FILM NOIR

Reflections in a dark mirror

Bruce Crowther

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REFLECTIONS IN A DARK MIRROR

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WHAT IS *FILM NOIR*?

'The world doesn't make any heroes any more.'
The Third Man

BLINDFOLDED, private detective Philip Marlowe sits at a table isolated in a pool of light which fails to penetrate the encircling darkness. Facing him are three cops. They are grilling him but have been unable, so far, to fracture his tight-lipped, wise-cracking shell. Another cop joins them, a man Marlowe knows, and asks for the whole story of how the private eye came to be knee-deep in corpses and temporarily blinded by a gunshot. Reluctantly, Marlowe agrees to talk.

Flatly, his voice devoid of emotion, Marlowe begins: 'It was about seven o'clock. Anyway, it was dark . . .'

A kaleidoscope of street lights, hotel and theatre signs, brightly-lit storefronts and automobile headlamps slicing through the darkness takes us back in time.

Marlowe is at his desk in his office high above the mean streets: 'There's something about the dead silence of an office building at night, not quite real. The traffic below was something that didn't have anything to do with me.'

As he stares through the window into the night and the city beyond, Marlowe's reflection in the glass flashes on and off, illuminated by the tawdry glitter of a neon sign just outside.

Abruptly, the mirrored image in the window changes.

A huge figure looms beside Marlowe; a giant of a man, Moose Malloy, fresh out of prison and looking for his long-lost girlfriend, is about to plunge the detective into a black labyrinthine mystery wherein lie mayhem and deceit, corruption and death.

This is the opening scene of a movie, *Farewell, My Lovely* (1944), based upon a private-eye novel by Raymond Chandler. It was an early example of a new kind of movie that was quite unlike anything that Hollywood had made before but which, like the musical and the western, is instantly and unmistakably identifiable as American.

It was not until later that these movies, which have been characterized as being sombre in tone and cynically pessimistic in mood, picked up a label: *film noir*.

Much less readily defined than either the musical or the western, the *film noir* category, while often centring on tales of cops and crooks and private eyes, usually reflects a darker world than that inhabited by such characters in other movies or even in real life. In place of the frothy romanticism at which Hollywood used to be so adept come haunted visions of doomed men and women for whom love is replaced by blind passion and sexual obsession, which often erupts into violence and cold-blooded murder.

Deceit and duplicity run their crooked courses through these stories, pervaded by an atmosphere of impending doom. Women are predators, ensnaring weak-willed men, yet, like the men they enslave, they have no control over their lives.

Fred MacMurray and Barbara Stanwyck (in *Double Indemnity*, take refuge in the concealing darkness of an echoing railway yard.

In *Double Indemnity* (1944) the icily malevolent Phyllis Dietrichson, played by Barbara Stanwyck, exploits her sexual allure to manipulate hapless Walter Neff, played by Fred MacMurray. However aware Walter may be of his impending downfall, he is unable to stop himself being sucked into a maelstrom of deceit and murder, at the bottom of which must lie his own death.

Out of the Past (1947) features another *femme fatale*, in the shape of Kathie Moffett, played by Jane Greer. As lethal in her way as Phyllis Dietrichson, Kathie coldly employs her body and her sexuality to seduce Jeff Bailey, played by Robert Mitchum, into involvement with criminal deception and murder. Here, too, the obsessed male's ultimate fate can only be death, which he accepts with perverse relief at being released at last from the clutches of his beautiful but evil nemesis.

Night and the City (1950) is filled with highly stylized visual images as the forces of darkness press in upon the seedy, amoral, frenetic world inhabited by ignoble Harry Fabian. Played by Richard Widmark, Harry plunges desperately through a claustrophobic world beset by menacing shadows in a futile attempt to evade his fate.

Film genres are usually easy to identify: a class or kind of film with common content or style. But, more than content or appearance, it is that pessimistic mood which most identifies *film noir* – often one of foreboding; a peculiarly intense anxiety; obsession, usually sexual; and above all a tension created by fear of violence and the inevitability of death.

This has led some observers to assert that *film noir* is not a true genre, but there is no sound reason for denying its instantly recognizable characteristics. Mood is, after

Jane Greer, as a lethal *femme fatale*, emerges to enmesh Robert Mitchum in *Out of the Past*.

all, just as much a part of film-making as any other, more tangible, quality.

The movies which make up the *film noir* genre were not made for a select group of connoisseurs but for the general public. They frequently starred popular actors such as Joan Crawford, Burt Lancaster, Gloria Grahame, Robert Mitchum, Barbara Stanwyck and Robert Ryan. These movies were made as 'entertainment'; their makers had no idea of creating a cult but were simply going about their business, treating the movies as a job of work to be completed efficiently, on time, and ideally under-budget.

The majority of these movies were based on crime stories, but they were quite unlike the earlier genre of gangster movies, which for all their preoccupation with violence and sudden death very much reflected the American Dream: young men rising to fame and riches through their own positive actions – albeit criminal ones (the film-maker's code of the day decreed, however, that such wrong-doers should pay for their crimes by dying in the last reel).

Film noir tales showed the other side of the American Dream, in which death has been preceded not by success but by grim failure.

Most *films noirs* were made in the years between 1945 and 1955 but they are by no means a thing of the past. In recent years it has become something of a fad to make films which echo the *noir* tradition, but even these movies, like those which inspired them, are made as popular entertainment.

The origin of the term *film noir* (the literal meaning of which is 'black film') is easily explained.

Shortly after the end of the Second World War a rush of American movies appeared in France, where French critics

and writers noticed certain common factors that held for them an instant appeal. Perhaps the French, emerging as they were from the shadow of war and with a between-the-wars literary tradition of deep pessimism, were more attuned to these qualities than were their transatlantic counterparts, who were not only slow to recognize *film noir* as a genre but were equally hesitant to give such movies more than a passing nod of acknowledgement.

In some cases the movies were based upon the work of such novelists and short-story writers as James M. Cain, Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett. The work of these and other American writers of the tough-guy and hard-boiled schools were published in France under the imprints 'Série Noire' and 'Fleuve Noire'. The hard-boiled novels became known as *romans noirs*, a term used a century before to describe the British Gothic novel. The prevailing atmosphere of pessimism and doom in these new *romans noirs* translated with ease to the medium of film and prompted the coinage of the term *film noir*.

Many elements went to form the distinctive products of the movement. Among them are dramatic camera angles and stark, angular sets, visual images of rain-lashed streets, fog-bound runways, sharply contrasted lighting and empty, echoing public buildings. The sun rarely shines in the world of *film noir*; indeed, many of the classic movies were shot in either real or simulated darkness. The urban jungles of *film noir* are peopled with troubled souls who haunt streets which Raymond Chandler described as being 'dark with something more than night'.

Although the storylines of *film noir* are richly varied, there are certain recurring themes. The principal character is almost always a man; he is usually isolated, either physically or mentally, from his surroundings. He is often foredoomed and, aware of his ultimate fate, he faces it with stoic resignation. The stories are usually told in the first person and a narrating voice-over is sometimes used to express bleak resignation

Shadows threaten Richard Widmark, ceaselessly on the run in *Night and the City*.

at what is being done to the story's protagonist. Fatalism is essential, because there is often an element in the past of these men – an event or an act – from which the story and the seeds of their own ultimate destruction develop. However hard they might try, *film noir* heroes can never escape their past.

In fact, the leading character is rarely a 'hero' in the usual sense, yet he has values which are frequently of a higher order than society's: out of step, perhaps occasionally even against the law, but always answering to a higher view of what is right and what is wrong. Philip Marlowe in *Farewell, My Lovely* is one such protagonist, whether played by Dick Powell in 1944 or by Robert Mitchum three decades later. For Marlowe and other *noir* heroes, the end must sometimes justify the means, even if they have to transgress society's established rules of good behaviour. In *film noir* there is no simple conflict between the good guys and the bad. Here there are just the bad guys and the ambiguous ones.

The women in *film noir*, while frequently powerful individuals who use their sexuality to attract men to their doom, are seen through misogynistic eyes (for the movies were and still are a society controlled by men). Phyllis Dietrichson and Kathie Moffett might be archetypal spiderwomen but there are many others, as different on the surface as the voluptuous tramp Kitty March (played by Joan Bennett in *Scarlet Street*) and the ageing, half-crazed movie star Norma Desmond (played by Gloria Swanson in *Sunset Boulevard*).

The genre is set within American life and culture, its social and sexual mores and excesses. All are viewed obliquely through a sometimes distorting and always dark mirror.

What the French critics had spotted was that the makers of these movies had exposed an inner core of darkness in American society which closely resembled that which engulfed Europe during the war and the immediate post-war years. Of course, there was no counterpart in America to the physical damage and wholesale death and destruction which had devastated Europe, but there was fear, alienation and both physical and psychological dislocation. A few years later, as red scares and witch-hunts damaged America, greatly affecting the nation's popular culture, disillusion set in and, more significantly for both the American people and Hollywood film-makers, fear turned into paranoia.

It was during these post-war years, including the period of 'police action' in Korea, that most of the classic *films noirs* were made.

Film noir, then, is very much rooted in a particular time and place – contemporary urban America – and is concerned with certain sensibilities, emotions, attitudes and human failings: pessimism, sexual obsession, deceit, fatalism. Yet for all its dependence upon mood and atmosphere, *film noir* has clear and positive links with certain specific practical, even mechanical, functions in motion picture-making.

The vital contributions to the genre were made by the practitioners of the craft of film-making: the actors and actresses; the directors and cinematographers who created the evocative visual imagery; and the writers whose work helped inspire the genre and who, in many ways, provide the essential ingredients of *film noir*.

2
THE ORIGINS OF *FILM NOIR*: TOUGH-GUY WRITERS

'Once I did something wrong.'
The Killers

EVEN before talking pictures, Hollywood's film-makers bought popular novels for use as the basis of motion pictures. With the onset of talkies, book publishers' lists and magazines were scavenged for anything which might conceivably be turned into a movie.

In order to turn these often unworthy literary efforts into filmable screenplays, the screenwriter was frequently faced with an uphill struggle, battling with unmalleable prose, stilted dialogue, the need to change characters to suit the studio's available actors, to trim potentially expensive sequences, to avoid conflict with the Hays Office (Hollywood's supposedly self-regulatory censorship body), and to keep sufficiently close to the original text to satisfy studio heads that they hadn't wasted their money in buying the book in the first place. That screenwriters were not more often entrusted with the task of creating original material indicates the scant regard in which they were generally held by the Hollywood moguls.

Among the problems facing screenwriters adapting novels for the movies in the 1930s were three which soon began to solve themselves: unwieldy prose style, unreal dialogue hung over from the previous century, and lavish settings.

A new breed of writer had begun making an impact on the American literary scene. While a few, like Ernest Hemingway, worked in the mainstream of fiction, a larger group wrote in the field of social protest. Radical in thought if not always in deed, they wrote about areas of American life and the sorts of people who had only rarely been the subject of close attention from the literary establishment of previous years: John Steinbeck and B. Traven are two examples.

In some cases the work of these writers attracted Hollywood's attention, but usually the teeth in any potentially awkward tract were carefully drawn so as not to damage solid, middle-class, capitalist values.

A third group among the new breed of 1930s writers making their mark on American literature were the crime writers, mostly writing short stories for the pulp magazines (so-called because they were printed on cheap paper that betrayed its wood-pulp origins). The leading magazines of this type were *Dime Detective, Dime Mystery* and the one which published the work of the best writers, *Black Mask*. Through this magazine's pages numerous young writers were first given their chance by its editor Captain Joseph T. Shaw. Some of them rose to international fame (and sometimes fortune); others remained buried there.

All three groups overlapped in certain important areas of their craft. They wrote in a distinctive style which earned the terse – and appropriate – epithets 'tough-guy' and 'hard-boiled'. Although often used interchangeably, in broad terms the distinction between 'tough-guy' and 'hard-boiled'

writers depends upon the nature of their protagonists: tough-guy heroes tend to be ordinary men forced by circumstances to try to survive difficult situations; hard-boiled heroes are usually involved in difficult situations because it is their work, perhaps as private detectives.

In time, Hollywood's eagle-eyed book scouts used writers from all three groups, but central to *film noir* are some whose work helped not only give the genre its identity but also resulted in many of its finest films. Well known among these are Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett, yet there are others of comparable significance who remain little known except by devotees of the hard-boiled school of writing and of *film noir*: among these writers are James M. Cain and Cornell Woolrich.

But these few hardly illustrate the indispensability of the tough-guy and hard-boiled writers to the origins of *film noir*. These writers took a cynically detached view of the American Dream, fully recognizing its darker side, and had an outlook that bordered upon existentialism. Like the existentialists, the tough-guy writers of the 1930s upheld the importance of the individual and his need to assert his uniqueness in the face of artificial social conventions and the political tyranny of an uncaring establishment. They created protagonists who were inadequate but did their best, who intuitively followed a course – perceptible only to themselves – along which they marched to the beat of a different drummer. Additionally, and of great significance for makers of *films noirs*, they dealt with the existentialists' obsessions with alienation, with man's helplessness when faced with the inexorable reality of life, and the significance to humankind of what was happening *now*.

This is not to say that many of the writers concerned delved deeply into the philosophy of the movement they mirrored. Indeed, few chose to philosophize much at all; when they did, as in Sam Spade's Flitcraft parable in Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*, their readers were momentarily disconcerted.

Among the tough-guy and hard-boiled writers who seem to this observer to have had the greatest influence on *film noir* are W. R. Burnett, Horace McCoy, James M. Cain, Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler and Cornell Woolrich, together with later writers such as Jim Thompson, Mickey Spillane and Elmore Leonard.

Although he is one of the least known of this group, the work of Cornell Woolrich is closest to the bleak mood and distorted vision of *film noir*.

Born in 1903, Cornell George Hopley-Woolrich was a strange, reclusive man who lived most of his life either alone or with his mother. After her death in 1957 he deliberately isolated himself from the rest of the world, failing utterly to come to terms with his homosexuality, which a brief and disastrous marriage did not disguise. He died in 1968 having spent his final years in a wheelchair, unable to learn to walk again after the amputation of a leg.

Woolrich's first novel was published in 1927 and his second, *Children of the Ritz* (1928), was bought by First National Pictures, which brought him to Hollywood to work on the screenplay. He continued writing novels and eventually turned to crime writing in 1934, initially short stories. His output in the late 1930s was extensive, comprising well over a hundred published stories and books. Woolrich's work was published under the names Cornell Woolrich, George Hopley and William Irish.

His first crime novel, published in 1940, was *The Bride Wore Black* (which eventually became a Franco-Italian movie in 1967). This was the first of a series of so-called 'black' novels: *The Black Curtain, Black Alibi, The Black Angel*, and so on. Woolrich continued writing, at a diminished rate, during the 1940s, a decade when his stories became a profitable mine for radio drama. From the late 1940s onwards his output slowed, but his work continued to provide the basis for dozens of motion pictures, radio plays and stories, and TV plays (including episodes in the series *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*).

Specific themes, many of them near-obsessions, made themselves apparent in Woolrich's work during the 1930s. Some attracted Hollywood; others were too difficult for moviemakers, wrestling with Hays Office restrictions, to risk tackling. These dealt with the degeneration of love

Hollywood's overheated idea of an after-hours jam session provides a tellingly orgasmic scene for Elisha Cook Jr and Ella Raines in *Phantom Lady*.

into hatred, melancholic longing turning to despairing lust, and an overpowering sense of an omniscient and malevolent deity.

Given the atmosphere of dark turmoil which pervaded so much of his work, it is easy to see why the makers of movies in the *film noir* category were attracted to Woolrich.

The first of the long catalogue came in 1942 with *Street of Chance* (based upon *Black Curtain*), which is a persuasive version of a Hollywood stand-by: the story of an amnesiac who might or might not have committed murder during a lost year.

Starring Burgess Meredith as Frank Thompson, the movie owes much to cinematographer Theodor Sparkuhl's striking use of shadowed lighting and an early use of jazz on a *noir* tale's soundtrack.

Phantom Lady (1944) is another stand-by movie plot: the reprieve of a wrongfully accused man sentenced to die for murder depends on his faithful secretary finding the woman who can provide his alibi – a woman whose existence everyone else denies. With indifferent performances from principals Franchot Tone, Ella Raines and Scott Henderson, all of whom are upstaged by Thomas Gomez's Inspector Burgess and Elisha Cook Jr as Cliff March, the disreputable jazz drummer, the movie is decidedly unsatisfactory. Yet it works; and what allows it almost unqualified acceptance into the *noir* canon is the direction of Robert Siodmak and the work of his cameraman Woody Bredell. The heated, brooding atmosphere of the shadowy city streets is threateningly evoked in a manner which deserved a better overall movie. Nevertheless, *Phantom Lady* proved to be the launch pad for Siodmak's later work as one of the leading *noir* directors.

The movie's most famous scene is the jam session in which Cliff March plays a decidedly masturbatory drum solo –

Dan Duryea as one of *film noir*'s perennial favourites, the amnesiac who might have committed murder (*The Black Angel*).

to which Kansas Richman (Ella Raines) unwillingly responds. Although the scene exists in Cornell Woolrich's original novel, he misses the opportunity to exploit the occasion as effectively as director Siodmak (and actor Cook).

A rush of Woolrich-based *films noirs* came in the next few years, among them *Black Angel* (1946). This worked an interesting variation on the amnesia theme with which Woolrich was clearly fascinated. Marty Blair (Dan Duryea) tries to discover the real killer of his wife in order to save the man sentenced to die for her murder. In this version, Marty eventually realizes that it was he himself who murdered his wife, then blocked the killing from his mind.

The effete and lightweight Robert Cum-

This time it is not the past but the future which holds most terror: Edward G. Robinson as the troubled mind-reader in *The Night Has a Thousand Eyes*.

mings made an unlikely hero for a Woolrich-based movie in *The Chase* (1946), in which dreams interweave with reality until none of the principals is wholly certain on which side of the blurred dividing line he or she belongs. *Deadline at Dawn* (1946) and *Fall Guy* (1947) also dealt with amnesia, the first induced by drink, the second by drugs, while *The Guilty* (1947) is made with insufficient skill to allow easy comprehension of a complicated plot centred upon the murder, by the protagonist-narrator, of an identical twin in mistake for her sister.

Other fancies of the mind appear in Woolrich's *The Night Has a Thousand Eyes* (1948), directed by John Farrow. This stars Edward G. Robinson as John Triton, whose mind-reading act suddenly becomes

Cornell Woolrich's morbid world is no place for a small boy, as Bobby Driscoll finds when he is menaced by Ruth Roman in *The Window*.

real when he begins accurately predicting deaths and disasters. Disbelieved by many, he is gradually seen to be truly capable of such feats. This reversal of the *noir* custom of a man being unable to escape his past by a man who is unable to escape the future works rather well, thanks to Robinson's convincing portrayal. This movie was scripted by Jonathan Latimer, a hard-boiled novelist in his own right who also wrote the screenplay for *The Glass Key*.

The Window (1949) became a minor *noir* classic, and a highly successful film to boot, even if Woolrich's theme is again less than original. Young Tommy Woodry (Bobby Driscoll) regularly tells harmless lies which distress his parents (Arthur Kennedy and Barbara Hale). When Tommy witnesses a murder by the Woodrys' neighbours, the Kellertons (Paul Stewart and Ruth Roman), no one will believe him. Tommy's mother makes him apologize to the Kellertons, thus alerting them to the fact that he is a witness to their crime. Although the movie thereafter becomes a straightforward suspense story, the dank, fetid tenements in which the Woodrys and the Kellertons live are excellently depicted and a genuinely claustrophobic atmosphere is evoked.

Also claustrophobic is Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954), based upon Cornell Woolrich's *It Had To Be Murder*. Here, the protagonist is literally an innocent trapped in events not of his own making.

The overripe, rotting core of much of Cornell Woolrich's writing gave film-makers endless opportunities for exploring the human psyche, as did his concentration upon psychologically disturbed men (and sometimes women). That the films rarely matched the books, especially in their inability to persuade the viewer to suspend disbelief as readily as Woolrich persuaded his readers, may be one reason why his writing does not receive as much attention as that of his more illustrious peers. It is unfortunate, because at its best Cornell Woolrich's work provides endless entertainment, even if, at times, there is about it a fascination reminiscent of the hypnotic gaze of a poisonous

reptile, as he goes about his explorations of his much-quoted aphorism, 'First you dream, then you die'.

More than most tough-guy writers, Cornell Woolrich helped establish the mood for *film noir* which attracted and inspired numerous film-makers of the day, and his sour tales of depraved humanity foreshadow the work of many later writers who were able to expand the boundaries of tough-guy fiction in directions Woolrich could only hint at, bound as he was by the conventions of contemporary popular fiction.

Unlike that of Woolrich, W. R. Burnett's work is closely linked to the world of 1930s gangsters. Consequently, the films based upon his work often have an ambiance inconsistent with true *film noir*. Nevertheless, these movies do include interesting examples of pre-*noir* and a few which are more centrally located in the genre.

Burnett exploded into fame thanks to a runaway success with his 1929 novel *Little Caesar*. Warner Brothers bought the screen rights and in 1931 released the movie, starring the busy but still relatively unknown actor Edward G. Robinson. As a movie, *Little Caesar* was a smash-hit, the story's energy powerfully embodied in a dynamic performance by Robinson in what must have seemed like a heaven-sent opportunity for a newcomer to leading film roles. William Riley Burnett moved to Hollywood, where he became a screenwriter but continued writing novels. Burnett did not remain rooted in one school; he worked on gangster movies, including co-screenplay on *Scarface* (1932) and the source novel for *Dr Socrates* (1935), which was remade as *King of the Underworld* (1939), and *Bullet Scars* (1942). He also worked on such widely differing movies as *Sergeants Three* (1962) and *The Great Escape* (1963).

Burnett's screenplay for *Beast of the City* (1932), while still ostensibly in the cops *versus* gangsters mould, blurs the conventional boundaries of the day. Indeed, its climactic shoot-out foreshadows the kind of movie Clint Eastwood was to make his own 40 years later. Here the cops, led by Walter Huston, are angered by the ease with which the criminals they have sought long and hard to bring to justice walk freely from the court

Edward G. Robinson, seen here in *Little Caesar*, was one of only a few actors who successfully made the transition from the cycle of high-energy gangster movies to the subdued, introspective world of *film noir*.

thanks to legal niceties; so they take the law into their own hands and gun down the villains. Unlike in Eastwood's films, however, the tenets of the day demanded that the cops die too.

Burnett's novel *High Sierra* became a movie in 1941 (and again in 1955 as *I Died a Thousand Times*) and confirmed the fame Humphrey Bogart had earned with a string of successful roles. Burnett's collaborator in adapting the novel into a screenplay was John Huston. The central character of *High Sierra*, played by Bogart, is 'Mad Dog' Roy Earle; although a hardened criminal, he readily involves the audience's sympathy as he seeks freedom and an escape from the treadmill of crime which brings him inexorably closer to his death. Roy Earle may dream idly of a place in the sun but deep inside he knows he will never reach it. For all the aura of impending doom surrounding the central character, the techniques and stylistic conventions of the day were such that much

Both Humphrey Bogart and the character he played in *High Sierra*, the ageing gangster Roy Earle, were men out of their time when *film noir* replaced gangster movies (with Henry Travers).

of *High Sierra* is shot in bright sunlight. Even the night scenes are bright with moon and stars and are far from the grimly portentous nights of the later *noir* movies.

The moral ambiguity of the central character is a quality which gives *High Sierra* its touch of *noir* atmosphere. Roy is a hardened and ruthless criminal but his heart is softened through his accidental meeting with Velma (Joan Leslie), a cripple whom he seeks to help. Such behaviour, together with his affection for a small dog, contrasts sharply with his criminal reputation and alienates him from his crooked associates. Even his girlfriend Marie (Ida Lupino), who is much more closely attuned to him than the girl he tries to help, is gradually pushed aside. But, unlike the *femmes fatales* who enslave so many *noir* heroes, Marie remains genuinely devoted to Roy until the movie's bitter end.

As directed by Raoul Walsh, *High Sierra* builds towards its inevitable climax in a manner which is almost uplifting. After the robbery undertaken by Roy and his makeshift gang goes wrong he makes a final bid for freedom which takes him up into the cathedral-like peaks of the high sierras from where there is no physical escape. But, as he is felled by a bullet from one of his hunters, the implication is that in death Roy can find the freedom he so desperately sought in life. Here, the film moves away from the true mood of *noir*, for although death is often the fate of *noir* protagonists, it is very rarely uplifting.

Another Burnett novel, *The Asphalt Jungle*, was deemed worthy enough to warrant three adaptations, the first in 1950, the others in 1958, as *The Badlanders*, and in 1972, as *Cool Breeze*.

Directed by John Huston, *The Asphalt Jungle* centres upon a gang of doomed criminals whom the audience can readily identify as being the 'heroes' of the tale. The plot is substantially that of what was to become known as a 'caper' movie.

Preparing for the heist (in *The Asphalt Jungle*) that will inevitably lead to imprisonment or death: Marc Lawrence as Cobby, Sterling Hayden as Dix and Sam Jaffe as Doc, the mastermind.

Even an old man like Doc Riedenschneider (Sam Jaffe) can fall foul of his sexual hang-ups in *film noir*. At the end of *The Asphalt Jungle* Doc watches a young girl dancing, unaware that the police are closing in on him.

The gang undertakes an elaborate jewel robbery devised by Doc Riedenschneider (Sam Jaffe) and funded by lawyer Alonzo D. Emmerich (Louis Calherne). All along, Emmerich, whose descent into criminality begins with his infatuation with a young and attractive blonde named Angela Phinlay (Marilyn Monroe), plans to swindle the gang when he can lay his hands on the loot. Emmerich's scheme is accidentally uncovered by gang member Dix Handley (Sterling Hayden), who gets into a gunfight with one of the shady lawyer's hirelings. Dix kills the other man but is himself mortally wounded.

Meanwhile the gang members, one of whom is the sweatily unreliable Cobby (Marc Lawrence), are fast disintegrating as they fall foul of the law, one another, and their own inherent flaws. Emmerich, the lawyer, kills himself to evade the law while Doc, the ageing mastermind, is well on his way to freedom when his sexual hang-ups impinge. He cannot bring himself to leave a roadside

diner where young girls dance to the music of a blaring jukebox. Doc is still feeding his voyeuristic desires when the police arrive.

Just as their inherent weaknesses have conspired to destroy Emmerich and Doc, so too does Dix's past affect his end. Although he is dying, Dix has escaped to the open country of his childhood home in Kentucky where, in the movie's most overtly symbolic scene, he collapses in a field with only horses to see him die.

The repressed sexuality of most of the characters, their duplicity and the way in which the criminals are eventually brought to book (through their flawed personalities, the efforts of corrupt cops, and the work of unsavoury members of the public) wraps the entire film in an air of doom.

While far from classic *film noir, The Asphalt Jungle* follows many of its conventions, even if they are seldom entirely fulfilled. For all its gritty realism, the film is filtered through the perceptions of a dominant director who was not in tune with the essentially downbeat mood of *film noir*, despite his having credit for two other movies often inaccurately acclaimed as 'classics' of the genre (*The Maltese Falcon* and *Key Largo*). Nevertheless, in *The Asphalt Jungle* Huston succeeded in drawing good performances from his entire cast, in particular Calherne, Jaffe and Lawrence.

W.R. Burnett's work for Hollywood included a film called *The Racket* (1951). The ambiguity of leading characters in many *films noirs* is clearly demonstrated in this movie. Originally a stage play, *The Racket* was first transferred to the screen in 1928. The producer of the original screen version was Howard Hughes and when he acquired RKO in 1948 he decided to take another crack at the story. Several writers were employed on the project (among them Sam Fuller) but Hughes was dissatisfied with the results and hired W. R. Burnett in the course of the filming. The end result, while expensive (many of the scenes already filmed had to be re-shot), is only rarely above average for a gangster movie. What makes it different, especially for the period, is that there is little to choose between the characters of the cop and the robber.

Police Captain Thomas McQuigg (Robert Mitchum) and gang boss Nick Scanlon (Robert Ryan) are out of their time. McQuigg, while incorruptibly honest, is old-fashioned in his attitudes and methods and can be just as ruthlessly violent as the worst of the criminals he pursues. Scanlon is equally conservative and just as McQuigg is constantly at odds with his superiors so too Scanlon and his bosses are in uneasy alliance. The gang bosses want Scanlon to soften his image and behave more like a regular businessman than the violent hoodlum he really is. The moral ambiguity of the situation is brought home when McQuigg's obsession with bringing Scanlon to justice forces him to ride roughshod over colleagues and criminals alike and makes him an unwitting collaborator with the gang bosses who also want Scanlon removed. At the movie's pessimistic end, McQuigg allows Scanlon to be killed, but he fails to understand that although Scanlon is dead the rackets remain and, due to their new surface gloss, are even stronger than they were before.

Of the numerous works with which W. R. Burnett was associated *The Racket* is one of the least successful. Perhaps as a result of the number of hands on the script, the film misses most of the opportunities its pedigree suggests. Certainly the rich potential of the teaming of Mitchum and Ryan is dissipated. Nevertheless, the ambiguity of the two leading male characters makes it an interesting, if peripheral, entry in the *noir* lists.

Horace McCoy worked as a newspaper reporter, writing short stories for *Black Mask* magazine in his spare time. In 1931 he went to Hollywood, where he planned to begin working as a screenwriter and actor. Eventually, after a long period of unemployment, he did become a successful and very busy writer in the movies, and it was during this time that he turned some of his observations of the darker side of life in Southern California to good effect by beginning work on his first novel.

They Shoot Horses, Don't They?, first published in 1935, fits well into the *roman noir* tradition, although it is not about crime or criminals. The prevailing mood is one of acute despair as it depicts the mindless soul- and body-destroying struggles of the poor and dispossessed to exist during the depths of the Depression. The marathon

The marathon dances of the 1930s provided the setting for Horace McCoy's finest novel, which eventually reached the screen 30 years on. Gig Young (in white jacket) in *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?*

dancers depicted in the tale are humiliated and exploited, becoming for a while a kind of freak show attended by the well-heeled and famous.

Although generally well-acted and with good production values, the 1969 movie based upon the book misses the acute despair of the original novel. Gloria and Robert, the central characters of *They Shoot Horses*, are both victims of a crumbling society. Coming as it did at the end of the 1960s, the *noir* ambiance that might have been present had the film been made twenty years earlier is largely lost. The screen personas of Jane Fonda as Gloria and Michael Sarrazin as Robert and the busy style of director Sydney Pollack conspire against a *noir* mood. Jane Fonda's personality is too powerful for the nature of her role, and especially for her 'suicide' at Robert's hands, while Michael Sarrazin makes his character too predictably inept. In contrast, two minor characters, Rocky, the egregious MC, and Alice, another marathon dancer (who is a creation of the screenplay), are very much in keeping with the genre. These characters, superbly played by Gig Young and Susannah York, have impressive echoes of, respectively, the grotesques and doomed second-lead heroines of *film noir's* heyday.

Apart from the introduction of Alice, several structural changes are made to the novel by screenwriters James Poe and Robert E. Thompson. Horace McCoy's original narrative is formed with passages from Robert's trial for Gloria's murder, interspersed with flashbacks to the marathon dance. The movie places the narrative thrust on the dance with flash-forwards to the trial. This in itself is no detriment to the intended mood, but flashbacks to Robert's childhood and a scene in which an old plough-horse is shot do little but expose the uncertainty in the minds of the movie's makers. True *noir* stylists gave their audiences greater credit for understanding the nuances of their tale-telling.

Horace McCoy's 1948 novel *Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye* was turned into a movie in 1950. Starring James Cagney as the brutally corrupt Ralph Cotter, the film traces the last months in the life of a completely unsympathetic villain. Cotter is shrewd and cruel, heartless and obsessed with success. For Ralph Cotter, success means the top

Despite the imprisoning shadows and John Garfield's proletarian presence, Lana Turner's squeaky-clean appearance was out of place in the seedy world of James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. By contrast, Jessica Lange projected an aptly steamy sensuality (with Jack Nicholson in the 1981 version).

of the criminal dung-heap and to reach it he will trample on anyone who gets in his way, unhesitatingly killing those who would obstruct him, be they police, fellow criminals or innocent citizens.

The moral ambiguity displayed by most *noir* protagonists is entirely missing in Cotter. He has no redeeming qualities whatsoever. (Even Cagney's psychopathic Cody Jarrett in *White Heat*, made a year earlier, had a sense of humour, however wicked it might have been.) Cotter's sidekick, Jinx Raynor (Steve Brodie), is closer to the *noir* type as he vacillates between his criminality and fear of retribution. Cotter himself is uncompromising and his determination to achieve his desired ends causes him to thrust aside his mistress, Holiday Carleton (Barbara Peyton). This ultimately proves to be his undoing. Where the cops and the mobsters Cotter has cheated fail, the spurned Holiday succeeds and she guns him down at the moment of his ultimate triumph. But Holiday is neither the classic *femme fatale* of *film noir* nor the representation of safe domesticity, the 'other woman' of such tales.

Of all the tough-guy school, James M. Cain is the most hard-boiled (David Madden, his biographer, refers to him as a twenty-minute egg). Cain's terse, almost curt prose style and sharp ear for dialogue whisk the reader breathlessly along. His masterpiece, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, first published in 1934, perfectly demonstrates his remarkable handling of pace and speed. The novel extends to just a little over 40,000 words, reads more like a treatment for a motion picture than a novel, and conveys a wealth of psychological detail, emotional insight, powerful action and intense sexuality at a headlong tempo that is never rushed.

The plot is simple enough: a drifter meets a sensual young woman who is married to an older, somewhat repellent-looking man. Mutual lust is sparked and they murder the husband. They get away with this murder but

then the woman dies in an accident and her lover is sentenced to death for the crime he didn't commit.

Unauthorized film versions of the novel were made in France in 1939 and in Italy in 1942, but Hollywood first came to it in 1946. The failings of Hollywood's version are many (the Italian version, Visconti's *Ossessione*, is by contrast a minor masterpiece), readily identifiable, and can be laid at the door of the studio which made the movie. Noted as it was for splendour and extravagance, MGM was singularly unsuited to *film noir* and effectively scuppered its chances of success in the casting of two of the three principal roles. The anglicized, jolly Cecil Kellaway plays the unattractive husband, Nick Smith, replacing the gross, sweaty Greek, Nick Papadakis, of Cain's novel (perhaps as a gesture towards suspected ethnic sensitivities). Just as probably, Kellaway may have been given the role to overcome the implausibility of marrying off a man like Cain's original Nick to the woman chosen to play Cora. MGM could never have allowed someone with Lana Turner's carefully created wholesome image to marry someone as unappetizing as Nick Papadakis. Turner's physical appearance in the film – clean, perfectly made-up and immaculately dressed in virginal white, replaced by crisply tailored black after her mother's funeral – renders her performance untenable. Turner's Cora looks as if she has never even seen a hamburger, much less spends her days cooking and serving them.

Despite generally good acting performances, limited by the screenplay from which they worked, the two leads suffer from 'star treatment' which, while allowing them to retain a measure of unsavouriness, sacrifices the essential sleaziness of Cain's original creations. John Garfield; as Frank Chambers, fares best. Too powerful and committed an actor to bow to studio pressures, he retains much of the ambiguousness of the novel's hero, which suits the requirements of *film noir*. The setting is also quite effective. Although the diner is usually well-lit, it is surrounded by darkness and is generally shabby and uninviting. The seedy interior is archetypal *noir* territory, even if the diner's rural location is not.

In several respects the 1981 remake of the movie was an improvement, most significantly in the leading female role. Jessica

Lange brings an overheated sensuality to the part of Cora that was missed completely by her predecessor. This helps make the motivation of her lover and the jealousy of her husband much more easily understood. The role of her husband reverts to the novel's version by making him an unattractive, sweaty individual (played by John Colicos) who is far removed from Cecil Kellaway's cuddly persona.

Yet for all these improvements, there is still much to commend the 1946 version. The role of Frank in the remake is taken by Jack Nicholson, who comes closer to Cain's original shiftless bum than Garfield; yet, for all his undoubted ability and the intensity of his performance, Nicholson is never quite right and only rarely subordinates himself to the role. Set against Garfield's understated interpretation, Nicholson appears almost always to be acting, with only the scene in which Frank and Cora urgently copulate on the kitchen table looking as though it might be real. Ultimately, however, it is Nicholson's sometimes uncontrolled aggression which places the remake on the fringes of *film noir*. *Noir* heroes are victims; Nicholson isn't a victim, Garfield is.

Cain's novel *Love's Lovely Counterfeit* became a movie in 1956, as *Slightly Scarlet*. Filmed in Technicolor and Superscope with two glamorous red-haired leading ladies, the film portrays a traditional triangular love affair yet has elements that give it a *noir*-ish feel much less obvious than in Cain's original text. The male side of the triangle is Ben Grace (John Payne), whose criminality is tinged with a measure of honesty that makes his working relationship with his boss, Sol Caspar (Ted De Corsia), decidedly awkward. Ben is in love with the sweetly moral June Lyons (Rhonda Fleming), whose sister Dorothy (Arlene Dahl) is just as sweet but a whole lot less moral.

In the book Dorothy and Ben have an affair which changes their very characters, but the Hollywood version of the eternal triangle is much less pointed.

Although the movie strays far from the *film noir*, the combined talents of the director Allan Dwan, art director Van Nest Polglase and especially the cinematographer, John Alton, overcome the considerable handicaps of the softened storyline and the big screen and even blunt the inappropriate glories of Technicolor. Alton's unhesitating use of highly contrasting shadows and black effectively retains the look of the more customary monochrome *noir* images.

Often listed as a marginal *noir* movie is *Serenade* (1956), which stars Mario Lanza as an opera singer whose voice varies according to which of his two lovers he is with at the moment. Cain's original novel was concerned with homosexuality (of which the writer clearly disapproved) and the variation in the singer's voice reflects his sexual ambivalence in fairly crude terms: deep when his masculine qualities are in command, high-pitched when his femininity is in ascendance. Given the times in which the movie was made, and the presence of Mario Lanza, the screen version took a markedly different course. Instead of a triangular affair between the singer and a male and a female lover, the movie substituted a straightforward triangle between the singer and two women. Together with the miscasting of Lanza, these changes in fact thrust *Serenade* far outside the fold.

Two other major James M. Cain novels, *Mildred Pierce* and *Double Indemnity*, have been adapted into *films noirs* and provided searing roles for two outstanding actresses, Joan Crawford and Barbara Stanwyck. Both movies are discussed in Chapter 6.

The work of Dashiell Hammett is usually placed in the hard-boiled tradition of American writing. It is hard to think of a better place for it – yet its inclusion, like Hemingway's among the tough-guy writers, is not always easy to accept. When set against the terseness of James M. Cain, or the ability of Raymond Chandler to delineate place and atmosphere (sharply but sometimes rather fulsomely), Hammett's more complex prose style makes him an awkward companion.

In all of Hammett's longer works are remarkable passages which open his work up to realms untrodden by other crime writers, then or now. In his most famous novel, *The Maltese Falcon*, he allows his central character, Sam Spade, to tell a story, which is really a parable, about a man named Flitcraft who narrowly avoids death from a falling beam. This event causes him to change his life by

Two of the best of the minor *noir* icons, Sydney Greenstreet and Peter Lorre, as Kaspar Gutman and Joel Cairo, in *The Maltese Falcon* with Humphrey Bogart and Mary Astor.

impulsively walking out on his wife, only to take up a new life which becomes a carbon copy of the one he has quit. Flitcraft's departure from his old life is prompted by his discovery that his well-ordered life was not in step with reality but was completely out of step. The falling beam showed him that his life was not 'a clean orderly sane responsible affair' but was open to random destruction. Equally randomly, he took off, drifted around, then settled down again into a groove much like the one he had left. As Spade observes, 'He adjusted himself to beams falling, and then no more of them fell, and he adjusted himself to their not falling.'

However unlike the work of other hard-boiled and tough-guy writers this passage may be (and not even Hemingway philosophizes in such an overt manner), it reveals direct links with the world as seen through the eyes of tough-guy and hard-boiled heroes. Life is not sane and orderly; however organized a man might be, he does not control his life. Life is something which happens to him. The tough-guy hero knows this, usually intuitively, but his awareness does not prevent him from behaving as if he can control life or from acting as though, for all the evidence to the contrary, life really is that clean, orderly, sane, responsible affair of which Hammett wrote.

The Maltese Falcon was made into movies in 1931 and 1936. The first was subsequently retitled *Dangerous Lady* to prevent confusion with the third version; the 1936 version was entitled *Satan Met a Lady*. Neither film stirred much interest, leaving the way clear for John Huston's 1941 adaptation, which he also directed, to become a classic of modern American culture.

Although highly praised then and now it deserves its place largely for reasons not entirely to do with intrinsic merit. It is a movie which helped turn millions of people on to detective stories in print and at the movies; it gave Humphrey Bogart the opportunity to establish a superstar persona which he seldom varied thereafter; and it gave memorable supporting roles to several actors, particularly Peter Lorre, Sydney Greenstreet (whose first film this was) and Elisha Cook Jr.

In some places the film plods, the photography is matter-of-fact when it could so easily have been highly evocative, and none of the characters is thoroughly developed, although Bogart's portrayal of Sam Spade comes close to conviction, thanks more to the actor than to the script. The character as written (in the script, not the novel) has the now-accepted shell of cynicism but at times it appears to lie over a harder shell of cruelty. At the end, Hammett's Sam Spade sends the malevolent Brigid O'Shaughnessy (played by a miscast and inadequate Mary Astor) to the electric chair for killing his partner. This reason is stated by Bogart's dialogue, but his manner hints that rather than merely rejecting any inclination he might feel towards sentimentality, he actually gets a kick out of doing so. The *noir* heroes who followed would have done anything, even if it meant going to the chair themselves, to save even the most predatory of *femmes fatales*.

Hammett's novel *The Glass Key* became a movie in 1935 (with George Raft in the role of Ed Beaumont and a script by tough-guy novelist Jonathan Latimer) and again in 1942, this time as a starring vehicle for a new 'discovery' named Alan Ladd. In fact, Ladd had been around for a dozen years playing bit parts and waiting for the elusive break. This came in 1942 with *This Gun for Hire*, which was quickly followed by *The Glass Key*.

In *The Glass Key* Ladd plays the Beaumont role, a gangster working for Paul Madvig (Brian Donlevy), whose ambitions in the political field are causing a problem for the gangster fraternity. Ed's attempts to clear his boss's name in a murder case lead him into conflict with the head mobster, Nick Varna (Joseph Calleia), and his right-hand man, the sadistic Jeff (William Bendix).

Typically for the period the screenplay was watered down from Hammett's novel, in which Ladd's character is masochistically linked with Jeff in a relationship which swings wildly between that of closest friends and sworn enemies. Ed's attitude towards Paul is also highly ambivalent, suggesting more readily than in most 'buddy' relationships a latent homosexuality. In the book Ed is an alcoholic and a failed suicide; he is also strikingly cold-blooded in the way he watches Jeff kill gang boss Varna and is quite prepared to let Paul's fiancée, Janet Henry (Veronica Lake), pay the ultimate price for a crime he knows she didn't commit in order to force the real murderer to confess.

The happy ending in which Paul smilingly watches Ed and Janet go off together is also a Hollywood confection. In the novel Ed is clearly less sure that he has done the right thing in pairing off with Janet and retains a lingering attachment to Paul.

Notwithstanding the origins of the material and the barely-hinted-at relationship between Ed and Jeff, the effective use of lighting (the cinematographer was Theodor Sparkuhl) and the coolly remote playing of Alan Ladd, the film strays far from the true *noir* path just as Hammett's work remains apart from the mainline of hard-boiled detective fiction of the period.

More than any other writer of the hard-boiled school, Raymond Chandler wrote with an acute sense of place. Although Hammett set *The Maltese Falcon* in San Francisco, it could have been relocated in any other major city with a waterfront. Shift it to New York or even Chicago and it would work just as well. Uproot Nick's diner in Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* from Southern California and relocate it in Arizona or Texas, Alabama or Tennessee, and nothing would need changing. But try relocating the work of Raymond Chandler anywhere but in Southern California and everything falls apart.

Los Angeles was the setting for most of Chandler's short stories and for six of his seven novels (the exception, *Lady in the Lake*, is only partially located there). As Chandler's masterly creation, Philip Marlowe, travels around LA on his cases, real places, streets and buildings become more than a backdrop for the tale Chandler is telling. They and the atmosphere of the city, and the nature of the people who live there, become an integral part of the structure of the novels. As W.H. Auden observed. Chandler's tales were 'serious studies of a criminal milieu, the Great Wrong Place'.

With Chandler's work appearing contemporaneously with the tail-end of the gangster-movie genre and the early flowering of *film noir* (his first novel appeared in 1939, his fifth ten years later, while the last two appeared

Typically, *The Glass Key* was watered down from Dashiell Hammett's novel and for the most part fell well short of establishing the mood that would later enhance *film noir*. Bonita Granville and Brian Donlevy in centre.

in 1954 and 1958), it is hardly surprising that Hollywood took an interest, especially given that he set his work in the present and the locations were just round the corner from the studios.

Chandler's second novel, *Farewell, My Lovely*, appeared in 1941 and the movie rights were bought by RKO for the ludicrously small sum of $2000. RKO used the story first as the basis for *The Falcon Takes Over* (1942), starring George Sanders in the smooth, sophisticated man-about-town role at which he excelled (and which manner he usually adopted regardless of what part he happened to be playing at the time). The Falcon is Gay Lawrence, a detective of the old school, a dilettante who steps in where policemen only blunder. The Falcon is not even remotely like Chandler's solitary knight, even if the other leading characters of the novel appeared with the same, or at least similar, names. Ward Bond plays Moose Malloy and Anne Revere is Jessie Florian. Laird Brunette becomes Laird Burnett (Selmer Jackson) which is a small change when set against the character's disappearance from the next screen version. Another character, Anne Riordan, and her subplot also had a chequered career in movie versions.

Twentieth Century-Fox bought the screen rights to Chandler's third novel, *The High Window*, at a 50 per cent increase in fee, which was still derisory. Like RKO, the company chose to be as unoriginal as possible, using the story as a plot line for one of its 'Michael Shayne' series of detective films. Marlowe became Shayne (Lloyd Nolan), and while he makes the Falcon look like the old-fashioned bird he really was, he is still a far cry from Chandler's creation.

Having made a mess of (and very little money from) its first attempt to adapt *Farewell, My Lovely*, RKO decided to try again. It still owned the rights and if Chandler cared what it did he was probably resigned by now to the vagaries of Hollywood, having been employed for some time up the road at Paramount (where, *inter alia*, he co-wrote

Philip Marlowe questions Jessie Florian in *Farewell, My Lovely*, in 1944 (Dick Powell and Esther Howard) and in 1975 (Robert Mitchum and Sylvia Miles).

with Billy Wilder the screenplay of the classic *film noir, Double Indemnity*).

This time RKO, in the shape of producer Adrian Scott, decided to make every effort to get it right. In the event, it very nearly brought off the impossible. To start with, Scott hired Edward Dmytryk to direct and both men took seriously the problem of finding an actor to portray Philip Marlowe. It was no easy task, especially given Chandler's idealized principal character who appeared in all his work, reaching his apotheosis in Philip Marlowe.

Chandler's later description of this character was an eloquent summary of his archetypal hero's traits but simultaneously showed how difficult it was to cast an actor in such a role:

> Down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. . . He must be. . . a man of honor, by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it. . . He will take no man's money dishonestly and no man's insolence without due and dispassionate revenge. He is a lonely man and his pride is that you will treat him as a proud man or be very sorry you ever saw him. . . If there were enough like him, I think the world would be a very safe place to live in, and yet not too dull to be worth living in.

With such a portrait to work from Scott and Dmytryk clearly needed an inspirational choice of actor. When they hired Dick Powell many doubtless thought that they had cracked under the strain. Powell was a lightweight actor who had made his name in Busby Berkeley musicals thanks to a pleasant but decidedly average singing voice.

Was this the stuff of which private eyes are made? More to the point, was this the stuff of Marlowe?

Thanks to a minor miracle – in reality, hard work by both actor and director – this seemingly outrageous casting against type worked superbly, although after the movie's original release its title was changed in America to *Murder, My Sweet*, to counter public expectations on seeing the name of Dick Powell on billboards that the movie was a lighthearted musical romp. In Britain, where Chandler

was then treated with rather more respect, the original title was retained.

With admirable ingenuity, the screenwriter John Paxton decided to add opening and closing scenes set in the present in which a temporarily blinded Marlowe recounts to the police the events that have led him to this state and how he came to be knee-deep in recently murdered bodies. This departure from the novel allows the introduction of two recurring devices of *film noir*, the flashback and voice-over narration. Here, the flashback contains the remainder of the film and Marlowe's narration blocks in events with a spoken version of Chandler's detached prose style.

Marlowe is plunged into his familiar world, which mixes mean streets peopled with sleazy lowlifes and the contrasting high-living super-rich, when he is hired by massive ex-con Moose Malloy (Mike Mazurki) to find Velma, whom he last saw eight years previously just before he went to prison. Malloy, whose first appearance – reflected in the window of Marlowe's office as a neon sign flashes on and off in the street outside – is a masterly moment in *film noir*, doesn't give Marlowe much to go on: Velma is 'as cute as lace pants' and once worked as a singer at a club named Florian's. Marlowe subsequently encounters the effete Lindsay Marriott (Douglas Walton), the glamorous and overtly sexy Mrs Grayle (Claire Trevor), who is about thirty years younger than her husband (Miles Mander), and various other individuals, mostly disagreeable, including Jules Amthor (Otto Kruger), who runs a sanatorium where Marlowe finds himself drugged and imprisoned.

In a climactic scene at the Grayle's beach house, after Amthor has been killed by Moose Malloy, Marlowe confronts Mrs Grayle. Resisting her attempts to bribe him into her shady finagling, Marlowe accuses her of killing Marriott. As she is about to shoot Marlowe her husband arrives and kills her just as Malloy bursts in. Malloy recognizes Mrs Grayle as his missing Velma and tries to kill the old man who shoots him. Marlowe, temporarily blinded in the gunfight, is left with a lot of explaining to do.

The moody quality of much of the film, the presence of a *femme fatale*, the series of encounters with grotesque characters, the fated central character and the tangled and often improbable plot (plotting was not Chandler's greatest talent) make it in many respects a classic piece of *film noir*.

Farewell, My Lovely proved to be one of the best interpretations of Chandler's work. This was largely due to the qualities imposed by Paxton and Dmytryk, the exemplary portrayal of a scheming, evil woman by Claire Trevor, and especially to Dick Powell's sound interpretation of Marlowe. Unfortunately for its status at the time, the movie was unfairly overtaken in the public consciousness a couple of years later when Humphrey Bogart played Marlowe in *The Big Sleep*.

Against all expectations, Powell had found his niche and made a number of other good *noir* appearances. Bogart, too, appeared in several *films noirs* but only rarely did he look entirely comfortable and was never as much at ease as Powell.

By 1946, *film noir* was getting into its stride, even if it did not yet have its descriptive name. Yet, for all the growing mood within Hollywood, especially among directors and cameramen, the making of *The Big Sleep* barely advanced the cycle, partly because of directorial whim which adversely affected the form of the original material.

Howard Hawks and his wife had spotted Lauren Bacall as a model and brought her to Hollywood to play opposite Bogart in *To Have and Have Not* (1944). To everyone's surprise, and Hawks's discomfort, Bogart and Bacall hit it off personally from the start and despite the 25-year age gap (she was barely 20) fell in love. Hawks decided to capitalize on the burgeoning relationship between his two stars (they married in 1945) and team them again. The choice of vehicle was *The Big Sleep*, which was adapted by Jules Furthman, William Faulkner (both of whom had worked on *To Have and Have Not*) and Leigh Brackett. To a considerable extent, the screenplay was faithful to Chandler's episodic and linear style of writing. Marlowe follows his leads from one set piece to another, usually encountering a somewhat grotesque character. This quality of Chandler's work makes him especially suited for translation into straightforward narrative treatment on the screen. Only rarely does Marlowe back-

Marlowe watches as Canino forces Henry Jones to take poison. Despite its cynicism, deceit, shadowy settings and Elisha Cook Jr, *The Big Sleep* falls short of being true *film noir*. (Humphrey Bogart, Cook, Bob Steele.)

track to pick up the same characters again (and when he does it is often to find them dead). These necessarily minor characters rarely interact with one another, which exacerbates those deficiencies of plot in Chandler's work. Fortunately, the supporting characters are usually so vivid and the linking narrative so evocative that plot defects can be readily overlooked.

In the case of *The Big Sleep*, the episodic nature of the novel is less well controlled than in Chandler's later work. Additionally, the joins where Chandler pieced together the earlier short stories from which the novel is largely constructed show clearly. The screenplay doesn't cover the seams any better than did Chandler and some loose ends are left to dangle alarmingly, but the nature of the episodes is so entertaining that the audience can forget any worries over cogency and simply go along for the ride.

One side effect of this is the loss of some of the depth necessary to retain a genuine *noir* atmosphere. Although generally dark, the mood is not sustained throughout and to a great extent the fault for this lies with Bogart's interpretation of the role of Philip Marlowe. Good as Bogart is – and were it not for the fact that he is supposed to be playing Marlowe he would be very good indeed – he completely misses the essential wryness of Chandler's creation, replacing it with a kind of jokey cynicism closely akin to that which the actor used in his portrayal of Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon*. While Dick Powell had subordinated his (admittedly much less well-defined) persona to the role of Marlowe, Bogart was simply Bogart.

The personal relationship between Bogart and Bacall, eagerly built upon by the script-writers, also causes problems in terms of the interpretation of Chandler's work. Good as their rapport and the resulting repartee is, the light, bright relationship Bogart evolves with Bacall stands out in stark contrast to the darker mood of the rest of the film.

The Big Sleep is always entertaining to watch but it misses being Chandler; most of the time it is not classic *film noir*, either, despite such powerful and decidedly *noir* scenes as that in which the villainous

Lash Canino (Bob Steele) forces the hapless Harry Jones (Elisha Cook Jr) to drink poison while Marlowe listens in the next room but does not help.

The next four Marlowe movies stray too far outside the *noir* canon to be seriously considered here. *The Lady in the Lake* (1947) used a subjective camera and the audience saw Marlowe (Robert Montgomery) only when he looked in a mirror. By seeing events through Marlowe's eyes the audience was denied the unusual camera angles, heightened light and shadow, and detachment necessary to evoke the true mood of *film noir*. *The Brasher Doubloon* (1947) was based upon *The High Window* (which title was retained in Britain) and starred George Montgomery as Marlowe. Neither the inexperienced Montgomery nor the enjoyably grotesque characters who people the film succeeded in lifting it out of disappointing blandness. *Marlowe* (1968) was based upon *The Little Sister*, Chandler's 1949 novel which marks his startling disillusionment with Hollywood. The movie stars James Garner as an amiable, easy-going Marlowe and is rather better than many critics of the time would allow. Overall, however, the sun-bright and colourful streets of Los Angeles figure so strongly in *Marlowe* that the whole film was lifted from its dour *noir* origins. Similarly out on its own peculiar and sometimes distasteful limb is *The Long Goodbye* (1973). Here, neither Elliott Gould as Marlowe nor director Robert Altman give even a passing nod to Chandler's conception of his character. If Leigh Brackett's screenplay did at least hint at its origins, the look, sound and feel of the movie are so altered by Altman and Gould that she can hardly be blamed for the end result.

Given the uncertainty of these four Marlowe movies, and especially the critical drubbing handed out to the Altman-Gould attempt, the decision to take another fling was a brave one. In the event, it proved to be a risk well worth taking.

A significant factor in the plans for a new version of *Farewell, My Lovely* in the 'seventies was the decision to recreate the ambiance of 1940s Los Angeles. In settling on this the makers acknowledged the importance to the novel of the city and of the period in which the novel is set (though in fact it is set in the late 1930s). The production design, by Dean Tavolouris, was therefore crucial to the movie's success. In the event the design, together with the exemplary cinematography of John Alonzo, proved impeccable.

David Zelag Goodman's script takes much of Chandler's novel but makes certain changes which help smooth the bumps caused by Chandler's sometimes unconvincing plot.

Dick Richard's direction is strong and at all times he pays conscious homage to 1940s *film noir* without falling too deeply into the nostalgia trap. In fact, the detachment which allows Marlowe to see clearly the squalor and corruption which surround him comes closer at times to the bitterness of Chandler's view of Los Angeles in *The Little Sister* than in *Farewell, My Lovely*.

The casting of *Farewell, My Lovely* (1975) has some pluses and some minuses when set against the 1944 version. Jack O'Halloran, as Moose Malloy, does not have the same quiet, brooding menace displayed by Mike Mazurki; Charlotte Rampling simply isn't in the same league as Claire Trevor in her portrayal of Mrs Grayle, while the fact that she is made up and dressed in the manner of Lauren Bacall, and plays the role that way, is both eccentric and mildly dislocating. John Ireland as police lieutenant Nulty is much better than his predecessors (two roles became one in the later movie). Ireland projects the weary cynicism that was the hallmark of so many tough-guy protagonists, thus demonstrating how under-used he was throughout most of his career.

Outstanding among many good and deeply *noir* performances are those of Walter McGinn and Sylvia Miles. McGinn plays Tommy Ray, former bandleader at Florian's club. The unspoken defeat of a man whose career and life have been destroyed by an interracial marriage is eloquently, if mutely, conveyed. Ray is not a character from the novel yet fits in well, even though Chandler's own approach to racial matters, if judged from the opening pages of the novel, might well have proved less sympathetic than scriptwriter Goodman's.

Sylvia Miles, as Jessie Florian, plays the alcoholic widow with the right degree of restrained hysteria, as a woman living perma-

nently on the brink, who eventually dies the same way – a faded old flower on the edge of a sink of squalor and degradation.

But in any Marlowe movie all supporting players are nudged aside by the actor cast in the leading role. If he is wrong the movie stands no chance; if he is slightly more than halfway right the movie will be at least adequate. If he is absolutely right then success is virtually guaranteed.

Robert Mitchum had been absolutely right for the part of Philip Marlowe since 1947 when he appeared in the classic *film noir Out of the Past*. The only problem now was his age. In common with most continuing characters in fiction, Marlowe never really aged – at least not in years (thanks to Chandler's changing perceptions Marlowe *did* age in attitudes). Marlowe was in his thirties; in 1947 Mitchum was 30. In 1975, when he finally put on Marlowe's trenchcoat and slouch hat, Mitchum was 58. It is a measure of his rightness for the role that this discrepancy does not matter.

Effortlessly displaying the weariness inherent in the character, he drifts through a Los Angeles reflected in the pellucid glow of John Alonzo's photography dispensing encouragement or sympathy or ruthless violence, whichever is needed, with equal detachment.

At the opening of the movie, in reflective voice-over, Mitchum intones the litany according to Chandler, neatly adjusted by Goodman to accommodate an older Marlowe:

'This past spring was the first time that I'd felt tired and realized I was growing old. Maybe it was the rotten weather we'd had in LA. Maybe it was the rotten cases I'd had, mostly chasing a few missing husbands and then chasing their wives once I'd found them in order to get paid. Or maybe it was the plain fact that I'm tired – and growing old.'

The essence of Chandler's White Knight is expressed by Marlowe when he meets Nulty in a seedy, tobacco-brown hotel room where the cop grudgingly offers a deal which will give Marlowe time to wrap up the case:

'Thanks, Nulty, but that's not what I need. What I need is another drink. I need a lot of life insurance. I need a home in the country. I need a vacation. I'm tired, Nulty. Everything I touch turns to shit. I've got a hat, a coat and a gun. That's it.'

The film ends on a slightly up-beat note, with Marlowe deciding to hand over $2000 he has acquired along the way to the wife and son of Tommy Ray, who has by then been murdered. If endings in *film noir* are generally downbeat, Chandler's usually are not – or, at least, they are ambivalent – but here this does not detract from the movie's overall and well-sustained mood.

The success of the new version of *Farewell, My Lovely* was such that a follow-up was predictable. *The Big Sleep* (1978) again used Mitchum, by now past 60, but made the cardinal error of switching the setting to England: not, as might have been expected, to seedy London dockland (as used to such good effect in *The Long Good Friday*) but to chintzy Home Counties suburbia. It was an unfortunate decision, especially as Michael Winner, who directed his own screenplay, possesses a sometimes disturbing cynicism which is well suited to the mood of *film noir*. In the event, Winner's cynicism is here held in check with the result that the movie is unsatisfactory Chandler and in its colouring, mood, production values and direction falls well outside *film noir*.

Unlike Chandler's work, the writing of Jim Thompson has qualities which caused problems for earlier moviemakers, not least the sadism and total immorality of his main characters. More recently such considerations have ceased to deter film-makers, but there are still difficulties.

When Thompson's 1950s novel *The Getaway* was filmed in 1972 as a star vehicle for Steve McQueen and his then wife Ali MacGraw (as Doc and Carol McCoy), it became, in director Sam Peckinpah's hands, a blood-soaked chase movie – not surprisingly, perhaps, in view of the novel's content. But there is far more to the book than the conflict between Doc and the law on the one hand, and on the other hand between Doc and his former sidekick, the sadistic and sexually depraved Rudy Torrento (who in the movie becomes Rudy Butler, played with relish by Al Lettieri).

The movie ends as Doc and Carol hightail it across the border into Mexico where, we are

Steve McQueen gets involved in the blood-letting that runs throughout Jim Thompson's work (*The Getaway*).

left to assume, they will live happily ever after on the loot of their last robbery. Thompson didn't see their fate that way at all. In the novel they find that life over the border, in the community known as El Rey, is a very strange affair indeed, by no means happy ever after. The book's ending, a long and surreal passage, enters an area far removed from the comparatively simplistic view taken by Peckinpah. True, these closing passages of Thompson's novel have little to do with the gangster movie Peckinpah chose to make. For that matter, they stray far from the tough-guy path. The life Doc and Carol enter in the novel is a dark reflection of that sub-genre of wartime and immediate post-war movies wherein the recently dead are held in symbolic limbo in order that they can resolve the unfinished business of their lives.

Although he worked on *The Killing* (1956) and *Paths of Glory* (1957) as a screenwriter, Thompson's substantial contribution to tough-guy thriller writing remains largely untapped by American film-makers. The French have taken rather more interest. Thompson's *A Hell of a Woman* became the evocatively named *Série Noire* in 1979 and his novel *Pop. 1280* was made into *Coup de Torchon* (1981) by Bernard Tavernier, but there is still a small goldmine awaiting any moviemaker who is prepared to dig a little deeper.

Jim Thompson has a curious screen credit unmatched by other tough-guy writers: he had an acting role in a film version of another writer's book. The year before his death he played Mr Grayle in the 1975 version of Raymond Chandler's *Farewell, My Lovely*.

The darkness of the human spirit explored by Cornell Woolrich and extended by Jim Thompson fell into insensitive hands when Mickey Spillane created the amoral, brutal, jingoistic Mike Hammer, who stomps his way through life like a mindless monster in a primeval swamp. With limited skill and no discernible saving graces, the Spillane-Hammer axis became hugely successful, tapping as it did a deep-seated streak of cruel, atavistic perversity in readers.

Screen versions of the Mike Hammer saga have proved difficult to make without major changes. Offering as they do Spillane's right-wing hostility, they missed their audiences by coming along at the wrong time. As such later movies as the *Rambo* series have shown, the right-wing tendency of American life in the late 1970s and 1980s provided a market for superficial, gratuitously violent, ill-conceived, inadequately defined movies. Spillane-Hammer would have been happy in that milieu but their ethos was unsuitable for *film noir* (although, thanks to substantial directorial control, one 1955 film, *Kiss Me Deadly*, had a great impact).

Several latter-day writers have continued the traditions of the tough-guy writers of the 1930s and the line of hard-boiled detectives they created. The degree of success attained has proved highly variable. Jonathan Valin has tried to do for Cincinnati what Chandler did for Los Angeles; James Crumley has taken to the wide open spaces of Montana; Robert B. Parker and George V. Higgins have made Boston their backdrop, but with very different results. Parker's private eye, Spenser, is firmly in the line of Chandler's White Knight, but if his work takes him to

Roy Scheider as Harry Mitchell threatens the easily frightened, sweating blackmailer Leo Franks (Robert Trebor) in *52 Pick-Up*.

the highs and lows of Bostonian society he never finds depths as dark and as evil as those plumbed by Higgins. Building his tales almost entirely from dialogue, Higgins sustains a remarkable narrative drive. One novel, *The Friends of Eddie Coyle*, became a late *noir* movie of some distinction and provided a major role for Robert Mitchum.

Most popular and successful of the crop of tough-guy writers of the late 1980s is Elmore Leonard. His writing career began in the movies, where his work was wide-ranging and always interesting. Leonard's early novels were similarly varied (one provided the source material for the 1971 western *Valdez Is Coming*), but he eventually settled on much the same ground as his tough-guy predecessors. Given that his books are fast-paced, feature strongly-drawn characters and are peppered with crisp dialogue, it is not surprising that the wheel has turned to reveal Leonard now adapting his own work for the screen.

While *52 Pick-Up* is not one of Leonard's best novels, it does contain much of *noir*'s sensibilities and is typically peopled with ambiguous characters and grotesques, as well as being steeped in an air of approaching doom. The 1986 movie, directed by John Frankenheimer and starring Roy Scheider as Harry Mitchell, moves at a fast pace for long enough to carry audiences over a flagging final third. The manner in which Mitchell encircles and eventually destroys the gang which seeks to blackmail him over his one and only deviation from the straight and narrow is effectively depicted. Throughout, the movie's bleak humour is enhanced by dialogue which, for the most part, comes straight from the page. If Leonard has not yet earned the right to sit unchallenged in Chandler's chair, his dialogue is certainly better suited to the movies than that of anyone else in the new wave of crime writers.

Today, the tough-guy writers should find it easier to gain acceptance, mainly because the motion-picture industry of the late 1980s differs greatly from that of the 1940s. There is now wider acceptance of certain kinds of material, greater tolerance towards violence and sexual waywardness and also a more receptive attitude towards film-makers from other media and countries. In the 1940s Hollywood tended to be very parochial. The existence of a wealth of potential material in popular crime fiction, built up during the 1930s, was not itself enough to give impetus to *film noir*. This material had to be developed and the most prominent developers were outsiders. Some came to Hollywood from the East Coast theatre, but the prime movers came from much further afield.

Peter Lorre as the hunted child-murderer in Fritz Lang's German masterpiece, *M*.

The waking nightmare of German Expressionist thought came to the screen through the Gothic artifice of Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*.

3

THE ORIGINS OF *FILM NOIR*: EMIGRE AND OTHER DIRECTORS

'It was in the cards, and there was no way of stopping it.'
Criss Cross

THE ties which bind American *film noir* of the mid-1940s to the German Expressionist cinema of the 1920s are visually self-evident. On-screen in *noir* can be seen cinematic effects (admittedly much diluted) reminiscent of the Gothic artifice of such films as *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1919), and reflections of the deeply pessimistic view of society demonstrated in *The Testament of Dr Mabuse* (1932).

The Gothic element had already made an appearance in some Hollywood films, notably in the cycle of horror films made by Universal under producer Carl Laemmle Jr, a first-generation American whose father had emigrated from Germany towards the end of the last century. Among Universal's Gothic horror stories were *Frankenstein* (1931), *Dracula* (1931) and, especially impressive, *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935).

The extent to which the German cinema's Expressionist films impinged on Hollywood might have been limited, given the strong cultural and artistic ties the movement had with Germany's own heritage.

Stemming as it did from the Expressionist art movement of roughly 1900 to 1930 – a movement morbidly fascinated by the dark forces of magic and the human psyche – German Expressionist cinema of the 1920s was cynically pessimistic, reflecting post-war disillusionment, and tended to view history as a waking nightmare. A contributory factor to this mood was an element of radicalism which ran counter to the rising tide of fascism.

The Cabinet of Dr Caligari, coming as it did early in the cycle, is strikingly non-naturalistic in its dramatic evocations of the tortured mind of its narrator.

The unreal and alarming world of Dr Caligari was soon overtaken by the real world. The growth of fascism and the coming to power of Hitler generated tensions and fears in many areas of German life. Inevitably the arts world, and especially its more radical practitioners, was adversely affected. Many film-makers felt compelled to leave Europe, among them several directors of considerable stature in their own land who were largely unknown to the rest of the world. They included William Dieterle, Fritz Lang, Otto Preminger, Robert Siodmak, Edgar G. Ulmer and Billy Wilder, all of whom made an impact on the development of *film noir* – notably Lang, Siodmak and Wilder.

In Germany, Fritz Lang's best-known work included *The Testament of Dr Mabuse, Metropolis* (1927) and *M* (1931).

M is a powerful film, visually, thematically, dramatically and in its performances. Based upon real events, the crimes of a child-murderer in Düsseldorf, it illustrates with masterly control the fine line which divides man from beast, individual from mob, and criminals from authority. Lang delicately balances the unspeakable brutality of the maniacal killer against the fury of the mob which hunts him down, subtly raising questions as to which is the most culpable:

Fritz Lang (left) on the set of *M*, with cinematographer Fritz Arno Wagner.

the man acting on uncontrollable impulse, or the mob of supposedly 'normal' people acting out of atavistic rage. The actions of the police and the criminal fraternity which co-operate in the hunt for the murderer are closely paralleled and no facile distinction between good and evil is allowed to dispel the prevailing pessimism.

The murderer, superbly played by Peter Lorre, is no mere cipher. Without defending him, Lang and Lorre create a character who is at once beyond the pale, yet perversely sympathetic. 'Always – always, there is this evil force inside me,' the murderer confesses, thereby breaking with the cinematic tradition whereby all criminals were portrayed as calculating individuals acting out of mercenary or malicious choice. The murderer's lament, 'Who knows what it feels like to be me?', strikes a curiously powerful chord of empathy.

After leaving Germany Fritz Lang worked briefly in France, where he made *Liliom* (1934), before travelling to America. His first two films in Hollywood were *Fury* (1936) and *You Only Live Once* (1937). Both films have features which strongly prefigure the *noir* movement and which provide important visual and thematic links between the German Expressionism of the previous decade and the American *film noir* which lay ahead.

Although *Fury* is essentially a story of revenge, the basis of its plot, the actions of a lynch mob, gives it a strong social consciousness and allows Lang to pursue again his interest in how individuals change character when they group together.

Unlike most later *films noirs*, there is little sign of resignation or doom foretold in *Fury*; instead, as its title implies, the prevailing mood is one of anger. At first it is the anger of the mob, townspeople who believe that Joe Wheeler (Spencer Tracy), a stranger in town, is a kidnapper. They storm the jail where he is being held on suspicion, attacking it with fire and dynamite, and, as they believe, kill him. But Wheeler has not been killed. He has escaped the flames and gone into hiding. Later, the real kidnapper is found but still Wheeler lies low as a crusading district attorney indicts more than a score of townspeople for his 'murder'. The DA's anger is at the injustice that has been done; Wheeler's anger is personal. Only when the townspeople have been found guilty does Wheeler eventually, and reluctantly, reappear.

The mood of the film, to some extent undercut by the studio's decision to tack on a happy ending, is one of unrelenting pessimism over man's animal instincts. It is clear that Lang doesn't think highly of mankind, whether as a mob, whose first civilized characteristic to be sacrificed is conscience, or as an individual, whose cold fury drives him to act as brutally as the mob.

Given the prevailing mood of this film and several others it is interesting to note Lang's own view of his work, as expressed in an interview with Peter Bogdanovich: 'They all say I am dark and pessimistic. . . I always made films about characters who struggled and fought against the circumstances and traps they found themselves in. I don't think that is pessimistic.'

It is hard to agree with Lang's view of his professional nature in the light of the events which befall the protagonist of *You Only Live Once*, Eddie Taylor (Henry Fonda), a three-time loser who tries hard to give up a life of crime. Unjustly suspected of involvement in a hold-up in which a man has been killed, Eddie is sentenced to death.

He plans an escape, unaware that the real killer has been found and that he, Eddie, is about to be pardoned. By the time the warden of the prison learns of Eddie's pardon, the escape attempt has begun and Eddie, understandably mistrustful of all authority and now thoroughly alienated from society, refuses to believe the truth. He persists with his escape attempt, killing a priest in the process. With his wife and baby, Eddie flees but they are doomed. Like numerous later *noir* heroes, Eddie can find freedom only in death.

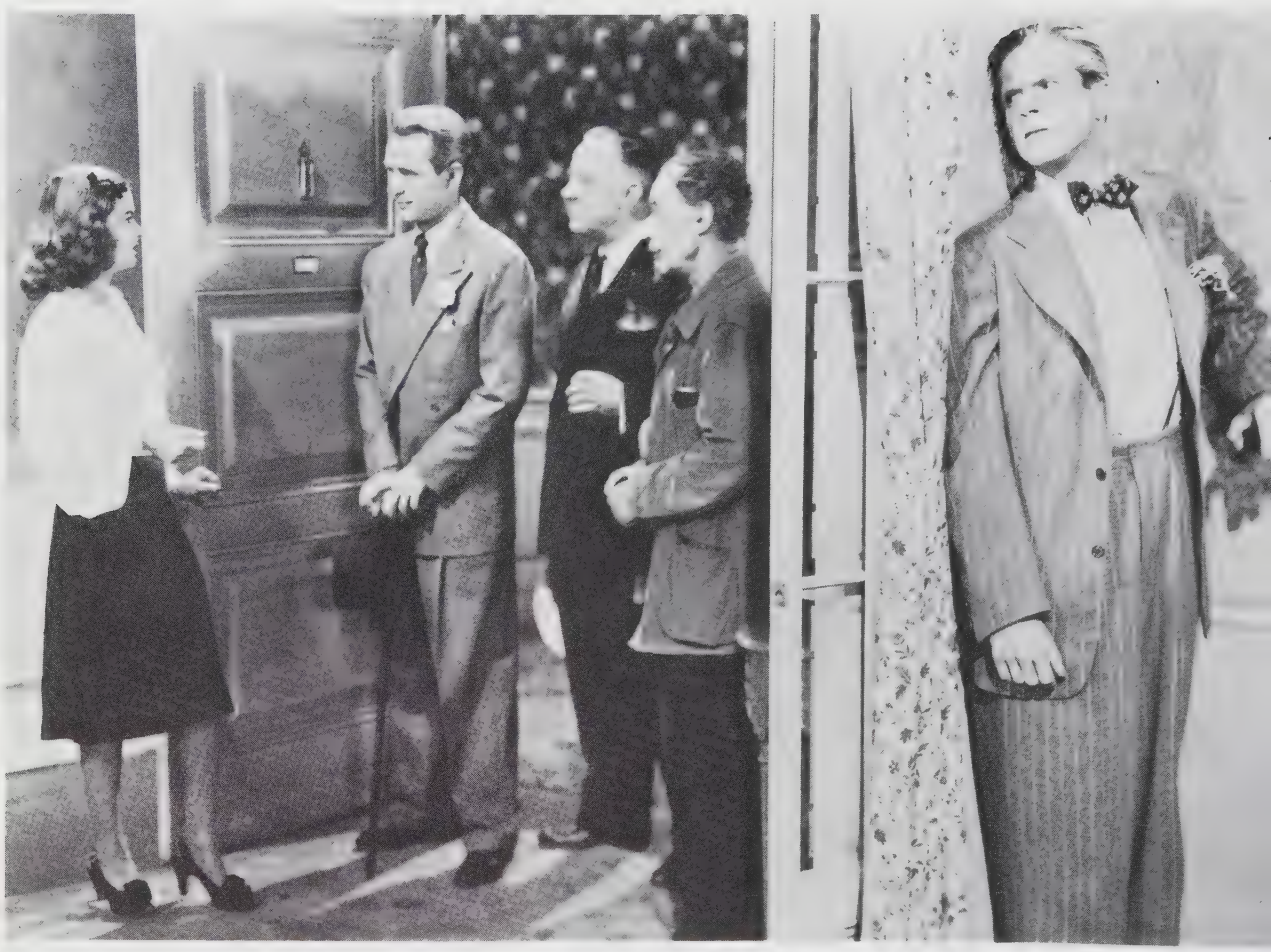
In 1945, now fully established in Hollywood, Fritz Lang directed two strongly *noir* movies. There are several similarities between *The Woman in the Window* and *Scarlet Street* (a remake of Jean Renoir's 1931 film *La Chienne*). The leading roles in both films are similar in type: the man is harmless, repressed, but carries within him surprising depths of passion; the woman is scheming and immoral. Compounding the similarity, these roles are played in both films by Edward G. Robinson and Joan Bennett. The storylines, too, are far from being unalike although with certain significant differences which make one the much stronger film.

The Woman in the Window traces the descent of a middle-aged professor, Richard Wanley (Robinson), from his uneventful existence into chaos thanks to a chance meeting with Alice Reed (Bennett), whose portrait he admires. In *Scarlet Street*, a lowly cashier turned artist, Christopher Cross (Robinson), sinks into an all-too-real nightmare after his meeting with the unscrupulous Kitty March (Bennett).

The events recounted in *The Woman in the Window* turn out to have been a dream. Professor Wanley, having lectured colleagues on Freudian impulses, dreams his adventure, implying a deeper and darker side to his psyche than his surface respectability would suggest.

In *Scarlet Street*, the more accomplished of the two films, Robinson powerfuly displays the infatuation of a mild cashier who betrays the trust of his employers by embezzling

Spencer Tracy as Joe Wheeler, the innocent victim of a lynch mob who returns to take his revenge in *Fury*, one of Fritz Lang's two American masterworks.



Joan Bennett and Dan Duryea, in villainous collusion, react very differently to the arrival of callers at the house on *Scarlet Street*.

money with which to retain Kitty's affection. In fact, she despises him; all her actions are dictated by greed, which is fuelled by her boyfriend Johnny Prince (Dan Duryea, who plays a similar role in *The Woman in the Window*). The use of lighting to show Christopher's slowly changing attitude towards Kitty as he discovers her true feelings is highly effective. The apartment in which Christopher keeps Kitty, in what he fondly believes to be their love nest, is brilliantly lit, but after he kills her his surroundings become progressively darker.

Unusually for Hollywood movies of the period, Lang manages to get away with an ending which evades the code dictating that a man must be seen to pay for his crimes. Johnny Prince is executed for Kitty's murder and Christopher goes free. Lang was able to persuade the studio that it was punishment enough that his protagonist's life is ruined. Cross's employers have discovered his embezzlement and have fired him. His paintings, which have suddenly become valuable, were usurped by Kitty before he killed her and he cannot benefit from their unexpected popularity. In the end, alone, broken and miserable, his mind begins to crack.

Fritz Lang continued to make *films noirs* in the 1950s, but with variable results. *Clash By Night* (1952) was moderately successful in transferring some of the mood of *noir* to an eternally triangular tale set in the decidedly non-urban fishing community of Monterey. *The Blue Gardenia* (1953) is disappointingly uninspired, given that for this film Lang was joined by one of *noir*'s most important cinematographers, Nicholas Musuraca.

The problem with *The Blue Gardenia* lies in its adoption of a higher level of involvement for women who are outside *noir*'s conventional roles. *Film noir* presents a man's world into

Edward G. Robinson's dream woman, played by Joan Bennett, leads him into a nightmare world of deception and murder in *The Woman in the Window*.

Anne Baxter as Norah Larkin, caught in the fear-filled world of *The Blue Gardenia*.

which women come as seducers, castrators, malevolent manipulators and harbingers of death. In *The Blue Gardenia* Norah Larkin (Anne Baxter) is none of these. She is an innocent, caught up in a world she neither understands nor cares for. While this is substantially the experience of many *noir* protagonists, the fact that a stronger narrative drive is given to the character of investigative reporter Casey Mayo (Richard Conte) makes it hard to retain sufficient empathy with Norah, whose plight is, in any case, largely self-induced.

One interesting if peripheral effect Lang and Musuraca created was the dichotomy between the Norah-orientated scenes and those in which Casey is the central figure.

A dark avenging angel: Gloria Grahame in Fritz Lang's classic, *The Big Heat*.

The female scenes are lively, bubbly and bright; the male scenes are bleak and chilling. For all that, the decision to photograph the movie in the flat, unshadowed style currently popularized by TV diminishes the potential impact of the film.

A few months after completing *The Blue Gardenia* Lang was in more typical and much stronger form with *The Big Heat* (1953), a movie which has been repeatedly, and largely unfairly, criticized for excessive violence. In fact, the violence in *The Big Heat* is marginal and mostly off-screen, but when it comes it is with such force that it makes far more impact than that of many other less well-structured movies wherein the violence is all too vividly on-screen.

The protagonist of *The Big Heat* is Dave Bannion (Glenn Ford), a dedicated and totally honest cop who pursues criminals with such single-mindedness that he risks alienating even his colleagues on the force. Bannion's clash with the local boss of organized crime brings him into conflict with corrupt officials. After his wife is killed in an attempt on his life, Bannion resigns and goes after the criminals alone.

Curiously enough, film-makers have found it difficult to gather audience sympathies behind honest cops unless, like Clint Eastwood and Charles Bronson, they behave at least as brutally as the criminals they seek to destroy. Conversely, moviemakers have contrived to build a sympathetic atmosphere around some criminals, whether an aberrant individual (Bruno's desperate attempt to recover the lost cigarette-lighter in *Strangers on a Train*) or an entire criminal community (*The Godfather*). With Dave Bannion the director and actor largely succeed, although it must be conceded that Bannion's conscience is decidedly narrow in scope and he is unaware of the wake of victims he leaves behind him.

Anyone who helps Bannion, or even talks to him, is marked for retribution. That most of these individuals are woman (four die violent deaths in the course of the film) suggests a powerful streak of misogynism in Lang that was usually held in better check.

There is no real *femme fatale* in *The Big Heat* but there is a character who appears in differing guises in several *films noirs*. Debby Marsh (superbly played by Gloria Grahame) is attracted to Bannion and makes no attempt to hide the fact. She is lively and sparkling, and, however immoral, is immensely likeable to everyone but Bannion, who sees her only as a reflection of the men with whom she associates. Debby's relationship with Bannion leads to conflict with a sadistic hoodlum, Vince Stone (Lee Marvin), who hurls boiling coffee in her face. Dreadfully scarred, Debby goes to Bannion, who shows for the first time a glimmer of conscience for the predicament of those who place their trust in his hands. Debby kills the woman who holds the key to the destruction of the city's criminal syndicates and then lures Stone into a trap before scalding him. She is shot by Stone, who is then taken prisoner by Bannion. Debby dies, her scars hidden in the folds of her treasured mink coat, and Bannion returns to his desk, vindicated but alone.

For audiences, Bannion's behaviour throughout the film, and especially after the murder of his wife, is believable and sympathetic yet, thanks to Ford's playing of the role, there is a curious ambivalence generated by his cold response to the warm, vital and sorely mistreated Debby. The ambiguity thus generated is not only central to *film noir* but also helps round out characters which are as complex as any in the canon.

While *The Big Heat* may not be quite on a par with *M*, there is about it an atmosphere of such powerful intensity that it remains one of the most striking examples of *film noir* and of the work of Fritz Lang.

In 1954 Lang again worked with Glenn Ford and Gloria Grahame, this time in a remake of Renoir's *La Bête Humaine* (1938). Entitled *Human Desire*, Lang's version of this tale of sexual jealousy and lustful desire, to say nothing of a sado-masochistic relationship, is predictably diluted to conform

Glenn Ford, unwillingly caught up in the sado-masochistic world of Broderick Crawford and Gloria Grahame in *Human Desire*.

to contemporary Hollywood restrictions. Nevertheless, thanks to the off-beat sensuality of Gloria Grahame, as Vicki Buckley, much of the original's mood is retained.

Here, Grahame is much more in the mould of the *femme fatale* than she was in her portrayal of Debby Marsh. Although Vicki starts out as a wife attempting to help her husband keep his job, his obsessive jealousy eventually causes an evil reaction in her. When Carl Buckley (Broderick Crawford) kills the man he incorrectly thinks is having an affair with his wife, Vicki is suspected of the murder. Jeff Warren (Ford) lies to protect her and he and Vicki are soon involved in a steamy affair. When she fails to persuade Jeff to kill Carl so that they can be together, Vicki leaves with her husband. Viciously, she pours out a torrent of abuse, reveals that she planned his death, and then catalogues her sexual encounters. When Carl, driven to the brink, kills Vicki it is the ultimate fulfilment of their sado-masochistic characteristics. The depths of Lang's perception, his controlled direction and the quality of Grahame's performance suggest that, however extreme the result may be, Vicki has achieved a deliberately sought victory. If she could not have what she wanted in life, she wanted nothing – not even life itself.

With the character of Jeff being much more passive than is usual, even for a *noir* hero, Vicki becomes the central figure around whom all the rest must revolve. In contrast to *The Blue Gardenia, Human Desire*'s victim is also the *femme fatale* – an unlikely combination that works superbly.

Fritz Lang's last American film is much less than his best, yet is as bleak as any other film in the entire *noir* canon. In *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* (1956) two men, writer Tom Garrett (Dana Andrews) and his publisher Austin Spencer (Sidney Blackmer), who is also the father of Tom's fiancée Susan (Joan Fontaine), contrive a scheme which will demonstrate the folly of capital punishment and at the same time be a great publicity coup. They deliberately set out to incriminate Tom in a recent murder, intending to reveal the truth after his conviction. But after Tom has been convicted Spencer, who alone holds the evidence of their scheme, is killed in an accident. Susan desperately tries to save her fiancé as the date set for his execution draws closer.

Up to this point, the film has developed like any good suspense story but there are constant hints that all is not as it seems. Little touches, most of them seemingly irrelevant (and, indeed, many of them turning out to be precisely that), alert the audience, at least subconsciously, to the twists to come. When Susan visits the prison with new-found evidence which will result in his pardon, Tom inadvertently reveals that he really *did* kill the woman. She was his wife and he wanted her out of the way so that he could marry Susan for her money. Shocked at the revelation of such black depths in the man she loves, Susan informs the authorities. Tom's pardon is withdrawn, and the sentence of death can be carried out.

The constant duplicity of the protagonist as he subtly schemes and lies makes him different from the customary blighted *noir* hero. Such heroes may lie, but usually they do so for unselfish reasons. The deviousness works well here, thanks in part to the cold-eyed, dead-voiced, deliberately wooden persona which Dana Andrews creates. Seen in the light of the movie's dénouement, Andrews's character is a calculating, manipulative, murderous cipher.

Another German director of seminal importance to the development of *film noir* is Robert Siodmak, born in America to German parents who returned with him to their homeland before their son's first birthday.

Siodmak's first film, *People on Sunday* (1929), a light-hearted look at how city dwellers from Berlin spend their weekends in the country, was a collaboration between Siodmak, his brother Curt, Billy Wilder and Edgar G. Ulmer. By the time of Siodmak's third film, *Inquest* (1931), the influence of Fritz Lang was already apparent, as was a measure of German Expressionism. When a later film was attacked by Hitler's aide, Joseph Goebbels, Siodmak took the hint and left Germany for France, and when the war began he headed for America.

Siodmak's first half-dozen films were routine products for Universal Studios but he then directed two *films noirs*, one of which, *Phantom Lady*, is a paranoid tale of the search for a woman whose existence is questioned by everyone except the man whose life depends

Fritz Lang on the set of *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* with Barbara Nichols.

upon her being found. *Christmas Holiday* (1944) is not paranoid but pursues obsession with a curious detachment.

To some extent the difficulty Siodmak had with *Christmas Holiday* lies in its origins and cast. The original story was by W. Somerset Maugham, a writer far removed from the traditional literary sources of much of *film noir*. For his leading actors, Siodmak had singer Deanna Durbin and dancer Gene Kelly. Although Durbin apparently resisted Siodmak's efforts to present her in an unglamorous light, her performance proves quite effective, to the surprise of anyone whose expectations were based upon her previous romantic musical films.

Told largely in flashback, *Christmas Holiday* traces the marriage of Abby and Robert Manette (Durbin and Kelly) and the third side of their uncomfortable triangle, his mother (Gale Sondergaard). Robert is an idly charming member of an old New Orleans family who barely conceals a violent temper.

A misleading halo of light hangs over Deanna Durbin as she faces her homicidal husband, Gene Kelly, in Robert Siodmak's *Christmas Holiday*.

Driven to despair by a curious form of split personality. Olivia De Havilland plays twin sisters in *The Dark Mirror*.

He and his mother have dark secrets, including a murder (and the barest suggestion of an incestuous attachment to one another). Robert's crime is uncovered and after he has been convicted Abby changes her name and becomes a cabaret singer (the nearest Hollywood could come to a whore working in a New Orleans brothel). It is at this point that the story returns to the present after the revelation that Robert has escaped from prison and is hiding in Abby's dressing room. In the film's climax Robert declares how he hates Abby for the degradation of the life she is now leading. She counters by asserting how she is vicariously sharing his imprisonment by trapping herself masochistically into the kind of life that she now has. Robert 'frees' them both from their imprisonment by killing Abby before he is himself killed by the police.

With a competent performance by Kelly, which continually hints at the perversity of his character and underlines the corruption and decline of the Manette family, *Christmas Holiday*, a rarely seen movie, contains much that is worthy of Siodmak, even if it is considerably undermined by the decision to change Abby from a whore to a cabaret singer, a career which hardly equates to the traditional fate worse than death.

Much more than merely worthy was *The Spiral Staircase* (1945), although the failure to give the psychopathic murderer, played by George Brent, any depth of characterization flawed what might otherwise have been a classic work. Essentially a suspense story in which the crazed killer stalks the deaf-and-dumb heroine (a splendid performance from Dorothy McGuire), the sometimes facile pseudo-psychology of *The Spiral Staircase* ultimately weakens the movie. Nevertheless, it contains many fine scenes and the photography, by Nicholas Musuraca, is exemplary as it plunges the stricken heroine into isolated darkness, corresponding to her physical handicaps, just as the spiral staircase symbolizes the twists of the human psyche.

The psychology of *The Dark Mirror* (1946) was only marginally tighter, allowing Siodmak to make a fairly interesting variation on the theme of identical twins (played by Olivia De Havilland) whose psyches could not be more different.

Dorothy McGuire caught by Nicholas Musuraca's camera in a trap of fear in *The Spiral Staircase*.

One sister, Ruth, is a warm and gentle person; the other, Terry, is cold-hearted and psychotic. The fact that they are outwardly identical makes it hard for the police and psychologist Scott Elliott (Lew Ayres) to deduce which twin is capable of murder. Once again, simplistic psychology weakens the premise and here the relatively normal setting (unlike the Gothic house of horrors in which *The Spiral Staircase* is set) militates against the movie's success.

Discarding such quasi-Freudian undertones for his next movie, also in 1946, Siodmak made a powerful drama replete with most of the qualities characteristic of the best *films noirs*.

The Killers is based upon an Ernest Hemingway story which more than any other justifies the writer's somewhat questionable inclusion in the tough-guy fraternity of American fiction. The screenplay of *The Killers*, by Anthony Veiller, begins by faithfully recording the whole of Hemingway's story of a killing by two hired gunmen. This occupies the first ten minutes of screen time, after which Veiller's script explores the reason, unstated by Hemingway, for the victim's passive acceptance of his fate.

The gunmen, Al and Max (Charles McGraw and William Conrad), arrive in the small town of Brentwood in the early evening. At a diner they ask about a man known as 'the Swede' for whom they are searching. Making no attempt to conceal their malevolent interest, they discover the Swede's address and leave. A young man from the diner beats them to the rooming house where the Swede, who calls himself Pete Lunn, is living.

The Swede is played by Burt Lancaster in his first screen role. Lancaster's remarkable passive sensuality, an aspect of his acting persona which always remained thereafter but was never again used to such good effect, makes him a perfect *noir* victim.

He is lying on his bed in the rooming house, his face hidden in the shadows as Nick enters and urgently warns him about the two men. The Swede's response is grimly fatalistic:

'There's nothing I can do about it.'
'I can tell you what they look like.'
'I don't want to know what they look like. Thanks for coming.'
'Don't you want me to go and see the police?'

The Killers, gunmen Al and Max (Charles McGraw and William Conrad), arrive in town in pursuit of their victim.

'No. They wouldn't do any good.'
'Isn't there something I can do?'
'There ain't anything to do.'
'Couldn't you get out of town?'
'No, I'm through with all that running around.'
'Why do they want to kill you?'
'I did something wrong. Once. Thanks for coming.'

Moments later, when the two gunmen mount the stairs, the Swede listens, his expression displaying not fear but resigned acceptance that his life is about to end. There is a hint behind his eyes that while he would not willingly have chosen to die in this way, death itself is not the enemy. Moments later, the Swede dies in a hail of bullets.

It is here that Hemingway's story ends, with no explanation of either the motive for the murder or the victim's unnatural refusal to attempt to evade his killers.

From the moment Anthony Veiller's screenplay takes over and new ground is explored, the film undergoes a shift of emphasis. An insurance investigator named Riordan (Edmond O'Brien), curious about the Swede's acceptance of his fate, pursues the story, digging into the background of a payroll robbery that ended in cross and double-cross – at the heart of which lies, of course, a *femme fatale* (played here by Ava Gardner). Good as the whole film is,

The Swede, the most passive victim of all *film noir*, is warned of the arrival of the gunmen in *The Killers* (Burt Lancaster and Phil Brown).

On the set of *The Killers*: director Robert Siodmak, producer Mark Hellinger and Sam Levene as Lubinsky.

and there is a virtuoso single-take sequence detailing the robbery, the later sequences never quite come up to the brilliant opening. It is in the opening that the superbly shadowed photography of Woody Bredell, the casual menace of the killers, the oblique dialogue that is almost pure Hemingway, all blend to form a perfect example of the essence of *film noir*.

The build-up of flashbacks, as Riordan questions first one witness to the Swede's life, then another, is another convention of classic *films noirs*, but the opening scenes set standards the film's makers could not sustain.

Siodmak worked again with Burt Lancaster, in what was to be the actor's last in a

Director Billy Wilder on the set of *Ace in the Hole*, with Richard Benedict as the man trapped in a cave.

string of *noir* performances. This was in *Criss Cross* (1949). Once again, Lancaster plays a passive victim caught up in a mesh of lies and cheating at the heart of which lies a scheming woman, this time played by Yvonne De Carlo. Again a robbery is the focus of the criminality but the centre of the story is the fluctuating relationship between the principals, joined here by Dan Duryea, an actor of considerable merit who enhanced numerous *films noirs* but who was rarely granted a role more sustaining than that of an oily third side to an eternal triangle.

Although in most respects a lesser film than *The Killers*, *Criss Cross* is a more consistent production, despite the fact that neither Siodmak nor Lancaster was enthusiastic about continuing with the film when producer Mark Hellinger (who worked on both films) died suddenly at the age of 44. Interviewed in 1973 by Gordon Gow, Lancaster referred to the movie dismissively, commenting that it had a 'rehashed chow of a script'. For all the star's displeasure, the movie has stood up rather better than many of its era.

The excellent photography is by Franz Planer. Even though there are rather more full-lit scenes than is usual for *film noir*, their brightness is not allowed to undercut the prevailing mood. Indeed, Siodmak's conception and Planer's interpretation are such that even these scenes fit into the overall visual conception through their contrast with the seediness of the milieu in which the other action takes place.

Of the other German émigrés who worked in Hollywood the most significant contributor to the *film noir* is Billy Wilder, whose *Ace in the Hole*, perhaps the most cynical movie ever to come out of Hollywood, *Double Indemnity*, with its mesmerically manipulative spiderwoman, and *Sunset Boulevard*, with its atmosphere of brooding baroque insanity, are classics of the genre.

The émigré directors made a unique contribution to the development of *film noir* by bringing their own visual and narrative concepts to bear upon native American literary material. But there were also many American-born directors involved in the movement, and some from Britain, whose work played a major part in consolidating American *film noir*.

Nicholas Ray and Samuel Fuller are two directors with highly individualistic visions whose work extends over a wide range of movies. Both made interesting *films noirs* although, given their personal characteristics, they were seldom content to remain entirely within the convention's bounds.

In 1948 Ray made *They Live By Night*, one of several films which skirted around the edges of the Bonnie and Clyde story. Here, the two young people are Bowie (Farley Granger) and Keechie (Cathy O'Donnell) but, significantly, their criminality is underplayed, with the girl being a passive onlooker to crimes committed by the gang of which her boyfriend is an unwilling member. By giving both principals passive victim roles the balance of the movie is affected and it becomes more a story of doomed young love than a true *film noir*.

Two films by Ray starred Humphrey Bogart: *Knock on Any Door* (1949) and *In a Lonely Place* (1950). The first of these has interesting flashback scenes tracing the life and crimes of Nick Romano (John Derek) which are suitably dark and portentous. The bulk of the film, however, takes place in a courtroom as Romano's lawyer, Andrew Morton (Bogart), strives to keep his client from the electric chair. The lawyer's plea, that Romano is the real victim, thanks to the deprived and violent background of his life, gives the movie a strong quality of social

awareness that sits uneasily in the *noir* idiom. *Noir* characters may carry the seeds of their eventual doom with them all their lives, but they are usually placed there by something less simplistic than an unhappy childhood.

In a Lonely Place is a love story, but one set in a mood of pervasive alienation. Bogart plays Dixon Steele, a screenwriter in Hollywood who cannot find work as a result of his reputation for violence and drunkenness. He is suspected of murder but is befriended by his neighbour, Laurel Gray (Gloria Grahame), who believes in his innocence and gradually begins to fall in love with him. Thanks to Laurel, Steele starts working again but his violent temper keeps their relationship uncertain and edgy. His violence distresses Laurel who, despite her conviction of his innocence, begins to think that maybe he really is a killer. Laurel's fears cause her to back out of their intended marriage and in a rage Steele tries to strangle her but is halted when the telephone rings. The police have found the real killer but the message has come too late; the relationship between Laurel and Steele cannot survive the effects of his violence and her fear.

Steele's entrapment in a life dictated entirely by his personal characteristics but over which he has no control affords an interesting variation on the foredoomed *noir* hero and gives Bogart one of his least mannered roles. Laurel's fearful passivity and her love which all but leads to her death makes her a typical *noir* victim (though a variation on the convention that such roles go to men). Gloria Grahame gives another fine *film noir* performance, seizing the opportunity to display her appealing blend of vulnerability and sensuality.

Sam Fuller's flair for apparently crude yet highly effective violence worked well with the war films he made but fits uneasily with *noir* traditions, despite the fact that these are by no means non-violent. In those films of his which sit on the periphery of *noir*, there are suggestions that his concern lay in areas of social awareness outside the personal motives which drive most *noir* characters. Given that he almost always wrote as well as directed his films, and frequently produced them too, there can be no doubt that his work was exactly the way he wanted it to be and that conventional boundaries were anathema to him.

In *Pickup on South Street* (1953) Fuller's story is tellingly concerned with a curious view of America. The film is anti-communist but the 'good' Americans are all members of the seediest edges of the criminal underworld. Skip McCoy (Richard Widmark) is a pickpocket who inadvertently 'lifts' some microfilm. The fact that he eventually routs the group of spies with whom he has become involved has nothing to do with patriotism. He is motivated only by a combination of revenge (he has fallen in love with the mistress of one of the spies and she has been badly beaten) and self-defence (becoming a patriot is the only way he can get himself off the hook with the cops).

In *Underworld USA* (1961) Fuller's hero is Tolly Devlin (Cliff Robertson), a criminal whose determination to avenge the murder of his father, who was also a small-time hoodlum, brings him into conflict with the crime syndicate and uneasy alliance with the forces of law and order. Clearly, however, Tolly's interest in the matter is solely that of personal revenge. He has no more interest in what his enemies are than had Skip McCoy.

Fuller's *The Naked Kiss* (1964) takes a characteristically offbeat view of sexuality. His leading lady is Kelly (Constance Towers), a reformed hooker who attempts to start a new life in a small town. She falls in love with Grant (Michael Dante) and earns the respect of the townspeople thanks to her work nursing handicapped children. But when she learns that Grant is a child molester she kills him. The townspeople turn against her and although she eventually proves that Grant really was a dangerous paedophile, Kelly feels obliged to leave and start again somewhere else.

In *Shock Corridor* (1963) Fuller enacts an interesting variation on the theme of Lang's *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* by having a journalist deliberately enter a mental hospital as a voluntary patient. This time it is not for personal gain but to solve the murder of a patient. Given Fuller's propensity for treating even ordinary subjects sensationally it is hardly surprising that when let loose in an insane asylum he doesn't spare his audience any of the predictable shocks. While

Many of the lighting techniques used in *Citizen Kane* were adopted by the cinematographers and set designers of *film noir*, as were the low camera angles. Orson Welles, as John Foster Kane, is often shown in deep shadow, his face sometimes completely blacked out.

the often fine dividing line between normal and abnormal behaviour is one which many *films noirs* cross and re-cross to good effect, here no attempt is made to observe society's unfortunates with compassion. None the less, *Shock Corridor* does have its moments and the photography, by Stanley Cortez (with the colour hallucinatory sequences by Fuller himself), is superb.

For several years it was almost *de rigueur* to suggest that Orson Welles was a one-movie man; that after 1941 and *Citizen Kane* he did nothing worthy of serious attention. Like many other intellectual pretensions attached to the film world, this one fails to stand up even to the most casual scrutiny and most, but not all, latter-day critics and writers on film have been far more willing to acknowledge Welles's massive talent.

All Welles's films have merit, even if they sometimes fall short of the heights

Orson Welles and Loretta Young in *The Stranger*, a film only slightly imbued with a *film noir* ambiance.

upon which he set his sights. Recurrently, from *Citizen Kane* onwards, there are interesting touches of *film noir* – in mood or visual imagery, or in the alienation of his characters.

The design and photography of *Citizen Kane* are replete with imagery which reflects earlier Expressionist and Gothic effects, and foreshadows many of the elements of later *films noirs*. Welles's very innocence in the ways of film-making, which undoubtedly led some early critics to undervalue his contribution, also caused him to give the studio craftsmen appointed to the movie their heads. While the cinematography of Gregg Toland is universally and rightly praised, the work of art director Van Nest Polglase should not be overlooked. If Toland brought Welles's vision to the screen, that vision was to a considerable degree embodied in Polglase's design.

Citizen Kane possesses many characteristics which were to come into common use in *film noir*: voice-over narration, multiple flashbacks, a questing investigator, moral ambiguity, and above all probing and imaginative camera-work and stylized sets.

Among Welles's later films, both *Journey into Fear* (1943) and *The Stranger* (1946) have touches of *noir*. The first imparts a sense of helplessness as its protagonist (played by Joseph Cotten) travels across war-torn Europe. The second is suffused with an atmosphere of alienation as a fugitive Nazi (played by Welles) tries to hide from retribution in a small New England town.

The Lady from Shanghai (1948) is saddled with a plot of staggering complexity that confounds the film's protagonist at every twist and turn. Michael O'Hara (Welles) becomes inadvertently embroiled in the affairs of Elsa Bannister and her lawyer husband Arthur (Rita Hayworth and Everett Sloane). Never fully grasping what they want of him or why they suck him into their schemes with such relentless fervour, O'Hara is eventually implicated in the murder of Bannister's business associate. The final shoot-out, which takes place in a hall of mirrors, is understandably the best-remembered sequence in the film. Bullet after bullet

Even the bars of a harmless gate can menace the unwary in the world of *film noir*. Orson Welles and Rita Hayworth in *The Lady from Shanghai*.

Multiple mirror images reflect the confusion of *noir* in *The Lady from Shanghai* (Rita Hayworth, Everett Sloane, Orson Welles).

shatters the misleading reflections of the participants until Elsa is mortally wounded and O'Hara is at last free to walk away. Those distorted images revealed in the mirrors provide one of the most powerful visual interpretations in all *film noir* of the confusion between reality and imagination which lies at the genre's heart.

Of all Welles's *noir* movies, *Touch of Evil* (1958) is the most self-consciously dramatic. It was his last Hollywood movie and is often cited as the final flourish of the classic period of *film noir*.

There are bravura flourishes throughout *Touch of Evil*, not least in its extraordinary, and amazingly lengthy, opening single take. The *noir* touches come in the manner in which the endless gallery of grotesques is introduced to the hero and his wife. Playing the roles of Mike and Susan Vargas are Charlton Heston and Janet Leigh, and though he may be too powerful and indestructible a presence to make a typical *noir* hero, Leigh

Orson Welles on the set of *Touch of Evil* (with Russell Metty).

Even a simple cup of coffee can be an object of menace. Ingrid Bergman in a marginal *film noir*, Alfred Hitchcock's *Notorious*.

is believable as the normal nice girl caught up in a situation she barely understands and over which she has no control. Among the evil characters who crowd into her life are the reptilian Joe Grandi (Akim Tamiroff) and Mercedes McCambridge as the lesbian leader of a gang of terrifying young men. But out-grotesquing them all is Welles himself as the bloated, degenerate and dishonest cop Hank Quinlan. However, grotesques alone do not make a *film noir*, and the movie is greatly enhanced by the superbly-lit cinematography of Russell Metty. In scene after scene, Stygian shadows contrast starkly with glaring light, dramatically evoking menace. On whatever level it is assessed, *Touch of Evil* is an excellent film, and for all its flamboyance, which runs against the grain of most *films noirs*, it is unquestionably a classic of the genre.

A director who made a certain contribution to the ambiance of *film noir* without ever working directly in the genre is Alfred Hitchcock. Throughout his career, Hitchcock's bleak view of humanity and his black sense of humour added touches which have endlessly influenced other film-makers.

Hitchcock's interest in the potential for duplicity which lurks inside all men and women caused him to bring a detached and cynical eye to human relationships. Few of the characters who people Hitchcock's world are what they seem. Is the husband (Cary Grant) really intent on murdering his paranoid wife (Joan Fontaine) in *Suspicion* (1941)? Will the American secret agent (Grant again) in *Notorious* (1946) allow the woman (Ingrid Bergman) to be murdered by the Nazi he has persuaded her to marry?

Closer to the mood of *noir* is Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943), in which a blithely innocent girl, Charlie (Teresa Wright), and her demonic Uncle Charlie (Joseph Cotten) represent the two halves of a schizophrenic personality. The director's latent cynicism is used to telling effect when the eventual death of the multiple-murdering Uncle Charlie is brought about by his devoted niece, but not before a powerful hint has been given that within her psyche lie resemblances to her uncle's insanity.

Apart from Hitchcock, few British directors have worked in American *film noir*. One

Doomed innocence kneels before implacable evil in Charles Laughton's superb *Night of the Hunter* (Shelley Winters and Robert Mitchum).

The halo of light over Lillian Gish's head would not serve to keep out Robert Mitchum's malevolent preacher in *Night of the Hunter*, but the shotgun might.

who did is Charles Laughton, who directed only one film, *The Night of the Hunter* (1955), and nowhere in American film, of any era, is the influence of German Expressionism so overtly displayed.

Laughton's visual imagination, fully realized by the brilliant photography of Stanley Cortez, uses dramatic angling of shots, bold use of shadow in moments of tension, and elegant chiaroscuro in the more tranquil moments.

The story, taken from Davis Grubb's best-selling novel, is not the usual *film noir* fare. It tells of an itinerant preacher, Harry Powell (Robert Mitchum), whose self-ordained task in life is to rid the world of fallen women by murdering them. Crazy though he is, the preacher is smart enough to deprive them first of any money they might have. Temporarily imprisoned on a minor charge, he shares a cell with a convicted murderer and learns that he has hidden the loot from a robbery. After the execution the preacher descends on the dead man's widow and children. He wins the affection of the woman, Willa (Shelley Winters),

and marries her before discovering that she doesn't know where the money is hidden. He slits her throat and dumps her body in the lake, then realizes that it is the children who were entrusted with the money.

In contrast to many of her later performances in which she paraded herself outrageously, Shelley Winters projected in *The Night of the Hunter* a remarkable combination of maternal warmth and potent yet curiously innocent sexuality. As the malignant preacher, Mitchum had the best role of his career and produced for it his best performance.

For all the strengths of the remarkable central performances, and the startling intensity of the photography (to say nothing of an evocative musical score by Walter Schumann which, at Laughton's request, was composed as the film was being shot rather than afterwards in seclusion from the immediacy of events), this is the director's film. Especially impressive are the scenes in which the children flee along the river pursued by the psychopathic preacher through a landscape that is deliberately artificial. Crooked houses are silhouetted against a featureless sky as the children float to temporary safety.

Night of the Hunter was a box-office disaster and Laughton was never again allowed to direct. As the years have passed and the film's true stature has been recognized it is possible to see that it represents a rare moment of true genius being created for the screen without interference from the studio. *Night of the Hunter* transcends period tastes and sensibilities and, while far removed from the gritty reality of urban America, the setting for most *films noirs*, it took those essential ingredients of light and shade and used them superbly. Laughton's decision to re-use, in the mid-1950s, effects which had emerged from the German Expressionist movement of the 1920s in a manner which was more closely identifiable than in any other *film noir* was a decision compounded, it would seem, of equal parts of naïvety and extraordinarily imaginative cinematic vision.

The directors discussed in this chapter are, of course, just a few of the many who worked on or influenced *film noir*. Others who made interesting contributions to the genre include Robert Aldrich, Jules Dassin, John Farrow, Henry Hathaway, Alexander Mackendrick and Jacques Tourneur, and their work is considered elsewhere in this book.

However, directors were only one element: the coming together of German émigrés and other film-makers and the popular crime fiction of the 1930s tough-guy writers helped create *film noir* as a genre, but without Hollywood's technical expertise – which by the early 1940s was considerable – it would have lacked its distinctive visual identity.

4
TECHNIQUE: THE LOOK OF *NOIR*

'I think I'm in a frame, I'm going in there to look for the picture.'
Out of the Past

TODAY'S moviegoers might occasionally decide to see a film because the cinematographer has a reputation for technical excellence which can be relied upon to enhance the work of any director: Nestor Alemanderos, for example, or Gordon Willis, John A. Alonzo or Nicolas Roeg. Recognition of the cinematographer is long overdue and comes much too late for many talented men who worked within Hollywood's studio system and were only rarely allowed to shine. The period which gave those older hands their finest moments ws that of the 1940s and early 1950s and the type of movie in which they were given the fullest scope to show their skills was *film noir*.

Before *film noir* took hold of imaginations in Hollywood, cinematographers had developed their skills to a very high degree. For the most part, however, they were inhibited from experimentation and had to confine themselves to delivering what the studio wanted. The result was usually flat, bright lighting which resulted in every portion of the frame being clearly visible. It was almost as if there were an unspoken rule that every penny the moguls spent had to be visible on screen.

When the German expatriates descended on Hollywood they were brimming over with imaginative ideas and were eager to continue their dramatic use of light and shade to reflect visually the violent contrasts of psychological unrest which fascinated them. They found in Hollywood many highly skilled technicians, all more than willing to demonstrate their talents. Often, these demonstrations were markedly different from the way they had been obliged to work in the past.

Correspondingly, the technical expertise of the Americans was a revelation to the Germans. As Fritz Lang observed to Peter Bogdanovich, 'The technical end was indescribably better. . . Lighting and everything was ten thousand times better here.'

No technique employed by Gregg Toland on *Citizen Kane* was revolutionary. Everything had been used before, often by Toland himself. What made the difference on this film was that the cinematographer, deferred to by the young tyro film-maker, Orson Welles, was allowed a free rein to indulge his special talent. Perhaps not all the directors working in the new genre were as generous as Welles, but there is no doubt that, more than ever before, the technicians were now given opportunities to experiment and to contribute ideas. Heading this group of technical experts were the cinematographers; the results of their efforts, visible for all time, have been copied endlessly but, within a similar context, only rarely surpassed.

Many of the cinematographers who worked extensively in *film noir* will be mentioned briefly elsewhere in these pages but there are some deserving of lengthier treatment, either because of special skills, because they worked on so many films in the category, or because they filmed certain

Jean Wallace and Cornel Wilde framed by the stark simplicity of John Alton's dazzling photography in *The Big Combo*.

John Alton, one of Hollywood's best and most prolific cinematographers. His imaginative skill enhanced numerous fine examples of *film noir*.

scenes that linger forever in the memory.

Hungarian-born John Alton was one of the two most prolific lighting cameramen working in *film noir*. In *The Pretender* (1947), an otherwise poorly conceived and made thriller, Alton's highly stylized photography provided an unambiguous visual confirmation of the debt *film noir* owed to Expressionism. *T-Men* (1948) was the first of several films Alton made with director Anthony Mann and helped establish their reputations. Alton's use of deep-focus photography allowed the director to demonstrate the mutual alienation of characters while granting them equal if separate screen space. *Border Incident* (1949) was shot largely on location in Mexico and the brightly-lit scenes throughout much of the picture could have diminished the *noir* mood.

Fortunately, Alton's camera-work exploits the striking contrast between the sunlit scenes and the dark shadows cast by any obstruction.

The Scar (1948) and *The Crooked Way* (1949) were also shot on location, this time in Los Angeles, and again Alton makes effective use of chiaroscuro resulting from sunlight and deep shadow and helps give both these minor films their few moments of interest. Another movie shot on location, this time in the orange groves of Southern California, is *Talk About a Stranger* (1952). This was one of a handful of feature films directed by David Bradley, whose work as an amateur (highly influenced as it was by Orson Welles and which featured a high-school actor named Charlton Heston) offered never-to-be-realized hopes of a film career as a major director.

In *The Big Combo* (1955), Alton's dazzling black-and-white photography starkly counterpoints the film's perverse sexuality, which constantly strains against the limitations of the Hollywood code. Whether exploring the sado-masochistic violence of the hoodlums, two of whom, Fante and Mingo (Lee Van Cleef and Earl Holliman), are clearly homosexual, or the psycho-sexual domination wielded by gang boss Brown (Richard Conte) over the young woman from the right side of the tracks, Susan Lowell (Jean Wallace), the script's and the director's needs are continually and effectively fulfilled by Alton's camera.

In Hollywood during the 1920s, Lee Garmes was already experimenting with unusual lighting of scenes in a way which often mirrored the work of the Expressionists. *City Streets* (1931) is a gangster movie based upon a Dashiell Hammett story. The direction of Rouben Mamoulian together with Garmes's photography gives the movie qualities that lift it out of category and qualify it as one of a small group of progenitors of *film noir*. Another in this group is *The Scoundrel* (1935), a version of the tale of a man who dies but cannot find rest until he has completed some unfinished business back on earth. In this case, the man, Anthony Mallare (Noël Coward), is a nasty piece of work who delights in making life unpleasant for everyone with whom he comes into contact. To gain eternal rest he has to seek out someone who mourns his passing. Although the film explores the corruption at the heart of high society it is Garmes's photography rather than any other element that earns it its place as an example of pre-*noir* imagery. In 1932 Garmes won an Oscar for *Shanghai Express* and in 1939 he worked, uncredited but extensively, on *Gone with the Wind*.

Despite his early interest in low-key dramatic lighting and his early work on *City Streets* and *The Scoundrel*, Garmes worked on only a handful of *films noirs* during the movement's heyday. Among these is *Nightmare Alley* (1947), a story set in part in the seedy and unsettling milieu of the travelling carnival. Peopled by freaks and undesirables, the film traces the rise to fame and eventual catastrophic fall of Stanton Carlisle (Tyrone Power, effectively cast against type), a fake mindreader. Garmes's photography dramatically and expressionistically reveals the shadowy, sometimes frighteningly unnatural, world of the carnival. Carlisle's fall reduces him to the despised status of the carnival 'geek': condemned by his alcoholism to earn his living any way he can, he bites the heads off live chickens for the horrified amusement of the carnival's patrons.

The macabre tale told in *Nightmare Alley* was effectively counterpointed by Lee Garmes's shadowy photography (Tyrone Power and Joan Blondell).

Lee Garmes also worked on Max Ophuls's *Caught* (1949), in which he helped create

the claustrophobic, brooding intensity of this melodramatic tale of a young woman, Leonora Eames (Barbara Bel Geddes), who escapes poverty by her marriage to millionaire Smith Ohlrig (Robert Ryan) only to find that he is dangerously neurotic. Uncharacteristically, Garmes failed to lift *Detective Story* (1951) from the unimaginative rigidity of its stage origins. *Detective Story* does however have touches of the *noir* mood, in the alienation of its principal character, Jim McLeod (Kirk Douglas), which reaches paranoid proportions and results in his deliberately stepping into the line of fire and so permanently ending his confusion.

Burnett Guffey is perhaps the most prolific of *film noir* cinematographers, having worked on even more movies in the category than did John Alton. Unlike Alton, however, Guffey preferred to work with more traditional lighting and the numerous *films noirs* on which he worked usually qualify for reasons other than the photography.

In *My Name Is Julia Ross* (1945) the otherworldliness of the environment in which the leading character, Julia Ross (Nina Foch), is trapped is signified by the manner in which Guffey shoots through windows. Otherwise, this tale of a woman who is forced to pose as someone else to cover up a murder, a cover-up which can be fulfilled only when she, too, dies in a fake suicide, is only marginally *noir*. Similarly marginal, but notable for the unambiguous way in which it links sexual stimulation with extreme and frequently bloody violence, is *Night Editor* (1946). The opening scene, in which the clandestine lovers, Tony Cochrane and Jill Merrill (William Gargan and Janis Carter), silently witness a vicious murder, an event which sexually stimulates her, is the highlight of the film. After that it is all downhill until the ending, when Jill, who has been turned on to a life of crime, sticks an ice pick into Tony's stomach.

Much more in the *noir* style is Guffey's work on *So Dark the Night* (1946) and *Johnny O'Clock* (1947). The first of this pair is a very ordinary B-movie in an uncharacteristically rural setting. Once again there are numerous scenes shot through windows but here there is also a much heightened use of shadow, and the customary flat lighting Guffey employed is largely absent. The second film, examined in more detail elsewhere, also stays within the accepted photographic conventions of *film noir*, unlike *Framed* (1947), *Knock on Any Door* and *In a Lonely Place*, which all owe their *noir* status to direction or acting qualities rather than through their visual appearance.

Guffey also worked unimpressively on *Scandal Sheet* (1952), a yellow-press exposé based upon a Sam Fuller novel, *The Dark Page*, and *Human Desire* (1954), in which his visual imagery powerfully enhanced the dark sexuality of a sometimes perverse love story. The matter-of-factness which pervades much of Guffey's work helped rather than hindered *The Harder They Fall* (1956), creating striking images of the cold, hard world of the prizefighter. An exposé of the exploitation of fighters by criminals (based loosely, and potentially libellously, upon the career of the Italian boxer Primo Carnera), the movie starred Humphrey Bogart as the crusading journalist Eddie Willis. It is Willis's cynicism and the unsentimental script that most justify the film's inclusion in the *noir* canon.

Guffey's shooting of *Nightfall* (1957) aids the film's overall effect, affording interesting contrasts between scenes on snow-covered mountains and haunting images on an oil rig on which hunted hero Jim Vanning (Aldo Ray) is held and tortured. Guffey's work also helped give *noir*-ish overtones to *The Split* (1968), a caper movie which came during the fallow years between the end of the *noir* cycle and the start of the deliberate recreation of its conventions.

While Milton Krasner's main claim to fame lies in his frequently impressive handling of CinemaScope, he also photographed a small but influential group of *films noirs*. These are *The Woman in the Window*, *Scarlet Street* and *The Dark Mirror*, in which he effectively uses dramatic lighting and camera angles to emphasize the strong psychological elements of the unfolding stories.

Also darkly psychological is *A Double Life* (1948), in which Ronald Colman played Anthony John, a schizophrenic actor for whom reality and the role he plays on stage, that of Othello, become increasingly mingled, with the eventual result

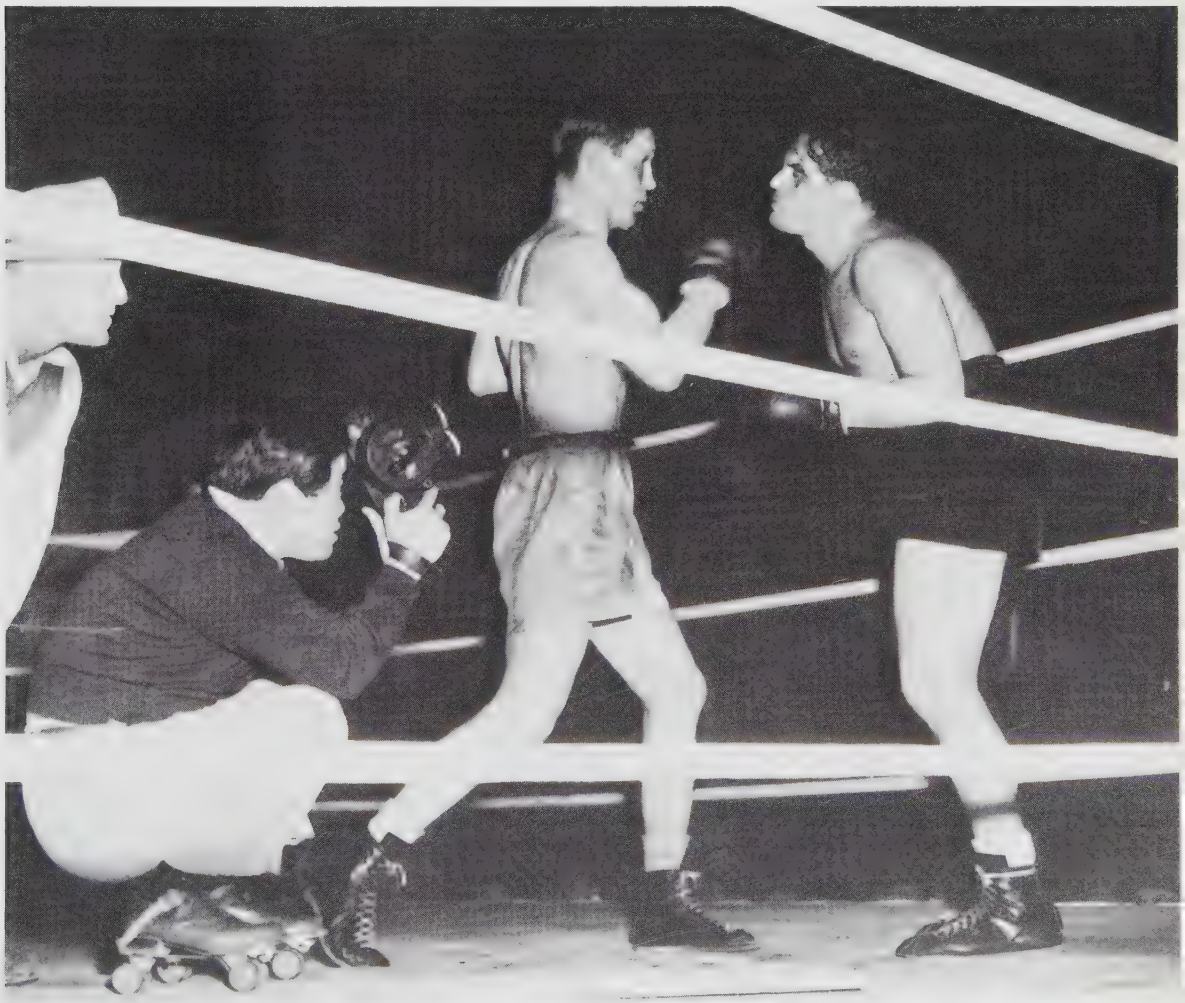
that he commits murder. The actor's confusion is powerfully reflected by the photography, which contrasts the dark recesses of his tortured mind with the brilliant yet dislocating footlights which illuminate his stage performances. Unlike most *films noirs, A Double Life* was a big-budget affair and apart from Colman had such other top-flight participants as screenwriters Ruth Gordon and Garson Kanin and director George Cukor.

Milton Krasner's cinematography was also instrumental in building the grimly violent imagery of *The Set-Up* (1949), a superb example of *film noir*'s occasional explorations of the dubious world of the prizefighter and a classic of the genre.

Another studio craftsman of note, Charles B. Lang, worked on numerous movies, many for Paramount, and contributed powerful visual imagery to three important *films noirs, Ace in the Hole, The Big Heat* and *Sudden Fear*.

Nicholas Musuraca first worked in the movies in 1918 and by the early 1940s was one of the most respected of the studio craftsmen. In 1940 he worked on *Stranger on the Third Floor*, a prototypical *film noir*. The art director on this movie was Van Nest Polglase, whose contribution towards the establishment of many conventions of *film noir* is often overlooked. Here, in *Stranger on the Third Floor*, Polglase's sets are dramatically lit and photographed by Musuraca in a striking demonstration of German Expressionist influence.

Musuraca's use of deep shadow blended well with the darkly foreboding nature of *The Spiral Staircase* (1945) and was also



Cinematographer James Wong Howe's unusual method of getting inside the action for the fight scenes in *Body and Soul*.

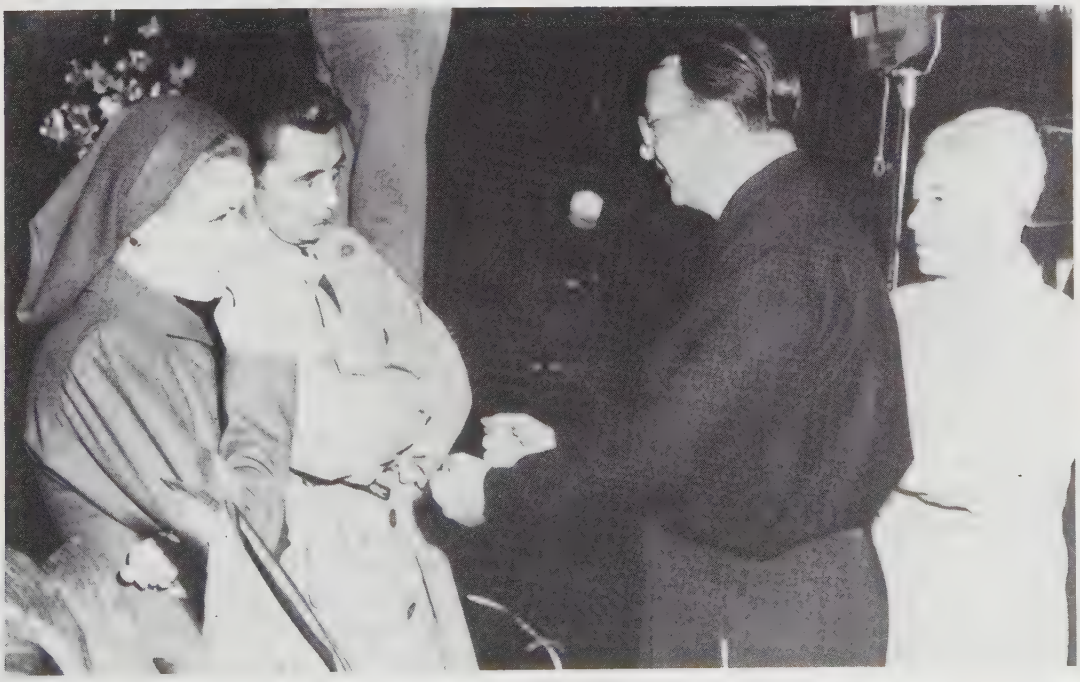
effective in bringing to the screen *Deadline at Dawn* (1946). Based upon a characteristically murky novel by Cornell Woolrich, the movie is enhanced by Musuraca's brooding photography, which goes a long way to helping correct the awkwardness of the inappropriately 'arty' dialogue of screenwriter Clifford Odets.

Musuraca also worked on *Out of the Past* (1947), his contribution being one reason why it ranks as one of the best of all *films noirs*. The movie is shot largely at night, and even scenes in well-lit rooms have disconcertingly deep shadows, reflecting the secrets each of the characters has hidden. Similarly overcast with shadows is *Where Danger Lives* (1950), a dark tale of a psychotic woman and her enslavement of her weak-willed lover.

The Hitch-Hiker (1953) is an early road movie in which a deranged hitchhiker, Emmett Myers (William Talman), thumbs rides, then kills those who help him along his way. In this movie, Musuraca joined

Nicholas Musuraca's camera ably captures the claustrophobic tensions in *The Hitch-Hiker* (Frank Lovejoy, William Talman and Edmond O'Brien).

The cinematography of Nicholas Musuraca superbly evoked the deep night explored in *Out of the Past*. Here, Musuraca (right) listens as Jacques Tourneur directs Jane Greer and Robert Mitchum.



The imagery of *film noir* was often used by the makers of movies that fell outside the genre – as here, where Joan Crawford enhanced the unpretentious *I Saw What You Did* and Claude Rains starred in *The Man Who Watched the Trains Go By*.

forces with the director Ida Lupino, who also co-scripted. British-born Lupino was one of the few women directors of the period and the only one to work in *film noir*. Here, her chosen setting for the film, the threateningly bleak and featureless American desert, is well captured by Nicholas Musuraca's camera.

John F. Seitz was deeply involved in moviemaking before the First World War, as was his older brother George. Possessing a highly inventive mind, Seitz patented numerous photographic developments, the most famous of which is the matte shot (a masking device through which scenes can be shot but which has blanks into which other scenes can later be incorporated).

Seitz's work in the fog-shrouded atmosphere of *This Gun for Hire* (1942) is particularly impressive, while his deep-night shooting on *Double Indemnity* (1944) together with the highly contrasting interiors, particularly in the Dietrichson house, helped this movie towards its status as one of the best *films noirs* ever made. The ominous world inhabited by a man who can foretell the future is well captured by Seitz in *The Night Has a Thousand Eyes*, while he was efficient rather than outstanding on *The Big Clock* (1948) and *Chicago Deadline* (1949). The following year, however, he helped create some of the memorable images that enhanced *Sunset Boulevard* (1950).

The crumbling baroque interiors of the mansion wherein lurks ex-screen goddess Norma Desmond (Gloria Swanson) are magnificently shot as, too, is the scene at the movie studio where Norma calls upon her old friend and former director Cecil B. DeMille. Only rarely does full light intrude upon this movie, which, with its Hollywood setting, immediately sets up a stark contradiction of accepted ideas about the motion-picture industry. Seitz handles the often cluttered sets well, using lighting to direct the eye to each scene's key areas. Even when light is used fully, as when Norma steps into the beam of her home movie projector or when a lighting technician at the studio turns the spotlight on her, it serves a dark purpose. Here, it shows with appalling clarity the incipient madness that will eventually destroy Norma. Yet, curiously enough, and due more to Billy Wilder's script and direction, and the performances of Swanson and Erich Von Stroheim (as her ex-husband turned butler Max Von Mayerling), it is the old-time movie people who engage the audience's sympathy. Although written as a black comedy, the use of *noir* stylization creates a mood of the bleakest cynicism worthy of the acknowledged classics of the genre and to which the cinematographer's art makes a major contribution.

5
NOIR PERFORMERS: MALE ICONS

'Everybody dies.'
Body and Soul

FOR all the directorial and technical skills brought to bear upon the tough-guy writers' creations, other important elements had to be fulfilled. The hard-boiled heroes, the vulnerable victims, male and female, and predatory spiderwomen, all needed bringing to life by actors.

The actors and actresses who brought to the screen so many rich and varied characters were themselves a mixed bunch. They were a *mélange* of established movie stars, Broadway names and, mostly, actors who were then comparatively unknown. Many of the latter were on contract and their studios jumped at the opportunity of using them in movies that were already low-budget and would stay that way if they didn't have to pay any more for the actors. Some of these contract players had their finest hours in *films noirs*; some went on later to international superstardom; others all but vanished when the genre faded.

The leading men in *film noir* were not heroes in the old Hollywood sense, but they did achieve a curious kind of stature. The traditional American hero, in real life as well as in the movies, has always been a loner. The solitary figures who advanced the Frontier, that near-mythic place in American folklore, epitomized an early, and not always mercenary, flowering of the American Dream: a man alone confronting the wilderness.

The first and most striking of these individuals were, literally, frontiersmen: hunters, trappers, prospectors, who explored the land to the west of the Mississippi river. It took some time before Hollywood made effective use of them, perhaps because they were too solitary and film-makers lacked the confidence to make movies which did not fill the screen with people. It was a very different matter when Hollywood looked at the successors to the frontiersmen, the cowboys.

Gary Cooper and his fellows later helped accentuate and stylize the myth of the poor but honest cowpoke, which proved sufficiently potent to take on another form when the cities became the new frontier, the new wilderness, the new battlefields on which man was to continue his eternal struggle with his environment.

The gangster films offered an uneasy alliance between hero and villain in which the edges blurred and essentially evil characters became popular thanks to engaging portrayals by Humphrey Bogart, James Cagney, Paul Muni and Edward G. Robinson.

The advent of *film noir*, while blurring the edges still more, at least removed from centre stage the gangster as hero, making room for men who had all the imagined virtues of the frontiersman and the cowboy but were visibly very much urban men of today.

The outstanding example of a complete unknown who later achieved superstardom in *films noirs* is Burt Lancaster. His first screen role, as Ole 'Swede' Andreson in *The Killers*, set him on the road to the top, but not before he had served a brief apprenticeship as a typical yet strangely vulnerable *noir* actor.

The grim, enclosed world of *Brute Force*, still one of the most violent prison movies. (Howard Duff, billed as 'radio's Sam Spade', and Burt Lancaster.)

Of all the *noir* icons, Lancaster is the most paradoxical. A powerful man in body and voice with a commanding, almost regal presence, he projects at the same time a remarkable vulnerability, though without the humility which so often accompanies it.

Brute Force (1947) placed Lancaster in the tightly enclosed world of the penitentiary, a world Hollywood developed into nothing more imaginative than a sub-genre of the gangster movie. Exceptional for its time, *Brute Force* lives up to its title with an uncompromising depiction of violence by jailers against inmates and the comparable level of savagery with which the prisoners eventually respond. By definition, the prisoners are alienated from society and physically and forcibly denied freedom. This alone is not enough to make *Brute Force* a *film noir*. What tips the scale is the total corruption of the prisoners' environment, created by those who ostensibly represent orthodox society. The warden is a vacillating weakling, the chief guard a sadistic brute; only the prison doctor shows vestiges of true humanity, but he is a defeated alcoholic.

There are flaws in *Brute Force*, most particularly the flashbacks, which do not serve the usual purpose of the technique in *film noir*. Here they are used to show the prisoners' lives outside the pen, such light relief being considered essential to the movie's success with a mass audience. Unfortunately, they serve only to interrupt the narrative flow and add little to the audience's understanding of the characters. That the film overcame such sticky patches is due largely to the direction of Jules Dassin, who worked on other interesting *noir* movies before falling foul of the House Un-American Activities Committee, which prevented him from working in the USA. The screenplay of *Brute Force* is the work of Richard Brooks (who also wrote the novel upon which *Crossfire* was based, and the screenplays for *Key Largo* and *The Blackboard Jungle*).

For Lancaster, *Brute Force* was an opportunity to build upon the doomed character he had played in *The Killers*. Although his character, Joe Collins, is similarly unable to avoid his destiny, he is much more positive than the Swede and while the storyline of *Brute Force* makes his fate inevitable Collins has none of his predecessor's resignation or self-destructive vulnerability. Like Ole Andreson, Joe Collins goes down, but he goes down fighting.

Tony Curtis as the egregious Sidney Falco with Burt Lancaster as the megalomaniacal newspaper columnist J. J. Hunsecker in *Sweet Smell of Success*.

Although within the broad framework of *film noir*, a 1948 Lancaster movie, *I Walk Alone*, is flawed in many ways that weaken its claim for serious consideration. The director, Byron Haskins, was a competent journeyman who turned his hand to westerns, thrillers and adventure yarns with considerable *élan* but lacked the special qualities required for *film noir*. The movie contains idealistic overtones that sit uneasily with the more characteristic downbeat moments. The extensive use of popular songs of the day (leading lady Lizabeth Scott plays a nightclub singer) adds to the unease. Lancaster's role is that of a recently released convict called Frankie Madison who finds himself not only outsmarted by his former racketeer friends but also outdated in the modern criminal world. Already an outsider so far as normal society is concerned, the character's alienation is compounded when he is also banished from his own world of crime.

In all these films, and in *Sorry, Wrong Number* (1948), a movie which is a *tour de force* for Barbara Stanwyck, Lancaster's performances clearly display the streak of masochism which lies beneath the skin of many *noir* characters. He pursued this course in *Kiss the Blood Off My Hands* (1948) which, perhaps owing to expectations raised by its title, was something of a disappointment. Lancaster's best scenes are those in which he flits through the darkened city (well photographed by Russell Metty in Hollywood's idea of London) when he is on the run for a murder he committed in a fit of uncontrollable rage.

The last of Lancaster's early *films noirs* is *Criss Cross* (1949), discussed in Chapter 3 in the light of Robert Siodmak's direction, in which he gives a performance of subtly controlled power.

Lancaster returned briefly to the world of *film noir* in 1957 with *Sweet Smell of Success*, in which he takes the menacing role of an individual whose natural habitat is beneath any available, but preferably slimy, urban stone.

J. J. Hunsecker is a megalomaniac newspaper columnist who lurks, spider-like, at the centre of a web of corruption and deceit. His gossip column can make or break individuals; and it is the breaking of those who cross him that Hunsecker sees as his mission in life. Even the one potentially virtuous area of his life, his attachment to his sister Susan (Susan Harrington), is soiled.

Few characters in this movie are remotely likeable; bottom of the heap and greedily sucking up to Hunsecker is Sidney Falco (Tony Curtis, in a performance he has rarely equalled). Falco is a sycophantic publicity agent with standards so low they make his idol seem positively angelic.

Sweet Smell of Success came as *film noir*'s decline had become headlong. There are notable differences between this and earlier movies, wrought by the passage of time. Real crime may be absent, but the film is a compelling study of deception, corruption and emotional dishonesty. The shadowy, expressionistic photography is the work of the invariably excellent James Wong Howe, while the direction is in the hands of Alexander Mackendrick, the Scottish filmmaker whose earlier credits, which included the amiably whimsical *Whisky Galore, The Man in the White Suit* and *The Ladykillers*, hardly prepared audiences for this grim tale.

All the characters in *Sweet Smell of*

Success, Susan and her boyfriend apart, display a total absence of moral scruples and everyone, including Susan and boyfriend, is a loser. Despite the film's title, success is unattainable for these sink-dwellers. For the amoral Hunsecker, people are pawns to be manipulated for his own mirthless amusement. These qualities create a major difference in structure to earlier *films noirs*: there is no one here with whom the audience can identify.

Commendably, Lancaster resists any temptation to give his character a single redeeming feature but characteristically underplays, rightly giving Hunsecker deeply disturbing undercurrents of evil. At the end, as Susan is about to walk out on her brother for ever, she tells him: 'I'd rather be dead than living with you. For all the things you've done, J. J., I should hate you – but I don't. I pity you.'

It is a measure of Lancaster's perception of the role and the accuracy with which he pitches his performance that the audience doesn't pity Hunsecker one little bit.

An actor whose early career and physical presence greatly resemble Lancaster's is Robert Ryan. Unlike his contemporary, however, Ryan never became a major star despite qualities and skills which marked him out for it.

Ryan's craggy good looks (he boxed as a young man) and tall, burly build gave film-makers a choice between casting him in leading roles or as the heavy. His ability to suggest a simmering and barely-concealed rage, liable to erupt at any moment into vicious violence, inclined them most often towards the latter. While this provided the movies with a superb villain, it simultaneously robbed them of a potentially great leading man.

Crossfire (1947) is one of those occasional message movies in which Hollywood attempted to show it had a social conscience. Only peripherally *noir*, the film's main strength and its only truly *noir* moments come from three of the acting performances. One is from Ryan, as a violent anti-Semite who kills a man because he is a Jew; one from

The empty, echoing streets of the city offer no hiding place for the killer in *Crossfire* (Robert Ryan).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ROOMS

A startling example of a bit-part player leaving a lasting impression on a movie: Paul Kelly's compelling character study in *Crossfire*. Here, Kelly (right) harangues George Cooper.

Gloria Grahame as a B-girl (employed to sit in bars persuading customers to buy expensive booze, which is as close as Hollywood came in those days to depicting hookers); and the third from Paul Kelly in a brief but oddly compelling character study as the B-girl's unnamed lover. Kelly's role, in both the writing and playing, might have come from another movie as, in a helpless torrent of words, he confesses his emotional torment at being in love with a woman who cannot return his love and who makes her living by selling to other men what he yearns to have for himself: her sexual favours, that is, not over-priced alcohol.

Ryan plays Monty Montgomery, one of a group of soldiers returning from the war (as does Robert Mitchum, whose thankless role gave him little to do but sit and wonder why everyone else had better scenes). Montgomery's paranoid hatred of Jews is only slowly revealed, yet his persona continually hints at the seething, mindless rage beneath the surface. Director Edward Dmytryk has explained how he progressively changed the lens on the camera when shooting Ryan's scenes, and thus gradually distorted the actor's face, accentuating the revelation of his suppressed viciousness.

The dislocation inherent in the lives of soldiers returning from the war was extensively exploited in post-war American movies. It features in *Act of Violence* (1949), another *noir*-ish movie with social undertones starring Robert Ryan. His character here is Joe Parkson, the only survivor from a group of prisoners-of-war betrayed by one of their comrades, Frank Enley (Van Heflin). Parkson's mind is unhinged by his experiences, which have also left him physically crippled. Nevertheless, he hounds Enley from his home into the darkest recesses of the city and it is here that the film becomes most clearly *noir*, thanks largely to superb cinematography by Robert Surtees; for although Ryan and Heflin perform well neither has scenes with sufficient emotional depth for them to create the *noir* atmosphere themselves.

Mention has already been made of Ryan's deeply impressive performance as the crazed millionaire in Max Ophuls's *Caught*; in the same year, 1949, he appeared in what remains one of the best boxing movies ever made.

In *The Set-Up* he plays Bill 'Stoker' Thompson, a washed-up fighter who clings to the dying hope that the heavyweight championship is just 'one punch away'. Stoker is an all-ways loser: his wife, Julie (Audrey Totter), is preparing to leave him; his manager, Tiny (George Tobias), has done a deal with the opposition for Stoker to lose his next fight.

The studio set of Paradise City loses nothing through its deliberate stylization. The Hotel Cozy looks like the flea-infested joint it is supposed to be and the neon-lit dance hall nearby, from which drift the soft, ironic strains of 'A Lovely Way to Spend an Evening', is as tawdry as only a small-town dance hall can be.

The life Stoker leads is typically fated. When Julie declares, 'Don't you see, Bill, you'll always be just one punch away!' he is unmoved, merely commenting, 'That's the way it is. You're a fighter, you gotta fight.'

Back-stage, the boxing arena is filled with a mixture of human wrecks and fit but inexperienced young men setting out on the same road Stoker has followed. Only in *film noir* could any aspect of society have been shown in such a bleakly uncompromising manner.

Still on his feet, Stoker Thompson is left to face his enemies in *The Set-Up* (Robert Ryan).


TAURANT

The film takes no stand on whether boxing is a sport or an entertainment; either way, it represents the dregs of human experience. The crowd is sadistic and unappetizing; even a blind man, usually portrayed sympathetically in the movies, is shown relishing the beatings he can only hear.

In the dressing room Stoker sits waiting to be called for his fight, unaware of anything other than his loneliness. He doesn't even know of his manager's duplicity, because Tiny is so sure he will lose he doesn't bother to tell him he is supposed to take a dive. At first Stoker is savagely beaten by his younger, fitter opponent. But the other man is also inexperienced and gradually Stoker gets on top. Horrified at the way the fight is turning out, Tiny whispers to Stoker between rounds, telling him he must lie down. Shaken by this betrayal, Stoker goes on to win the fight. But he is still alone and in the alley after the fight is beaten up by the hoodlums who paid Tiny for the dive.

Although brutally beaten, and with his hands crushed so that he can never fight again, in the end Stoker is a winner of sorts as Julie comforts him, but his victory is sufficiently ambivalent to leave the bitter aftertaste that life holds nothing more for him.

Unusually told in 'real time' – the film's action starts at 9.10 at night and ends at 10.22, exactly matching the running time of 72 minutes – *The Set-Up* is utterly unromantic in its view of an area of American life long associated with the American Dream. Countless thousands of young men have started out on the road to the fame and fortune a boxing championship can bring; the film draws attention to the fact that for the dozen who make it in each generation, hundreds sink down among the dregs. In its unswervingly *noir* image of a gritty and sickening aspect of society, *The Set-Up*, directed early in his career by Robert Wise, paints a grim picture – greatly benefited by a flawless performance from Robert Ryan.

Ryan's ability to engage an audience's sympathy when portraying characters who are outright losers helped a visually impressive but otherwise undistinguished marginal *film noir, Beware, My Lovely* (1952). In this he plays Howard, a psychotic handyman whose occasional murderous rages cause him to strangle one woman and all but kill a second (played by Ida Lupino) without his ever being aware of his dangerous and usually hidden impulses. The same year, Ryan and Lupino again co-starred, this time in Nicholas Ray's *On Dangerous Ground*, in which Ryan is Jim Wilson, a New York policeman hovering on the brink of nervous and emotional collapse. His neuroses continually drive him into a corner of his mind from which he shuts out everyone, be they criminals or colleagues or, as here, a blind girl (Lupino) whose mentally handicapped brother is a suspected killer. Thoroughly alienated, Jim Wilson is unrelenting in his self-destructive urge and it is a measure of his performance that Ryan makes the gloomy cop a figure of considerable sympathy.

Odds Against Tomorrow (1959) was late for the main *noir* period and too early for the first of the nostalgic recreations. By the time it was made, ideas were a bit thin on the ground and Robert Wise's film (from a novel by William P. McGivern) is a patchwork of other movie genres. It is essentially a caper movie, about a racially bigoted cop, Earl Slater (Ryan), who has teamed up with a black singer, Johnny Ingram (Harry Belafonte), and others to rob a bank. Even the ending borrows – heavily, from *White Heat* – as the two men fight it out on the top of oil tanks which eventually explode. Ryan's racial bigot is much more fully defined than his comparable role in *Crossfire* but the film stutters along uncertainly, just as *film noir* itself was stumbling towards a hiatus.

Contrasting with Ryan's solid, dark, looming presence in *film noir* is Richard Widmark's highly-strung, taut blond persona.

Widmark's career began in *film noir* and so great were his impact in *Kiss of Death* (1947) and his affinity for this type of movie that he has had difficulty ever since in being taken seriously as the gifted, versatile actor he really is. In many respects *Kiss of Death* is an unsatisfactory movie, uneasily blending documentary stylistics with a melodramatic

Beaten at last, with no future in the ring, Stoker Thompson at least has his wife beside him (Robert Ryan and Audrey Totter in *The Set-Up*).

Richard Widmark as the sadistic killer Tommy Udo in *Kiss of Death*, with Victor Mature as Nick Bianco.

storyline and erratic acting and direction. Nevertheless, it is hard to forget Widmark's portrayal of Tommy Udo, the sadistic, giggling hit-man whose pursuit of small-time crook Nick Bianco (Victor Mature), who has unwillingly become a police informant, provides the movie's best moments. By the standards of the next generation of movie villains, Widmark plays Udo way over the top, although his character's vicious sadism is a precursor of many killers in the present generation of crime movies. Censored from original copies in many countries was the famous scene in which Udo pushes an old woman in a wheelchair down a flight of stairs. Those who did see the scene are unlikely ever to forget it, or fully wipe out the memory of Widmark's crazy laughter which accompanied the deed.

Road House (1948) is a highly stylized movie directed by Rumanian-born Jean Negulesco, a former artist and stage designer. Little attempt is made to conceal the fact that the roadhouse and the surrounding forests in which the action takes place are studio sets, the director preferring instead to trace the story much as if it were a stage play. Here, Widmark plays Jefty, an outwardly normal man who conceals a deep-seated psychosis which is revealed only when his girlfriend Lily (Ida Lupino) and his best friend Pete (Cornel Wilde) fall in love with one another. As in *Kiss of Death*, it is the ambivalent behaviour of Widmark's character that gives the movie its *noir*-ish flavour.

Another early Widmark movie which depends largely upon his presence for inclusion in the *noir* catalogue is *The Street with No Name* (1948). Set in a town in the Mid West, this movie follows a trend of thrillers of the period in using a semi-documentary style to tell the story of an undercover agent's

On the set of *Night and the City*, cinematographer Max Greene (left) takes it easy while the director, Jules Dassin, makes a point.

attempts to infiltrate and bring to justice a criminal organization. As gang boss Alec Stiles, Widmark clearly relishes the only fully-rounded, if somewhat overwrought, character in the script. Typically for such movies, the criminal develops a close relationship with the undercover man who is out to nail him. This reversal of the traditional 'buddy' relationship which permeates much of American literature and movies is suggestive of unstated homosexuality. Widmark's presence is such that he overcomes the implausibility of such a relationship and instead develops Alec Stiles as a complex neurotic.

Widmark changed sides for *Panic in the Streets* (1950), becoming an official in the New Orleans Public Health Service. As Dr Clinton Reed, Widmark engages in a hunt for a gang of petty criminals who have become infected with pneumonic plague. Forced through police inaction into hunting down the men himself, Reed enters the underworld of New Orleans wherein lurk some of the most unpleasant grotesques ever to inhabit *film noir*. Among them are obese, sweating Fitch (Zero Mostel in fine form) and tall, gaunt Blackie, the gang leader. This role went to Jack Palance, making his movie début, and his portrayal of the bestial villain is the best thing in the movie, a rare occasion when Richard Widmark, who generally upstaged the stars in movies in which he was a supporting actor, was himself upstaged.

Despite a cast of excellent and largely British character actors, Widmark allowed no such upstaging in the superb *Night and the City* (1950), a movie shot in London and directed by Jules Dassin, who was at that time blacklisted in Hollywood. Widmark portrays Harry Fabian, a small-time crook with delusions of becoming a sports promoter. On

Richard Widmark (centre) became a violent racist in *No Way Out* (with Linda Darnell and Harry Bellaver).

screen almost throughout, Fabian runs and runs, sweatily trying to raise money to promote a wrestling tournament, wheedling his way into the good books of big-time promoter Kristo (Herbert Lom) and Helen Nosseross (Googie Withers), for whose husband, Phil (Francis L. Sullivan), Fabian acts as a shill (a small-time conman). When Kristo's father Gregorius (Stanislaus Zbyszko), a wrestler of the old school, dies after fighting Strangler (Mike Mazurki), Fabian is a hunted man. By now Phil Nosseross believes him to be having an affair with Helen and joins forces with Kristo to track Fabian down. Only once does Fabian make a redeeming gesture, when the forces of Kristo and Nosseross are closing in on him and, knowing there is no escape, he makes sure that his girlfriend, Mary Bristol (Gene Tierney, not really justifying her co-star billing), is not implicated in his nefarious schemes.

Throughout the movie, which follows Fabian's frantic race through London, whether trying to raise money at the outset or attempting to evade his hunters, Dassin sustains pace and tension to a remarkable degree. His heavily symbolic images of London, drawn from numerous locations, are highly stylized yet never lose their claustrophobic effect as shadows lengthen and the unseen forces of darkness impinge upon Harry's small, fearful world. Widmark's naturally gaunt features are exaggerated by the use of angled lights, although the most impressive shots are frequently those in which he becomes a featureless silhouette caught against the dank, backlit walls of the streets and alleyways of this surreal cityscape.

A remarkable *tour de force* for the director, Dassin, his cinematographer, Max Greene, and especially for Richard Widmark, *Night and the City* is a classic of the genre.

Widmark played a violent racist in *No Way Out* (1950), one of a number of movies which combined the newly popular theme of racism in contemporary American society with

Richard Widmark as the seedy, unpatriotic petty criminal in Sam Fuller's *Pickup on South Street*.

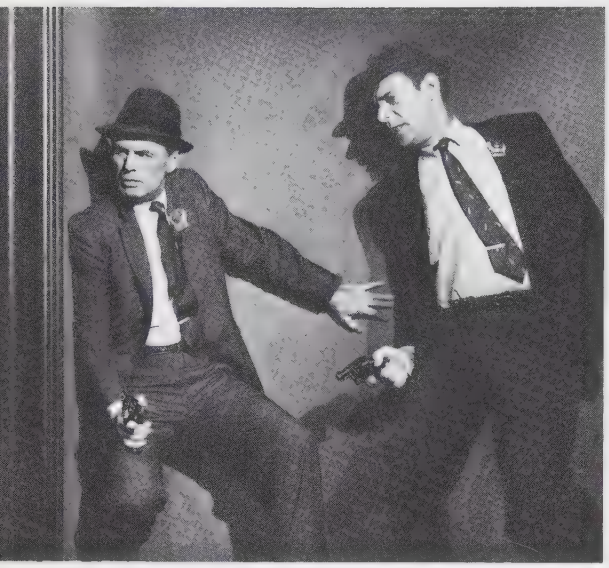
noir sensibilities and attitudes. Widmark's co-stars were Linda Darnell and, inevitably for the period, Sidney Poitier. Widmark's seedy, amoral pickpocket in *Pickup on South Street* (1953) was another memorable portrait of a loser, although this time one much less twitchily neurotic than was his forte.

Throughout his *film noir* appearances, the barely concealed hysteria lying beneath the skin stretched taut over his skull, Widmark created one of the convention's archetypal characters, even on the odd occasions when he played the hero.

Between the ending of the great *noir* period and the start of the self-conscious recreations, Widmark became a busy actor co-starring and sometimes taking the lead in a string of westerns and war or adventure movies. Yet for all his undoubted abilities as an actor, he always appeared to present problems to moviemakers and he was rarely offered roles which stretched him.

By 1968, the problem of engaging audience sympathies with a 'good' cop were being overcome by making cop heroes violent men whose actions often differed little from those of the criminals they hunted. In *Madigan* (1968) Widmark took the title role in Don Siegel's tough-cop drama, which was by way of being a warm-up for the director's later exploration of similar tales in *Coogan's Bluff* and *Dirty Harry*, although Madigan is both a more complex and a less psychotic character.

Dan Madigan is no paragon of virtue. He is as honest as he has to be and dedicated in his pursuit of criminals, if only because the alternative might lead to death in a city in which crime not only pays but also goes largely unpunished. Leaned on by Police Commissioner Russell (Henry Fonda) after having let a small-time crook escape only to discover he is a wanted murderer, Madigan and his sidekick, Rocco Bonaro (Harry Guardino), cut a swath through the city's underworld, trampling on anyone who gets in their way. Madigan's single-mindedness



Madigan bridged two genres of movies and was an early example of the honest but violent cop (Richard Widmark and Harry Guardino).

Richard Widmark as Madigan, fighting fire with fire.

and his alienation from 'normal' society (the problems he and his wife face are rooted in his involvement with his job) align Madigan with the traditional *noir* hero. This alignment is strengthened by Richard Widmark's previous close involvement with *film noir*, even if he was then usually on the other side of the fence.

More than any other actor, Edward G. Robinson made the transition from gangster movie to *film noir* without any noticeable difficulty. Unlike such contemporaries as Bogart, Cagney and Raft, Robinson's physical appearance was such that he was more suited to character roles than any other contemporary star of comparable magnitude. Indeed, it was in character parts that he gave some of his most memorable performances in the later years of his career. During the few years of his involvement with *film noir* Robinson foreshadowed his later character roles with a wide variety of interesting portrayals.

Robinson is the investigator in *Double Indemnity* and *The Stranger*, and although in the former his role as Barton Keyes is of secondary importance to those of Barbara Stanwyck and Fred MacMurray, he effectively delineates the father-son relationship he has with the latter's Walter Neff. In *The Woman in the Window* and *Scarlet Street* Robinson plays the innocuous little man caught in a web of corruption, deceit and murder through infatuation with a beautiful woman. His portrayal of the psychologically tormented mind-reader, John Triton, in *The Night Has a Thousand Eyes* is crucial to the movie's success. Were he not convincing in the part, which is essentially improbable, the entire story would collapse. In managing not only to suspend the audience's disbelief but also to convey the tormented depths of the mind of a man hopelessly trapped outside society Robinson gives the movie strong *noir* overtones.

For *Key Largo* (1948) Robinson is back in gangster garb as Johnny Rocco. This is very much a reprise of his role as Cesare Rico Bandello in *Little Caesar*, but now he is an ageing mobster, clinging to the edge of the rackets he once controlled. Trying to re-enter America, from where he has been deported, Rocco holes up in a hotel on the Florida Keys where he and his sidekicks are confronted by a hurricane and Frank McCloud (Humphrey Bogart), a disillusioned ex-soldier. Rocco is allowed no redeeming qualities and is played by Robinson as a manic, strutting, sadistic bully. Despite the near-caricature of Robinson's performance as an old-time hoodlum, it is Rocco who provides the *noir* atmosphere in what is otherwise an untypical setting.

One of Robinson's peers during his gangster-movie days, who appeared in several *films noirs* with only limited success, was George Raft. For many moviegoers of the 1930s Raft was the epitome of the immaculately dressed, smoothly merciless gangster. In his numerous gangster movies his limited acting range and usually frozen facial expressions allowed him to imply a tough, no-nonsense attitude towards his victims. The same limitations lent his *noir* characters an air of appropriate detachment from normal society. However, the perceptible lack of emotional depth in his portrayals meant that he could never turn in significant performances.

In *Johnny Angel* (1945) Raft plays the title role, a seaman bent on revenge as he hunts down his father's killers through the streets of New Orleans. These scenes are greatly enhanced by the expressionistic cinematography of Harry J. Wild, a major contributor to *film noir* techniques, even though Raft's impassiveness makes it hard for audiences to become emotionally involved in his quest.

Harry J. Wild was also responsible for the camera-work on *Nocturne* (1946), in which Raft is again a hunter – this time a police detective. The opening scene is an excellent example of camera technique, blending as it does a model shot with live action: the camera sweeps across a facsimile of the familiar Hollywood landscape before entering a house in which a man sits alone playing the piano. As the camera homes in for a close-up of the man a gun appears in the frame and the man is shot dead. It is his murder that Joe Warne (Raft) seeks to solve, even though everyone else thinks it is suicide: everyone, that is, except the audience.

With little mystery left, other than the identity of the killer, most interest resides in Joe Warne, a man whose background is never examined and whose personality, thanks in part to the script but mainly to Raft's

Edward G. Robinson, as an ageing king of crime, in *Key Largo* with Humphrey Bogart.

glossy imperturbability, remains an enigma. Similarly puzzling is the reason for Warne's conviction that the man was murdered, and his deep interest in the man's lifestyle. As the man was romantically involved (as they politely put it in those days) with numerous women, there is a slight hint of morbid jealousy in Warne's motives. It is in these areas, which may well be accidental, that *Nocturne* enters the *noir* mood.

Raft yet again plays a hunter in *Red Light* (1950): Johnny Torno, who is attempting to track down his brother's killer. Johnny's brother is a priest, which, uncommonly for *film noir*, allows a religious element to enter the story, most particularly when Johnny finally confronts the killer, Nick Cherney (Raymond Burr), on a roof-top and remembers his brother's last message: ' "Vengeance is mine," saith the Lord.' Johnny decides not to kill Cherney but, fortunately for the audience who might otherwise have left their seats unsatisfied, God moves in mysterious ways and Cherney is accidentally electrocuted on a neon sign.

By now in an established *noir* characterization, Raft plays vengeance-seeking Joe Gargen in *Loan Shark* (1952). Hunting down the killers of his hard-working brother-in-law, he eventually meets the top man of the loan sharks who have ruined countless working men. It is in the final scenes, menacingly photographed by Joseph Biroc, that the *noir* flavour emerges. The fate of the villain (played by John Hoyt) is somewhat more grisly than was usually the case, in or out of *film noir*: Joe tosses him into a vat of boiling chemicals.

George Raft is back in hoodlum guise for *Rogue Cop* (1954), in which he plays gang boss Dan Beaumonte. The story centres on a crooked cop, Chris Kelvaney (Robert Taylor), who starts out as Beaumonte's creature but becomes his sworn enemy. The night-shrouded world of crime in which Kelvaney eventually confronts Beaumonte is archetypal *noir* territory. Excellent photography by John Seitz highlights the contrast between the grim world of the city streets and the glittering luxury in which Beaumonte lives.

Enigmatic though he was, George Raft was too glossy to be quite right for the grubby world of *film noir* (*Nocturne*).

If the early gangster roles of George Raft made him an unusual, and generally unsatisfactory, choice for *film noir*, then a similar move made by Humphrey Bogart was more successful. Nevertheless, Bogart's reputation as a major *film noir* icon is hard to justify without reservations.

As suggested earlier, *The Maltese Falcon*, in which Bogart made such an impact, barely enters the world of *noir* but is a precursor of the genre, thanks mainly to its gallery of superbly rendered supporting roles. Bogart's performance as Roy Earle in *High Sierra* is more firmly rooted in the *noir* tradition of an alienated individual whose only escape lies in death, even if the movie's main allegiance is to the gangster cycle.

Conflict (1945), in which Bogart plays Richard Mason, a man who kills his wife, is more obviously *noir* in mood. The psychological torment suffered by Mason after the murder eventually turns out to have been not an attack of conscience but the result of actions taken by his friend Mark Hamilton (Sydney Greenstreet), a psychiatrist who knows from the start that Mason is the murderer but cannot prove it.

By the following year, when he made *The Big Sleep*, Bogart was firmly established as a major star, with a strong screen persona and a massive following among the moviegoing public. It therefore became progressively more difficult for him to convey the alienation essential to *noir* leading men and, by most of the accepted tenets, *The Big Sleep* is outside the *noir* canon.

The nature of the plot of *Dark Passage* (1947) and the means taken by the movie's makers to resolve its inherent difficulties make it an awkward film and a curious one for a major star to have agreed to make. Bogart plays Vincent Parry, a wrongly convicted murderer who escapes from prison and undergoes plastic surgery to change his appearance. It was decided not to show Parry's face until the bandages are removed some time after surgery. As rather a lot of action takes place before this moment the camera becomes largely subjective, seeing only what Parry sees: he himself is seen only as a shadowy outline. It is therefore more than an hour

For all his enormous and justified fame, Humphrey Bogart did not project the authentic image of *film noir*'s beleaguered heroes. Here, in *Dark Passage*, he kept that tough 1930s face well hidden for most of the movie.

Humphrey Bogart's role in *Dead Reckoning* brought him much closer to the vulnerability of the *noir* hero than was usual for him (with Lizabeth Scott).

before an identifiable Bogart appears. This weakens the film, but what places it outside the *noir* genre is the fact that Parry is a strong character, whose predicament stems not from inner weaknesses, or some past infraction he cannot outlive, but simply from the fact that he was framed for a crime he did not commit.

Much truer to *noir* conventions is *Dead Reckoning* (1947), in which Bogart plays Rip Murdock, an ex-soldier who is trying to trace his wartime buddy. Murdock is much less tough and self-sufficient than the characters Bogart usually played and he brings an untypical vulnerability to his interpretation. Murdock's involvement with *femme fatale* Coral Chandler (Lizabeth Scott) is also much more suited to the *noir* ethos than was possible in *The Big Sleep, Dark Passage* or *Key Largo*. In these three films the casting of Lauren Bacall, with her unique on-screen rapport with Bogart, made it impossible to maintain the traditional male-female conflict of the best *films noirs*.

Key Largo, Knock on Any Door and *In a Lonely Place* are three marginally *noir* Bogart films. In the first two of these he is a non-*noir* hero but in the last of the trio his portrayal of the violent-tempered Dixon Steele gives a sharp edge to a curious love story. Also only marginally qualified for inclusion in the *noir* canon are *The Enforcer (Murder Inc.)* (1951) and *The Harder They Fall*, Bogart's final film. Again, Bogart plays non-*noir* heroes pitted against forces which are truly dark. In the first of these he plays DA Martin Ferguson, whose attempts to expose the execution squads of organized crime are treated in quasi-documentary style. The crusading but deeply cynical journalist he plays in his last screen role stands isolated against the forces which corrupt the fight game and in this sense the part places him close to the centre of *noir* territory.

Humphrey Bogart played the role of a dangerously unpredictable screenwriter in *In a Lonely Place* (with Gloria Grahame).

James Cagney's sustained bravura performance as the insane Cody Jarrett in *White Heat* proved to be unforgettable, though too larger-than-life to qualify the role – or the film – as *noir*. Here, Cody suffers agonies only his devoted Ma (Margaret Wycherly) can soothe.

Although seen by many as an archetypal *noir* actor, Bogart's powerful personality, however dark it might have been, was seldom sufficiently subdued to express the vulnerability of the classic *noir* hero. There are always subtle undercurrents present, but with the exception of *High Sierra*, which was itself largely non-*noir*, and *Dead Reckoning* they are never sustained long enough to make him one of the actors best-suited to the task of bringing *noir* sensibilities to the screen.

Similarly unsuited to *film noir* was Bogart's great contemporary James Cagney, who had also previously earned a substantial reputation for gangster roles. Unlike Bogart, whose darker persona led people to class him as a major *noir* icon, Cagney's extrovert personality and his obvious delight in playing the quick and the soon-to-be-dead prevented his being so categorized. There are, however, two Cagney roles which cannot be overlooked.

In *White Heat* (1949) Cagney plays Cody Jarrett, an emotional and psychological cripple, whose violent outbursts are among the most memorable ever put on film. Jarrett's headaches, which can only be calmed by the ministrations of his mother (Margaret Wycherly), almost prepare the audience for what will happen when he learns of Ma Jarrett's death. By then Jarrett is in prison; he is in the huge dining hall when he is told about his mother, the message coming to him along a chain of whispers like a sputtering fuse. Cagney's sustained outburst as he clambers up on to the table before stamping crazily across the hall is an outstanding piece of bravura acting.

Curiously enough, despite Jarrett's pathological nature Cagney is also able to throw in little touches of humour, which by no means weaken his characterization. The manner in which he casually pumps bullets into the boot of a car in which one of his henchmen is hiding and has been whining about the lack of air, is done with considerable *élan* – heightened by the fact that at the same time Jarrett is chewing enthusiastically on a chicken leg.

The depth of Cagney's characterization is such that Edmond O'Brien, who plays the cop infiltrating the gang, is made to

'Top of the world, Ma!' James Cagney prepares himself for one of cinema's most spectacular deaths (*White Heat*).

appear even more reprehensible than the psychotic Jarrett.

Obviously foredoomed, Jarrett goes out in a scene which manages to top even the dining-hall outburst. This time, however, the explosion is not only psychological but real, as Jarrett blasts away with his gun into the gas tanks beneath his feet. The apocalyptic image of Jarrett disappearing in a mass of smoke and flame to the echoing cry 'Top of the world, Ma,' has become one of the film world's most cherished moments.

The touches of humour and human frailty which made Cody Jarrett an occasionally acceptable if not actually sympathetic individual do not extend to Ralph Cotter, the character Cagney plays in *Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye*. Cotter is utterly evil, one of the blackest of *noir* villains. Although a much less well-known performance, this is the more deserving of the two roles which earn him his place in the annals of *film noir*.

Much lower on the Hollywood ladder than either Bogart or Cagney, but far more highly

James Cagney as Ralph Cotter, the blackest villain he ever played, for once on the receiving end in *Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye* (with Ward Bond).

qualified as *noir* icons, however minor they might be, is a long string of actors who only rarely enjoyed comparable success in other areas of moviemaking. Among them are Dana Andrews, Glenn Ford, Alan Ladd, Victor Mature, John Payne and Dick Powell.

Patterns of light and shade further obfuscate the already complex relationship between Dana Andrews and Gene Tierney in *Laura*.

Often underrated, possibly because of his apparently wooden acting style, Dana Andrews in fact brought many subtleties to his screen roles. Always under-playing, he used his eyes better than most actors and could convey the inner, tortured self-doubt of the *noir* protagonist with great skill.

One of the best of Andrews's *films noirs* is *Laura* (1944), in which he plays police detective Mark McPherson, engaged in investigating the murder of Laura Hunt (Gene Tierney), whose portrait dominates her room and soon begins to dominate McPherson. The mood of *Laura*, which was produced and directed by Otto Preminger, is constantly shifting; nothing is what it seems. As McPherson's investigations progress he falls under the spell of the dead girl and is understandably shaken when she walks back into the room as he gazes raptly at her portrait.

Learning that the disfigured dead body is that of another girl, possibly killed in mistake for Laura, McPherson continues his enquiries, hindered by his emotional attraction to Laura – who just might have been involved in the other girl's death. McPherson's obsession with Laura and the ever-shifting mood of the film creates ambiguities which establish its credentials as a *film noir*. The killer is eventually revealed to be Waldo Lydecker (Clifton Webb, in a performance of characteristically ambiguous sexuality) and the film ends with the implication that Laura and the detective will live happily ever after, a fate not usually reserved for *noir* lovers.

The success of *Laura* led Preminger to produce and direct another complex *noir* love

Dana Andrews, trapped by his own duplicity in *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt*.

story, again starring Dana Andrews. This was *Fallen Angel* (1945), in which Andrews plays Eric Stanton, a more ambiguous character than the cop in the previous film. Stanton is a wastrel who uses trickery in an attempt to convince people that he is a medium. His machinations involve him with three women, sisters June and Clara Mills (Alice Faye and Anne Revere) – one of whom, June, he hopes to relieve of her money – and Stella (Linda Darnell), whom he wants to marry despite her indifference to him.

Although Eric starts out as a suitably ambiguous *noir* protagonist, the emotional shift which transforms him into a man of more heroic attributes when Stella is murdered and he tracks down the killer makes him less central to the tradition. This transformation, together with the fact that Stella is not the *femme fatale* the story needs, also makes this a less compelling movie than *Laura*, although it certainly does not deserve its relative obscurity.

Dana Andrews's role in another Otto Preminger movie, *Where the Sidewalk Ends* (1950), again concerns a man whose morality undergoes reassessment. Andrews plays Mark Dixon, a brutal police detective whose methods lead to the death of a suspect he is interrogating. Dixon's father was a small-time crook and the film's simplistic psychology suggests that his attitude towards criminals is a reaction against his background. Improbable though this explanation may be, it gives the movie its *noir* ambiance, together with the grim city setting Dixon moves through as he tries to make the killing look like a gangland murder. By falling in love with the daughter of the man he inadvertently implicates in the killing, Dixon undergoes a moral reawakening. Thanks to his love for Morgan (Gene Tierney), Dixon confesses his guilt in the original killing.

An interesting psychological movie of the paranoid post-*noir* period is *Brainstorm* (1965), in which Dana Andrews plays Cort Benson, a cold and ruthless industrialist. The storyline centres on a young scientist, James Grayam (Jeff Hunter), who falls in love with Benson's wife, Lorrie (Anne Francis). Benson tries to destroy Grayam's career by making him appear insane. Grayam eventually evolves a scheme: with Lorrie's co-operation he will pretend to be insane, then deliberately kill Benson in front of witnesses in the hope that he will be sentenced to a temporary stay in a mental hospital. When Grayam is committed to an asylum Lorrie changes her mind and will have nothing more to do with him. All along there have been signals that Grayam is genuinely insane and now his condition deteriorates. He escapes in order to tell the truth to a psychiatrist who worked on his case (Viveca Lindfors) but she returns him to the hospital, apparently for ever.

The interrelationship between the societies inside and outside hospitals for the insane dramatically reflects the contrasts made earlier by mainstream *films noirs* between normal society and the underworld. Sharp direction and editing help make *Brainstorm* a much better movie than its consignment to late-night television suggests. The film was directed by William Conrad, best known as TV detective Cannon, who in 1946 played one of the gunmen in *The Killers*.

Another actor who fell short of true star status is Glenn Ford. The war interrupted his career before it was fully off the ground and soon after he returned from active service he was fortunate in being cast in *Gilda* (1946), opposite Rita Hayworth in the title role. It would be stretching the limits of *film noir* to their limits to admit *Gilda* without numerous reservations, yet the tortuous human relationships the story explores make it hard to ignore completely. Ford plays Johnny Farrell, a gambler temporarily spurned by Lady Luck. He has an established close friendship with his boss, nightclub owner Ballin Mundson (George Macready), and is deeply disturbed when Mundson marries Gilda, Johnny's former lover. Johnny's emotional response shifts wildly between the reawakening of the old desires and hatred of Gilda for disrupting his friendship. The implications of homosexuality are strongly defined for the time, as Johnny constantly seeks to humiliate Gilda even to the point where, after Mundson's supposed death, he marries her in order to make her life truly miserable. Eventually, after Mundson has returned, only to be killed by the one real friend Gilda ever made at the nightclub, Johnny and Gilda are able to face a future uncluttered by extraneous

relationships. Given the way they have lied, cheated and humiliated one another throughout, the implication that they will live happily ever after is hard to swallow.

The manner in which an ordinary guy is sucked into a maelstrom of conflicting loyalties and emotions by a designing woman is central to the *noir* tradition; this theme forms the basis of *Framed* (1947), an indisputable B picture. Glenn Ford plays Mike Lambert, a blue-collar worker who is seduced by waitress Paula Craig (Janis Carter) for the sole reason that he resembles her boyfriend Stephen Price (Barry Sullivan). Paula and Price need someone to take the rap for their scheme to embezzle from the bank where Price works. Paula, however, falls genuinely in love with Mike and once Price has his hands on the loot she kills him, assuring Mike that it was an accident. He goes along with this for a while, at least until a friend is picked up on suspicion. He then forces a confession of the truth from Paula and in true *noir* tradition hands her over to the authorities.

Firmly in the *film noir* genre is Glenn Ford's appearance in Fritz Lang's 1953 movie, *The Big Heat*. As the honest and dedicated cop Dave Bannion, Ford added a soured and embittered presence to Lang's conception of how a movie dealing with organized crime should be made. Ford's contribution to the overall quality of *The Big Heat* was to bring a credible dimension to the improbable role of a cop who, without any help from a compromised police force, brings to justice a highly organized group of criminals prepared to kill anyone who gets in their way. Ford's task was made doubly difficult in that he had to play scenes of domestic innocence with his wife and daughter after showing himself, at the start of the movie, to be capable of as much sudden, explosive violence as the people he is dedicated to destroy. In fact, these scenes work very well and therefore make his later transformation into an avenging angel of death, after his wife has been blown up by a bomb meant for him, entirely believable.

In complete contrast to the gruff ordinariness which Glenn Ford displayed, Alan Ladd was almost ethereal. His slight build, short stature, pale complexion, light-blond hair and freeze-dried whispering voice was everything that a traditional movie hero was not. Times changed, however, and Ladd had his day.

Alan Ladd as the detached, freeze-dried gunman in *This Gun for Hire* (with Marc Lawrence).

Ladd had made numerous bit-part appearances (including an almost invisible role in *Citizen Kane*) before being cast as Raven, the enigmatic hired killer in *This Gun for Hire* (1942), a movie co-scripted by W. R. Burnett from Graham Greene's novel *A Gun for Hire*.

After he is paid off in hot money for a hit, Raven sets out to even the score. He becomes involved with Ellen Graham (Veronica Lake), who is engaged to Michael Crane (Robert Preston), one of the policemen pursuing Raven. Raven and Ellen strike up a cautious relationship which results in Ellen, who is really a secret agent, persuading him to help her. He does, although his motives are not at all clear-cut. After helping clean up the spies Ellen is hunting, Raven is killed by Crane.

The lower than low-key acting of Ladd, allied as it is to similar underplaying from Veronica Lake, an equally cool, quiet blonde counterpart, makes *This Gun for Hire* very different from the highly charged emotional drama that became central to *noir* as the movement established itself a few years later.

The coolly ambivalent Alan Ladd in *The Blue Dahlia*.

This movie does, however, contain many of the later ingredients: the detached protagonist and the implication that some past action has condemned him, the strange sexuality of the leading lady, the grotesque villains, Alvin Brewster (Tully Marshall in a wheelchair) and Willard Gates (Laird Cregar, grossly overweight in his curiously refined way), all became standard *noir* fare.

Ladd's ambivalent playing of small-time gangster Ed Beaumont in *The Glass Key* (1942) and his waif-like physique allowed the movie's makers to retain at least a hint of the sexual ambiguity present in Dashiell Hammett's novel.

The cool, ambivalent detachment Ladd brought to *The Glass Key* (and just about every role he ever played) was not quite right for his performance as the returning soldier, Johnny Morrison, in *The Blue Dahlia* (1946). Suspected of murdering his two-timing wife Helen (Doris Dowling), Johnny is helped by Joyce Harwood (Veronica Lake), who turns out to be married to Eddie Harwood, one of the men in Helen's life. Johnny is caught between Joyce, the police and his ex-army buddies Buzz and George (William Bendix and Hugh Beaumont) but, thanks to Ladd's imperturbability in whatever crisis Johnny faces, it is hard to know what he thinks or feels about it all.

In Raymond Chandler's original screenplay the killer was Buzz, whose head wound, sustained in the war, causes him to experience blackouts and violent rages. It was decided, however, that returning warriors should not be displayed as killers (although *Crossfire* did just that the following year) and the ending was changed so that the blame is taken by Dad Newell (Will Wright), the hotel detective who hadn't seen loyal service in the war (and didn't see enough service in the movie to be a convincing fall guy).

As physical types go, it is hard to think of anyone more unlike Alan Ladd than Victor Mature. Tall, heavily built, florid and dark, Mature seems as unsuited to *noir* roles as Ladd. Yet, despite his massive screen presence (he played Samson in *Samson and Delilah*) Mature brought to a short string of appearances in *film noir* a curious vulnerability. That such a large man could betray an inner softness without noticeable changes of expression (facial immobility was the only thing he had in common with Ladd) was quite remarkable.

The Shanghai Gesture (1941) is pre-*noir* yet has many qualities which make it worthy of attention. Not least is the manner in which Josef von Sternberg's direction almost gets around the fact that Hollywood's built-in censorship had drastically toned down the original material, a stage play by John Colton. Gone is Mother Goddamn and her brothel, gone are the whores of which the heroine, Poppy, is one. In their place comes Mother Gin Sling and her gambling club, among whose customers is Poppy (decorously played by Gene Tierney). Sternberg craftily creates a mood of pervasive decadence which leaves little doubt about the real nature of this section of Shanghai's underworld. Victor Mature plays Dr Omar, a sinister Oriental whose presence looms darkly over Poppy, the one redeeming light in the entire grim setting. Unusually for Hollywood at this time, Sternberg not only gets away with a scene in which young women are sold to the highest bidder, but he also achieves a decidedly

downbeat ending in which Poppy is murdered by Mother Gin Sling, who has revealed that she is really Poppy's mother.

Mature also appeared in another *noir* precursor, *I Wake Up Screaming* (1942). Sexual ambivalence is again a feature, this time in a tale of two glamorous young sisters, Jill and Vicky Lynn (Betty Grable and Carole Landis). When Vicky is murdered, her manager, Frankie Christopher (Mature), is suspected and arrested. Knowing that the only way he can clear himself is to be free, he escapes and hides out with Jill, with whom he has fallen in love. Hounded by an obese detective, Ed Cornell (Laird Cregar), Frankie eventually finds the culprit, weaselly Harry Williams (Elisha Cook Jr), who has already confessed to Cornell. Like Williams, whose room is papered with pictures of the dead girl, Cornell has become obsessed with her and has decided to let Frankie go to the chair for the killing. Frankie proves Cornell's complicity to the cops and he and Jill are free to live happily ever after. Once again, it is the atmosphere and the grotesque characterizations of the bit parts, especially those played by Cregar and Cook, that hint at the *noir* style just around the corner. (*I Wake Up Screaming* was based upon a Steve Fisher novel and the character of Ed Cornell was so named to pay homage to Cornell Woolrich.)

Kiss of Death (1947), directed by Henry Hathaway, does not owe its presence in the *noir* canon to a complex storyline. It is a somewhat simplistic tale of a petty crook, Nick Bianco (Mature), who becomes a police informer after he has been sent to prison, his wife commits suicide and his children are placed in care. When he comes out Bianco marries Nettie (Coleen Gray) but the cops are constantly on his back for more information and to testify against hoodlums. The semi-documentary style does not itself distinguish the film from the orthodox crime movies of the period. What makes it very definitely *film noir* is the character of the insane killer played by Richard Widmark, whose performance, when set against the dour, foreboding mien of Victor Mature, is positively incandescent.

Mature played the lead in *Cry of the City* (1948), a rare instance of Robert Siodmak's directing a film in the *noir* tradition which

Victor Mature on the set of *Cry of the City* with director Robert Siodmak.

strays outside the deliberately claustrophobic atmosphere of the studio. Using a documentary style, this is a tale of two men, police lieutenant Candella (Mature) and Martin Rome (Richard Conte), who grew up together but whose personalities have taken them on to opposite sides of the law. Only fleetingly are hints of a *noir* background allowed to gleam bleakly through, mainly thanks to Lloyd Ahern's photography and the performances of Conte and Hope Emerson. Mature, here the good guy, is not powerfully enough imbued with the *noir* atmosphere to make an impact.

Another minor icon is John Payne, whose early career was in musicals. By the 1950s his physical appearance had taken on a tougher edge and he was cast in the leading role in a number of minor *noir* films, three of which were directed by Phil Karlson.

Payne's first entry into *noir* territory was in an interesting variation on the twin themes of the dislocated returning soldier and the amnesiac searching for his true identity. In *The Crooked Way* (1949), which was directed by Robert Florey in a straight-ahead manner dictated partly by the script's radio-play origins, Payne plays amnesiac ex-soldier Eddie Rice, who is determined to discover all that he can about his past. His search, through Los Angeles and its environs, offers excellent location opportunities for the cinematographer, John Alton, and the designer, Van Nest Polglase, to create atmospheric *noir* scenes.

In the first of Payne's trio with Karlson, *Kansas City Confidential* (1952), he plays Joe Rolfe, an ex-con wrongly accused of robbing an armoured security van. Beaten up by the cops, Rolfe sets out angrily to prove his innocence, taking on the underworld and a crooked cop, Timothy Foster (Preston Foster), who is behind the security van robbery. This is a simple tale, complicated only by Rolfe's chance encounter with Foster's daughter, Helen (Coleen Gray), to whom he is attracted. Foster has not sought to implicate Rolfe, and Rolfe does not seek to prove Foster the guilty man. Each man affects the other's life through the kind of chance on which the world of *film noir* thrives, and omens of the eventual outcome occur throughout.

99 River Street (1953) develops unusual areas of story-telling for *film noir*. Ernie Driscoll (Payne) is an ex-fighter now scraping a living driving a cab and attempting half-heartedly to prop up his crumbling marriage. Linda James (Evelyn Keyes) is a struggling actress trying to break into the theatre. Ernie and Linda know each other slightly but do not begin to develop a relationship until Linda, in order to demonstrate her acting skills to a producer, persuades Ernie to help her cover up a murder she claims to have committed. Ernie is understandably angry when he discovers the truth but soon has other problems on his mind. His wife really is murdered by a thief with whom she has been having an affair. Ernie hunts down the killer, aided by Linda, who now regrets using him to help further her career.

The theatrical settings for some scenes introduce a new element into *film noir* and the use of the boxing theme is unconventional. Ernie's last fight, which results in the eye injury which ended his career, is seen twice, but not in the usual motivational flashback. Instead, Ernie sees it once on TV, and again in his mind's eye during his final confrontation with Rawlins.

John Payne's third and last film with Phil Karlson is the underrated *Hell's Island* (1955), which traces the fall from grace of a man of substance and his discovery of inner strengths he did not know he had. This leads him to try again, only to discover that his original weakness, for a woman, is still present and capable of defeating him for a second time. This common device in *film noir* is well presented as Mike Cormack (Payne) recounts his story as he lies in hospital.

Despite the strongly *noir*-flavoured relationship between the protagonist and the *femme fatale* in *Hell's Island*, the use of Technicolor and VistaVision conspire against its achieving successful visual imagery. However, John Payne's 1956 movie, *Slightly Scarlet*, achieved a reasonable degree of success despite being in Technicolor and, this time, in Superscope. This was largely thanks to yet another teaming of John Alton and Van Nest Polglase, even if the film's origins (in a novel by James M. Cain, *Love's Lovely Counterfeit*) were largely ignored in the adaptation.

More successful than Payne in adapting to *film noir* after a career in musicals was Dick

John Payne as ex-prizefighter Ernie Driscoll is threatened by a hoodlum named Mickey (Jack Lambert) in *99 River Street*.

Powell, whose convincing début in *Farewell, My Lovely* persuaded him to give the genre another few shots.

Cornered (1945) sees Powell again directed by Edward Dmytryk with the same producer and screenwriter as for *Farewell, My Lovely* and, significantly, Harry J. Wild again behind the camera. Powell is Laurence Gerard, a French-Canadian intent on avenging the death of his French wife at the hands of the Germans during the Second World War. Gerard, a tough, cynical loner, is determined to track down former collaborators and ex-Nazis now living in South America. His quest leads him into solitary conflict in which his isolation is intensified by the fact that he is prone to attacks of amnesia. One such attack occurs at the movie's end as Gerard fights Marcel Jarnac (Luther Adler), the collaborator directly responsible for his wife's death, and Gerard unknowingly beats the collaborator to death.

Powell's next film, *Johnny O'Clock* (1947), which was Robert Rossen's first attempt at directing, was less effective than *Cornered* in evoking a deeply pessimistic tone. Although Rossen had previously written, either alone or in collaboration, several good, tough movies, including *The Roaring Twenties* (1939), *The Sea Wolf* (1940) and *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* (1946), this first shot at directing a contemporary crime movie was not a complete success. A few months later Rossen created the required *noir* mood with much greater impact in *Body and Soul*, but *Johnny O'Clock* is generally too upbeat and Powell too clearly capable of looking after himself for this to be an entirely satisfactory exercise.

Similarly self-sufficient and not at all neurotic is Rocky, Powell's character in *Cry Danger* (1951). Here, he plays an ex-con released on parole who seeks to discover who framed him and his friend Danny for a robbery. Rocky is motivated by the fact that Danny is still inside and there are therefore none of the usual internal impulses generating

the protagonist's actions. Only marginally *noir*, the movie does have a glamorous *femme fatale* in Rhonda Fleming as Nancy, Danny's wife, who is also Rocky's ex-girlfriend. There are a number of enjoyably unsavoury minor roles, too, notably William Conrad as the gangster Castro, and a strong supporting performance by Richard Erdman as Delong, an ex-soldier who, unusually for Hollywood in this period, suffers from painful injuries which he ameliorates by drinking.

Unlike Dick Powell (and most other Hollywood actors of any generation), John Garfield was in private life a proletarian radical and also a defiant loner, up against an implacable establishment which he viewed with cynicism. These traits break through into many of Garfield's screen roles and, not surprisingly, made him an ideal choice for several *film noir* protagonists.

In *Nobody Lives Forever* (1946) he plays Nick Blake, a returning soldier whose expectations of what awaits him in civilian life are severely frustrated. Formerly a gambler, Nick finds he has been usurped by people he

Constantly under threat, John Garfield needed to be tough in order to survive even worse scrapes than these both on and off the screen. In the end, he all too soon proved the truth of this movie's title. With Geraldine Fitzgerald, Walter Brennan and George Tobias in *Nobody Lives Forever*.

Against all expectations, Dick Powell proved to be an excellent choice to play Raymond Chandler's White Knight, Philip Marlowe, in *Farewell, My Lovely*.

thought were friends and his girl, Toni (Faye Emerson), has taken up with someone else. Deciding to try his luck in another part of the country, Nick heads for California with Al Doyle (George Tobias). There he meets up with an old crony, Pop Gruber (Walter Brennan), now down on his luck. Another former associate, Doc Ganson (George Colouris), talks Nick into helping con a wealthy widow out of her fortune. Nick is attracted to the widow, Gladys Halvorsen (Geraldine Fitzgerald), and tries to buy off Ganson. Toni, who has also come out to California, convinces Ganson that Nick is planning to take all the widow's money for himself. When Gladys is kidnapped by Ganson's gang, Nick goes to her aid and in the ensuing gunfight Ganson and Pop Gruber kill one another.

The bleakly unromantic view taken by the movie, supported by Garfield's strong, unsentimental performance, creates a darker ambiance than that of most emotional dramas of the day and nudges it into the periphery of *film noir*.

Although released earlier than *Nobody Lives Forever, The Postman Always Rings Twice* was made a short time later and earns its place in the *noir* canon thanks to the source material, James M. Cain's scorching novel, and Garfield's gritty performance as the drifter, Frank Chambers. The grim fatalism of the novel and the manner in which Frank, the narrator, is pulled inexorably towards his destiny through his irresistible attraction to Cora Smith (Lana Turner) are persuasively rendered by Garfield, even if he is not quite the no-account bum of the novel. Indeed, Garfield's no-nonsense, man-of-the-people air gives his portrayal of Frank dark echoes of Henry Fonda's non-violent Tom Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Unlike his co-star in *Postman*, Lana Turner, whose Hollywood glamour was not allowed to be tarnished by the seediness of her character's nature and environment, Garfield had no delusions about stardom. He was an actor who dug deeply under the skin of a character without ever resorting to the more flamboyant tricks of the trade.

Body and Soul (1947) is one of several *films noirs* which used the setting of the fight game. While not as gloomily introspective as *The Set-Up*, and not as dynamically upbeat as another contemporary boxing tale, *The Champion, Body and Soul* does share with these movies a first-rate central performance. As boxer Charlie Davis, John Garfield subtly conveys the determination of a young man who has risen from the gutter by the use of his fists and is determined never to return there, whatever the cost. This causes him to discard old friends and relatives, his artist girlfriend Peg Born (Lilli Palmer), and even to turn his head away when a friend becomes a fatal victim of the gangsters with whom he is now associating. Nevertheless, there is a strong streak of idealism inside Charlie Davis and he eventually realizes the values of the life he has deserted, the reality of what Jews like him are suffering in Europe, and the sordid nature of his new friendships. As the movie draws to a close he wins the fight he has agreed to throw and thus paves the way for an unrealistically upbeat ending. But for this ending, which contrasts unfavourably with the victorious but more appropriate end of *The Set-Up, Body and Soul* could have been the best of the boxing *noirs*. Garfield's lines, as he faces up to his enemies, express the philosophy of all existentialist heroes: 'What are you going to do, kill me? Everybody dies.'

John Garfield, along with director Robert Rossen and the screenwriter on *Body and Soul*, Abraham Polonsky, were all seriously affected by the activities of the House Un-American Activities Committee and the strong streak of liberalism which pervades the movie can be interpreted as an indicator of their social consciences.

Polonsky graduated to director and co-screenwriter for Garfield's 1948 movie *Force of Evil*, another socially-conscious tale thinly disguised as a late entry in the gangster genre. Garfield plays Joe Morse, a lawyer employed by a criminal organization which is intent on monopolizing the numbers racket. Joe's brother Leo (Thomas Gomez) is a small-time bookmaker blocking the way of the syndicate. The crime bosses ask Joe to persuade his brother to step aside and when he fails to do so they use force to wipe him out. The brutality of their actions forces Joe to take stock and he turns against his former associates.

Polonsky's treatment of the film retains a

Framed in a powerful moment from one of the toughest boxing movies: John Garfield (right) in *Body and Soul*.

sharp sense of reality and, thanks to the leading actors, conveys great depths of character. Of these performances, Garfield's, characteristically understated, is flawless and he even overcomes the hazard of an improbably uplifting final speech. He is aided by excellent support from Gomez and from Marie Windsor as Edna Tucker, the archetypal gangster's moll, who performs the traditional task of leading the hero astray.

The Breaking Point (1950) is a film version of Ernest Hemingway's novel *To Have and Have Not*, and is in most respects a more successful effort than the earlier, much better-known travesty of the book directed by Howard Hawks and starring Bogart and Bacall. Here, directed by Michael Curtiz, John Garfield takes the role of Harry Morgan and is ably supported by Patricia Neal, Phyllis Thaxter and, especially good as Wesley Park, Juano Hernandez. Garfield's ability to convey effortlessly an air of defeat lends great strength to the role. Bogart, on the other hand, was allowed a more upbeat interpretation, thanks to Hawks's drastic reshaping of the novel for his film. The mood of *Breaking Point*, for which the (mostly faithful) adaptation was by Ranald MacDougall, is certainly *noir* even though, on the surface at least, the film is an entertaining romance.

Unjustly overshadowed by an inferior film, this version of Ernest Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not* still had its problems, but John Garfield's performance as Harry Morgan was not one of them. A quiet moment from *The Breaking Point* with Phyllis Thaxter, Sherry Jackson and Donna Jo Boyce.

Death in the gutter for a small-time crook: John Garfield and Shelley Winters in *He Ran All the Way*.

Coincidentally, there is a tendency to overlook another fine Garfield performance because of a comparable film role by Bogart. This came in *He Ran All the Way* (1951), in which Garfield plays Nick Rocco, a criminal on the run who takes refuge in the home of an ordinary family. Unlike those of the Bogart film, *The Desperate Hours*, which came four years later, the gangster's actions in *He Ran All the Way* are not deliberate. Rocco, who is not too bright, does not seek out a family to terrorize in order to stay hidden from the pursuing cops. Instead, he chances upon Peg Dobbs (Shelley Winters) while hiding from the police at a public swimming pool. Later, after he has taken her home, he decides to stay and then only because he thinks the girl's father (Wallace Ford) has recognized him. The swiftly burgeoning relationship between Rocco and Peg is caught effectively by the stars and, while Rocco perhaps represents less of a threat than did Bogart and his sidekicks in the later film, there is still an air of unpredictable menace in his behaviour. The earlier film also has a more powerful ending, when Peg is forced to kill the young man, to whom she is strongly attracted, in order to save her father's life.

This was John Garfield's last role. In 1952 he died of a heart attack, which friends, knowing him to be bitter and frustrated, believed was an after-effect of his treatment during investigation by HUAC. He was 39.

Some indication of how the studio system tended to repress individualism is given by the fact that many of John Garfield's most important movies were independents, some made by a company in which he was a partner (with Abraham Polonsky and Robert Rossen). Among them were *Body and Soul, Gentleman's Agreement* (a powerful indictment of anti-Semitism), *Force of Evil, The Breaking Point* and *He Ran All the Way*.

It is idle to speculate how great a star John Garfield might have become had he lived. However, for two other young actors, Kirk Douglas and Robert Mitchum, near-

contemporaries of Garfield's, this period of film-making, the 1940s and early 1950s, offered appreciable advancement on the road to international fame and superstardom.

Unlike Garfield, a downbeat, low-key performer, Kirk Douglas was always a high-tension actor. In several of his early films he kept the tension in check and this often provided an exciting undercurrent to his roles in *film noir*. Later in his career, the fizz was let out of the bottle, often non-stop throughout a movie. While this sometimes made his performances less interesting, it no doubt helped his career by landing him roles in several larger-than-life epics.

Although he had earlier acted on Broadway and on radio, Douglas came rather late to the movies. He was 29 when he made *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* (1946), a film which mixes dark psychological drama with lush romanticism. Cast as the weak, neurotic Walter O'Neil, Douglas fares reasonably well given the fact that he was ranked number four in a cast list which included Van Heflin, Lizabeth Scott and the formidable Barbara Stanwyck in the leading role.

Douglas has little to do in the quintessential *film noir Out of the Past* (1947), in which he is a shade too young to be convincing in the role of obsessive gangster Whit Sterling. He plays a similar role in *I Walk Alone* (1948), in which he is a gangster, Noll Turner, whose chiselling of his partner, played by Burt Lancaster, sets the film's plot in motion.

It was in his starring role as Midge Kelly in *The Champion* (1949) that Douglas hit his stride and entered the big-time. Released in the same year as *The Set-Up, The Champion* is a less convincing picture of the boxing world and Douglas's performance in the central role is less grittily real than Robert Ryan's. But, judged in the light of the movie it set out to be, *The Champion* deserves the praise it has received. Where it fails, and why it falls well short of *The Set-Up* as *film noir*, is that the fight scenes are improbably spectacular, there is too much synthetic sentiment, and the boxer himself is just too unpleasant. Despite the veneer of cynicism that coats the film, which was scripted by Carl Foreman and directed by Stanley Kramer, there is never any doubt that the audience is being manipulated on to Midge Kelly's side, even though he is a thorough-going scoundrel. In *The Set-Up* the audience sides with Stoker Thompson for sound emotional reasons based on the evidence of his character.

Perhaps the strongest of Douglas's early roles, and bidding fair to be his best of all, is that of the embittered, drunken journalist Charles Tatum in the 1951 movie *Ace in the Hole* (later re-released as *The Big Carnival*). Directed by Billy Wilder from a screenplay on which he worked as co-writer, the story is as thoroughly cynical as any to come from Hollywood.

Tatum is working on a small-town newspaper in New Mexico, having been fired from the big-time thanks to his drinking and generally irresponsible behaviour. Ever hopeful of a big story with which he can write his way back to New York, Tatum strikes lucky when a man is trapped in a disused mine. By convincing several disreputable individuals that they too can benefit by protracting the story, Tatum diverts the rescue party to take the longest and slowest way into the mine. Even the trapped man's unhappy wife, Lorraine Minosa (Jan Sterling), is persuaded to stay on and capitalize on the sensation-seeking crowds visiting the Minosa's diner. A makeshift carnival materializes and the instant community of trailers and tents takes on an excited frontier atmosphere.

Eventually, with his story being eagerly snapped up by the big-city newspapers, Tatum is ready to return to the big-time he craves. But by this time, the trapped man has contracted pneumonia and he dies before the deliberately delayed rescuers reach him.

An unusually bleak vision of American culture and mores, *Ace in the Hole* earned a considerable measure of critical wrath. Newspapers felt, understandably, that it degraded them, and despite receiving critical praise overseas the film was not a success in America. As time has passed the public has become more aware of the failings of the press, which has, for its part, become steadily less reputable than it was even in the 1950s.

In this film, more than in any other of his early *noir*-ish movies, Kirk Douglas's surface brittleness and air of manic intensity meshes perfectly with the character he portrays. Ultimately, however, it is Billy Wilder's

Jan Sterling, a sadly underrated and under-used actress, played Lorraine Minosain in *Ace in the Hole*. Here, goaded to vengeance by the lethal cynicism of Charles Tatum (Kirk Douglas), she stabs him.

One of the most cynical movies ever made, *Ace in the Hole* gave Kirk Douglas one of his best screen roles.

savagely accurate representation of modern man's tenuous grip on civilized behaviour that makes *Ace in the Hole* so memorable.

Douglas's interpretation of the role of Jim McLeod in William Wyler's production of *Detective Story* (1951) is another good example of his personal characteristics matching the needs of a part. The air of suppressed tension as the unstable detective goes about his daily round is convincingly captured. Nevertheless, the movie is only peripherally *noir* and owes its place in the genre more to the gradual build-up of pressure which leads to McLeod's eventual break-down.

The other major star whose career took an upswing thanks to his early appearances in a succession of *films noirs* is Robert Mitchum. He had already made several movie appearances, often unbilled, including several Hopalong Cassidy westerns, when he was cast as Fred Graham in *When Strangers Marry* (1944). Shot in ten days at a cost of $50,000, this King Brothers movie shows its cheapskate origins in its use of simple, stagey sets, but offers much more than the average B-picture of the day to the discerning viewer. Psychological thrillers were not all that thick on the ground in the B-movies of the early 1940s but this one shows what could be done, thanks to a good script by Philip Yordan, then near the start of a long and distinguished writing career, and good performances from leads Dean Jagger and Kim Hunter.

As the man responsible for the murder of which Paul Baxter is suspected, Mitchum demonstrates flashes of an underlying malevolence that he would later use to superb effect in bigger-budgeted, but not always better, movies.

Mitchum's high output of movies during the 1940s was made possible by his working on more than one at a time. At one point he was working simultaneously on three films, including *Undercurrent* and *The Locket* (both 1946). In the first of these two he plays a sensitive painter, Michael Garroway, who

The miscasting of Katharine Hepburn and Robert Taylor did not help *Undercurrent*, which was only marginally *film noir*.

Noir westerns are rare and this one, *Pursued*, is a greatly underrated movie (Judith Anderson, Teresa Wright and Robert Mitchum).

is the third and very much smaller side of a triangle completed by Katharine Hepburn and Robert Taylor. With Taylor cast as a cold, neurotic killer it is tempting to speculate how much the movie might have been improved had the male roles been reversed. The conflicting personalities of the two men, the brothers Alan and Michael Garroway, provide some sort of psychological angle, as does the gradual build-up of fear as Ann realizes that Alan is mentally unstable; but the movie never fully enters the *noir* world, perhaps due to its director, Vincente Minnelli, whose best work lay in much brighter and more buoyant works.

In *The Locket* Mitchum is another painter, Norman Clyde, who plays a small part in the complex life of Nancy Blair (Laraine Day), a psychologically disturbed young woman who is about to be married. The film develops through an interlocking series of flashbacks-within-flashbacks which traces and gradually uncovers Nancy's concealed neuroses. Although the character played by Mitchum kills himself as a result of his relationship with Nancy, the fact that her problem is the relatively harmless one of kleptomania makes her ultimate fate, incarceration in an asylum following a complete mental breakdown as she is about to be married, seem unduly harsh.

Despite its many fine qualities, especially the performance of Robert Ryan, *Crossfire* was not a highlight in Mitchum's *film noir* career. The main problem for him is that his role, as Sergeant Peter Keeley, is largely passive.

Pursued (1947) found Mitchum in a rare kind of movie, a *noir* western. Concerned more with the psychological motivation of its characters than with gun-play and horses, this movie, directed by Raoul Walsh, employs flashbacks to explore the past and explain the motivation of the characters. The absence of blazing gun battles and hectic horse-riding has severely limited its subsequent screenings, even on late-night TV, which is unfortunate since the movie has considerable merit.

Flashbacks were much in evidence again in *Out of the Past* (1947), the movie which, more than any other of the period, estab-

Outsiders in the dark are a recurring feature in *film noir* but where light shines does not always denote a place of safety. Steve Brodie approaches Jane Greer and Robert Mitchum, and his own violent death, in *Out of the Past*, while Robert Mitchum seeks a world of which he can never be a part.

lished Robert Mitchum as an actor who was unlikely to slip back into obscurity, even if it did not necessarily forecast his later status as a superstar.

A true classic of *film noir, Out of the Past* (which was originally released in Britain under the title of the Geoffrey Homes novel upon which it is based, *Build My Gallows High*) is well directed by Jacques Tourneur and, though there are a few confusing moments along the way, it generally moves crisply. Opening in a small, sunlit town, the story picks up Jeff Bailey (Mitchum), the local garage-owner who is a man with an unknown past. His relationship with a local girl, Ann Miller (Virginia Huston), is interrupted by the arrival in town of Joe Stefanos (Paul Valentine), who works for a big-city racketeer, Whit Sterling (Kirk Douglas). Sterling wants to see him again and Jeff is forced to tell Ann about his past and his relationship with Sterling.

Three years earlier, Jeff was hired to trace Sterling's mistress, Kathie Moffett (Jane Greer), who shot and injured him before running off with a bundle of money. When Jeff finds Kathie he falls in love with her and accepts her version of events. They go off together but are eventually traced by Jeff's former partner, Fisher (Steve Brodie).

Kathie kills Fisher and Jeff realizes what she is really like. He leaves her and hides out in the small town where he and Ann now live.

Back in the present, Jeff meets Sterling and finds that Kathie is once again the gangster's mistress. Gradually, Jeff is sucked into their devious world and is again deceived and betrayed by Kathie, who eventually kills Sterling.

Jeff calls the police before he and Kathie head for the border, only to confront a police road-block. Kathie, realizing that Jeff has finally broken the spell she has over him, shoots him but the police open fire, killing her too.

Setting aside some storyline confusions, there is a dramatic inevitability about the movie which, in contrast to many *films noirs*, justifies the sometimes too-freely-made comparison with Greek tragedy.

Mitchum's laconic, hard-boiled portrayal of Jeff Bailey resembles several of the better private-eye renditions of the 1940s but, thanks to the complexities of character and story, is open to a much deeper interpretation. Mitchum's as yet unappreciated capability as an actor is fully realized, as is the on-screen persona he had by now developed. After *Out of the Past* Mitchum only rarely stepped far from roles in which he played the eternal outsider. Paradoxically, the best of his later roles were those in which he either polished the outsider to perfection or went completely against type.

Mitchum tangled with a dangerous woman again in *Where Danger Lives* (1950). This time he plays Jeff Cameron, a doctor who becomes involved with Margo Lannington (Faith Domergue), the young wife of Frederick Lannington (Claude Rains). In a tussle with the older man Cameron is knocked out, after which, unknown to him, the errant wife hits her husband just a little bit harder and kills him. On the run and heading for Mexico, Cameron becomes aware that he is suffering from concussion; his state of mind is not helped by the realization that he is caught up with a woman who is homicidally insane. Despite a good performance from Mitchum and a superbly elegant one from Rains, to say nothing of excellent cinematography by Nicholas Musuraca, the movie does not measure up to the best of *film noir*, being sabotaged partly by Domergue's inadequacy and partly by its predictable plotting.

Although commonly listed among the best of the genre, indeed regarded by some as quintessential *film noir*, it is hard to justify ranking *His Kind of Woman* (1951) as anything other than extremely marginal *noir*, and not very good whatever its categorization. Mitchum's presence, as Dan Milner, certainly helps, as does Raymond Burr's portrayal of mobster Nick Ferrero, and there are some interesting camera angles, but there are many other moments that fall outside *noir* conventions: Vincent Price gives a camp performance as the movie actor Mark Cardigan, relishing some good lines ('Survivors will get parts in my next picture'), and there are too many scenes with comic-opera foreign policemen and soldiers. The sequences in which Milner is about to be injected with a brain-destroying drug by a malignant ex-Nazi are milked for tension in a wholly unconvincing manner to allow intercutting of comedy scenes with Price. Good old-fashioned Hollywood hokum, yes; classic *film noir*, by no means. It would, however, be interesting to know what the movie was like after John Farrow finished directing it and before it was edited in accordance with Howard Hughes's distorted vision.

The Racket (1951) is another example of a lost opportunity. The teaming of Mitchum and Robert Ryan as Captain McQuigg and Nick Scanlon, respectively cop and gang boss, could have meant fireworks but in the event did not. The movie's *noir* pretensions come from the ambiguities of these characters: McQuigg is often as brutal as the mobsters he hates and hunts; Scanlon attracts most sympathy as a man unable to cope with changing society, even if it is criminal society.

Macao (1952) was the last of the string of *noir*-ish movies Mitchum made for Howard Hughes and, like the others, sat around for a time before release. It also suffered from a severe case of front-office interference. Josef von Sternberg directed, only to be replaced by Nicholas Ray when the film was all but complete; Ray re-shot much of the footage, substituting his hard-edged vision for his predecessor's sometimes rococo flamboyance; and overall hung the dim artistic conception of Howard Hughes.

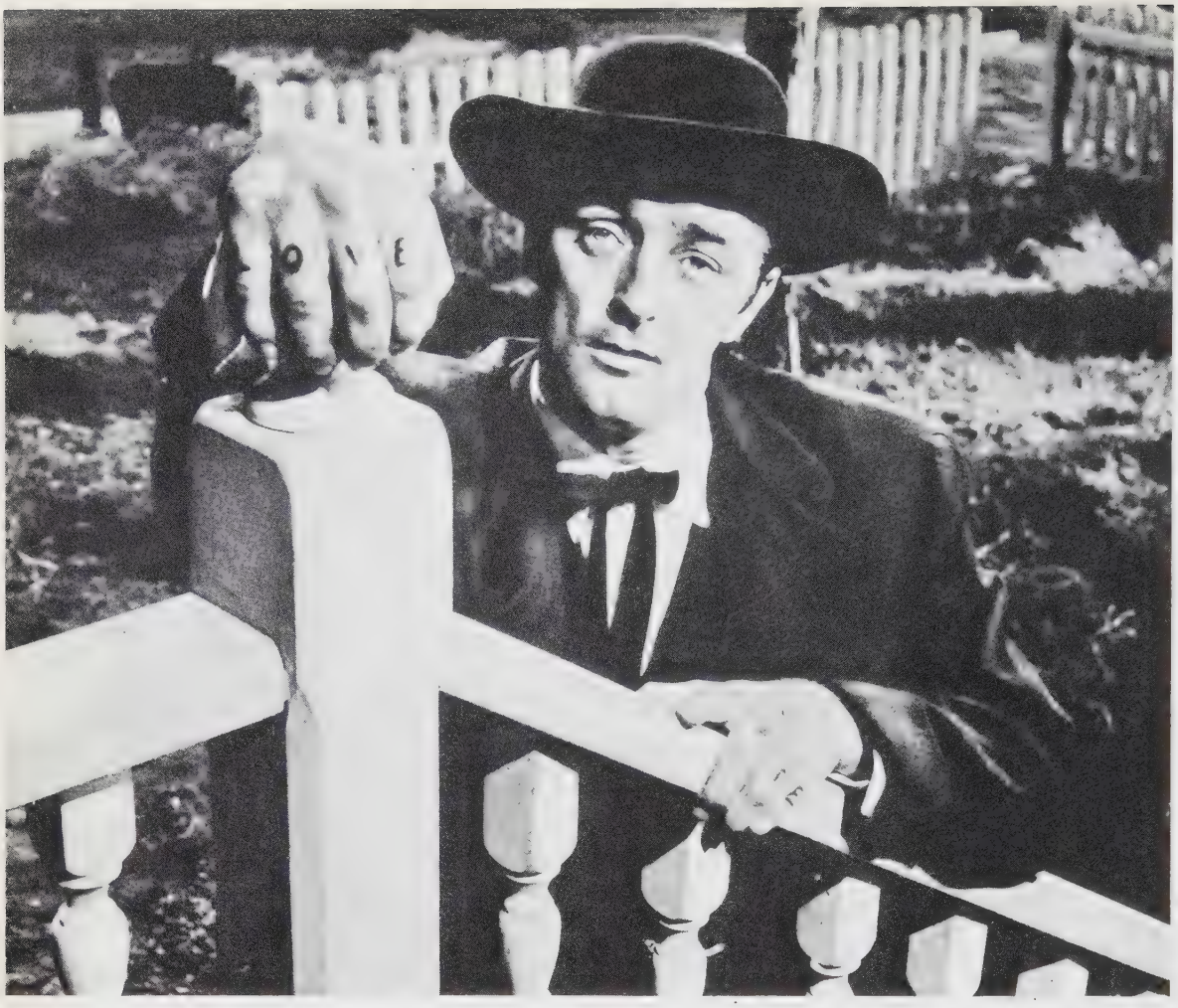
'When I have nothing to do and can't think, I always iron my money.' Robert Mitchum finds a way to relax under the speculative gaze of Jane Russell in *His Kind of Woman*.

Cast as Nick Cochran, an American hiding out from the law in Macao, Mitchum here lays on thick the sleepy nonchalance which had already become his trademark and which he would, from time to time, exaggerate in order to display his off-handed attitude towards some assignments. William Bendix is cast as Lawrence Trumble, a detective intent on bringing an end to the activities of the local gang boss. When Trumble and Cochran are mistaken for one another, as a result of a little wallet-stealing by Julie Benson (Jane Russell), the way is opened for a series of misadventures typical of *film noir*. It is this, together with the iconographic presence of Mitchum and Bendix (and Gloria Grahame as Margie, a good-time girl), that justifies this movie's presence in the borderlands of *noir*.

Angel Face (1952) is a fairly stolid melodrama, directed by Otto Preminger with his customary heavy hand. Although Preminger was also the producer, the movie came under the auspices of Howard Hughes who, for once, did not interfere.

Mitchum plays Frank Jessup, an ambulance driver who becomes fatally attracted to Diane Tremayne (Jean Simmons), a very beautiful but mentally unstable young woman. Frank's first encounter with Diane comes when he is called to the Tremayne house, where she has just failed to gas her stepmother. Frank eventually quits his job to become chauffeur to the Tremaynes, only to be faced with the fact that Diane is determined to kill her stepmother, of whom she is insanely jealous. Despite his growing realization that he is in love with a homicidal maniac, Frank cannot leave. Diane's next attempt on her stepmother's life, by way of a contrived car accident which sends the car backwards off the cliff next to the mansion, is successful: too much so, in fact, because Diane's father dies in the same smash.

Jointly charged with murder, Frank and Diane marry on the advice of their lawyer and are acquitted. But by now Frank has shaken off Diane's spell and tells her he is leaving. She appears to accept his decision and offers



One of Robert Mitchum's finest screen roles was in *Night of the Hunter*, in which he portrayed the homicidally insane preacher.

to drive him to the station. With a farewell glass of champagne in hand, he sits beside her as she starts up the car and promptly reverses over a sheer drop.

Aided by the camera-work of English-born Harry Stradling, which takes advantage of the half-light of the Tremayne mansion, *Angel Face* is thoroughly steeped in *noir* atmosphere, yet it has the air of contrivance which adversely affected so much of Preminger's work.

Robert Mitchum's performance as the crazy preacher in Charles Laughton's expressionistic *film noir The Night of the Hunter* (1955) has already been touched upon. More than in any other role he played, in this movie Mitchum suggests to brilliant effect that his outward somnolent passivity is but a dangerously thin shell concealing a highly volatile nature. Not only does he dominate every scene in which he appears but such is his impact that he also contrives to cast a grim shadow over scenes from which he is absent.

Despite having shown considerable acting talent even when weighed down by inadequate scripts, few can have expected Mitchum to be cast in this role, still less to have made such a success of it. The barely concealed psychotic anger shown by the preacher as he sits in a darkened burlesque house watching a stripper bumping and grinding on stage is strikingly contrasted with the religiosity of his imagined calling. Confronted by the middle-aged ladies of the small town in which he preys upon a young widow and her children, he is a perfect preacher; the contempt with which he treats Willa Harper (Shelley Winters) after their marriage is chilling in its ferocity.

It is in his scenes with the children that Mitchum is at his best. When they first meet the boy attempts to outsmart the preacher by ingenious questioning to determine just how much he knows about the money their executed father has hidden away. What the boy does not realize until too late is that his questions have served only to reveal how

The bleak, cold world of *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* gave Robert Mitchum another fine role (with Peter Boyle).

much *he* knows. The boy's mistake, and the danger it has placed him in, is revealed by Mitchum with nothing more than a sardonically gleaming eye.

When the preacher listens to God, who is demanding further human sacrifices in his bid to cleanse the world of evil women, Mitchum uses deliberately exaggerated movements suggestive of his tortured mental state. He is similarly exaggerated in the scenes which follow the murder of Willa. He begins his pursuit of the children in a scene played as broad farce which serves to contrast dramatically with events a few moments later as the children escape his clutches and sail off down the river. As the preacher flounders in the water, roaring atavistically with rage, the mood changes to one of dreamlike unreality. From this point onwards, Mitchum is only rarely on screen and then frequently in long-shot, yet the power of his appearance in the opening two-thirds of the movie is such that he remains a dominating malignant presence.

Several years later Mitchum played, in *Cape Fear* (1962), a broadly similar role to that of the preacher. In the later film he is again the external presence which threatens the stability of a family. He plays a violent criminal, Max Cady, who is released from prison and begins a campaign of terror against the man who sent him away, a lawyer named Sam Bowden (Gregory Peck). Constantly threatening, yet never actually breaking the law, Cady circles the embattled Bowden family like a predatory jungle beast. Not as fully realized as the preacher, Cady is still a menacing psychopath even if the movie never has the foreboding of true *film noir*. There is never any real doubt that the Bowden family will survive and Cady get his comeuppance.

Mitchum's links with the heyday of *film noir* were important in establishing the ambiance of *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* (1973), a movie based upon George V. Higgins's novel which mirrors the grubby contemporary immorality of post-Watergate America. Mitchum plays Eddie Coyle, a crushed, doomed petty criminal living on his

Although Robert Mitchum might have been too old for the role of Philip Marlowe when he made *Farewell, My Lovely*, age paled into insignificance in the light of his exemplary performance.

limited wits among people who use him mercilessly. This downbeat character, so close to the gutter, provides Mitchum with one of his greatest roles. Eddie Coyle is the fall guy for the operations of a US Treasury agent whose determination to root out criminals leads him to act with even greater immorality than the people he pursues. Surrounded by strident, violent latter-day criminals, Eddie is resigned to the fact that he is a three-time loser who will never amount to anything. Although it is the most downbeat role of his career, Mitchum invested this unlikeliest of characters with a remarkable quiet dignity.

All the scenes in which Eddie appears,

whether in the tiny, cramped apartment he shares with his hapless wife, or the echoing, barn-like bar-room operated by the venal Dillon (Peter Boyle, in an excellent performance), who eventually becomes Eddie's executioner, have compelling echoes of the best of *film noir*.

Much more than merely echoes were the deliberate *film noir* resonances of *Farewell, My Lovely* (1975), in which Mitchum finally donned Philip Marlowe's trench-coat and slouch hat to walk down Raymond Chandler's mean streets. He had been right for the part ever since his role as Jeff Bailey in *Out of the Past* almost 30 years before and although, by now, he was a trifle too old, he brought to Chandler's White Knight a profound sense of tired, tattered but still dignified resignation. Mitchum's casually laconic persona, which was utterly laid-back long before the phrase entered the language, greatly enhanced a movie already delightful to look at. The fine dialogue, by David Zelag Goodman out of Raymond Chandler, was perfectly delivered in Mitchum's deep, dry monotone which implied that, for all his outward detachment, here was a man who cared.

Mitchum did his best in his reprise of the Marlowe role in *The Big Sleep* (1978) but he alone, as *noir* icon supreme, represents a lingering connection with the past.

Of all the actors considered here only a handful are still active, though intermittently: Kirk Douglas, Glenn Ford, Burt Lancaster, Robert Mitchum and Richard Widmark. Indeed, most of the others are dead. Of them all, only Mitchum is so steeped in the sardonic characteristics of the old *noir* icons that he brings echoes of those movie idols to everything he does, on screen or off.

Robert Mitchum (right) explaining away the first of the bodies in *Farewell, My Lovely* to John Ireland.

6

NOIR PERFORMERS: *FEMMES FATALES*

'I don't wish to die of loving you.'
Force of Evil

TO a significant extent, *film noir* is a man's world. Most protagonists are men: the voice-over narration used in many *films noirs* is usually a man's (among the few isolated exceptions is Jean Gillie as Margot Shelby in *Decoy*). The literary origins, the tough-guy writers and their hard-boiled heroes excluded women from principal roles. The dominance of men on the production side of the motion-picture industry – studio bosses, producers, directors, cinematographers, art directors, editors, screenwriters – militated against women. There were exceptions, of course: Ida Lupino as director and writer, Leigh Brackett as writer, but so few that the exceptions proved the rule.

The enforced subordination of women in *film noir* was exacerbated by an unmistakable measure of misogyny, especially noticeable in the novels of Cornell Woolrich and, much less overtly, in those of Raymond Chandler.

As a result of Hollywood's limited vision, women in *film noir* have tended to fall into two broad categories: one, a tiresomely predictable stereotype; the other, a powerfully impressive group which, against the odds, made a huge and dramatic impression upon audiences and engineered a major change in the perception of women in popular cinema.

The stereotype was the home-loving girl-next-door who retained a dog-like devotion to the hero despite his often perverse alienation.

The new women were startlingly different to the compliant, apple-pie-baking types. They, too, were supposed to be stereotypes, something like the vamps of an earlier era in motion picture-making, but the actresses who played them were well aware that bad-girl parts are infinitely superior to Goody-Two-Shoes roles and they revelled in the opportunities offered by some splendidly rich and varied roles.

Of course, there had been some powerful portrayers of dominant women, not least Bette Davis, Joan Crawford and Barbara Stanwyck, but such types were relatively rare. The advent of *film noir*, however, brought to the fore a new breed of woman. She was calculating, manipulative, cruel and she used her sexual attractions blatantly and without regard for the polite conventions of the past. She knew what she wanted and she didn't care what she did to get it. She understood that while society had dealt her a low hand from a stacked deck, she did have an ace up her sleeve: her body.

Although not usually intended to glorify actresses, these roles were used by some women to enhance fading reputations, and to carve new and highly successful careers. Some of the actresses who took the roles of *noir*'s spiderwomen had previously played home-lovers, which lent an intriguing sense of dislocation to their portrayals: Dorothy Malone, Gail Russell and Joan Bennett.

Joan Bennett displaying a dangerously wanton streak to Dan Duryea in *Scarlet Street*.

Some had employed a coarse brassiness in previous roles as 'the other woman': Jan Sterling, Claire Trevor, Audrey Totter and Marie Windsor. There were a few who seemed to materialize out of nowhere, as if they were created especially for *film noir* (and one or two of this group vanished just as quickly afterwards): Gloria Grahame, Veronica Lake, Lizabeth Scott and Jane Greer. There were some who were hard to categorize, a quality which condemned many actresses to a curious kind of limbo despite numerous examples of their great skill: Ida Lupino, Evelyn Keyes. And, of course, there were a few *femmes fatales* in *film noir* who came from the ranks of those tough, dominating women who had made their mark in the 1930s and were already *grandes dames* of Hollywood: Joan Crawford and the genre's first lady, Barbara Stanwyck.

A soulfully attractive woman, Dorothy Malone's early film career found her in a depressingly predictable series of girl-next-door roles with only occasional excursions into parts which offered her an opportunity to display her dramatic talents. During the 1950s such opportunities became more frequent as Hollywood recognized her ability and the fact that her physical appearance combined an indelible restrained sexuality with a remarkable haunted expression half-veiled behind her eyes.

Not surprisingly, given the hectic goings-on all around her, Malone's bit part in *The Big Sleep* passed largely unnoticed. Similarly small and undistinguished were her next two *noir*-ish movies. In 1950, when she was 25, Malone played the female lead in *Convicted*, a prison movie in which her role is little more than window-dressing. In *The Killer that Stalked New York* (1951) she is lost in the panic as everyone hunts the movie's titular 'heroine', a smallpox carrier.

Three marginally *noir* movies released in 1954 found Malone in slightly better roles but usually still trailing behind a leading lady. In *Loophole* she is the long-suffering wife of a bank clerk wrongly accused of robbery; in *Pushover* she is the *femme fatale*'s innocent neighbour; and in *Private Hell 36* she is the wife of a detective. In these small roles, all of which are relatively unimportant within the context of the screenplay, Malone manages to attract the eye and interest of the audience and makes one wonder why Hollywood never found the best way to use her.

After a patchy career, Dorothy Malone appeared fleetingly in *Winter Kills* (1979), a conspiracy-theory movie about a presidential assassination, wherein *noir* overtones were enhanced by her presence.

Gail Russell's darkly attractive looks allowed her to make a number of varied *film noir* appearances, sometimes confounding expectations formed by the lightweight roles of her early career. In *Calcutta* (1947) she plays *femme fatale* to Alan Ladd's dourly romantic hero. Part of a smuggling ring which has already murdered Ladd's partner (who is also her expendable fiancé), Russell suffers more than most of her kind, being beaten by Ladd before he hands her over to the cops.

In *The Night Has a Thousand Eyes* (1948) Russell plays the suicidal Jean Courtland, whose life becomes entangled with the predictions of a clairvoyant played by Edward G. Robinson. In *The Tattered Dress* (1957), a curious late entry in the main period of *film noir*, Russell is Carol Morrow, a corrupt juror. The dénouement of this courtroom drama, in which Carol is revealed to be lying, is made all the more surprising by the innocence and vulnerability Russell brought to all her screen roles. Tragically, Gail Russell's career was abruptly terminated by her death at the age of 36.

The strong sense of *déjà-vu* which hangs over Fritz Lang's 1945 movies, *The Woman in the Window* and *Scarlet Street*, is partly created by the repeat casting of the three principal roles, including that of Joan Bennett as the beautiful but corrupt *femme fatale*.

Bennett's dark, voluptuous beauty contrasts sharply with the characters of the cheaply amoral women she plays in both movies. Alice Reed, the woman whose portrait in an art gallery's window proves so attractive to Edward G. Robinson as the middle-aged Professor Wanley, contrives to hide her true nature, revealing it only when she is alone with her equally scheming boyfriend. Much more overt in the grasping use she makes of her tawdry sexuality is *Scarlet Street*'s Kitty March, who mistakenly believes Robinson's Christopher Cross to be rich.

In *The Scar (The Hollow Triumph)* (1948),

Bennett plays a doctor's secretary, Evelyn Nash, who is seduced by John Muller (Paul Henreid), whose physical resemblance to her boss gives him ideas. After altering his appearance so that he can pass as the doctor, Muller kills the other man, inadvertently setting in motion events which will bring about his own downfall. When Evelyn discovers the truth her reaction is not one of outrage at murder and deception, but anger that she hasn't been cut in on the deal, behaviour which Bennett contrives to make believable in an otherwise improbable tale.

Although Bennett's roles in *The Woman in the Window* and *Scarlet Street* are among the best examples of *film noir* spiderwomen, one of her best and most memorable performances came in *The Reckless Moment* (1949), which deviated markedly from the *noir* tradition.

Unusually, the movie's protagonist is a woman. Middle-aged, middle-class Lucia Harper (Bennett) leads a comfortable, quiet, even sheltered existence in Southern California. When her daughter's happiness is threatened by an ill-judged love affair with a blackmailer, Lucia summons up great reserves of strength. When the blackmailer dies after fighting with her daughter, Lucia hides the body. Later, Lucia is approached by another shady character, Martin Donnelly (James Mason), who has acquired the letters the dead man was using as his blackmailing weapon. Donnelly is attracted to Lucia and quarrels with his other associates, eventually killing one of them, but is himself wounded. Lucia tries to help him but Donnelly drives off with his partner's body. When he crashes and is mortally injured, Donnelly confesses to both killings, thus letting Lucia and her family off the hook.

Lucia Harper and her world are far-removed from the dark, mean streets inhabited by the criminals she fights and it is understandable that Donnelly is powerfully attracted to her, even if this attraction ruins him as surely as if she were one of *noir*'s spiderwomen. Lucia's unsuspected toughness may run counter to real life, but it is made credible here by Joan Bennett's performance.

If the women such actresses as Gail Russell and Joan Bennett portrayed were ladylike on the outside, however tawdry they might sometimes be on the inside, there were others whose inner coarseness was not for a moment concealed by their brassy exterior.

Jan Sterling's strident screen voice and manner was in sharp contrast to her real-life background in America's high society. Set off by bottle-blonde hair, heavy make-up and the calculated posturing of her angular body, she brought to vivid life some of *film noir*'s most interesting female characters.

Sterling's was only one of several well-played but minor roles in *Caged* (1950), a movie set in a women's prison and qualifying as *film noir* mainly by its unremitting pessimism. Although playing a key role in *Mystery Street* (1950), that of the pregnant blackmailer Vivian Heldon, Sterling is not on screen long before her character is murdered in order to set in motion the investigation which the movie then traces with the documentary thoroughness that was briefly typical of this fringe area of *film noir*. Sterling was again cast in a small but key role in *Union Station* (1950), a movie which charts the efforts of an ordinary man to clamber from the gutter by way of a ruthless kidnapping, only to find that the forces of law and order can be just as brutally ruthless as any criminal.

In *Appointment with Danger* (1951) Sterling is still playing second female lead, this time in the role of the gang boss's mistress, but in her other 1951 movie, *Ace in the Hole*, she moved up to the leading role and what was to be her best performance on film.

Sterling plays Lorraine Minosa, the embittered wife of Leo, the man trapped in a cave whose fate attracts the attention of newspaper reporter Charles Tatum (Kirk Douglas). As she is on the point of taking advantage of her husband's enforced absence from the roadside diner they run, Lorraine is tempted back by Tatum's promise of the money Leo's fate will attract. Lorraine is as mercenary as the journalist but her calculating streak is qualified by her awareness that making money out of her husband's predicament is taking her lower than she wants to sink. It is a measure of Sterling's performance that even in the scenes in the crowded diner, as she attempts to serve hordes of greedy, morbid sensation-seekers, she conveys both her own innate greed and her underlying shame and guilt.

More than in any other role, Jan Sterling's playing in *Ace in the Hole* demonstrates the fatuousness of Hollywood's determination to stereotype actors. Quite clearly, she was more than capable of playing any part they put before her but, as was so often the case, the studio bosses missed the opportunity and allowed her to drift into premature retirement – in England, from where she has made only rare reappearances in movies.

Claire Trevor was another fine actress confined to stereotypes, usually those of whores with hearts of gold.

Street of Chance (1942), a screen adaptation of Cornell Woolrich's novel *The Black Curtain*, centres upon an amnesiac, Frank Thornton (Burgess Meredith), who tries to discover what happened to him during the year of his life that has been lost. His first intimation that all is not well comes when he meets up with Ruth Dillon (Trevor), who tells him he is wanted for murder. Eventually, Frank uncovers the truth, that Ruth is the killer, but she tries to kill him only to be shot by the police detective who has been trailing him. Trevor's ambivalent screen presence, already hardening into the stereotyping she suffered, adds depth to the role of Ruth, who is at one level the kind of woman Frank, happily married in his normal life, really wants.

As Velma, the cute-as-lace-pants missing woman for whom Philip Marlowe searches in the 1944 version of *Farewell, My Lovely*, Trevor allows the tawdriness inherent in her character's background to emerge even when her circumstances have radically changed. Despite the lavish yet elegant setting of her new life as Mrs Grayle, Velma cannot help but behave like the tramp she was before she married her millionaire.

Born to Kill (1947) came in the middle of a run of excellent *films noirs* made by RKO. This one, directed by Robert Wise, features Claire Trevor in the starring role of Helen Trent. The highly complicated and occasionally confusing plot centres upon Helen's fatal attraction to Sam Wild (Lawrence Tierney), a man who has already killed two people. Wild is interested in Helen, but only for her money; when he learns that she is planning to marry someone else he turns his attentions instead to Helen's sister-by-adoption, Georgia Staples (Audrey Long). After Wild and Georgia are married, various figures from his past turn up and he kills his old partner, Marty Waterman (Elisha Cook Jr). Helen cannot overcome her feelings for Wild and tries to persuade him to kill Georgia, but is herself killed when Wild learns that she has been talking to the police.

Trevor was again typecast in *Key Largo* (1948) but this time turned the fact to her advantage by a deliberate, and moving, parodying of the kind of role she had played dozens of times before, that of the gangster's moll. She plays Gaye Dawn, the fading, alcoholic mistress of Johnny Rocco (Edward G. Robinson), whose sadistic treatment of her demonstrates both his cruelty and her helpless dependence. For this role Claire Trevor won an Oscar as Best Supporting Actress.

As Pat, the girlfriend of gangster Joe Sullivan (Dennis O'Keefe) in *Raw Deal* (1948), Trevor enjoyed the rare privilege of supplying the narration, thus gaining the pivotal female role despite the fact that the key scenes went to Marsha Hunt, as Ann Martin. A brutally violent film, *Raw Deal* not only reversed tradition by giving the role of narrator to a woman, but also up-ended the stock device of having a spiderwoman seduce an ordinary man into a life of crime. Here, it is Joe Sullivan who enchants the innocent Ann so much that she kills for him. By the end, when Joe has caused the death of his fellow-gangster Rick Coyle (Raymond Burr) and has himself been mortally wounded, it is Ann who tends her dying lover. Pat doesn't even have that memory to carry into her lonely future.

Unlike Jan Sterling and Claire Trevor with their deliberate brassiness, Audrey Totter displayed a cold detachment which her blondeness emphasized. Although outside the main plot of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946), her fleeting appearance as the woman with whom Frank Chambers has a brief fling contrasted with that of Lana Turner's too softly glamorous portrayal of Cora. She was similarly cast outside the main thread of the action in *The Unsuspected* (1947) but had the central female role in *The High Wall*, released in the same year. In the former she is up against the formidable talents of Claude Rains, revelling in one of his all-too-few chances to play the lead, while in

Another display of wantonness, this time by Marie Windsor at her brassiest (*The Killing*).

the latter she plays Ann Lorrison, a psychiatrist trying to help yet another of *film noir*'s amnesiacs, this time played by Robert Taylor, to recover some awkwardly missing memories, including that of how his wife was murdered.

Although important to the principal character's motivation in *The Set-Up* (1949), Totter's role, that of Julie Thompson, is inevitably minor and much softer than was usual for her. While her husband, Stoker Thompson (Robert Ryan), battles away in the boxing ring, she waits in their hotel room. Thankless though her role might be, Totter successfully manages to sustain the tension generated by events at the boxing stadium.

Of all the brassy females in American crime movies, none came brassier than Marie Windsor. Her vulgar sexuality was used to good effect in her role as Edna Tucker in *Force of Evil* (1948), in which she is used by the gang boss to seduce Joe Morse (John Garfield) into acceptance of the need to destroy his brother.

An even better effect was created by her

casting as Mrs Neil in *The Narrow Margin* (1952). Mrs Neil is the widow of a gangster and has agreed to testify as a witness at a forthcoming hearing. Two detectives, Walter Brown and Gus Forbes (Charles McGraw and Don Beddoe), are assigned to escort her by train. Forbes is killed almost at once, leaving Brown tense and uncomfortable. His job is not made any easier by the dislike he feels for Mrs Neil and he makes no secret of the fact that he despises her. Much closer to Brown's idealized vision of womanhood is a young mother, Ann Sinclair (Jacqueline White), who is travelling on the train with her small son.

Brown resists bribery and threats by the gangsters, who are desperate to prevent Mrs Neil from testifying. Eventually, they kill her and only then does Brown discover that she was really a policewoman sent along both to act as decoy and to allow Brown's superiors to learn just how honest he is. Brown's humiliation at discovering how he has allowed himself to be misled by outward appearances is doubled when he discovers that the outwardly innocent Ann Sinclair is the gangster's widow.

The Narrow Margin benefits greatly from the performances of McGraw and Windsor and their scenes together have a vibrancy often missing when bigger-name actors star together.

Windsor's leading role in *The Narrow Margin* was not followed up. She was quickly returned to supporting roles in minor movies but made a powerful impact in *The Killing* (1956). This is a caper movie but, thanks to Stanley Kubrick's direction, several excellent acting performances from a gallery of minor *noir* players, and moody cinematography by Lucien Ballard, it attains much greater depths than most of its kind.

Marie Windsor plays Sherry Peatty, whose husband George (Elisha Cook Jr) works as cashier at a race track. George is the inside man for the heist which brings him into uneasy alliance with various low-lifes including Johnny Clay (Sterling Hayden), Randy Kennan (Ted De Corsia) and Nikki Arane (Timothy Carey, an actor with a marvellously grotesque appearance and a capacity for teetering fascinatingly on the brink of insanity).

After the successful robbery at the race track the gang's fortunes swiftly ebb. Sherry, who hates her weak husband, has a lover, a small-time crook named Val Cannon (Vince Edwards). When she learns of the gang's plans she tells her lover, who calls in a colleague before setting out to rob the robbers. Johnny has not yet returned when the two gangs shoot it out. Only George survives. Mortally wounded, he returns home and declares his love for Sherry before killing her. Johnny, who has escaped the mayhem, leaves for the airport but is arrested as the case containing the loot from the robbery bursts open and the stolen money is scattered by the wind.

Marie Windsor's performance is as powerful as that of any of the men in the movie, even if most of their roles are better written. She even manages to overcome the improbability that someone as overtly sexy as Sherry would ever have married anyone as weak and snivelling as George Peatty.

The small group of actresses whose personal characteristics were made to measure for *film noir* was led by Gloria Grahame, whose subtle talents, allied as they were to unconventional looks, were not appreciated by many of the major studios. Grahame's roles were usually only borderline *femmes fatales* for there was always an underlying hint of good humour and her sensuality exhibited contained a playful quality ill-becoming the classic *film noir* spiderwoman.

Her early appearance as Ginny, a B-girl, in *Crossfire* set a pattern for many later roles. The part is that of a girl who is paid to hang around bars and persuade customers to buy drinks, with the dangled implication that something more entertaining will follow after the bar has closed. Grahame did this with great skill, uncovering different levels of suggestiveness. The first layer beneath the slightly sordid surface was that of a fun-loving girl who was only doing it for the laughs; but beneath that was a further hint that any after-hours encounter would indeed be steamy.

As Laurel Gray in *In a Lonely Place* Grahame offers an interesting contrast to Humphrey Bogart's strangely manic Dixon Steele. The manner in which these two people, so unalike in almost every way, fall in love, and then separate when his

Gloria Grahame, one of the most vulnerable of women in *film noir*, here temporarily at ease with Humphrey Bogart (*In a Lonely Place*).

uncontrollable rages alienate her, make this one of the more interesting love stories in all of *film noir*, and it is hard to think of many other actresses who could have pulled off the difficulties of the implied masochism quite so well.

The Big Heat is filled with striking images and individuals, not least Lee Marvin's portrayal of a vicious hoodlum, yet Grahame more than holds her own. As the amoral and scatter-brained Debby Marsh, she begins the movie almost as if she were the comic relief in a tough and occasionally very violent tale. In one early scene she canters around her lover's flat, crying 'Hup, Debby, hup' to demonstrate how well-trained she is. Later, she is more sober as she begins to understand the kind of people with whom she associates. Later still, savagely injured by having scalding coffee thrown in her face, she has abruptly matured. Her death scene, in which she conceals the scarred side of her face against her beloved fur coat, thus recovering her earlier appearance

The unconventional looks of that fine sensual actress Gloria Grahame caused Hollywood a few problems by not fitting any of the stereotypes, but her presence lent considerable strength to many *films noirs*.

of innocence, is slightly melodramatic but is nevertheless effectively performed.

As Irene Neves in *Sudden Fear* (1952) Grahame offers a striking contrast to the film's leading lady, Joan Crawford in the role of Myra Hudson. While Crawford makes Myra an outwardly cold and implacable woman who has hidden reserves of passion and desire within her, Grahame plays Irene as a cheap and conniving little tramp, yet one whose sexuality would clearly attract the kind of man Crawford has married.

Fritz Lang's *Human Desire* is more deliberate in its use of human sexuality than most movies of the period and Grahame's Vicki Buckley is one of the most obviously masochistic of all *noir* women, taking her perversity to the ultimate conclusion by provoking her husband to the point where he kills her. A variation on the theme of sexual violence comes in Grahame's role as Helen in *Odds Against Tomorrow* (1954). Here, she urges Earl Slater (Robert Ryan) to describe how it felt when he killed a man, his words arousing her more than could any words of love. Grahame's unusual combination of childish warmth and quirky sexuality allow her to bring credibility to both roles.

The cool, detached style of Veronica Lake, limited though her acting range was, made her the ideal companion for Alan Ladd, whose technique was similarly restricted. From a standpoint 40 years on it is hard to understand the appeal Lake and Ladd had for contemporary audiences and it is tempting to go along with observers who felt that Ladd was a schoolboy's idea of a tough guy. If this were so, then Lake, who was similarly slightly built, may have been carried along on his coat-tails because she was, physically at least, a perfect partner for such adolescent daydreamers.

Lake had already appeared in half a dozen

films (some under the name of Constance Keane) before being cast as Ellen Graham in *This Gun for Hire* opposite Ladd's psychotic gunman, Philip Raven. Her role in the movie was unnecessarily complex, calling for her to cope with rather more shades of character than she was equipped to handle. She is supposed to be the loving fiancée of the detective, she sings at a club owned by one of the villains, she is an undercover agent for the US government, and by offering kindness to the enigmatic assassin she becomes the unwitting cause of his death. Even one of the *grandes dames* of *film noir* would have had a hard time carrying all that off with complete aplomb. Nevertheless, Lake's scenes with Ladd, played as they are with such detachment, are sufficiently intriguing to explain their prompt re-teaming in *The Glass Key*. Here, Lake's low-key style is overwhelmed by the implications of a script which makes the strongest personal relationships those between men: Ladd and Brian Donlevy, Ladd and William Bendix. As for Lake's role as Joyce Harwood in *The Blue Dahlia*, it is hard to avoid seeing this as anything more than a piece of opportunistic casting for the box-office – to capitalize on the popularity of the Ladd-Lake teaming. Indeed, her role could have been written out without any noticeable detriment to the plot.

For all the drawbacks created by her limited abilities, Veronica Lake remains one of the most visually evocative female figures of 1940s crime thrillers. Unlike some of her contemporaries, however, she did not add appreciably to the *noir* qualities of any of the movies in which she appeared.

Although in many respects as limited an actress as Veronica Lake, Lizabeth Scott presented a very different screen presence. Physically she was strong and sultry, her heavy, dark eyebrows contrasting with her blonde hair. The pitch of her voice, low and husky, allowed her to deliver lines in a manner which resembled that of Lauren Bacall, but she lacked that actress's humour and sensual grace.

Scott's role in her second film, *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* (1946), was peripheral to the plot; she was in any case bound to suffer from being cast in the same movie as Barbara Stanwyck. Although she was the co-star in her next movie, *Dead Reckoning* (1947), Scott was in similarly tough company playing opposite Humphrey Bogart. As Coral Chandler, the secret wife of the leading local gangster, her part calls for her to appear friendly and seductive ('Cinderella with a husky voice') to Bogart's Rip Murdock while suggesting hidden depths of corruption. Scott achieves this with considerable success and was patently better suited to the part than Lauren Bacall (who had just finished *Dark Passage* with Bogart) would have been. Bacall's irrepressible humour would have upset the balance. As Kay Lawrence, the nightclub singer in *I Walk Alone* (1948), Scott gives a strong performance opposite Burt Lancaster, but the mere fact of her singing several songs in the course of the movie greatly diminishes the *noir* mood.

In *Pitfall* (1948) Scott plays opposite another major *noir* icon, Dick Powell. Here Powell is John Forbes, a solid citizen with a wife, son and a good if dull job. When he meets the exotic Mona Stevens (Scott) he is immediately captivated, though aware that she is potentially dangerous. A love affair develops which angers private detective Mack Macdonald (Raymond Burr), who also has eyes for Mona. Mack tries to have Forbes killed and is himself eventually killed, by Mona, leaving Forbes to patch things up with his understanding wife. Although the main thrust of the story is, as usual in *film noir*, centred upon men, Scott's role is pivotal and she conveys a kind of decadent charm that would conceivably attract men as widely different as the characters played by Powell and Burr.

Hints of decadence and corruption in Scott's earlier roles pale beside her portrayal of Jane Palmer in *Too Late for Tears* (1949). With one suspiciously dead husband behind her when the film opens, she soon eliminates her second when he refuses to go along with her plans to keep a cache of stolen money they have found. Working with a criminally-inclined private eye, Danny Fuller (Dan Duryea), she schemes and connives; when he falls in love with her, thus becoming a burden she does not want, she kills him too. Scott's powerful performance raises an otherwise minor film above its class. Similarly minor, and with an awkward

shift out of its *noir* mood towards the end, is *Dark City* (1950). Here Scott is once again a nightclub singer who drifts on the edges of a dark and despairing criminal world. Her love affair with Danny Haley (Charlton Heston in his first Hollywood role) is shown to be uplifting, an element which is clearly at odds with the film's *noir* earlier ambiance.

Another movie in which Scott as female lead plays a subdued second fiddle to several of the leading male roles is *The Racket* (1951). By this time Hollywood was having a hard time finding suitable roles for Lizabeth Scott and before the 1950s were out she had gone into premature retirement. She emerged briefly, in 1972, to make *Pulp*, a British thriller which owed its inspiration, if not its ambiance, to the kind of movie in which Lizabeth Scott had enjoyed her brief moment in the spotlight.

Another actress whose career coincided with the great years of *film noir* is Jane Greer. Like Scott, she too retired while still a young woman and made only a few appearances after the 1950s. Interviewed by the BBC, Greer revealed how her refusal to accede to demands made of her by RKO boss Howard Hughes led to her being dumped. That any actress should have had her career truncated in such a manner is deplorable; given the promise Greer displayed in her few films it approaches tragedy.

In *Out of the Past* she is Kathie Moffett, one of *film noir*'s most lethal *femmes fatales*. From the moment private eye Jeff Bailey (Robert Mitchum) first sets eyes on her, as she walks out of the sunlight into the Mexican cantina to which he has traced her, he is doomed. The ease with which she changes character to suit her particular needs, remote one moment, seductively charming the next, is effortlessly achieved. In order that the film will work, Kathie Moffett has to be believable as a woman with whom Whit Sterling (Kirk Douglas) could be obsessed, she has to have the quickness and strength of mind to decide to kill Jeff's partner and carry out the deed in a split second, and she must so fascinate Jeff that he returns to her time and time again, even though, finally, he knows that their relationship can end only in death. Jane Greer achieves all this with remarkable flair.

Lizabeth Scott as the sultry nightclub singer in *I Walk Alone*.

Two of *film noir*'s greatest icons, Jane Greer and Richard Widmark, add a nostalgic touch of class to *Against All Odds*.

After her enforced retirement in 1953 Greer returned briefly for three movies in the late 1950s and early 1960s but then retired again. In 1973 she was one of several familiar *noir* icons, including Marie Windsor, Elisha Cook Jr and Robert Ryan, in *The Outfit*.

When in 1984 *Out of the Past* was remade as *Against All Odds*, she and Richard Widmark were hired to play small roles (not in the original) intended to emphasize this movie's *noir* character.

Among those actresses whose talents are sufficiently diverse to make them hard to categorize is Ida Lupino. Born into a noted, centuries-old English show-business family, she achieved no great distinction in her early film career (in both Britain and America) but from 1940 onwards she began to make her mark. Unfortunately, there were too few strong dramatic roles which suited her particular talents and she suffered from being a contemporary of Bette Davis.

In *High Sierra* she brought an intriguing

Yet another under-used actress who later turned writer and director, to similar critical neglect, was the highly talented Ida Lupino. Here, with Pard the dog, she kneels beside the body of 'Mad Dog' Roy Earle at the end of *High Sierra*.

ambivalence to her role as Marie opposite Humphrey Bogart's Roy Earle. Outwardly tough and scheming, Marie has much more depth than most gangster's molls of the period and her growing love for Roy is displayed with subtlety. Similarly accomplished is Marie's resigned acceptance of the fact that Roy yearns for a different kind of life, and a different kind of woman. She knows, as does he deep down, that this yearning is just a dream, but instead of deriding him she goes along knowing that eventually he will learn to accept reality.

Lupino co-starred with Robert Ryan in two 1952 movies and had no trouble holding her own against one of the screen's most powerful actors. In *On Dangerous Ground* she plays Mary Malden, a blind girl whose gentleness and spirit break down the shell with which Ryan's tough city cop shields himself from the harsh realities of his world. Such a potentially sentimental role could have proved a hazard for a lesser actress but Lupino carries it off remarkably well. She is equally successful in *Beware, My Lovely*, in which she plays a widow who innocently befriends a murderous psychotic. The role of a terrorized woman often descends into little more than hysterical screaming but Lupino achieves the desired effect with commendable restraint.

Lupino's future in movies was signposted by *Private Hell 36* (1954), which she co-scripted. She plays a singer, Lilli Marlowe, whose ideal man should be rich. When she becomes entangled with two detectives who find, and keep, money from a robbery which she has witnessed, it begins to look as if she will get her wish because one of the cops falls in love with her. Later, she begins to accept that her view of life is unwarrantedly cynical, but by then events have moved on too far to halt the inevitable plunge towards death.

From 1950 onwards, Lupino took more interest in writing, producing and directing, although she continued to act, playing Marion Castle in the mildly *noir* but over-excited view of Hollywood depicted in *The Big Knife* (1955). Lupino also appeared in *While the City Sleeps* (1956), taking the minor role of reporter Mildred Donner.

Just as it was hard for Hollywood to know

Evelyn Keyes (centre) as the unwitting plague victim in the extravagantly titled *The Killer that Stalked New York* (with Charles Korvin and Lola Albright).

how best to use Ida Lupino's strong dramatic presence in acting roles, so too there were problems in accepting her in the traditionally male role of director and after the mid-1960s her distinctive career was virtually over.

Another actress who played a wide range of screen roles is Evelyn Keyes. Like several other actresses whose careers ran parallel to the heyday of *film noir*, Keyes retired in the mid-1950s.

Although cast in the leading female role, that of Nancy Hobbs, in *Johnny O'Clock* (1947), she is far from being a *femme fatale*. Instead, she is the nice-girl-from-out-of-town who befriends and then falls in love with Johnny (Dick Powell), who is suspected of several crimes including the murder of her sister. She took an unusual role for a woman in *The Killer that Stalked New York* (1950), that of a smallpox carrier who is hiding from the police. Sheila Bennet has been involved with her husband in a diamond theft. As police and the medical authorities hunt for her, Sheila buries herself in the city despite her deteriorating health. It is a somewhat thankless role, its very nature not allowing Keyes to work with the film's other main actors, yet she creates a considerable degree of tension before her decidedly unglamorous end.

In *The Prowler* (1951) Keyes plays Susan Gilvray, who begins an affair with policeman Webb Garwood (Van Heflin) which leads to her husband's death when Garwood shoots him. Unknown to Susan, Garwood has planned the killing and makes it appear as if he thought her husband was a prowler. Later, Garwood and Susan, who is pregnant, marry but he is worried that someone will discover that her first husband was sterile and that the child will be evidence of their affair, hence a possible motive for the killing.

Garwood insists that they leave their new home and hide out in the desert in a ghost town until the baby is born. Susan's delivery is complicated and Garwood has to fetch a doctor, to whom he confesses his guilt. Aware that this admission has doomed the doctor, Susan helps him escape. Garwood is shot while attempting to evade the police.

The nature of the film, with its tight concentration upon the relationship between Susan and Garwood, makes this more a

straightforward melodrama than a *film noir*. But the atmosphere of paranoia – Garwood's fear that the baby will be seen as evidence is largely self-induced – fits more readily into this genre than any other.

In *99 River Street* (1953) Keyes plays a role which allows her to shift between *femme fatale* and girl-next-door without unduly stretching credibility. As the actress Linda James she deliberately 'acts' the part of a murderer as part of her schooling, and in doing so upsets her friend Ernie Driscoll (John Payne). When Ernie is later the suspect in a real murder case, Linda does all that she can to help, thus setting in motion the change in their relationship which will lead to love. The constant shifting between scenes of acting in the theatre where Linda works and the 'real' world of the movie is effectively handled by Keyes.

Among the least likely spiderwomen of American *film noir* was the former silent star Gloria Swanson. Yet, in *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), she succeeded in bringing to demonic life Norma Desmond, an old-time movie star who is one of the most grotesque of all *femmes fatales*.

The manner in which Norma enmeshes Joe Gillis (William Holden), while still holding in thrall her ex-husband turned butler-protector, Max (Erich Von Stroheim), is made believable by the sheer intensity of Swanson's personality. The manner in which she dominates this film is a testimony to the remarkable combination of Swanson's talent and the ability of director and co-writer Billy Wilder to probe mercilessly beneath the tawdry surface of a degenerate Hollywood.

Swanson's performance here hints at how great an asset to *film noir* she might have proved had she been a few years younger. Fortunately for the genre, it did have two *grandes dames* of Hollywood whose careers were timed just right for them to become the greatest of the *femme fatales*. These great ladies, *reines fatales* perhaps, are Joan Crawford and Barbara Stanwyck.

Joan Crawford's film career began in the silent 'twenties and by the end of the decade she was Hollywood's, and much of the world's, idea of the Jazz Age flapper. She readily adapted to the talkies and through the 1930s appeared in numerous Depression-era movies, playing ordinary working girls. Crawford had risen to stardom despite having a narrow acting range and by the start of the 1940s many had written her off. They reckoned without her overwhelming ambition. If subsequent biographies are even half-true, Crawford's ambitious streak was only one manifestation of a harsh, even cruel, temperament. She fought back after being dropped by MGM, and with Warner Brothers she shifted comfortably into a series of roles in which she played powerful women fired by all-consuming ambition and possessed of harsh, even cruel, temperaments. Art, it seems, was imitating life.

Crawford's strong screen presence is the backbone of a fascinating reversal of the *film noir* tradition in *Mildred Pierce* (1945). As the title indicates, the central role is not that of a man obsessed with a *femme fatale*, but of a woman. Mildred Pierce (Crawford) is obsessed with providing a life of luxury for her daughter Veda (Ann Blythe). When Mildred's unambitious husband, Bert (Bruce Bennett), proves financially unequal to the task, Mildred leaves him. To provide for her daughters, she becomes a waitress, a decision which horrifies Veda – a thorough-going little snob. Mildred's obsession with Veda causes her to neglect her other daughter, who dies. When Mildred opens her own restaurant with the help of Wally Fay (Jack Carson) and backing from Monte Beragon (Zachary Scott), the spendthrift heir to a fortune, Veda takes a little more kindly to her mother's new role. However, Veda is attracted to Beragon and begins an affair with him. By now, Mildred has built up a chain of successful restaurants. Having divorced her husband, she marries Beragon, who soon dissipates her accumulated riches. Mildred learns of the relationship between her daughter and Beragon, who casually dismisses Veda as a tramp. Veda kills him but her still-devoted mother tries to take the rap. Eventually, the police arrest Veda and Mildred is left with nothing, although her ex-husband, Bert, is there to comfort her.

Directed by Michael Curtiz and photo-

One of the least likely spiderwomen in *film noir*, but one of the most dramatically effective: Gloria Swanson as the deranged silent movie star, Norma Desmond, in *Sunset Boulevard*.

Joan Crawford in a rare moment of repose in *Mildred Pierce* (with Jack Carson).

graphed by Ernest Haller, the visual effect of certain key scenes in *Mildred Pierce* is thoroughly in the *film noir* tradition. Ranald MacDougall's screenplay is based upon James M. Cain's novel and takes a number of liberties with the original, including setting the main part of the movie in flashback after Beragon's death. Most notably, the changes concern Mildred, whose personality is made much harder and thus provides a more credible context for her determination, while simultaneously highlighting her one weak spot: her daughter. Ann Blythe's interpretation of the outwardly pretty and innocent but inherently cold and calculating *femme fatale* is a little uneasy, but for the most part disbelief can be suspended thanks to the power of Crawford's performance. Crawford has no difficulty in portraying this tough, dominant woman even though that massive blind spot, over her daughter's utter selfishness and clear absence of love for her mother, takes some swallowing.

Crawford's performance as Mildred Pierce won her the 1945 Academy Award as Best Actress.

A similarly highly-charged performance from Crawford lifted *Possessed* (1947) and helped overcome an occasionally over-

complicated screenplay (again by Ranald MacDougall, this time in collaboration with Sylvia Richards). The story is told in flashback as a psychiatrist uses drugs to unravel the deranged mind of Louise Graham (Crawford), a rich woman found wandering the streets of Los Angeles. Louise's life has been one trauma after another: rejection by the man she loved; marriage to a rich man whose first wife has killed herself because of an imagined love affair between her husband and Louise; the return of her lover, who has an affair with her stepdaughter. All this builds up a compelling picture of a deeply neurotic woman driven to the edge of insanity. Finally, Lousie tries to persuade her former lover to leave, but when he refuses she kills him, thus precipitating the descent into the mental state in which she was found at the start.

Possessed may be a somewhat overripe melodrama but its flashback structure is typical of the *noir* genre and its screenplay confidently displays the motivation of past events as they are imagined to have been, rather than as they really were. Crawford's customary one-note acting is here admirably suited to the repressed anger and confusion of a woman on the brink of madness.

Another rich melodrama is *The Damned Don't Cry* (1950), in which Crawford plays Ethel Whitehead, a woman from a poverty-wracked background who leaves her husband after their young son dies and sets out to make it alone in New York. Making it on her own means dependence upon men, in this case rich men who pay for the privilege, and soon Ethel meets gang boss George Castleman (David Brian) and becomes his mistress. He completes her transformation into a wealthy socialite by providing money and a new name: Lorna Hansen Forbes. One of the tasks Lorna must do for Castleman is to persuade a recalcitrant colleague, Nick Prenta (Steve Cochran), to come back into the fold. Lorna falls in love with Nick and quickly forgets her duties, although reminded of them by Martin Blackford (Kent Smith), an honest man whom Lorna involved in gangland affairs. Eventually, Castleman kills Prenta and Lorna heads back to her parents' home, where she is traced by Castleman. He injures her but

Locked in a frame of bars, shadows and her own unreasoning fears, Myra Hudson (Joan Crawford) hides from the police in *Sudden Fear*.

is stopped from killing her when he is shot by Blackford.

The rise of Ethel and the transformation into Lorna results from the acceptance of immorality at all levels, a standard feature of *film noir*, and it is this thread of the storyline which gives the movie its *noir* quality. Otherwise, in its overall treatment, *The Damned Don't Cry* is closer to the Hollywood tradition of three-handkerchief weepies which would eventually evolve into the never-ending latter-day TV soap sagas.

Sudden Fear (1952) comes much closer to the centre of *film noir*, tracing as it does the doomed love of Myra Hudson (Crawford) for Lester Blaine (Jack Palance), who wants her only for her money and subsequently decides to settle just for the money even if it means killing her to get it. With Gloria Grahame as the third (cheap) side of the triangle, the storyline is relatively simple.

Crawford plays the tough-minded playwright with considerable flair, managing to make Myra Hudson credible even when melting at the attentions of Lester Blaine.

Barbara Stanwyck hides from insurance investigator Edward G. Robinson while, for the moment, Fred MacMurray takes it all in his stride (*Double Indemnity*).

Her later reaction when she learns of the plot to murder her is effectively done, as is her determination to kill first rather than be killed. Equally, the moment when she cannot bring herself to pull the trigger works because we believe that, however ruthless this woman might be in her business life, she is not a murderer. Crawford even accomplishes the final little twist as she tries, unavailingly, to prevent Blaine from killing the other woman in mistake for herself. The movie's ultimate failure lies in a glaring omission: why doesn't Myra simply call the cops?

Joan Crawford's major Hollywood starring roles fell either on the edges of or completely outside *film noir*, but her contributions to the genre, together with her strong reputation in other areas of moviemaking, qualify her as one of *film noir*'s two *grandes dames*.

The other *grande dame*, whose status needs no justification, is Barbara Stanwyck.

Stanwyck's first appearance in the genre was as Phyllis Dietrichson in one of *film noir*'s unquestioned masterpieces, *Double Indemnity* (1944), where she set standards which no one, not even she, ever managed to top.

Shadows and restraint are a perpetual hazard in the world of *film noir* but in *Sudden Fear* neither threatens the heroine as greatly as the presence of Jack Palance

The screenplay for this movie was written by Raymond Chandler and Billy Wilder (who also directed) from the novel by James M. Cain. The property had been around Hollywood for some time but so far no one had been able to crack the problem of presenting to movie audiences such a thoroughly evil woman as Phyllis without making her an unsuitable role for a star. Before the movie starts, Phyllis has been involved in several highly suspicious deaths and, before it is over, adds to her score without batting an eyelid.

From the moment insurance agent Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) steps from the sunlit streets of Log Angeles into the shadowy interior of the house where Phyllis lives with her husband (Tom Powers), he is sucked into a trap set by the most voracious of spiderwomen. Stanwyck exudes sex, but hers is not the soft seductiveness of Gloria Grahame, Gail Russell or Joan Bennett. Neither is it the overt appeal of Claire Trevor or Marie Windsor, nor even the low-key sensuality of Dorothy Malone or Jane Greer. In her scenes with the lover she entangles in a web of deception and murder, Stanwyck is any or all of these, choosing her weapons

Double indemnity – triple ending: at the end of *Double Indemnity* Walter (Fred MacMurray), wounded by Phyllis whom he has just killed, confesses to investigator Barton Keyes (Edward G. Robinson). This was the finale director Billy Wilder eventually settled upon, although he shot a different, bleaker version in which Keyes watched Walter go to the gas chamber. Neither approached the Gothic horror of the ending of James M. Cain's novel.

with infinite care. She is prepared to be all things to this man, until he has done what she wants. After that, he will be as expendable as the male spider who is consumed by his mate after performing the sex act.

Although the movie shifts Cain's original tale into a flashback format, allowing the dying Neff to relate events to insurance investigator Barton Keyes (Edward G. Robinson), there is never any doubt who is boss. Stanwyck takes hold of the movie from her first appearance at the head of the stairs at her home, at which Neff has called to renew one of her husband's insurance policies. Strong sunlight contrasts with the deepest shadows, out of which Phyllis emerges with the grim stateliness of a Black Widow, which is exactly what she plans to become.

Although he is drawn unresistingly into her clutches and co-operates eagerly with her murderous plans, Neff is a weak man and later tries backing out. Phyllis is ready for him, however, and any suggestion that he might have been acting on his own initiative is swiftly dispelled as she manipulates him as though he had no mind of his own.

Stanwyck's delivery of her lines is most skilful. She employs an icy monotone, regardless of whether the words she speaks are those which enhance their first meeting – clever verbal foreplay – or those which ruthlessly command Neff to commit murder.

It is possible to imagine ways of improving most movies, in either plot, dialogue, direction, performance or casting. It is hard to think of any way in which *Double Indemnity* could be improved except, perhaps, to reinstate the Gothic horror of the novel's

ending. There, Walter and Phyllis are allowed by Keyes to escape on a ship bound for South America, but soon realize that they have no future. As usual it is Phyllis who takes the decision: they will jump overboard. Earlier they had watched as a shark trailed the ship, eating refuse cast over the side. This appeals to an unsuspected streak of masochism lying deep inside Phyllis.

'Walter, we'll have to wait. Till the moon comes up.'

'I guess we better have a moon.'

'I want to see that fin. That black fin. Cutting the water in the moonlight.'

As the movie stands, however, the ending used (one of two shot by Wilder) is effective enough, as Walter completes his confession to Keyes.

If a change of ending might have marginally enhanced the movie (the alternative saw Walter going to the gas chamber), it is impossible to imagine any other actress coming even close to Barbara Stanwyck's portrayal of the thoroughly evil Phyllis Dietrichson. It is not surprising that the movie caused a sensation, dispelling as it did all previously-held conceptions that America's womanhood should stand pure, unalloyed and out of reach on a pedestal.

Any subsequent performance was bound to have a lot to live up to, but Stanwyck's interpretation of the title role in *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* (1946) is by no means completely overshadowed. As the young inheritor of an industrial fortune, Martha dominates the small town where she lives with her weakling husband, Walter O'Neil (Kirk Douglas). When a former childhood friend, Sam Masterson (Van Heflin), arrives in town a jagged triangle is formed which serves only to open up long-hidden events from Martha's youth. Martha's inheritance resulted from murder and, threatened with revelation and retribution, Martha and her husband are forced into a suicide pact.

Stanwyck's power casually dominates Douglas, then at an early stage in his

career and lacking in confidence, but she is well-countered by Heflin's easy charm. It is Heflin who endows the movie with a curious ambivalence, by delivering a closing line which implies that he knows more about past events than the plot would have us believe: 'I wanted to see if I could be lucky twice.'

In *Sorry, Wrong Number* (1948) Stanwyck is cast opposite another young actor still some years away from achieving his eventual ability to command the screen. She plays wealthy, bed-ridden Leona Stevenson, who dominates her husband Henry (Burt Lancaster). Leona rules Henry and everyone with whom she comes into contact, using her bedside telephone like a military commander. Believing that his wife suffers from a heart condition, Henry plans to have her murdered so that he can inherit her money. A crossed line results in Leona overhearing the plot. Trapped in her bedroom, she tries desperately but unavailingly to persuade the police of her plight. When Henry learns that the police are on to him for his part in supplying drugs to a criminal ring he tries to warn Leona but his fellow conspirator, Morano (William Conrad), is already mounting the stairs.

The claustrophobic atmosphere is generally well-sustained although the movie uses flashbacks to open it out from the confines of Leona's room (*Sorry, Wrong Number* began life as a short radio play). The role of Leona is a *tour de force* for Stanwyck, who effortlessly overcomes the difficulties faced by any actor working alone or with only an inanimate object, in this case the telephone. Although her performance does have moments of uncharacteristic shrillness, especially as the murderer approaches her bedroom, Stanwyck carries it off with considerable aplomb.

Stanwyck's title role in *The File on Thelma Jordon* (1950) provides an interesting variation on the type of character she portrayed in *Double Indemnity*. Here, too, she seeks to entrap a man into a web of deceit and murder, but this time she has an unsuspected weakness and falls in love with her intended victim. Stanwyck handles this shift of character well and builds a strong performance although, overall, this movie has neither the quality of script and direction nor the strength of supporting players of *Double Indemnity* but, thanks to Stanwyck, it always sustains interest.

Barbara Stanwyck, still on her feet during the flashback sequences of *Sorry, Wrong Number*.

Barbara Stanwyck and Wendell Corey in *The File on Thelma Jordon*.

As Mae Doyle D'Amato, Stanwyck forms the third side of the eternal triangle in Fritz Lang's *Clash By Night*. Although the structure of the piece, especially the long opening documentary scenes of life in a fishing town, is somewhat outside the norm for *noir*, the performances of the main actors, especially Stanwyck and Robert Ryan, aided as they are by Lang's direction and Nicholas Musuraca's cinematography, build an impressive drama. Stanwyck effectively delineates a complex character, one who is much more self-aware and self-critical than is usual in the dominating roles she perfected.

Only bordering on *film noir, Witness to Murder* (1954) is a strong suspense drama about a woman, Cheryl Draper (Stanwyck), who sees a neighbour, Albert Richter (George Sanders), kill a young woman. When the body disappears the police will not believe Cheryl and Richter contrives to have her mental state doubted. So effective is this that Cheryl too doubts her sanity and voluntarily enters a mental hospital. On her release she discovers evidence that she was sane all along and really did witness a murder. When Richter tries to kill her she escapes and is rescued by the police as the murderer falls to his death.

Although cluttered with unnecessary detail (for example, Richter is made a neo-Nazi), the story is strong and Stanwyck's scenes, especially those in the mental hospital, have great dramatic impact. It is these moments, effectively photographed by John Alton, and Cheryl's constantly shifting psychological state which qualify the movie for inclusion in the genre.

Coming at the end of the main cycle of *film noir, Crime of Passion* (1957) uses a relatively straightforward approach to the

story of a ruthlessly ambitious woman, Kathy Ferguson, who helps promote her new husband's career by seducing his boss. Her husband, Bill Doyle (Sterling Hayden), is a lieutenant in the Los Angeles Police Department, and Kathy's ambitions for him result in her contriving to have his only serious rival for promotion transferred in disgrace. When her lover, Inspector Tony Pope (Raymond Burr), changes his mind and promotes the disgraced officer instead, Kathy kills him. Bill Doyle investigates Pope's murder, eventually proves his wife's guilt and arrests her, surviving an attack on him which proves to be the final outburst of the malignancy deep inside her.

Barbara Stanwyck's film career ended in the mid-1960s when Hollywood simply stopped making her kind of movie. She retained her strong good looks and her physical vitality and was thus fortunately spared the offers of grotesque roles which added little of consequence to the later careers of her contemporaries, Joan Crawford and Bette Davis. Instead, Stanwyck turned to TV with a strong role in a popular series, *Big Valley*.

Despite a succession of excellent performances in numerous movies in a film career which began in 1927, Stanwyck never won the Academy Award as Best Actress (she was nominated four times for films including *Double Indemnity* and *Sorry, Wrong Number*). In the 1980s, as she approached her 80th birthday, Barbara Stanwyck was tempted out of retirement to appear on TV in *The Thorn Birds* and *The Colbys* and was finally honoured with a special Oscar for her services to cinema.

For all her many fine performances, however, it is as Phyllis Dietrichson that Barbara Stanwyck will be best remembered and it is largely thanks to this role that she became the greatest of the *femmes fatales* of *film noir*.

It is a measure of the capabilities of the many fine actresses who illuminated *film noir* that they succeeded against the odds and a stacked deck. *Film noir* may be a man's world but it is one in which women were able to make a significant mark through strength of character, ambition, determination, some challenging roles, and a compelling ability to exploit the power of their sexuality.

Barbara Stanwyck facing the consequences (*Crime of Passion*).

7

NOIR PERFORMERS: MINOR ICONS, GROTESQUES AND OTHER SUPPORTING PLAYERS

'Your side of the fence is almost as dirty as mine.'
The House on 92nd Street

FROM the start moviemakers have used stereotypes to establish impressions quickly in the minds of their audiences. Leading men were tall, dark and handsome; leading ladies were blonde and coquettish, or dark and sultry depending upon whether they were the future bride or the 'other woman'. Such simplistic patterns of casting were particularly evident among the supporting players. Fat men who dripped sweat were usually senior villains; small, rodent-like characters were their minions (but if they had a twitch were likely to prove homicidally psychotic).

As time passed and film-making became more sophisticated there was little improvement in the level of stereotyping, partly because visual shorthand was needed and this kind was effective even if it was unimaginative.

In *film noir* the technique was especially useful and granted minor icon status to many journeyman actors whose careers might otherwise have vanished in the mists of the B-movies.

A string of middle-aged character actors paraded through *film noir*, sometimes appearing as gang lords, crooked businessmen or older husbands married to young and wayward wives, sometimes as cops who were either resigned but honest or wholeheartedly corrupt. Occasionally they found themselves playing major roles, even leads, but often as an unsympathetic character.

The Adler brothers, Jay and Luther, were two of these, clocking up more than a dozen *noir* appearances between them; Barton MacLane was a reliable heavy, as was the much less well-known Emile Meyer, who played many roles including that of Harry Kello, the cop in *Sweet Smell of Success*. Towards the end of that movie, when finally told by Burt Lancaster that Tony Curtis's egregious Sidney Falco no longer has protection, Meyer delivers a seemingly innocuous line of dialogue in such a manner that it positively reeks with sadistic menace: 'Come back, Sidney. I want to chastize you.'

Two suave Hollywood actors who occasionally graced *film noir* are Claude Rains and George Macready.

In Alfred Hitchcock's *Notorious*, a movie on the fringe of *noir*, Rains plays Alexander Sebastian, a neo-Nazi living in South America. His marriage of convenience to the character played by Ingrid Bergman endangers him and he must murder her even though, by the time he puts his plan into effect, he has grown to love her. It is a difficult role, as indeed are those of Bergman and Cary Grant. All three actors have qualities which make the audience want to sympathize with them, yet their roles make them decidedly unsympathetic individuals.

Rains took the lead in *The Unsuspected* (1947), in which he plays Alexander Grandison, a radio broadcaster whose tales of homicide enthral listeners. Rains ably conveys the silky arrogance of a man who believes

Claude Rains, the suavest of villains, is more than a match for petty cook Jack Lambert in *The Unsuspected*.

that he can get away with murder. Well lit and photographed by Woody Bredell, the movie has many of the visual images associated with *film noir* and though the leading role may be unorthodox for the genre it is played with such finesse that it hardly matters.

As Frederick Lannington in *Where Danger Lives* (1950) Rains doesn't last very long, having made the mistake of marrying a young wife (Faith Domergue) who flirts wildly with a character played by Robert Mitchum. After being knocked out by the Mitchum figure, Rains isn't even allowed to regain consciousness before being beaten to death moments later by his wife, who is pathologically eager to become a widow. It is a measure of Rains's scene-stealing abilities that the movie nosedives after his early departure.

Like Claude Rains, George Macready didn't do much for the reputation of quietly-spoken men with good manners. Macready had less sleek charm than Rains but more than made up for the deficiency with his ability to convey a most delicate touch of insanity beneath his cultured surface.

Macready was the homicidally insane Ralph Hughes in *My Name Is Julia Ross* and the urbane Ballin Mundsen in *Gilda*, displaying in both roles an air of repressed and perverse sexuality. Ralph's relationship with his mother is so close that they have already conspired to conceal the murder of Ralph's first wife and are now planning to cover up that killing by disposing of Julia Ross. In *Gilda* his relationship with Glenn Ford's Johnny Farrell has homosexual overtones which give the movie an unusual dimension for crime movies.

Macready's casting as the DA in *Knock on Any Door* added enormous zest to the courtroom confrontations with defending lawyer Humphrey Bogart, but slightly affected the audience's impartiality, as they were by now

programmed to mistrust the characters he portrayed.

Several fine actors who, had they got the breaks, might have attained stardom enjoyed a few brief moments of glory during *film noir*'s great days. They turned up in a number of roles: the hero's best friend, a villain-turned-hero, a hero-turned-villain. Once in a while, they were even given the lead.

Joseph Cotten is highly effective as the Merry Widow murderer in Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt*. His effortless charm completely entrances his niece, whose later suspicions are countered partly by the fact that she cannot bring herself to believe that a man like him could harm a fly, let alone a series of wealthy widows, and partly because, as he delights in telling her, the same blood runs in their veins.

Cotten's association with Orson Welles involved him in a number of *noir* and *noir*-ish films, including *Journey Into Fear, The Third Man* and *Touch of Evil*, but his roles were usually those of ordinary people on the edges of the *noir* world. Also, of course, he played a major role in Welles's *Citizen Kane*.

In most respects *The Third Man* is well outside the *noir* canon. Directed by Carol Reed and superbly photographed by Robert Krasker, the film is essentially a suspense thriller, but outstanding surreal imagery gives it qualities which grace few other thrillers.

Cotten's role as writer Holly Martins is relatively straightforward as he pursues the elusive Harry Lime (Welles, in a brief appearance). There is also a marvellously offbeat quality to the film's enigmatic leading lady, Alida Valli. The final scene, as she comes down a long, long road towards Holly, only to walk straight past him, embodies all the ambiguity and unexpectedness of male-female relationships in *film noir*.

Joseph Cotten also appeared in *The Killer Is Loose* (1956), in which he is the cop whose wife is threatened by a deranged escaped con, and in *Niagara* (1953), where it is his turn to be mentally unbalanced. Only recently out of a mental hospital and being taunted for his sexual shortcomings by his provocative younger wife (played by Marilyn Monroe), his behaviour is understandably erratic and he eventually strangles her.

John Ireland, one of many underrated and under-used actors whose career was restricted by a physical appearance that Hollywood could not stereotype.

Cotten's nemesis in *The Killer Is Loose* is played by Wendell Corey, whose thin-lipped, icy-tongued persona added a chilly touch to several interesting films of the late 1940s and 1950s, among them *I Walk Alone, Sorry, Wrong Number, The Accused* (1949), *The File on Thelma Jordon* and *The Big Knife*. Corey's career declined in the 1960s although he worked extensively in administrative and political posts until his death in 1968.

John Ireland's craggy appearance made major starring roles impossible, owing to Hollywood's shortsightedness, but he did play a number of leads in minor films. He also added texture to several *films noirs*, including *The Gangster* (1947), in which he plays the treacherous gambler Karty. Despite its title this movie is far removed from the previous decade's gangster movies, concerning itself more with the neuroses, jealousies and hatreds of the participants.

Ireland took the lead in *Railroaded* (1947), bringing heavy Freudian overtones to his portrayal of gunman Duke Martin. By concentrating on Martin's role, director Anthony Mann did not fully exploit the film's *noir* possibilities but, given that the

wrongly accused man, Steve Ryan, is played somewhat ineffectually by Ed Kelly, this was probably just as well.

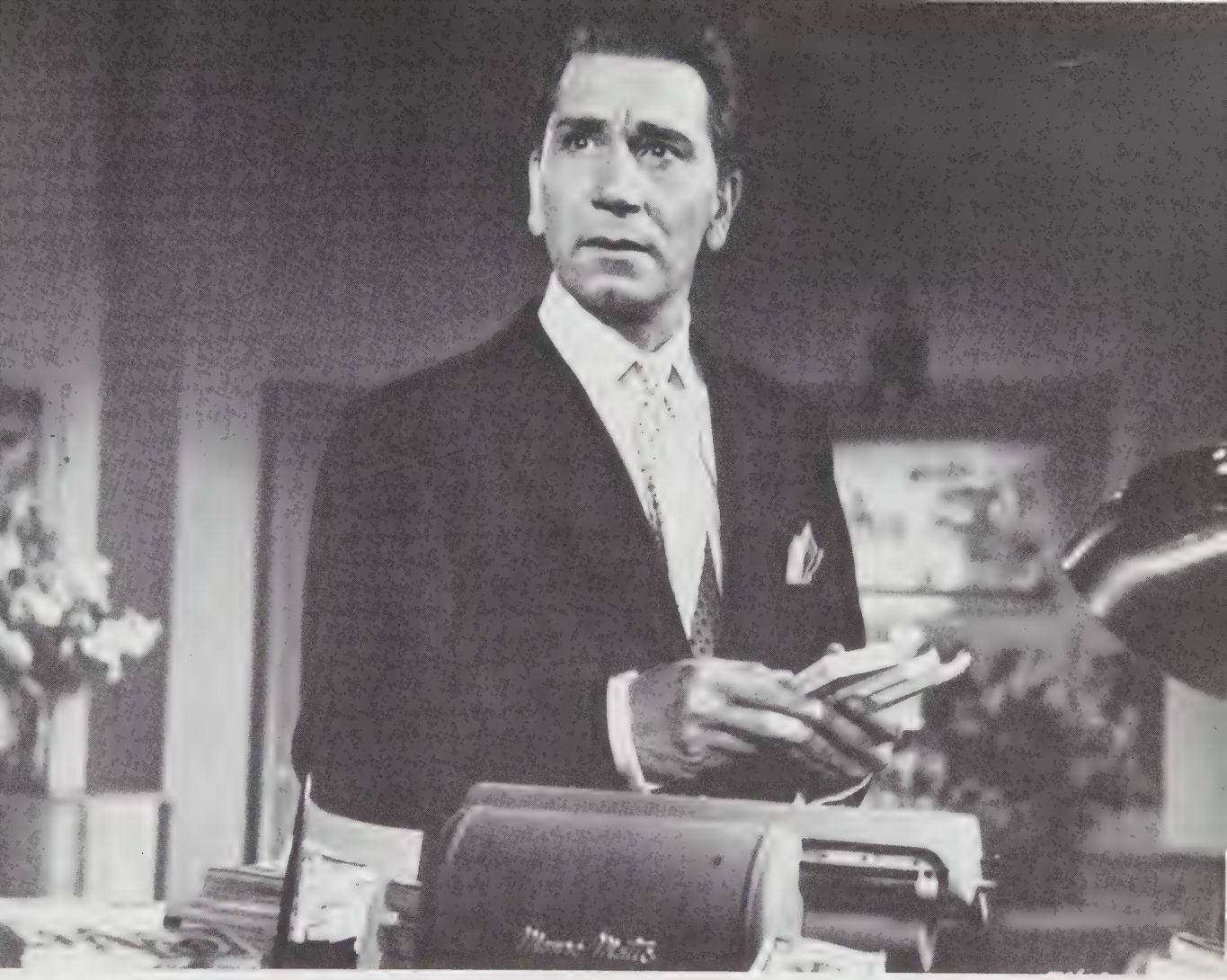
Ireland plays another psychotic killer in *Raw Deal* but could be found, a quarter-century later, on the side of the Los Angeles Police Department in *Farewell, My Lovely*. As the honest but resigned cop Lieutenant Nulty, he is even more morose than Robert Mitchum's Philip Marlowe and his presence helps create the movie's numerous echoes of the heyday of *film noir*.

Another actor prominent in the 1940s and 1950s who was used to good effect in a more recent movie is Richard Conte. He appeared in *The Godfather* (1972), awakening memories of countless roles as a smooth, quietly-spoken and usually immaculately dressed criminal. He was not always the bad guy. Indeed, he was the wrongly imprisoned Frank Wiecek in *Call Northside 777*, a fringe *film noir* directed by Henry Hathaway. The story centres upon a newspaper reporter's quest for the truth about a man sent to prison eleven years before, and is told largely in semi-documentary style befitting the tale's real-life origins; the film features numerous scenes which evoke the seedy, downbeat atmosphere of Chicago's criminal underbelly.

In *Cry of the City* (1948) Conte plays Martin Rome, a criminal whose childhood was shared with that of the man who must now hunt him down. This ploy has been used several times by Hollywood: two kids grow up together; one becomes a criminal, the other a cop or a priest. This is not one of the best examples of the sub-genre as it does not pursue the sociological implications of its thesis. Nevertheless, it is a watchable film thanks to Robert Siodmak's direction and to Conte's playing which, for all his villainy, has considerably more charm than Victor Mature's good guy.

Conte took the lead in *Thieves' Highway* (1949), an interesting and often highly entertaining movie about truckers and the hard times they endure at the hands of unscrupulous racketeers. Conte's Nick Garcos is a traditional *noir* figure. Returning from the army he feels like a stranger even in his parents' home. His father has

Richard Conte, another fine actor who was never rated as highly as he merited, had one of his best roles in the marginally *noir Thieves' Highway*. Here he hides from Lee J. Cobb's beady eyes.



Another excellent role for Richard Conte came in *The Big Combo*, in which he portrayed the smoothly evil gang boss Mr Brown.

been crippled by the criminals to whom the Garcos family is obliged to sell its produce. Determined to rebuild the family business, Nick risks his impending marriage and eventually takes on the thugs controlled by Figlia (Lee J. Cobb). His eventual victory, in which he is helped by Rica (Valentina Cortese), a hooker, is rather improbable. Nevertheless, Conte's ability to portray a man of deep emotion, notably a constantly suppressed anger, allows him to carry off the rout of Figlia remarkably well.

Conte's dark good looks allowed him to make an effective hero in *Thieves' Highway* and in *The Sleeping City* (1950), a hospital-set drama in which only he has a sympathetic role. He also made an impact in *The Big Combo*, in which his restrained sexuality brings great strength to scenes in which he pursues Jean Wallace's Susan. With a less presentable actor the manner in which she responds to his advances would have seemed much less probable.

The Brothers Rico (1957), in which Conte plays Eddie Rico, is a kind of halfway house between the declining *noir* output of the preceding decade and the crime syndicate movies which were even then becoming a mite wearisome. This one, although presented in a straightforward, unimaginative manner, is better than most. Conte is effective as the former mobster who has become a success in a legitimate business but is sucked back into criminal ways by those past connections. This story, from a Georges Simenon novel, is stronger than most in that it places the central character in a predicament wherein he is forced to choose between family and evil friends and, worse, between different relatives within his family. In its relatively simple form *The Brothers Rico* makes an interesting character study without falling

The gravelly-voiced, rough-hewn actor Charles McGraw was only rarely allowed a leading role. When he did have such opportunities (as here, in *The Narrow Margin* with Marie Windsor) he proved his ability to carry a movie as effectively as any star actor.

into the trap of becoming pretentious (which is what happened when it was remade in 1972 as *The Family Rico*).

If Conte's looks and manner made it possible for him to be cast, occasionally, in a leading role, conversely, Charles McGraw's rugged appearance and gruff manner seemed to destine him never to rise above the role of minor heavy or tough-but-honest cop. It was as a strong, silent but dangerous hit-man that he made an impact in *The Killers*, as one of the two men sent to gun down the Swede. During the late 1940s McGraw appeared in numerous crime thrillers, several of them in a *noir* mood, and usually fairly well down the cast list. In 1950 he was given the lead in *Armored Car Robbery*, in which he played the cop in charge of hunting down a gang of criminals who, by way of compensation for coming to mainly sticky ends, have all the best scenes.

Another leading role followed in 1951, this time as insurance investigator Joe Peters in *Roadblock*, a relatively little-known film with many *noir* elements. It is evocatively photographed by Nicholas Musuraca and was co-scripted by Steve Fisher and George Bricker from a story by Geoffrey Homes (Daniel Mainwaring), who between them worked on many interesting *films noirs*. Despite being cast against type, McGraw proved believable as an ordinary, honest man who, thanks to a chance meeting with an attractive woman, turns to crime which escalates until he commits murder. Unlike other actors used in roles in which sexual obsession leads to criminal duplicity, McGraw never displays vulnerability, which makes his fall from grace simultaneously surprising and dramatically effective.

Of all McGraw's handful of starring movies *Roadblock* is the most *noir*, but the best-known is *The Narrow Margin*. It is also the best movie, even if its mood is often outside the genre. McGraw gives detective Walter Brown exactly the right aura of honest toughness, which makes his disgusted reaction towards Marie Windsor, whom he believes to be a gangster's widow, entirely credible.

It is McGraw's natural grimness that helps make his role of the investigator, Gus Slavin, in *Loophole* (1954) similarly believable. As a kind of avenging angel, Slavin pursues bank clerk Mike Donovan (Barry Sullivan), whom he believes to be responsible for a robbery even after his quarry's innocence has been proved beyond doubt. McGraw's silent presence in long-shot as he waits and watches is a fine example of the power of established *noir* icons to change perceptions and create impressions by exploiting their previous screen appearances.

Another gruff, burly actor is William Bendix, whose ungainly bulk cast dangerous shadows over a number of movies, especially those in which Alan Ladd starred. Bendix added the weight and dynamism Ladd lacked and was particularly impressive as the mentally unstable Buzz Wanchek in *The Blue Dahlia*. Indeed, Bendix's performance makes an utter nonsense of the fact that Raymond Chandler's original script was changed to make someone else the killer. Whatever the censors might have insisted, Bendix made sure that any member of the audience who was paying attention knew that he should have committed the crime.

Sterling Hayden was hired by Hollywood after making headlines as one of the last working sailing-ship captains. Tall and rangy, Hayden's small-featured face didn't match the rest of him and for the most part he failed

The carefully laid plans of the gang in *The Asphalt Jungle* start to fall apart: Dix Handley (Sterling Hayden) helps his wounded companion Louis Ciavelli (Anthony Caruso) through a tunnel.

to impress as the leading man in the actioners in which he usually appeared, despite being billed, somewhat optimistically, as 'the Most Beautiful Man in the Movies'. However, the same looks helped give him an air of weakness which suited some of the *films noirs* he made.

As Dix Handley, the toughest if not the brightest member of the gang planning the jewel robbery in *The Asphalt Jungle*, Hayden has his most important role in the genre. Nevertheless, despite his massive physical

Edmond O'Brien learns that he is dying of radiation poisoning in *D.O.A.*

The corrupt cop in *Shield for Murder* provided Edmond O'Brien with another good role.

presence, he is outclassed, having the misfortune to be in the company of three actors who, although in smaller roles, chose this movie as the one in which they would deliver their best screen performances: Sam Jaffe as the sexually-obsessed Doc Reidenschneider; Louis Calherne as the venal lawyer Emmerich; and Marc Lawrence as the nervily sweating Cobby.

As Johnny Clay, leader of the race-track robbery gang in *The Killing*, Hayden was well able to convey the laconic fatalism of a man who senses all along that he and his plans are doomed to failure. Once again, however, he was unfortunate in having to share screen time with such inveterate scene-stealers as Marie Windsor and Elisha Cook Jr.

As a very young man Edmond O'Brien's physical appearance was sufficiently attractive to allow him to play such romantic roles

as that of Esmeralda's lover in the 1939 version of *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*. Soon, however, he put on weight and his heavily-jowled face, which scowled easily, pushed him into character roles. He was effective in several *films noirs*, in which his roles were significant, perhaps pivotal, but some notches below those of the stars. A good example of this is *The Killers*, in which he plays the insurance investigator whose fascination for the manner of Ole Andreson's death slowly unravels the story.

In *White Heat* O'Brien plays Hank Fallon, the undercover cop who, in the guise of Vic Pardo, becomes the closest friend of James Cagney's Cody Jarrett. It is a thankless role, given that for all his vicious criminality Jarrett is by far the most interesting man on the screen and his betrayer therefore becomes a bad good guy.

The best of O'Brien's leading roles in *film noir* is as Frank Bigelow in *D. O. A.* (1950). Here the revenge motif present in several movies in the genre is unusually powerful because Bigelow is hunting his own murderer. Suffering from deliberately-induced radiation poisoning and with only hours to live, he is determined to track down those responsible and is drawn into a web of corruption and deceit. The manic intensity felt by the doomed Bigelow is superbly caught by O'Brien and his comparative ordinariness makes him considerably more effective than many star actors would be playing this type of role.

In a claustrophobic 1953 movie, *The Hitch-Hiker*, O'Brien plays one of two men setting out by car on a fishing trip (the other is played by Frank Lovejoy) who have the misfortune to give a lift to a psychotic killer. It was made some 25 years before the serial killer syndrome was widely recognized as a hazard of American life, and works well today, even if its roots lie less in the actual phenomenon than in the feeling of acute paranoia which was pervading America at that time.

O'Brien plays a crusading politician in *The Turning Point* (1953), a movie in the then popular trend of stories about organized crime. Its status in *film noir* is due largely to the performance of Ed Begley, whose interpretation of the gang boss is among the most unredeemingly vicious ever recorded on film.

A minor crime thriller from 1954, *Shield for Murder*, was based upon a William P. McGivern novel. Not only did O'Brien star as a corrupt and murderous cop, Barney Nolan, but he also co-directed with Howard Koch. Unlike most crime movies, *noir* and otherwise, this one strays far outside the city centre and shows how corruption can extend into leafy suburbia, which is where Nolan wants to live and where he is eventually killed.

Dan Duryea appeared in about a dozen *films noirs*, sometimes in leading roles but most often as second male lead. His slightly offbeat good looks and his air of decadent charm allowed him to play rakish con-men with believable ease. By only slightly exaggerating the sneer which constantly edged his mouth, Duryea could become repellently evil. This quality made him a suitable vehicle for the vision of Fritz Lang, who used him in several movies.

Duryea added a little weight to *Lady on a Train* (1945), which is that rarest of movie forms, a *film noir* comedy. Deanna Durbin's presence in the leading role perhaps prevents its place in the canon being any more than somewhat tenuous. Evocative photography by Woody Bredell enhances this story of a young woman who witnesses a murder and, in trying to track down the killers, becomes involved with a series of highly suspicious characters of which Duryea is the most suspect. But even in *noir* comedies no one is quite what he seems and Duryea, for once, is innocent.

In Fritz Lang's *Ministry of Fear* (1945), a complex tale of spies and counterspies in Second World War London, Duryea is grimly menacing, while in the following year's two Lang movies, *The Woman in the Window* and *Scarlet Street*, he is very effective in the parallel roles of Heidt and Johnny Prince respectively, the second of which he fills with sexual innuendo.

Granted a leading role that called for something more complex, Duryea was excellent in *Black Angel* (1946), in which he plays Martin Blair, an alcoholic composer. As Marty was driven to his condition by his two-timing wife, he is a sympathetic character. Despite the fact that he is weak and ineffectual, the audience is on his side when he is suspected of his wife's murder. Another man is indicted for the mur-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der but then Marty realizes that it *was* he who killed his wife, during a drunken blackout.

Duryea returned to playing a sinister and untrustworthy individual in *Criss Cross* (1949). He is Slim Dundee, a gangster whom Anna (Yvonne De Carlo) is planning to marry despite the strong physical attraction she still feels for her ex-husband Steve (Burt Lancaster). When Anna and Steve begin an affair they are discovered by Dundee, with whom they then become embroiled in a robbery. On this occasion Duryea's performance is not as subtle as it might have been and it is difficult to believe that even Anna and Steve, neither of whom is especially bright, would have been fooled by his duplicity.

Duryea played the heroic lead in *World for Ransom* (1954), a Robert Aldrich movie which owes its inclusion in the *noir* catalogue more to the fact that *films noirs* were intermittently set in the decadent East than to anything that happens on screen. It is one of a handful of marginal *films noirs* to move into the atomic age (the plot centres on the search for a kidnapped nuclear physicist) but the closing sequences degenerate into just another unconvincing jungle-bound shoot-'em-up. Duryea's performance in this movie is startlingly uneven. In some scenes he acts with effective understatement while in others he goes way over the top.

Another borderline *film noir* is *Storm Fear* (1955), in which Duryea plays the law-abiding brother of a criminal. In the end, the honest man must defend his wife and child even if it means killing his brother. A twist to this simplistic but claustrophobic tale is achieved by the fact that the bad brother once had an affair with the good brother's wife and the son of that marriage is really his child.

Dan Duryea also starred in *The Burglar* (1957), a late fling at *film noir* which also features the highly improbable Jayne Mansfield. Duryea's career was on the decline by the mid-1960s and he died in 1968 at the age of 61.

Leading roles were rarely accessible to the gallery of grotesques who featured in countless *films noirs* and whose presence added mood and nuance, horror and humour, depending on the needs of the occasion.

Naturally commanding the screen with their bulk were the fat men, and the doyen of this breed was undoubtedly Sydney Greenstreet, although his *noir* appearances were minimal. Indeed, Greenstreet's film career was short. It began in 1941, when he was 62, with *The Maltese Falcon* and ended in 1950, four years before his death. As suggested earlier, *The Maltese Falcon* only just qualifies as *film noir*, but it is a measure of Greenstreet's performance as Kasper Gutman, the archetypal Fat Man, that the scenes in which he takes part come most readily to mind.

Greenstreet appears as Peters in *The Mask of Dimitrios* (1944), an unsuccessful attempt to adapt for the screen Eric Ambler's entertaining mystery novel *A Coffin for Dimitrios*. Although well-endowed with flashbacks and possessing a dramatic visual style, the movie never grips the imagination or the emotions as well as its source material. In *Conflict* Greenstreet plays Mark Hamilton, the psychiatrist friend of Richard Mason (Humphrey Bogart), who eventually proves him to be a murderer.

Another bulky individual who menaced several *film noir* heroes is Raymond Burr (although his weight fluctuated wildly, occasionally encouraging moviemakers to risk casting him on the right side of the law). He plays the villainous gang boss Walt Radak in *Desperate* (1947), a neglected early film of director Anthony Mann, and was a gangster again in Mann's *Raw Deal* (1948). Burr changed sides for *Pitfall* (1948), but only so long as it suited him (and eventually coming to a sticky end after competing with Dick Powell for the affections of Lizabeth Scott). Unusually for *film noir, Pitfall* is set firmly amidst the middle classes but the darker side of this slice of American life is effectively captured by strong central performances and some fine images by the cinematographer Harry J. Wild.

Although never as memorable as Sydney Greenstreet, Burr did die some of *film noir*'s more spectacular deaths: faced with being burned to death in *Raw Deal* he opted for leaping from a high window; he was electrocuted on a neon sign in *Red Light*; after being knocked unconscious by one woman

Camera angles accentuate the already grotesque: Jack Palance and Waldo Pitkin in *Panic in the Streets*.

One of *film noir*'s broodingly malignant fat men: Francis L. Sullivan in *Night and the City*.

That heaviest of heavies, Laird Cregar, faces a heavy hero, Victor Mature, across a portrait of Carole Landis in *I Wake Up Screaming*.

in *The Blue Gardenia* he was bludgeoned to death by another. Eventually tiring of being on the receiving end of so much mayhem, Burr retired from films to establish himself as one of TV's best-known lawyers, Perry Mason, and then a similarly famous detective, Ironside.

Although much less well known than any of his American counterparts, the British actor Francis L. Sullivan cast an impressive still shadow over Richard Widmark's frenzied activities in *Night and the City*. With camera angles designed to make him appear even bulkier than in real life, itself no mean

Kate Murtagh is more than a match for even Robert Mitchum in *Farewell, My Lovely*, while Sylvester Stallone (right) has yet to develop muscles like hers.

achievement, Sullivan's Phil Nosseross oozed a great deal of sweaty menace.

Most massive of all the fat men, outweighing even Sydney Greenstreet as a threatening presence, was Laird Cregar. His huge bulk overflowed screens too small to hold him in such tales as *I Wake Up Screaming* (first released in Britain as *Hot Spot*), *This Gun for Hire, The Lodger*, in which he played Jack the Ripper, and *Hangover Square*. Cregar never had a chance to capitalize on his threatening yet soft-voiced and delicately poised presence. Dieting drastically for a role, he died from a heart attack in 1944 at the age of 28.

For obvious if sexist reasons (after all, Hollywood has never liked to admit that women can be fat and frumpy), there have been few female grotesques even in *film noir*. When they have appeared, however fleetingly, their impact has been sufficiently dramatic to expose the shortsightedness of Hollywood's attitude to such individuals.

Hope Emerson's role in *Cry of the City* is as a tough masseuse whose manipulation of Richard Conte's neck has powerful sado-masochistic overtones. She also has one of the most visually impressive entrances in all of *film noir* as she responds to Conte's arrival at her door. Her progress through a succession of inner doorways, each illuminated as she passes them, demonstrates the lighting cameraman's craft at its most dramatic.

A powerfully-built lady who even managed momentarily to dominate Robert Mitchum is Kate Murtagh, who plays Frances Amthor in the 1975 version of *Farewell, My Lovely* (the role in the 1944 version, as in the novel, is taken by a man). Murtagh's beefy body, straining at her quack doctor's uniform,

Ward Bond was first to play the part, Jack O'Halloran was the most recent, but Mike Mazurki was the best: the massive, slow-witted ex-con Moose Malloy, from Raymond Chandler's novel *Farewell, My Lovely*.

Set design and photography, allied to Peter Lorre's presence, lifted the pre-*noir* movie *Stranger on the Third Floor* out of its class. Here, hero Mike Ward (John McGuire) pursues the killer down the stairs.

outclassed even one of her assistants, a not-yet-muscle-bound bit-part player named Sylvester Stallone.

A genuine muscle-man was Mike Mazurki, whose pre-movie career as a wrestler earned him more than a few lumps. Mazurki had two highly memorable *film noir* roles. As Moose Malloy in the 1944 version of *Farewell, My Lovely* his looming bulk first appeared threateningly reflected in the window of Philip Marlowe's office in one of the most highly charged scenes in all *film noir*. Unlike his predecessor and successor in the role (Ward Bond and Jack O'Halloran respectively), Mazurki matched Raymond Chandler's original description: 'He was a big man but not more than six feet five inches tall and not wider than a beer truck.'

As the all-in wrestler, the Strangler, in *Night and the City*, Mazurki combined his talents as an actor and former real-life wrestler. His fight with Ştanilaus Zbyszko, also an ex-wrestler, is the most vivid depiction of the sport ever put on film (and a great deal more exciting than most real wrestling matches).

If the fat men, led by Sydney Greenstreet, and the big men, led by Mike Mazurki, held down one end of the *noir* repertory company's scale, the other was occupied by snivelling little weaklings whose presence illuminated many dark corners.

Peter Lorre was Greenstreet's partner-in-crime in *The Maltese Falcon*, bringing a marvellously perfumed quality to the role of Joel Cairo. Lorre's career was barely under way when in 1931 he was chosen by Fritz Lang to play the child-murderer in the expressionistic *M*, a role which brought him immediate international acclaim. Two years later he left Germany just ahead of the Nazis and two years after that he was in Hollywood. His early American movies took full advantage of his fine acting talent and his sinister yet polished appearance. Then, however, commercial considerations took over and he played the continuing role of Mr Moto, a kind of Japanese Charlie Chan, in a series of low-budget detective movies through the 1930s.

In 1940 Lorre made *Stranger on the Third Floor*, a rarely seen movie often regarded as the first true American *film noir*. Certainly it draws heavily upon German Expressionism and Nicholas Musuraca's imaginative

camera-work reveal a thorough grasp of the potential of heavily shadowed sets. The fact that this movie slightly pre-dates *Citizen Kane*, while not detracting from the latter, highlights Orson Welles's shrewdness in relying on the technical abilities of such RKO stalwarts as art director Van Nest Polglase, who also worked on *Stranger*, to realize his vision.

Lorre turned up in a number of other early *noir*-ish movies, including *The Mask of Dimitrios, The Black Angel* and *The Chase*, but as the genre came to centre more upon urban America the sinister foreigner became less important. Nevertheless, there were still many other types of American film which continued to employ the stereotype of the oily stranger and Lorre continued to work steadily. Interestingly, he returned to Germany in 1951 to star in and direct a film he had also co-written. This was *The Lost One*, a movie which harked back stylistically to the almost forgotten days of Expressionism.

Steve Brodie excelled at playing malicious but weak characters. However, in *Desperate* (1947) he plays an ordinary young man, recently married, who is innocently caught up in gangland activities. The desperate and seemingly hopeless situation in which Brodie's Steve Randall finds himself is that unless he confesses to crimes he did not commit the gangsters will kill his wife.

More in keeping with his usual on-screen persona of general untrustworthiness is Brodie's role as Robert Mitchum's partner in *Out of the Past*. The casual manner with which he tries to inveigle himself into the lives of Mitchum and Jane Greer is brought to a dramatic end when Greer guns him down. Brodie is similarly unscrupulous as Al Mapes in *Armored Car Robbery* and, as Jinx Raynor, is an equivocating sidekick for James

Steve Brodie nervously fingers murderer Robert Ryan, thereby ensuring his own untimely demise in *Crossfire*.

One of the greatest of the minor icons, without whom *film noir* would have been so much less than it is: Elisha Cook Jr as the tortured George Peatty in *The Killing* (opposite).

Cagney's malevolent Ralph Cotter in *Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye*. He was also fearfully equivocal as Floyd in *Crossfire*, in which he unwisely tangles with Robert Ryan and ends up strangled and hanging from the ceiling.

Steve Brodie had a chance to change sides for the 1951 remake of *M* in which he and Howard Da Silva were both cast against type as policemen.

If Sydney Greenstreet is the doyen of screen fatties, then the leading light among the weaselly ones must be Elisha Cook Jr. In a string of roles from 1940 onwards he came to epitomize the small-time, scared hoodlum afraid of his own shadow and liable to back-stab a friend as readily as he would an enemy. Indeed, so well did he typify the heyday of *film noir* that when film-makers began to recreate the genre Cook was regularly called upon to sanction their homage merely by making an appearance.

Although Cook generally played unsavoury characters, he took the part of good-guy Joe Briggs, a taxi-driver wrongly accused of murder, in *Stranger on the Third Floor*. In the following year, 1941, Cook found his niche and gained worldwide fame through his portrayal of the gun-toting Wilmer Cook in *The Maltese Falcon*. Cook's role in *The Maltese Falcon* is usually spoken of as having deeply homosexual undertones, resulting in part from the manner in which Sydney Greenstreet speaks about him and in part from the use, by Humphrey Bogart, of the term 'gunsel', which Hollywood's censors appeared to think was a slang expression for a gunman when in fact it denotes sexual proclivities. However, like so many aspects of this movie's fame, which appear to be more in the minds of beholders than in the film itself, this interpretation is hard to justify from Cook's performance alone.

Numerous other roles followed: in *I Wake Up Screaming* (1941) he is the murderer whose squalid room is papered with pictures of the showgirl he has killed; he is the jazz drummer who plays the memorable orgasmic drum solo in *Phantom Lady*; as Harry Jones, Cook is forced to drink poison in *The Big Sleep*.

Cook had a bigger role in *Born to Kill* (1947). The lengths to which his character, Marty Waterman, will go to save his murderous friend Sam Wild (Lawrence Tierney) from retribution are quite startling, this time really suggesting powerful homosexual undertones to their relationship. He is even prepared to kill to save him but Sam, misinterpreting Marty's motives, kills him instead.

During the late 1940s and early 1950s, Cook appeared in a string of movies, many of them in the *noir* mood: *Fall Guy, The Gangster* (both 1947), *Don't Bother to Knock* (1952) and *I, the Jury* (1953).

Cook's best role was that of the miserable weakling George Peatty in *The Killing* (1956). Even if it is hard to believe in him as a marriage partner for the voluptuous Marie Windsor, the scene in which, on the point of death, he shoots her while simultaneously declaring his love for her, is an amazing mixture of eroticism and necrophilia.

By the 1970s the new *noir* film cycle had begun and Cook was just one of a batch of former icons called in to add visual impact to *The Outfit* (1974). Along with Robert Ryan, Jane Greer and others he gave the movie a dimension it might not otherwise have had and lifted it from being just another (albeit powerful and well-made) one-man-against-the-syndicate movie into quite a different class. *The Black Bird* (1975) was an outright parody of *The Maltese Falcon* in which Peter Falk played an incredibly seedy Sam Spade while a couple of members of the original cast turned up for a reprise. Among them was Elisha Cook Jr as a latter-day Wilmer the gunsel.

The little men, of whom Cook was king, the fat men for whom Greenstreet weighed in, many other bit-part players and those leading roles played by defiantly non-star actors, form an endlessly fascinating, virtually all-male gallery of minor *noir* icons. Although they competed with lighting men and cinematographers, directors, writers and stars, it is hard to imagine *film noir* making the impact it did without them.

8

FEAR, PARANOIA AND A SELF-CONSCIOUS LEGACY

'I'm backed up in a dark corner and I don't know who's hitting me.'
The Dark Corner

EMIGRÉ directors and their like-minded American counterparts may have found source material, technical expertise and suitable performers awaiting them in Hollywood, but the product they created none the less needed a suitable atmosphere in which to grow.

Some studios were amenable to change. Eager to seek new markets during a period when cinema attendances were falling, they actively encouraged the introduction of new ideas. A few studio bosses were liberal in outlook: Dore Schary's presence at RKO was a significant factor in that studio's dominance of *film noir* (conversely, the change in RKO's attitude that followed hard upon Howard Hughes's purchase of the studio caused Schary to quit before he was pushed).

But attitudes in some studios were only a small part of the pervading atmosphere. American society and culture in the immediate post-war years offered an appropriate climate of dislocation and disillusionment. For many young American males, leaving home for the war brought a cultural awakening. The isolationism America had practised in the years between the wars and the educational system's lack of interest in non-American affairs had not prepared them for the world outside. On their return to America these young men found it less easy than they had hoped to fit back readily into society.

Their feeling of alienation was aggravated by a measure of disillusionment: why, after all they had been through, wasn't life different?

Some of these changes in outlook filtered into the motion-picture industry, from both the paying customer and the makers of films. For example, customers now had a different attitude towards personal (as opposed to 'gang war') violence, a change engendered in part by the exposure of servicemen to fear, disablement and the bloody reality of sudden death.

Changes behind the cameras were generated in part by the drain on manpower during the war years, which had provided opportunities in Hollywood for young, untried film-makers, many of whom were radical in thought and ideals. Theirs was not an exceptional attitude. Every generation is radicalized, although usually to a far lower degree than its participants might believe. Indeed, more often than their right-wing opponents might allow, this was the radicalism of youth rather than committed political idealism. The number of radical thinkers in the post-war generation of film-makers was probably no greater than at any other time, but in the 1940s more of them had major opportunities to make movies than might have been the case had there been no war.

Their involvement in film-making, as writers, directors and actors, helped nourish the development of the burgeoning genre of *film noir*.

Unfortunately, this radicalism, as so often in American history, was seen by some in a

fearful light. Members of the older generation were filled with an acute awareness that their children spoke another language and moved to the beat of a drummer who was not merely different but was, for them, unheard.

That different drummer, some claimed, was in a far-off land, and these radicals were the outriders of a new and potentially more dangerous invader than fascism (although then, as now, for many Americans, even those in the highest levels of government, the distinction between communism and fascism was difficult to comprehend). These fearful ones, a substantial percentage of middle-Americans, saw and heard radicalism in books, plays, on radio, TV and especially in the movies. They believed it to be an infiltration of communistic ideals and a positive threat to American values, society and even lives.

Fear of communism in the early 1950s was not a new experience, nor was investigation into subversive thoughts and deeds unknown in Hollywood. In the late 1930s and early 1940s there had been investigations led by Martin Dies (whose zeal caused him to question even that most stalwart of Americans, little Shirley Temple). If the experience of Dies had left smiles on some faces there was nothing to laugh about when Senator Joseph McCarthy picked on communism as a means of making a name for himself. While McCarthy held his kangaroo courts in Washington, out in Hollywood others followed his example and the film community came under attack.

By European standards left-wing radicalism in post-war America was a pretty mild affair, even if American communists of the 1920s and early 1930s had often been extreme and prepared to take violent action in support of their aims. Nevertheless, for the majority of Americans the sense of a threat from the left was readily exaggerated by unscrupulous political manipulators into fear, and once that fear was deeply rooted it quickly grew into galloping paranoia.

Among the moviemakers who came under attack (and were, in many instances, blacklisted in Hollywood) were several who worked in *film noir*. The fact that the behaviour displayed by characters in many *films noirs* was outside the normal standards of behaviour for 'good' Americans made them an obvious target. The extent to which many writers, directors, actors and technicians were unfairly treated has been extensively written about elsewhere and has no real part in this book. Nevertheless, the numbers of blacklisted people who were involved in *film noir* (as opposed to, say, frothy comedies and musicals) show that, even if the French critics who coined the term *film noir* had yet to receive extensive support from their American counterparts, many in American political life had already identified a decidedly un-American trend in motion picture-making.

Some movies of the period took advantage of popular interest in the subject of communism while simultaneously offering the investigators a simplistic proof that the studios concerned were solidly behind the flag. In their structure and morality, however, there is little to distinguish these movies from countless others in which American agents infiltrated Nazi spy rings during the Second World War or, earlier, gangs of bootleggers.

Vividly and viciously outspoken in his hatred of communism is the pulp writer Mickey Spillane, whose creation Mike Hammer replaces Sam Spade's words with his fists and would undoubtedly regard Philip Marlowe as a dangerously liberal softy worthy of an immediate working-over with his boots.

Mike Hammer's various screen incarnations have been highly variable in style and quality. The first, *I, the Jury* (1953), was restricted by the code of the day and is therefore not as violent as the novel, although it manages to sneak in several scenes which were uncommon at that time: the cold-blooded shooting by a gunman of a helpless cripple and Hammer's execution of his unarmed and (naturally) semi-naked girlfriend when she turns out to be the villainess of the piece. As Hammer, Biff Elliott goes woodenly through his paces and fails to make the movie enjoyable.

In an altogether different category is the 1955 entry into Mike Hammer's world. *Kiss Me Deadly* stars Ralph Meeker as Spillane's fascistic tough guy and from the start this is a fast-paced, inventive movie (with character portrayal to match) that never lets up long enough to allow considered judgement.

Mike Hammer (Ralph Meeker), getting out of one spot of trouble, is unaware that something even he can't handle lies in the Pandora's Box containing 'the great whatsit' in *Kiss Me Deadly*.

Hammer's search for the killers of a strange and beautiful woman he met only briefly leads him into a typically *noir* web of corruption and deceit, but this time there is a major difference. At the heart of Mike Hammer's dark world lies not gold or stolen money or even drugs. The 'great whatsit' he and his secretary Velda seek turns out to be enough radio-active material to blow up a slice of the Californian coastline.

Hammer and Velda (Maxine Cooper) apart, no one in the movie is quite what he or she seems. Deception is rife, lies and cheating are commonplace; all are capable of any extremes, even murder, to achieve their aims. 'Trust nobody' is the clarion-call. Curiously enough, however, thanks to the producer-director Robert Aldrich and the screenwriter A. I. Bezzerides, the communists are not behind it all, at least not overtly. The villains are mostly all-American and are motivated not so much by political ambition as by their desire for a fast buck.

The end result is a movie of considerable power and integrity, and in a class well above that of its source material.

Stylistically, Robert Aldrich plunges his unlikely hero into a nightmare world which simultaneously mirrors past brutalities while offering a disturbing foretaste of disasters yet to come. Nightmare and poetic allegory all rolled up into one apocalyptic *film noir, Kiss Me Deadly* is an impressive demonstration of the power of film to exploit the worst of man's efforts, whether literary or scientific, and create from them a work of vision and significance.

Total paranoia pervades the 1956 science-fiction movie *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. Yet, by ingenious writing and direction, the movie becomes a cri-

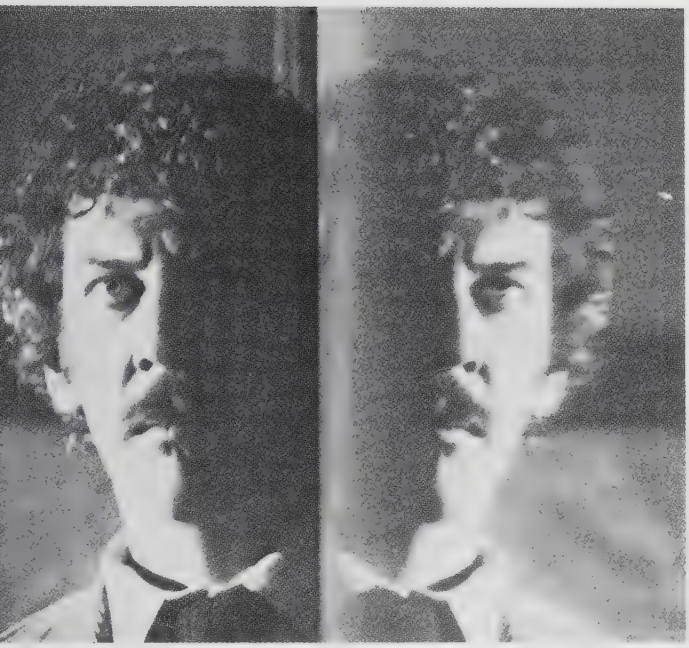
'They're here already!' Paranoia at large on an ordinary American highway: Kevin McCarthy in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*.

tique of what was happening in America at a time when witch-hunters were rampant. Here, it is fear of what happens to non-conformists which motivates the action and is recalled in Kevin McCarthy's cry as he struggles unavailingly to impress upon heedless motorists the dangers they all face: 'They're here already!' When the movie was remade in 1978, paranoia had temporarily eased; accordingly, this version leans more towards science-fiction than to polemic. Nevertheless, thanks to interesting sets and camera-work, the remake contains some vivid imagery.

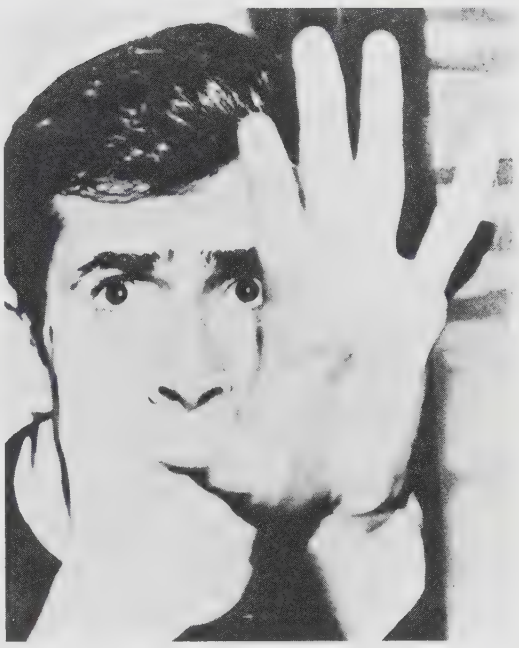
Decidedly lacking in subtlety, *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962) is awash with paranoia. With most of the characters either leading double lives or brainwashed into committing acts of acute depravity, little can be taken at face value. Dream sequences which might be true recollections of past events intermingle with the present. Although some of the casting and acting is questionable, the work of the cinematographer Lionel Lindon and especially the director John Frankenheimer sustains the movie over its more awkward passages.

Of course, this period of movie-making was not all fear and loathing and rampant paranoia. Films continued to thrive on crime but even the most casual glance at crime movies made from the 1960s onwards reveals striking differences from those of the period before and during the years of *film noir*.

The conspiracy of organized crime attracted Hollywood's attention, as did the interior conspiracy of the paranoid's world. If this concentration upon dubious elements in both society and individuals suggests a gen-



Schizophrenia at large in the remake of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Donald Sutherland).



Schizophrenia contained: Anthony Perkins in Hitchcock's *Psycho*.

eral malaise among film-makers, the movies themselves were often interesting, although many were highly derivative. Of course, not all changes are attributable to the influence of the classic *noir* period but many elements in more recent movies display an acute awareness of the genre's stylistic devices. At first, some of these influences were probably unconscious, others vaguely conscious but not specially aware of the nature of *film noir*. Later, all that diffidence vanished.

Even if several of the most noted practitioners of *noir* had been surprised at first to find themselves lionized for their work in creating a new genre of movies, by 1958 they all understood and accepted their role. Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil*, commonly regarded as the end of the *film noir* cycle, is therefore consciously and even extravagantly *noir*. The subtleties of early *film noir* vanished beneath a barrage of baroque effects and a demonstration of bravura film-making that makes even much of Welles's own earlier work look quite pale.

As the 1950s faded into the distorting mists of nostalgia there were a few final twitches from the corpse: *Odds Against Tomorrow* (1959) is a caper movie with *noir*-ish touches and added social consciousness by way of a black man and a racist as members of the gang; the opening of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) takes the audience from a wide, sunlit cityscape into the shady interior of a room in which the supposed heroine is up to no good; as observed earlier, *Cape Fear* and *The Manchurian Candidate* (both 1962) had several *noir* touches amid the flamboyance; the sexual perversity of *The Naked Kiss* (1964) owed much to the traditions established by the genre.

Of these examples *Psycho* has the highest reputation, even if it displays Hitchcock's habit of playing games with his audience at its most overt. For all its flaws, most irritating of which is the unnecessary closing psychological explanation, the movie is an exceptional portrayal of murderous psychosis. However, the *noir* mood of the opening sequences vanishes once Janet Leigh has been butchered in the shower: from that point on, Gothic horror takes over.

A very different trend in film-making followed the trail of organized crime in which Hollywood became interested after Senator Kefauver's investigation in 1951 into organized crime in inter-state commerce which, among other matters, had formally recognized Mafia control of the rackets.

Extraordinary imagery creates an alarming vision of contemporary America in John Boorman's *Point Blank* as Lee Marvin cuts a deadly swath through Southern California.

One of the most powerful thrillers of the late 1960s is John Boorman's *Point Blank* (1967), which stars Lee Marvin as the enigmatic Walker. The opening of the movie displays extraordinary visual imagery, filled with the threat of physical violence, and is simultaneously replete with erotic promise. The images, superbly orchestrated against a battery of dramatic sound effects, culminate in an orgasmic fusillade of bullets which dislocates the audience because suddenly all is not what it seems. From this point onwards, as dream interweaves with reality, Walker hunts down his betrayers in a manner which resembles the older *film noir* in its values if not in the brutality of its execution.

The fact that Walker's enemies are representatives of organized crime gives the movie a barely tenable motivation. Walker's own violence and his membership of that same organization (he is being manipulated by one of its top men) are overlooked as he goes about his task of cleaning up America with a gun.

The world of espionage is itself sufficiently alien to offer promise for satisfactory *films noirs* yet has rarely been used to good effect. John Huston's *The Kremlin Letter* (1970) is a complex and often confusing tale in which no one is what he seems to be. With Dean Jagger, Orson Welles and Marc Lawrence in the cast, there is a fair reflection of old *noir* iconography, while some of the other members of the cast fit well into the squalid, mistrusting and occasionally grotesque ambiance. Everyone here is either a manipulator or is being manipulated; indeed, even the manipulators are themselves far from being free of outside interference in their lives and deaths.

Manipulators abound in *Winter Kills*

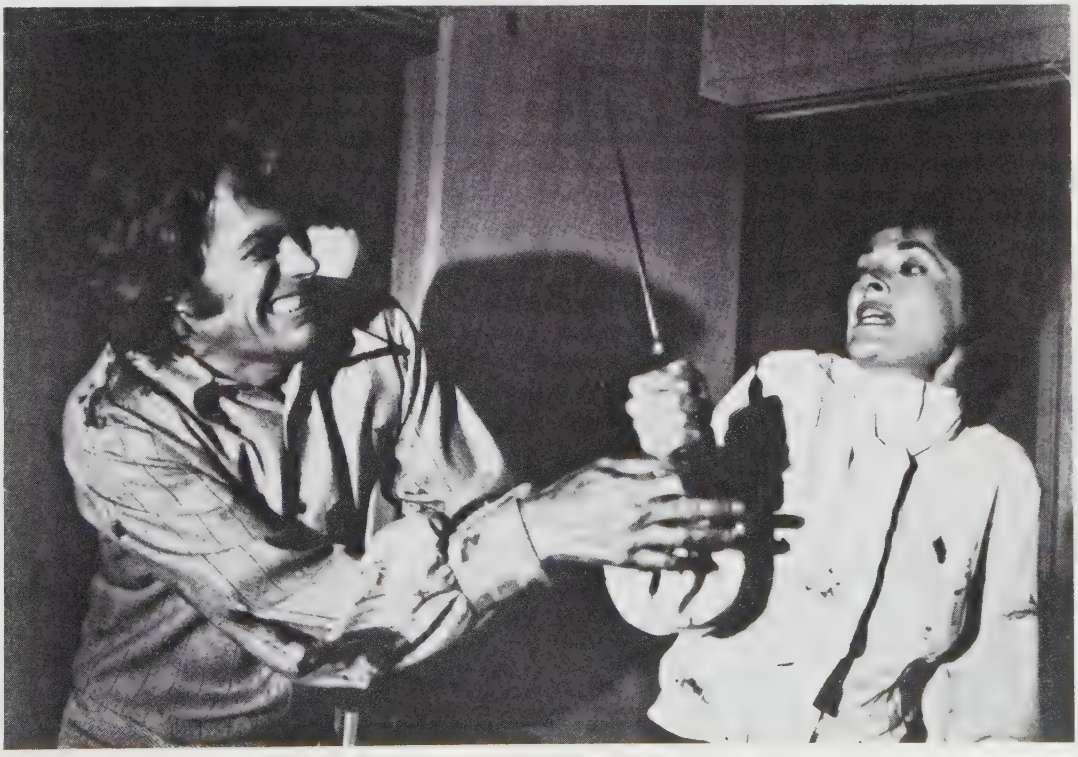
(1979), which centres upon the youngest son (Jeff Bridges) of a political dynasty who investigates the assassination of his brother, the President, who may have been killed on the orders of their maniacal father (played by John Huston). After a promising start the movie runs wildly off the rails, becoming a parody of itself before it is over. Minor *noir* icons such as Dorothy Malone and Sterling Hayden add to the movie's visual impact.

The year 1971 saw two interesting movies with echoes of the imagery and deep-seated psychosis of *film noir*. *Klute* stars Jane Fonda as Bree Daniel, a hooker caught up in a web of corruption and deceit when a detective, John Klute (played in his typical off-the-wall fashion by Donald Sutherland), attempts to trace an old friend. Sutherland's portrayal of this strange, obsessive individual overshadows Fonda even though her performance was highly praised (she won an Academy Award for it).

The second 1971 movie well worth attention is *Play Misty For Me*, Clint Eastwood's confident directorial début. Although he also stars in the movie, his customary wooden-Indian style of acting leaves the way open for a superb performance of manic intensity by Jessica Walter as the homicidally inclined

Jane Fonda uses violence to defend herself against the threat of violence in *Klute*.

Clint Eastwood as the hapless disc-jockey caught up with more than he can handle when he trifles with the affections of psychotic Jessica Walter in *Play Misty for Me*.



psychopath. It is her performance, allied as it is to effective if cluttered visual imagery, that most strongly evokes the world of *film noir*.

Movies about crusading cops were not generally in the early *noir* tradition but the appearance in 1968 of Richard Widmark's Madigan and in 1971 of Clint Eastwood's 'Dirty' Harry Callahan edged into the genre mainly because of their deliberately pessimistic air and the alienation of Madigan and Harry from criminals and fellow cops alike.

However pessimistic he might be, Harry Callahan was at least upbeat but Popeye Doyle, equally unimpressed by the world in which he lived, was decidedly downbeat. As the true-life protagonist of *The French Connection* (1971) and *The French Connection II* (1974) Gene Hackman brought depressing realism to his portrayal of a crusading cop whose image is perpetually tarnished. It is Hackman's performance rather than any visual image or structural artifice which edges these movies into *noir* territory, although some of the street scenes would have been recognized as familiar ground by any earlier *noir* hero.

'Depressing' and 'tarnished' are words which might also be used about two 1973 movies. The seedy side of outwardly respectable Boston provided an unlikely setting for *The Friends of Eddie Coyle*, while New York seldom looked worse than in the aptly titled *Mean Streets*. Reflecting as it does the criminal low-life of a group of small-time hoodlums, Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets* is in the tradition of such pre-*noir* environmentalist movies as *Dead End* (1937) and *Angels with Dirty Faces* (1938) but avoids the sermonizing. Starring in *Mean Streets* is Robert de Niro, who, three years later, played Travis Bickle in Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*.

While not setting out to recreate in the 1970s the earlier *noir* setting of a city at night (as did, say, *Chinatown* and *Farewell, My Lovely*), *Taxi Driver* is a powerful modern version of the classic *films noirs*. Bickle drifts through a city he hates but cannot abandon, entering and for a while even participating

The mean streets of New York City in *The French Connection*, a latter-day urban jungle any early *noir* hero would recognize with ease.

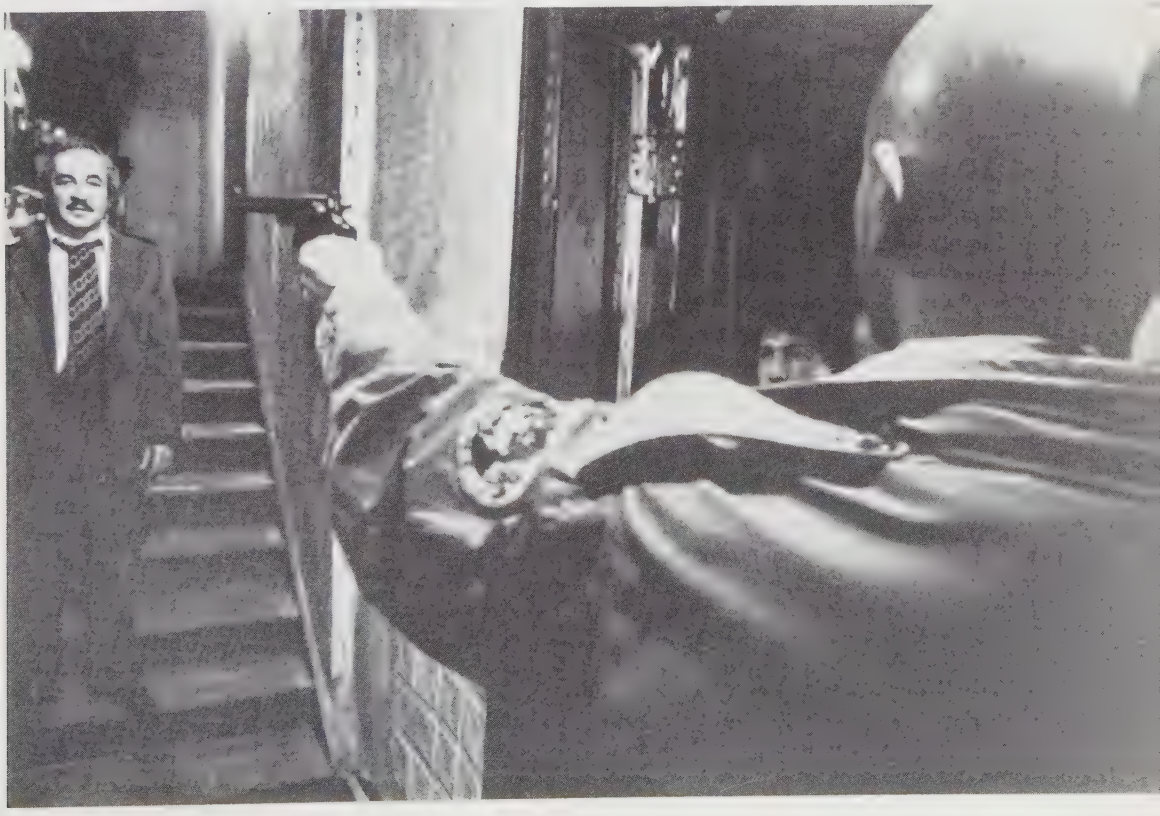
in the sexual exploitation rife in some of the meanest streets ever used as the setting for a feature film.

These streets, first seen during the opening credit title sequences, while a-glitter with the colour which undermined the *noir* pretensions of less well-conceived and photographed movies, are filled with all the tawdry atmosphere of a world in which Cornell Woolrich would have felt completely at home.

Scorsese's command even allows him to get away with such overtly symbolic scenes as Bickle driving his cab through a jet of cleansing water from a broken fire hydrant right after a hooker and her john have copulated on the back seat.

As Bickle, Robert De Niro delivers one of his customarily faultless interpretations in which, chameleon-like, he almost disappears into his characterization. He completely masters the slow slide Bickle takes into murderous paranoia, which is only momentarily

A study in alienation: Robert De Niro as Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver* before and after he goes on the warpath.



Jack Nicholson and Faye Dunaway in Roman Polanski's look at life in 1930s Los Angeles in *Chinatown*.

halted by a hopeless attempt at a relationship with Betsy (Cybill Shepherd), whom he takes to a porno movie on their first (and last) date – not out of any ulterior motive but simply because this is the only form of entertainment he knows.

After Betsy's rejection of him, Bickle becomes involved with a 12-year-old hooker, Iris (Jodie Foster). Although his fascination with Iris may well be slightly suspect he sets out to free her from her pimp, with bloody consequences.

The movie has a lean and telling screenplay by Paul Schrader, who has written extensively and with great insight on *film noir*, evocative cinematography by Michael Chapman, and a superb score by Bernard Herrman (who, three decades earlier, had made a major contribution to *Citizen Kane*).

Although Travis Bickle is a far cry from Chandler's Philip Marlowe, he is a kind of white knight, albeit a decidedly soiled and unromantic one. He demonstrates standards which Marlowe would have recognized as updated versions of his own, here being made to work within the urban decay of late 1970s America.

Like *Farewell, My Lovely*, *Chinatown* (1974) consciously evokes the *noir* world of the past. (Both films were photographed by John Alonzo.) Just as the former recreated early 1940s Los Angeles, so Roman Polanski's film depicts 1937 LA in all its tawdry glory. In the role of private eye J. J. Gittes, Jack Nicholson deliberately adds no class to his seedy character. Gittes isn't in business for any of the reasons Raymond Chandler would have understood; he is in it for a buck.

Downbeat, sometimes depressingly so, the story of corruption Gittes uncovers is much like many in *film noir* but there are added elements which make *Chinatown*, for all its 1930s setting, very much a movie of the 1970s. The rich corrupter, Noah Cross (played by John Huston, who had by this time become something of a minor *noir* icon himself), is not only venal, he is also sexually corrupt. His daughter, Evelyn (Faye Dunaway), hates

An ornate room implies corruption in the world of *film noir*, even in a late marginally-*noir* movie such as *Hustle* (Ben Johnson and Eddie Albert).

him with just cause. When she was a child he raped her and the result of this act, Katharine (Belinda Palmer), is therefore both sister and daughter to her. Evelyn attracts Gittes with all the inevitability of a traditional *femme fatale* while he, like other *noir* protagonists, is doomed to follow her lead. Ultimately, however, it is only she who dies, shot down while Gittes, handcuffed and helpless, is forced to stand and watch.

Sexual deviation forms a central and ultimately destructive thread throughout *Hustle* (1975). Burt Reynolds plays Phil Gaines, a Los Angeles police officer who lives with a high-class hooker, Nicole Britton (Catherine Deneuve). Much less disposed towards violence than Harry Callahan, Gaines lives in a world dominated by movie images. Whether he is at home in bed or in a bar, there is always a TV set showing an old movie, adding self-conscious echoes of earlier worlds.

Robert Aldrich's direction makes extensive use of deeply shadowed sets, especially in the scenes shared by Gaines and his girlfriend in their twilight world. Equally gloomy but ornate are the scenes in which Gaines confronts Leo Sellars (Eddie Albert), the big-time lawyer who corrupts all who cross his path.

From the early 1970s onwards, major changes took place in the American motion-picture industry. For one thing, to refer to it as 'Hollywood' was no longer accurate, as production companies found it cheaper and easier to make movies in Arizona or Florida, New York or Spain, Italy or Ireland.

But movies depicting the seamy side of urban life were still being made, albeit with a new element. Just as the dislocation of soldiers returning from the Second World War had contributed to the mood of *film noir*, veterans were now returning from Vietnam to kindle a similar feeling of unease. There were differences, however, and not least among them was the fact that Second World War soldiers returned as heroic victors of a just war, whereas

Vietnam vets were seen in some quarters, not least among themselves, as losers of an unjust war.

Dislocation and disillusionment were rife. Many ex-soldiers found themselves to be an embarrassment. Their response was bitter and sometimes violent and in Hollywood, if nowhere else, this cast them in the role of a new kind of avenging outsider.

If Travis Bickle's Vietnam experiences were not his motivation, they certainly provided him with the technique of violent response.

As the decade passed, this trend in movies became tiresome but the spirit of alienation laid the foundations for a further variation, one which became in the 1980s a distorted reflection of *film noir* (which had itself been a dark reflection of the culture of an earlier America). Unlike true *film noir*, however, the new wave of movies self-consciously adopted its style and technique. In some hands the effect worked well; in others it merely demonstrated that technique alone doth not a moviemaker make.

William Hurt in more trouble than he can handle in *Body Heat* – still proving he is one of the best actors around today and one who is ideally suited to the tortuous world of *film noir*.

M. Emmet Walsh trapped in a frame of his own making in the dark of *Blood Simple*.

A good idea which does not quite work is the 1981 comedy *Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid*. Ingeniously blending scenes from 1940s and 1950s *films noirs* into a tortuous plot being investigated by private eye Rigby Reardon (Steve Martin), the movie eventually slides into little more than an exercise for nostalgia buffs, who can occupy themselves by identifying the movies from which clips are taken. Had the present-day movie into which the clips are woven so adroitly been half as carefully scripted, directed and acted as the originals, it could have been good.

Among contemporary actors and actresses whose personas, acting style and, indeed, physical appearance fit very well into the erotic promise of *film noir* are William Hurt and Kathleen Turner. These exceptional players appeared together in *Body Heat* (1982), screenwriter Lawrence Kasdan's first directorial venture. Set in Florida's steaming midsummer heat, the tale follows the torrid love affair between the lawyer Ned Racine (Hurt) and Matty Walker (Turner), the bored wife of a rich older man. As Racine falls deeply under Matty's spell he begins to think of murder as a way to keep her and her money.

After he has killed Edmund Walker (Richard Crenna), flaws begin to appear in the devious plot Racine has devised, flaws seemingly brought about by Matty's over-eagerness and forgetfulness. As the law closes in on Ned he and the audience slowly begin to realize that all along Matty has played him for the cocky and not-too-smart individual he really is.

At the movie's close, Ned is in prison with all the answers but no hope while Matty lies in sunlit luxury, free but with maybe just a hint of regret that she is sharing her riches with someone other than the lawyer she so successfully duped – and who, for a while, gave her the sexual excitement on which she thrives.

Hurt's ability to play characters with outward panache and inner weakness, coupled with Turner's voluptuous *femme fatale*, make this an excellent movie with a mood that is remarkably close to the central grain of American *film noir*.

Strongly reminiscent of *film noir* at its seediest is the mood of *Blood Simple* (1983), directed by Joel Coen and starring John Getz

Latter-day villain and hero as James Woods and Jeff Bridges reprise roles played by Douglas and Mitchum (*Against All Odds*).

and Frances McDormand as two hapless lovers caught in an intricate web of deceit and murder. As Ray and Abby they begin a brief affair, only to find themselves the intended victims of a double killing when Abby's husband, Julian Marty (Dan Hedaya), hires Visser (M. Emmet Walsh) to murder them.

In its perverse plotting, in particular the confusion over who has done what to whom, *Blood Simple* has links with many of its predecessors. The depressing setting, rural Texas, is the kind of territory James M. Cain's Frank and Cora would recognize and, like Cain's work, it is a place unto itself: if there is an outside world it does not impinge.

Visually, the movie is replete with splendidly *noir* images photographed by Barry Sonenfield. One scene, in which Visser fires bullets through a partition between two rooms, is particularly effective. Bright beams of light strike through each hole, transfixing Abby, who is hiding, terrified, in the dark.

Unfortunately, *Blood Simple* has a major flaw: none of the characters is even slightly likeable. Because M. Emmet Walsh is so good in his role as the murderous detective, he becomes the most interesting and involving character and this unbalances the film. The lovers are unredeemingly dull, with the leading lady making a mistake to which so many modern screen actresses are prone: she believes she is being sultry when in fact she is merely pouting.

Eric Hughes based his screenplay for *Against All Odds* (1984) upon Geoffrey

Homes's script for *Out of the Past* some 37 years earlier. The remake partly conceals its origins by setting the story among pro football players. Jeff Bridges, James Woods and Rachel Ward take the roles originally played by Robert Mitchum, Kirk Douglas and Jane Greer. One touch of pure nostalgia is added by Jane Greer herself, who appears as Rachel Ward's mother, a role absent in the original, as is the role of Ben Caxton (played by *noir* icon Richard Widmark).

After *Taxi Driver* it might have been thought that Martin Scorsese had said all he wanted to say about the seamier side of New York City life. He hadn't, but he speaks in a different tongue in *After Hours* (1986), a black comedy which traces the frantic events of one night in the life of a young New Yorker. If Scorsese's scatter-gun technique is wilder here than in his earlier, sharper but commercially disastrous black comedy, *King of Comedy* (1982), it is certainly entertaining.

Although frequented by low-lifes and criminal types, *After Hours* is only barely concerned with crime (the 'criminals' here are merely art-world rip-off merchants). Nevertheless, the manner in which Paul Hackett (Griffin Dunne) tumbles helter-skelter from one crisis to another is a manic version of the course of events which sucked along many old-time *noir* protagonists. As for the visual imagery, Scorsese's view of New York is never couched in less than the blackest of *noir* terms.

Griffin Dunne as Paul Hackett, the innocent victim of a big city, in *After Hours*, with John Heard.

Contemporary tastes demand more blood and more overt sexuality than were usually evident in the heyday of *film noir* (Kyle MacLachlan and Isabella Rossellini in *Blue Velvet*).

Heavily atmospheric in the *noir* tradition is *Blue Velvet* (1986), in which nothing is what it seems. Indeed, the closing scene implies that everything that has passed has been dreamed by protagonist Tom Beaumont (Kyle MacLachlan).

Something Wild (1986) may be likened to Scorsese's *After Hours* in that it builds up its own impetus – carrying its hero, Charlie Driggs (Jeff Daniels), into a maelstrom of petty crime and sexuality – and layers the plot with humour. While director Jonathan Demme might not have Scorsese's panache, he does impart a manic energy to his movie which effectively covers most of the ragged edges.

Very much in the tradition of *film noir*, though introducing original and inventive elements, is Bob Rafelson's *Black Widow* (1987). The central characters are women: Alexandra Barnes (Debra Winger) and Catharine (Theresa Russell). Alex is an investigator with the US Department of Justice whose work puts her on the trail of Catharine, a woman who appears to be making a comfortable living by poisoning a succession of husbands in order to inherit their wealth. Alex's interest becomes an obsession and she gives up her job to track down Catharine. Soon the lives of the two women are inextricably intertwined, until Alex is suspected of killing Catharine's latest husband.

Well acted by the two principals, *Black Widow* has all the flair of the best of *film noir* even if its visual imagery owes little to the genre. The use of two women, rather than a man and a woman, in no way undermines

Unusually, the investigator pursuing the *femme fatale* in *Black Widow* is also a woman. Here Debra Winger and Theresa Russell confront each other. James Hong looks warily at Theresa Russell as she prepares to make herself a widow again in front of a window frame that resembles a spider's web.

Few contemporary actresses have the appearance and manner to carry off roles as *femmes fatales* as well as such earlier stars as Ava Gardner (seen here in *The Bribe*), but one superb exception is Kathleen Turner (shown here in *Body Heat*).

the strength of the formula which calls for a *femme fatale* to fascinate and ultimately obsess (although not, in this case, finally destroy) another human being.

The major problem with these latter-day *noir*-ish films is that their deliberate use of *noir* style has intellectualized a motion-picture genre which was unique in being not deliberately created, but emerging unbidden from the subconscious minds of disparate individuals thrown together by chance.

The work of those 1940s and 1950s film-makers helped establish a new chapter in the constantly developing language of film, which allows present-day film-makers to express themselves more fluently. The reference points, identified by the coded language of *film noir*, are not always fully understood

and there are major areas still needing refinement, notably the need to underplay sex and violence and to make much better, and more sparing, use of sound and music.

As promiscuous sexual activity and gratuitous violence face an audience backlash, two of these flaws may soon correct themselves.

As for sound and music, there is still a lot to be learned from the past. The pre-*noir* gangster movies had used sound effects to help build up a sense of urgency. Coming as these did soon after the beginning of the talkies, moviemakers were alert to the shock value of roaring automobile engines, screeching tyres, the explosive rat-a-tat-tat of machine guns and the clash of breaking glass. *Film noir* did not need shock tactics; indeed, if they *were* to be used, there was a danger that they would break the generally introspective mood. There are car sounds, true, but it is usually the quietly menacing approach of tyres on wet streets. There are gunshots, too, but often muffled. Makers of *films noirs* had quickly realized that loud and sudden noises

were usually far less dramatically effective than the echoing tread of footsteps in empty buildings or the staccato click of high heels along deserted corridors.

It takes true mastery of the art of motion picture-making consciously to achieve a similar effect today, when the soundtrack is so often dominated by a currently popular type of music which has nothing whatever to do with the mood of what is happening on the screen. The sound may seem dated to some latter-day film-makers, but the manner in which modern jazz was incorporated into *film noir* soundtracks and scores carries a number of valuable lessons.

Of course there are film-makers around who are able to take a new approach to *film noir*, given the opportunity and the desire: directors such as Martin Scorsese and Bob Rafelson, for example; actors such as Robert De Niro and William Hurt; *femmes fatales* of the 'eighties such as Jessica Lange and Kathleen Turner; cinematographers such as Nicholas Roeg and John Alonzo; and there are certainly writers today providing the fictional source material that is still rooted in the mean streets of urban America.

Who knows whether a future re-awakening of the liberal consciousness may not bring about a resurgence of the impulses, fed by disillusion, that led to the creation of *film noir*?

9
A SELECTION OF CLASSICS

'Nobody ever really escapes.'
Brute Force

HAVING explored the elements that go to create the sort of movie that is instantly recognizable as *film noir*, it is perhaps forgivable to make a selection of the best. Suggesting a short list of classic *films noirs* is something of a self-indulgence but, like so many indulgences, hard to resist.

Any such list would have to include *Ace in the Hole*, with its deep-seated pervasive cynicism (it is difficult to imagine any American bringing this quality so vividly so the screen); *The Big Heat*, for its powerful central performances, intense imagery and directorial control; *Double Indemnity*, for its archetypal portrayal of a spiderwoman weaving her murderous web of sexual corruption; the 1944 version of *Farewell, My Lovely*, which brought to vivid life the characters from the pages of a leading writer of

Expressionistic religious imagery persuasively combines with thorough-going evil in *Night of the Hunter* (Shelley Winters and Robert Mitchum).

Most grotesque of all *film noir* characters, Orson Welles's unsavoury cop gives the heyday of the genre a bravura send-off in *Touch of Evil*.

hard-boiled prose; *The Killers*, the vulnerable, foredoomed victim of which became the exemplar for so many *noir* heroes; and *Night and the City*, for another doomed victim, but one who never gives up hope of escape and whose tortured passage is rendered in a series of imaginative sequences of extraordinary intensity and power. The list would also have to take in *Night of the Hunter*, with its deeply malevolent central character and virtuoso display of expressionistic imagery; *Scarlet Street*, for its revelation of the softly seductive yet corrupting influence a woman can exert over a weak-willed man; and *The Set-Up*, for its stark imagery and unsentimental exploration of a man who is so near the bottom that he has nowhere left to fall, yet somehow finds the inner resources to resist his fate. Also indispensable are *Out of the Past*, in which a lethal *femme fatale* subjects her doomed lover to her will in a series of evocative visual settings; and *Touch of Evil*, filled with baroque imagery, grotesque characters and gloomy shadows, which proves that the *noir* mood is strong enough to withstand the most self-consciously bravura filmmaking.

The directors of these archetypal *films*

Shadows cast a blight across the threatened heroine in a typical *film noir* scene (Ida Lupino and Robert Ryan in *Beware, My Lovely*).

noirs were the leaders of the genre: Jules Dassin, Edward Dmytryk, Fritz Lang, Charles Laughton, Robert Siodmak, Jacques Tourneur, Orson Welles, Billy Wilder and Robert Wise. The key roles were played by Joan Bennett, Gloria Grahame, Jane Greer, Barbara Stanwyck and Jan Sterling; Kirk Douglas, Dan Duryea, Glenn Ford, Burt Lancaster, Robert Mitchum, Dick Powell, Edward G. Robinson, Robert Ryan and Richard Widmark, supported by a whole gallery of fine character actors. Among the cinematographers who worked on these movies were Woody Bredell, Stanley Cortez, Max Greene, Milton Krasner, Charles Lang, Russell Metty, Nicholas Musuraca, John Seitz and Harry J. Wild (which unfortunately leaves out maestro John Alton). The writers of the novels and short stories from which these movies stemmed were James M. Cain, Raymond Chandler, Davis Grubb, Ernest Hemingway, Geoffrey Homes, Gerald Kersh, William P. McGivern and Whit Masterson (three of the films originate from a poem, a play and an original screenplay respectively). Although Cornell Woolrich is absent from this list of classics, it must not be forgotten that he did more than most to create the literary mood which shaped the world of American *film noir*.

This morbidly perverse mood was memorably displayed in archetypal *films noirs* by means of dramatic visual imagery in which dark shadows blighted the lives of innocent (and often not-so-innocent) victims: when Phyllis Dietrichson descends the staircase of her home to her first encounter with her victim, insurance salesman Walter Neff, in *Double Indemnity*, the play of shadows on the light-coloured walls foretells their eventual fate.

The mood is intensified by dark mirrors, reflecting a distorted vision of society which comes at times much closer to reality than do most areas of popular cinema. When, in *Out of the Past*, Kathie Moffett steps from the sunshine into the life of Jeff Bailey her face is shadowed, concealing from him the evil that is embodied in her.

In their skilful use of light and shadow, of camera angles and evocative sound, in their exploration of the dark side of the human mind, the men and women who worked in *film noir* portrayed the fears of doomed lovers, the obsessions of fatalistic anti-heroes, the deceit and duplicity of predatory women, the isolation of grotesques. If such characters often appeared to live out their pessimistic lives in a vacuum, then it was a vacuum which constantly threatened to suck into it all but the strongest-willed.

Those writers, directors, cinematographers, actors, male and female, star or support, who took part in this cycle of films may not have known that they were contributing to a major movement in popular culture, but from the standpoint of the late 1980s it is possible to see that, while the heyday of *film noir* was a period of acute pessimism and morbid cynicism, it was also one of the most powerful, most effective, and certainly one of the most dramatically secure periods of American popular culture.

Mirrors, shadows, menace: though the *film noir* imagery was spot-on, the movie, *Pitfall*, was less than the sum of its evocative parts (Raymond Burr and Dick Powell).

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B. C.

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With the advent of the Second World War a new mood was discernible in film drama – an atmosphere of disillusion and a sense of foreboding, a dark quality that derived as much from the characters depicted as from the cinematographer's art. These films, among them such classics as *Double Indemnity*, *The Woman in the Window*, *Touch of Evil* and *Sunset Boulevard*, emerged retrospectively as a genre in themselves when a French film critic referred to them collectively as *film noir*.

Bruce Crowther looks into *noir*'s literary origins (often in the novels of the so-called 'hard-boiled' school typified by Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett and Cornell Woolrich), and at how the material translated to the screen, noting in particular influences from German expressionist films and the almost indispensable techniques of flashback and voice-over narration.

He also assesses the contribution made by the players – by actors such as Robert Mitchum, Dick Powell, Alan Ladd and John Garfield and actresses such as Barbara Stanwyck, Lizabeth Scott, Joan Crawford and Gloria Grahame, together with a roll-call of supporting players whose screen presence could lend almost any film the *noir* imprimatur.

Noir was in its heyday from 1945 to 1955, a time when paranoia and disillusion, anxiety and violence could be said to have been part of the fabric of American, and particularly Hollywood, society, yet its impact and its influence are with us still – in films as diverse as *The French Connection*, *Chinatown* and *Body Heat*. This book commemorates a special period in film-making and a unique combination of talent resulting in a spectrum of films that are as welcome today on their small-screen airings as they were when first shown in the cinema.

BRUCE CROWTHER, who lives in Yorkshire, is the author of many books including a series of novels under his own name and under the pseudonyms James Grant and Michael Ansara. His most recent non-fiction titles for Columbus include *Charlton Heston: the epic presence*, *Laurel and Hardy: clown princes of comedy*, and *Bring Me Laughter*, a survey of four decades of television comedy. His main interest outside books and the movies is jazz.

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