basis of film noir style.” It “altered the visual and narrative conventions of American film.” Welles followed up his debut with a number of film noirs that were paled when compared to Citizen Kane. The Lady from Shanghai was a commercial flop and destroyed by critics. Although containing one of the most malevolent femme fatales in the form of Elsa Bannister, it was forgotten about. Welles even admitting, “Friends avoided me… Whenever it was mentioned, people would clear their throats and change the subject very quickly.”

“Most fittingly, the cycle achieved a self-conscious conclusion by the man who started it with Orson Welles’s Touch of Evil.” Taking place in a “seedy Mexican American border town,” Touch of Evil forgoes the tradition femme fatale for the much deadlier Hank Quinlan. “The movie becomes a competition between two men,” with one of the most recognisable opening scenes in cinema history. Welles is an essential figure in the discussion of film noir. There since of the birth of it, to the end of it, he was a key figure resulting in a phenomenon unparalleled to any other style seen in cinema.

With multiple publications about film noir discussing its style, its aesthetic and the methods of it, there is no denying the influence film noir has had on cinema. It altered “the way culture was seeing
itself. Film noir allowed women to imagine themselves as the deadly Phyllis Dietrichson, men fantasized about the dangerous femme fatales that oozed sex appeal on screen and filmmakers were free to explore parts of cinema that were previously frowned upon or avoided.
The Nefarious Affairs of The Big Sleep

In discussions centred on the legacy of *The Big Sleep*, it is often described as one of the most influential examples of “film noir since *Double Indemnity*,” However, at the time of release, it did not gain such favourable reviews. Bosley Crowther, for the New York Times, did little to hide his disdain for the film, writing:

“If somebody had only told us- the script-writers, preferably- just what it is that happens in the Warners’ and Howard Hawks’ *The Big Sleep*, we might be able to give you a more explicit and favourable report on this over-age melodrama which came yesterday to the Strand. But with only the foggiest notion of who does what to whom- and we watched it with closest attention- we must be frankly disappointing about it.”

Yet, despite Crowther’s scathing review and a generally low key response by the cinema going populace, *The Big Sleep* has remained as one of the iconic films in film noir in the minds of cinema enthusiasts for generations. Was it the sizzling chemistry between Lauren Bacall and Humphrey Bogart? The “renowned,” complex plot “that no one agrees even on why it is so puzzling” Or the “bold fusion of highbrow and lowbrow,” by Raymond Chandler, that has enticed and seduced audiences for nearly seventy years? It may be a combination these aspects that created a film that was “so comfortable a vision, [it is] the smoothest and most serpentine of noir experiences.”

*The Big Sleep* is often recognized as the epitome of film noir, the pioneer of “the Chandler formula,” in “the wartime period,” as described by Paul Schrader. He reasons that it was “the phase of the private eye and the lone wolf, of Chandler… of Bogart and Bacall… studios sets, and in general, more talk than action,” each mirrored in the 1946 film.

Private detective Philip Marlow is called upon by General Sternwood to investigate the “nefarious affairs,” that his daughters have become embroiled in. After accepting the case, he becomes, for the audience, a sort of “guide as he descends into Hollywood’s darkest and dirtiest corners, unravelling a murder/blackmail plot that involves pornographers, nymphomaniacs, and a bevy of hired hoods.”
“The plot is as convoluted as they come.” Based on Raymond Chandler’s novel, the intricacy of the plot has earned its place in cinema history, as much as the actors. In his review, Roger Ebert notes that the complexity of the plot is “one of the best-known of all Hollywood anecdotes.” According to Lauren Bacall’s biography, he recalls, after “Bogie” asked who had killed Owen Taylor, “Everything stopped.” Hawks had to ask Chandler “to explain the number double crosses, twists and surprises… the writer famously and honestly replied, “I have no idea.” However, despite the highly intricate plot, the numerous murders and the character’s arcs, it set a trend in film noir. Mark Cousin explains that co-writers Raymond Chandler and Dashell Hammond were responsible for the creation of “the character types and situations of noir.”

From his very introduction, private detective Philip Marlow embodies the “archetypal hero,” so often featured in wartime period of film noir. In their essay, Towards a Definition of Film Noir, Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton discuss “ambiguous protagonist,” describing the film noir hero as “often more mature, almost old, and not too handsome. Humphrey Bogart typifies him.” As Andrew Slattery insists, “Bogart slips into Chandler’s hard-boiled Marlowe character and makes himself right at home.” Constantly with his guard up, he uses his intelligence and wit to extract information. In one instance, he questions Agnes, the sales assistant in Geiger’s bookstore, and deliberately confuses her to find out if the store is a front for illegal operations. He is an outsider, in two ways; the first and
most obvious is his inexperience in “the world of men like Gen. Sternwood and... women like his daughters.”

The second is his profession; Marlowe represents a compromise within film noir. “It would have been too controversial... to impugn American police officials,” so the private eye character was decided upon. He was “mid-way between lawful society and the underworld... fulfilling the requirements of his own code and of the genre as well.” He hovers just far enough outside of the law to be unscrupulous, and bends it to a degree that audiences would have accepted. When Marlowe breaks into Geiger’s house after hearing a scream, inside, after discovering an intoxicated Carmen and the dead Geiger, he begins to examine the house, and finds Geiger’s notebook that holds all of the details of his blackmail operation. This scene perfectly illustrates Marlowe standing outside of the law, in order to establish facts.

When Marlowe meets Vivian, it seems he has met his equal. She frees him from his “realization that his life is en prise and its continuance depends on the sufferance of those he does not fully trust.” She is “the level-headed older sister” of Carmen, revealed as “a thumb-sucking nymphomaniac whose compromising photos are the subject of the blackmail.”

Bacall and Bogart
Capitalizing on the success of *To Have and Have Not*, it seemed natural to replicate the chemistry Bogart and Bacall brought to the screen. After the success of her debut, her “wave of popularity continued with her next film.” She was young, and relatively untrained as an actor, she astonished audiences by matching Bogart’s intense performance with her own.

She is the ambiguous “femme fatale,” who engages in some of the most provocative and subtly erotic conversations with her male counterpart. In one of the most audacious and memorable exchanges in the film, “Bogart and Bacall, pretending to discuss horse-racing, discuss the tactics of copulation, exemplifying the clandestine cynicism and romanticism which the film noir apposes to the Hays Office.” When they engage in “one of the most daring examples of double entendre in any movie up until that point,” Ebert writes, “What you sense here is the enjoyable sight of two people who are in love and enjoy toying with one another.” The “crackling dialogue,” between the couple is a “feature of the best noirs.” Vivian and Marlowe represent “the yin and yang of puritanism and cynicism, of egoism and paranoia, of greed and idealism, deeply perturbs sexual relationships, and film noirs about in love hate relationships ranging through all degrees of intensity,” as described by Durgnat.

Initially, Vivian seems defiant of their growing chemistry, “she cannot rid herself of Marlowe. She goes to his office with that idea in mind but ends up… helping him throw the police off track.” The phone call is evidence of their tangible attraction. She teases him, saying, “You like to play games.” She enjoys “her verbal jousts with Bogart.” Her “inconsistency,” is typical of “this new type of woman,” found in film noir. She is “manipulative and evasive, as hard bitten as her environment, ready to shake down or to trade shots with anyone.”

The strength of her character is not only represented through her ability to “function in this environment of murderers and blackmailers.” Not only does Vivian function in these circumstances, but also she survives her femme fatale fate. Her “inconstancy… may not cost her her life,” unlike many of her female counterparts. She manages to avoid the violent end faced by Phyllis Dietrichson of *Double Indemnity*, or Cora in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*.
Slattery elucidates that her costume and wardrobe is a significant factor in the development of her character. He writes, “Her costuming is a subtle denial of another stylistic convention of the *film noir* genre: the sinister allure of the femme fatale – Vivien wears not passive and seductive whites…but active and assertive jackets and collars.” Her impressive wardrobe, ranging from silk nightgowns, to a hound’s-tooth suit, to her impossibly glamorous evening clothes, allows Vivian to “dress for success.”

In addition to the sparkling chemistry between the two protagonists, Hawkes uses the setting of LA to “add a horizontal dimension,” to the film noir. Setting the murder-mystery turned love story in a “place of looming monoliths and endless urban alley ways,” Hawkes uses the city as a metaphor for the chaotic and menacing case Marlowe has undertook. The enigmatic Vivian is the “chain of suburbs full of legal and illegal activities.” When Marlowe meets her, he must go on “a series of journeys across of mythical landscape,” and in doing so, finds himself.
A city landscape was typical of film noir in serving to emphasize the dangers lurking therein. The use of Los Angeles in “the hard wet rain” adds to the overwhelming feeling of the sinister, seedy feeling of the “noir underworld” that Marlowe finds himself involved in. The “darkened bungalow,” that he finds Carmen in, the bookshop façade he investigates and “sinister nightspots” that Vivian frequents, are staples of film noir. So too is the “Freudian attachment of water” as an enhancer of the noir atmosphere, and as a means of disposing an adversary.

“Rain-slick streets, hard-boiled protagonists, femmes fatales,” Kristin Jones elucidates in her article, are “the hallmarks of film noir,” which each feature in the celebrated The Big Sleep. It is “faithful to the noir vision,” as a result of Hawkes utilizing every aspect of the film noir tradition to create an oeuvre, “chock full of colourful characters and logging no less than seven dead bodies.” From Humphrey Bogart as the “droll antihero, cruel in the face of cruelty, unfazed in the face of wanton sleaze and always appreciative of a pretty face,” to Lauren Bacall applauded for her mesmerising performance alongside her soon-to-husband, she was the “adolescent cougar,” who embodied the “frustrated and deviant, half predator, half prey, detached yet ensnared,” femme fatale. It is instantly recognisable, from “the mood of the film… the stunning costumes, the crisp cinematography, the snappy script,” to the “brooding and haunting scores, non-linear and often elliptical editing.” It is the essence of film noir, showcasing every aspect of it flawlessly.
Miss Stanwyck Triumph

Paul Schrader asserts that, “Film noir seemed to bring out the best in everyone… a film noir will make the high point on an artist’s career graph.”04 This statement can be comfortably applied to Barbara Stanwyck’s impressive and expansive acting career in film noir. She remains one of Hollywood’s best-regarded actors; her career extended from a chorus line dancer to “the hardest working gal in showbiz.”05 However, her mastery of her craft in later life was earned after a childhood that could have “been grist for a Warner Bros. programmer from the dirty ‘30s.”06 Growing up as Ruby Stevens from Brooklyn, she was “orphaned at a young age,” and spent most of her childhood “in a variety of foster homes,” as a result of her sisters career as a “busy… chorus girl.”07 She quickly developed a hardened skin and strong work ethic, later saying that she did not “feel sorry for the kid [she] used to be…[because] she didn’t feel sorry for herself.”08 Robert Wagner recognised her difficult childhood as a significant contribution as to why “she had such authenticity as an actress, and as a person.”09

Her career began in the melee of chorus lines but soon her transformation from Ruby Stevens to Barbara Stanwyck was under way. It was during her time preforming in The Noose, that the subject of her “burlesque queen”100 name was brought up and a more fitting name was fashioned. “While leafing through old theatre programs, [Willard] Mack found a title that caught his eye: “Jane Stanwyck in Barbara Frietchie.”101 Barbara Stanwyck was “born.”101 Stardom soon followed, constantly gaining praise for her performances, making Hollywood take notice. By 1944, she “was top billed in her first 20 Hollywood films,”102 that varied over a number of genres. She had built up such a rapport with directors that they “instinctively… knew what material to give the actress.”103

It was Billy Wilder who persuaded Barbara to accept the role of Phyllis Dietrichson in Double Indemnity, “one of the most highly acclaimed examples of film noir.”104 Wilder saw something not only in the power behind her acting, but also her appearance. Utilising her legendary eyes, to emphasis the evil of her character, “black like marbles, glacial and devoid of feeling,”105 her “garish
lipstick." Richard Corliss explains that “he’d been able to observe her from a distance, gaining an informed appreciation of her talents,” before decided that she was needed for the role. This was a new, and uncharted phase of Stanwyck’s career. Admitting she “was scared” because of the depth and malevolent nature of Phyllis, saying, “I’d never before played an out-and-out killer.”

“As the deadliest of femme fatales,” Stanwyck’s performance was sleek, innovative and chilling. “Icy, calculating, murderous” and beautiful, she lures “insurance man Walter Neff… to kill Phyllis’s oil man husband and collect the money from his accident insurance.” It seemed Stanwyck was destined to play the role of Phyllis. Although she was not “conventionally” beautiful, as Richard Corliss reasons, her eroticism was unparalleled, “she had the musk of a creature on the prowl and the skill to convince audiences of her beauty.”

From the very first moment of Phyllis entrance, she commands the attention of the scene. In her near nudity, with her towel draping over her snowy skin, she oozes the eroticism and sexuality that defines the “malefic siren.” With Walter’s libido aroused, he is left to “think about that dame upstairs and the way she had looked at me, and I wanted to see her, close. Without that silly staircase between us.” Moments later, Walter’s wish comes true as Phyllis glides down the stairs, her glittering anklet tantalising Walter, and the audience. Wilder uses the Hays Code to his advantage throughout Phyllis’s debut. Only suggesting Phyllis’s sexuality, “and only when essential for the plot and even then never shown by explicit method,” Wilder dances around the blatant sexual tension between Walter and Phyllis. However, its effect can be seen in Walter’s subsequent amoral behaviour suggests a man wandering in an unfamiliar dreamscape, fuelled by Phyllis’s dark eroticism.
From her iconic entrance, to her ultimate demise, Phyllis’s life and death had been “fated”\textsuperscript{117} by the rules of film noir. Phyllis encompasses, the “classic femme fatale,” obligations. She “resorts to murder to free herself from an unbearable relationship with a man who would try to possess and control her.”\textsuperscript{118} Using every ounce of her coquettish nature to entice Walter into her web of deceit, “her only emotions are passion and greed.”\textsuperscript{119} Phyllis’s ruthless manipulation of Walter in pursuit of money and freedom, but which ultimately led to her own violent death, cemented a ‘new’ Barbara Stanwyck in the minds of cinemagoers. Stanwyck embraced her role as a “modern woman: assured, in-charge, alluring and all business,”\textsuperscript{120} admitting that she began “enjoying,”\textsuperscript{121} the role she was initially afraid of. However, “despite [her] initial misgivings, audiences and critics alike accepted her as the unrelenting villainess.”\textsuperscript{122} After her success in \textit{Double Indemnity}, Stanwyck found a niche in film noir, which became her most successful period of film making in her career.

\textit{Double Indemnity} established Stanwyck as the face of film noir and a number of noir roles came her way. \textit{Sorry, Wrong Number} was “her third excursion into film noir,”\textsuperscript{123} but a very different role to the murderous temptress she played in \textit{Double Indemnity} and \textit{The Strange Love of Martha Ivers} (1946). In \textit{Sorry, Wrong Number}, Leona Stevenson is a stubborn, “possessive, imperious heiress, who is confined to her bed,”\textsuperscript{124} as a result of a psychosomatic heart condition. The first time Leona is introduced to the audience, her excessive lifestyle is evident. As she frantically talks into the phone to
the Operator in an attempt to locate her husband, the camera pulls the audience closer to Leona to reveal the lavish bedroom she resides in. Swathed in diamonds and lace, she is left with only a telephone to connect her to the outside world. Bob Porfirio and Lee Sanders describe the confinement Leona feels as depicted through, “a circling camera that moves from the array of useless medicines on her bedside table to Leona herself clothed in lace and ensconced in her elegant bed.”

Unlike her Phyllis Dietrichson character, Stanwyck is portraying a woman who is not the characteristically typical femme fatale. She cannot use her obvious sexuality to stay in control of “her weak-willed husband,” instead choosing to use “her condition to keep him ensconced,” in their loveless marriage. Once again, Stanwyck shows her mesmerizing versatility on screen. She depicts the two sides of Leona flawlessly, the invalid, impatient wife introduced in the first scene and her flirtatious younger self, both equally as maliciously manipulative as the other.

As she makes a series of telephone calls to try and locate her husband, Leona’s temperament is revealed through a number of flashbacks as told by her father, doctor and Henry’s former love, Sally
Hunt. After Leona’s conversation with Sally, a crucial scene unfolds that demonstrate the seductive and manipulative power that the early Leona possesses. As Sally and Henry dance around the school hall, the camera focuses on a sectioned off, sparkling Leona intently watching the loved-up couple gaze into each other’s eyes. She quickly makes her move and interrupts their intimate moment. Henry, saying, “If you don’t mind Miss, where I come from it is the man who does the picking”, initially rebuffs a presumptuous Leona. Contrasting Leona’s glittering outfit with the background of the hall, her assertiveness is not only present in her personality but in the mise-en-scene of the scene, through her clothing. Although Henry rejects Leona’s advances initially, it is clear that her manipulation has been successful. Following the dance scene, Leona has persuaded Henry to join her on a trip “out of town,” allowing her to successfully seduce him.

The audience are brought back to the present and are immediately confronted with the idea that, although an invalid, she is no longer a “victim,” but “bossy and vindictive, in a characterization so acutely unpleasant that Stanwyck dares to spit the audience’s reflexive sympathy back in its face.” 127

While Stanwyck has not been able to prowl around the screen, as she had in Double Indemnity, her performance in Sorry, Wrong Number endorsed Stanwyck’s as an essential role in the film noir movement. She was “acclaimed by critics,” touting it to be the “best performance of her career.” 128 Leona Stevenson allowed Stanwyck to demonstrate how she can command the screen from any situation, whether it is in the front seat of the car to the confines of an over-stuffed bedroom.

Her final jaunt into film noir was Gerd Oswalds, 1957 film Crime of Passion. It was, as Alain Silver and Bob Porfirio elucidate, “quite typical of most 1950s film in that it relies more on scripting and strong performances than on the expressionistic visual style that characterized the 1940s productions.” 129

Stanwyck plays Kathy Ferguson, “a lovelorn columnist in San Francisco who gets her big break when she convinces a murderess to give herself up.” 130 Expecting that she will work closely with the police
after helping them apprehend a murderess, she is astonished that the L.A. policemen will have nothing to do with her, speechless at the misogyny of the Captain. Kathy represents the post-war disillusioned mentality felt by women, because “the war meant a new economic and social freedom for women, the experience of which could never be entirely lost.” Kathy epitomises an independent spirit signifying an attitude that many of these career women portrayed saying, “For marriage I read life sentence, for home life I read T.V. nights, beer in the fridge, second mortgages-not for me.” She wanted “something more than that.”

Kathy Doyle entertaining guests

The success of her column leads to a job in New York, “but when she meets Bill Doyle, a handsome Los Angeles police officer, Kathy abandons her opinions about wedlock and before long she and Bill are married.” However, marital bliss becomes boring for Kathy “with the monotonous gatherings… and transfers her innate ambition into furthering Bill’s career.” She cunningly plans a car accident between herself and Alice, Inspector Tony Pope’s wife and “arranges for them to become more sociable,” in order to influence her “husbands position in the department.”

Stanwyck’s final film noir seems to bring together the two most ruthless aspects of her previous characters. She is bored in her suburban life, entrapped by her “prison” of a marriage so she decides to use her charm and sexuality to “influence Pope to favour her husband,” when he is preparing for a promotion. She is accepting her role as the femme fatale once again, using her feminine “wiles to get [her] way,” a way that leads only to her own destruction at the hands of her husband.
In Mark Cousin’s documentary, *The Story of Film: An Odyssey*, he memorably declares, “The women in film noir haunt the films.” Stanwyck’s characters represent and embody all the film noir female characteristics, from the eroticism displayed by Phyllis, to the malevolent manipulation by Leona, to the eventual demise and destruction of Kathy. Whether she affected the evolution of film noir more than the noir style benefitted her career can be debated. What cannot be doubted is that both stimulated each other, leading to a defining moment in Stanwyck’s career in the crucial “bridge” that *Double Indemnity* provided between “the war time period, 1941-46,” and “the post-war phase of film noir.”
A Deeply Perverse Game?

In David Niven’s *The Moon’s a Balloon*, Niven recalls “Orson Welles once said to me, ‘we have now acted in theatres, on radio, in films and on live television- they can’t think of anything else, can they?’” Welles’ diverse career was not limited to acting, but encompassed the creation of some of the most influential films in cinema history. As one of the most versatile figures in Hollywood history, Welles is an essential personality in the discussion of film noir. He was a “maestro of cinema,” who stretched “the limitations of film and fully exploit its potential.” One can trace the lineage of Orson Welles’ contributions, from *Citizen Kane*, “the breeding ground for several screen movements, cycles and genre developments,” to the critically panned, *The Lady from Shanghai*, to “film noir’s epitaph, *Touch of Evil.*” His multifaceted artistic influence has indelibly marked the history of film in general, and film noir in particular.

He was the original wunderkind. At age 24 he thunderously announced himself to the cinematic world as a director and actor by telling the story of one of Hollywood and America’s most powerful men, William Randolph Hurst, the newspaper magnate. Named in numerous compilation lists and a winner of countless accolades and awards, *Citizen Kane* has earned its reputation as one “of the greatest films ever made.” Its legendary status was a result of a number of features. “Partly fuelled by the fact that Welles was only 24,” and relatively inexperienced filmmaker, paired with his extreme departure from “the soft and shallow look of American cinema” of the time, which lead many to question, “how did Orson Welles, with no real experience in motion pictures, create what critics have dubbed, ‘the greatest film ever made?”

While it is not classified as a film noir, it is “an invaluable storehouse of noir technique,” and an essential film to examine in the discussion of film noir and its origins. Welles utilizes some of film noirs most distinctive features, “voice-narration, multiple flashbacks, a questing investigator, more ambiguity,” as well as expertly manipulating light and shadows and the use of the German Expressionist stylistic influence.
In his essay, *Orson Welles – Painter*, Michael Riedlinger elucidates that it was because of Welles’ “developed… theatrical skills,” as well as his “passion for the visual arts”¹⁵² that resulted in distinct characteristics in the highly stylistic film. His early excursions into the entertainment industry had a lifelong influence on his work. From his years on Broadway and elsewhere (The Gate and The Abbey), he developed a heightened understanding of the influence of lighting and the power of background and deep staging.

Schrader refers to the German Expressionist movement and its influence on film noir. It is hard to conceive that German Expressionism did not similarly influence Welles in his crafting of *Citizen Kane*. The German influence is evident in the heavily contrasting light and shadow, the distortion of normality, and the creation of a sense of alienation and tension in the audience by presenting streetscapes and deep staged sets thus “disorienting the spectator” and depriving them of their normal “reference points.”¹⁵³ *Citizen Kane* evokes the “design and photography,”¹⁵⁴ of the famed German Expressionist film *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1920), to create the Gothic and eerie atmosphere felt throughout the production.

In addition to this, during his years in “Todd,” he would have received an impressive and extensive education in classical art. The evidence of these early influences is apparent throughout *Citizen Kane*. His edification in the arts would have introduced him to the stylistic characteristics of the Renaissance movement, in particular to the works of Caravaggio and Rembrandt, amongst others.¹⁵⁵ In his essay, Riedlinger says that it was this inspiration by the Italian Renaissance movement that allowed Welles to develop his “Baroque style.”¹⁵⁶ Throughout the film, he explains, Welles’ imitation of the Caravaggio influence and how it can be seen in several sequences via the manipulation of light.
In Caravaggio’s *The Taking of the Christ*, the use of light is one of the most stunning aspects of the painting. Caravaggio uses multiple sources of light, an unidentified light source as well as a small lantern, to highlight a number of points of expression within the piece. In doing so, he shows a range of emotions and facial expressions on the faces of the figures. Welles uses light to reveal the nature of the protagonists also but in a reversed or ‘negative’ way. A room full of reporters review the documentary reel remembering Kane’s impressive life. Welles uses the light of the projector to obscure the reporters’ facial features. However, it is their powerful silhouettes that are eloquent in describing the scene and to inform the audiences in their understanding of the characters - the alpha male in a powerful stance and the more considered, restrained gait of Thompson.

It is no accident that *Citizen Kane* is constantly featured in the vocabulary of critics and cinema enthusiasts. In his review of the film, Roger Ebert writes:

“It is one of the miracles of cinema that in 1941 a first-time director; a cynical, hard-drinking writer; an innovative cinematographer, and a group of New York stage and radio actors were given the keys to a studio and total control, and made a masterpiece. “Citizen Kane” is more than a great movie; it is a gathering of all the lessons of the emerging era of sound… [It is a peak] that stands above all others.”157
Whereas *Citizen Kane* was not a true noir, it established, as discussed, many of its traits. A notable Welles film noir, *The Lady from Shanghai* sees Welles retaining the use of light, atmosphere and disorientation, but also utilises the noir staple of the *femme fatale*. “For many years *The Lady from Shanghai* has had the reputation of being one of Welles’ great failures,”¹⁵⁸ it was notable for its lack of commercial success as well as being critically berated, and eventually forgotten about. “According to Welles, the idea for *The Lady of Shanghai* came purely by accident.”¹⁵⁹ Stuck in a financial hole while producing *Around the World in 80 Days*, Welles “called Harry Cohn… and said, ‘I have a great story for you if you could send me $50,000 by telegram in one hour.’”¹⁶⁰ Choosing the pulp novel at random, “an hour later, [they] got the money.”¹⁶¹

The film follows “a roving merchant seaman who falls in with some over-rich worldlings and who almost becomes the innocent victim of their murderous hates and jealousies.”¹⁶² Presenting one of the most ruthless femme fatales in the film noir cycle, Elsa (Rita Hayworth) embodies some of the most malicious traits of the *femme fatale*. She is “cold, impassive…[showing] us a woman who has been so psychologically abused by her husband she has lost her own humanity in the process.”¹⁶³ In her marriage to Arthur Bannister, his vicious and cruel nature towards his beautiful wife “compensates for his physical paralysis and spiritual ugliness.”¹⁶⁴ “At the centre of events,”¹⁶⁵ Elsa plays her cards close to her chest, “revealing very little about her intentions and duplicity.”¹⁶⁶ She possesses a “unique sexuality, which she uses to define herself and manipulate,”¹⁶⁷ the male characters that surround her throughout the film. Chris Justice elucidates that her raw sexual magnetism, expressed by the jarring, edgy contrasts of her clothing, which, almost in a self-harming manner, provides Elsa with a coded way of “expressing [her] inner pain.”¹⁶⁸ Outlining her “shifting allegiances,” through her wardrobe as well as “the scenes of her bathing along the rocks… and singing on the boat,”¹⁶⁹ Welles establishes Elsa as “the original femme fatale.”¹⁷⁰
"The Lady from Shanghai is an unusual noir film." It avoids the “hard-boiled tradition," of the "ambiguous male protagonist," but “contains elements of chaos and obtuseness," common to the style. The convoluted plot is the result of a number of problems experienced throughout production and shooting. "Approximately 60 minutes of it have been removed from Welles’ original version," in addition to a number of “distinct cinematographers," who worked on the film, lead to its perplexingly “surreal and confusing plot.”

Mirror Scene in the Fun House

The penultimate sequence in the fun house is the perfect summation for the power of the cinematography in the film. It “confounds and unsettles," the audience through the distorted images of Elsa and Michael, “they cannot distinguish their true position," from their reflections. Sheri Biesen quotes Crowther in her discussion of The Lady of Shanghai, writing, “Those distorted images,
revealed in the mirrors, provide one of the most powerful visual interpretation in all film noir of the confusion between reality and imagination.”

**Touch of Evil (1958)**

*Touch of Evil* marked the end of the film noir movement. It “tells the story of an upstanding Mexican narcotics agent… who interrupts his honeymoon with a very innocent and far too understanding Janet Leigh to investigate a murder.” It quickly changes from a routine murder investigation to a lethal uncovering of corrupt police chief, Hank Quinlan, in a “deeply perverse game.” Touch of Evil is “Welles’s vivid creation of a Mexican nightmare.” He makes a significant departure from the classic film noir traits, in his elimination of the femme fatale figure, while retaining, in the much deadlier antagonist, Quinlan, the noir staple of the “rotten” cop. He is “one of the giant noir psychopaths, a bloated figure whose abuse of power has turned into a monster.” “Welles is a substantial presence off and on the screen.” He embraces “the seediness,” of Quinlan, from “his vast paunch, his limp, his half-closed eyes,” and the prosthetic noise, his portrayal as the “corrupt and grotesque chief of police,” lingers with the audience.

However, despite his eradication of one of the fundamentals of film noir, he creates equilibrium in his use of film noir techniques. His use of the long tracking shot in the opening border scene, the striking
violence and the malevolence of Quinlan, as well as film noir’s methodical lighting, Welles’ *Touch of Evil* is “metaphorically and cinematically… a picture about crossing over.”

In their essay, Blake Lucas and Tracey Thompson discuss, in detail, Welles’s effective use of “his bravura style,” to create one of the most memorable sequences in film noir, writing:

“The opening shot, lasting over three minutes, displays Welles’s propensity for the moving camera and the long take… The camera begin on a close-up of a time bomb and then cranes up to reveal the bomb being planted in a car. Linnekar and his girl friend emerge out of the background darkness and, as they enter the car and being to drive away, the high craned camera travels up and back, moving with them along the streets towards the border.”

They elucidate that as a result of “the uninterrupted fluidity,” of the inaugural shot, “the suspense which the visual style engenders is heightened by the fact that only the spectator is aware of the bomb’s presence.”

*Touch of Evil* stays true to the aesthetics of film noir and has remained a firm “favourite of those who enjoy visual and dramatic flamboyance.” The “exaggerating stylistic elements,” paired with “Russell Mean’s sharp black and white cinematography and Henry Mancini’s Latino/ jazz/ rock-'n’-roll score,” creates “a delirium of flamboyant visual, experimental sound effects, and pervasive doom.”

Welles is an essential figure in the examination of film noir. The movement found its roots in Welles’ genius directorial debut. His collaboration with Gregg Toland “gave later directors, cinematographers and designers access to a wide range of previously unproven visual methods.” Over a decade later, *The Lady from Shanghai* saw “Welles move from noir studio interiors to the cliffs of Acapulco,” and adapting his visionary style to incorporate the fundamental femme fatale figure through the extremely cruel, Elsa Bannister. While the critics panned it for, as Bosley Crowther writes, Welles’ “strange way of marring his films with sloppiness which he seems to assume that his dazzling exhibitions of skill will camouflage,” it is entirely appropriate to discuss *The Lady of Shanghai* in a
dissertation that seeks to reflect on the entirety of Welles's cinematic œuvre. His final film noir was the “epitaph of film noir,”¹⁹⁷ that “endures as a superbly kinky masterpiece of technique, imagination and audacity.”¹⁹⁸ Although “his style at times undercuts basic noir tendencies,”¹⁹⁹ each of his contributions to film noir are key in the understanding of the evolution of the style.
Conclusion

In *The Classic Hollywood Cinema*, David Bordwell debates “The Case of Film Noir” writing:

“What is film noir? Not a genre. Producers and consumers both recognise a genre as a distinct entity; nobody set out to make or see a film noir in the sense that people deliberately chose to make a Western, a comedy, or a musical. Is film noir then a style? Critics have not succeeded in defining specifically noir visual techniques… or a narrative structure. The problem resembles one in art history, that of defining ‘non-classical’ styles.”

Film noir must not be understood as a genre but rather a series that “seemed to bring out the best in everyone.” Initially critic’s thought that this type of film should be describes as “criminal adventure,” or better still “criminal psychology,” – but these tags did not express the full impact that these releases had on cinema. In their examination of “the definition of film noir,” Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton discuss the idea of film noir being “a series,” that was “a group of movies from one country, that shares sufficient of certain traits (style, atmosphere, subject matter…)” which have unique characteristics that “mark them unequivocally with an unmistakable character.”

After *The Big Sleep* was released however, it was clear that “a new series had emerged in the history of film.” Borde and Chaumeton’s discussion of “the essential traits,” of film noir can be faultlessly applied to the films chosen in this dissertation. These “film noir qualities such as nightmarish, weird, erotic, ambivalent, and cruel,” are abundant in *Double Indemnity, The Big Sleep* and any of Orson Welles’ noir works.

A series spans a finite length of time, reaches its “peak, [its] moment of purest expression.” Throughout the cycle of film noir, it is not easy to identify an imperious film release or date that presents this “peak” in film noir. Paul Schrader discusses “three broad phases,” of film noir in an attempt to find a defining moment of the series, reducing it “to its primary colours.” He dissects film noir into “the wartime period, 1941-1946… the phase of the private eye and the lone wolf, of Chandler, Hammett and Green, of Bogart and Bacall.” He continues on to discuss the second phase,
“the post war phase,” he says that “Double Indemnity provided a bridge,” to the second phase. It was the “realistic period from 1945-1949,” that “tended more toward the problems of crime in the streets, political corruption and police routine.” The third and final phase of film noir, from 1949-53, was the period of psychotic action and suicidal impulse. Unlike “the noir hero,” of the previous phases, the protagonist of this era was a “neurotic,” “psychotic killer.” He writes that the third stage of film noir was “The cream of the… period.” It was “the most aesthetically and sociologically piercing [that] got down to the root causes of the period.” Being “painfully self-aware… the third phase [was] rife with end of the line heroes.”

In my dissertation I have chosen aspects of film noir that could claim to represent the peak of some aspects of the series – the femme fatal character of Stanwyck in Double Indemnity, the inadvertent film noir masterpiece, Citizen Kane, that gave the series its initial impetus and the labyrinthine plot of The Big Sleep, suffused with film noir traits and devices. Few could argue that these subjects do not deserve to be mentioned when discussing the most create and most influential of film noir’s progeny.

As Borde and Chaumeton elucidate, as with all films, “they slowly fade and disappear leaving traces and informal sequels.” The decade of the 1980’s brought a significant resurgence of the interest in themes and protagonists that typified classic film noir, Alain Silver discusses in his essay, Son of Noir: Neo-Noir and the Neo-B Picture. The film noir period “transcended person and generic outlook to reflect cultural preoccupations.” This renaissance of film noir led to the productions of neo-noir film that attempted to “recreate the noir mood, whether in remakes or new narratives.” From 1970 onwards, “over 300 noir-influenced pictures have been released as theatrical features.” Roman Polanski’s Chinatown released in 1974 is one of the most appropriate and successful films to draw influence from the film noir series. Featuring the fundamentals of film noir, “it is a conspiracy and a hard-boiled detective mystery in the Raymond Chandler/ Dashiell Hammett line.” It follows private detective Jake Gittes, who is described to be “more dapper, humorous, prosperous, and alienated,” than the film noir hero of the post-war era. Faye Dunaway embodies the femme fatale element “cool, elegant Evelyn.” As with its ancestors, Chinatown was a collection of, murders, “oddballs, victims
and miscreants.” However, “the noir films of contemporary American cinema are different from the films noir of the forties and fifties, for the noir movement was a phenomenal occurrence in cinematic history that will never be duplicated.”

The first cycle of film noir was “an immensely creative period,” for filmmakers, cinematographers, composers and actors. It achieved something that was never before seen in cinema. Through the use of themes that were relatively avoided in previous films, as well as being an artistic response to an ever-changing post-war society, it sought to “make the viewer co-experience the anguish and insecurity which are the true emotions of contemporary film noir.” It dealt with “realistic” topics, as Paul Schrader discusses, which “suited America’s post-war mood.” It satisfied “the public’s desire for a more honest and harsh view of America would not be satisfied by the same studio streets that have been watching for a dozen years.”

Entering into a world “of darkness, ambiguity, and moral corruption,” film noir led its audiences into an oneiric milieu filled with deceit, mystery, corruption and deadly women.
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