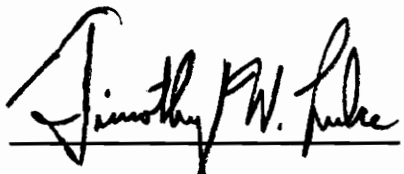
THE SOCIO-POLITICAL DIMENSION OF FILM NOIR

by

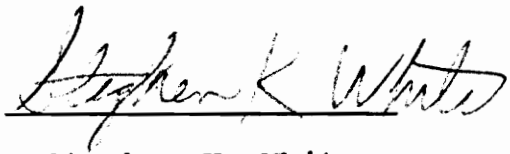
Hugues Maltère

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
in partial fulfillement of the requirements for the
degree of Master of Arts
in
Political Science

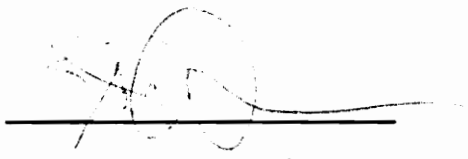
APPROVED:



Timothy W. Luke



Stephen K. White



Stephen Prince

August 18, 1992

Blacksburg, Virginia

c.2

LD
5655
V855
1992
M258
c.2

THE SOCIO-POLITICAL DIMENSION OF FILM NOIR

by

Hugues Maltère

Timothy W. Luke

Political Science

(ABSTRACT)

After World War II, Hollywood produced a series of low-budget pictures characterized by a dark mood, bleak urban landscapes and fierce violence. French critics called them films noirs (black films). These movies presented a critical vision of the social injustice present in the American capitalist society. This thesis examines the socio-political dimension of film noir firstly through its social, literary and filmic origins, then through a piecework study of shots and dialogues from six noir pictures: Body and Soul (1947), Force of Evil (1948), Knock On Any Door (1949), Kiss of Death (1947), I Walk Alone (1948) and The Set-Up (1949). It is shown how the Marxist convictions of their makers influenced their style and their content. Even films noirs made by apolitical or moderate filmmakers follow a similar pattern. It is concluded that film noir contains expressions of anti-capitalist struggle toward social justice and moral redemption. The appeal of these ideas to many Americans is shown by the box-office success of these pictures, while many noir writers, actors and directors were the victims of the reactionary repression of the early fifties.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, I would like to express my profound gratitude to my committee chairman Dr. Timothy Luke for providing me his support and his enlightening guidance all through the time it took me to complete this thesis. I am also very grateful to Dr. Stephen White for his unflinching support and for being such a humanistic teacher and a sensible advisor and to Dr. Steven Prince for his precious help and insightful contribution to this thesis.

Many thanks to those to whom I owe the opportunity to come to Blacksburg: Dr. Richard Rich, Dr. Charles Taylor, Dr. Arnold Schuetz, Mrs. Gamerre, Mrs. Lucas, and the International Student Exchange Program (ISEP).

Special thanks to Dr. John Rohr of the Center of Public Administration and Policy for his friendly support and many hours of enriching conversation in his impeccable French.

A big thanks to the secretaries in the political science department and to the P.S. graduate students which made my McBryde experience so special: Birgit Voigt, Helen Thompson; Carsten Zelle, Paul O'Neill, Eric Lashley, Tim Maas. Thanks also to other students and friends from Viginia Tech: Karl Melder, Achim Leister, Paul Jed and Brigitte, Dusan Lesjak, Terence Lung, the people from the Anaerobe Lab, and specially the players from the K.A. volley-ball team.

Special thanks to Birgit Alber for her unique generosity, for being such a positive example and for giving me the motivation to finish this thesis.

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my parents, Danièle et Jean-Marie Maltere to whom I owe an eternal debt; their love and immense generosity made all this possible. This thesis is a small token of my undying gratitude and love for them.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION 1

A. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY 7

B. THE PROBLEM OF THE STUDY 16

C. REVIEW OF SELECTED LITERATURE 17

D. ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY 29

CHAPTER II. THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND METHOD OF ANALYSIS 32

A. SEMIOTICS 39

B. DECONSTRUCTION 46

C. PROPOSED METHOD 51

CHAPTER III. THE ARTISTIC AND SOCIAL ORIGINS OF FILM NOIR 58

A. THE LITERARY ORIGINS 60

B. THE CINEMATIC ORIGINS 81

1. German Expressionism 81

2. The Gangster Film 88

3. Citizen Kane 94

CHAPTER IV. EXAMINATION OF SOME RADICAL ELEMENTS OF THE AMERICAN FILM NOIR 99

A. RADICAL INVOLVEMENT IN FILM NOIR 101

1. Body and Soul (1947) 104

2. Force of Evil (1948) 116

3. Knock On Any Door (1949) 135

B. LIBERAL ELEMENTS IN NON-RADICAL FILM NOIR 140

1. Kiss of Death (1947) 140

2. I Walk Alone (1948) 147

3. The Set-Up (1949) 161

CHAPTER V. CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS 166

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY 182

VITA 188

THE SOCIO-POLITICAL DIMENSION OF FILM NOIR

by

Hugues Maltère

Timothy W. Luke

Political Science

CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

During the last years of World War II and in the early post-war period, a series of films were produced in Hollywood which were quite different from the rest of their contemporaries. Although these motion picture films could have accidentally been mistaken for a kind of gangster film, they actually belonged to another category. They featured neither of the two main elements of a typical gangster movie: extreme violence for the sake of violence, and gangs. The latter were traditionally depicted in gangster movies as centralized, hierarchical and conservative social units. Instead, these newcomers substituted suspense for gratuitous violence and were marked by characteristics which had been absent from most pre-war Hollywood productions. For example, they had in common a touch of social transgression. They presented a critical vision of many institutions of the American society such as money, politics, law and order, the capitalistic spirit of success, etc. They were also marked by a challenging aesthetic and an insistent violence, though

in this case violence was usually more psychological than physical.

At the time of their release, the thematic coherence of these films was overlooked by the American public--as well as by film critics, who were generally more interested in theme than style. They were first identified by French critics who simply happened to have more perspective and a sharper critical eye than their American counterparts, mostly because of the interruption caused by World War II. During the German occupation, the French were deprived of pictures from Hollywood. The post-war atmosphere of American films surprised them all the more since they were used to the musical and romantic pictures of the Thirties. In contrast, the French named this new type of movie film noir, after the visual aspects and dark psychological tones underlying the style.1 In 1946, French cineaste Nino Frank was the first to categorize films noirs as a type of "psychological crime" film. The same year, critic Jean-Pierre Chartier gave film noir its denomination as well as a kind of formal recognition.2 Films and books belonging to the noir tradition have ever since acquired a certain cult status as well as a large popularity. Nowadays, with the

1 Literally, black film.

2 Jean-Pierre Chartier, "Les Américains aussi font des films 'noirs'", La Revue du Cinéma, no. 2 (November 1946): 66-70.

shift in presentation format, noir pictures (like other old, classic movies) are not shown in movie theaters--except in a few independent theaters in New York, Paris and London. Some of these films occasionally are sometimes rerun on cable television channels such as American Movie Classics (AMC), Arts & Entertainment (A&E) and TNT. However, only a handful of all films noirs are programmed by these channels. They include the best known and most popular such as The Maltese Falcon (Warner Brothers, 1941), Mildred Pierce (Warner, 1945), The Big Sleep (Warner, 1946), The Killers (Universal, 1946), They Live by Night (RKO, 1949), The Asphalt Jungle (MGM, 1950), or Touch of Evil (Universal, 1958).3 These pictures still play mainly because of their stars such as Humphrey Bogart, Joan Crawford, Burt Lancaster, Farley Granger, Orson Welles. Yet, in fact, the vast majority of noir thrillers have been eclipsed by these few major productions, which were made on big budgets and with the fortunate presence of stars in the cast, a rather unusual thing in film noir.

---

3 Ted Turner is the owner of the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer film catalog and sometimes reruns old MGM classics on TNT, preferably in their colorized version. Whoever has not seen The Asphalt Jungle in 'color' cannot really understand the destructive effect of this process. John Huston's film noir, colorized and cut by commercials, looks like a tragic version of Mary Poppins. Attending a private screening of his mutilated film shortly before his death, the old director burst into tears. See "A French Court Blocks an Altered Huston Film", New York Times, 11 July 1988, 17(N) and C13(L).

Authors differ on opening and closing dates of the film noir era. In a 1970 dissertation, Amir Karimi limited the period from 1941 to 1949.4 Later authors pleaded for an extended approach and a long-term view of film noir. In his "Notes on Film Noir" (1972), Paul Schrader placed the style's outer limits from The Maltese Falcon (Warner) in 1941 to Orson Welles' Touch of Evil (Universal) in 1958.5 This opinion subsequently prevailed and many authors, including Alain Silver, Elizabeth Ward and Robert Ottoson followed it.6 A compilation of all these scholarly opinions would probably limit the classical noir production period to the years of 1944 to 1958. In 1944, two great pictures were released which are today considered as the first true milestones of the noir tradition: Double Indemnity (Paramount) and Murder, My Sweet (RKO). Film noir's popularity and creative period peaked in the late forties

4 Amir Massoud Karimi, Toward a Definition of the American Film Noir (1941-1949) (Ph.D. diss., University of Southern California, 1970) (New York: Arno Press, 1976). To my knowledge, this is the first American study of film noir ever written in the United States. Karimi was strongly influenced by European film critics such as Borde and Chaumeton and the team of the Cahiers du Cinema. In turn, Karimi's study influenced Paul Schrader's 1972 paper titled "Notes on Film Noir", reprinted in David Denby ed., Awake in the Dark (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 278-290.

5 Paul Schrader, "Notes on Film Noir" (1972).

6 Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward ed., Film Noir, rev. and exp. ed. (Woodstock, New York: The Overlook Press, 1988). This is probably the most thorough and accurate reference guide on American film noir. Robert Ottoson, A Reference Guide to the American Film Noir: 1940-1958 (Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, 1981).

and early fifties with pictures such as Crossfire (RKO, 1947), Force of Evil (MGM, 1948), Gun Crazy (United Artists, 1949), and The Big Heat (Columbia, 1953). Subsequently, they gained the status of movie classics and can give a fairly good representation of the genre. But there were many more films noirs. Silver and Ward counted no less than three hundred noir thrillers, while Robert Ottoson made a list of 215 titles.7

It is a well-known fact that Orson Welles' Citizen Kane (1940) greatly influenced film noir visual style and narration style with his use of flashbacks and voice-over. Oddly enough, the great director also had the privilege to close the noir cycle. Indeed, his brilliant Touch Of Evil (Universal), written and directed in 1958, is a masterly tribute to film noir, as well as its epitaph.8 Film noir displayed a unique chemistry between actors, writers, directors and technicians. The constraints of a low budget and the lack of technical resources frequently led to the adoption of an inexpensive visual style borrowed from the German Expressionism of the 1920s. Characterized mainly by extensive use of studios and low-key lighting, this style saw the debuts in Hollywood of several German filmmakers who were fleeing the rising threat of Nazism. Director Paul

7 Silver and Ward, Film Noir. Ottoson, A Reference Guide to the American Film Noir.

8 Schrader, "Notes on Film Noir", 279.

Schrader wrote that film noir can indeed be regarded as some of the best work that was ever to be produced by Hollywood studios: "[A] film noir will make the high point on an artist's career graph....[F]ilm noir was good for practically every director's career."9

For the purposes of my study, I will take 1958 as the end of the film noir period with regard to my study for political and aesthetic reasons. Politically, it corresponds to the post-war period of the conservative, anti-New Deal movement and to the blacklist era. Aesthetically, Touch of Evil marked the end of the black-and-white period of the style. I consider that the switch to color deeply altered the look as well as the spirit of film noir. Owing to its name, film noir lost its original identity when it met the Technicolor process. The year 1958 does not mark the end of the genre, but the end of its classic, black-and-white period, the only one which concerns the present study.

9 Schrader, "Notes on Film Noir", 288.

A. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Several books and articles have been published on the origins of film noir, on the moral message of film noir, on violence in film noir, on film noir's status as a genre or as a style. The present study intends to associate political theory and film analysis in investigating the presence of ideological and social content in film noir. A survey of the literary and cinematic origins of film noir is necessary in order to determine its artistic sources. Some methodological considerations are required in order to select the most appropriate form of analysis for the purpose of the study. I shall then proceed with the study of the political and social content in the framework of a handful of films noirs. These films were selected according to their socio-political interest and their relevance to my topic. They may not be extremely well-known, but this should heighten the interest of their study since studies on the major pieces of film noir have already been published.

The present study assumes that the noir tradition underscored, both consciously and unconsciously, social and political features through both its thematic content and its aesthetics. We shall see that these features are perceptible in many noir movies, although in varying degrees. This is due to the rigorous censorship which was exerted by

Hollywood studios on any intent to incorporate in a screenplay any trace of a political or social message. It nevertheless remains that film noir was an artistic medium for a number of American radical leftists who were for the most part Jewish. Indeed, a closer look at the personnel which produced most of film noir reveals that they were for a large part American Jews with liberal, leftist political inclinations. As such, they were very representative of the fraction of Jews who had been seduced by Marxism in the thirties. They were very aware of the fact that the young Communist regime of the Soviet Union had acted as the only European counterbalance to the menacing rise of the violently anti-Semitic Third Reich of Chancellor Adolf Hitler. Some other noir film artists were immigrant Jews from Germany and Eastern Europe who were trying to observe a certain reserve appropriate to their status as political refugees.

I shall try to examine how film noir could contain ideological elements which clashed with numerous ideals of the so-called 'American way of life'. Using box-office figures and a few critical reviews, I shall try to evaluate what could have been the actual impact of these motion pictures on their audiences. Presumably a good test of that effectiveness can be found in the reactions to which radical writer/director Abraham Polonsky's films gave rise in their own time. Body and Soul (1947) and Force of Evil (1948), two

masterly examples of film noir, were both praised for the quality of their screenplay and dialogues. However, critics--and probably audiences alike--saw in them only good vehicles for action and suspense at the service of a star, namely John Garfield. However, these two motion pictures were used, along with others, by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in its second wave of investigations in 1951. They were presented as pieces of evidence of the heretical political beliefs of their makers (Abe Polonsky, director Robert Rossen, producer Bob Roberts) and of their star, John Garfield.

In addition to his talent as a screenplay writer and film director, Abraham Polonsky is an interesting character on two accounts of political importance. Firstly, he is very representative of the group of Hollywood radicals who were investigated by the House Committee in 1947 and 1951, and subsequently blacklisted. He belonged to their social and intellectual circle. During the 1930s, these artists had believed in and fought for the same causes: the New Deal, the struggle of Republicans against Franco in the Spanish Civil War, the fight against fascism at home and abroad, etc. He too had to undergo the same innuendo, harassment and humiliations of which his fellow radicals were the victims from 1947 on, when the cold war started. Moreover, numerous people who had been working with him, like John Garfield,

black actor Canada Lee, and assistant director Robert Aldrich, had also to face the inquisition led by HUAC. Abraham Polonsky represents the group of film makers, many of them involved in film noir, who were blacklisted for their political beliefs and for their attempt to incorporate some socio-political content on the screen, against the established rules of the Hollywood production system.

Secondly, Polonsky appeared to be a sincere Marxist and a real Communist, which was not the case for many of his fellow radicals. His political commitment was not circumstantial. It had begun long before the time he arrived in Hollywood in 1941. Polonsky was raised in a socialist Jewish milieu in which he recalled that "the attitude was, what civilized person is not a socialist?"10 He was an intellectual and a brilliant, independent spirit. In 1962, Polonsky described himself as a "volunteer in politics (Democrat, Anarchist, Radical, Confused)."11

He had become involved with the Communist Party in the early thirties, during his undergraduate years at City College of New York.12 His socialist and democratic

---

10 Barbara Zheutlin and David Talbot, Creative Differences: Profiles of Hollywood Dissidents (Boston: South End Press, 1978), 57.

11 Interview in William Pechter, "Abraham Polonsky and Force of Evil", Film Quarterly, Spring 1962: 50.

12 Zheutlin and Talbot, Creative Differences, 56.

convictions were strengthened, like those of many American intellectuals, during the 1930s. He had struggled, along with the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA), in favor of the Spanish Republicans, against the propagation of fascism, etc. He was an authentic socialist and a democratic militant, with a dose of humanism.

In the second wave of HUAC hearings, which started in March 1951, some writers, directors and actors whose situation was threatened by the HUAC inquisitional hearings and the parallel witch hunt instigated by Senator Joseph McCarthy through the media, eventually gave up their beliefs and pride in a desperate effort to salvage their careers. They submitted to the will of the Committee and became informers. Henceforth, they engaged in a lamentable process in which they had to 'give' names of their fellow comrades, with the hope of being 'cleared' by the Committee. Such was the case of directors Edward Dmytryk, Robert Rossen and Elia Kazan, actors Lee J. Cobb and Sterling Hayden, writer Stanley Roberts.

At the same period, Abraham Polonsky and some of his peers showed their honesty by choosing to put their principles and political beliefs before their career. They refused obstinately to collaborate with HUAC. In return, the House Committee's blacklist ruined all chances for them to

pursue their work in Hollywood. It was in many cases a serious loss for the American film industry. For example, according to his contemporaries, Polonsky's early productions already looked like the promise of a long and brilliant career. In a review of Body and Soul shortly after the film had been released, John Houseman, a leading Hollywood producer, wrote in a comparison with two equivalent films noirs, the hyperviolent Brute Force (Universal, 1947) and the "social problem" film Crossfire (RKO, 1947), that "Body and Soul emerges as an absorbing piece of entertainment....The writing has tempo and some sensitivity....Within its own limited idiom, Body and Soul is eminently successful."13

The influence of radical ideology on film was the subject of a few studies.14 Yet, the analysis of the ideological dimension of film noir was never conducted to a substantial extent. As of today, it remains incomplete. Some problems, such as the actual influence of Marxist radicals on the content of Hollywood movies or the impact of the

13 John Houseman, "Violence, 1947: Three Specimens", Hollywood Quarterly, Fall 1947: 64.

14 See for instance Thom Andersen, "Red Hollywood", in Ferguson and Groseclose ed., Literature and the Visual Arts in Contemporary Society (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1985). Also, Robert Ottoson, A Reference Guide to the American Film Noir; Jean-Pierre Telotte, Voices in the Dark (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989); David Thomson, America in the Dark: Hollywood and the Gift of Unreality (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1977).

blacklist's political purge on the quality of the Hollywood cinema of the 1950s, never were really addressed. Furthermore, film noir has consistently been underestimated by a majority of American film critics. For instance, in their monumental work Classical Hollywood Cinema, Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson devoted only four pages to film noir, just merely to point out its literary origins and its status as a subversive sub-genre of the gangster film.15

Noir works were frequently released to a general semi-indifference, and it took lavish praise from the British and French critics before they could come back to the United States with a quality label. This reaction was the case of Force of Evil (1948), among others. In "Red Hollywood", Thom Andersen tentatively addressed this problem, and justly distinguished the achievements of the Hollywood blacklistees as forming a genre that he called film gris.16 Andersen labeled this film category with reference to the noir genre "because it grew out of the body of films that have come retrospectively to be called film noir and because it may be distinguished from the earlier film noir by its greater psychological and social realism."17

15 David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 74-77.

16 Literally, grey film. Andersen, "Red Hollywood", 179-191.

17 Andersen, "Red Hollywood", 183.

Andersen counted thirteen films as composing this genre, all of which were traditionally listed as noir pieces: Body and Soul (directed by Robert Rossen, Enterprise Studio/ United Artists (UA), 1947), Force of Evil (Abraham Polonsky, Enterprise/MGM, 1948), Thieves' Highway (Jules Dassin, Twentieth Century-Fox, 1949), They Live by Night (Nicholas Ray, RKO, 1949), Knock on Any Door (Nicholas Ray, Columbia, 1949), We Were Strangers (John Huston, 1949), Night and the City (Jules Dassin, 20th Century-Fox, 1950), The Asphalt Jungle (John Huston, MGM, 1950), The Breaking Point (Michael Curtiz, Warner Brothers, 1950), The Lawless (Joseph Losey, Paramount, 1950), The Prowler (Joseph Losey, UA, 1951), Try and Get Me (Cyril Endfield, UA, 1951), He Ran All the Way (John Berry, UA, 1951). It is revealing that all of these pictures were directed by Americans, although European directors were actively involved in the noir genre. It indicates that American film makers were willing to take more chances than their foreign immigrant counterparts when it came to including some socio-political content in their film productions. Because of their status, immigrant filmmakers in Hollywood were in general willing to stay out of the political debate and were rather closely monitoring the evolution of fascism and of nazism in their homelands. The exception to the rule was Charles Chaplin. Arriving in

the United States at the turn of the century, he wrote and directed films which stood out among the bulk of Hollywood productions for their sarcastic tone towards the capitalist mode of production and the American society: City Lights and Modern Times. He was a friend of many immigrant artists and intellectuals known for their Marxist commitment: Hanns Eisler, Bertolt Brecht, Theodore Dreiser, Clifford Odets.18 He had never applied for American citizenship and this caused him a considerable amount of trouble after World War II. In 1952, after a visit to Europe, he had to undergo an extensive investigation by the Immigration Department in order to get his reentry permit. He had to answer charges of a political nature (on his presumed Communism) and of personal matter (about his private life). He opted to stay abroad and returned only once in the States, in April 1972, to receive a special Academy Award.

In general, immigrant film-makers had fled Europe in the thirties because they were either Marxist or Jewish (or both). But at the end of World War II, the collapse of Nazism and the beginning of the Cold War prompted most of them to depart from the country where they had found asylum. They decided to leave the United States and went back to their countries of origin in Europe or, after 1948, to the

18 David Caute, The Great Fear: The Anti-Communist Purge Under Truman and Eisenhower (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), 516.

newly created state of Israel. They had escaped the Nazi rule and did not want to get caught by the rising reactionary tide which they foresaw was to sweep America.

Thom Andersen's article is very important because it formally established for the first time the relationship between film noir and the blacklist victims. Although the method of selection which he used to establish his list of films is somewhat vague, the article marked the beginning of the study of film noir as a genre with political content. The purpose of the present study is to bring an additional contribution to the knowledge of an aspect of film noir which, previously, had been deliberately ignored, i.e. its obvious as well as its hidden political symbolic overtones.

B. THE PROBLEM OF THE STUDY

The current study is designed to investigate the following questions: Was film noir influenced by the social and political tendencies of the thirties? Have Hollywood radicals intentionally used film noir to leave their mark on film? To put it differently, is the political content of film noir the result of the deliberate work of some Hollywood radicals? Is film noir influenced also by more inherently American, less radical political ideas?

C. REVIEW OF SELECTED LITERATURE

The French had been deprived of American motion pictures during the whole period of World War II. Consequently, they quickly realized after Liberation Day that the war had changed Hollywood to a great extent. The new batch of films was significantly influenced by social, economic, technical and aesthetic developments. As a result, the silver screen was now filled with grim stories in which cynical, disenchanted heroes were moving about in nocturnal and dehumanized urban landscapes. The problems posed by the definition of film noir and its significance within the history of American motion pictures were the subject of previous studies. Not surprisingly, the first ones came from France. As I have already mentioned, the term film noir first appeared in France in a 1946 article by film critic Chartier.19 However, the publication by Borde and Chaumeton of their Panorama du film noir Americain in 1955 marked the first recognition by critics of the specificity of a genre called film noir. It also was the first attempt to circumscribe and characterize the new genre. The authors established the qualities that they saw in order for a picture to be quintessentially noir: confusion between dream and reality, aspect of cruelty and ambivalence, presence of

19 Chartier, "Les Américains aussi font des films 'noirs'".

a sensual but ruthless woman, etc.20 However, their analysis was limited for two main reasons. Firstly, it was contemporaneous with the noir cycle. The latter was not over yet. It was still waiting for Touch of Evil. Therefore, the final phase of film noir could not be fully taken into consideration. Secondly, Borde and Chaumeton insisted too much on the private eye, street crime and police routine films which marked the first years of the style. They passed over the psychological, quasi-psychoanalytic aspect of film noir in silence, although this aspect was characteristic of the later years of the genre. For the "period of psychotic action and suicidal impulse", according to Schrader's expression, which lasted from 1950 until 1955, relieved film noir of most of the Hollywood romantic and aesthetic conventions.21 The noir heroes became less and less romanticized, while McCarthyism and the threat of nuclear weapons inspired a paranoia which was echoed by the noir cycle. It took American critics fifteen years to begin to consider film noir as a topic worth studying. The interest was initiated in 1970 by Amir Massoud Karimi's dissertation.22 Karimi provided a bridge from Borde and Chaumeton's work to the numerous studies on film noir later

---

20 Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton, Panorama du film noir américain (1941-1953) (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1955).

21 Schrader, "Notes on Film Noir", 286.

22 Karimi, Toward a Definition of the American Film Noir.

published in the United States. Paul Schrader's "Notes on Film Noir", published in 1972, were an attempt to rehabilitate a period which, "with its emphasis on corruption and despair, was [previously] considered an aberration of the American character."23 However, Schrader disagreed with the French over the nature of film noir and wrote: "Film noir is not a genre....Since film noir is defined by tone rather than genre, it is almost impossible to argue one critic's descriptive definition against another's."24

Schrader undertook to single out the cultural and stylistic elements peculiar to the film noir. He suggested four major original influences: war and post-war disillusionment, which helped to make the transition from the gangster film to the sordidness and the sardonicism of the urban crime film; post-war realism, instigated by a handful of film producers who moved to on location sets in the streets; German-style expressionist lighting, imported by European expatriate directors and technicians; and hard-boiled detective fiction which in the thirties produced commercially successful novels by Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, James M. Cain... The article then pointed out some of the stylistic techniques distinctive of film noir,

23 Schrader, "Notes on Film Noir", 288.
24 Ibid., 279.

outlined the main noir themes and brought out three so-called phases of the noir production cycle. Schrader concluded:

> film noir was first of all a style, because it worked out its problems visually rather than thematically, because it was aware of its own identity, [thus] it was able to create artistic solutions to sociological problems.25

Schrader's pioneer piece made way for numerous later books on film noir. In 1979, Jeanine Basinger gave, in her book on director Anthony Mann, a rather broad definition of the genre:

> Film noir is usually defined not as a genre, but as a mood, characterized largely by a postwar feeling of alienation and disillusionment that permeated such familiar genres as gangster films, women's films, detective films, and melodramas of all types.26

However, she comprehensively described both noir visual elements and recurring subjects and attitudes, while exploring Mann's contribution to film noir between 1947 and 1950. In Dreams and Dead Ends, Jack Shadoian studied the so-called gangster/crime film genre from Little Caesar (1930) to The Godfather II (1975).27 He presented film noir in a strict sense as an evolution of the crime film in which

---

25 Schrader, "Notes on Film Noir", 290.

26 Jeanine Basinger, Anthony Mann (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979), 48.

27 Jack Shadoian, Dreams and Dead Ends (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1977).

"style itself becomes a value; when all else fails, it must assume the burden of establishing a meaning to existence and to art."28

What is generally considered the best reference guide on film noir was edited in 1979 by Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward.29 I believe that their stand on the nature of film noir satisfactorily settled the debate:

> [it] is not merely a genre of American film but also a movement inspired and supported by a collective vision, [so] it may seem arbitrary to exclude films with certain noir characteristics simply because they are genre pieces.30

Indeed, Silver and Ward established a list of over three hundred noir pictures ranging in a wide period which extends from 1927 to 1976. However, the vast majority of these films belong to the years 1945 to 1955. The book displayed the credits of each movie, a summary of the plot and a short critical review, evaluating notably the visual or thematic significance of the movie to the noir tradition. Robert Ottoson's Reference Guide to the American film noir was simply a compilation on the model of Silver and Ward's work. However, Ottoson was slightly more selective and he reduced the list of noir pictures down to 215 titles which he reviewd summarily reviewed using a vague sign analysis

28 Shadoian, Dreams and Dead Ends, 13.
29 Silver and Ward, Film Noir.
30 Ibid., 323.

approach. In The Dark Side of the Screen, Foster Hirsch sustained the opinion of Silver and Ward about film noir. He asserted that "[t]he most consistently stylized acting in American genres is in film noir, which is itself, along with the special case of the musical, the most stylized Hollywood genre."31 Hirsch's study explored in detail the social, literary, and cinematic backgrounds of film noir, that is respectively the urban world, the hard-boiled crime novel and pulp magazines of the twenties and thirties, and German expressionism and Italian neo-realism. Hirsch also presented the traditional themes and iconography of the genre with an approach which tried to reconcile style analysis with a look at noir's basic story patterns. But in Thomas Schatz's survey of Hollywood Genres, film noir was once again reduced to "a system of visual and thematic conventions which were not associated with any specific genre or story formula, but rather with a distinctive cinematic style and a particular historical period."32 Robert Ray's study of A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema was by far more interesting.33 The author proposed an anti-auteurist accounting for the American cinema in choosing ideology as

---

31 Foster Hirsch, The Dark Side of the Screen: Film Noir (San Diego: A. S. Barnes & Company, Inc., 1981), 146.

32 Thomas Schatz, Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981), 112.

33 Robert B. Ray, A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985).

the masterplot of his argument. Ray investigated the ideology, myths and artistic conventions of the American cinema in three periods: Classic Hollywood (1930-1945), the Postwar Period (1946-1966), and the Contemporary Period (1967-1980). As for the period relevant to the present study--the Postwar period--Ray asserted that "the noir films represented an eruption into the American cinema's main tradition of values, emotions, anxieties, and behavior systematically suppressed by Classic Hollywood."34 Ray underlined the variance between the conventionality of many noir intrigues and the effectiveness of their visual style which was able to transcend the genre beyond the intended level. However, Dale Ewing observed in his article "Film Noir: Style and Content" that modern style-is-content analysts have ignored the specific historical contexts and values of film noir.35 Hence, this flaw exposed the limits of their assessments on film noir. Ewing, along with Bill Nichols, suggested a rehabilitation of content and proposed a new interpretation of the use of style and content in film noir by fusing them both into an integrated critical theory.36 This tendency was also illustrated by Nina Leibman's excellent article on the importance of the family

34 Ray, A Certain Tendency, 159.

35 Dale E. Ewing, Jr., "Film Noir: Style and Content", Journal of Popular Film and Television 16 (Summer 1988): 60-69.

36 Ewing, Jr., "Film Noir: Style and Content", 68.

unit as a viable textual component of film noir.37 She contended that "[f]ilm noir, by virtue of its contrasts, centers the family as the locus of normalcy, a haven from a hateful world, and a cure for angst and alienation."38

Jon Tuska introduced in his Dark Cinema a more intellectual approach to film noir.39 He traced its literary antecedents much further than roman noir, back to the Greek, Roman, and Shakespearean tragedies. By looking beyond the pulp novel origins of the genre, he thus ennobled its themes and characters. He also made an extremely pertinent observation on the consequences of the House Committee's investigation of Marxism in Hollywood: "Film noir came to an end...because the political influence of HUAC became such that the motion picture industry had to return to its pre-war role of optimism and affirmation."40

The literature on the links of film noir with the radical movement in Hollywood, the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) investigations and the infamous blacklist process is quite recent. The blacklist period

---

37 Nina C. Leibman, "The Family Spree of Film Noir", Journal of Popular Film and Television 16 (Winter 1989): 168-184.

38 Ibid., 182.

39 Jon Tuska, Dark Cinema: American Film Noir in Cultural Perspective (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1984).

40 Tuska, Dark Cinema, 231.

ended in the early sixties. Writer Dalton Trumbo was the first to emerge from underground. He was able to write Exodus (1960) in his own name for director Otto Preminger.41 Besides, it took scholars a decade to consider objectively the whole period. Polonsky exclaimed in the early eighties: "It [the blacklist] is old enough now that the worms can come out from under the rocks."42 When David Caute gave an account of the anti-liberal hunt of the forties and fifties, he devoted a whole chapter of his book entitled The Great Fear to Hollywood.43 However, his report remained too journalistic and failed to provide the reader with a proper reflection regarding the actual effect of the congressional Red hunts and of the blacklist. This reproach does not apply to Barbara Zheutlin and David Talbot's biography of Hollywood dissidents.44 The authors profiled two famous blacklist victims (Albert Matz, one of the Hollywood Ten, and Abraham Polonsky) who both worked on films noirs. Maltz's seven credits as a writer before the blacklist featured screenplays for two influential movies, This Gun For Hire (Paramount, 1942) and The Naked City (Universal, 1948). As for Polonsky's Marxism, it was expressed in his scripts for three postwar pictures--Body and Soul (1947),

41 Eric Bentley ed., Thirty Years of Treason (New York: The Viking Press, 1971), 707.

42 Quoted in Richard Trainor, "Blacklist", Sight and Sound 57 (Summer 1988): 199.

43 Caute, The Great Fear.

44 Zheutlin and Talbot, Creative Differences.

Force of Evil (1948) and I Can Get It for You Wholesale (1951). Polonsky said of his method of thought and of writing:

> The dialectical process as I understand it means that we constantly have in motion, at all levels, uneven contraries which interact with each other, and this interaction creates the energy which is the nature of the world.45

Polonsky tried to express in his novels and his movies this interaction of uneven contraries, and today's critics agree that he succeeded fairly well in bringing energy to the screen. However, his political and artistic involvement later caused him to receive a HUAC subpoena and, eventually, to have his career aborted by the shameful process of the blacklist.

Bernard Dick's Radical Innocence is a biographical study of the men who were the victims of the first HUAC hearings on Hollywood in 1947 and were associated by the press and the public under the name of the Hollywood Ten.46 Dick examined their lives and careers with a critical and rather objective eye, sorting out those whose careers either ended in 1947 or never returned to what they had been

---

45 Zheutlin and Talbot, Creative Differences, 82.

46 Bernard F. Dick, Radical Innocence: A Critical Study of the Hollywood Ten (The University Press of Kentucky, 1989). The Hollywood Ten are: Alvah Bessie, Herbert Biberman, Lester Cole, Edward Dmytryk, Ring Lardner, Jr., John Howard Lawson, Albert Maltz, Samuel Ornitz, Adrian Scott, Dalton Trumbo.

(Ornitz, Cole, Lawson, Biberman, Maltz, Bessie, Scott), and those who survived the blacklist by recanting (Dmytryk) or selling their work on the black market until their disgrace was removed (Lardner, Trumbo). Terence Butler published in 1988 an article entitled "Polonsky and Kazan", in which he examined the crossed tragedies of these two radicals, both children of immigrants.47 Polonsky's career was crushed by HUAC in 1951, while Kazan became an informer for HUAC on the ground that he was "simply acting to oppose left-wing totalitarianism."48 Kazan later attempted repeatedly to justify in his films--Viva Zapata (1952), On the Waterfront (1954)--his commitment to individual liberty and his co-operation with HUAC, in short his individualistic struggle for his career. Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund's The Inquisition In Hollywood depicted in vivid details the repression of the liberal and radical circles in the American film community.49 Their bias in favour of the HUAC victims somewhat impaired their credibility, although the book was rich in details on the personal stories of many protagonists of that period. Otto Friedrich too was concerned with the stir caused by the HUAC investigations.50

47 Terence Butler, "Polonsky and Kazan: HUAC and the violation of personality", Sight and Sound 57 (Autumn 1988): 262-267.

48 Ibid., 263. Kazan named 11 names in 1951.

49 Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund, The Inquisition In Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community 1930-1960 (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press, 1980).

50 Otto Friedrich, City of Nets: A Portrait of Hollywood in the 1940's (New York: Harper & Row, 1986).

His lively account of the social, public and private life of the Hollywood society mentioned the 1947 hearings as well as the destiny of the 'Hollywood Ten' and the subsequent disgraces and dismissals.

One of the most innovating entries to the literature on film noir is Thom Andersen's essay "Red Hollywood".51 Andersen reevaluated the specific work of the victims of the blacklist and attempted to classify their artistic production in a corpus that he called film gris because it was derived directly from film noir. Andersen's interesting article on Marxism and film noir deserves to be recognized. However, I must confess that I am quite sceptical about the value of Andersen's film gris sub-genre. Such an effort tends to divide the consistency of film noir, whereas "the relationship of film noir to genre" has already been qualified as "a tenuous one at best".52 Hence, the creation of a new genre called film gris is not appropriate either to the recognition of the cohesion of film noir or to its existence as a credible genre, since it can easily be broken down into distinct sub-categories. The merit of Andersen's effort is that his rather short and incomplete list attempts to gather the works of the blacklist victims into a distinct body, thus underlining their specificity and their probable

51 Andersen, "Red Hollywood".
52 Silver and Ward, Film Noir, 3.

common features. However, it surely isolates these pictures from the rest of *noir* pictures and thus, as a result, destroys the unity of *film noir*. The adoption of such reasoning would make it even harder to study the influence of subsequently blacklisted film workers on the genre. I believe that the blacklistees' contribution to *film noir* is an indivisible component of the cycle and, as such, must be studied with regard to the dominant trends in the social and political backgrounds of the genre. Indeed, the connotations of paranoia and postwar guilt which are typical of *film noir* were fundamentally incompatible with the new era of optimism and economic prosperity which swept the United States during the fifties and the sixties. Also, the atmosphere of the Cold War practically prohibited any form of denigration of the American society and economic system. Henceforth, *film noir* was doomed.

D. ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY

The next chapter offers some theoretical elements which provide the basis of the methodological process which I will be using in the subsequent chapters. I intend to examine both the semiological approach and the deconstructive practice, each with its strengths and its shortcomings. However, I have selected only one of these methods for my analysis, the one which seemed the most appropriate to a

film analysis based on a politically oriented reading. The chosen method is based on a deconstructive approach of some examples of films noirs. I believe that the political essence of film noir lies mainly in the center of the work itself, in its inner logic and in its message.

The third chapter of my study traces a general overview of the literary and cinematic origins of film noir. It will show the dominant artistic, social and political trends which have inspired the noir genre. The diversity of the literary, filmic and social forces which were combined in the cycle is a major explanatory factor of its physically dark images as well as of its dark look on America.

The fourth chapter is a deconstructive and interpretative analysis of film noir with regard to its political content. An examination of the mechanisms which pass on the political message through the noir style will be carried out by examining pieces of dialogues and some illustrations from noir pictures. These movies are Body and Soul (1947), Force of Evil (1948), Knock On Any Door (1949), Kiss of Death (1947), I Walk Alone (1948) and The Set-Up (1949). I will make a distinction between the conscious and hidden political components.

I will conclude in the fifth chapter with a general

critical evaluation of the films which I examined. I will attempt to evaluate their actual impact on the American public. This question will raise another one: Was the blacklist process either politically or culturally justifiable? In other words, were conservatives right to see film noir as a subversive menace? Was there enough radical content in film noir that may have justified the strength of the conservative reaction?

CHAPTER II. THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND METHOD OF ANALYSIS

This chapter is devoted to the presentation of the theoretical elements which underlie film analysis. Theory is important insofar as it provides a framework for understanding interactions between politics, ideology and film. My basic theoretical assumption lies in the following postulate made by sociologist Graeme Turner:

> Films, ...both as systems of representation and as narrative structures, are rich sites for ideological analysis....
>
> Film institutions have political interests which ultimately determine what films are made, let alone what films are seen.1

---

1 Graeme Turner, Film as Social Practice (London: Routledge, 1988), 132.

Film criticism can uncover the field of the ideological discourse contained in the depiction of reality which the silver screen offers. Films are artistic productions. However, they are not individual works like paintings, sculptures, books, etc. They are the collective result of an organized collaboration of different artistic, technical and financial professions. Hence, they are partly determined by the ideological systems and the economic forces which produce them.

The cinema is said to reproduce reality, but which reality and whose? Indeed, what is a "system of representation" as Turner mentioned? In his study of the relationship between Ideology and the Image, Bill Nichols gave the following definition of the act of representation: "Represent: to stand for or in place of something else, to bring clearly before the mind. To represent with images is to symbolize, and symbolization is basic to intercommunication."2

The general lexicon of symbols used in film may vastly differ from one culture to the other. For instance, narrative conventions applied in the Hollywood cinema are quite different from the ones in use in the European cinema.

2 Bill Nichols, Ideology and the Image: Social Representation in the Cinema and Other Media (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), 1.

One notices many differences, particularly when it comes to storytelling, editing, happy endings, profanity, nudity, etc. Even though the 1932 Hays Production Code ceased to exist in the mid-sixties, some of its general patterns are ostensively still enforced in network television productions. Further, the Hays censorship code survived informally in many contemporary film productions whose directors do not have enough control over their creative work because producers determine their content and have the final word on their editing and commercial distribution.

In Hollywood, canons of narration have evolved along with the evolution of technique and the taste of audiences. Since the early sixties, motion picture films have become more spectacular and sensational in order to resist the growing success of television. For it is clear that Hollywood has always viewed cinema as a medium for entertainment. Box-office results are the main criterion for judging talent.3 A director like Woody Allen is an aberration in the American film landscape because he is able to control the content and the entire production process of his films. Incidentally, he works only in New York and has been supported for over fifteen years by the same team of producers. European film makers have more creative freedom

3 Americans use the terms 'film industry', whereas the French refer to cinema as 'the 7th Art'. This difference in terms gives a clear hint of the differences in approach.

and more control over their work than their American counterparts, because of independent movie financing and the absence of censorship. Europeans can deal with almost any issue that they wish. They frequently deal with social and political issues. For cinema as a mass medium is (or at least can be) a powerful support for ideologies.4 Ideology fills the "screens of power", including the silver screen. But what exactly do we mean by ideology? Is ideology a clear and well-defined idea or is it not rather a complex, elusive concept?

The current study does not aspire to redefine or even to circumscribe the notion of ideology. The latter has been and still is explored, refined, and debated by political and social scientists within the scope of virtually all theoretical systems and cultural spheres. It cannot be denied that there is no absolute and incontestable definition of ideology as such. Consequently, any attempt to provide such an indisputable definition would prove to be self-indulgent and risky.

The goal of the present study is to show what makes film noir appear as anti-social. Indeed, I contend that film

4 See Timothy W. Luke, Screens of Power: Ideology, Domination, and Resistance in Informational Society (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), especially Part III; Bill Nichols, Ideology and the Image; and D.N. Rodowick, The Crisis of Political Modernism, esp. Parts Three and Four.

noir is a subversive genre, both in its aesthetical style and in its depiction of American society and economic system. Clearly, every film genre is ideologically marked because it is determined by the ideology which produces it. However, film noir was able to find artistic ways not to turn itself into an instrument of the dominant ideology. Its literary and cinematic origins conferred upon it the capacity to develop political and social themes under the appearance of a harmless film genre. Film noir was completely integrated into the Hollywood system. However, an internal criticism of the prevailing ideology is taking place in its cinematic framework. Film noir ends up "by partially dismantling the system from within."5 Subsequently, I have to explain what I mean by the terms 'prevailing ideology' when it comes to film.

Film is a cultural activity whose impact on public opinion is far from being negligible. Therefore, the state has a clear interest in making sure that films reflect the dominant ideology which governs the system of political, economic and cultural relations. This element supports Comolli and Narboni's assertion that "as a result of being a material product of the system, [film] is also an

5 Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni, "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism", in Bill Nichols ed., Movies and Methods: An Anthology (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 27.

ideological product of the system, which in France [and *a fortiori* in the United States] means capitalism".6

Graeme Turner sketched the work of ideology in every culture as an implicit "'theory of reality' which motivates its ordering of that reality into good and bad, right and wrong, them and us, and so on."7 This very ordering can be found in newspapers, in the administration of justice, in the social organizations, in cultural and artistic creation, thus in film, etc. Durkheim's work clearly underlined the fact that it is the state which instills what Comolli and Narboni called "the dominant ideology" in the capitalist economic system.8 Therefore, film is subject to this ideological code and reflects this "dominant ideology". I have to specify that the term 'dominant ideology' used by Durkheim, and Comolli and Narboni, comes from a corpus of writings by European scholars.9 The concept of class has been somehow neglected by most American sociologists and political scientists, in part because of the greater degree of individualism and atomization of American society, and also in part because of the natural repulsion caused by a term extracted from Karl Marx's doctrine. Besides, the

---

6 Comolli and Narboni, "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism", in Nichols ed., *Movies and Methods*, 24.

7 Turner, *Film as Social Practice*, 131.

8 Comolli and Narboni, "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism", in Nichols ed., *Movies and Methods*, 23.

9 For instance, Max Weber, Marcel Mauss, Claude Levi-Strauss, Louis Althusser, and many others.

concept of the cultural hegemony of the socially dominating class may have more relevance when applied to the European model of society, which differs from its American counterpart. Anyhow, Comolli and Narboni emphasized that ideological influence can be countered by conscious film makers. It is a political struggle which must be fought with artistic weapons:

> For them [Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni], the camera reveals nothing but the realm of ideology, and hence political struggle in the cinema must inevitably involve work at the level of form [signifier] as well as content [signified].10

This statement takes for granted the semiological subdivision of the sign into a signifier and a signified. However, there is a strong antagonism between sociologists when it comes to the definition of the basic element of the communication process, i.e. the sign. Many disagreements also exist on the methods of analysis as well as on the margin of freedom which critics can use in their reading of film.

The distinction lies between, on the one hand, the school of 'classical' film semiologists influenced by de Saussure and on the other, the deconstructionists led by

---

10 Bill Nichols, foreword to "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism" by Comolli and Narboni, in Nichols ed., Movies and Methods, 22.

French sociologists Jacques Derrida and Jean Baudrillard. Both advocate a more arbitrary approach of sign systems, based on a vision of the sign as the basic unit of the political economy of culture.

A. SEMIOTICS

The semiologists have been the first intellectuals to attempt to analyze the social functioning of language through its basic component, the sign. In 1916, Ferdinand de Saussure postulated in his Course in General Linguistics the existence of a general science of signs, or semiology.11 He defined the sign as a binary element, composed of two sub-units that he called the signifier and the signified. Saussure thoroughly dissected the functioning of systems of signification in an attempt to capture linguistic identities independently of an appeal to extra-linguistic features. He examined and explained the process of symbolic representation. In the terminology of pre-Saussurean, classical semiology, 'symbol' used to mean either a motivated signifying link or an arbitrary one.12 The Saussurean tradition eliminated the term 'symbol' because of

---

11 Ferdinand de Saussure, Course in General Linguistics, trans. W. Baskin (New York: New York Library, 1960).

12 See Christian Metz, The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 197-206.

the idea of motivation and replaced it with 'sign'. Roland Barthes justified the shift with the following reason: "...in the symbol, the [mental] representation is analogical and inadequate (Christianity 'outruns' the cross), whereas in the sign the relation is unmotivated and exact...."13

Therefore, semiologists clearly indicated their intention to remove any cultural and ideological elements from their analysis of the signification process. Rodowick rightly emphasized that the level of symbolization, the other operation of textual activity, is of crucial importance. The author drew attention to the fact that it is "a level of interpretation varying from one reader to the next."14 It is the field where the individual has the freedom to use his imagination and his sensibility in the perception of the message. Rodowick observed that the level of symbolization is not subject to arbitrary or absolute freedom.15 Limits to interpretation are imposed by cultural constraints (individual sensibility, social customs, religious beliefs, etc.). Consider the case of the role played by music in film. American audiences expect certain narrative techniques by which music intervenes almost constantly during films. Composers know how to express

---

13 Roland Barthes, Elements of Semiology (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 38.

14 Rodowick, The Crisis of Political Modernism, 282.

15 Ibid.

constantly during films. Composers know how to express feelings or atmosphere with a few notes. Music conditions the reading of the picture, and spectators learn very early to decode film music. Music in the film has an eminently connotative function. It is related to the plane of signification. It constitutes added value to the images' meaning. Theodor Adorno and Hanns Eisler contended: "A talking picture without music is not very different from a silent picture....the sound picture still needs music."16

Hence, Saussurean semiology assumes that the basic unit of communication is the sign, i.e. the compound of a signifier and a signified which relate to a referent. In film, signs are formed with the image track and the sound track. Film language associates images and sounds to produce meaning. This is called the narration process. It is achieved through editing pieces of film and of music together in a sign language whose codification can be read by the audience. There are two ways (or systems) of constructing meaning via audiovisual representation: denotation and connotation. On the one hand, the denotative system works by allocating to a word the literal meaning attached to it by usage. The relation between the sign and the object to which it refers is fixed and quite neutral.

16 Adorno and Eisler, "Music and the Film", in Maynard Solomon, Marxism and Art: Essays Classic and Contemporary (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), 382.

relationship between signifier and signified. For example, the denotative meaning of a picture of the sea is quite simply the ocean as a mass of salt water.17 This has been called "non-interpretive or non-expressive art".18

On the other hand, connotation is more complex. It involves a two-degree significant process in which the first-degree, basic relationship between signifier and signified becomes a signifier for a new, second-degree signified. I will illustrate how connotation works with the same example of an image representing the sea. However, in the present case a picture of the ocean will evoke thoughts of vacation, of sailing boats, of pirates, of privateers, of submarines, of pollution, etc. One can see that connotation designs the affective nuance, the social meaning, the cultural image or the political representation of a word added to its basic acceptation. The current study is more concerned with the connotative level of signification employed in film narrative. Indeed, film has developed narrative methods that enable a realistic representation of the world. Meaning arises from the articulation of the mass of the multiple and divided images and the soundtrack constituting the film. Therefore, reality is simultaneously

17 As opposed to images of sailing, seagull, sunset on the horizon, etc.

18 Peter Gidal, in D. N. Rodowick, The Crisis of Political Modernism, 135.

divided and articulated, just like the assembled pieces of a puzzle form a clear image. Reality is dismembered by film narrative (24 images per second), just like "the continuous spectrum of the colours is verbally reduced to a series of discontinuous terms"19. But the editing process articulates these images in order to constitute the vehicle of the film's own meaning.

In this connection, one can distinguish three cases in which the mind will have difficulties in supplying a signified to the signifier. Firstly, the case may arise of a misunderstanding due to an error in the perception of a sign. This mistake may be attributable to the person who sends the sign. The sign may either be not well-enough defined or it may be incorrect. But the error may also be imputable to the person to whom the sign is addressed, due to a misreading by the sensory receptors or due to the pinning of a wrong signified to the received signifier. Such is the case of spectators who may misinterpret a movie scene. For instance, a scene which is supposed to be moving may actually cause hilarity either because the filmmaker failed to transcribe touching feelings to the screen or because the viewers misunderstand the true purpose of the scene and finally laugh at what was presumed to be poignant. Either way, the error of perception ends up wasting the

19 Barthes, Elements of Semiology, 64.

efficacy of the whole scene.

Secondly, the sign can be unfamiliar to the mind because it is an unknown word that is part of a familiar language. For example, we could hear an English word to which we are unable to attach a signified because the word previously had never been found and therefore lacks a referent. The solution to this situation lies in the learning process through which one learns to associate a signified to the signifier and to attach the appropriate referent to it. Thus, another word is added to our storehouse of memory traces.

Thirdly, the case may arise where the receiver encounters a foreign language, i.e. any language whose signs are all unfamiliar. The mind will try in vain to recognize the new signs, provided that our memory cannot supply any signified--hence any content--to them. This case might apply to the perception of narrative and stylistic constructions in film. Spectators respond to films in as much as they have learned the signs and the norms appropriate to those films, norms which are arbitrary.20

The internal form of films also changes with time.

---

20 For more details on the spectator's role, see Kristin Thompson, Breaking the Glass Armor (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 25-35.

There has been a notable evolution in the way films are written and edited, and in the method of acting. Spectators are not untouched by history, and their understanding of films is modified by the alteration of the narrative and stylistic forms. Since the beginning of this century, viewers have witnessed an evolution from silent motion pictures to talking images, then a few years later a move from black-and-white to color movies. Hollywood films also adopted with time an increasingly faster pace as their editing was involving a larger number of shots per minute while scripts were getting somewhat shorter by reducing the amount of dialogue. Today's audiences have been familiarized with appealing colored images which parade on the screen at a rapid rate. This tendency has even been increased by the television style of editing and, in a more recent period, by MTV-style music videos of which younger audiences are so fond. Hence, contemporary viewers are very often disconcerted by old motion pictures whose historical and cultural backgrounds are quite remote from their own. The techniques which are used to improve the relationship between spectators and these works (colorization, new editing, etc.) still cannot eliminate the misunderstanding that exists in the opinion of a modern audience faced with a so-called classic movie.

The Saussurean concept of sign deliberately avoids all

reference to extra-linguistic features. It limits itself to a mechanical process of attaching the proper signified to the signifier. The process of identifying the referent is determined by denotation or connotation. Consequently, the field of surrealism and fantasy is singularly reduced. The innocence of language can hardly hide the fact that language defines the world in a restrictive manner. In that respect, a commentator could write that "for Saussure language determines the world..."21 The post-structuralist school argues the opposite approach.

B. DECONSTRUCTION

The partisans of the deconstructionist theory (also called post-modernism or post-structuralism) largely disagree with the premises of the semiological theory which they view as a biased, artificial construction. They have a radically different perspective on the theory of the sign and on the value of meaning. They also have a different philosophy regarding the function of criticism. Whereas Barthes understands the nature of writing as an aesthetical form and articulated a discourse on literary stylistics, Jacques Derrida and Jean Baudrillard are more interested in the formal activity of the modernist text as an ideological

21 Colin MacCabe, Tracking the Signifier: Theoretical essays: film, linguistics, literature (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 141.

practice of realist forms. The publication in 1947 by Sartre of his Qu'est-ce que la litterature? had inaugurated the discourse of political modernism by pleading in favor of the allocation of more freedom for the writer's ability to communicate his political thoughts and his aesthetic conceptions.22

Semioticians like Christian Metz tentatively established an elaborate grammar of the cinema.23 However, their work drew criticisms from a number of film theorists. For instance, Dudley Andrew replied,

> Cinema simply does not exist as a system outside of all use, as does English, or French, or the Morse code.... Cinema exists as a set of films and their history, all drawing in various ways on the list of codes semiotics has enumerated, but intertwining them, exchanging their functions, and inflecting them in ways impossible to specify by a semiotic rule. Indeed, we must begin to conceive of cinema not so much as a system of signification as a place where various codes come together to create meaning.24

Clearly, the cinema is under the influence of cultural, social and even political factors. It is clear that films do not accurately reflect or record reality; they rarely even pretend to do so. Like any other form of art, film rather

---

22 Jean-Paul Sartre, Qu'est-ce que la litterature? (Paris: Gallimard, 1947).

23 See Christian Metz, Essais sur la signification au cinema (Paris: Editions Klincksieck, 1978).

24 Dudley Andrew, Concepts in Film Theory (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 68.

expresses and interprets that which is real by means of its own language. Its idiom is composed of narrative codes, visual and esthetic conventions, ideological inflections, etc. These components are part of the linguistic, cultural and social milieu in which the picture is produced. They can vary a lot with time and space. The deconstructive practice seriously challenges the quest for the specific symbolic mode of a text. It claims that every text is a reserve of symbols, and that in a text everything can therefore be read beyond its conventional (and often delusory) meaning. Umberto Eco summarizes the mechanism and the ultimate purpose of the deconstructive practice:

> ...the text must be...deconstructed, until fracturing its own expressive texture. Thus the text does not speak any longer of its own "outside"; it does not even speak of itself; it speaks of our own experience in reading (deconstructively) it.25

The argument of deconstruction is that there is no such thing as an easy and obvious meaning of signs. A text can only be understood with the experience and the knowledge found in our inner mental life. Perception is a conventional, social activity which relates to the present moment and its content. At the center of Derrida's analysis is "a sustained argument against the possibility of anything pure and simple which can serve as the foundation for the

25 Umberto Eco, Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 154.

meaning of signs."26 This point gives a serious blow to the efforts of the semiologists to classify the meaning of signs in order to build a grammar of the cinema. Deconstruction clearly shows that Barthes' semiology is limited in its scope and its impact because it relies on the formal premise that signs have a meaning and a logic of their own. The main methodological difference between Saussurean semiology and deconstruction is that the latter no longer reads the text as symbol in order to find in it a truth that lies outside. With deconstruction, the only truth of the text becomes the very play of deconstruction.27 As a consequence, the deconstructive thought explores the very reserve of symbols of the text itself and brings to the surface a wide range of interpretations which were previously concealed by the texture of the dominant conventional meaning. Baudrillard shows that signs have become completely separated from their referents. As a result, signifiers emit meanings to which there is no linguistic response. Signifieds are extracted from the social field and redeployed in the media as "canonical" signifiers "which set themselves up as expressing an "objective reality."28 Baudrillard claims that there is no such thing as an "idealism of the referent" that

---

26 Newton Garver, preface to Speech and Phenomena by Jacques Derrida (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), xxii.

27 Eco, Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language, 155.

28 Jean Baudrillard, "The Mirror of Production", chap. in Selected Writings (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1988), 114.

would express a "concrete" reality. He adds that it would be a mistake to believe in "a total resurrection of the "real" in an immediate and transparent intuition" established by semiotic systems and codes.29 These systems only alienate the field of critical thought. Deconstructive analysis admits the arbitrariness of the sign which reduces and intercepts the "real", the referent.30 The sign is described as misleading because it replaces reality. The post-structuralist critic must overcome "the social and political terrorism of the bracketing (encadrement) of meaning" imposed by the systems of signs.31 The key to meaning lies in the demise of the sign, whose value must be replaced by the reader's own culture and understanding.

Clearly, the play of deconstruction is very appropriate for an analytical study that focuses on the unconscious ideological content of a text. Indeed, the post-modernist method of analysis has the purpose of looking at the very inner meaning of a stock of symbols, whether the latter is a text or, as in the present case, a motion picture. This is the reason why Baudrillard dismisses the semiological concepts of denotation and connotation. He argues that denotation is based on the false assumption that the

---

29 Baudrillard, "The Political Economy of the Sign", chap. in Selected Writings, 90.

30 Ibid., 92.

31 Ibid.

assignation to the sign of a rational and fictive equivalence is done in an objective way. For him, "Denotation maintains itself entirely on the basis of the myth of "objectivity"..."32 The same goes with connotation, "a myth" that allows ideology to spread unnoticed into the very infrastructure of the sign.33 Denotation and connotation are two processes by which the codes formed by ideology are indefinitely reproduced. Both concepts appear rational and objective but they serve ideological purposes. Their ideological function is disguised under the pretense of a universal and "objective" innocence.34 Deconstruction seeks to uncover the traces of this false objectivity and to restore the ideological degree of the text. This is why my free-form reading of the films favours the deconstructive approach.

C. PROPOSED METHOD OF ANALYSIS

It appears that the deconstructive method of analysis is likely to bring some light on the relationship between ideology and the image. However, the semiotic theory which I discussed earlier cannot be entirely discarded. Despite their antagonism, both schools of criticism have some

---

32 Baudrillard, "The Political Economy of the Sign", 88.

33 Ibid., 89.

34 Ibid., 90.

complementary qualities. Semiology is more interested in the examination of the apparent meaning of signs. Its goal is to organize comprehensively the knowledge of this meaning in a formal and universal way. There lies its inherent shortcoming. However, its technique of analysis has the advantage of clarity and simplicity. Unlike deconstruction, it does not attempt to grasp the complexity of a text. Instead, it is interested in the meaning of the sign taken as a single and isolated element. Consequently, semiotics can complement deconstruction in the study of film shots. Post-structuralism provides a reading that takes into account the contextual complex meaning of the text and the cultural sensibility peculiar to the reader. Semiology provides a strict and detailed review of a single element such as a still frame.

The combination of both methods is likely to shed light on the perception of ideology in film noir in two ways: Firstly, through the socially and politically-motivated study of the content of the genre--or at least of some films noirs. Secondly, through the examination of picture shots taken from these films. I believe that social and political criticism requires a historical analysis and a contextual placement of the studied works. Any serious study must focus on the effort which produces film and the effort which uses it. As David Bordwell explained in his book Making Meaning,

"most textual effects are the result of deliberate and founding choices, and these affect form, style, and different sorts of meaning."35

Hence, I believe that a better knowledge of the history of cinematic genres and of their origins is a key condition to get a more accurate image of the political dimension of film within a given ideological system. According to Graeme Turner, the discussion of ideological elements in certain pieces of film noir has to be based on two main components: on the one hand, a contextual approach; on the other, a textual analysis.36

Turner defined the object of the contextual approach as being the examination of the "function of cultural policy, government intervention, censorship, technologies, patterns of ownership within the film industry", etc.37 Its purpose is to portray and examine the culture which produced a particular film or a certain type of films. This approach seeks to extract and establish the substance of a film genre. It also examines the personality of writers and filmmakers, the political and social pressures affecting the film production process, etc. This critical approach will be

35 David Bordwell, Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989), 269.

36 Turner, Film as Social Practice, 129-130.

37 Ibid.

developed in the next chapter, which deals with the literary, cinematic and social origins of film noir. This chapter will provide some explanation about how the noir style, in its eclectic borrowing of generic influences, developed into a distinctive genre of social commentary.

The tendency of the critics to construct generalizations based on the style of the films has caused them to overlook the way content is expressed. I believe that the attempted construction of a unified theory of film, then applied to various aspects of film, is not only vain but also impossible. It is more useful to study many different, smaller questions about film which may be compiled in order to draw some conclusion. I believe in the need to examine one film and then elaborate on the implications of its actual literal conclusion. Deconstruction must put the emphasis on content. The task implies a certain amount of reflection upon already existing norms, values and beliefs. Bill Nichols, in his article "Style, Grammar, and the Movies", suggested that content and style must be fused into an integrated critical theory.38 Indeed, style and content work together in film noir.

Therefore, my inquiry into the genre includes the

38 Bill Nichols, "Style, Grammar, and the Movies", Film Quarterly 28, No. 3 (Spring 1975): 34, 44.

analysis of the film story itself. This analysis includes the fate of the principal characters, the reasons why they are unhappy and alienated, or despairing and nihilistic, etc. The end of the story is important whether it brings a positive end or a negative and despairing end. While the latter indicates the presence of a genuine film noir, one should remember that many noir pictures feature a happy ending that was usually imposed on the film makers by the studios.

I intend to look at film noir with a free-form interpretive method that uses style and content as interrelated principles that work in the films to create a totality of meaning. This type of analysis concentrates "on the film text, or a body of film texts, and reads from them information about the cultural function of film".39 It consists in reviewing the screenplay and the themes of a particular film or group of films in order to extract their ideological segments. Turner aptly explained,

> textual approaches are responding to a set of conclusions about the specific characteristics of the film text(s); then, operating on the assumption of the of the culture's 'authorship' of the text, they trace the myths or ideologies of the films back to their source within the culture.40

My approach tends to be sociological, psychological,

39 Turner, Film as Social Practice, 129.
40 Ibid., 130.

philosophical, and narratological. It is devoted to the study of specific film devices, film stils, and to audience reception. My goal is to contribute some knowledge about film in general and film noir in particular. Whether sociological, political, or formal, this knowledge will contribute to the theoretical study of film culture and politics in America.

My method of analysis studies specific questions, problems and topics concerning six examples of film noir: Body and Soul (1947), Force of Evil (1948), Knock On Any Door (1949), Kiss of Death (1947), I Walk Alone (1948), and The Set-Up (1949). It is an attempt to present an illustration of what Noël Carroll calls "piecemeal theorizing".41 I am interested in elements such as conditions of production, visual narration, character portrayal, psychological dimensions, cinematic representation, etc. The aggregate of the answers to these questions will provide the substance of my concluding remarks.

Therefore, my method of analysis does not depend either on semiology or on deconstruction. It departs both from any unified theory of film and from any system of thought. I do

41 Noël Carroll, Mystifying Movies: Fads and Fallacies in Contemporary Film Theory (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 233; also, see 199-208.

not wish to apply either the theory of semiology or the post-modernist method. I simply intend to study a range of issues concerning a handful of noir pictures. These issues include literary and filmic origins, the socio-political context, economic conditions of production, screenplay value, psychological and philosophical dimensions, etc. Needless to say, I reserve the right to make comments and express ideas concerning both the movies and the political issues at stake. This is a crucial point since it should be clear by now that my approach relies quite heavily on perception and interpretation.

CHAPTER III. THE ARTISTIC AND SOCIAL ORIGINS OF FILM NOIR

When we examine the various origins of film noir, we must keep in mind the fact that the noir style was the avatar of several social and artistic forces. The mixing of these ingredients brought about a catalysis from which film noir was created. Indeed, it took a unique combination of people at a given time and in a given place to create such a coherent body of films. The time was the late thirties and the forties, the place was Hollywood, and the people were an heterogeneous assortment of talented German immigrant film artists and daring American filmmakers. Silver and Ward underlined the surprisingly conscious aesthetic homogeneity of film noir visual style:

> In a random selection of productions, such as The Big Clock (Paramount), Cry of the City (Fox), Strangers on a Train (Warners), The People Against O'Hara (MGM), Out of the Past (RKO), Criss Cross (Universal), and Dead Reckoning (Columbia), seven different directors and cinematographers, of great and small technical reputations, working at seven different studios, completed seven ostensibly unrelated motion pictures with one cohesive visual style.1

Despite this cohesion, both the form and the content of film noir results from a variety of sources. It is virtually impossible to number all the roots from which film noir originated. They are numerous and diverse, and it would be vain to pretend to complete an exhaustive survey of these influences. However, a survey of the available bibliography on film noir suggests the existence of a certain consensus among scholars on the origins of the style. These origins have traditionally been classified between literary and cinematic antecedents. We shall respect this classification while presenting and commenting them. However, I believe that film noir was also the product of other antecedents of a socio-political nature. Film noir was the expression of a precise period of time and of its general atmosphere: postwar economics, the threat of nuclear weapons, the Cold War, McCarthyism, etc.

The purpose of this chapter is not to provide the reader with a comprehensive review of the noir ancestry, but

---

1 Silver and Ward, Film Noir, 3.

rather to present an overview of the literary, cinematic and social precursors of film noir. The presentation of these sources will contribute to shed some light on the ideological content of film noir. Globally, we can assert that film noir's content derived from its literary parentage while its cinematic origins inspired its typical aesthetic style.

A. THE LITERARY ORIGINS

The first thing that must be said is that I reject the idea that film noir is the product of nothing but mystery and detective fiction such as the crime literature from the 1930s. This idea was developed by Karimi in his study of the literary origins of film noir, in which he listed English Gothic literature (Radcliffe, Mary Shelley...), the detective story (Edgar Allan Poe, Arthur Conan Doyle...) and what is known as the Black Mask school (Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain...).2 Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson even cut these sources down to the 1930s detective and crime literature only.3 It is quite regrettable that the authors decided to adopt such a narrow-minded approach whose purpose could only be to express a certain contempt for the

2 See Karimi, Toward a Definition of the American Film Noir, 43-56.

3 Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, The Classical Hollywood Cinema, 75-76.

genre itself. I believe that mystery fiction and pulp literature were certainly not the only inspiration to the film noir genre, although they have played a decisive role in its formation. Indeed, film noir has a certain grandeur and lyricism whose origins are to be found in some more "noble" literature.

The oldest source of film noir can be traced to the Shakespearean tragedies and even to the dramas of classical antiquity. Both appear as remote sources of the noir tradition. This argument was developped by Jon Tuska in his study of the literary antecedents of film noir.4 Indeed, a thematic examination of Greek and Roman tragedies could give a hint of where the detective novelists of the thirties found their inspiration. The noir hero usually was a predestined victim. He was portrayed as a puppet in the hand of fate. He could not do anything to escape the events that were to crush him. This pattern was specially visible in Hemingway's works, as for instance in The Sun Also Rises, A Farewell To Arms, To Have and Have Not and The Killers. Let us not forget that the last two novels were adapted to the screen as noir productions. The Killers (1946) kept its original name, whereas To Have and Have Not was brought to the screen both under its original name (by Howard Hawks) and later as The Breaking Point (1950). These movies

4 Tuska, Dark Cinema, Part I.

displayed many of the fatalistic tendencies associated with film noir. In the opening of German director Robert Siodmak's The Killers, the Swede, played by Burt Lancaster, silently waits in a darkened room for the pair of hired killers who tracked him down. He sits back and offers no resistance, allowing the two men to murder him. Silver and Ward aptly pointed out:

> A pervasive feeling of hopelessness and futility surrounds the protagonist and, although he displays the characteristic toughness of the action hero, his vulnerability and capacity for suffering make him an archetypally defeated noir figure.5

That tragic vision of the loss of the desire to live can also be traced back to Sophocles' Antigone. In the play written in 441 B.C., the young heroine sacrificed her life just to give her deceased brother a burial against the will of the ruling tyrant. Antigone's struggle against the reign of the arbitrary is the personification of the resistance to the rules of an unjust society. Film noir, at least in its post-detective phase, presented many heroes whose quest for personal dignity had to go through their standing up to society and the established order of things. This feature was evident in the productions of the years immediately after the war up to the early fifties. Most of these films were directly adapted from the crime and detective literature of the thirties. These books reflected the social

5 Silver and Ward, Film Noir, 43.

and cultural atmosphere of the Great Depression era. They offered a very gloomy depiction of the American political and social system. A reason for this was the major discredit that was suffered by the American capitalist system during the 1930s. The blame for the economic and social disaster experienced by the American economy had been put on the failure of American political, economic and social institutions. With poverty and unemployment at an all-time high, many Americans, disheartened by the fact that capitalism had failed them, considered Communism as a solution to their economic woes. Also, inherent in the ideals of Communism was a belief that the brotherhood of all men would eventually lead to world peace. Therefore, it was both the desire for political and social progress and this hope for world peace that drew many Americans into the Communist Party. Clearly, the objective of both Antigone and the American radicals was not to overthrow the established order and to subvert the foundations of the society in which they were living. It merely was to resist arbitrariness and injustice under any form: poverty, unemployment, religious and political persecution, etc.

Greek and Senecan tragedies also inspired some essential noir traits. One of the most striking examples is violence and the horrible which were much more present in films noirs than in any other production made at the time.

Tuska established a connection between the graphic depiction of violence in film noir and the fascination of the Ancients with morbid scenes. We find this feature in many antique plays, as with the description of a corpse in Seneca's Troades, with corporal mutilations in his Titus, etc.6 Another similarity between Greek drama and film noir is the fate of their heroes. In both genres, man is put to the test and has to confront evil forces. Their plots revolve around such themes as the clash of evil with good, oppression, honesty, guilt, suffering, etc. Poised by fate, the Greek hero and the noir hero almost inevitably meet physical defeat, but are spiritually, and therefore tragically, victorious.

Karimi discussed the question of extreme violence in films noirs.7 Violence was one reason why the value of these films was underestimated and why they were sometimes called "films of death". This violence was also present in the detective story of the 1930s. Karimi reminded his readers that "violence and conflict have existed since Aeschylus and [have been] deemed to be indispensable to drama."8 He noticed that it was suggested that the rise in portrayal of violence was to be linked to the decline in the portrayal of sex in cinema (imposed by the Hayes Production Code). The

6 Tuska, Dark Cinema, 32-33.
7 Karimi, American Film Noir, 171-178.
8 Ibid., 177.

noir woman was ambitious, neurotic and castrating. Hence, the noir male had to find another object on which to discharge his tension and his aggressiveness. He became all the more violent against the social order because his sexuality was severely repressed.

Consider also the impossibility to escape from fate, as seen in Seneca's Oedipus and later in James M. Cain's The Postman Always Rings Twice. Added to that, the exploration of the human conscience, of man's need to know and justify his own motives. The detective novel is often narrated by the 'sleuth' himself who gives to the reader the account of his thoughts, his fears, etc. One should note here that the contribution of psychoanalysis must not be underestimated. After Sigmund Freud had revolutionized the knowledge of the human mind in the beginning of the twentieth century, interest in Freudian psychology grew rapidly between the First and the Second World War. The outcome for modern literature, beyond an abundance of psychological melodramas, was the considerable attention devoted to the therapeutic exploration of characters. The detective/crime novel used this approach extensively by putting the emphasis on introspection. This feature is illustrated by the first-person narration method found for instance in Dashiell Hammett's first four novels (1929-31) and in Raymond Chandler's The Big Sleep (1939): "I leaned back and hung an

arm over the back of the chair. I studied his face. It told me nothing. I didn't know the answer to his question--no satisfactory answer."9 This new perspective in the American literature of the period was transposed to the screen by the voice-over narration. This technique was pioneered by film noir and still is closely associated with the genre. Voice-over narration is often used "to produce ironic contrasts between the past and the present".10 The narrator tells the story with a retrospective point of view. The audience already knows the end of it. Therefore, the purpose of the film is to show how the narrative managed to reach such an ending. Narrative monologues are useful in condensing events and time. The advantage is that the story can span long periods of time without losing its continuity. Also, the off-screen narrator acts as a character in the story--if he is not already one. He is not neutral. On the contrary, he can use the first-person narration to interpret the events. Thus, he influences the audience's understanding of the story plot. Evidently, this technique is very appropriate to film noir. By underlining the contrast between the past and the present, it denotes a sense of destiny and fate. The theme of the hand of fate guiding the noir characters to their tragic destiny is central in the narrative tradition

9 Raymond Chandler, The Big Sleep (New York: Random House, 1939), 197.

10 Giannetti, Understanding Movies, 5th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1990), 209.

of film noir.

Shakespearean tragedy also influenced noir novelists and filmmakers. Its themes directly derived from Seneca's "hopeless fatalism",11 balanced by an Elizabethan belief in the power of the law of Nature to maintain the natural order against human villainy.12 William Shakespeare exploited Greek and Roman tragic themes because they transcended time and space. His five-act narrative dramatic structure greatly contributed to film noir's schematic pattern.13 Most of the classic films noirs have a carefully-built plot in which tension increases until the tragic denouement. That certainly is the case of The Postman Always Rings Twice (1946), the screen adaptation of a 1934 novel by James M. Cain. Frank Chambers (John Garfield), a young vagrant, obtains a job at a California road-side diner. He and Cora Smith (Lana Turner), the sexy, bored wife of the restaurant owner plan to murder her older husband, Nick (Cecil Kellaway), in order to stay together. After an initial attempt failed, they murder him in a staged automobile accident. They are prosecuted by the District Attorney (Hume Cronyn) but, through the aid of a lawyer, they are both able to go free. Although the whole ordeal has somehow harmed

11 Tuska, Dark Cinema, 36.
12 Ibid., 39.
13 Inherited from Seneca's tragedy, the five distinct parts are: (1) Situation; (2) Conflict; (3) Crisis; (4) Reversal; (5) Catastrophe.

their romance, they get married and resolve to begin a new, free and happy life. But fate intercedes: they have another car accident and Cora is killed. Frank is falsely convicted of her murder and will have to die in the electric chair. The Postman, following the example of Greek tragedies, was deeply marked by soulless ambition and the sense of frustration, and the overall inevitability of one's fate for Frank and Cora. Albert Camus later acknowledged that Cain's novel was both the inspiration and the model for The Stranger, his acclaimed novel on fatalism.

Another major--and direct--origin of film noir was the American hard-boiled school of crime writing which flourished in the pulp magazines of the twenties and thirties.14 Authors such as Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain and Horace McCoy brought to life "tough" detective heroes with a cynical way of acting and thinking. Hard-boiled toughness was merely a matter of style, a life attitude that "[demanded] the suppression of any openly expressed feeling."15 The hard-boiled hero can be described as such: He is a man of the city, a cop or a sleuth, he moves about in the criminal underworld with familiarity. The paradox of the noir hero lies in the fact

14 Karimi, American Film Noir, 42; Schrader, Notes on Film Noir, 282; Hirsch, Dark Side, 23-51; Tuska, Dark Cinema, 43-101.

15 Hirsch, Dark Side, 24.

that, although his integrity is total and unquestionable, his ethics and morality are somewhat the opposite. He fights violence with violence, he upholds the law with twisted or even illegal means, he constantly smokes16 and drinks almost as much...

The so-called hard-boiled detective story first came to life in the pages of Black Mask magazine, founded in 1920. Within a few years, the Black Mask developed its line of private investigator stories. By 1926 Dashiell Hammett's stories had become patterns for what was subsequently called the Black Mask school.17 His writing style was praised for its sharpness, its aggressiveness and its flamboyant realism. Ellery Queen aptly remarked:

> Hammett combines extreme romanticism of plot with extreme realism of characterization. His stories are the stuff of dreams; his characters are the flesh-and-blood of reality... Their speech is tough, earthy, two syllabed; their desires, moods, frustrations are laid bare with probing frankness.18

In fact, Hammett took crime back to the streets as a

---

16 For the contemporary viewer, films from the 1940s and 1950s are quite surrealistic. Their heroes (men and women) smoke almost constantly. In film noir, the cigarette is a symbol of toughness, power or anxiety, according to the circumstances. Indoor shots are filled with smoke, hence a certain esthetic that is impossible to recreate today (the Surgeon General would not permit it).

17 Tuska, Dark Cinema, 45-46.

18 Ellery Queen, Queen's Quorom (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1951), 101; quoted in Karimi, American Film Noir, 52 and in Tuska, Dark Cinema, 46.

reaction to the prevailing conventions illustrated by Sherlock Holmes' investigations and Edgar Allan Poe's novels. Karimi noted: "No longer were crimes committed against the background of Scottish castles and the howling wind, but in the city streets, in pool halls, abandoned warehouses, dock yards, and smoke filled back rooms."19 The prose of Poe was formal, abstract, dry; Hammett's was shrewd, concrete, tense. He turned the detective literature into an American art, after a century of British monopoly. His central characters, such as the fat and oily Continental Op and the more well-known, prototypically noir Sam Spade, moved through a dark, mean and corrupt world. There were no rules of fair play and no one in this bizarre and nightmarish world can be trusted.

At this point, it is important to underline Dashiell Hammett's strong leanings towards Communism. Critics have been arguing about the influence of Hammett's radical political commitment upon his view of American society.20 Indeed, Hammett was a longtime fellow traveler. Without being a member of the Communist Party, he participated in many of its meetings, activities and struggles. For instance, he was an active member of many organizations which emanated from the Party or which were closely

19 Karimi, American Film Noir, 52.
20 Tuska, Dark Cinema, 53-54.

associated with it: Hollywood Writers' Congress, Abraham Lincoln Brigade, Motion Picture Artists' Committee, Civil Rights Congress, etc.21 Hammett primarily was the noted author who created the "Thin Man" stories and "Sam Spade". His talent as a novel writer and his sharp writing style produced successful books such as The Dain Curse (1928), Red Harvest (1929), The Maltese Falcon (1930), The Glass Key (1931) and The Thin Man (1934).

At first sight, there were no apparent signs of Marxism throughout Hammett's work. However, it is manifest that an obvious display of Marxist ideology would have neither added anything to his novels nor been to the credit of the writer. It would not have increased the quality and the impact of his detective novels. Hammett's skill lay in his ability to enhance details like the atmosphere, the local color, the dialogue and the tone over the coherence of the story. Hammett's talent is fully displayed in The Maltese Falcon whose narrative does not advance in any direct way but wanders through strange unrelated episodes.

Despite his sympathy for the Communist cause, Dashiell Hammett was cautious enough to draw the line between his career and his political activities. Hammett's Marxism must rather be traced back in the thematic frame of his novels.

21 Eric Bentley, Thirty Years of Treason, 304.

His main theme was a committed depiction of corruption as the dominant feature of American society. Given his experience of the Great Depression, he also was very cautious with money and considered wealth as the driving force behind all criminal activities. These two features dominated the story line of many films noirs, some of them being adaptations of Hammett's novels.

Whereas the gangster was intrisically and irremediably corrupt, Hammett's noir hero owed his decay to an immoral, unprincipled society. It is clear that for him, money was the root of all evil. In my opinion, Tuska's evaluation of Hammett's political commitment was quite close to the truth when he wrote: "I think what appealed to Hammett about Marxism was its disapproval of capitalistic society and, on the most superficial level, its seeming attitude about money and the accumulation of money."22

In regard to this opinion, I do not understand Tuska's disagreement with Peter Wolfe, who very logically presumed that Hammett's Marxist convictions hold the key to his view of American society.23 Tuska's attitude seems to insinuate that Hammett's Marxism was only naive and superficial. Such an insinuation would be to diminish the intelligence and the

22 Tuska, Dark Cinema, 54.
23 Ibid., 53-54.

ideological commitment of the author of Red Harvest and The Maltese Falcon. Moreover, it would depreciate the social and political content of his books, which may have been Tuska's intention. In his novels, Hammett opened the crime field to interesting motifs which were not previously associated with crime fiction. He went beyond the narrow conventions of the mystery genre which he opened to social and political questions. For instance, Red Harvest and The Glass Key have to do with political corruption. Hammett uncovered the hidden relationships between politics and organized crime. He exposed the dubious similarities which exist between both activities and compared political authorities with crime bosses.24 In The Dain Curse, Hammett denounced the power of sects, cults and false religions. These socially-oriented crime fictions did not raise any major controversy at the time they were published. My explanation of this fact is that including social and political issues in the crime and mystery genre without them being noticed is quite easy. I will show later that this is what happened with film noir.

Hammett was not a revolutionary in the Marxist sense of the term. During the second wave of HUAC hearings in 1951, Hammett was ill-treated by the press who accused him of "participating in subversive activities and aiding in matters which seek and conspire to overthrow the United

24 Hirsch, Dark Side, 29.

States Government."25 Formulated in July, 1951 in the pages of a magazine called Hollywood Life, these accusations are ridiculous. Hammett was determined to denounce throughout his work the contradictions and the hypocrisies of the capitalist establishment. But he certainly was not the dangerous communist agent as described by the popular press which had joined the anti-Communist crusade led by Senator Joseph McCarthy. Interestingly enough, Dashiell Hammett was the main inspiration to the hard-boiled school of writers and by extension, to film noir. The prevalent traits of his tales: a fight between the hero and the forces of darkness and of corruption, a struggle for moral and human values, remained in the framework of many American films noirs.

Raymond Chandler followed the Hammett tradition in the thirties. However, his novels had a higher literary and psychological content. Born in Chicago, Chandler was raised in England where he received a classical education. As an adult, he returned to the United States which he was able to see with the eyes of a foreigner. That characteristic may explain his sharp, incisive view of America. He did not begin writing until he was middle-aged and in full possession of his style.26 He introduced his hero Philip Marlowe, a private detective, in his first novel The Big

25 Bentley, Thirty Years of Treason, 304.
26 Hirsch, Dark Side, 32-33.

Sleep (1939). Marlowe is a proper noir hero. He is a lonely and basically honest private eye who hides his austerity and vulnerability behind the facade of a tough guy. He shows little regard for money, is rather sympathetic about the poor and does not like the rich whose world he frequents without belonging to it.27 In The Big Sleep, the usually taciturn Marlowe doesn't hide his feelings when he faces the daughter of a California millionaire: "A pretty, spoiled and not very bright little girl who had gone very, very wrong, and nobody was doing anything about it. To hell with the rich. They made me sick."28

Marlowe's relations with women are ambiguous. He is surrounded by beautiful women all falling for him. However, he is wary of them and often happens to turn their advances down.29 For example, The Big Sleep finds Marlowe successively turning down Carmen and Vivian Sternwood, two beautiful sisters whose millionaire father has hired him in a case of blackmail. In this regard, Raymond Chandler largely helped to establish the noir misogynous tradition of evil, seductive women who drive the hero to his doom. Films noirs are filled with icy, dangerous vamps and castrating femmes fatales. Only nine novels were published by Chandler between 1940 and 1959; seven of them were brought to the

27 Karimi, American Film Noir, 54.
28 Chandler, The Big Sleep, 59.
29 Hirsch, Dark Side, 33.

screen. Philip Marlowe appears in several of them: Farewell, My Lovely (1940), The Lady in the Lake (1943), The Little Sister (1949) and The Long Goodbye (1953).

The Black Mask school also produced writers who followed the Hammett-Chandler tradition, although with less popular success. The common denominator of their heroes was violence: violence against a corrupt society, violence against an unbearable environment... The heroes were called Ben Shaley, Ben Jardinn, Jo Gar, Dick Donahue, Flashgun Casey, and their respective creators Norbert Davis, Raoul Whitfield, Frederick Nebel and George Harmon Coxe. These authors had some talent but they were incapable of equaling Hammett's fine writing or Chandler's impressions of Los Angeles. On the contrary, reactionary Mickey Spillane decidedly exploited the lowest, caricatured elements of the hard-boiled school. His hero Mike Hammer deserved his name because of his openly gratuitous violence against traditional right-wing targets: Communists, homosexuals, foreigners... Hirsch commented:

> Spillane's work is the nadir of the hard-boiled school. His fiction confirms the worst elements that critics of the crime novel have customarily charged against it: its exploitation of sex and violence and sensational crime, its sleazy atmosphere, its misogyny, its lack of aesthetic standards.30

---

30 Hirsch, Dark Side, 37.

Other writers of the hard-boiled school who inspired film noir did not appeal to the detective or private eye character. Such was the case of James M. Cain and Horace McCoy and to a certain extent Cornell Woolrich. Their characters were simple citizens and their novels were quite socially oriented. James M. Cain depicted American society during the Great Depression with a point of view that left very little to hope and romanticism. His characters were ordinary people, or even dropouts and drifters looking for a way to get out of poverty quickly. His stories staged diabolical murders plotted by ordinary people trying to escape poverty and boredom. Cain can be said to have described the underside, trashy and tragic side of the American dream. The fate of the criminal usually was to end up either in a jail or in the electric chair, or at least as resigned losers in an alienated society. There was no mystery as in Chandler's novels because Cain's criminals served as narrators. They related their own story and examined the fatalistic process that had led us to their doom. Another major difference was the absence of the sexually restrained detective who was at the center of Hammett and Chandler's novels. Cain's stories are morally twisted and sexually intense. Women are beautiful and alluring but sex leads quickly to crime: this became a recurrent theme in film noir. That tendency as well as the examination of consciousness can possibly be attributed to

the influence of Freudian psychoanalysis. After the previously mentioned Postman Always Rings Twice (1934), Cain published several other novels which were also adapted as motion pictures: Double Indemnity (1936), Mildred Pierce (1940) and The Butterfly (1947). Cain's novels reflected the moral and social mood of their times. They also indicated the tone, atmosphere and dialogue proper to film noir. The influence of Dashiell Hammett, James M. Cain and Raymond Chandler on American crime fiction literature and film was considerable. Their literary universe was at the center of the first years of film noir. Schrader wrote about this film noir period,

> The first, the wartime period, 1941-46 approximately, was the phase of the private eye and the lone wolf, of Chandler, Hammett and Greene, of Bogart and Bacall, Ladd and Lake, classy directors like Curtiz and Garnett, studio sets, and, in general, more talk than action.31

The influence of these authors still can be felt in contemporary American popular culture: in motion pictures, novels, television series, in many commercials, etc. In 1990 alone, several released feature films were direct attempts to revive the fictional world of Hammett, Chandler and other hard-boiled novelists. For example, James Foley's After Dark, My Sweet and Stephen Frears' Academy Award-nominated The Grifters were made from Jim Thompson's novels, while

31 Schrader, "Notes on Film Noir", 285.

Dennis Hopper's The Hot Spot and David Lynch's Wild at Heart were adapted from hard-boiled novels, respectively Charles Williams' Hell Hath No Fury, published in 1953, and Barry Gifford's Wild at Heart.

Unlike the preceding authors, Horace McCoy never found popularity, at least in his own country. He was famous mainly for They Shoot Horses, Don't They? (1935), a novel hailed by Albert Camus. Not surprisingly, McCoy was praised by French writers and critics for the existentialist spirit which pervaded the story.32 However, his description of the hard and unfair social conditions which prevailed during the Great Depression explain the disregard in America both for the novel and its author. McCoy is considered by some as the first American existentialist writer. In his novels, he put the emphasis on existence in an amoral, absurd universe. His world is an amoral world in which nothing, therefore, is either moral or immoral. Despite a rather successful career as a screenwriter, McCoy never achieved the renown he desired as a serious writer.33 This was probably due to the fact that McCoy was writing in the existential and absurdist vein long before the American public had even heard about Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. He was completely misunderstood and therefore underrated. When Sydney Pollack

32 Hirsch, Dark Side, 41-42.
33 Tuska, Dark Cinema, 95.

directed the adaptation of They Shoot Horses, Don't They? in 1969, he did not want to end the story the way McCoy had ended it. He wanted someone to win the dance marathon, against the very existentialist vision of the novel and the will of its author. Praised in France and in England, it is not incorrect to say that McCoy still waits to be recognized by his fellow Americans.

Cornell Woolrich was probably the most authentic noir writer although he too was never as successful as his peers. He was a prolific and talented writer whom Hollywood appreciated. A dozen of his novels were adapted into films noirs: The Black Curtain (1941), Phantom Lady (1942), The Black Angel (1943), The Black Path of Fear (1944), etc. The omnipresence in the titles of terms like 'black', 'dead' and 'night' indicates the frightful and menacing tone of the novels: The Bride Wore Black, Black Alibi, Dead Man Blues, I Married a Dead Man, Night Has a Thousand Eyes. Woolrich's prestige extended beyond the limits of Hollywood film noir. Alfred Hitchcock turned his short story Rear Window into a magnificent thriller (1954), while The Bride Wore Black was adapted to the screen in 1967 by the French director Francois Truffaut.

B. THE CINEMATIC ORIGINS

Artistically and thematically, two major filmic antecedents to film noir emerge: on the one hand, the German expressionist cinema; on the other hand, the American cinema of the 1930s illustrated by the gangster film genre. The Italian neo-realist vision was also included in some of the last noir pictures. However, the German influence must primarily be underlined when it comes to the technical visual aspects of the Hollywood film noir. Such is not the case when it comes to other American genres--such as the musical, the western film, the gangster film...--which were kept away from the innovations introduced by German immigrant film-makers. This was because the rules and conventions of these genres were already firmly established by Hollywood. They were quite immune to the European influence. Nonetheless, German Expressionism clearly appears as the stylistic antecedent of the American film noir. Indeed, due to the influx of German immigrant film-makers in the Hollywood of the 1930s, the Expressionist style happened to be a decisive influence on the dramatic and aesthetic content of film noir.

1. German Expressionism

At the end of the nineteenth century and in the first

decade of the twentieth century, a depressing sensibility could be found in the work of many poets and writers. In France, it was reflected in the poems of Verlaine and Guillaume Apollinaire; in Austria, in the novels of Franz Kafka, etc. In his Flowers of Evil, Baudelaire had called this frame of mind "spleen".34 It can be described as a mixed feeling of boredom, despair and moral suffering. Terms such as 'nihilism', 'nothingness', 'Angst', 'existence', 'death', etc, were being made familiar by famous writers (Thomas Mann, Hermann Hesse), brilliant philosophers (Martin Heidegger) and talented poets (Heinrich Heine, Stefan Zweig).35 This somber mood was generated by the uncertainties which confronted the individuals in modern society.

In the beginning of the twentieth century, this modern society was characterized by the domination of the industrial bourgeoisie over the working class, by the emergence of socialist movements in Western European industrialized countries as well as by a social malaise due to the growing threat of the coming first World War. In Germany, some artists had built their works under the

34 Charles Baudelaire, Les Fleurs du Mal (Paris: Poulet-Malassis et de Broise, 1857; repr., Librairie Générale Française, 1972). More specifically, see the poems LIX-LXII of the section entitled "Spleen et Idéal" on pages 89 to 93 of the 1972 edition.

35 Tuska, Dark Cinema, 108-111.

influence of late nineteenth-century artists such as Matisse and the Fauves. They added to this influence their own feelings of depression, and also their optimism about the future and about the possibility to change the world for the better. In 1911, the new artistic movement started by these artists took the name of Expressionism. Its ambition was to "go much further in transforming art into a representation of inner emotion".36 This psychological and artistic trend was later darkened by both the German defeat in World War I and the subsequent stupendous post-war economic and financial crisis which hit the Weimar Republic. But the Expressionists kept their preoccupation to improve the world. They created for a popular audience. They displayed their work even in such public places as railroad stations because they wanted the workers to be able to look at their art and benefit from it. Expressionism was not art for art's sake, but rather art for the people.

Expressionism (as opposed to the earlier Impressionist movement) was the expression of young and idealistic German artists. The Expressionists were looking for a sort of artistic harmony with the workers. Their fight for a popular, dynamic art was supported by a structured visual style. This passionate, feverish style was present in

36 Otto Friedrich, Before the Deluge: A Portrait of Berlin in the 1920's (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 153.

painting, in architecture, in the theater and in film. The young and rising German cinema of the 1920s echoed the feelings of the German intellectuals and the work of expressionist painters such as Kirchner, Kandinsky and Munch. Film directors opted to work in studios where they were able to set themselves free from the real world and create their own picturesque universe. Stories were set in a claustrophobic and distorted physical environment which psychoanalytically reflected the mentality of the characters. The mood was expressed by the scenery drawing on cubism and chiaroscuro, high-contrast lighting. The image was cleft by oblique, splintery lines and twisted angles. All these combined features tended to express the paranoiac feelings and twisted mental environment of the protagonists. Hence, the visual techniques inherited from the Vienna School of painting, influence of rising psychoanalysis, and contribution from early German directors and cinematographers brought together the style known as Expressionism. The style prospered and flourished during the 1920s.

The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1919), directed by Robert Wiene, remains the most famous and the most perfect film of the expressionist period. It was created by two young tormented poets named Hans Janowitz and Carl Mayer who wrote a screenplay about nightmares of their own. In this story of

pesonality takeover, Dr. Caligari is a hypnotist who trains Cesare, a somnanbulist to commit a series of murders.37 The movie itself was intended to be no mere horror flick but an allegoric and revolutionary work of art. According to Janowitz himself, Caligari is a metaphor for "an unlimited [state] authority that idolizes power" and Cesare is supposed to represent "the common man who, under the pressure of compulsory military service, is drilled to kill and to be killed".38 More widely, Dr. Caligari was a remarkable premonition of Nazism and Hitler's tyrannous domination over a hypnotized Germany. The staging of the film was approached entirely in expressionist style to capture the insane emotional atmosphere: distorted, symbolic settings, anti-naturalistic shapes and angles, etc. The high contrast lighting emphasized the struggle between good and evil, while the paranoiac atmosphere of the film was underlined by the twisted angles cretaed by the framing device.

Many other contemporary films depicted, though not with the same intensity, a crooked world. These films were the work of accomplished directors like Fritz Lang, Robert Siodmak, Billy Wilder, F.W. Murnau, G.W. Pabst... A few years later, more or less the same universe was processed

37 Hirsch, Dark Side, 54-55.
38 Friedrich, Before the Deluge, 67.

into film noir by the same German and East European directors, then working in Hollywood. Indeed, by the middle of the thirties, most of them had been driven away from Europe by the growing Nazi peril and were now working in Hollywood. Rare were those who, like Ernest Lubitsch and Eric Von Stroheim, did not contribute to film noir. All the others contributed to a certain extent to film noir: numerous directors like Curtis Bernhardt, John Brahm, Michael Curtiz, William Dieterle, Stuart Heisler, Boris Ingster, Fritz Lang, Anatole Litvak, Joseph L. Mankiewicz, Rudolph Mate, Jean Negulesco, Max Ophuls, Otto Preminger, Robert Siodmak, Douglas Sirk, Edgar G. Ulmer, Josef Von Sternberg, Billy Wilder, Fred Zinnemann; composers like Max Steiner and Franz Waxman; directors of photography: John Alton, Karl Freund, Theodore Sparkuhl, Karl Strauss...

All this goes to show that the German dramatic repertoire and cinematographic technique strongly imprinted film noir. One has to admit along with Paul Schrader that "the influence of expressionist lighting has always been just beneath the surface of Hollywood films, and it is not surprising, in film noir, to find it bursting out full bloom."39

As for German screenplay writers, they never were able

39 Schrader, "Notes on Film Noir", 281.

to match the Hollywood success of their fellow directors and cinematographers. Germans had somehow invented the noir visual style and brought it to maturity, whereas Americans always dominated noir writing. Whether Hollywood recruited accomplished authors, like Chandler, Hammett, Richard Brooks, Sam Fuller, or just competent staff writers, noir screenplays belonged to American writers, and noir photography to German directors. Two notable exceptions were Sydney Boehm who signed the screenplays of Side Street (MGM, 1949), Fritz Lang's The Big Heat (Columbia, 1953) as well as other pictures, while his fellow citizen Ben Hecht was credited with screenplays for Kiss of Death (Twentieth Century-Fox, 1947), Where the Sidewalk Ends (20th Century-Fox, 1950), etc. However, these two authors remained isolated examples.

Meanwhile in Germany, the rise of Nazi political and cultural forces in the early 1930s proved fatal to the expressionist vision, at least in Europe. The rising tide of anti-Communism and intellectual intolerance swept the Expressionists' dream of a free and creative art intended for the workers. The books of Bertolt Brecht, Stephan Zweig, Thomas Mann, et al. were condemned by the Nazi movement and burnt at the stake by fanatical crowds. The German film industry was brought to heel by the Nazis. Expressionism, this disturbing symbol of a radical and soulful freedom of

expression, yielded to lyrical and propagandistic Nazi aesthetics illustrated by the films of Leni Riefenstahl.40

2. The Gangster Film

The American gangster film of the thirties is the second major cinematic influence of film noir. The genre was boosted by the success of the hard-boiled literature and the exploits of infamous heroes of the Prohibition whose names still sound familiar: Al Capone, Frank Nitti... The first important films of the gangster cycle were Mervyn LeRoy's Little Caesar (1930) and James Cagney's vehicle The Public Enemy (1931). They introduced audiences to the classic elements of the genre: The gang as social universe, the extensive use of automatic machine-guns (Machine-Gun Kelly), the macho attitude, etc. The gangster film thrived after the stock market crash of 1929. A wide audience was attracted by these screen criminals who, noted Karimi, "could live luxuriously, without working, at a time when mass unemployment and hunger had struck at many people's confidence and self-respect."41

The character of the American gangster was very ambiguous. On the one hand, he was a sort of embodiment of

40 See Susan Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism", in Bill Nichols ed., Movies and Methods, 30-43.

41 Karimi, American Film Noir, 59.

the ferocity and ruthlessness of the American capitalism which was at the root of the economic disaster of the thirties. On the other hand, the gangster (like the noir hero) represented the rejection of the American way of life. He had made the choice to leave the social mainstream and to live on the margin of society. Whereas the noir hero was alienated by a cold and numbing society, the gangster had chosen to employ illegal means and to risk punishment for his actions. He had taken his responsibility in deciding to join the underground world of crime.

In the beginning of the 1940s, the gangster genre gave way to film noir whose more socially-oriented tone was more in harmony with the post-war social disillusionment and the nastiness of the Cold War. In a certain way, film noir echoed the cynicism and the intolerance of this whole period. Socio-political contemporary events which contributed to the ambient cynicism and intolerance also had an influence on film noir.

The American gangster expressed the general mood of disarray and pessimism which pervaded American society in general and more specifically the middle class of the 1930s. This gloomy view of the situation was prompted by the domestic economic collapse, the rise of fascist dictatorships in Europe and the disturbing feeling of the

inevitability of the approaching world war. In these times of uncertainty, the gangster was a powerful and reassuring figure. Most of all, he was an extremely conservative character. Firstly, the gangster was always a powerful and wealthy man. Therefore, he appeared as a symbol of success, of self-achievement. In fact, the theme of success, which is so important in American cinema, was the cornerstone of the genre. The gangster was the living proof that there are unlimited possibilities for achieving wealth and power, i.e. the ultimate satisfaction which a capitalist democracy can offer.42 However, the gangster film tended to show the limits and the dangers of such a line of reasoning. Due to the requirements of the censorship code established by Will Hayes in 1930, it presented a rather harmless equation between crime and business. Indeed, ideological and political motifs were replaced by dramatic considerations. For example, the gangster's eventual fall was not caused by his violent rise to the upper class although that upward social rise was achieved through illegal methods. The gangster was simply the ultimate example of success in the capitalistic society. However, morality called for his elimination because the gangster trespassed the rules of law and order.

Secondly, despite his criminal activities, the gangster

42 Shadoian, Dreams and Dead Ends, 5-6.

was usually respected by the police. Everybody knows that the gangster and the policeman are just the two sides of the same coin. The gangster is the policeman's raison d'etre. Their universes are parallel and somewhat similar. The difference is that they face each other in a permanent challenge.

Thirdly, the gangster was a member of his own private social club: the gang. The gang members were united by bonds of fraternity, solidarity and partnership in crime. At a time when American society was strained by the economic and social effects of the Great Depression, audiences could only be very receptive to this description of an equitable and fraternal social organization. While the economic crisis destroyed many American families, the gangster film showed the example of a substitute family, a "false" family.43 The gang was even a model of economic justice. Indeed, the tradition was that gangsters shared equally the profits from their illegal activities. Thus, the gangster film depicted what could very well look like a sort of Communist economic organization. However, this idea was in a large measure dissipated by two characteristic patterns of crime organizations: on the one hand, their extremely structured hierarchical organization and on the other, the strong flavor of machismo and misogyny which spread throughout the

43 Shadoian, Dreams and Dead Ends, 8.

gangster film genre.

The gangster's methods of enrichment were also very questionable. The American gangster was an importation from Europe. He had come from Italy to the United States in the beginning of the twentieth century. The rise of Fascism had speeded up the process. The gangster came from an extremely conservative society. Indeed, the social organization which prevails in his native region (Sicily, the Mezzogiorno and Corsica) was--and still is--one of the most rigid and conservative of Europe and perhaps of the western world. It is based on a tradition of clans, machismo, religious superstition and a code of honor which blends these elements together. This society is also strongly hierarchic, anti-democratic, and marked by violence. The traditional vendetta (war of clans) was simply replaced by the conflict between Mafia families.

The social rigidity is reinforced by the gangster's economic functioning. The gangster is integrated in the local capitalist system of production. He controls the economic channels of production and distribution. However, his grip on the economy is of parasitic nature. He has no utility whatsoever in the economic process. He preys on the work of others. He grows rich to the detriment of the real economic producers, the working people. As a result, he is

by his presence only one additional and totally unnecessary link in the capitalist chain of those who exploit the workers. His financial gain, which is absolutely unmerited in the economic process, results in higher costs of production, and therefore in higher prices for the consumer. However, the workers receive no additional benefit from all this. They are the real losers of this degenerate form of capitalism. Moreover, the gangster maintains his parasitic function by means of violence and intimidation. He is a partisan of the social status quo. Any social or economic change would endanger his domination over a society which is thus reduced to immobility.

All these socio-political characteristics of the gangster features were ignored at the time of the classical gangster film period. The public looked at these films with an innocent, non-ideological approach. For Hollywood had always educated the American audience not to look for social or political features in the film medium. The gangster genre, like the other genres, was conceived just for entertainment. Indeed, Hollywood always excluded any political and, as far as possible, social considerations. However, its gangsters were ideologically-conditioned social actors. Their wealth, their power and their brutality indicate that they belong to the dominant class. They are fantasized depictions of those who, during the Great

Depression, maintained--and sometimes increased--their domination. The message of the gangster film is that this domination was exerted mainly by means of violence and exploitation.

My purpose has been to show that the real innovation of film noir over the gangster genre was the inversion of the whole situational process. Whereas the gangster is usually wealthy, the noir hero generally is of modest means. He is either a private eye or an ordinary citizen. He does not belong to any high social sphere. The noir character is the antithesis of the powerful and successful gangster. He is usually a victim of the capitalist economic, social and cultural system. Unlike the gangster, the noir hero is at the bottom of the social pyramid. Hence, he represents both a challenge and a threat to the established order of things.

3. Citizen Kane

Ultimately, the most important and the most immediate source of inspiration for film noir remains Citizen Kane. Orson Welles co-wrote and directed this masterpiece in 1941 with the protection and the support of RKO studios. The film crystallized the form and some of the content that later became typical of the style of noir movies. Subsequently, RKO became the studio the most actively involved in the noir

genre. During the 1943-1956 era, RKO produced forty one films noirs from Journey Into Fear (1943), produced and co-directed by Welles, to Fritz Lang's subtle While the City Sleeps (1956).44

The most striking feature of Citizen Kane is arguably the unprecedented quality and sophistication of its photography. Orson Welles brought to the film his theatricality and his experience of stage lighting. Veteran cinematographer Gregg Toland carried out spectacularly the difficult task of capturing the virtuosic, formalist lighting desired by Welles. Although Citizen Kane did not introduce any new shot or narrative technique, it combined an extensive variety of lenses, shots, camera angles, and special effects. It utilized the flashback technique, already used by Welles in many of his radio dramas, to the degree that almost three quarters of the plot of Kane are composed of individual flashbacks.45 In return, the flashback structure of Citizen Kane strongly inspired film noir. The narrative structure of most noir movies was based on the flashback technique. That pattern allowed directors to provide narratives with a more complex sense of time dimension than other cinematic techniques would have delivered. Moreover, Citizen Kane was a technical showcase,

---

44 Silver and Ward, Film Noir, 334-336.

45 Louis Giannetti, Understanding Movies, 5th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1990), 431.

using an exceptionally large range of cinematic artifices and shots to reinforce the meaning of every image, of every scene. Whereas most directors and cinematographers adopted a 'neutral' point of view, Orson Welles relied on a formalist style. Louis Giannetti remarked, "There is not an indifferently photographed image in the film."46 Hence, form emphasized content, but without taking over the latter. Described as "a discourse on method" by critic Andre Bazin, Citizen Kane opened the way for film noir's stylish formalism.47 Indeed, Welles had magnificently brought out in Citizen Kane a large variety of techniques that were utilized later in film noir. The influence of Kane on the noir photography is visible in low-key lighting, deep-focus photography (with wide-angle lenses), back lighting, and steep, oblique camera angles. Also, film noir made an extensive usage of voice-over narration on the model of pulp novels, which were usually narrated from the point of view of the detective telling the story. In addition, Welles utilized the narration technique in the individual flashbacks of Kane. Moreover, the visual style of film noir attempted in many cases to associate formalism with a documentary-like atmosphere that was inspired by Kane's fictionalized account of the life of a powerful magnate.

---

46 Giannetti, Understanding Movies, 410.
47 Quoted in Giannetti, Understanding Movies, 408.

Indeed, the subject of Citizen Kane inspired the content of the American cinema of the forties and fifties. Welles presented a controversial portrayal of a powerful businessman. He portrayed cynically both the world of business and the political sphere. In the movie, Charles Foster Kane is alternatively called a Fascist by blue collar workers and a Communist by angered businessmen. Politically, Orson Welles came from the stage theater of the thirties, which was "intensely political and left-wing in its leanings."48 Like many intellectuals of the New Deal era, Welles was a committed liberal and supported Roosevelt's economic and social policy. He was interested in delivering an ideological liberal message within the framework of his artistic productions, as in his theater and radio work of the thirties.49 His links with leftist politics arguably influenced also the content of his films. The technical qualities of Kane have overshadowed the ideological dimension of the film as expressed in its discussion of power, money, fame, and politics. I think that this ideological perspective of Citizen Kane influenced also film noir. For example, Orson Welles had important friendly and professional links with two blacklisted noir directors.50 Firstly, Cyril Endfield, a Hollywood Communist who directed

48 Giannetti, Understanding Movies, 426.
49 See Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Guilty By Omission", Film Comment 27 (September-October 1991): 42.
50 Ibid., 52.

notably Try and Get Me (1951, United Artists), starring John Garfield. The picture, full of humanitarian and social overtones, chronicled "the inevitable destruction of a man hopelessly lost in his own society."51 Secondly, director John Berry, who directed He Ran All the Way (1951, United Artists), John Garfield's last picture. This movie portrayed paranoid characters caught in a paranoid society, a reference to then ongoing McCarthyism. Many noir pictures presented a somewhat similar debate about the relationship between money and power, and about the acceptance or rejection of the social, economic and ideological system.

I shall examine some visual and thematic elements with the help of a limited number of films. I will attempt to bring some underlying features into the light, to read beyond the primary, evident level of signification. That is the object of chapter IV.

---

51 Silver and Ward, Film Noir, 296.

CHAPTER IV. EXAMINATION OF SOME RADICAL ELEMENTS OF THE AMERICAN *FILM NOIR*:

The next step of my study consists in the analysis of six *films noirs*. The choice of these pictures was not made arbitrarily. It was made according to the following criteria: their availability and their relevance, i.e. their appropriateness to the subject of the current study. As for the availability, I have to mention that *films noirs* are quite hard to locate and watch. Only a handful are available at the Newman library.1 As for the others, some research was needed in order to make it possible to view them. These investigations were partially succesful thanks to some fortunate television programming and private screening.

1 *The Big Sleep* (1946), *The Killers* (1946), *Body and Soul* (1947), *Crossfire* (1947), *Force of Evil* (1948), *They Live by Night* (1948), *White Heat* (1949), *Clash by Night* (1952), and *The Big Heat* (1952).

However, it is still too difficult to get to watch many Hollywood films of the forties and fifties. As for the relevance, I selected the pictures which I thought were the most appropriate to the present study. Due to their subject matter or to the identity of their makers, these movies all make a contribution to the current study. Besides, they are all fairly well-known and relatively important noir pictures. I deliberately neglected minor pictures and movies whose content may be of a lesser use.

The selected films include two pictures which were directed by Abraham Polonsky: Body and Soul (1947) and Force of Evil (1948), as well as several other noir pictures: Knock On Any Door (1949), Kiss of Death (1949), I Walk Alone (1948) and The Set-Up (1949). My intention is to identify which of these pictures are the fruit of the work of leftists and how they reflect the political radicalness of their makers. However, not all these movies were the product of politically conscious writers and directors. Consequently, I intend to show in a following section that the substance of film noir was intrisically radical, hence subversive.

A. RADICAL INVOLVEMENT IN FILM NOIR:

Film noir was usually described as a genre presenting American society under the appearance of a fatalistic and despairing universe:

> Film noir is in my opinion a darkling vision of the world, a view from the underside, born of fundamental disillusionment perhaps, but also invariably the result, no matter how timid, of a confrontation with nihilism.2

I agree with this perspective but only in part because it refers mainly to the style and the atmosphere of film noir. Hence, it tends to assimilate film noir to the gangster film. Following this line of thinking, Robert Warshaw even asserted that "the gangster hero represented the rejection of 'Americanism' and its basic optimistic view of life." Paradoxically, he added that the gangster "is a 'no' to the American 'yes' [sic], and that he is doomed not so much because he employs illegal means, but because he is under obligation to succeed."3 This assertion is somewhat in contradiction with my earlier argument that the American gangster embodied the ambition and the ruthlessness of the

---

2 Tuska, Dark Cinema, xvi. Also, see Giannetti, Understanding Movies, 13; Shadoian, Dreams and Dead Ends, 13; Silver and Ward, Film Noir, 6.

3 Karimi, Toward a Definition of the American Film Noir (1941-1949), 60, citing Robert Warshaw, The Immediate Experience (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1964), 88.

American capitalist businessman. Indeed, during the Prohibition and Depression eras, the gangster appeared as a substitute for the economic and moral institutions which had both collapsed. Despite his use of violent illegal means, he was able to fulfill his greed for money and drive for power at the head of a gang. The gang is a highly structured and hierarchical organization. In fact, it is very similar in many respects to a capitalist company. Both operate in a competitive environment, have a pyramidal and hierarchical structure and are driven by the quest for financial profit. In short, the message of gangster films was that gangs--and the capitalist system for that matter--emphasize power and money over human values.

I believe that films noirs conveyed quite the opposite message. Gangster films were taking sides with the gangster boss and depicting his lawless and violent quest for a luxurious life. The pattern of these films and the moral rules of the Hayes code required that the gangster perish as the price of his success. That was the case of the heroes of films such as Little Caesar (1930), The Public Enemy (1931), Scarface (1932) and many others. Film noir was based on the opposite pattern. It usually described the lonely struggle of individuals against a violent, greedy and depraved society. Noir heroes were often pariahs by choice. They turned against the social forces that kept them prisoners of

a fatalistic and despairing universe. These forces could be either a criminal gang or a political network or a business organization or, more generally, the American capitalist system. Film noir frequently took the side of individuals trying to free themselves from the grip of society and of the underworld. For instance, Abraham Polonsky supported the ethical struggle of his boxing hero throughout Body and Soul until his eventual moral redemption. This vision of a quasi-religious social redemption proved later to be embarrassing for its supporters, because of its political implications. Indeed, the noir hero was seeking to set himself free from the American system of capitalism. Faced with a choice between humanistic values and money, i.e. between socialism and capitalism, he chose humbleness and honesty. One can say that film noir showed the rejection of the unfairness and cruelty that typified the American society during the Great depression.

Indeed, a number of noir pictures were written, produced and directed by Hollywood leftists and Communists, or people close to the Communist milieu. These left-wing films introduced audiences to heroes who "were victimized by class."4 In fact, their attack on the American capitalist society was channeled in two main themes. On the one hand,

4 Peter Biskind, Seeing is Believing: How Hollywood Taught Us to Stop Worrying and Love the Fifties (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 194.

they repeatedly emphasized that crime is business and, conversely, that business is crime. They denounced the power enjoyed by the rich and powerful over the disadvataged sections of society. I will examine some left-wing films noirs in the current section. These films were not chosen at random. They appear on Andersen's list of films noirs made by Hollywood left-wing writers and directors.5 They are Body and Soul, Force of Evil, Knock On Any Door and The Asphalt Jungle. The part devoted to film analysis will start with a film written by Abraham Polonsky, a prominent figure of the Hollywood radical milieu.

1. Body and Soul (1947)

This motion picture was arguably a radical cry against corruption and the corruptive power of money. It was also an idealist plea in favor of personal affirmation and positive growth. Released August 22, 1947 by United Artists, Body and Soul was one of the last manifestations of Hollywood liberalism before the House Un-American Activities Committee investigations cracked down on many of the film's supporters. Director Robert Rossen, screenplay writer Abraham Polonsky and actors Anne Revere, Lloyd Goff and Art Smith were all subsequently blacklisted; John Garfield and Canada Lee were to be harassed by HUAC and both met early

5 Andersen, "Red Hollywood", 183.

deaths.

Body and Soul was the first film over which screenwriter Polonsky had a close control. This was because the picture was produced by a small independent film company: Enterprise Productions. Polonsky was working in the company of Bob Roberts, a producer who shared his beliefs and was ready to accept his screenplay without any essential changes.6 In this respect, one cannot overlook the influence of John Garfield on the freedom that was granted to the making of Body and Soul. Himself a liberal, Garfield had embodied on the screen the archetype of the Jewish working-class, sensitive but tough, ambitious but talented. He had played the leading role in many social problem films at Warner Brothers. But he wound up resenting the studio system that had left him very little choice over the films in which he starred. When his contract with Warners expired in 1946, he teamed up with producer Bob Roberts and together they formed their own production company, Enterprise Productions. They both wanted to use Enterprise "as an outlet for socially relevant filmmaking".7 The prospect of being able to determine the content of their movies, as was being advocated by Lawson, head of the Hollywood Communist Party,

6 Bob Roberts, who at the time was the business manager and producer of John Garfield.

7 Andersen, "Red Hollywood", 185.

exhilarated Garfield.8 He chose Robert Rossen to direct Body and Soul--their first production--with an original screenplay by Abraham Polonsky, himself a disciple of Clifford Odets.

Polonsky created the story of Charlie Davis (Garfield), a young man from the slums who is determined to escape from his life of poverty. Charlie enters an association with Roberts (Lloyd Goff), a gambler and fight promoter, and uses his boxing skills to achieve his material ambitions. He then drifts away from Peg (Lilli Palmer), the woman who loves him, from his mother (Revere) and from his best friend Shorty Polaski (Joseph Pevney). He acts this way mainly because they represent the world and the values that he is trying to escape. Their humble but honest universe is seen as the antagonistic opposite of the world of money, corruption and treachery where Roberts dragged Charlie. Roberts exemplifies the spirit of capitalism. He sees champion boxers as only economic investments: good as long as they are profitable but to be dumped when no longer worthwhile. However, Roberts eventually causes the death of Shorty who was trying to convince Charlie to give up his lucrative but alienating partnership with Roberts. A little bit later, Charlie witnesses during a training session the

8 George Morris, John Garfield (New York: Harvest/ HBJ, 1977), 118.

death of Ben Chaplin (played by Canada Lee), a proud and unbending black boxer who had been his faithful trainer and sparring partner. The death of Ben, the last honest person left around him, leads Charlie to start questioning the values he has chosen. He decides to act in a positive and liberating way. He rises against Roberts and the gangsters by winning the fight that his avaricious promoter asked him to throw.

Despite the story line, Body and Soul was not just another boxing picture. Polonsky said about it: "The film is not so much about how mean prizefighting is; it's about how mean life is. Prizefighting distills it."9 Polonsky wanted to convey the message that greed for success and money brings about corruption, and that corruption eventually leads to death. The film severely attacked the American philosophy of success which Polonsky turned into an individualistic and egoistic attitude. In this way, the attack was also on business and capitalism, which are depicted in the film as inevitably leading to corruption. Polonsky's characters are tangled in a fight between good and evil, that is between capitalistic individualism on the one hand and on the other hand, simple and traditional values: family, honesty, solidarity, common sense, etc. A

9 Quoted in Zheutlin and Talbot, Creative Differences, 75.

textual examination of the screenplay brings out these features very clearly. For instance, Charlie admits to Roberts, his ruthless manager, the reason why he decided to enter into a partnership with him against the will of his mother and of Peg, the woman who loves him: "I just want to be a success. You know, every man for himself."10

Charlie's ruthless ambition comes from a lifetime spent without money. His parents are decent, honest people who own a small grocery store that they want their son to inherit. To their despair, Charlie has always had his eyes on something much bigger. He belongs to the post-Great Depression generation which has known the pangs of poverty and is ready to use whatever means are necessary to rise about the lot. In that respect, Body and Soul was a denunciation of the capitalist system in general, which was metaphorically assimilated to Roberts' fight racket. When the boxer warns his promoter that "you're only buying into my contract--not me", Roberts knowingly answers: "Sure, Charlie. It's a free country. Everything's for sale."11 For Roberts, life is just "addition and substraction. Everything else is just conversation."12 The emphasis put by Polonsky on the corrupting power of money is clearly visible in the

10 Ottoson, A Reference Guide to the American Film Noir, 25.

11 Except where indicated, I personally transcribed the dialogue and am responsible for any possible mistake.

12 Tuska, Dark Cinema, 185.

shot identified as Plate 1. It is a 'three shot' taken from the scene of the party given by Charlie's manager to celebrate the success of his protégé.13 Charlie (on the left) is holding an enveloppe full of dollars that Roberts just gave him to congratulate him for his success in the ring. On the right, slightly behind him, Charlie's mother and his longtime friend Shorty observe the scene. Shorty and the mother came reluctantly to visit Charlie, with the hope of changing the fighter's mind. Charlie expresses his satisfaction to his manager, as well as a certain surprise to receive so much money at once. His radiant face makes a sharp contrast with the severe, disapproving expressions of his mother and Shorty. The characters on the right represent honesty and a certain common sense symbolized by virtuous values such as family, friendship, work, etc. Their reserved attitudes and their disapproving looks at Roberts and the enveloppe express clearly a sincere distrust towards easy money. This shot has neither the low key and high contrast lighting nor the usual harshness of film noir. However, the meaning of the scene is conveyed by the stiffness of the characters on the right as well as by their obvious discomfort in front of such an indecent display of money. As for Charlie, he seems to have rejected the moral choices of his mother and given in to the temptation of the dollar. The

13 A three shot is a medium shot, featuring three actors. Giannetti, Understanding Movies, 9.



Plate 1 - Body and Soul (1947), directed by Robert Rossen.

dividing point between both sides is the central part of the image, made up of the stuffed enveloppe. Its whiteness contrasts in the foreground, specially with the mother's dark clothes.Charlie is holding the enveloppe open, right under his mother and his friend as if he wanted them to share his enjoyment of the color of money. However, the look on the mother's face is meaningful enough. Shorty is not even looking at the money. He is addressing a heavy, scornful look to the corrupting manager. Both characters on the right of the frame express disdain for Roberts and his money, and sorrow for Charlie's surrender to money and corruption.

The comparison with the capitalist business world was widely used by Polonsky to the point where the well-meaning Shorty says very innocently about the way the boxer is being exploited: "You know what they're making of Charlie--a money machine, like oil wells, like gold mines. They're cutting him up a million ways." This extremely disparaging reference to two major industries prototypical of American capitalism revealed the Communist sentiments of Polonsky. He took advantage of the relatively large freedom left to him as well as of the favorable nature of <u>film noir</u> to pour left wing social and political content into his film. This attitude underlined the way in which Hollywood Communists, who were prohibited by the major studios either to influence

film aesthetics or to make stylistic experimentation, resorted to the attitude in use in the Soviet film industry during the thirties. Polonsky remembered what happened to Soviet directors like Eisenstein:

> the Soviet Union...had destroyed the dynamic aesthetic movement of its late 1920s. To them, the social content of a film was its aesthetic. If the Party line or progressive social ideas or progressive subjects were treated in a film--that was communist aesthetics.14

The aesthetic essence of film noir (drabness, gloominess, depression, combined with black-and-white photography) was propitious for American Communists looking to convey a social message that would have had reasonably good chances to evade the producers' censuring barrage. James Wong Howe's stark photography for Body and Soul got him a nomination for the Academy Award. Howe was one the finest stylists among Hollywood cameramen. The early thirties had seen him experimenting with ceilinged sets, wide-angle lenses, deep focus and other devices which were to contribute to his style, a mixture of expressionism and realism. This style was also put into evidence in films noirs such as Danger Signal (Warner, 1945), He Ran All the Way (United Artists, 1951) and the screen adaptation of Clifford Odets' Sweet Smell of Success (United Artists, 1957).

---

14 Quoted in Zheutlin and Talbot, Creative Differences, 83.

Polonsky's defiance of the Establishment is noticeable in the final scene in which Charlie is fighting Marlowe, the opponent against whom he was asked to take a dive. Charlie's furious and unrelenting ardor allows him to beat the odds and to reverse the issue that was settled by big shots. This mixture of defiance and determination is visible in the second shot that I chose to extract from the film (Plate 2). It belongs to the final scene of the fight. Charlie is sitting in his corner, waiting for the bell to ring. He has rejected the corruption of the fight game. He is ready to face the underworld and fight his way out. He is longing to redeem himself from the forces of money and greed. The director chose a 'full shot' which includes the boxer's body in a sitting position. Unlike Plate 1, this shot typifies better the visual style of film noir. The cinematography emphasizes a high contrast between the sharply lit stage and the dark background. The fighter's corrupt trainers stand menacingly, towering behind him in the darker background. The ropes of the ring separate him from his trainers whose silhouette only is visible. The choice of the full shot is well suited to show the physical and moral isolation of the boxer, although it is close enough to capture the actor's facial expression.15 Charlie has a calm but rather discouraged attitude. Yet, even though he is surrounded by

15 Giannetti, Understanding Movies, 9.

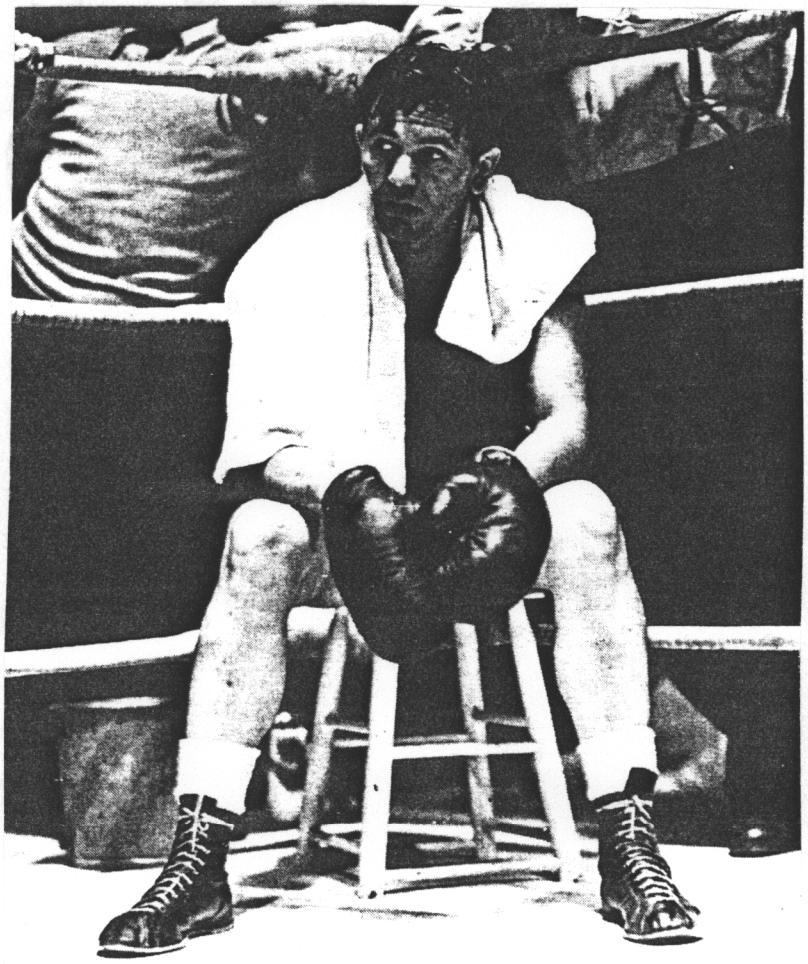


Plate 2 - Body and Soul.

enemies sitting in the darkness, Charlie's eventual redemption is visually symbolized by the fact that he is standing in a pool of light.

Charlie triumphs over the forces that have brought estrangement and moral decay to his life. Roberts can threaten him: "What makes you think you can get away with this?", but Charlie is redeemed. He is prepared for the punishment he may receive for standing up to his oppressors. His last words to Roberts sound like those of the HUAC "unfriendly witnesses" who are bold enough to sacrifice their careers to their political and intellectual convictions: "What are you going to do, kill me? Everybody dies."

The end of the film is consequently open to any hypothesis. The fate that awaits Charlie is left to the spectator's imagination. Robert Rossen, the director of Body and Soul and a member of the Communist Party, was more of an anarchist and a pessimist. He wanted to seal Charlie's heroism in a bleaker and more definitive way: "Rossen felt that Charlie should be gunned down as he exited the boxing arena and left sprawling in the street next to an overturned garbage can."16 Rossen tried to impose his own view of the story, although he had been hired after the script was done.

16 Zheutlin and Talbot, Creative Differences, 76.

Polonsky subsequently remembered in a 1962 interview:

> There was a struggle during the shooting to prevent Rossen from rewriting the script and changing the ending. In fact he shot an alternative finish in which the fighter is killed and ends up with his head in a garbage can. I think a comparison of Body and Soul with The Hustler might indicate not only the uses Rossen made of the former but where his temperament and style inevitably lead him.17

Polonsky did not want to spoil the sensibility and the vitality of the picture with too gruesome an ending. He stood by the hollow perspective of his more humanistic version. Although the film offers no final conclusion, we know that the argument between Charlie and his manager is not settled. It seems that Roberts will not let him get away so easily. But the outcome is not totally pessimistic. There is a certain heroic dimension in Charlie's stand against gamblers. His assertion that his triumph and moral redemption are inalterable even in death causes a main shift in his life. In the future, the fighter no longer fights for money alone. He fights for his pride, and for his life.

Because of this bleak but exhilarating mood, some critics have reproached Body and Soul for "not [being] really a film noir".18 This reproach was based on the fact that its hero, Charlie Davis, was able to resist the

---

17 Quoted in William Pechter, "Abraham Polonsky and Force of Evil", 51.

18 For instance, see Tuska, Dark Cinema, 186.

temptations of the dominant class and eventually emerge as a winner from his confrontation with the rich. I believe that this conclusion is far from being inconsistent with the narrative patterns and class criticism characteristic of film noir. These patterns were the individual struggle of the hero against the corrupting power of money and the class criticism of both rich gangsters and/or corrupt politicians. The outcome was usually ethically satisfactory and politically correct. It involved the triumph of the hero's moral principles over the ruthlessness and lawlessness embodied by the rich. Body and Soul offered a critique of American capitalism by a Marxist filmmaker. Disguised as a portrayal of corruption and crime in the boxing milieu, this manifestation managed to keep an overall elation which seemed to reflect the joy of its authors for having had the possibility of expressing themselves with an unprecedented openness. Thus, I strongly disagree with Andersen who wrote that the movie's claim was not so much that "business is criminal, only that criminality can be businesslike".19 I believe that the movie's dialogue and images that I have presented conveyed quite the opposite message. Consequently, it appears that the ideological meaning of film noir is more profound than it is usually admitted. This assertion is valid both for the noir pictures which were made by Hollywood radicals and for those which were made by 'non-

19 Andersen, "Red Hollywood", 186.

radicals'. Indeed, I believe that film noir is an inherently subversive genre. It has many ideological overtones, whether implicit or explicit, as in Force of Evil.

2. Force of Evil (1948)

Polonsky had to struggle on the set of Body and Soul to impose his views. Fortunately for him, things changed with Force of Evil. For this picture, Polonsky disposed of a freedom hardly ever seen in Hollywood and which disappeared for a while because of the 1947 HUAC investigations of the movie industry. Bob Roberts and John Garfield were very satisfied with the critical and box-office success of Body and Soul. The picture had been an excellent start for the Enterprise Studios Productions. John Garfield boasted "that his own company had discovered the director-writer of the age in Abraham Polonsky."20 Polonsky, who had had some friction with director Robert Rossen over the script, now wanted to have more control over the final product. Roberts proposed that Polonsky cumulate the functions of screenplay writer and film director of the company's next production. Polonsky accepted, because he knew that this kind of opportunity was unusual enough in Hollywood and he justly thought that it would only come once. He wanted the picture,

---

20 Larry Swindell, Body and Soul: The Story of John Garfield (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1975), 219.

Force of Evil, to go even further than Body and Soul:

> I believed that they would only let me do one, before they found me out, so I might as well enjoy myself. I treated it like I was a member of Clionia [his college literary society] and a Marxist. I was going to make an aesthetic experiment with a Marxist meaning. And I did. 21

Indeed, Force of Evil was an unveiled attack on business and the capitalist economy and society. It offered a skillful denunciation of the way the American economic system promotes lust for money and greed which in turn can cause ambition, envy, frustration, hatred, fear, and death.

Abraham Polonsky clearly had the goal of showing the relationship between gangsterism and the American society. He chose to veil his attack behind a story that would strip the analogies between organized crime and capitalist business. He selected Ira Wolfert's Pulitzer Prize winner Tucker's People, a novel about the New York numbers racket. He and Wolfert worked together on the screenplay whose title was changed to the more colorful Force of Evil.

Force of Evil centered its offensive on the very symbol of capitalism throughout the world: Wall Street. The name itself was and still is full of ideological and political content. It symbolizes for leftists of all countries the

21 Quoted in Zheutlin and Talbot, Creative Differences, 78.

octopus' head, the place of all sins, where the occult powers that rule the world are located. Jack Shadoian suggested:

> Polonsky is getting at what living in the American economic system does to people, Leo and Joe and everyone else. Capitalism promotes greed and greed causes hatred, envy, guilt, and fear....The force of evil is American business, symbolized by Wall Street.22

Indeed, the connection between crime and Wall Street is established from the opening of the story. It is given as an axiom. In the 'establishing shot' of the movie, the camera begins to pan down slowly in a high-angle tilt shot.23 The camera, located on the top of a Wall Street building, pans down to Trinity Church and Wall Street where we see people and cars running around like ants in front of the entrance of the New York Stock Exchange (Plate 3). In my opinion, the choice of such a panning down shot is not fortuitous. Giannetti explained that pan shots "tend to emphasize the unity of space and the connectedness of people and objects within that space."24 Polonsky wanted to introduce Wall Street as the center stage of the action. In doing so, he underlines by the same token the fact that all the characters of the story live in the universe of high finance

---

22 Shadoian, Dreams and Dead Ends, 138.

23 Giannetti defines tilt shots as "vertical movements of the camera around a stationery horizontal axis." Giannetti, Understanding Movies, 95.

24 Ibid., 94.



Plate 3 - Force of Evil (1948), directed by Abraham Polonsky.

and gangsterism. Yet, I believe that this opening shot also has a second, higher level of signification. The director used it subjectively as a point-of-view shot, as if Polonsky himself was looking down on Wall Street and inviting the viewer to accompany him in his exploration of the world of money and crime. Meanwhile, his hero, Wall Street lawyer Joe Morse, played by John Garfield, says in voice-off narration:

> This is Wall Street. And today is important. Because tomorrow, July 4, I intended to make my first million dollars. An exciting day in any man's life. Temporarily, the enterprise was slightly illegal. You see, I was the lawyer for the numbers racket.

Thus, Polonsky voluntarily established a tight relationship between the financial world of Wall Street and the illegal business of the numbers racket from the very first line of the screenplay. Obviously, Abraham Polonsky remained faithful to his political convictions and developed in Force of Evil the same political credo he had already presented in Body and Soul: Money is evil, and the force of evil is business. Throughout the picture, profit--whether big or small--is qualified as morally wrong. For instance, Joe's brother, Leo, has the following conversation with his wife Sylvia who is trying to convince him to refuse Joe's offer of a profitable position in Tucker's organization:

SYLVIA: You're a businessman.
LEO: Yes, I've been a businessman all my life, and honest, I don't know what a business is.
SYLVIA: Well, you had a garage. You had a real estate business...
LEO: A lot you know. Real estate business. Living from mortgage to mortgage, stealing credit like a thief. And the garage-that was a business. Three cents overcharge on every gallon of gas. Two cents for the chauffeur and a penny for me. A penny for one thief, two cents for the other.25

The ideologically motivated comparison between business, money, lawyers and crime is repeated, even reinforced throughout the film. When Joe tells Doris, Leo's former secretary with whom he has fallen in love, that he does not understand his brother's ethical stand, she replies: "There must be something in you that is evil and corrupt." Indeed, Joe Morse admits his own fascination for money. In Body and Soul, Polonsky was already suggesting that money has a certain smell, as we have seen in the analysis of Plate 1. However, it was merely evocated by a visual element, therefore an elusive one. The same idea is present in Force of Evil and underlined in the dialogue. Joe tells the sweet and innocent Doris how a young Wall Street lawyer like him was unable to resist the corrupting power of business: "The boom was on, and I could feel money spread all over the city like perfume from those flowers I gave you. I could breathe the smell of money." Later, a repentant

25 Shadoian, Dreams and Dead Ends, 139. The elegant chiasmus at the end of the paragraph undescores the formal quality of the literate dialogue written by Polonsky.

Joe explains to Doris the corrupting process of capitalism and power according to Polonsky:

JOE: I had so much strength. I did not have enough strength to resist corruption but I was strong enough to fight for a piece of it.
DORIS: And now you want to get out. Is that what your trouble is?
JOE: My trouble is, Miss Doris, that I feel like midnight and I don't know what the morning will be.

Force of Evil abounds also in biblical connotations. One of these is related to Cain and Abel, whose figures are represented by Joe Morse and by his brother Leo. Such references to the Bible in a Marxist work may look surprising. In my opinion, a possible explanation to these references--rather frequent in film noir--is to be found in this consideration by George Steiner about the relationship between religion and socialism:

> Even when it proclaims itself to be atheist, the socialism of Marx, of Trotsky, of Ernst Bloch, is directly rooted in messianic eschatology. Nothing is more religious....than the socialist vision of the destruction of the bourgeois Gomorrah and the creation of a new, clean city for man.26

Steiner added: "Some political scientists put at roughly 80 percent the proportion of Jews in the ideological development of messianic socialism and communism."27 Without

---

26 George Steiner, In Bluebeard's Castle: Some Notes Towards the Redefinition of Culture (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), 43.
27 Ibid., 45.

being able to refer to precise figures, I believe that the proportion of Jews in film noir must have been of the same importance. This is particularly true when one considers the aesthetic and thematic contribution made by Jewish filmmakers who had fled Nazi Germany. However, the strong proportion of Jews in Hollywood in general somehow reduces the impact of such an observation.

The fact remains that the noir hero was in many pictures the instrument working to the destruction of the bourgeois Gomorrah, symbolized by film noir's dark urban universe and mean city streets. Whether he was a gangster or just a simple family man, the noir hero frequently turned against the gang that exploited him and/or against the society that alienated him. That motif was present in both noir pictures written by Polonsky whose hero was embodied by John Garfield. Moreover, this recurrent thematic element was reprised in the development of numerous films noirs, as I will show further.

In Force of Evil, another reference to the Bible appears in the scene where Leo is waiting in a restaurant for his brother Joe who wants to warn him that he runs the risk of being killed because he refused to join the gangster organization. Before Joe can arrive, Leo is abducted by the mob and taken for his last ride. As Leo is dragged up the

stairs, the camera concentrates on a close-up shot of his teary, desperate face. Technically, the close-up "magnifies the size of an object, it tends to elevate the importance of things, often suggesting a symbolic significance."28 Hence, instead of emphasizing the violence of the physical struggle, the director chose to use a close-up shot to stress the despair and distress of Leo who believes that he had been betrayed by his own brother. Leo's face becomes a striking visual evocation of Christ's suffering on the Way of the Cross after he had been abandoned by his own disciples. The pain is not so much in the flesh as in the soul. Leo thinks that his brother Joe has definitely chosen the wrong path. He has the feeling that he has been sacrificed on the altar of money, business and capitalism.

The religious connotation of martyrdom was intended to prepare the audience for the final sequence of the film when a repentant Joe Morse goes looking for the body of his dead brother. After Joe has failed to save the life of his brother and has given up his own situation in the racket organization, he bids farewell to his former law office "up in the clouds." By this expression, Polonsky means that Joe Morse thought that his position in Wall Street put him above the law. Joe Morse is pessimistic about his eventual replacement. He clearly expresses his opinion that business,

28 Giannetti, Understanding Movies, 9.

crime and corruption all belong to the same never-ending vicious cycle. He observes that his old office is waiting for another "smart young lawyer trying to get ahead in the world".29 Joe Morse, speaking for Polonsky, believes that Wall Street will corrupt many other young and ambitious lawyers because business and money are inherently corrupting. The system destroyed Joe Morse as it crushed many others before him. One can only guess that this state of things will certainly prevail for a long time.

With his career shattered, his dreams broken and his brother dead, Joe then wanders in the middle of the night in a deserted Wall Street. I now want to analyze a sequence of four shots which were extracted from this scene. I have to indicate that these shots were photographed directly from a television screen. They were kept in sequential order and were labeled Plates 4 to 8.30 Here are five images (4-8) in which the obvious meaning that is in display is superimposed by an important, symbolic level of signification that only the deconstructive approach can decode. On the one hand, the film sequence has an evident meaning that is intentionally held in a complete system of destination while its code is kept in a classic cinematographic semiological code. On the other hand, the selection of cinematic shots and their

29 Shadoian, Dreams and Dead Ends, 139.
30 Plates 5 and 6 are from the same shot.

aesthetic composition contains a politically motivated, ideological meaning deliberately included by the filmmakers.

On the informational level (the level of communication), we are able to learn from the setting, the costume and the character. The setting is a deserted Wall Street at night. The streets are empty. The frenetic rush of humans and cars shown in the opening shot (Plate 3) has now ceased. The stage belongs to the character alone. The first light of dawn is appearing above the tall buildings. In accordance with the film noir aesthetic tradition, the sidewalks and the streets are wet and they shine in the pale morning (Plates 4 and 8). Since it's not raining, they have probably been hosed by some New York municipal employees. The actor, John Garfield, wears a crumpled, light-colored costume. This contrasts sharply with the first scenes of the movie in which Joe Morse was on top of the world and was wearing a dark, three-piece suit with an ostentatious chain of gold to hold his watch. These artificial symbols of success have now disappeared. Finally, the character himself has lost his confidence and his arrogance. He walks dazedly, sleepless, with his hands in his pockets (Plate 4). He is the very image of a man who cannot believe what has happened to him and tries to understand the reason why. He is trying to put his mind together. He is searching for something to hold on to. Ironically, the only being that seems to care

for Joe Morse is the statue of George Washington on the left. It seems to take him under the protection of its hand that is stretched open in a quasi-religious gesture of blessing.

On the symbolic level, the whole scene is remarkably rich in Marxist symbolism. It addresses referential symbolism, which was extremely developed and stratified in Force of Evil. Abraham Polonsky accumulated biblical and Marxist, anti-business textual references. Yet, first-time director Polonsky was able to convey his message through the net of the Hollywood production system in part because he remained surprisingly very much in control of his films' narrative visual effects. The sequence that I examine now is a good illustration of that point. Polonsky was able to express his ideological convictions through a succession of carefully chosen camera shots. At first, Joe Morse is followed by a distant, quite indifferent camera in a high angle long shot (Plate 4). This shot displays the immensity of empty streets and shows symbolically that the fallen lawyer has been abandoned by all those who previously were his partners in business and his accomplices in crime. The shot underlines, even accentuates, the loneliness of the hero. Its catalogue of signs is basic and adapted to a first degree reading. Joe Morse looks like an actor wandering on a deserted stage where he used to be the star acclaimed by the



Plate 4 - Force of Evil.

public, but where he now is no more than a loser who has to go into exile. The character is lost in the frame in the same way he is lost in life. The curtain has fallen on the play in which he used to be the fearless hero. Wall Street was at his feet. Yet, the curtain has fallen on Joe Morse and he now painfully realizes that the play was a tragedy.

I find Plates 5 and 6 quite fascinating. Their length in the film is very short, only a few seconds. These two shots are part of the same sequence that is not a wide high angle shot but an extreme low angle medium shot. In my opinion, there is no doubt that this particular sequence was consciously inserted by Polonsky at this particular moment. It is too well framed and crafted to have a purely decorative function. The tall buildings in the background loom threateningly over the character who appears to feel even more insecure and dominated by his environment. Giannetti explained that "[a] person photographed from below inspires fear, awe, and respect."31 I think that the raison d'être of this shot needs to be examined and clarified. Roland Barthes wrote that the "obtuse [hidden] meaning is a signifier without a signified, hence the difficulty in naming it."32 True, the meaning of Plates 5 and 6 is more of a vague perception. It is a coded message that is difficult

31 Giannetti, Understanding Movies, 13-14.
32 Barthes, "The Third Meaning", 326.



Plate 5 - Force of Evil.



Plate 6 - Force of Evil.

both to perceive and to understand. Yet, it is suspended between the image and its interlocution. It is virtually impossible to be understood or even detected by the semiological method, because the meaning of the images of a film is not fixed. It can vary according to different factors such as time, the social and cultural environment of the viewer, its political convictions, etc.

Look at Plate 5. Joe is walking in the middle of the street, with his head down and his hands in his pockets. He looks pensive, demoralized, disheartened, disillusioned. Now look at the background. The pseudo-Greek temple that rises behind Joe, over his head, like a sinister and impregnable fortress, is the front of the building of the New York Stock Exchange. It is the very temple of capitalism and business on Wall Street. The actual meaning of the sequence is that the evil force of Wall Street has overcome the moral principles of Joe Morse, thus ruining his career and his life. The inherently criminal nature of capitalism has corrupted his honesty and his moral values. Joe looks bitter and distraught. Plate 6 specially expresses the defeat of the young ambitious lawyer as the Stock Exchange's proud pediment towers proudly above his stooped figure. The low angle shot emphasizes the overwhelming size of the building over the character, thus bringing a feeling of oppression. Moreover, the martial front of the building, resembling the

temple of some tyrannical god, exudes a strong impression of absolute power. According to Plates 5 and 6, that tyrant is called money. Its dictatorial, merciless rule is called American capitalism. Wall Street has become the symbol of the social and political forces that have brought Joe down, along with his hopes and ambitions.

Thus, Joe Morse appears as the degraded victim of the capitalist system, represented in the film by financial world of Wall Street. The hero leaves Wall Street like the loser of a boxing fight. Whereas John Garfield in Body and Soul was the winner of his final fight, Garfield in Force of Evil has lost to the powers of money against which he had tried to rebel. Too little, too late. The contrast between Joe Morse's stooped attitude and crumpled suit on the one hand, and the imposing size and cold symmetry of the temple of business on the other, holds a disguised and complex meaning. This meaning is not represented on the screen. It lies in the unarticulated language of the film. Plates 5 and 6 are its most articulated representations. In my opinion, these two stills are what comes the closest to the radical, Marxist meaning underlying Polonsky's work. This political credo can be found also in many films noirs written by Hollywood radicals. It was inspired by the crisis of American capitalism during the Great depression of the thirties. For these left-wing intellectuals, capitalism is

based on money and power, which both corrupt. Hence, one must renounce power and money to escape the social injustice and inhumanity of the capitalist system.

In Plate 7, Joe Morse is standing pensively in the middle of a crossroads. The high angle shot, the enormous size of the building in the background, and Joe's loneliness in the middle of the street intentionally emphasize the character's entrapment and powerlessness. This shot has a developed symbolic level of ideological signification. Indeed, at this very moment, Joe Morse has to make a choice that will have consequences on the rest of his life. He has to choose between, on the one hand, salvaging what can be saved of his career and, on the other hand, being reconciled with his consciousness by tearing down the powerful criminal organization for which he was working. If Joe takes the ultimate action to avenge the death of his brother Leo, he will have no way back to the posh life he was living. He knows that if he wants to bring back a little bit of decency and justice in his life, then he must go to the very bottom of his descent into evil. He must go down and touch the bottom if he wants to kick his life back up towards the light. He must kill the beast.

Joe is determined to clean the waste which he is responsible for. He will himself kill the root of his decay:

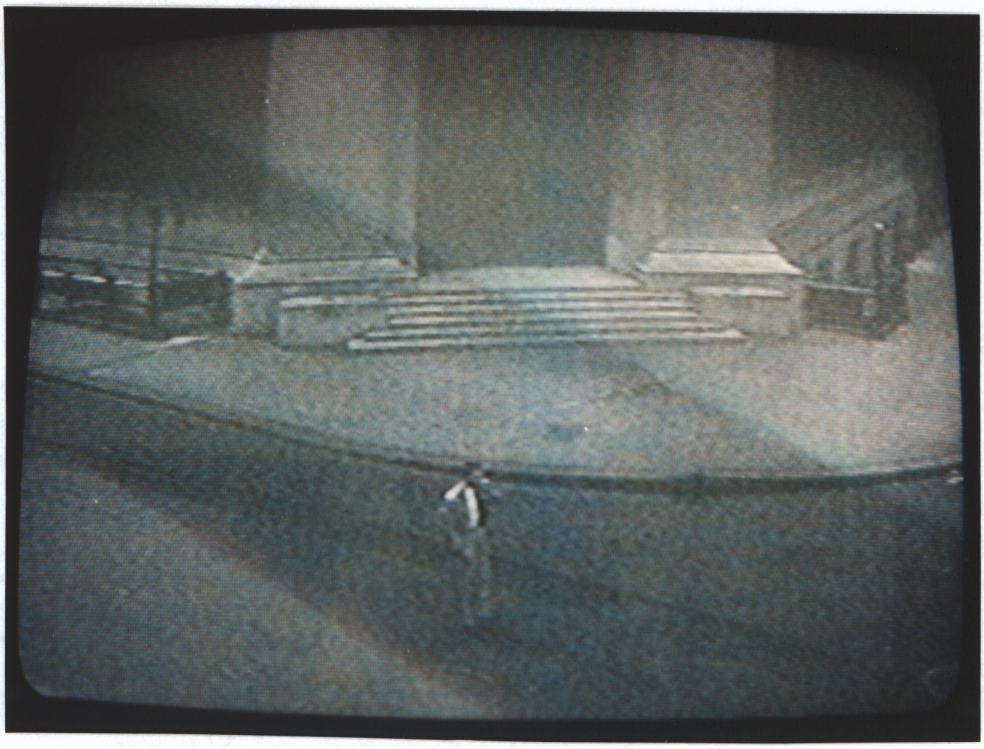


Plate 7 - Force of Evil.

Tucker. His itinerary is one towards purification. Polonsky states that Joe's withdrawal from Wall Street is the first step on this long road to moral renewal, and social redemption. In that regard, Plate 8 indicates the moral direction that Joe has decided to take. Joe is running away between the high buildings that seem to about to fall down over him. The wide-angle shot increases the impression that the pillars on both side of the image are going to collapse. The ideological message is very strong. Joe seems to flea before the destruction of the bourgeois Gomorrah that he feels is close. Moreover, Joe has decided to contribute to that "socialist vision" explained above by George Steiner. He is seeking salvation by destroying the syndicate which was using his services. Joe Morse starts running towards Trinity Church, standing out at the end of Wall Street. Jack Shadoian briefly described and analyzed Plate 8:33

> At the point of his lowest emotional state, his life crumbling about him, Joe, sleepless, walks dazedly down Wall Street at dawn toward a huge, centrally framed church, his small figure overwhelmed by the surrounding architecture....The point seems to be that [the church] is there, in the midst of greed and evil, but ignored.34

Indeed, Joe's run toward the church towering on the horizon symbolizes his desperate battle to break loose from his past and to redeem his soul.35 At this point, I have to

---

33 Shadoian, Dreams and Dead Ends, 145-146.
34 Ibid.,145.
35 Ibid., 145-146.



Plate 8 - Force of Evil.

disagree with Shadoian who stated that although Joe Morse "appears to be progressing toward [Trinity Church]...it becomes apparent that he has not chosen it as his destination." On the contrary, I believe that Polonsky has voluntarily given a religious dimension and a certain mystic aura to the tragic figure of Joe Morse.

In a scene that takes place in near-total darkness, a shoot-out takes place between Joe, Tucker, and his right-hand man, Ficco. The three men crawl around in the dark, like wild animals hunting each other. Joe kills Tucker and Ficco who were opposed to his leaving their criminal organization. After having killed Tucker, Joe Morse is filled with guilt, though not for having killed the criminals but because he feels responsible for the killing of his brother. He desperately wants to see him for the last time. It is clear that Leo has been martyred for the redemption of his brother. So Joe goes down to the river where he was told the body of his poor brother lies. This search down along the banks of the river looks very much like a descent to Hell. As a matter of fact, the idea is suggested by Joe himself:

> It was morning by then, dawn. And naturally, I was feeling very bad then, as I went down there. I just kept going down and down there. It was like going down to the bottom of the world to find my brother.

The on-screen visualization of the scene strengthens the theme. John Garfield is shown going down large, cold staircases and running in empty gardens. He eventually arrives in the land of the dead and finds his brother lying dead on the bank of the river (the Styx?):

> I found my brother's body at the bottom there, where they had thrown him away on the rocks by the river like an old dirty rag that nobody wants. He was dead and I felt I had killed him.

Unlike Cain, Joe Morse does not run from his responsibility. He does not give in to guilt and remorse. He wants to repare the original error that he made in leaving the straight and narrow path on which his brother had placed him. Indeed, we learn during the film that Leo has sacrificed his career to allow his younger brother go to Law School. Leo was really cut out to be a martyr. Joe feels that he had betrayed his brother's hopes and dreams as well as his own. What he wants now, along with Polonsky, is to go back and destroy those who are responsible for his own collapse and the loss of his only brother. He wants to help clean up the abject milieu of the numbers racket as well as the corrupt business world--in short, Wall Street:

> I climbed back to give myself up to Hall [the District Attorney]. Because if a man's life can be lived so long and come up this way, like rubbish, then something was horrible and it had to be ended one way or another. And I decided to help.

As in Body and Soul, Polonsky leaves the outcome of the story open to all hypotheses.36 It remains uncertain whether Joe is seeking redemption or revenge. The message may be that both may be the same.

The theme of American capitalism as the source of frustrated ambition and gangster violence was typical of the American populism of the thirties whose aggressive social views were shared at the time by many radicals. Elia Kazan later narrated:

> We used to say in the Communist Party that in American society you can either become a gangster or a revolutionary: both are bred of the same anger and the same resentment.37

That valuable confession is worth keeping in mind when looking at film noir. It may not be the only key to the genre but it undoubtedly has some relevance when it comes to explaining the political and social meaning of a film like Knock On Any Door (Columbia, 1949).

---

36 Years later, Polonsky admitted that he had to adopt this "happy ending" in order to get the censors' seal. One can only try to imagine what would have become of Joe Morse if Polonsky would have been totally free in the writing of his screenplay.

37 In Michel Ciment, Kazan on Kazan; quoted in Butler, "Polonsky and Kazan", 264.

3. Knock On Any Door (1949)

The film was directed by Nicholas Ray and released by Columbia Pictures. Ray's films are generally considered to "have a strong sense of social and moral issues."38 It was a vehicle for Bogart who liked its artistic and social message so much that he had formed a corporation with two producers to produce the film.39 The screenplay of Knock On Any Door was adapted from a novel by Willard Motley, originally published in 1947.40 It was a story of people and of a society that could drive a sensitive, innocent boy to crime, murder and to his death. It used the classic liberal belief inherited from the thirties that American society was characterized by cruelty and unfairness.

Knock On Any Door tells the story of Nick Romano (played by John Derek), a rebellious young man, who is arrested by the police and accused of killing a policeman during a robbery. Andrew Morton (played by Humphrey Bogart) is a well-established lawyer who knows Romano because of their mutual slum background. Although his colleagues try to dissuade him, Morton chooses between money and the life of a human being and decides to defend Romano. He believes in his

38 Silver and Ward, Film Noir, 162.
39 Ibid.
40 Willard Motley, Knock On Any Door (Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1947; New York: The New American Library, Signet Books, 1950).

client's innocence. After the trial opens and the jury is selected, Morton proceeds to narrate the life of Romano in order to establish the conditions that turned Nick into a young criminal. He reveals that he tried to help Nick since the boy was a juvenile delinquent, stealing watches and selling them to bring some money to his mother, a widow trying to raise her children despite extreme poverty. Despite his mother's advice and his internment in Reform School, Nick eventually took the wrong path. His motto became: "Live fast, die young, have a good-looking corpse." His love for Emma, a sweet and innocent girl, had a positive influence on him and the two got married. Morton offered Nick a position in his firm to help him. But the youth refused because he had come to believe that: "Only suckers work." Since he could not keep a job, Nick gambled in attempts to improve things for Emma. He simply fell back into alcohol and crime. Desperate, Emma finally killed herself with gas. Insane with pain, guilt and rage, Nick committed the armed robbery that resulted in the policeman's death. Thus ends the long flashback, narrated by Bogart, that constitutes about half of the movie's length. Morton is winning the case with the jury when the district attorney pressures Romano about the actual reasons for his wife's suicide. In an unexpected twist, Nick confesses that he killed the policeman. Caught by surprise, Morton tries to get the jury's pity and describes eloquently the

circumstances that led his client into this tragic situation. However, he fails to save Nick, who is sentenced to death and, after a last visit from Morton, dies in the electric chair.

Nicholas Ray is known as a director who "imposed his romantic, lyrical, and semifatalistic view of the world".41 In fact, Ray was a skillful director who dealt with social and moral issues, sometimes before they became part of American mainstream culture (for instance, youth culture and social problems of adolescent in Rebel Without a Cause). This tendency to produce socially conscious films put Ray in a special position since his works offered a thematic consistency which, incidentally, was not matched by an equally even visual quality. In that respect, film critic Andrew Sarris wrote:

> Nicholas Ray is not the greatest director who ever lived; nor is he a Hollywood hack. The Truth lies somewhere in between....Knock On Any Door is particularly bad social consciousness on the Kramer-Cayatte level. His form is not that impeccable, and his content has generally envolved [sic] considerable issues....42

In fact, Knock On Any Door is one of the last examples of a

---

41 Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Guilty By Omission", Film Comment 27 (September-October 1991): 44-45.

42 Andrew Sarris, The American Cinema; quoted in Rosenbaum, "Guilty By Omission", 43. Stanley Kramer and French director Andre Cayatte's films were all ostensibly interested in social issues.

certain tendency of the social problem film dealing with the problems of youngsters growing up in a a tough, sometimes hostile social environment.43 This kind of film depicted delinquents as victims of society. Delinquence--mostly petty delinquence--was not blamed on the individuals who committed crimes, but on their environment. This approach enabled a critical analysis of political, social and economic institutions. This trend came directly from the liberal movement of the New Deal era which advocated social justice. The liberal bias of the film is expressed in Morton's interior monologue when he observes the members of the jury seating at Nick Romano's trial:

> Social worker. Good... Grand-mother. Firm believer in the gentle Christ. Good. Jewish refugee, ex-professor, naturalized. He'll know about persecution and slums... Truck driver. Plays chess. Good... Mix them well, and shake before using.

The characters mentioned by the lawyer are fairly representative of the liberal ideals, a mixture of working class people, good Christians and foreign refugees. I would like to underline the audacious linkage between the "persecution and slums" of Jewish people and the political and social environment in America of poor people like Nick's family of Italian immigrants. Peter Biskind aptly noted the ambiguity raised by such a powerful comparison. Although Romano eventually confesses the murder of a policeman,

---

43 Biskind, Seeing is Believing, 198.

> we feel sorry for him anyway, because his lawyer [...] convinced us that he was only 'guilty of knowing his father died in prison, of living in poverty, of having been raised in the slums, of the foul treatment of a primitive reform school,' and so on.44

Thus, the message of Knock On Any Door is that society has to be improved and poverty has to be eliminated. This is the only way to prevent the same fate for other youngsters like Nick Romano. Moments before Nick dies on the electric chair, Morton declares to his unfortunate client : "I promise I'll help other fellows like you, as long as I live." In short, Nicholas Ray's film is quite plain visually. It has neither the low-key, high contrast lighting nor the artistic, formal composition typical of film noir. However, it qualifies as a film noir because of its bitter, desperate tone and its political and social significance.

---

44 Biskind, Seeing is Believing, 198.

B. LIBERAL ELEMENTS IN NON-RADICAL FILM NOIR:

In the previous section, I examined noir pictures written and directed by left-wing Hollywood filmmakers. At this point, I think it would be interesting as a comparison to study some films noirs which were produced by the Hollywood political mainstream. These features were made either by immigrant filmmakers or by people without any strong political commitment. For example, Kiss of Death (1947) directed by Henry Hathaway, I Walk Alone (1948) directed by Byron Haskin, and The Set-Up (1949) directed by Robert Wise.

1. Kiss of Death (1947)

Kiss of Death is certainly the most famous film noir of director Henry Hathaway, who directed also many successful Western films such as the well-known True Grit, as well as North to Alaska (1960), How the West Was Won (1962), The Sons of Katie Elder (1965). He also tackled other film genres with pictures such as The Lives of a Bengal Lancer

(1935), Desert Fox (1951), Niagara (1953), Circus World (1964), etc. The screenplay of Kiss of Death, which was written by Ben Hecht and Charles Lederer, tells the story of Nick Bianco, an unemployed family man who participated in the robbery of a jewelry store to buy toys for his children.1 Nick, played by Victor Mature, is caught by the police and sent to prison after he refused to inform D'Angelo, the Assistant District Attorney, on his accomplices. In the Sing-Sing penitentiary, Nick meets gangster Tommy Udo, a dangerous killer played by Richard Widmark in his first role. Nick is worried for his wife. After some time, he reads in the paper that she committed suicide and that his two daughters were placed in an orphanage. Nettie, a girl who used to baby-sit his kids, visits him in jail and reveals him that his wife had an affair with Rizzo, Nick's ex-partner. Nick Bianco decides to make a deal with D'Angelo, although three years have passed, and he turns informer. The Assistant District Attorney protects Bianco by implicating Rizzo as a police informant. After getting out of prison, Udo hunts down Rizzo. Nick gets out of prison, is reunited with his children, and marries Nettie. However, problems arise when D'Angelo presses Nick Bianco to testify against Tommy Udo and publicizes his name during the trial. Unfortunately, Udo is found not guilty and

1 Note the similarity of names between Nick Bianco and Nick Romano, the unfortunate youth delinquent who is the hero of Knock On Any Door.

walks out free. D'Angelo calls Bianco to tell him that Udo is after him. After sending his family away, Nick organizes a trap in which he gets shot by Udo who is killed by the police. Seriously wounded, Nick leaves in an ambulance but the ending of the film suggests that he will survive and begin a new life with his family.

Kiss of Death possesses all the elements of a true film noir: a sympathetic hero, sinister gangsters, an insensitive Assistant District Attorney, realistic documentary-like photography, social overtones, a mixture of despair and optimism, etc. Nick Bianco embodies the typical victim of the Great Depression of the thirties. He is a good family man and a good father. Unfortunately, he lost his job and is driven to crime. However, he never becomes a member of the gangster society. Even his friendship with killer Tommy Udo is purely circumstantial. Neither did Nick intend to become a criminal nor does he want to remain one. His experience with the criminal underworld had the sole purpose of bringing him enough money to support his family. His constant goal is to be reinstated within society and to be able to live honestly and decently. Whereas the films of Abraham Polonsky presented heroes in conflict with the capitalist society, the screenplay written by Ben Hecht and Charles Lederer depicts the struggle of an individual eager to be an ordinary member of society again.

However, there is a major similarity between both types of characters. In order to achieve their ideal, both heroes have to confront a powerful, ruthless gangster organization. Their fight, whether liberating or reconciliatory, is directed against a small, oppressive elite. This gangster elite is in fact a metaphor for the ruling class in capitalist societies. Both control a disproportionate amount of wealth which they acquire and increase at the expense of workers, embodied by Nick Bianco. Their accumulation of wealth is not based on their work, but on illegitimate means of enrichment such as the exploitation of the work of others, crime, and racketeering. In addition, this wealth enables them to assert even more their power. The ideological message conveyed by film noir is that liberation from oppression comes only from confrontation with the source of injustice. I think that this point is an important key to reading the framework of many noir pictures. This meaning is present in pictures made by radicals, as well as in movies whose makers were neither liberal nor particularly involved in politics, for that matter. It is the product of the political and social content of the sources from which film noir emerged. It corresponds also to the mainstream liberal thought of the New Deal era which advocated a certain 'humanization' of capitalist societies. For many, the time of unbridled, uncontrolled capitalism belonged to

the past. Priorities had to change. The drive for profit did not justify the excessive toughness of capitalism anymore. The difference between the wealthy and the poor had to be balanced in a more equitable fashion.

The similitude with the ideas of the Populist movement of the late nineteenth century is remarkable. Born in the agrarian world, Populism generated a message of individual self-respect and collective hope. Lawrence Goodwyn points out that Populists were neither capitalist reformers nor socialists.2 They had "a greater sense of self as democratic citizens and a more hopeful view of democratic possibility than that which is culturally licensed within the modern progressive societies around the globe, either socialist or capitalist."3 Populism sought to establish what they called a "cooperative commonwealth" that would fairly respect individual human striving.4 This progressive approach is very similar to the ideology shared by many non-Marxist, non-radical filmmakers in Hollywood after World War II. These moderate reformers believed in the power of masses, if given the opportunity, to bring about a better society. This propopular change was to happen against the resistance of the traditional political world which has been supporting

2 Lawrence Goodwyn, Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), xii-xv.
3 Ibid., xiii.
4 Ibid., xv.

the business such as the industrial establishment, the banking industry, etc. The story of Kiss of Death can be included in the line of thought of Populism.

The film depicts the extreme brutality of a handful of gangsters towards good, decent people. There is a famous scene in which Tommy Udo visits Rizzo's mother. He wants to shoot Rizzo, whom he thinks is a 'squealer'. The old lady, crippled on a wheelchair, says that she does not know where her son is. Furious, Udo wheels her to the top of a staircase, laughing hysterically, and sends the old crippled lady tumbling down the stairs. The effect of the scene is chilling. This gratuitous act of cruelty shows that gangsters are beyond any hope of redemption. On the other hand, Nick Bianco is on the road to social and moral redemption, since the criminals who were his friends are now trying to murder him. Nick is a man on the run. His collaboration with the forces of law and order, represented by D'Angelo, the Assistant District Attorney, has infuriated those who made him believe that crime and oppression were the tools to succeed in society. Nick Bianco's struggle to be reinserted into society has made him the target of organized crime. From a sociological perspective, gangsters represent a centrifugal force driving honest people to a life of easy money and tyrannical power.

Director of photography Norbert Brodine represented visually the moral attributes of Nick Bianco and Tommy Udo. Plate 9 is a medium shot of Nick Bianco at the end of the film, after he called Udo to lure him in a trap. He is anxiously waiting for Udo whom he knows is still determined to execute him. The scene takes place in an Italian restaurant. The background is dimly lit. Several round objects, probably some brass plates, hang on the column and the back wall. They look eerie, like shooting targets or distorting mirrors. The actor stands in the foreground, wearing an immaculate white jacket. His face is even whiter than his outfit. This is due as much to his anguish as to the bright light that is illuminating him. The actor is lit almost as if he were an angel, by a frontal light coming from above. Here, the lighting suggests virtue, truth, honesty. On the other hand, the medium shot of Tommy Udo (Plate 10) suggests quite the opposite. The shot represents Udo and one of his acolytes at the exact moment when Udo shoots Nick Bianco who is standing next to the car, on the sidewalk. Next to him, the thug is anxiously looking at the scene. Two things stand out on the darkness. Firstly, the sadistic smile on the face of the killer. The side light on his face and the white of teeth shine in the dark. Secondly, the gun held by Udo glistens. The gun seems to reflect the light emanating from the killer's face. Moreover, both point to the same direction. The gun looks like just the



Plate 9 - Kiss of Death (1949), directed by Henry Hathaway.



Plate 10 - Kiss of Death.

extension, the natural complement of the maniac. In this image, light is overcome by darkness, which suggests terror, evil. Udo and the other gangster wear dark clothes and hide in the dark. The only reason why Udo comes into the light is to commit a crime, to shoot a defenseless man. Kiss of Death depicts Nick Bianco, the unemployed family man trying to redeem his faults, as a model hero. Tommy Udo, the killer in the pay of gangsters, is shown as an evil maniac whose crimes serve only a small caste of wealthy, ruthless criminals. The misdeeds of this group are illustrated also in I Walk Alone, a film noir less famous though as much edifying as Kiss of Death.

2. I Walk Alone (1948)

Byron Haskin directed for Paramount this tale of betrayal and vengeance from a screenplay co-written by Charles Schnee. That same year, Schnee wrote also the screenplay of They Live By Night (RKO, 1948), Nicholas Ray's acclaimed directorial debut. The tone of I Walk Alone is uncharacteristically bitter, although the storyline manages a few romantic scenes which provide some warmth to the leading characters. The film teamed for the first time Burt Lancaster and Kirk Douglas. The partnership proved to be successful and the two actors were cast together again several times, notably in 1957 for John Sturges' Gunfight at

the O.K. Corral.

During the Prohibition era, Frankie Madison (played by Burt Lancaster) and Noll Turner (played by Kirk Douglas) were partners in bootlegging. Chased by the police after a raid one night, they decided to separate: Turner would escape on foot while Madison would stay with the truck. If one was caught, the other would continue to manage their nightclub and save half the profits for the jailed partner to collect when free. A dozen years later, Frankie Madison is released from prison and he is determined to claim his share from Noll Turner. He is full of anger against Turner because his partner neither visited him nor wrote to him during the years he was imprisoned. Frankie's brother Dave welcomes him at the train station, installs him in a hotel and promises to arrange a meeting with Noll. Dave reveals that he works as an accountant for Turner, who owns a new, successful club. Noll tries to appease Frankie with favors and attention from singer Kay Lawrence, who works for him. However, Turner refuses to share evenly the club's profits because he sold the old club and he claims that Frankie is only entitled to half of that club's modest profits. Madison realizes that he has been betrayed by his old partner, but also by his brother Dave who helped Noll Turner build his fortune. Only Kay takes his side and turns against Noll. Dave too stands up to Turner after the latter had Frankie

beat up by his thugs. Furious, Turner has Dave killed. Finally, Frankie gets his revenge against Turner by obtaining a full confession from his former partner and turning to the police. Thus, Frankie's vengeance is fulfilled and he has won Kay's love.

I Walk Alone is a perfect example of film noir without any political or social ulterior motive. Director Byron Haskin was a competent studio employee without any particular style. His only other noir picture was Too Late for Tears (1949), a minor though well-crafted low budget film. Unlike the case of Body and Soul or Force of Evil, neither Haskin nor any member of the writing or technical crew were politically committed. I can assert that I Walk Alone was clearly not intended to be a vehicle for an radical ideological and social message. It is a fairly good film noir with well established characters, a fine low-key lighting, and an adequate balance between violent scenes and romantic moments. The high contrast photography by Leo Tover establishes the noir look of the picture, which by the way respects the conventions attached to the genre: night scenes, wet streets, smoke-filled rooms, indirect lighting, etc. In short, I Walk Alone possesses all the characteristics of a good, small, inoffensive Hollywood noir production. However, I Walk Alone is in many respects marked by political and ideological considerations. These motifs

were not intended by the creators of the film. I contend that they derive from the ideological and social character of film noir, which comes from its literary and filmic origins. Most noir pictures feature manifestations of radical ideology, even though these signs are noticeable only through a careful deconstructive analytical study. Such a task is relatively easy when it comes to films written and directed by radicals, as we saw in the first part of this chapter, because the clues appear quite clearly on the screen. 'Non radical', pure entertainment films noirs also have many political and social overtones, although the latter are more carefully hidden in the framework of the film. Despite the 'non-radicalness' of I Walk Alone, i.e. the absence of Hollywood radicals involved in its making, the film shares several characteristics with its 'radical' counterparts. These elements can be traced back to the Populist view of the relationship between money and democracy. Firstly, the film repeats the argument used in Body and Soul, Force of Evil and--in a lesser part--in Knock On Any Door that money is the corrupting force behind every criminal enterprise. Secondly, the film denounces the capitalist form of corporation as a source of power whose anonymous holder(s) remain(s) dangerously uncontrollable. Thirdly, it supports the liberal slogan 'People, not profits' by vindicating human values versus business greed. The struggle of Frankie Madison against Noll Turner

illustrates, as in Force of Evil, the theme of the individual seeking to destroy a business/criminal organization as a way to reach both redemption and revenge. Also, the relationship between Frankie Madison and his brother Dave evokes the biblical story of Cain and Adam, as did the relationship between Joe and Leo Morse in Polonsky's Force of Evil.

The first radical theme found in I Walk Alone is the argument that money is a corrupting agent and that crime and business are based on the same principles. Although this idea is present in many gangster pictures about crime and corruption, director Byron Haskin makes this point with a special rigor. The dialogues and the images of the film emphasize the question of the close relationship between organized crime and big business. Noll Turner embodies the model capitalist entrepreneur, with the difference that he started his business with money earned in illegal enterprises. Frankie Madison, then his partner in crime, has paid his debt to society with a long stay in jail. He has not known the failure of the capitalist economy and the social hardships of the thirties. His idea of racketeering "dates from a less complicated era", i.e. from before the Great Depression.5 Meanwhile, Noll Turner has made the switch from bootlegger to big time gangster and club owner.

5 Blake Lucas, in Silver and Ward, Film Noir, 142.

The most important scene of I Walk Alone is the long, central scene of the argument between Frankie and Noll. Frankie visits his former partner in his office at the club to force Noll to give him back half of the club's ownership. Indeed, Frankie believes that, according to their old partnership, half of the club should come to him. However, the exchange between Noll and Frankie at the beginning of the scene stresses plainly the gap that exists between the two men's points of view:6

NOLL: [Plate 11] This is big business. We deal with banks, lawyers and financiers. The years of small business are over, Frankie. In the twenties, you were great. In the thirties you might have made the switch but today you're finished. As dead as the headlines of the day you went to prison....
FRANKIE: Dick, you've got one minute...to cut me for what I own. The half that belongs to me. [Plate 12]

The financial and ethical disagreement between the two former partners is visible on the screen. This is the case, for instance, in Plates 11 and 12 which are close-ups of respectively Noll (Kirk Douglas) and Frankie (Burt Lancaster). These shots immediately precede the previous altercation and announce the ensuing confrontation. Giannetti has underlined the role of the close-up shot, which "tends to elevate the importance of things, often

6 I personally transcribed the dialogue and therefore am responsible for any possible mistake. I deleted small portions of the dialogue which I thought are not essential to analysis. These cuts, which are indicated, alter neither the essence nor the meaning of the text.



Plate 11 - I Walk Alone (1948), directed by Byron Haskin.



Plate 12 - I Walk Alone.

suggesting a symbolic significance."7 Here, the symbolic content is suggested by the fact the two close-ups are opposed both in their composition and in their lighting. Firstly, the opposition in the direction of the looks of both actors shows the opposition in sentiments. The difference of the situations of both ex-partners appears also in the camera angles. On the one hand, the close-up on Noll (Plate 11) is shot slightly from a low angle, therefore increasing the psychological domination of the gangster. The severity of his face is subtly emphasized by the low angle and it inspires fear and respect. On the other hand, the close-up shot of Frankie (Plate 12) is seen from a slightly high angle. This type of camera angle reduces the importance of the photographed character. It tends to express a certain sense of harmlessness and helplessness, which reflects the situation of Frankie during the rest of the confrontation.

Secondly, Noll stands in front of a curtain in Plate 11, while the background behind Frankie in Plate 12 is a bare white wall. As a result, the harsh contrast between the vertical lines of light and shadow in the background of Plate 11 symbolizes the dual personality of Noll. It seems to notify to the audience that this wealthy, prosperous capitalist is really a sinister character and a double-crosser. In contrast, the back lighting--i.e., deriving from

7 Giannetti, Understanding Movies, 9.

the rear of the set--in Plate 12 creates a ring of light around Frankie's head. It symbolizes, like a halo, the innocence and the purity of the character, who has been betrayed by his greedy ex-partner. The scene continues with Noll asking Dave to explain to his brother why he cannot give him to Frankie the share that he is claiming:

NOLL: Well, it's not that simple, Frankie. Ask Dave. That's why I had him in here.
FRANKIE: [To Dave] All right. Start talking.
DAVE: Well, the Regine Club, Frankie, is controlled by three corporations: Regine Inc., Regine Enterprises, Regine Associates.
FRANKIE: I don't care what kind of Regine you call it. What sticks in?
DAVE: Well, it's not that easy to explain, Frankie. For instance, the fixtures and furnitures, that's the property of Regine Inc. The equipment, on the other hand, belongs to Regine Enterprises. Now, Regine Associates...[taking a pen] I'll diagram it for you. Regine Associates...
FRANKIE: [interrupting Dave] Stop trying to dizzy me up! Now, I want simple answers, Dave. No diagrams.... Just what does Dick own?
DAVE: In which corporation?
FRANKIE: Take them one by one!
DAVE: Now, Regine Associates is a sort of holding company. A desk.
FRANKIE: A desk?
DAVE: Yes. It owns 51 percent of Regine Enterprises.
FRANKIE: And is that a desk?
NOLL: [who has observed the scene with a light smile] No. That's the corporation which provided you with a good dinner, music and champagne tonight.
.....
DAVE: Regine Enterprises is a service company. It owns such assets as silverware, linen, glasses...
FRANKIE: Now, we are getting somewhere! This is the bankroll, stuff that counts. The silver, the liquor in the cellar...[seeing Dave's expression] What's the matter now?
DAVE: The liquor, that's Regine Incorporated.
THUG: Right back where you started from!
FRANKIE: Shut up!
.....

The whole purpose of the scene is that Noll shows Frankie that he has lost touch with the modern methods of racketeering and business. The proof is that Frankie has been deprived of his own money. However, it appears quite clearly that the perpetrator of the theft is as much Noll Turner as the capitalist structures of corporation. The wealth claimed by Frankie has been alienated from him by three corporations against which he is helpless. This episode reflects the Marxist view of the capitalist society. In I Walk Alone, as in capitalist and neocapitalist societies, the material wealth is under the control of a small, powerful elite (the ruling class), insuring its power. In both cases, this wealth has been taken away from its producers, even though they have suffered to earn it. Frankie has spent over a dozen years in prison, while in capitalist societies workers receive a minuscule portion of the economic wealth and are deprived of power and self-determination. In addition, Marxism theory establishes that, because of the economic competition, workers are alienated from their work, their fellow worker and their social community. Frankie is, in his own way, a victim of this phenomenon of alienation. As it becomes more evident that he will not defeat Noll's assurance, he begins to lose the support of those who respected his authority during the Prohibition era and while he was in jail. The lesson is that

loss of wealth equals loss of power. A thug that Frankie has hired to protect him shouts out:

THUG: Brother! They've got you swimming in it!
FRANKIE: Oh yeah? Associates, that's a desk. Enterprises is a service company. That leaves Regine Inc., and that ust be the big one. How much does Dick own in that?
DAVE: Seventeen percent.
FRANKIE: You mean to say that a guy with seventeen percent can hire and fire waiters and musicians? What are you handing me?
DAVE: Waiters and musicians, that's Regine Enterprises.
THUG: Absolutely swimming in it!
FRANKIE: I am through swimming. I know what I want. [To Noll] Write down a paper that gives me half of everything you own. You can transfer half of the stock to me.
DAVE: No.
FRANKIE: Why not!? [Plate 13]
DAVE: According to Article 6 in the articles of Noll's corporation..., no stock will be transferred without the consent of the board of directors.
NOLL: And in the bylaws...
DAVE: Yes. And in the bylaws, passed at the first corporate meeting, which provided that the manager must hold at least sixteen and two-third percent of the company. Half of Noll's seventeen percent would only give you eight-and-a-half per cent. That's not enough.

At this point of the conversation, Frankie begins to realize that he has been tricked by Noll and by his own brother. In effect, by becoming Noll's accountant, Dave has become also Noll's accomplice in the scheme that swindled Frankie out of his share. The weapon used by Noll against Frankie is the capitalist company structure, whose sophisticated mechanisms of control have alienated Noll's assets from virtually anybody. Frankie is all the more helpless since the three corporations do not have a clearly

identifiable head. Clearly, the organization of Noll's club is a metaphor for the Marxist view of capitalist and neocapitalist societies, the material wealth is controlled by a small elite. This elite is identified by Marxists as the the ruling class. In I Walk Alone, this small elite is made up of Noll Turner and his gang. In both cases, the wealth insures the domination of this powerful, idle class. Frankie is disoriented by Dave's arguments and by the whole situation. His racketeering and operational methods come from simpler, more straightforward times. He feels even ridiculous because he has brought with him a few thugs to intimidate Noll and he gets scorned by these hoodlums. His frustrated anger is visible in Plates 13 and 14. Both are medium shots, showing the characters from the waist or knees up. Plate 13 is a three shot, with three figures, i.e. from right to left, Dave, Frankie and one of Noll's men in the background. Frankie is shot from a low angle which emphasizes his outrage. His fists clenched with anger, he is towering above his seated brother and giving him a hostile look. The uneasiness of Dave is expressed by his position in the frame. Unlike the other characters, he is seating with his hands on the ledgers. He is looking behind him and his face is almost turned opposite to the camera. In the background, the menacing figure observes the scene between the two brothers while keeping an eye on Dave. The dominating position of Frankie in Plate 13 has disappeared



Plate 13 - I Walk Alone.



Plate 14 - I Walk Alone.

in Plate 14. The three shot has become a full shot, i.e. a medium shot containing more than three figures.8 Frankie is still in the center of the frame but, instead of dominating the scene, he is now surrounded by menacing figures. His isolation and helplessness are becoming more visible. The tension has increased, as Frankie and the two thugs in the background have their fists clenched. Dave is still seating. He seems shattered by the revelation that his skillful work for Turner is the cause of the misfortune of Frankie. The most important element is the presence of a figure on the extreme right of the frame. This is one of Noll's men, his direct assistant, who is standing by him while he is seating at his desk. His head is out of the frame, but he appears to control the situation for two reasons. First, the scene is shot from an angle which is close from his point-of-view, indicating that Noll is now ruling the game. Second, his position in the extreme right foreground makes him appear from a low angle position which, as I have already mentioned, underlines his authority and his domination. Even though his face is not shown, one can guess that he and Noll must be enjoying the quarrel between Frankie and Dave. Through the unfortunate Dave, Noll is giving to the naive Frankie a punishing, humiliating lesson of economics:

---

8 Giannetti, Understanding Movies, 9.

FRANKIE: You did this to me, Dave. You! [Plate 14]
DAVE: It is the usual setup for clubs like the Regine Club, Frankie.
.....
NOLL: I've told you, Frankie. The old days are gone and you're gone with them.
.....
THUG 1: It's like my used Cadillac. I've got a piece of it. My wife has got a piece of it. My brother-in-law never worked a day in his life and he's got a piece of it too. It's on account of the taxes, Frankie.
FRANKIE: Get out of here! [He gets mad and starts tearing up the ledgers: Plates 15 and 16] You did this to me, Dave! Yes, you...You know what you have done? Cheating me. Dave, I'm going to kill you so help me God!...

Now comes the logical, inevitable conclusion of the whole scene. Frankie understands that Noll has had him by using the legal weapons offered by capitalism. His rage explodes. Curiously, instead of attacking Noll or his men, Frankie directs his anger, his resentment toward the ledgers. This is a symbolic visualization of Frankie's attack against the embodiment of capitalism, i.e. the accounting books which contain the tricky setups that he does not understand but that he knows have stolen his only wealth. Plates 15 and 16 illustrate this scene. They both belong to the same shot, a full shot, i.e. that "includes the human body in full, with the head near the top of the frame and the feet near the bottom."9 This full shot is taken from a high angle which emphasize the vanity of Frankie's act. The actor rushes to the ledgers which lie in

9 Giannetti, Understanding Movies, 9.



Plate 15 - I Walk Alone.



Plate 16 - I Walk Alone.

the foreground. In doing so, he comes down to the bottom of the screen, leaving the top of the image to the gangster businessmen who are watching him with disdain and perhaps a little bit of pity. At this point, crime and business are associated in the misfortune of a decent and repentant man, who has redeemed his past with fifteen years in jail. On the left of the screen, capitalist businessman Noll is sitting behind his desk, seemingly enjoying the pathetic spectacle:

NOLL: There is only one way to treat you. I am going to have some sense beaten into you and I hope that works because if it doesn't, and you come around here again, I'll have you beaten up and thrown out again and again until you crawl.

.....

THUG 1: [To other thug, after they both beat Frankie senseless] See how he got up? And the right he caught me with?

THUG 2: I have always liked the guy. Fifteen years ago he was the best there was.

THUG 1: So what?

THUG 2: So nothing.

[End of the scene]

The two leave Frankie unconscious in the pile of garbage in the dead end street at the back of Noll's club. Frankie is eventually found by Dave and Kay, the club singer. Beaten but not defeated since he believes truth is on his side, he walks away leaning against Kay, preparing his revenge against Noll, the capitalist crook, and his ledgers...

3. The Set-Up (1949)

The framework of Body and Soul's screenplay can be found also in The Set-Up, another film noir about the boxing milieu in which a prizefighter is victimized by his manager's greed for money and by the gangsters who have fixed the fight he needs to win. An RKO production, the film was directed by Robert Wise. However, unlike Robert Rossen's Body and Soul, The Set-Up ended in a very gloomy way. That ending was very similar to the nihilistic version suggested by Rossen for Body and Soul and that had been refused by Polonsky. A fine example of film noir, The Set-Up narrates the last seventy-two minutes in the boxing career of an aging fighter, Stoker (Robert Ryan). Unlike many noir pictures which use the technique of flashback, the film is played out in real time. While his wife Julie waits in a shabby hotel room, Stoker prepares for a meaningless bout. No longer at his best, he has lost most of his recent fights. However, he believes that he can win this next match against a younger opponent so he can invest in a beer hall or a cigarette stand. Yet, he is unaware that his manager, Tiny, and a group of local gamblers have fixed the match. They are confident that Stoker will lose the fight. Only he endures brutal assaults and even takes advantage of his less experienced opponent. Tiny finally decides to tell him of the deal. Stoker, dismayed but determined, refuses to throw

the fight. Instead of 'taking a dive', he goes on to win the fight. When he leaves the boxing arena, the gamblers' thugs beat him up very badly and crush the bones of his right hand. They abandon him on a pile of garbage in a dead end street where Julie finally finds him.

Although Stoker will never be able to fight again, he has saved his honor and his integrity. Ottoson noted with acuity:

> Unlike John Garfield in Body and Soul, Ryan [Stoker] is not a heroic figure, but a tragic one. His refusal to capitulate to the gamblers takes place in such a shabby milieu, and the size of his "triumph" is so minuscule, that any heroic notions the viewer might perceive are quickly dashed.10

Indeed, the figure of Stoker is the one of an existential hero, a martyr of capitalism. The boxing arena is the symbolic place where evil reigns. This is emphasized by the fact that The Set-Up occurs entirely at night, in a dark and gritty world filled with parasitic, sinister characters. The noir visual style emphasizing low-key lighting reproduces the menacing atmosphere of the city at night filled with shadows, corruption and despair. Ironically enough, the boxing arena is called 'Paradise Alley'. Its name flashes in neon letters above the mean city streets. In this fatalistic universe, Stoker has the face of the innocent caught in a

---

10 Ottoson, A Reference Guide, 155.

game whose rules he does not understand. Unlike Charlie Davis, Stoker has never given up to the lure of money. His integrity and his independence are intact. Therefore, he refuses to surrender his purity to the merchants who have bought him without his knowing and against his own will.

The visual style of The Set-Up departs from the formalist tradition of film noir. Milton Krasner, the famous director of photography, chose a more realistic approach, more appropriate to the world of boxing. The photography takes advantage of the high contrast between the brightness of the ring and the shadowy atmosphere of the stands. As for the depiction of characters, the contrast between the 'good' and the 'evil' is visually emphasized without any subtlety. The film is full of merciless, very caricatural close-ups depicting the corruption of greed of those for whom Stoker is just a puppet. For instance, Plate 17 shows a conversation between the manager of Stoker's opponent and the gangster who fixed the fight. Plate 18 shows the same character with the boxer against whom Stoker is supposed to lose. The manager's attitude, in both pictures, suggests dishonesty, greed and corruption. The characters are talking to each other but their eyes do not meet. The gangster, to whom he promises Stoker will lose the fight, seems to despise him. The boxer, to whom he affirms he will defeat Stoker easily, seems to enjoy a previsible easy victory.



Plate 17 - The Set-Up (1949), directed by Robert Wise.

Meanwhile, Stoker is constantly represented as a hero. The close-up shot of Plate 19, which shows him trying to catch his breath between two rounds, is strikingly evocative of the Passion of Jesus Christ. The ropes behind the boxer him form the symbol of the cross. Stoker's attitude, his open mouth, his closed eyes, his imploring expression are the exact image of the sufferings of Christ on the Cross. Stoker's becomes a martyr in the ring, crucified by a handful of gangsters. The symbolic meaning is that the boxer's sufferings will redeem in the arena. It is no coincidence that the latter is called 'Paradise Alley'. In the vertical close-up shot on Plate 20, Stoker is lying on the carpet of the ring. He seems to have lost the fight. In fact, he seems to be dead. However, the biblical allusion continues and Stoker ressuscitates, gets up again and, in a desperate effort, wins the fight.

The reputation of film noir for downcast endings is justified in The Set-Up. Stoker dared to stand up against business. He put his pride and his honor before the capitalistic values of money. A humble boxer has humiliated the wealthy, powerful elite. He knows that this ruling elite will make him pay. Stoker's firm resolution is emphasized in the image identified as Plate 21. It is taken from the begining of the final scene when the fighter takes a vicious beating by the crooks who made the deal with his manager

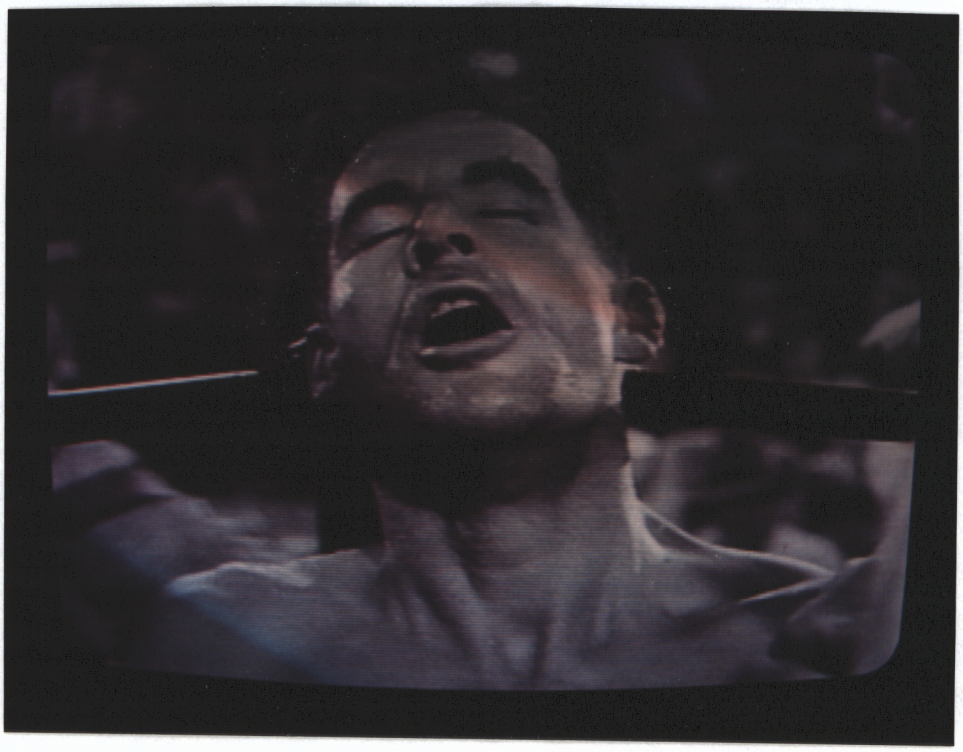


Plate 19 - The Set-Up.



Plate 20 - The Set-Up.



Plate 21 - The Set-Up.

Tiny. It is a medium shot, revealing the boxer from the knees up. The scene takes place in the dead end alley where the back door of the arena leads. Stoker has changed into his street clothes. His face still bears the marks of the long and terrible fight from which he emerged victorious. The high contrast, vertical lighting emphasizes his swollen features. He stands with his back against an iron curtain whose horizontal lines evoke the ropes of the boxing ring. However, he is standing in a ray of vertical light which symbolizes his quasi-angelic status in the film. This time Stoker is cornered against cold, metal ropes. His opponents are cowards armed with guns. The gangsters punish him in what they think is most cruel way for him. Indeed, they break his right hand, i.e. his force of production, his way to make a living (Plate 22). However, Stoker has saved his honor and his moral principles. When his wife finds him lying on the sidewalk, he whispers to her: "I won. I won tonight." She answers: "I know. We all won tonight." Stoker's victory over gangster crooks symbolizes the triumph of morality over the corrupted business ethics of profit.



Plate 22 - The Set-Up.

CHAPTER V. CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS:

In the early thirties, Hollywood had seized upon the musical "as an antidote against Depression moods and a contribution to New Deal optimism."[1] Their tenuous intrigue and their sumptuous, colorful displays of settings and ballets affirmed their pretension to sheer entertainment. Their highly staged fantasy offered a transcended image of American society and its social, cultural and economic system. In the early forties, the film noir genre came out of Hollywood with a surprisingly free-spirited tone, given the "confining formula which had hindered the creative development of the motion picture since the introduction of the Production Code."[2] Retrospectively, the film noir genre appears to be the very antithesis of the musical. Whereas

---

1 Siegfried Kracauer, Theory of Film (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960; repr., 1978), 147.

2 Garth Jowett, Film: The Democratic Art (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1976), 367.

the musical gravitated around fantasy, film noir endorsed a kind of stylish, formalistic vision which was inspired from German pre-Nazi realism. This pattern was underlined notably by the black-and-white, high-contrast photography that contrasted sharply with the colorful formalism of musicals. After the war, film noir tackled social problems with films such as The Killers (1946), Force of Evil (1947), Crossfire (1947), Knock On Any Door (1949), Criss Cross (1949) and many others. This opportunity was made possible thanks to the genre's standard themes which were generally inspired from the hard-boiled tradition of the thirties, thanks to the relative lack of pressure on the directors of small-budget pictures, thanks also to the liberal convictions of many filmmakers involved in the genre. There is no doubt that the hard-boiled literature paralleled and predicted the founding principles of film noir. Yet, there is more in film noir than just a series of crime/detective films. Film noir is also "an essential part of the 1940s outlook, a cinematic style forged in the fires of war, exile, and disillusion, a melodramatic reaction for a world gone mad."3 In my opinion, film noir, at least in its 1946-1950 cycle, combined successfully the hard-boiled tradition with the 'problem' film. Incidentally, Jowett mentioned a study indicating that

3 Tom Flinn, "Three Faces of Film Noir: Stranger on the Third Floor, Phantom Lady, and Criss Cross" (1971), in Kings of the Bs, ed. Todd McCarthy and Charles Flynn (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1975), 155.

social-problem movies peaked during the exact same period. In fact, they represented 28.0 percent of the industry's output in 1947, 20.2 percent in 1948, 17.7 percent in 1949, and they were down to 9.2 percent both in 1953 and 1954.4 Jowett aptly noted that the influence of the hearings of the House Un-American Activities Committe affected greatly the development of the problem film and of film noir. "The fear of government reprisals, and the fate of the 'Hollywood Ten', had a definite effect on the decline of the 'social interest movie'."5 Incidentally, the period of time that saw the decline of film noir witnessed the increase of 'escapist material', and in particular the renewal of the musical genre which enjoyed a second 'golden age' with major productions like On The Town (1947), An American in Paris (1951), Singin' in the Rain (1952), and Oklahoma (1954).

I tentatively showed that film noir contains deep expressions of moral redemption and social struggle. The noir genre almost systematically questioned many social, political and cultural foundations of American society. These films attempted to depict the decay of American values under the light of the social and political crisis of the thirties and the early forties. The ethics of capitalism and American society were probably the most severely criticized

4 Jowett, Film: The Democratic Art, 368-369.
5 Ibid., 368.

of these values. I showed that they were abruptly questioned in Body and Soul, Force of Evil, Knock On Any Door, Kiss of Death, I Walk Alone and The Set-Up. Many other noir pictures exhibited a similar social and political statement.

Respect for civic and moral values was questioned too. Indeed, many films of the noir tradition depicted heroes whose struggle to escape from the grip of a numbing, indifferent society involved the scorning of traditional American values. This liberating fight was directed either against the oppression exerted by a criminal organization, as in Body and Soul, Kiss of Death, I Walk Alone and The Set-Up, or against the authority of an immoral and oppressive social environment, as in Force of Evil and Knock On Any Door. The capitalist system of business and the accumulation of capital were exposed as factors of criminality, as my analysis of Force of Evil and I Walk Alone tended to demonstrate.

Although many noir pictures were self-consciously giving a dark image of American society, I definitely do not think that this tendency was motivated by harmful or destabilizing intentions. In my opinion, it was an attempt to examine without complaisance the state of American society in the immediate post-war era and to display its flaws and shortcomings. Yet, it turned out that the American

public was quite interested by these pictures presenting such a bare-faced criticism of its society, culture, and ideology. That wave of criticism was led by left-wing, radical writers and filmmakers who were blacklisted as a result of the HUAC hearings of 1947 and 1951. Many foreign, liberal filmmakers had come to Hollywood in the thirties after leaving Europe where Fascism and Nazism crushed all freedom of artistic creation. In particular, the colony of German immigrants was quite sizeable. They had hastily left their country when Nazism began to show its true colors. Some were Jewish writers, directors, actors, and intellectuals who had fled to save their own life as well as their family's. The others had left Europe and come to Hollywood more simply in order to preserve their freedom of expression and of creation.

Radicals, communists and 'fellow travelers' were quite numerous in Hollywood during the thirties and the forties. The Hollywood branch of the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) was founded in the early thirties. However, it did not play an important role until 1936, when it started expressing its support for causes such as blacks civil rights, migrant agricultural workers protection, and, of course, anti-fascism.6 The front against fascism proved

6 See Ceplair and Englund, "The Communist Party in Hollywood", chap. in The Inquisition in Hollywood, 47.

to be extremely attractive to Hollywood's intelligentsia, especially to writers. Several of them, like John Howard Lawson, Ring Lardner Jr., Dalton Trumbo, Albert Maltz, Abraham Polonsky, Donald Ogden Stewart, Guy Endore, Paul Jarrico, and Lester Cole, were active members of the Communist Party, sometimes to the detriment of their writing production and their artistic career.

The third Congress of the League of American Writers (LAW), controlled by the CPUSA, was held in New York in June 1939.7 It was the climax of the work that had been accomplished by the Communist Party during the whole decade.8 The delegates to the LAW's Congress, representing a majority of 'leading' American writers, registered significant gains in six areas. Of these areas, perhaps the most important and the most significant concerned progress made in the film industry. Dashiell Hammett, eminent member of the CPUSA and author of detective novels that influenced film noir so much, declared about his conception of the political role of contemporary novel:

---

7 Lawrence H. Schwartz, Marxism and Culture: The CPUSA and Aesthetics in the 1930s (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1980), 9.

5 Ibid., 63.

> The novel and the movie are not the same medium....A novel is a collection of words....A movie is a series of pictures with spoken words....[Yet] It would be foolish to say the novelist can learn nothing at all from movies.9

The LAW's Hollywood chapter issued a report on cinema untitled "The Screen As a Democratic Force". The report explained the Communist will to incorporate some serious political content in entertaining motion pictures. Also, it noted with satisfaction the organization of workers in Hollywood in strong unions and the extensive political activity which had provided the opportunity to achieve economic security for thousands of workers and to work for the development of a social cinema.10 This free cinema had already achieved successful results in the 1930s in producing movies such as King Vidor's Our Daily Bread (1934), Emile Zola, and Mr. Deeds Goes to Town (1936). It also released the cinematic adaptation of Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath (1940).

From the middle thirties to the middle fifties an estimated three hundred film writers, actors, directors and designers joined the Hollywood branch of the Communist Party. In the thirties, West Coast Communism was fueled and strengthened by the arrival of New York radicals hired by

---

9 Donald Ogden Stewart ed., Fighting Words (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1940), 55.

10 Schwartz, Marxism and Culture, 65.

major studios, mainly as writers. It was even alleged that during World War II the Los Angeles County Communist Party reached a peak of 4,000 memberships.11 Furthermore, Communist charisma was far from being limited to within the Party. The CPUSA had many liberal satellite organizations that did not wear the rather disparaging 'Communist' label. They attracted non-Communists such as mild Socialists and New Deal liberals. A contemporary observer may be surprised by this success of Communism in Hollywood. However, during the thirties and forties, there was no important moderate, alternative Socialist movement in the United States. Liberal intellectuals committed to issues such as the fight of the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War, and the domestic plight of the poor and the unemployed, found their concern echoed only by either the Communist Party or one of its affiliated leagues.

When the post-war anti-Communist inquisition spread to the film industry, the 'Hollywood Ten' became the initial line-up of blacklist victims after the first hearings held by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in October 1947. During the fifties, there were hundreds more victims after the second wave of HUAC hearings which began in May 1951, supported by the McCarthyist frenzy. The HUAC committee included in its annual report for 1952 an

11 Caute, The Great Fear, 487.

alphabetical list of 324 people who had rightly or wrongly been named as Communists by cooperative witnesses. Several private organizations like the American Legion, Red Channels, Counterattack, and Alert, drew up collections of names which they sent to major studios. However, the authors of such lists had no authority whatsoever to punish anyone. They had to leave it up to the diligence of the Hollywood studios to expel their employees or have them cleared from any suspicion by the House Committee. Indeed, the Hollywood authorities tried to police themselves. The Screen Actors Guild, under the leadership of Ronald Reagan, drafted in 1950 a loyalty oath and earnestly condoned the blacklist in 1952. It claimed that it would oppose any secret blacklist, but claimed simultaneously that "if any actor has so offended American public opinion that he has made himself unsaleable at the box office, the Guild cannot and would not want to force any employer to hire him."12

The question is to know whether American public opinion was actually offended by the works of Hollywood radical writers, actors, and directors. In my opinion, these pictures left a deep mark on the American public. It is all the more probable they had a strong impact because the actual number of people who actually saw these movies was rather extensive. I will examine as an example the box-

12 Quoted in Friedrich, City of Nets, 379.

office figures for several films noirs. In 1947, some films noirs did well enough at the box office to appear on the list of the year's top grossers. The most successful film noir of that year was without Body and Soul whose star, John Garfield, was extremely popular then. The film ranked 28th on the list of the year's top grossers with $3,250,000 in income.13 That same year, Dark Passage was ranked 33rd with $3,000,000, Edward Dmytryk's Crossfire came in 50th position with a remarkable $2,500,000, while Jules Dassin's Brute Force was 63rd out of 75 with $2,200,000.14 In 1948, there were as much as ten films noirs on the list of the top grossers which included 93 pictures. Among them, one notices John Huston's Key Largo which, boosted by the presence of the Bogart-Bacall duo, took the 18th position with $3,250,000), Sorry, Wrong Number (25th, $2,850,000) and Jules Dassin's The Naked City (43rd, $2,400,000). With the presence of two major stars such as Burt Lancaster and Kirk Douglas, I Walk Alone finished 60th with $2,100,000. Night Has a Thousand Eyes, adapted from Cornell Woolrich's novel was in 92nd position with $1,500,000.15 The same list also featured Henry Hathaway's Kiss of Death, starring Victor Mature and Richard Widmark. The film has emerged along the years to become a classic. However, it was just fairly successful at the time of its release, appearing only in

13 Variety, 7 January 1948, 63.
14 Ibid.
15 Variety, 5 January 1949, 46.

83rd position with $1,650,000.16 The year 1949 saw a slight decline in film noir's popularity, perhaps due to the repercussions of the HUAC hearings. The Committee denounced the presence of Communist propaganda in Hollywood movies and called American audiences to caution and discrimination while choosing a movie. The fact is that six noir pictures were admitted on the 1949 list of top grossers, against ten the previous year.17 Thanks to the presence of Humphrey Bogart, Knock on Any Door is ranked at a surprising 39th rank, given the nature and the treatment of the movie's subject, grossing $2,100,000. Howard Hawks' White Heat, starring James Cagney, is 57th with $1,500,000 while Jules Dassin's Thieves Highway, listed by Thom Anderson as a 'red' film noir, is at the botton of the list (89th) with $1,500,000. The year 1950 saw the continuation of the slow decline of film noir. The most successful noir picture was Billy Wilder's Sunset Boulevard (29th, $2,350,000).18 Five other films noirs appear, although at the bottom of the list. In 1951, a record eleven noir pictures were among the year's top grossers.19 They brought a good average of $1,588,636 per picture. He Ran All The Way, John Garfield's last picture, was ranked 127th with $1,000,000. This is a good result, considering that the film's chances had been

16 Variety, 5 January 1949, 46.
17 Variety, 4 January 1950, 59.
18 Ibid., 3 January 1951, 58-70.
19 Ibid., 6 January 1952, 70.

hurt by the HUAC's implication of Garfield, whose popularity fell sharply. On the verge of being blacklisted, the actor was about to die as the consequence of the harassment by the House Committee. In 1952, only three films noirs were listed among the year's top grossing pictures.20 Fritz Lang's brilliant Clash By Night was ranked 70th with $1,500,000.

In the end, it appears that the popularity of film noir with the American public was quite strong. At the time, both the studios and film critics failed to acknowledge that reality. However, box-office results show that these low budget pictures attracted the audience and brought substantial profits to their producers. According to the box-office figures given by Variety and to my computations, a noir movie raised an average $2,541,667 in 1947, $2,210,000 in 1948, and $1,925,000 in 1949. One can observe a slight, continuous decrease in 1950 ($1,616,667) and 1951 ($1,588,636) to reach a low $1,400,000 in 1952, i.e. after the second of HUAC hearings which resulted in the Hollywood blacklist.

The victims of HUAC were many prominent writers and directors whose names were not very familiar to the public, and secondary actors like Howard Da Silva and Gale Sondergaard. Just like the Inquisition, HUAC did not--at

20 Variety, 7 January 1953, 61.

least in 1951--take any politically motivated sanction against the people it was investigating. It is remarkable that although the Hollywood Ten had gone to prison in 1947-1948, their sentencing was obtained on the grounds of contempt because they had taken the Fifth Amendment and refused to answer the Committee's questions. However, it is quite clear that the true reason for their condemnation concerned their radical beliefs: HUAC considered taking the Fifth Amendment as an admission of one's Communist convictions. The Committee asked one unique and simple question: "Are you a member of the Communist Party, or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?"21 If the answer was positive, the witness had condemned itself. Subsequently, the media, conservative groups and the Hollywood Establishment started a campaign whose goal was to evict the bad element from its professional position. The studios were left with no other option than to fire these dangerous individuals. All means were allowed in order to achieve that goal: innuendo, rumors, pressure, boycott, harassment, etc. For some people, the preservation of the purity of American culture was priceless.

On the other hand, top stars were harassed and pressured but not permanently banished. It would have been much too costly for the studios. Only a few stars like

21 Friedrich, City of Nets, 324.

Edward G. Robinson and specially John Garfield found themselves in trouble. It was no coincidence that both were typical noir actors. Robinson played in Double Indemnity (1944), Scarlet Street (1945), The Night Has a Thousand Eyes (1948), House of Strangers (1949) while Garfield was Frank Chambers in the screen version of The Postman Always Rings Twice (1946) and, of course, the star of Body and Soul and Force of Evil, as well as of John Berry's He Ran All the Way (1951). John Garfield had never really been a Communist, but he had considered in the early forties joining the Party and had signed in favor of numerous generous causes advocated by the CPUSA. In the late forties, he had to face the persecution of the media and was helpless to curb the decline of his acting career, due to the relative failure at the box-office of several movies he personally chose, such as He Ran All The Way. He also felt the insidious effect of the graylist, the informal blacklist instituted by producers. John Garfield was accused in 1951 by the FBI and HUAC. He tried to clear himself, looked for support, but his cause was lost. Nobody wanted to stand in his favor: it would have immediately been, in the eyes of the Committee, equivalent to an admission of guilt. The Committee knew that the Communist Party had always considered the film industry as an important arena to be active in because of the immense influence it had over public attitudes and opinion. John Howard Lawson exposed in his pamphlet Film in the Battle of

Ideas the Communist conception of what needed to be done in order to move Hollywood's production towards a people's film art:

> The idea that it is futile to attack Hollywood's film [bourgeois] propaganda indicates lack of confidence in the capacity of the masses to grasp the issues, and to organize effectively to influence the content of films. It indicates failure to see the ideological struggle, the struggle to expose and defeat fascist and war propaganda, in its necessary connection with the political and economic struggle....The struggle against the corrupting influence of the commercial film must be combined with the struggle for an independent motion picture art, genuinely free from Wall Street control. The struggle on both fronts cannot fail to have an effect on the content of Hollywood films.22

This text was completely ignored when it was published by a Communist press in 1953 and is still not as well-known as it should be. It is of extreme importance because it sheds some light on the artistic considerations and social views which drove most of those who were persecuted in 1947 and 1951 by the House Un-American Activities Committee, and eventually blacklisted. The studios and their producers were extremely vigilant to eliminate political inserts that Communist screenwriters may have tried to add to their scripts. However, I showed that radical screenwriters were not fighting in order to produce a real social, aesthetic or cultural impact on Hollywood films. They were aware that they had no possibility whatsoever to put any openly Marxist

---

22 John Howard Lawson, Film in the Battle of Ideas (New York: Masses and Mainstream, 1953; repr., New York: Garland Publishing, 1985), 90-91.

speech or issue on the agenda of a producer. It would have been unacceptable to the studios as well as to the many reactionary witch-hunters who were closely monitoring them. Instead, they were trying to instill progressive social content in subtle ways. They resorted as much as is allowed to an objective and realist approach of their assigned subjects. They were "artists with a generalized political awareness who were trying to make films that reflected this awareness in one way or another when they had an opportunity to do so."23 Finally, I think that this quotation from Schiller captures the essence of the message of film noir and justifies the efforts of Hollywood liberals who endeavoured to turn the genre into something more than plain entertainment: "To arrive at a solution even in the political problem, the road of aesthetics must be pursued, because it is through beauty that we arrive at freedom."24

---

23 Quoted in Ceplair and Englund, The Inquisition in Hollywood, 323.

24 In Maynard Solomon ed., Marxism and Art: Essays Classic and Contemporary (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), 492.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

A. BOOKS

Andersen, Thom. "Red Hollywood". In Literature and the Visual Arts in Contemporary Society, edited by Suzanne Ferguson and Barbara Groseclose, 141-96. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1985.

Andrew, Dudley. Concepts in Film Theory. New York: Oxford University Press, 1984.

Aronowitz, Stanley. The Crisis in Political Materialism: Class, Politics and Culture in Marxist Theory. New York: Praeger, 1981.

Barthes, Roland. S/Z. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1970.

_____. Elements of Semiology. New York: Hill and Wang, 1967.

Basinger, Jeanine. Anthony Mann. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979.

Baudrillard, Jean. Selected Writings. Edited, with an Introduction, by Mark Poster. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1988.

Bentley, Eric, ed. Thirty Years of Treason: Excerpts from Hearings before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, 1938-1968. New York: The Viking Press, 1971.

Biskind, Peter. Seeing is Believing: How Hollywood Taught Us to Stop Worrying and Love the Fifties. New York: Pantheon Books, 1983.

Borde, Raymond, and Etienne Chaumeton. Panorama du film noir americain (1941-1953). Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1955.

Bordwell, David, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson. The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985.

Cain, James M. The Postman Always Rings Twice. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1934; reprint, New York: Random House, 1978.

Carroll, Noël. Mystifying Movies: Fads and Fallacies in Contemporary Theory. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.

Caute, David. The Great Fear. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978.

Cavell, Stanley. The World Viewed. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1979.

_____. The Claim of Reason. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979.

Ceplair, Larry, and Steven Englund. The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community: 1930-1960. New York: Anchor Press, 1980.

Chaikin, Judy. Legacy of the Hollywood Blacklist. Produced and directed by Judy Chaikin. 60 min. Direct Cinema Limited, 1988. Videocassette.

Chandler, Raymond. The Big Sleep. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1939; reprint, New York: Random House, 1976.

Clark, M. J. Politics and the Media. New York: Pergamon Press, 1979.

Deleuze, Gilles. Cinema 1: The Movement-Image. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.

Denby, David, editor. Awake In The Dark. New York: Vintage Books, 1977.

Derrida, Jacques. Speech and Phenomena. And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs. Translated, with an Introduction, by David B. Allison. Preface by Newton Garver. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973.

Dick, Bernard F. Radical Innocence. The University Press of Kentucky, 1989.

Durkheim, Emile. Professional Ethics and Civic Morals, translated by C. Brookfield. London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1957.

Eco, Umberto. Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.

Friedrich, Otto. Before The Deluge. New York: Harper & Row, 1972.

_____. City of Nets. New York: Harper & Row, 1986.

Giannetti, Louis. Understanding Movies, 5th edition. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1990.

Goodheart, Eugene. The Skeptic Disposition in Contemporary Criticism. Princeton University Press, 1984.

Goodwyn, Lawrence. Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America. New York: Oxford University Press, 1976.

Habermas, Jurgen. The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians' Debate. Edited and translated by Shierry Weber Nicholsen. Introduction by Richard Wolin. Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press, 1989.

Hammett, Dashiell. The Dain Curse. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1929; reprint, New York: Permabook, 1961.

Hirsch, Foster. The Dark Side of the Screen: Film Noir. San Diego: A. S. Barnes & Co., 1981.

Jay, Martin. Permanent Exiles. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985.

Jenkins, Stephen. Fritz Lang: The Image and the Look. London: BFI Publishing, 1981.

Jowett, Garth. Film: The Democratic Art. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1976.

Kaminsky, Stuart M. American Film Genres, Second Edition. Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1985.

Karimi, Amir Massoud. Toward a Definition of the American Film Noir (1941-1949) (Ph.D. diss., University of Southern California, 1970). New York: Arno Press, 1976.

Kracauer, Siegfried. Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality. New York: Oxford University Press, 1960; reprint, 1978.

Lawson, John Howard. Film in the Battle of Ideas. New York: Masses and Mainstream, 1953; reprint, New York: Garland Publishing, 1985.

Luke, Timothy W. Screens of Power. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989.

MacCabe, Colin. Tracking the signifier: Theoretical essays: film, linguistics, literature. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985.

MacCann, Richard Dyer. Film: A Montage of Theories. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1966.

Martin, Mick, and Marsha Porter. Video Movie Guide 1990. New York: Ballantine Books, 1989.

McCarthy, Todd, and Charles Flynn, editors. Kings of the Bs: Working Within the Hollywood System. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1975.

Metz, Christian. Essais sur la signification au cinéma. Paris: Editions Klincksieck, 1978.

_____. The Imaginary Signifier. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982.

Motley, Willard. Knock On Any Door. Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1947; New York: The New American Library, Signet Books, 1950.

Nichols, Bill, editor. Movies and Methods: An Anthology. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976.

_____. Ideology and the Image: Social Representation in the Cinema and Other Media. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981.

Ottoson, Robert. A Reference Guide to the American Film Noir: 1940-1958. Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, 1981.

Ray, Robert B. A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985.

Rodowick, D. N. The Crisis of Political Modernism: Criticism and Ideology in Contemporary Film Theory. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988.

Schatz, Thomas. Hollywood Genres. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981.

Schwartz, Lawrence H. Marxism and Culture: The CPUSA and Aesthetics in the 1930s. Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1980.

Shadoian, Jack. Dreams and Dead Ends: The American Gangster/Crime Film. Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press, 1977.

Silver, Alain, and Elizabeth Ward, editors. Film Noir: An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style. Revised and expanded edition. Woodstock, New York: The Overlook Press, 1988.

Solomon, Maynard, editor. Marxism and Art: Essays Classic and Contemporary. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973.

Sontag, Susan, editor. A Barthes Reader. New York: Hill and Wang, 1982.

Steiner, George. In Bluebeard's Castle: Some Notes Towards the Redefinition of Culture. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971.

Stewart, Donald Ogden, editor. Fighting Words. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1940.

Swindell, Larry. Body and Soul: The Story of John Garfield. New York: William Morrow and Company, 1975.

Telotte, J. P. Voices In The Dark. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989.

Thompson, Kristin. Breaking the Glass Armor. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988.

Thomson, David. America in the Dark: Hollywood and the Gift of Unreality. New York: William Morrow and Co, 1977.

Turner, Graeme. Film As Social Practice. New York: Routledge, 1988.

Tuska, Jon. Dark Cinema: American Film Noir in Cultural Perspective. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1984.

Ungar, Steven, and Betty R. McGraw, editors. Signs in Culture: Roland Barthes Today. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989.

Whittemore, Don, and Philip Alan Cecchettini. Passport to Hollywood: Film Immigrants Anthology. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976.

Wood, Michael. America in the Movies. New York: Basic Books, 1975.

Zheutlin, Barbara, and David Talbot. Creative Differences: Profiles of Hollywood Dissidents. Boston: South End Press, 1978.

B. ARTICLES

Bennett, Tony. "Text and Social Process: The Case of James Bond". Screen Education 41 (Winter/Spring 1982).

Butler, Terence. "Polonsky and Kazan: HUAC and the violation of personality". Sight and Sound 57 (Autumn 1988), 262-267.

Chartier, Jean-Pierre. "Les Américains aussi font des films 'noirs'". La Revue du Cinéma 2, November 1946, 66-70.

Eagle, Herb. Review of Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema, by David Bordwell, in Wide Angle, Volume 12, Number 3, July 1990, 118-123.

Ewing, Dale E. Jr. "Film Noir: Style and Content". Journal of Popular Film and Television, Summer 1988, 60-69.

"A French Court Blocks an Altered Huston Film". New York Times, 11 July 1988, 17(N) and C13(L).

Houseman, John. "Violence, 1947: Three Specimens". Hollywood Quarterly, Fall 1947, 63-65.

Krock, Arthur. "In The Nation: The Movies' Influence on Public Psychology". The New York Times, October 23, 1947.

Leibman, Nina C. "The Family Spree of Film Noir". Journal of Popular Film and Television, Winter 1989, 168-84.

Pechter, William. "Abraham Polonsky and Force of Evil". Film Quarterly 15, no.3, Spring 1962, 47-54.

Rosenbaum, Jonathan. "Guilty By Omission". Film Comment 27, no.5, September-October 1991, 42-57.

Trainor, Richard. "Blacklist". Sight and Sound, Summer 1988, 198-199.

VITA

Hugues Maltère was born in Antony, France on July 24th 1964. His secondary school education took place at the Lycée Lyautey, Casablanca, Morocco. In September 1982, he began his studies at the University of Paris 2-Assas and graduated in June 1986 with a degree in Law. He then studied at the Institut d'Etudes Politiques in Aix-en-Provence where he graduated in July 1988. He came to Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in August 1988 and completed the course requirements for a Masters Degree in Political Science in August 1992.

