Street with No Name

A History of the
Classic American Film Noir

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THE UNIVERSITY PRESS OF KENTUCKY

Frontispiece: *Force of Evil* (1948).
Joe Morse (John Garfield): a fugitive from himself.

To JoAnn
and to my sister, Anne
who must surely remember the times
we got ready for bed by preparing to watch
His Girl Friday on the late show

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PREFACE

Attempting to write a history of the film noir provokes two questions. First, what does one mean by chronicling a loose number of films considered films noirs; that is, What is the film noir? What makes a film noir? And which films best serve to illustrate film noir? Second, how can one offer a historical perspective, and of what kind, to such an amorphous "cycle" of films. It is hardly a neat package for historical organization, and therein lies the folly of undertaking an account of such movies that have had a significant and compelling influence on postwar cinema. Consequently, this history of a number of films considered on many counts to be noir is digressive in form, free-ranging in scope, and, through the combination of these strategies, specific and illuminating, I hope, in reaching an essential understanding of the film noir.

I discuss the subject in terms of its roots in the classical German cinema of the period following World War I, its genesis in the French cinema preceding World War II, and its flourishing in the American cinema since. The discussion touches upon film history in terms of nations and national artists, film industry developments, and sociopolitical changes. It also envelops the noir in philosophical and aesthetic concerns and their connections to film as it reflects the changing world perceived by its audiences. I also seek to discern the distinctiveness of the film noir and its motifs through the styles of its key artists in the first four decades of its existence in this country. It has been argued that, like other kinds of films, the film noir has certain narrative and structural requirements and a distinctive iconography. This is truest to the extent that these merge with the filmmaker's personal vision of the noir's bleak world.

In this historical framework, the film noir is viewed for the potent force it has become in the evolution of cinematic style. But what, then, is it? Is it a style? The expression through which a mood or temperament is revealed? And what of generic conventions? What makes the noir such argumentative fodder for those

wishing to define or distress it as a genre proper? Here some basic definitions and descriptions are necessary in order to discuss the film noir in a comprehensible historical context.

The film noir as I have approached it is a group or collection of films that were first made in about 1940 (1938 in France) and continue to be produced in the present. (The hesitation in calling these films a cycle lies in the implication of ending, of finality, of the cycle's having been "exhausted.") The year 1940 serves as an index for a climate of change in the tone of many melodrama films in America because of the sociocultural changes in American and European society, the ominous politico-historical wind of the time, and the formal developments in film present at the advent of World War II. Although the innovations of Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* were not yet marveled over, the gradual if not particularly anticipated change in the perception of what narrative Hollywood cinema could offer in its depiction of human problems, their ambiguities, and the social landscape from which they emanated nonetheless provided trail markers of what was to follow. The Carné-Prévert *Quai des brumes* (1938) and *Le Jour se lève* (1939) and Carné's *Hôtel du Nord* (1939), for example, were potent enough indications on the international film scene to parallel, for another example, Raoul Walsh's 1941 *High Sierra.* That film was scripted by John Huston and starred Humphrey Bogart in a decidedly more complex variation of the gangster film, where the ambiguous tone lies in contradistinction to Walsh's own *Roaring Twenties,* made two years earlier.

The year 1940, fraught with anxiety despite an isolationist policy, was a ferment of artistic change in Hollywood that would see a fine rupture develop into a chasm between what industry entertainment had offered before and what it would soon offer in the future. Those who joined the émigré movement, which was nurtured on the disillusionment of a crumbling European society, left the tyranny replacing an Old World they knew but never created and came to Hollywood. As products, too, of the artistic developments of the interwar years (modernism, in its broadest appeal), particularly the expressionist movement in Germany, German and Viennese filmmakers such as Fritz Lang, Robert Siodmak, Otto Preminger, Billy Wilder, Edgar G. Ulmer, and William Dieterle brought to a new environment lifetimes of cultural experience. To

the coast of southern California they carried a philosophical worldview, ironic and bleak with the possibility both of a redemptive universe and of a place where people succumb to their weaknesses and passions; they contributed to the American screen in the guise of popular entertainment a necessary maturity, the next phase of its growth.

When Welles made *Citizen Kane* and John Huston made *The Maltese Falcon* in 1941, the American cinema could no longer ignore the schism that had been created. Screen melodrama would now, however unconsciously and unperturbingly, evoke elements of unexpectedness and intrigue that it had not aroused in the past. Characters were insinuatingly more complex, mirroring a society not always just despite the story's happy ending. What Charles Foster Kane and private eye Sam Spade have in common above all is that they are not happy men and that knowledge of the world ensures not harmony but elusiveness and uncertainty. Kane dies without the satisfaction of a precise meaning for his life, and Spade turns over a duplicitous Brigid O'Shaughnessy to the cops despite his feeling for her because it enforces his code of honor. But he does not forget that there are other Miss O'Shaughnessys out there. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, the American screen was riddled with this dark alter-side of American life. Random movie titles evoke countless variations of a despairing and haunted universe, often of fatalistic design: *Where the Sidewalk Ends*; *The Asphalt Jungle*; *The Street with No Name*; *The Big Heat*; *The Big Sleep*; *Act of Violence*; *Force of Evil*; *Touch of Evil*; *Desperate*; *Detour*; *Caught*; *Railroaded!*; *The Set-Up*; *Kiss Me Deadly*; *Murder, My Sweet*; *Fallen Angel*; *On Dangerous Ground*; and *In a Lonely Place*.[1] The directors of these films and their literary counterparts—Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Cornell Woolrich, James M. Cain, and Jim Thompson, among others—fashioned this noir landscape in the city and peopled it with troubled and desperate characters whose passions and obsessions drive them to upset a precarious moral ground. It is fitting, then, to begin a definition of the film noir by recognizing the city.

Urban America, as a panorama of the anonymous, emerges as a moody set piece of human anxiety. Most often depicted at night and often in the rain, the city is where human motivations find action, where people betray, lie to, and hurt others, where their

passions are activated. Films noirs have been set outside the city, but they invariably require an urban influence either through refugees that attempt, unsuccessfully, to find solace in the country (Anthony Mann's *Desperate*, Nicholas Ray's *They Live by Night*) or in the damaged lives that have gone there to be nourished by rural peacefulness (Ray's *On Dangerous Ground*). Of course, a small town can function as well as a city, but it must have those social and legal-political institutions that urban civilization has bequeathed us, for it is in the encounter with these corrupted institutions in one's pursuit of a derailed American Dream that the film noir displays its greatest vigor. The happiness promised in the daylight normality of home and wholly integrated personal and social relationships runs awry in the face of human weakness and desire. The institutions of the law, the sanctity of marriage and family founding, and the zeal to overcome personal economic distress through ingenuity and hard work fail. The psychic variables of the human condition intrude all too often in the noir world to make these features of American life little more than a cruel deceit. It is, then, a characteristic of the film noir that life is seen through the eyes of the city and its shrewd and often broken denizens.

Who are these people, though, and what has shaped them? Who best represents them? In the American noirs (and to some extent in the French, too), the characters most clearly illustrating the influences of this urban landscape are involved with crime and the law, usually law enforcement. The private detective and the police detective have acquired the stature of phlegmatic heroes because of their ability to move in all circles of urban society: institutional and criminal, "respectable" (of seemingly unimpeachable wealth and social status) and disreputable (often by implication, as through nightclubs and casinos, the numbers racket, horse racing, organized crime in various forms, and other illicit personal enterprises). The symbiosis between them and their adversaries and sometime alter egos—the racketeers, club owners, grifters, and extortionists—contains the basic dramatic tensions in greed, intimidation, submission and betrayal, fear and violence. And the supporting types include petty chiselers, cops on the take, boxing promoters, lounge singers, stoolies, gunsels, molls, and an assortment of down-and-outers. The detective's mobility exposes him to such characters, and it has hardened his vision in the cynical, all-too-

knowing sense that he accepts how little human behavior can be trusted, how easily betrayal occurs, and how illusory the truth is.

All this indeed sounds enrapt in the romantic nihilism that the patina of time has given the noir. It is perhaps its most compelling legacy that the movies in their magical connection to our lives have shown these features of the human condition with a seductive, modern allure, a tawdry glamour at once mesmerizing and disturbing. The handiest representatives of the noir hunters and hunted—Bogart, Robert Mitchum, John Garfield, Barbara Stanwyck, Robert Ryan, Gloria Grahame, Burt Lancaster, Richard Conte, Claire Trevor, Kirk Douglas, Richard Widmark, Joan Crawford, Dick Powell, Lizabeth Scott, Dan Duryea, Ida Lupino, and Sterling Hayden, among so many others—all invested their roles with the existential idiom of the noir city.

Equally important are the passionate natures so often igniting criminal acts by the characters of noir drama: Stanwyck and Fred MacMurray in *Double Indemnity*; Mitchum, Douglas, and Jane Greer in *Out of the Past*; Farley Granger and Cathy O'Donnell in *They Live by Night* and *Side Street*; John Dall and Peggy Cummins in *Gun Crazy*; and Joan Crawford and Ann Blyth in *Mildred Pierce*. Their crimes result from sexual and love drives too single-minded or selfish to satisfy socially sanctioned prescriptions for shared happiness; in their desperation these characters go too far and pay a price for it. Such men and women caught in their obsessions acquire a rebelliousness and individualism of spirit in a doomful atmosphere. For the men, breaking the law or getting caught in the injustices of it often provokes the psychotic appearance of running. Running away from danger, from entrapment by the authorities or one's own enemies, brings the noir man into the even greater entrapment of a dark moral tangle from which the only escape is often suicide before the otherwise inevitable end of being killed. "I did something wrong, once," answers a doomed Ole in Robert Siodmak's *Killers*. For this vague but unforgivable transgression we know he must die. Bowie must pay an equally harsh price for his criminal complicity in *They Live by Night*. Dix Handley cannot have his gentle horses but instead must die in the grass at their feet in John Huston's *Asphalt Jungle*. And John Garfield's Nick Robey "runs all the way" to his death in the gutter—a bit of grim poetry in this, Garfield's last film (*He Ran All the Way*). This rebellion marks

the impossible division between freedom and entrapment as it reminds us that one cannot truly be defined without the other and that each is the incomplete part of the existential equation befitting the noir world.

The noir women, in contrast, have often been doomed to live because of their intelligence and individualism. Barbara Stanwyck wants money, sex, and quite possibly love, but she has given Fred MacMurray little apparent reason to trust her style in *Double Indemnity*; nor can Wendell Corey trust her in *The File on Thelma Jordon*, nor Robert Ryan in *Clash by Night*. If misogyny appears the order of the day in the treatment of many noir women, then it is also true that the ordinarily available option of hearth and home unavailable to so many of them exacts a price in sacrifice and madness. The noir woman is rarely a bedrock of domestic virtue, but the alternative role as *femme fatale* has also been overemphasized. The Joan Crawfords, Gloria Grahames, Rita Hayworths, and, above all, Barbara Stanwycks have joined the ranks of women with the psychic force of Hedda Gabler, striking out against the fate of their conventional social roles. In a notably cruel irony of this, Joan Crawford, who sacrifices all for her daughters in *Mildred Pierce* and for her husband in *Flamingo Road*, is not punished for her efforts so much as for the direct *manner* of their execution. The tragic consequence can also come in the *femme fatale*'s penitent conversion. It is not enough to be disfigured with scaldingly hot coffee; Gloria Grahame's Debbie Marsh must also take the bullet for Glenn Ford in Fritz Lang's *Big Heat*. As he cradles her in his arms, the mink-coated vestige of her past gently soothes her burned, scarred face. It is the poetry of stark violence, one that can be mitigated only by her death.

In the end the lives of these people come to represent that exciting and often fearful image of the darker recesses of human nature unleashed and unappeased in definition of an American culture at odds with its most optimistic illusions. The two confront each other to produce the anxiety we often face in modern life and see displayed in noir cinema. "[N]ow trembling and creative, now panicky and destructive," wrote the philosopher-critic William Barrett, "always it is as inseparable from ourselves as our own breathing because anxiety is our existence itself in its radical insecurity."[2]

This writing project would have been immensely more difficult

This book is by no means complete; most of the films discussed here are, above all, those that fueled my imagination of a noir world over the years and that resonated beyond their running times to hold me in thrall of a cinema whose vibrancy still excites. These films, and many others, still speak to us in the manner of passionate replies to the dark nature they exhibit. If this book does nothing more than provoke a consideration of them, and of those

omitted, then their legacy remains vital, trapped, as it were, in that pocket of consciousness that perpetually connects movies to our lives.

INTRODUCTION

TO NAME THE THING—FILM NOIR AS STYLE, AS GENRE

The persistent questions in most theoretical discussions of the film noir are what makes a film a film noir and whether such films can be considered to constitute a genre, an entity that possesses a language of iconography and conventions, or whether they instead merely display a certain cinematic style, intergeneric and substantially the product of film technique that augments screen narrative. To answer these questions, perhaps consideration of what a screen genre is and is perceived to be will help; it may illuminate not only the fundamental recognitions we make of genres but also the cultural meaning we attach to their identifications and conventions.

Thomas Sobchack observed that "the subject matter of a genre film is a story. It is not something that matters outside the film, even if it inadvertently tells us something about the time and place of its creation. Its sole justification for existence is to make concrete and perceivable the configuration inherent in its ideal form. That the various genres have changed, gone through cycles of popularity, does not alter the fact that the basic underlying coordinates of a genre are maintained time after time."[1] With this classical, literary definition, the film noir may be challenged as a group of films that, though identifiable in *look* (lighting, nighttime urban settings) and *iconography* (seedy hotels, cars, lounges, cigarette lighters, smartly dressed *femmes fatales,* etc.), resists the appeal "to make concrete and perceivable the configuration inherent in its ideal form," for there is no ideal form upheld in this modern group of commercial films. There are stories analogous to the myths of classical Greek drama, but this is not peculiar to the noir; comedies and westerns have appealed to this dramatic heritage—so often, as a matter of course,

that an Oedipal, Medean, or Hamlet-like protagonist or story scarcely redefines its recognizable genre associations. Sobchack further notes: "There is little room in the genre film for ambiguity anywhere—in characters, plots, or iconography. But even when seeming ambiguities arise in the course of a film, they must be either de-emphasized or taken care of by the end of the film" (199). By this continued definition, the film noir can hardly qualify as a genre, since, at its finest and with recognizable characters and iconography, it is rarely without ambiguity.

I bring Sobchack's definition of a screen genre to the forefront of my discussion of genre and its application to the film noir because it is an important touchstone for any critical evaluation of and divergence from the issues raised in its wake. In response to such a definition, film critics have described the film noir as a deflection from genre or, more interestingly, as an emanation from it. Raymond Durgnat wrote: "*Film noir* is sometimes called a genre, but it's a moot point whether it's normally used for a perennial mood (a gloomy cynicism), or restricted to a particular historical epoch (around the Forties); whether it's a certain kind of thriller, or whether it includes Westerns, domestic dramas, and normally unclassified films (*Citizen Kane*). Thus *noir* could signify an attitude, or a cycle, or a subgenre, or a tonality."[2] John Whitney concluded that the subject matter of the noir "took the private detective film, the gangster film, the police film, middle class melodramas, and films about boxing and prisons, all of which were established genres in their own rights, and absorbed large portions of them."[3] And Alfred Appel contended that "because the *film noir* is not a genre, its properties cannot be defined as readily or exactly as those of, say, the Western. It is a kind of Hollywood film peculiar to the Forties and early Fifties, a genus in the gangster film/thriller family. The taxonomic tag first introduced by French *cinéastes* of the Fifties is appropriately imprecise—*film noir* is a matter of manner, of mood, tone, and style—though its cultural attitudes are concrete enough, its psychological appeal quite direct."[4]

What Durgnat and Appel speak of is a kind of film recognizable from types of screen stories, those belonging in various genres and subgenres, peculiar in style and standing apart from, although perhaps alongside, familiar genre narratives. Whitney simply acknowledges that film noir is a generic amalgam of established independent genres. These partial descriptions have one common point of departure: each recognizes the film noir *in relation or juxtaposition to* other kinds of film stories. The point is worth noting because it highlights the dilemma of

how film noir is perceived: not as a subset of any given genre, the noir here becomes a screen entity of parasitic definition, dependent upon those very taxonomic standards that may seek to subsume its expression but cannot quite do so. It is that problematic space between "kind" of film recognized and the constituent qualities of structural style that make this particular film recognizable as something other, or more, than its "kind." Robert Porfirio clarifies the issue when he observes that "much of the trouble plaguing scholars attempting to deal with the *film noir* as a genre stems from the fact that it stands somewhere between a historical and a theoretical genre."[5]

Tzvetan Todorov noted that genres as entities "can be described from two different viewpoints, that of empirical observation and that of abstract analysis. In a given society, the recurrence of certain discursive properties is institutionalized, and individual texts are produced and perceived in relation to the norm constituted by that codification. A genre, whether literary or not, is nothing other than the codification of discursive properties."[6] Because the film noir speaks to us in certain patterns of visual narration and, through them, establishes a bleak mood that defines the melodramatic conventions of story and character in peculiar recurrence to their time (mostly, the 1940s and 1950s) and place (Hollywood's representation of modern urban America), we come to recognize such a cinema as a discrete area of investigation. René Wellek and Austin Warren conceived of genres as having both "outer form (specific metre or structure) and . . . inner form (attitude, tone, purpose—more crudely, subject and audience)" and saw the critical project in finding the two.[7] The task is similar to Todorov's necessity to combine the constituent "historical reality" (the trend, movement, school, of a body of work) with the constituent "discursive reality" (modes, registers, forms, manners, styles).[8] And in discussing literary studies—which for our purposes crosses over into the narrative concerns of genre cinema—he concludes, "Genres are the meeting place between general poetics and event-based literary history; as such, they constitute a privileged object that may well deserve to be the principal figure in literary studies" (pp. 19–20).

But film noir as a staple of postwar commercial American cinema developed according to aesthetic and financial influences that often compromised each other with the kind of overtness rarely recognized in the production of genre pieces in the other arts. "Genres communicate indi-

rectly with the society where they are operative through their institutionalization," Todorov continued. This applies well to the culture of Hollywood as well as to American society as a whole. And, "like any other institution, genres bring to light the constitutive features of the society to which they belong."[9] Hence, in this sense and as a product of commercial American filmmaking, screen genres emerge as "sets of cultural conventions" that, according to Andrew Tudor, "seem best immediately employed in the analysis of the relation between groups of films, the cultures in which they are made, and the cultures in which they are exhibited."[10]

Because of the film noir's palpably felt and expressed philosophical dimensions and the discursive methods that give them narrative shape, what emerges is the fusion of myth—a very modern myth of alienation and obsession—with an essential style inextricable from its representation. The dilemma of how noir cinema should best be categorized has most often hedged toward its being named, however unspokenly, a genre. But it has been the ineffability of its psycho-philosophical stance as a *modern* experience, with the corresponding formal depiction of bleak mood; the hardened and nihilistic attitudes of its characters, with their often obsessive drives; and an aura of hopelessness and doom that envelopes their lives, that has given hesitation here. (Classical literary and other film genres hardly serve to illustrate this dilemma well.) Yet one has always known which films are significantly noir, albeit not without occasional qualification: the popular references have rarely been debated. What the film noir has done is to structure this stance as the peculiar and defining structure of its otherwise traditional melodrama (or, in rare cases, tragedy) storytelling. The question that emerges then is, Why must we resist recognizing the development of a *kind* of film during World War II that later increasingly embodied in its narrative concerns the disruptive, dark forces that drive and deplete modern urban man? The growth of such a cinema cannot be regarded only as a historical development, although it surely is that. Rather, it must be seen as a specific aesthetic response to the way we have come to see our human condition, shaped by the world and the movies expressing it.

Therefore, in considering the film noir to be a body of work conforming to generic standards, we may apply the historical dimension to its creation. Porfirio recognized four stages in its development, from its "early period of 'experimentation' (1940–43)," to "the 'studio-bound' period

of the 'private eye' (1944–47)," to "the 'location' period of the semi-documentary and social problem film (1947–52)" and on to its "final period of fragmentation and decay (1952–60)."[11] Porfirio here recognizes the noir as a movement. However, in a different perception of the film noir—as a genre—and with much qualification, this course of progression is still largely, but by no means completely, correct, and it serves to recognize some of the historical influences that shaped the film noir in wartime and postwar America. The first recognition of a noir cinema must inevitably be the stylistic distinctiveness that transformed the conventions of the crime and private eye dramas into those peculiar to the noir. Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton saw this back in 1955 when they wrote in their landmark book on the American film noir: "In its most typical works, the *film noir* tried to give rise to a 'new thrill,' indivisible and inimitable. It juxtaposed certain themes within the framework of a particular technique: unusual plots, eroticism, violence, psychological ambivalence within criminal parties. It is the convergence of these dramatic particulars, some of which are not new, that created a style."[12] This is, of course, largely the case, but it is only partly true in that Borde and Chaumeton did not fully recognize the ramifications of a technique that finally transformed a style into a new narrative expression.

The visual style of noir cinema is the first and most obvious point of departure toward that end, since the influence of the Golden Age of German cinema in the 1920s and early 1930s crossed the Atlantic in the directorial sensibility of several of its émigré practitioners (Lang, Siodmak, Dieterle, etc.). As in the German expressionist and *kammerspiele* cinema, low-key lighting, with the effective contrast of chiaroscuro to delineate the shadows of people, buildings, and cityscapes, predominates.[13] In such exterior settings, the lighting design often shows distorted, outsized shadows, menacing and paranoiac in the mind of those sought or hunted. Oblique and vertical lines capture buildings, lampposts, and alleyways in similar distortion. The lighting of interiors shows the same scaled-down pattern, but revealing entrapment over pursuit. Venetian blind slats, hallway and other room lights left on in the dark, and shafts of light shooting inside windows from blinking or partially broken neon signs form a looming and palpable geometric design of psychic imprisonment and terror. Low-angle and, to a lesser extent, high-angle shots in this context are more common in the film noir than in any other genre except the science fiction film. As Paul Schrader noted, "the

typical *film noir* would rather move the scene cinematographically around the actor than have the actor control the scene by physical action."[14] In the most evocative films noirs, nothing could be truer.

The visual style of noir narrative structure is a recurrent theme throughout the development of the genre and in the particular expressiveness it attains in the hands of notable noir filmmakers, usually in collaboration with their cameramen. (One thinks here of Otto Preminger and Joseph La Shelle, Anthony Mann and John Alton, Robert Siodmak and Woody Bredell, and Robert Aldrich and Joseph Biroc, among others.) Accordingly, this style is discussed throughout the book. The other structural elements of noir narrative that are considered in this book and that established its genre status include

- An urban setting or at least an urban influence. This setting, according to noir convention, is captured mostly at night and often just after rain.
- A modern, twentieth-century setting, from the Great Depression on, and usually of the 1940s, 1950s, or early 1960s, with latitude permitting its extension to the present day.
- A lack of comic structure, although the film noir may have comic elements (Dassin's *Rififi*) and often has humor (*The Big Sleep*). There can be no true noir comedy as there is a western comedy or a war comedy. (Frank Capra's *Arsenic and Old Lace*, George Marshall's *Murder, He Says*, and Preston Sturges's wonderful *comédie noire*, *Unfaithfully Yours*, function as black comedies, a distinct variation of comedy.) Two directors often considered to have made films noirs, Alfred Hitchcock (*Shadow of a Doubt*, *Strangers on a Train*, *I Confess*, *The Wrong Man*, and perhaps *Rear Window*) and Billy Wilder (*Double Indemnity*, *Sunset Boulevard*, *Ace in the Hole*) are problematic cases because their visions are steeped in cruel and corrosive humor, distinctive in its own right and in its ability to function apart from the noir universe. One senses that both of these artists, especially Hitchcock, would have expressed their personalities unallied with any particular genre. The one notable exception is Wilder's *Double Indemnity*. Any film that is based on James M. Cain, is scripted by Raymond Chandler, stars Barbara Stanwyck, and

contains every stylistic convention of the film noir, insists
upon recognition of that kind.

- A denial by its main characters of conventional social and
  domestic happiness through unattainability or refusal.
- An assertion of individuality as defined by the killing
  (although not necessarily murder) of someone (including
  oneself) in defiance of modern social mores and the law.
- The iconic representation of the above-mentioned features by
  a definitive star of the screen or through a striking
  performance by a less recognized screen star or actor.

The conventions of the film noir ensconced in its narrative struc-
ture, which make it distinctive yet are not exclusive to the noir, include
the following:

- The *femme fatale* or her counterpart, the *homme fatal*.
- The active/sexual and passive/nonsexual characters.
- The voice-over narration and the flashback. Both are usually
  from the male protagonist's point of view.
- Frequent portraits (*Laura*, *The Woman in the Window*, *Scarlet
  Street*).
- Telephones—ringing, answered, or dialed—that portend bad
  and often incriminating news. (*Sorry, Wrong Number* is the
  obvious case. In *Detour* the telephone is literally an instrument
  of manslaughter, and in *Double Indemnity* a Dictaphone
  functions as a confessional.)
- Temporary amnesia, often suffered by noir characters and
  often diagnosed in tandem with the increasingly popular use of
  Freudian psychology in postwar American cinema (*Phantom
  Lady*, *My Name Is Julia Ross*, *Black Angel*, *Somewhere in the
  Night*, *The Dark Past*). Psychology itself can acquire a sinister,
  manipulative function in noir films (*Nightmare Alley*, *The
  Accused*, *Hollow Triumph* [*The Scar*]). Nightmares or
  daydreams function as disturbing symptoms of hidden fears or
  desires (*The Woman in the Window*, *Scarlet Street*, *The Chase*,
  Crack-Up, *Fear in the Night*).
- Cars as indispensable devices of escape, from crime or a
  criminal past, one's pursuers, the law, or marital and domestic
  unpleasantness.

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