Twixt Night and Dark: Colonialism, Trauma and Noir’s Hidden Transcript

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Abstract

My essay is intended to serve as a very concise introduction to the themes and motifs of that great American tradition of crime literature and film known as noir. Although ultimately impossible to define in either a precise or an exhaustive fashion, noir is best understood as a ‘hidden transcript’ offering commentary upon a uniquely American form of onto-political trauma: the replacement of Great Britain as the hegemon of the Modern World-System. This violent shift, accompanied by two world wars (1914-45) was ‘recorded’ in American popular culture through the development of the noir style within the Hollywood tough crime thrillers of the 1930s and 1940s. The essence of this cinematic style, and its literary counter-part in the hard-boiled detective novel, consists of three signature elements: the paranoid man, the femme-fatale, and the traumatized veteran returning home from the wars along the neo-colonialist frontier, which now includes domestic space. Two general observations are made: the presence of a thematic linkage between Crime and Horror within the film noir tradition and that American noir literature represents a continuation of post-colonial literature. One question will be asked: why is it that noir film and literature, which are so immersed within the historical trauma of neo-colonialism and de-colonization, have been so marginal to film making and literary production within both Indonesia and Malaysia?
Introduction: The Hidden Transcript of the Babylon Shitstem

‘One gets the feeling that all of the components of the noir style lead to the same result: to disorient the spectators, who no longer encounter their customary frames of reference.’—Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton [12]

The synopsis of Marlon James’ Booker Prize winning crime novel A Brief History of Seven Killings (2014) is as follows: the CIA is sponsoring a plot to assassinate Reggae singer Bob Marley (‘the Singer’) for attempting to mediate a settlement (‘the peace treaty’) between the two major crime gangs of Kingston, Jamaica, the Eight Lanes (led by Shotta Sheriff and Funnyboy) and the Copenhagen City gang (led by Papa-Lo and Josey Wales). Each gang is a proxy of one of the two major political parties of Jamaica: Papa-Lo is the front for the JLP (the Jamaica Labour Party) and Shoota Sheriff is connected to the more left-wing PNP (the People’s National Party). The CIA is concerned that the peace treaty will solidify the PNP’s hold on power, which will result in Jamaica normalizing relations with Cuba and nationalizing U.S. corporate interests. In return for shooting the Singer (which forces him into exile), Josey Wales becomes a cut-out for the CIA; with the tacit approval of Washington, Wales eliminates both Papa-Lo and Shotta-Sheriff, establishes an alliance with the Colombian narco-cartels of Medellin and Cali, and transfers the Copenhagen gang to New York City, where they re-form as the Storm Posse, the primary conduit of Columbian cocaine into the eastern United States. It should come as no surprise that the Jamaican slang term for the Modern World-system is ‘the Babylon shitstem’.1 Consider the useful commentary provided by Barry DiFlorio, a CIA Kingston Station officer, on the ‘empire of disorder’²:

_Shit just blew up_ in Iran. Well, it blew up back in January [1979], but fallout’s just reaching us now. Shit is blowing up all over the world. Chaos and disorder, disorder and chaos, I say them over and over like they have anything to do with each other, Sodom and Gomorrah, Gomorrah and Sodom.³

And now listen to Bam-Bam, a juvenile gunman for Papa-Lo hold forth:

Kill for food. Kill for money. Sometimes a man get kill because he look at another man in a way he didn’t like. And killing don’t need no reason. This is ghetto. Reason is for rich people. We have madness. Madness is walking up a good street downtown and seeing a woman dress up in the latest fashion and wanting to go straight up to her and grab her bag, knowing that it’s not the bag or the money that we want so much, but the scream, when she see that you jump right into her pretty-up face and you could slap the happy right out of her mouth and punch the joy right out of her eye and kill her right there and rape her before or after you kill her because that is what rudeboys like we do to decent women like her.⁴

In this essay I suggest that crime fiction is an important but generally underappreciated form of cultural critique that is centrally embedded within the discourses of anti-colonialist and post-colonialist writing. More precisely, crime writing in both the ‘core’ and ‘peripheral’ zones of the World-System can be usefully read as a clandestine strategy of covert discourse, or ‘infra-

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1 James, 155.
2 A phrase that I have taken from Alain de Joxe.
3 James, 314.
4 James, 9.
politics', very much along the lines of what James W Scott has identified as the hidden transcript of subjected, or abject, peoples.

How do we study power relations when the powerless are often obliged to adopt a strategic pose in the presence of the powerful and when the powerful may have an interest in overdramatizing their reputation and mastery? [...] Every subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal, a ‘hidden transcript’ that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant. [...] the process of domination generates a hegemonic public conduct and a backstage discourse consisting of what cannot be spoken in the face of power. [...] Short of actual rebellion, powerless groups have [...] a self-interest in conspiring to reinforce hegemonic appearances.  

Just like Edgar Allan Poe’s purloined letter, the subversive function of crime literature is always hiding in plain view: Crime, like Horror, de-stabilizes all conventional systems of cognitive order through the traumatic violence of epistemological and metaphysical rupture. What both Crime and Horror share in common (the latter’s subversive potential never in doubt) is an archetypal narrative: the appearance of a monster or a criminal and its consequences. And, of course, both the monster and the criminal, in their different ways are law breakers: the monster breaks the laws of Nature (or God) and the criminal breaks the laws of Man (or God). If we were to pursue this notion of crime writing as a hidden transcript then a central paradox of this form of literature become easier to understand: historically, it has been subject to both institutionalized censorship and cultural marginalization but remains consistently popular, a neat example of the hidden transcript as ‘a backstage discourse consisting of what cannot be spoken in the face of power’ (said another way: everyone knows that something is seriously wrong but no one can say what it is; in this sense Crime, and Horror act as kinds of vicarious ‘delights’). And if this is granted, then we should expect to see crime fiction form an important part of the national literary traditions of the ‘victimized’ countries of the Babylon shitstem. And, happily, we do: Jamaica, Haiti, Trinidad and Tobago, Cuba, Mexico, Brazil, Nigeria, Thailand, the Philippines (Japan as well, although a member of good standing of the core zone of the Babylon shitstem; I suspect that this has to do with the hybridization of the indigenous traditions of ukiyo-e/shunga with the imported tropes of American crime novels and films during the Occupation). But, unhappily, sometimes we do not: Indonesia and Malaysia. This requires an explanation, but complicating any such explanation is the (to me) curious fact that Indonesians and Malaysian are quite confident that they do possess a robust, albeit culturally marginalized, tradition of crime writing and film-making, frequently identifying their cultural artefacts as noir (see below). A full explanation is well beyond the boundaries of this essay. What I propose to do instead is to provide as concise but as complete a definition of noir as is possible for the purpose of showing that Southeast Asian noir fulfils no part of the definition, but that—and here is the greatest paradox of all—American noir, the archetypal form of dark crime writing, itself serves as a hidden transcript of colonialist trauma, albeit one of a very American kind. The birth of noir in its ‘true’ form is the hidden transcript of the primal traumas induced by the genocidal transition from British to American hegemony (1914-45, neatly book-ended by two world wars)

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5 Scott, xii-xiii.
6 See Hunter, passim.
7 Naremore, Chapter Three, 96-135.
8 Admittedly, a nod to Formalism—noir is not a genre but the noir style does contain defining characteristics. See below.
and the cascading cataclysms unleashed within the Babylon shitstem: neo-colonialism and anti-neo-colonialism, or ‘post-colonialism’ (1945-75)—an observation validated by the left-wing politics of many noir filmmakers, a disproportionate number of whom were ‘black-listed’ during the McCarthyite politics of the 1940s and 1950s.9 The time frame of the great convulsion (c.1940-75) neatly corresponds to the classic era of iconic American noir—1941 to 1958.10

A coincidence?

I think not.11

Tough/Noir Thrillers: The Hard-Boiled Hero and the Paranoid Man

And now I ask: what else has bourgeois Europe done? It has undermined civilizations, destroyed countries, ruined nationalities, extirpated ‘the root of diversity’. No more dikes, no more bulwarks. The hour of the barbarian is at hand. The modern barbarian. The American hour. Violence, excess, waste, mercantilism, bluff, conformism, stupidity, vulgarity, disorder. — Aime Cesaire, Discourse on Colonialism [76]

‘The vocation of film noir has been to create a specific sense of malaise.’—Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton [13]

The first thing to understand is that the word noir, within the American context, is both a cinematic and literary term and both meanings must be treated separately. Artistically, film noir should be viewed in anti-essentialist terms, ‘a periodic or stylistic inflexion of the broader category of the crime film’.12 It is, in my opinion, not a genre in the strict sense of the term, a view that I share with Frank Krutnik.

It is doubtful that one could convincingly show that noir is actually characterized by a unified body of stylistics—rather, it seems to be the case that what is referred to as the ‘noir style’ tends to be a more disparate series of stylistic [and thematic] markings which can be seen as noir when they occur in conjunction with sets of narrative and thematic conventions and narrational processes.13

9 Naremore, 123-35. Dashiell Hammett was a member of the American Communist Party. Vernet, 6.

10 Harvey, 46 fn. 1. Because of space I am leaving out all discussion of the two cinematic successors to noir, neo-noir and post-noir; the former emerged in the 1970s with the films The French Connection (1971), Badlands (1973), Chinatown (1974), The Conversation (1974), Taxi Driver (1976) and The Godfather Parts One and Two (1972; 1974); the second emerged in the 1980s, with films such as Blood Simple (1984), Blue Velvet (1986), Fargo (1996) and A Simple Plan (1998). So, by film noir, I mean noir ‘properly so called’. It should be noted that neo-noir emerged in tandem with the Vietnam War and the Watergate Scandal; that is, alongside a neo-colonialist crisis that was both foreign and domestic. For neo-noir, see Christopher, Chapter Eight, 262-66. Post-noir is more difficult to pin down in terms of specific historical events; it appears to be just another instance of post-modernism’s free-floating ‘viral infection’ of all cinematic forms.

11 ‘Film noir is not firmly rooted in either personal creation or in the translation of another tradition into movie terms. Rather film noir is a self-contained reflection of American culture and its preoccupations at a point in time. As such it is the unique example of a wholly American film style.’ Silver, ‘Introduction’, 6.

12 Krutnik, 19. See also Walker: ‘film noir is not simply a certain type of crime movie, but also a generic field: a set of elements and features which may be found I a range of different sorts of film.’ Walker, 8. On balance, I take Schrader’s point in opposition to Silver. See ‘Part One: Seminal Essays’ in Silver and Ursini, 17-127 and the essays by Durgnat, Schrader, Place and Peterson, Porfiro and Damico in particular. Naremore doubts that noir even exists as a category as such; rather, it is a ‘discursive construct’. Naremore, 6, also, Chapter One, 9-39. Vernet denies the intelligibility of the term altogether; Vernet, passim.

13 Krutnik, 19. See Place at 49-50, who defines noir as a ‘movement’.
These ‘narrative conventions’ include, but are not restricted to, *chiaroscuro* lighting, voice-over narration, and multiple flash-backs, which all suggest an ungrounded perspective and a fragmented self\(^\text{14}\); much of this is derived from German Expressionism,\(^\text{15}\) most notably *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919), directed by Robert Wiene.

Although the degree of expressionism in *noir* films varies considerably, elements of the expressionist tradition may be traced through the *noir* cycle. [...] Expressionism serves as a convenient shorthand for the notion of the outer world expressing the inner world of the characters, and it occurs across the arts. It is a ‘heightened’ form, bringing into play exaggeration, distortion, the grotesque and the nightmarish, and it may be found in a literary form in some of the *noir* writers [...] there is a strong correlation between the mood of German Expressionism—bleak, fatalistic, claustrophobic, with overtones of madness and despair—and that of many *films noir*.\(^\text{16}\)

Historically, cinematic *noir* emerged from within a wider series of film-cycles in 1930s and 1940s Hollywood collectively known as ‘*tough* thrillers; ‘By “tough” thriller is meant those films [which were] centred upon the exploits of a male hero who is engaged either in the investigation or commission of a crime...’\(^\text{17}\) and which experienced two major cycles: the Great Depression (1929-41) and the Cold War (c. 1945-55\(^\text{18}\)), drawing artistic sustenance form a uniquely American type of crime writing known as *hard-boiled* (see below\(^\text{19}\)), which in the 1920s emerged as a literary response to the social problem of ‘The Forgotten Man’: the returning veterans of the First World War and the ‘faceless’ masses of the unemployed who culturally operated ‘not so much of emasculation but as a warning sign of the pressing need to re-masculinize the American man rendered impotent during the economic crisis’ of the 1930s.\(^\text{20}\) Cleaving to the Sartean axiom that existence precedes essence, Krutnik wisely counsels a thoroughgoing historical approach to any attempt at a unified definition of *noir*, placing its genesis within the managed chaos of the Hollywood film industry of the 1940s.\(^\text{21}\)

\(^{14}\) In its earliest usage, *noir* ‘was not initially a definitional or categorical term but served rather to locate multiple and un-systematized forms of differentiation [among film genres]: referring, for example, to a non-classical visual style [...] to an unflattering representation of law and society, to a fatalistic or existential thematic or to the representation of disturbed, often criminally excessive sexuality’ Krutnik, 16 and 20-3.

\(^{15}\) Although many of these techniques were used before *noir*, primarily in Crime, Detective and Horror films. Vernet, 7-12.

\(^{16}\) Walker, 26.

\(^{17}\) Krutnik, 24.

\(^{18}\) Colloquially known within Hollywood as the ‘red meat crime cycle’—as in ‘sexually suggestive’. Biesen, 2.

\(^{19}\) Krutnik, 33-44 and 182-7. See also O’Brien, passim. Hard-boiled crime writing was birthed through the medium of another supremely American invention, glossy and risqué disposable publications known as the ‘pulps’. ‘When the movies of the Forties turned to the American “tough” moral understrata, the “hard-boiled” school was waiting with pre-set conventions of heroes, minor characters, plots, dialogue and themes.’ Paul Schrader, cited in Krutnik, 33.

\(^{20}\) Abbott, 24.

\(^{21}\) A complicating factor here is that the word *noir*, although understood today primarily as a cinematic term, was first deployed by European literary critics to describe a kind of novel, which was then later transposed to film criticism. ‘First labelled *films noir* at the end of the war by French critics—who linked the films with the series of crime novels (including American novels in translation) known as *Serie Noire*—the films mark a distinct break with the generic groupings of the thirties.’ Walker, 8. For the ‘genealogy’ of the term *noir*, see Christopher, 267-8. Naremore goes so far as to argue that *noir* was really an invention of French film critics—not film-makers. Naremore, 11-27.
threads of the ‘tough’ thriller (also known as the ‘tough crime thriller’ due to its cultural roots in the hard-boiled) included: the espionage thriller; the ‘period’ crime thriller; the boxing thriller; the prison picture; the anti-communist thriller; the rogue-cop thriller; the ‘women’s-picture’ crime thriller; the semi-documentary/police-procedural thriller; the ‘social-problem’ crime film (see below); the outlaw-couple (e.g. Bonnie and Clyde) film; and, most importantly, the ubiquitous gangster film. In conclusion: noir films are most economically defined as ‘tough’ thrillers that have undergone some sort of stylistic and/or thematic noirification, yielding a hybrid sub-set of the tough crime thriller known as the noir thriller.

To appreciate the significance of this development to American popular culture, one must understand the centrality of masculinization to the tough crime thriller: both the tough films and their hard-boiled literary sources involved not merely an Americanization of the classical crime or detective story, but also an emphatic process of masculinization. These stories are most often concerned with the aims, ambitions and activity of a male protagonist who proves and defines himself by his ability to overcome the challenges to his life and to his integrity which the narrative places in front of him. [...][The hero] seeks to prove his masculine professionalism by outwitting his criminal adversaries, and often by triumphing over the dangers presented by the feminine—not just women in themselves but also any non-‘tough’ potentiality of his own identity as a man.

Simply put, hard-boiled crime writing was an American-based reaction against the hyper-ratiocination and cultural conservatism of classic English-style detective and mystery writing; importantly, hard-boiled fiction is distinguished primarily by the alienated and even anti-social nature of the protagonist.

The classical mystery story is often set in a stable, generally conservative social environment—the country mansions and small villages of [Agatha] Christie, for example—and it generally manifests a confidence in the power of the mind to order and thus to dispel chaos [signified by the onto-social ‘rupture’ of the murder] [...]. Crucially, the [American] private eye—the most archetypal ‘hard-boiled’ hero—operates as a mediator between the criminal underworld and the world of respectable society. In [Dashiell] Hammett’s stories, the detective’s independence is characterized in terms of his professionalism, whereas [Raymond] Chandler adds to this a sense that his detective, Philip Marlow, is a stable moral centre from whose perspective the reader can gauge the various forms of corruption uncovered through the investigation.

Although frequently condemned by literary critics of the time as nihilistic and amoral, hard-boiled in fact posits its own version of the moral order of the universe: a rough, even frontier-like, notion of natural justice. The hard-boiled private-eye hero (or ‘sleuth’), to a noticeably greater degree than the proper English detective ‘more overtly infringes legal...

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23 Although virtually any genre could be noir-ized, even the greatest of American genres, the Western. The two best directors of noir Westerns were Anthony Mann and Sam Peckinpah.
24 Krutnik calls this ‘Masculine testing’. Krutnik, 4. See below.
25 Krutnik, 42.
26 Invoking the most un-English phenomenon of liminality, or the crossing of boundaries. See Naremore, 220-53.
27 Krutnik, 39.
procedure, but as an individual, non-affiliated professional, he nonetheless embodies a principle of law which is superior to that signified by the police force and the legal system.\textsuperscript{28} And this free-handed application of natural justice as moral imperative presupposes an equally oppositional view of both social order and personal agency.

In the private-eye thriller, truth is not scientifically or systematically ascertained (as in the police-procedural) and neither is it pieced together through ratiocination (as in the classical detective story). Rather, it is emphatically constructed by the private-eye hero, and it derives its legitimacy precisely from his personal worth. The private eye occupies a mediating position between the worlds of crime and legitimate society. [...] But what is principally at stake in the private-eye story is not the safeguarding of ‘normal’ society [...] the real thrust of the narrative [is] the affirmation of the hero as an idealized and undivided figure of masculine potency and invulnerability...\textsuperscript{29}

There is an important time-gap at work here that governs the parallel evolution of literary and cinematic noir. The historical development of the hard-boiled novel can be broken down into three distinct phases. The first is the ‘classic’ hard-boiled of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler and the two seminal texts are Hammett’s \textit{The Maltese Falcon} (1929) and Chandler’s \textit{The Big Sleep} (1939). Both authors strive for the successful recovery of the (threatened) masculinity of the Forgotten Man, taken to its most extreme degree with Hammett’s own alter ego, Sam Spade of \textit{The Maltese Falcon}, an (ultra-) masculinist hero situated within weird surroundings (San Francisco—at night) that remain thoroughly externalized allowing his masculinity to remain naturally assumed, or ‘taken-for-granted’ throughout the novel\textsuperscript{30}; as the ‘invulnerable, controlled hero, Sam Spade represents an attempt to deny that masculinity is divided or problematic. Although he faces a complex web of dissimulation, the trajectory of his quest (a term the film\textsuperscript{31} invites, with its opening title invocation of the Knights Templar) is emphatically linear, with the detective located as the dynamic agent of the narrative process.\textsuperscript{32} The second phase, which is best represented by James M. Cain, is ‘femme-fatale’ hard-boiled (neo-classic?) and the seminal texts are three Cain novels, \textit{The Postman Always Rings Twice} (1934), \textit{Double Indemnity} (1936) and \textit{Mildred Pierce} (1941)\textsuperscript{33}; I will be discussing the master-sign of the femme-fatale in more detail below. The third is ‘paranoid’ hard-boiled (post-classic?), and is not clearly dominated by any one writer (Cornell Woolrich; David Goodis; Dorothy B. Hughes; Jim Thompson; Patricia Highsmith\textsuperscript{34}); it is (probably) best understood as tale of Cain’s femme-fatale anti-hero minus the physical presence of the femme-fatale and it is these novels that can be properly considered as literary noir. As Geoffrey O’Brien memorably puts it

In mystery and hard-boiled fiction, the transition from the Thirties to the Forties is unmistakable. Cain and Hammett and [Horace] McCoy deal in a clear unblinking

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{28} Krutnik, 92. Vernet sees hard-boiled fiction as a hidden transcript for egalitarianism, populism and American individualism. Vernet, 16-17.
\bibitem{29} Krutnik, 93.
\bibitem{30} Walker, 9-12. Walker considers Sam Spade to be the archetypal ‘seeker-hero’ of hard-boiled.
\bibitem{31} Released in 1941 and directed by John Huston.
\bibitem{32} Krutnik, 113.
\bibitem{33} Walker, 14-16.
\bibitem{34} Women making it to ‘the list’ of course raises an intriguing possibility: Hughes and Highsmith are simply writing their male protagonists as female.
\end{thebibliography}
light. Objects are delineated against the quietly terrifying neutrality of a noon sky [...] Then, with the 1940s, comes the Great Fear. The light is shadowed over; for ten years the key words will be ‘night’ and ‘dark’. The hard-boiled wry grimace will be replaced by abject terror, by a sense of ultimate impotence in a world suddenly full of danger, of nothing but danger. In Hammett’s novels there are conspiracies, but there is nothing mysterious about them. They are part of the everyday violence of an everyday corrupt city, and they need no superhuman powers, secret weapons, or network of invisible agents to make themselves felt. In Raymond Chandler’s books, the menace is vaguer, more all-embracing, more redolent of primitive terror—the world is a vast spider’s web.\(^{35}\) A post-war writer like Dave Goodis writes of fear as if it were the only emotion his heroes were capable of experiencing.\(^{36}\)

Put more simply: the paranoid phase is wholly post-classic hard-boiled, the signature theme nothing other than ‘that of a man who becomes a victim of a violent and hostile world and who lives in fear.’\(^{37}\) The external sign of the femme-fatale has been replaced by a thoroughly internalized sign-system: the ‘noir’ world has moved inescapably inside him, and so he is inevitably doomed ... The world is often like a nightmare from which the hero will usually escape only at great costs, if at all... [paranoid man tales] are surely without parallel in other genres ... [in] taking the hero on a downward path to a miserable death or annihilating despair.\(^{38}\) In short: early Cold War America, c. 1945-53.

If we look closely we can observe an (approximate) ten year ‘lag’ between literary innovation and cinematic adaptation. Parallel to the classic hard-boiled novel, Hollywood responded cinematically with the (pre-noir) gangster film, which featured a regular stable of ‘Tough Guy’ protagonists (James Cagney, Humphrey Bogart, James Garfield, Edward G. Robinson, George Raft) who represented the Forgotten Man’s ‘isolation and marginalization...the tough guy retains the individualist spirit of nineteenth-century models of white masculinity, but with an added sense of a particularly urban and distinctive mood of alienation.’\(^{39}\) Superficially, the generic tough-guy hero is re-cast in the more specific mould of either cop or private detective in the place of the gangster or some other kind of marginal or deviant private actor (boxer; outlaw). However, as film noir, following literary trends, came to foreground paranoid man, changing its focus from the tough guy investigator who makes Sam Spade-style ‘sceptical forays into criminal settings to the feverish criminals hopelessly entangled in webs of crime, its tone grows noticeably darker, more menacing and unsettled. The change of emphasis from the investigator to the criminal cannot be traced in a neat chronological curve,

\(^{35}\) Chandler is a bit of a transitional figure in this sense, sign-posting the ‘leakage’ between classic and neo-classic hard-boiled; the Philip Marlow of The Big Sleep is more like Sam Spade than not, but the Marlow of Chandler’s other two great novels, Farewell, My Lovely (1940) and the comparatively late The Long Goodbye (1953) is beginning to acquire some of the characteristics of Cain’s ‘femme-fatalized’ anti-hero. Again, the critical issue is masculinization and its contents.

\(^{36}\) O’Brien, 94-5. Emphasis added; paranoid hard-boiled occurred simultaneously with the early Cold War. It should be noted that Chandler’s Philip Marlowe does not succumb, or, more accurately, that he successfully resists contamination.

\(^{37}\) Walker, 15. Emphasis added.

\(^{38}\) Walker, 16.‘The connection of desire with death is central to film noir, for it is with film noir that American cinema finds for the first time a form in which to represent desire as something that not only renders the desiring subject helpless, but also propels him or her to destruction.’ Cowrie, 148.

\(^{39}\) Krutnik, 26.
but in general noir heats up, gets crazier, towards the latter part of the 1940s.\textsuperscript{40} This, in fact, may be the single most important narrative innovation: the shift in dramatic focus away from the lawful (or semi-lawful) investigator towards the ‘liminal’ actor (the ‘cheap’ private detective) or, even more subversive, the private individual, who is acting in a quasi-legal and/or criminal manner.\textsuperscript{41} Strikingly, there is no direct line of continuity between the gangster and the noir film. Although crime figures centrally in both, the gangster film remained a separate genre in its own right; the vital factor that demarcates the two genres (or one genre and one style if noir is better understood as the latter) is that noir intentionally highlighted a central component of second and third stage hard-boiled that the gangster film elided altogether: the hysterical male. In noir, the defining ‘textual pattern emerges in which notions of male agency are thrown into doubt, and male subjectivity constantly threatens to unravel. Masculinity is situated as weak, changeable, even hysterical, with the feminine characterized as potentially lethal in strength and amoral will.\textsuperscript{42} For Megan Abbott, the defining archetypal theme of noir is that there is ‘no safe sexual encounter for the lone white male, no encounter that will allow him a consistent position of power and control.’\textsuperscript{43} So, in purely cinematic terms, the noir film ‘proper’ does not appear until two of the seminal transitional texts of hard-boiled are translated to the screen: Hammett’s The Maltese Falcon (1941)\textsuperscript{44} and Cain’s Double Indemnity (1944).\textsuperscript{45} And it is here that we can perceive a clear fissure within the assumed continuity of Hollywood cinematic development—which, being governed by economic considerations, is always inherently conservative.

The ‘tough’ thrillers that dominated 1940s Hollywood crime films

...served as a generically-regulated response to the various upheavals of the wartime and post-war eras. [...] the ‘tough’ thriller seems to be driven by challenges to the mutually reinforcing regimes of masculine cultural authority and masculine psychic stability [...] ‘tough’ thrillers reveal an obsession with male figures who are both internally divided and alienated from the culturally permissible (or ideal) parameters of masculine identity, desire and achievement. Regarded in this light, film noir [...] emerges as a particularly accentuated and pressured mode of [hard-

\textsuperscript{40} Hirsch, 12. See Copjec: ‘The world no longer unfolds in non-simultaneous parts, as in detective fiction; in film noir it breaks up into inconsistent and always alien fragments.’ Copjec, ix.

\textsuperscript{41} As Vernet puts it: ‘in film noir the hero is an orphan.’ Vernet 29 fn. 33.

\textsuperscript{42} Krutnik, 27.

\textsuperscript{43} Krutnik, 69.

\textsuperscript{44} Another of my heresies is that I believe that The Maltese Falcon is better understood as the apotheosis of the hard-boiled tough crime/detective thrillers rather than the very first of the noir thrillers: Sam Spade (Humphrey Bogart) is never really threatened by the proto-femme-fatale, Miss Wonderley/Brigid O’Shaunnessy (Mary Astor). ‘In The Maltese Falcon this danger [of the femme-fatale] is rigidly controlled: in 1941 Mary Astor was a distinctly “mature” star and in the Hammett adaptation she is never the object of the kind of eroticized representation found in such later [noir] thrillers as The Killers, The Postman Always Rings Twice and Dead Reckoning. As a result, Spade’s overcoming of the lure of sexual pleasure is made very easy, for, unlike the heroes of these other films, he is never in any real danger of being overwhelmed by his desire for the erotic woman. Brigid never poses any real threat to his rationality, his control or his phallic self-containment.’ Krutnik, 96. As I shall point out below, it is not enough for a woman to be evil, powerful and dangerous to qualify as a femme-fatale; a much more precise set of signs is required.

\textsuperscript{45} For Double Indemnity’s status as the first ‘true’ noir, see Biesen, 96-123. The other seminal films are Laura (1944); Murder, My Sweet (1944); Phantom Lady (1944); Mildred Pierce (1945); Detour (1945); The Big Sleep (1946); The Postman Always Rings Twice (1946); The Killers (1946) and Out of the Past (1947). An exceptionally important precursor to noir ‘proper’ is Alfred Hitchcock’s Shadow of a Doubt (1943).
boiled] hero-centred fiction. These films will frequently offer an engagement with problematic, even illicit potentialities within masculine identity, yet at the same time they cannot fully embrace or sanction such ‘subversive’ potentialities.46

Yet within the very first film noirs, there is a clear double-movement vis-à-vis the central trope of masculinization: tough thrillers offer audiences a neurotic over-affirmation of masculinity while noir thrillers portray an hysterical contamination of masculinity, a movie-goer’s ‘choice’ between observing neurosis or witnessing hysteria.

In place of this conventional affirmation of heroic masculinity, [the early noir thrillers of the 1940s] offer a range of alternative or ‘transgressive’ representations of male desire and identity, together with a manifestly more sceptical framing of the network of male cultural authority. … the conventionalized figuration of ‘tough’, controlled and unified masculinity is invoked not so much as a model of worthwhile or realistic achievement but more a worrying mark of what precisely is lacking.47

The wounded/hysterical anti-hero has become contaminated to some degree by his environment, internalizing the weirdness of the dark urban landscape48; here masculinity is asserted rather than taken for granted.

‘Tough’, controlled masculinity becomes an ideal which is lost or unattainable, or which can only precariously be achieved: it is represented not as something which can be taken for granted—as in any way integral—but as something which has to be achieved and consolidated through an awesome struggle. … What is involved here is not simply the postponement or forestalling of the eventual triumph of the hero, both as hero and as a man, but a more traumatic uncertainty as to whether such a resolution is actually possible.49

Consistent with the styles’ concern with social realism50 noir is a supremely ‘un-American’ art form precisely because it is a dramatization of that most un-American phenomena: failure—social, moral or psychological—here resulting from a trauma-induced inability to exercise free will.51 But why this shift towards the hysterical male within the movies? This problem becomes even more difficult to answer when one recalls an elementary truth of film: the paramountcy of the pleasure principle. If I were to attempt my own one sentence definition of film noir it would be this: the eroticization of malaise—which is almost a contradiction. Films are consumed for entertainment, at least on some level,52 and it is difficult to see how either neurosis or hysteria can serve as a source of delight (we have the same problem with the horror film and its necessary relation to fear). Part of the answer might lie within the historical division of the noir cycle between its pre-WWII and post-WWII phases: the

46 Krutnik, xiii. Cowrie identifies this element as signifying melodrama; ‘Characters feel compelled by forces and passions beyond their reason to act as they do—in the form of amour fou.’ Cowrie, 130.
47 Krutnik, 88.
48 See Christopher, in general.
49 Krutnik, 131.
50 Naremore, 103-7.
51 Osteen, 118. The essence of Robert B. Pippin’s recent account of film noir is that it is a cinematic exploration of the implications of the philosophical critique of the notion of freedom of the will. Noir asks the question: what would the world be like if no one could really exert control over themselves? See Pippin, in general.
52 ‘This [noir] fantasy is not produced by the spectator but by the filmic text itself, which must “move” the spectator to occupy his or her place within it.’ Cowrie, 137.
historically contingent variable here is the returning war veteran. Quite simply, the alienated veteran suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) had emerged by 1944-45 as a subject of ‘social concern’. It can hardly be a coincidence that many noir thrillers ‘feature returning veteran heroes, for they are persistently obsessed with the depiction of maladjusted or disrupted masculinility. An even greater source of dramatic potential was provided by the parallel entry of psychoanalytical discourse into American popular culture; ‘neurosis being all the rage, the war veteran was a natural for cultural obsession and cinematic exploitation’: ‘shell shock’ meant war trauma which meant, literally, ‘wounded Man’. Even better—the wounded Man was not merely rendered passive in a new and fascinating way but, as war trauma is frequently accompanied by amnesia, he could also be discursively framed as the bearer-of-the-repression-of-forbidden-truths—which was narrative gold to a producer of noir-ized tough crime thrillers. As a (passive) subject of psycho-analysis, the PTSD afflicted veteran will be culturally ‘framed’ as a divided, conflicted, or fragmented self, signifying either neurosis or psychosis. But however you took him, the noir anti-hero is ‘emphatically not the prime agent of the narrative order.’ More moved than mover in fact.

If this is at all plausible, then a fuller explanation becomes possible: the cinematic pleasure that the noir film delivers is of the same kind as that of the horror film. Stephen King once said that the horror film was a fairy-tale for teenagers; I am suggesting that the film noir, or what Krutnik has called ‘paranoid man films’, is Horror cinema for adults, or at least for the adults of post-WWII and early Cold War America (and, by extension, western Europe, given the extreme enthusiasm with which film noir was received, by the French and the Italians in particular). Therefore, we should be willing to cinematically read the noir thriller as the tough crime thriller re-told as an adult horror story—or, even better, as a nightmare.

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53 Osteen, 77-92.
54 Krutnik, 132.
55 Krutnik, xii.
56 The Id, or the repressed component of the unconscious, as not only a psychological substance but a cultural one as well. ‘In the noir thrillers—and in 1940s cinema more generally—the invocation of psycho-analysis proved a particularly useful means of suggesting that which could directly be shown. The narratives of many noir thrillers are concerned with corruptive and criminal sexual intrigues which were problematic within the representational confines of classical Hollywood.’ Krutnik, 50.
57 Krutnick, 101.
58 ‘One of the fundamental results of the war [was] the dislocation of men from their former sense of being the prime movers of culture.’ Krutnik, 64.
59 Krutnik, 131. It is important to remember that there was a parallel movement at this time between paranoid-men’s films and paranoid-women’s films, or ‘the women’s picture crime thriller’ (Rebecca, Suspicion, Gaslight, Jane Eyre), in which the heroine’s lover, fiancée or husband is seeking their death, madness or institutionalization. Krutnik, 193-7. Superficially this sub-genre of women’s films would appear to invalidate the viscerally masculinist presumptions of noir cinema. However, the contradiction is more apparent than real; what thematically links both species of films is the dread-inducing invasion by an alien presence. In paranoid-men’s movies, the transgression is against public space and the political domain; in paranoid-women’s flicks, the transgression is against private space and the domestic realm. Artistically, paranoid-women’s films are a derivative of the Gothic style which, however, because of the latter’s association with Horror, brings it into the wider stylistic domain of noir, re-enforcing the subliminal correlatives between noir and Horror. Although Cowie also believes that noir is not a genre, she tentatively suggests that it might be viewed as a sub-genre of a well-established category, the melodrama. Cowrie, passim.
60 See Borde and Chaumeton, generally
61 One reason, no doubt, why the words ‘night’, ‘dark’ and ‘black’ appear in the titles of so many film noirs.
To strengthen my argument, I will need to re-visit two issues already discussed: the American war veteran and psycho-analysis. What is striking in early film noir is how concerned they are with the experience of the returning warrior. The central male protagonist in films noirs of 1946-48 is almost invariably marked as a veteran by one means or another. [...] In film noirs and the related crime melodramas of the post-war period, the trajectory of the central male figure is either towards recuperation or death—either toward a reintegration into a normal society with the demonstration of his [legal] innocence [...] or towards fatal retribution for past guilt. [...] The central protagonist of these movies is not marked as a figure of difference by the conventional signs of heroism—the possession of exceptional abilities or a dynamic moral certainty. Rather, he is average, conventional particularly in his ambitions, and his capacity to survive the fiction is above all determined by whether he can manage to re-establish a normality which has been disrupted at the start of the movie. That disruption invariably has a psychological dimension; the protagonist of these movies is Hollywood’s neurotic personality par excellence, afflicted with one or another form of compulsive behaviour, psychosis, identity crisis, guilt complex, amnesia or general paranoia. He is the unstable occupant of a paranoid world, in which people are likely to change their identities, and the plot is capable of going off at an unexpected tangent in a world thrown out of joint.

One of the more interesting aspects of this complex and multi-layered cinematic ‘view’ is the occurrence of amnesia within the veteran: loss of memory accentuates disorientation by signifying loss of self. Even more striking is that the post-tough guy is frequently rendered unconscious (often by chemical means) or ‘blacks out’ as a result of unbearable psychic agony: in both cases, veteran or sleuth, the paranoid man is rendered as passive victim; it is a truism of film noir studies that the signature flash-back and voice-over narration are aural and visual ‘actings out’ of an existential collapse into oblivion. Amnesia is a gloriously multi-faceted sign, the bearer of trauma, repressed memory and denied truth, the temporary suspension of the Self in the face of unbearable reality—or, in the most extreme circumstances, the loss of the Self altogether. Strikingly, the medical symptoms of PTSD are identical with the narrative

And which raises the interminable problem of the historical dynamic between film noir and the Second World War. Sheri Biesen lays out three compelling reasons for understanding early noir (1944-46) as a cultural artefact of WWII: (i) restrictions on production materials, including the enforcement of the war-time ‘black-out’, which made it economical to produce low budgeted films set at night (the ‘B-picture’); (ii) the influx of German refugee directors who imparted Expressionism to Hollywood film making; and (iii) the proliferation of the war documentary and newsreels, which caused censors to adopt a more ‘liberal’ attitude towards graphic images of violence (‘Midway through the war, by 1943 to early 1944, the government’s patriotic agenda motivated the federal Office of Censorship to lift its ban on depicting atrocities and war-related crimes in newsreels, in effect endorsing and promoting screen violence for propaganda purposes and establishing a precedent for narrative films.’). Biesen, 6-8; also, 59-95. It is tempting to view early noir as a semi-deliberate attempt to inure American audiences to violence. ‘Wartime murder was increasingly “acceptable”—it was committed in combat every day, endorsed by the government, and shown to the public in wartime documentary combat newsreels.’ Biesen, 229 fn. 29.

See Telotte, passim. Telotte identifies the impossibility of being able to make oneself understood (or listened to) a central component of noir narrative.

Osteen, Chapter Two, (‘Missing Persons’) 46-76. The noir veteran’s ‘quest for selfhood becomes literal, for those returning soldiers truly don’t remember who they are. These characters lead socio-political weight to the noir theme of alienation and isolation by acting as synecdoches for a whole generation of displaced men and for
techniques of film noir: “‘persistent, intrusive re-experiencing of the traumatic event through flashbacks and recurrent dreams with persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma, numbing of general responsiveness and persistent symptoms of increased arousal’”\(^\_\)\(^\_\)^{66} hence, the noir veteran ‘blacking out’ irresistibly invokes the anxiety-inducing phenomenon of ‘lost time’ which is itself the sign of historical atrocities that are unspeakable.\(^\_\)\(^\_\)^{67} As Richard Maltby puts it, the ‘narrative structure common to the majority of films noirs of this period [1946-48] is one in which the protagonist has to account for a missing period of his life, when he was outside the world in which the film is set, and in which things that happened to him set him at a distance from that world and its inhabitants’\(^\_\)\(^\_\)^{68}—which strongly suggests a war zone. Even worse—because the trauma, mediated via amnesia, is ‘unspeakable’, the noir veteran’s experiences form a “‘crisis of representation, of history, of truth, and of narrative time”\(^\_\)\(^\_\)\(^\_\)^{69} which neatly explains the narrative centrality of the voice-over/ flashback as the dramatic recovery of (denied) ‘motivation’.\(^\_\)\(^\_\)^{70} But film noir is of Hollywood, and Hollywood is always practical—and politically obedient. It is possible to regard many of the early paranoid man films as a sub-set of what is known as the ‘social-problem picture’: the movie assumes a quasi-documentary manner in dramatically staging a plot that both reflects an issue of contemporary concern as well as providing a satisfactory narrative in which the problem can be successful solved, or, at least, better understood. Accordingly

A number of films noir depict the plight of the returning veteran in terms of amnesia [...] This is another example of the psychological thread that runs through the films: where twenties and thirties films about veterans of the [sic] World War I tended to stress physical rather than psychological damage, films about World War II veterans focused on the ‘problems of re-adjustment’, a psychological slant on their re-integration into country, society and family. [...] the war is the ‘traumatic event’ which lies behind many noir narratives, making its presence felt in a variety of ways.\(^\_\)\(^\_\)^{71}

This makes more sense if we view noir, at least in part, as a particular kind of social-problem film: noir’s post-tough guy is drawn in a manner fully consistent with (then) best medical knowledge; psychiatric studies undertaken in the 1940s ‘represented the war as a traumatic experience for its participants.[...] It proposed that the normal soldier would undoubtedly return from the war maladjusted and confronted with an array of psychological problems in relocating himself in a peacetime society.’\(^\_\)\(^\_\)\(^\_\)^{72} This approach also re-enforces the status of the noir thriller as a type of hidden transcript: the clearly discernible leftist sub-text of the noir veteran films can easily be read as a critique of the social costs of US hegemony.\(^\_\)\(^\_\)^{73} Even

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\(^{66}\) Theodore Nadelson cited in Osteen, 79.
\(^{67}\) Osteen, 79-105.
\(^{68}\) Maltby, 46.
\(^{69}\) Roger Luckhurst cited in Osteen, 79.
\(^{70}\) Telotte, 14-17.
\(^{71}\) Walker, 35.
\(^{72}\) Maltby, 44. Beginning in 1943 the American military had begun discharging ‘psycho-neurotic veterans’ at a rate of ten thousand per month; by 1944, the US Army alone had discharged 216,000 soldiers for ‘psychiatric illness’. Osteen, 80.
\(^{73}\) Naremore, 107-23. Vernet argues that ‘classic’ hard-boiled served as a hidden transcript for the Great Depression; Vernet, 12-20. What links both transcripts is the Forgotten Man.
if read a-politically (or psychologically), film noirs notably provide ‘excessive representations of the normal as neurotic, providing confirmation, for anyone seeking it, that maladjustment was a normal response to post-war America’. They therefore perform a rehabilitative function; ‘persistently obsessed with the depiction of maladjusted or disrupted masculinity’ the paranoid man movie aims for a masculinizing re-integration and re-assimilation as a way of obviating the moral panic latent within the now alienated returning warrior.

The films probe the darker areas of the psyche (obsession and neurosis are common preoccupations) and focus in particular on male sexual anxieties and on the pathology of male violence. ... Overall, they portray a society in which the American dream of success is inverted, alienation and fatalistic helplessness being the dominant moods, and failure the most frequent outcome.

According to Krutnik, this represented the ideal opportunity for Hollywood to combine two separate cultural tropes with enormous potential for social engineering: cinema and psycho-analysis. First, cinema:

The post-war era required a reconstruction of cultural priorities, and one can see the post-war noir tough thrillers as being one of the principal means by which Hollywood, in its role as a cultural institution, sought to tackle such a project, by focusing attention upon the problems attending to the (re)definition of masculine identity and masculine role.

Second, psycho-analysis: 

[During] the early years of World War II there was a notable intensification of Hollywood’s interest in and use of psychoanalysis. It was in the thrillers of the 1940s that Hollywood’s appropriation of Freud found a particularly comfortable niche. For many of the crime films of the period betray an interest in the ‘personalization’ of crime, rather than framing criminal activity as of either a ‘social problem’ or the product of organized gangs. This fascination with internal, subjectively generated criminal impulses has widely been recognized as a crucial characteristic of 1940s film noir. The incorporation of a psychoanalytic frame of reference served both to explicate and to contextualize a growing interest in the excesses provoked through ‘psychical disturbance’.

For Krutnik, the defining characteristics of noir, apart from purely stylistic issues such as lighting (chiaroscuro) and the all-important voice-over/flashback all have to do with eroticism: ‘a critique of the values of post-war American society; a new “psychological” trend in the

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74 Maltby, 47.
75 Krutnik, 132.
76 Walker, 38.
77 Krutnik, 64.
78 See Thomas in general. As film style, noir’s primary concern was ‘with the emotional and physical defences and anxieties of its men’, especially those concerning passive or repressed homosexuality. Ibid, 79. See also Buchsbaum in general. Here the issue is whether noir dealt with issues of psychoanalytical concern or whether Freudianism simply provided a trope for narrative framing. Personally, I suspect the latter. See Borde and Chaumeton in general.
79 It is significant that the three iconic gangster films of Hollywood—Little Caesar (1930), Public Enemy (1931) and Scarface (1932)—where all shot within the social-problem/documentary mode.
80 Krutnik, xii.
presentation of character; and a recurring attention to excessive and obsessive sexuality\(^{81}\) with the result that ‘a high percentage of the noir films themselves are fundamentally concerned with a heightened “economy of seduction” (involving transgressions of the licit and rational boundaries of desire and identity).\(^{82}\) The narrative centrality of the ‘representation of disturbed, often criminally excessive sexuality’\(^{83}\) is most useful to me; we must not forget that trauma is the Attic Greek word for ‘wound’ and is a syllogism of the modern German word for ‘dream’ (traum)—the uncensored expression of unconscious desire. And film noirs are very much patterned after dream sequences\(^{84}\); in relation to plot and narration, noirs are less like who-done-its and more like missing person cases (Murder My Sweet; Farewell My lovely; The Long Goodbye)—the focus is on hunting and searching rather than ratiocination and problem solving, in which the hero does not so much reason as sees and learns. The noir detective does not ‘solve’ the crime, rather explores and navigates criminal terrain—in other words, he is on a quest.

[The] mystery element serves often to give but a sense of coherence to the narrative, and its principal purpose seems to be to permit access to those features which serve as the real interest of the story: the presentation of an exotic milieu of crime and corruption; a representation of characters who scorn the moral regimentation of ‘conformist’ society; a sequence of scenes structured around principles of masculine testing where the hero defines himself through the conflict with various sets of adversaries (criminals, women).\(^{85}\)

The pronounced oneiric aspects of film noir constitutes a singularly ‘pure’ example of the translation of literary conceit into visual form; naturalist hard-boiled differs from formalist who-done-it insofar as there is present within the former the ‘subordination of the drama of solution to the detective’s quest for … justice; and the substitution of a pattern of intimidation and temptation of the hero for … what Northrop Frye calls “the wavering finger of suspicion” passing across a series of potential suspects.’\(^{86}\) And at the centre of the quest of the (dreaming) paranoid man lies the primal struggle, or what Krutnik calls masculine testing, which serves as the final moment of ‘doubt’; the ‘hero’s potency has to be proved and asserted, rather than being simply assumed. The quest requires him to face up to various forms of obstruction and delay, and these provide opportunities for a testing of prowess—his ingenuity, physical courage or “honour”.\(^{87}\) In other words, the anti-rational detecting quest of the noir anti-hero is a symbolic journey into the unconscious, the ‘dark’ city as a metaphor for the unnameable Id. For Michael Walker, the paranoid man films

[M]ay be termed seeker-hero films noir: a major noir category. In these films, the hero’s investigation takes the form of a quest into a dangerous and threatening

\(^{81}\) Krutnik, x. For a concise statement of key Freudian principles, especially the Oedipus Complex, see Krutnik, Chapter Six, 75-91.

\(^{82}\) Krutnik, 28. Especially in regard to violence, or the ‘death wish; noir eroticism ‘is at times merely an eroticization of violence.’ Borde and Chaumeton, 9.

\(^{83}\) Krutnik, 16.

\(^{84}\) ‘We’d be oversimplifying things in calling film noir oneiric, strange, erotic, ambivalent, and cruel […] but sometimes it’s the oneiric quality that predominates […] It’s the accumulation of […] realistic shots on a bizarre theme that creates a nightmarish atmosphere.’ Borde and Chaumeton, 12.

\(^{85}\) Krutnik, 40.

\(^{86}\) John Cawelti cited in Walker, 9.

\(^{87}\) Krutnik, 88.
world, the **noir** world. This **noir** world has two facets. On the one hand, it is an underworld of crime, vice and murder; on the other, it frequently lies behind [...] the ‘respectable’ world, the world of bourgeois order and propriety. It is a world of duplicity and dissimulation: the hero doesn’t know who to trust and is confused about what’s going on. The characters he encounters are indeed rarely trustworthy, but tend to be variously corrupt, perverse, threatening or violent. [...] [He] is repeatedly ‘tested, interrogated, attacked, etc’. [...] so as to test his wits, perseverance and integrity. As he unravels the often labyrinthine plot and uncovers the layers of deception, it is as much his incorruptibility as his intelligence which enables him, finally, to emerge safely.\(^{88}\)

It is hard not to see a pun on the word ‘under-world’ here—it denotes both the Netherworld and organized crime, which brilliantly illuminates the katabatic dimension of the **noir** style: the descent into the Land of the Dead.\(^{89}\) The **noir** tale is a cine-poetic dream\(^{90}\) and the move to psycho-analysis signifies a parallel move towards Horror. But as ‘Rust’ (Matthew McConaughey) reminded us at the end of episode three (‘The Locked Room’) of the first season of *True Detective* (2014), ‘Like a lot of dreams, there’s a monster at the end of it.’\(^{91}\)

**The Subversively Significant Other: The Femme-Fatale**

‘*Criminals are disgusting, like the castrated.*’—Arthur Rimbaud

“Listen. This won’t do any good. You’ll never understand me, but I’ll try once and then give up.”—Sam Spade (Humphrey Bogart) to Brigid O’Shaughnessy (Mary Astor) in *The Maltese Falcon* [Telotte, 218]

As virtually every single writer, film-maker and literary critic working with the **noir** tradition attests, the ‘fatal woman’ is a necessary condition of **noir** (although there are other necessary conditions as well, such as dis-orientation and chaos). Here, I am going to go farther and opt for a more extreme position—such a potent sign is the **femme-fatale** that SHE is not merely a necessary condition but a **sufficient** condition of **noir**. In other words, if you have a character in your story—any kind of story—that bears all of the marks of **noir** feminine fatality then you have the ‘black tale’, whether it takes the form of the hysterical melodrama of Orson Welles, the Old-World cynicism of Billy Wilder, or the black comedy of the Coen Brothers. On what do I base this insolent claim? On nothing other than this: the **femme-fatale** stands in as the double of the paranoid man: inverting patriarchal expectations, it is the visceral Woman who signifies the (non-) ‘truth’ of the Man. Her presence *alone* guarantees that His existence is so narratively and

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\(^{88}\) Walker, 10. See also Christopher, 7-11 and 16-19.

\(^{89}\) Christopher, Chapter One, 1-32.

\(^{90}\) The distorted *mise-en-scène* characteristic of **noir** serves as a correlative of the hero’s psychological destabilization. It operates—like the German Expressionist films and the Universalist horror films of the 1930s—by invoking a dislocated perspective, where the “reality principle” is swamped by the twisted logic of desire.’ Krutnik, 49.

\(^{91}\) Rust’s monologue is worth quoting in full here, besotted as it is with the meta-psychology of the **noir** aesthetic—and with trauma. ‘In the last nanosecond, they [the murder victims] saw what they were … “you”, “yourself”, it’s all a big drama, but there was never anything but a big jerry-rig of presumption and dumb will. And you could just let yourself go and finally know that you didn’t have to hold on so tight. To realize that in all your life, in all your love, all your hate, all your memories, all your pain, it was all the same. It was all the same dream, a dream you had inside a locked room; that dream about being a person. And, like a lot of dreams, there’s a monster at the end of it.’
ontologically derived from SHE that the noir tale is never anything other than the un-Man’s descent into the Inferno.

So, the question must now become: how exactly does a woman appear to a traumatized, amnesiac and paranoid man? The answer is: in the first instance as a castrator, the displacer of men. The cinematic evolution from the apotheosis of the ‘tough guy’ Sam Spade/Humphrey Bogart of *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) to the almost feminized (passive victim) of Philip Marlow/Dick Powell in *Murder, My Sweet* (1944) corresponds almost exactly to the dates of America’s involvement in the Second World War. Arguably, the single greatest psychic challenge that the returning veterans had to face was the feminine invasion of the public work space from 1941-45. If we accept that *film noirs* are in some sense social-problem pictures and that they possess some kind of rehabilitative intent, then the forgotten men badly required counselling—or perhaps *catharsis*—on this issue.

The solution [to the veteran ‘problem’] arrived at dealt with both the psychological and the economic aspects of re-adjustment; normality would be re-established by reversing a number of wartime trends. Women war-workers should give their jobs back to the returning soldiers, marry [them] and buy the plethora of consumer durables which would replace the war materiel, abandoning their economic independence for a role as providers of well-adjusted homes for their husbands and children—the Levittown ideal of conformist suburban living. It was a solution reiterated in the half dozen movies which dealt explicitly with the situation of the returning veteran in 1945 and 1946.

In a manner wholly inconsistent with the gangster film, which almost totally eradicates the presence of Woman, *noir* expressly privileges a dangerous and predatory woman, the femme fatale, who signifies a terminal crisis within American masculinity, and both the *noir* film and the hard-boiled novel invariably ‘ends with the rejection of a woman and a retreat from the intimate and the personal.’ In the *noir* thrillers made after the *Maltese Falcon*, such as the first unanimously recognized *noir* film *Double Indemnity* (1944), ‘women tend to represent a disturbance of the process of masculine consolidation which is integral to the trajectory of the detective hero in the *Falcon*.’

The woman [...] presents the hero with an opportunity to transgress, rather than simply causing his transgression. [...] It is through her insistent seductions that the

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92 Krutnik, 93-100.
93 Krutnik, 242-3 fn. 5.
94 The other great influence at work here is the war-time documentary and propaganda film, which buttressed Hollywood’s addiction to cinematic realism, as in both France and Italy; ‘In the case of America, this realism engenders three new genres: the war film, the police documentary, and from a certain angle at least, film noir.’ Borde and Chaumeton, 21.
95 ‘The force and persistence of this image of the woman as amoral destroyers of men can be traced, in part, to the wartime reassignment of roles, both at home and at work.’ Hirsch, 21. Harvey suggests that the entry of women into the work-force is a sufficient explanation of the ‘dis-orientation’ theme of the dark tale. Harvey, passim.
96 Maltby, 44-5. *Noir*’s ‘tormented dreamers act as surrogates for audience member’s own struggles with renewal, reinvention, or return.’ Osteen, 20.
97 Maltby, 45.
98 Krutnik, 112. The general consensus is that the three supremely ‘iconic’ femme-fatales of *film noir* are Barbara Stanwyck (*Double Indemnity*) Jane Greer (*From Out of the Past*) and Ava Gardner (*The Killers*, 1946).
99 Krutnik, 142.
hero is lured from the ‘straight and narrow’, and, significantly, the films do not seek to explore in any detail what motivates her in her attempt to defy the law. Frequently, the woman is revealed ultimately to be a pathological case, her deviance and dissatisfaction set beyond the boundaries of rational explanation, recuperated as madness...

The femme-fatale, the feminine signifier of the decomposition of masculinity into hysteria, will always manifest herself within the terms of a crisis of Law—which is to say, of criminality. The paradox of the Judicial, as Judith Butler has brilliantly argued, is that the ‘prevailing law threatened one with trouble, even put one in trouble, all to keep one out of trouble.’ Consistent with the dramatic logic of the femme-fatale, Butler noted that ‘trouble sometimes euphemized some fundamentally mysterious problem usually related to the alleged mystery of all things feminine.’ She concludes that

For that masculine subject of desire, trouble became a scandal with the sudden intrusion, the unanticipated agency, of a female ‘object’ who inexplicably returns the glance, reverses the gaze, and contests the place and authority of the masculine position. The radical dependency of the masculine subject on the female ‘Other’ suddenly exposes his autonomy as illusion.

The easiest way, then, to problematize Femininity is to make the Woman herself a ‘problem’; and the most subversive way to do that is to criminalize her—which means that, cinematically, the ideal medium of transmission would be the noir-ized tough crime thriller. The dynamic, however, is complex, for the dark Woman of noir, just like the ‘real’ women of everyday life, is both attractive and repellent—according to psycho-analysis. Simply put, there is no ‘unified’ Feminist opinion ‘on whether film noir as such is progressive or not, precisely because the femme-fatale is the bearer of both emancipatory and reactionary meaning(s); noir ‘gives us one of the few periods of film in which women are active, not static symbols, are intelligent and powerful, if destructively so, and derive power, not weakness, from their sexuality.’ The downside, according to Janey Place, is that the ‘ideological operation of the myth (the absolute necessity of controlling the strong, sexual woman) is [...] achieved by first demonstrating her dangerous power and its frightening results, then destroying it.’ Thus, the ‘dark tale’ will always repeat a fairly rigid narrative structure, invariably ‘suggesting that the threat of the feminine and/or feminization be met with hermetic self-containment (Chandler, Hammett) or containing violence (Spillane, who kills Commies, male or female).’ Psycho-analysis proves itself a somewhat double-edged sword.

When confronted with the problem of the definition of the feminine [...] popularized psycho-analysis can function securely enough as a viable system of explanation: for the male perspective is structured [i.e., presents itself to itself as] the norm, and the touchstone of authority, and the feminine is a safely distanced ‘other’. However,

100 Krutnik, 141.
101 Butler, vii. Compare Butler with Annette Kuhn on the seminal Chandler novel and film, The Big Sleep: “‘The trouble, the disturbance, at the heart of The Big Sleep is its symptomatic articulation of the threat posed to the law of patriarchy by the feminine.’” Cited in Abbott, 151.
103 Place, 48.
104 Place, 49.
105 Abbott, 89.
when the scrutinizing psychoanalytic gaze is directed at the problems of male subjectivity and desire, this necessarily sets up the danger of a ‘short-circuit’ [‘psychical disruption’] within the system; the very basis of the system of male identity and authority becomes subject to self-investigation.106

In dialectical terms, the femme-fatale is the perfect antithesis to the paranoid man, for she is nothing less than the exact symbolic/psychic inversion of the (by now missing-in-action) overly-masculinized ‘tough guy’, the phallus-enhanced bearer of Hollywood’s ‘narcissism and narcissistic identification [that] involve phantasies of power, omnipotence, mastery and control.’107 And here, for once, cinematic art was far superior to the literary: in terms of ‘cultural shock’, nothing in the American novel could hope to compete with the highest accomplishment of the noir imaginary, the ‘awesome spectacle’ of the woman with the gun.108

A favourite subject [of the covers of the ‘lurid’ noir and hard-boiled paperbacks, the literary equivalent of film posters] was a woman with a gun, usually threatening a man. This image ... can probably be claimed for [a] noir iconography. ... In film noir, women possess sufficient phallic power to be shown regularly wielding—and frequently firing—such weapons; and ...where a woman produces the gun can be a crucial element in the film’s symbolic system.109

It is appropriate that I paraphrase Jacques Lacan here: every man has a penis but no man has the phallus; conversely, no woman has a penis, but every woman can have a phallus. And this (lame) joke takes us to the second and far deeper question to the answer: how exactly does a woman appear to a traumatized, amnesiac and paranoid man?

Elsewhere110 I have employed employ the neologism ‘neo-phallic’ to convey what is the central notion of popularized Lacanian discourse: in a subversion of Marx, the ruling symbols of any society are the symbols of the ruling gender which sets up the really big gag—the penis is nothing, but the phallus is everything, or ‘the big Other’.111 ‘Big’ because phallo-centrism is the transfiguration of the actual, real thing (the male sex organ) into the foundation of an entire symbolic order that is both the indispensable cause and effect of patriarchy, ‘the rule of Men’ (the linga of the cults of Vishnu and Shiva are the most naked examples of this that I know). So, when understood properly, we realize that the penis equals the ‘Real’ which signifies ‘mere’ maleness but that the phallus, as the ‘symbolic order’, is identical with masculinity (or—biology is the thing, culture is the construct). But masculinity/patriarchy cannot truly equal maleness, for to allow this would be to collapse the phallus into the penis which would constitute a category mistake—the mis-taking of the real for the symbolic. Since masculinity is symbolic rather than real no man can ever really truly ‘have it’ in terms of actual and exclusive possession; undone by its nature as pure symbol the phallus is subject to endless migrations, reversals, deflations and inflations some of them psychically quite painful (it is a bit of Hollywood folklore that the real reason why there is so little frontal male nudity in films is because the hero, the

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106 Krutnik, 54.
107 Steve Neale, cited in Krutnik at 90.
108 Krutnik, 259 fn. 20.
109 Walker, 31 and 32.
110 Wilson, ‘Almost Noir’, passim.
111 In the words of Slavoj Zizek, the big Other is the ‘symbolic order, society’s unwritten constitution, [that] is the second nature of every speaking being: it is here, directing and controlling my acts; it is the sea that I swim in, yet it remains ultimately impenetrable—I can never put it in front of me and grasp it.’ Just like the genitals. Zizek, 8.
locus of the symbolic order, can never fail to disappoint. I mean, just how ‘big’ does James Bond have to be really in order to be the equal of his own phallic gravitas? To employ a Lacanian construction—James Bond’s lament must always be ‘I wish that I was as good as me’). The danger, for the male, is that as Woman is an object of desire she is, without exception, a source of anxiety. For Freud and Lacan what defines Woman-as-Woman (her ‘essence’) is that she is ‘Not-Man’; that is, she lacks the penis (=she is a victim of castration). And because Woman lacks the penis (her presence is an absence meaning that she is forever an inexhaustibly weird version of the Man), it is suspect for her to serve as the object of desire of the male, for the male is attracted to that which represents his ‘un-making’, or castration. But of a symbolic order only: the Woman never eliminates the penis, she merely steals the phallus.

This bears repeating. While it is undeniable that the femme-fatale is the symbolic (psychic) inversion of the overly-masculinized ‘tough guy’, the suspect and phallus-deprived bearer of Hollywood’s narcissistic fantasies of omnipotence, it is equally true that since what the gun signifies is not the real penis but the symbolic phallus the Woman-With-the-Gun is not the substitution of the noir anti-hero but his double: Woman-with-Phallus (but not penis). The issue at stake, I would argue, is not one of displacement but of mirroring—since it really is a question of the phallus and not the penis then the appropriation of the gun/phallus by either party always remains a latent possibility (and is frequently acted out in noir film as in the justifiably iconic shoot-out between Un-Man and femme-fatale near the end of Double Indemnity). Here, the ‘correct’ formulation—and an intensely mirrored one—would be: the paranoid Man is seeking to recover that which he last (but once had) whereas the dark Woman is seeking to acquire (for the very first time) that she has always been denied. In arguably one of the most important and influential essays of film criticism ever written, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, Laura Mulvey opts for a ‘strong’ application of Lacan to Film Theory: ‘The cinema satisfies a primordial wish for pleasurable looking, but also goes further, developing scopophilia in its narcissistic aspect.’

The secret of cinema is really the secret of the Self, which is ‘ideal’, than the real or actual self. This idealized self-projection becomes the basis of self-love, or narcissism. Cinema, through its total reliance upon the visual (the image) and its manipulation of desire (for profit), has become our culture’s primary repository of the narcissistic imagination. Ergo, the so-called ‘magic’ of the Hollywood-style ‘at its best (and of all the cinema which fell within its sphere of influence) arose, not exclusively, but in one important aspect, from its skilled and satisfying manipulation of visual pleasure. Unchallenged, mainstream film coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order.’

The problem, though, is that the Hollywood film is haunted by the specter of symbolic castration: the filmic depiction of the Woman invariably carries with it the latent (or sub-textual) threat of the un-manning of the male viewer through the mechanical manipulation of visualized desire. In brief: castration anxiety (the feminization of the Male through the operational medium of the gaze) proceeds on two levels. The first one is mimesis: one strives to imitate the object of one’s love (erotic desire) — the more that the Man wants the Woman the more he (naturally) wishes to become like her so that the fixed boundaries of essential gender differences become subject to pressure (note here

112 Mulvey, 9.
113 Mulvey, 8.
that Lacan’s notion of scopophilia and the male gaze closely follow the logic of imitation, ‘castration anxiety’ as flowing from mimetic desire). The second is by the inversion of the gaze: by making the Woman an active personality and prioritizing her gaze (making her genuinely want the one who is looking at her), the Man is reduced to a passive object. The solution to this phallocentric dilemma is the effective ‘silencing’ of the dangerous Woman/Un-Man, by extensively ‘coding’ her with complex cinematic symbols and images; her ‘meaning’ is determined for her through the film that is the vehicle for the male gaze.

Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic [or ‘visual’] command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning [...] the psychoanalytic background [is] that woman as representation signifies castration, inducing voyeuristic or fetishistic mechanisms to circumvent her threat.114

Mulvey breaks cinematic voyeurism into three component parts: (i) the camera; (ii) the audience; and (iii) the characters within the film: each component replicates the voyeuristic logic of the other two. As a result, the conventions of narrative film deny or disguise the presence of the first two and ‘subordinate them to the third, the conscious aim being always to eliminate intrusive camera presence and prevent a distancing awareness in the audience.’115

What separates Man from Woman, therefore, is not the rigid fixedness of the penis but the migration of the phallus between them, a transferrable object (commodity?) that is perpetually nomadic. Thus do we finally understand the true gendered horror of noir: it is not that Woman has replaced Man (for that is impossible considering the sheer giveness of phallic migration) but rather that there is, in the very final analysis, absolutely no essential difference between them. Which is why the real issue is never one of substitution or replacement (to take an example from science fiction: even if the Martians exterminated all of the ‘Earthlings’, the Martians would remain Martians.) The real terror is the total suspension of any form of essential difference. As Rene Girard would express it, we are not confronted with a universal anxiety of castration but with an interminable crisis of un-differentiation.

It is simply too easy to explain this erotically charged misogyny simply in the social terms of the Forgotten Man: if ‘masculinity under pressure’ (to paraphrase James Ellroy) is the archetypal hard-boiled theme, then the post-traumatic woundings of both world wars, coupled with the economic catastrophe of the 1930s, is almost sufficient to explain a collective crisis in the viability of orthodox conceptions of masculinity (and patriarchy). Yet, this view is clearly inadequate for understanding the visceral dramatic and cinematic power of the femme-fatale. If the social crisis theory is correct, the femme-fatale should have vanished after 1945; instead, she rises to even greater heights (especially cinematic) with the commencement of the second historical phase of hard-boiled: the Cold War. The explanation, then, would seem to lie within the ideological system of what became known in the US as the doctrine of ‘containment’, a geopolitical response to the need for maintaining ‘difference’ within international relations. As Alan Nadel has pointed out, George Kennan, the generally acknowledged author of the doctrine,
regularly advocated an ‘Hemmingwayesque masculinity’ in containing the Soviet Union; ‘Kennan’s writings rely heavily on constructions of Russia as a femme fatale figure, an Eastern exotic who does not abide by the rules of (masculine) logic.’ Amazingly, the discourse of containment, precisely because it is so gendered, creates a parallel form of domestic colonialism, or what Paul Virilio called *endocolonization*: the racially contaminated colonial frontier—contaminated because the US is now extended into everywhere—migrates into the gendered ‘troubled’ domestic space of the white, middle-class, and heterosexual home of the paranoid man (in a sense, a ‘double’ contamination of both hysteria and racism). America’s success in containing the Red Menace ultimately depended upon the policing and enforcement of an infallible masculinity; ‘In distributing the potentials for domination and submission, allegiance and disaffection, proliferation and self-containment, loyalty and subversion—all of which require clear, legible boundaries between Other and Same—the narrative of the American cold war takes the same form as the narratives that contain gender roles.’

Containment, then, conveyed two messages.

The first speaks to a threat outside of the social body, a threat that therefore has to be excluded, or isolated in quarantine, and kept at bay from the domestic body. The second meaning of containment, which speaks to the domestic contents of the social body, concerns a threat internal to the host which must then be neutralized by being fully absorbed and thereby neutralized.

Containment presented a fundamental problem to *film noir*. On the one hand, the expansion of endocolonization into the homeland permitted an even wider landscape for dramatic plotting. As Elaine Tyler May noted:

More than merely a metaphor for the cold war on the home front, containment aptly describes the way in which public policy, personal behaviour, and even political values were focused on the home front [...] Where [...] could a man still feel powerful and prove his manhood without risking the loss of security? In a home where he held the authority, with a wife who would remain subordinate.

On the other hand, the phenomenal success of cinematic *noir*, which was uniquely well suited to portraying domestic space(s) and, simultaneously, glamourizing the feminine form, operated in such a way as to make the femme-fatale even that much more seductive. *Film noir* “afforded women roles which are active, adventurous and driven by sexual desire… [female as well as male viewers can enjoy the] fantasy of the woman’s dangerous sexuality… [a fantasy whose] pleasures lie precisely in its forbiddenness.” Thus, despite “the ritual punishment of...”

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116 Nadel, 31. According to Kennan, “‘if we can maintain that situation [of containment], keeping cool nerves, and maintaining it consistently, not in a provocative way but in a polite way, a calm way, preserving at all times with our own strength and firmness [...] I am personally quite convinced that they will not be able to withstand us [...] that sooner or later the logic [of American hegemony] will penetrate their government.’” Cited in Nadel, 31.


118 It is interesting to recall that typical American slang for an overseas war-zone, such as Vietnam or Iraq, is ‘Indian Country’ or the ‘Wild West’, conveying the sense that the internal ‘westward’ frontier of the US has been re-experienced as the ‘Third World’. Engelhardt, 313.

119 Nadel, 29. And, of course, the hegemonic expansion of America’s boundaries towards infinity allows for the conceptualization of communist infiltration as a sort of border conflict, or ‘reverse colonization’. Christopher, 51.

120 Andrew Ross, cited in Abbott, 164.

121 Cited in Abbott, 164 and 165.

122 Cowie 136.
acts of transgression, the vitality with which these acts [of the fatal woman] are endowed produces an excess of meaning, which cannot finally be contained. Narrative resolutions cannot recuperate their subversive significance.”123 And this led directly to the single greatest irony of the ‘moral panic’ incited in the US over the traumatized and amnesiac war veteran: film noir, which as a social-problem picture, was meant to rehabilitate American masculinity was, in fact, covertly undermining it from within.

The fear derives from the potential that the man alone, the tough guy, might in fact participate in gender play or gender dissolution, that this figure of seemingly unimpeachable and hardboiled masculinity might in fact engage in less contained or binary-rigid circuits of identification and desire. A man already alarmingly unfettered by paternal or household roles might in fact threaten the very binaries that rule Cold War America, that constitute Cold War America. The seeming apex of tough masculinity might at the same time embody gender disintegration or a pleasurably tangled network of sexuality and homo-sociality, of eroticism and intimacy that is not constituted through male/female at all. If these gender binaries are disabled, who is to say how secure any of them are, be they gay/straight, black/white, Eastern/Western, capitalist/communist, American/Soviet?124

Not surprisingly, it is the immediate post-war era which was also the preliminary phase of the Cold War (1947-53) that proved the golden age of the films of the paranoid man.

The genre is most at home in the post-war forties, at a time when the nation re-entered private life [i.e., the historical cross-currents of de-mobilization and a nascent global hegemony] ... Noir thrives on confusion and a breakdown of values, and, in prospect, the utter political absurdity of the search for communists in the late forties and early fifties contained ripe possibilities for noir stories of paranoia, and of nightmarish disruptions of everyday routine. But the fact remains that no significant films noirs were concerned, either directly or metaphorically, with the contemporary political scene. The genre worked most effectively in recording private rather than large-scale social traumas; its most congenial framework was domestic: murderously angry husbands and wives, embattled parents, siblings and lovers.125

But if the colonial frontier has been re-directed within, towards the interior, then there is no longer a clear boundary between inside and outside, familiar and alien, Self and Other. Where is the struggle to take place since everywhere is a war-zone?

The answer is quite horrifying.

Black Skins, White Masks and the Babylon Shitstem

‘... on the individual level, on the plane of human rights, what is fascism if not colonialism when rooted in a traditionally colonialist country?’— Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth [71]

‘Sordid or strange, death always emerges at the end of a tortuous journey. Film noir is a film of death, in all senses of the word.’—Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton [5]
According to Jean-Paul Sartre

[For] with us there is nothing more consistent than a racist humanism since the European has only been able to become a man through creating slaves and monsters. While there was a native population somewhere this imposture was not shown up; in the notion of the human race we found an abstract assumption of universality which served as cover for the most realistic practices.  

Why is the paranoid man so integral to post-war noir? The answer lies with the wider cultural traumas associated with the de-colonization of the Modern World-System (or the Babylon shitstem in Jamaican), which was triggered by the rise of Fascism inside the core-zone of the western European states. Franz Fanon convincingly argues that the Second World War, no less than the First, must be understood as a genocidal struggle not of emancipation but imperialism; ‘Not long ago Nazism transformed the whole of Europe into a veritable colony.’

Or, more precisely, the transformation of Europe into Africa—at the heart of National Socialism lay a pathological ‘confusion’ of onto-political categories as Aime Cesaire put it.

At bottom what [the European humanist] cannot forgive Hitler for is not the crime in itself, the crime against man, it is not the humiliation of man as such, it is the crime against the white man, and the fact that he applied to Europe colonialist procedures which until then had been reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the ‘coolies’ of India, and the ‘niggers’ of Africa.

Noir’s paranoid man is a metaphor, both literary and cinematic, of the veteran-as-colonialist who has now returned home from the wars—except that the veteran is no longer a ‘colonialist’ in the correct sense of the term. To be a colonialist one would have to be masculine, or at least externally conform to the markers of an invincible masculinity; now, the veteran is the de-colonizer the one who, even if successful in combat, has lost his patrimony which is the frontier. Which is the grounds of neurosis, specifically the neurosis of inner-directed violence, as Sartre recognized clearly: today, ‘violence, blocked everywhere, comes back on us through our soldiers, comes inside and takes possession of us all’ is it not […] the case that, since we cannot crush the natives, violence comes back on its tracks, accumulates in the very depths of our nature and seeks a way out?

The more rigidly demarcated era of eurocentrism has given way to an entirely new phenomenon, neo-colonialism, which bizarrely gives birth to a double movement within the Babylon shitstem: the intensification of neo-colonialist warfare within the peripheral zones and the creation of a quasi-militarized national security apparatus within the core zone as part of the Cold War—that is, endo-colonization. Ironically, the Babylon shitstem formally presupposes absolute demarcations between core and periphery, de-colonizing and de-colonized; yet what it yields is a weird pattern of imitation, the Developed and Developing Worlds entering into a system of tortuous mimetic relationships, or doublings. Again, Sartre

[We] only become what we are by the radical and deep-seated refusal of that which others have made of us […] You [the de-colonizer] said they [the de-colonized]

126 Sartre, 22.
127 Fanon, Wretched, 80.
128 Cesaire, 36.
129 Sartre, 23.
130 Sartre, 24.
understand nothing but violence? Of course; first, the only violence is the settler’s; but soon they will make of it their own; that is to say, the same violence is thrown back upon us as when our reflection comes forward to meet us when we go towards a mirror.131

And as Sartre, along with all of the ‘first wave’ of post-colonialist writers (Fanon, Cesaire, Memmi) knew full well, the material ‘split’ between the core and peripheral zones of the Babylon shitstem was uncannily mirrored by a psychological ‘split’ within the psychic economies of both the de-colonizer and the de-colonized,132 both sets of ‘split personalities’ mimetically linked through an inverted image of re-masculinization: the former the survival of trauma induced paranoia, the latter the acquisition of the phallus. Therefore, the ‘colonial situation manufactures colonialists, just as it manufactures the colonized’133; as Ashis Nandy put it

Such splitting of ones’ self, to protect one’s sanity and to ensure survival, makes the subject an object to himself and disaffiliates the violence and the humiliation he suffers from the ‘essential constituent’ of his self. It is an attempt to survive by inducing in oneself a psychosomatic state which would render one’s immediate context partly dreamlike or unreal. Because, ‘in order to live and stay human, the survivor must be in the world but not of it.’134

The paranoid de-colonizer first. As the (passive) discursive subject of psycho-analysis, the PTSD afflicted war veteran will be culturally ‘framed’ as a divided, conflicted, or fragmented self under the competing rubrics of neurosis or psychosis; ergo, the noir anti-hero is ‘emphatically not the prime agent of the narrative order.’135 Following Krutnik, I hold that the single most important—and, therefore, the crucial signifier—of noir in all of its forms is a specifically American-style crisis of masculinity.

Masculine identity and sexuality are never stable and unified but are rather in flux between conflicting positions of desire; masculinity is hegemonic rather than homogenous. The ‘tough’ investigative thriller, then, should be considered not in terms of any simple reiteration of a coherent masculinity but as having to negotiate conflicting and contradictory positionings of male desire, identity and sexuality, and to consolidate masculinity as unified.136

I have already highlighted the centrality of amnesia to the paranoid anti-hero, not only as a signature trait but as the sign of both lost time and repressed memory: specifically, the trauma of American hegemonic warfare, what Tom Engelhardt has intriguingly called ‘the end of victory culture’.137 Therefore, we experience no direct perception of either warfare or the colonies within film noir; what we are exposed to, however, are the dis-placed signifiers of de-colonization. The entirety of the noir landscape is Manichean, a segregated (and claustrophobic)

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131 Sartre, 15.
132 Here I have slightly confused Fanon’s comments on the colonized with Albert Memmi’s notion of the de-colonized. My point is that Fanon’s ‘colonized’ is the abject Other of the periphery who has initiated the process of national liberation—the one who is the process of de-colonizing, which symbolically means ‘masculinizing’.
133 Memmi, 56.
134 Nandy, 109. Nandy is relying upon Erving Goffman in this passage.
135 Krutnick, 101. Pippin takes the same line.
136 Krutnick, 113.
137 ‘Ended’ in that the wars will never cease and ‘Victory’ never achieved, whatever the body-count. See Engelhardt, generally.
world of isolated domains which are being constantly transversed by the quester-seeker anti-hero, all of which evokes Fanon's description of the colonial frontier.

The colonial world is a world divided into compartments. ... [If] we examine closely this system of compartments, we will at least be able to reveal the lines of force it implies. This approach to the colonial world, its ordering and its geographical layout will allow us to mark out the lines on which a de-colonized society will be re-organized.138 The colonial world is a world cut in two. The dividing line, the frontiers are shown by barracks and police stations. In the colonies it is the policemen and the soldier who are the official, instituted go-betweens, the spokesmen of the settler and his rule of oppression.139

Two of noir's primary signifiers of the colonial frontier that have been imported into the heartland are 'the city as colony' and 'the border town'—border here being both physical and symbolic. The greatest literary purveyor of the city-as-colony is the paranoid noir writer Cornell Woolrich140; in his crucial text Deadline at Dawn (1944) [New York] is explicitly the villain: the heroine never ceases to see it as a sentient, malevolent force, deliberately setting out to sabotage any plans for happiness or escape. Although few of the films are quite as explicit as this, film noir nevertheless took over from nineteenth-century melodrama the sense of the city as a dangerous, hostile place. The films may range through some of the same settings as the gangster movie—downtown bars, classy nightclubs, seedy hotel rooms, precinct stations, the city at night—but the emphasis is crucially different. In the gangster movie, the city may be dangerous, but it's also exciting, and the hero moves through its settings with a breezy confidence and sociability; in film noir, it is, rather, bleak and isolating, and the hero tends to take to the streets uneasily, aware of himself as an outsider. If the city may be taken as an image of capitalism, the gangster movie dwells on its luxuries and spoils in a way which captures something of their allure; but in film noir the focus is on the seedy underside of the city: the casualties or crooks of capitalism [in Fanon's terminology, 'the wretched of the Earth']. Where the glamour and glitter are shown, there is typically a sense of alienation.141

It is surprising that so many noir thrillers, such as the film Out of the Past (1947), take place in rural settings142; the 'nightmarish setting' of the border town represents not only the town itself but the inchoate shapelessness of the border that lies beyond it—'Ideologically viewed as the outer reaches of the “civilized” (American) world, the border town tends to be presented as peculiarly dangerous and threatening'143 reaching its cinematic apogee in the very last film noir, Orson Welles' Touch of Evil (1958). But it is only when we read these signs through the lenses of post-colonialist critique that we realize that the First World is a veritable 'stand in'

138 De-colonization being nothing other than the breakdown of such territorial demarcations, the 'ideology' of eurocentrism notwithstanding.
139 Fanon, Wretched, 29.
140 For Woolrich's noir novels as hidden transcripts for dystopian urbanism, see Reid and Walker, passim. As with Fanon, Woolrich envisaged the American metropolis as both colonized and compartmentalized. Reid and Walker, 74 and 78-9.
141 Walker, 30.
142 Contrary to Christopher, who views noir in almost exclusively urbanist terms.
143 Walker, 31.
for the Third. The de-colonized is no less a ‘split self’ than the de-colonizer and his ‘world’ is thus no less Manichean and compartmentalized—the crucial difference is the space occupied by the respective selves within the Babylon shitstem. The de-colonized’s ‘challenge to the colonial world is not a rational confrontation of points of view. It is not a treatise on the universal, but the untidy affirmation of an original idea propounded as an absolute. The colonial world is a Manichaean world.’ And this absolute is nothing other than an annihilating violence.

The native’s work is to imagine all possible methods for destroying the settler. On the logical plane, the Manicheanism of the settler produces a Manicheanism of the native. To the theory of the absolute evil of the native’ the theory of the absolute evil of the settler’ replies. The appearance of the settler has meant in the terms of syncretism the death of the aboriginal society, cultural lethargy, and the petrification of individuals. For the native, life can only spring up again out of the rotting corpse of the settler. This, then is the correspondence, term by term, between the two trains of reasoning.

Fanon’s greatest contribution to post-colonialist literature was to re-cast the issue of de-colonization within the terms of psycho-analysis: trauma, psychosis and sexual pathology are all read as both the signs (literary) and symptoms (clinical) of de-colonization. I have already established that the noir anti-hero is not conflicted because he possesses multiple sexualities; rather, he possesses multiple sexualities because he is conflicted. Yet, the exact same is the ‘truth’ of the de-colonized—and this ‘truth’ is the absence of a ‘real’ Self.

Even prior to the global wave of wars of national liberation, the ‘truth is that colonialism in its essence was already taking on the aspect of a fertile purveyor for psychiatric hospitals. ... Because it is a systematic negation of the other person and a furious determination to deny the other person all attributes of humanity, colonialism forces the people it dominates to ask themselves the question constantly: ‘In reality, who am I?’

An inverted mirror image of the de-colonizer within the de-colonized—whereas the former lost his masculinity (phallus) through the trauma of frontier atrocities, the latter must reclaim his masculinity (phallus) through the deliberate enactment of such atrocities which, for him, are therapeutic: ‘At the risk of arousing the resentment of my coloured brothers, I will say that the black man is not a man.’ Fanon outlines a complicated mimetic inter-play between Black and White: the Black emulates the Whiteness of the colonizer out of a form of desire (albeit one that is neurotic in origin) yet, thereby, unintentionally replicates the deeper truth of the colonialist-settler: his lack of true (symbolic) masculinity: ‘The black man wants to be white. The white man slaves to reach a human level.’ In other words: the mimetic relationship between White Man and Black Man is identical to that of paranoid man to femme-fatale. Specifically, the Black Man wants something that is not ‘really’ there (the White Man) but, to

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144 Fanon, Wretched, 31.
145 Fanon, Wretched, 73.
146 Fanon, Wretched, 200.
147 Fanon, Black Skins, 1.
148 ‘Every colonized people—in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality—finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nations; that is, with the culture of the mother country.’ Fanon, Black Skins, 9.
149 Fanon, Black Skins, 3.
the degree that he can successfully imitate him, he acquires what the Other is presumed to have (the phallus, or, in this case, the symbolic order of masculinity and national independence). Hence, ‘For the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white [...] If there is an inferiority complex, it is the outcome of a double process—primarily, economic—subsequently, the internalization—or, better, the epidermalization—of this inferiority.’

The insurmountable problem—the true neurosis—is that within the totalizing racial hierarchy of the Babylon shitstem the ‘Negro symbolizes the biological’—meaning only the penis. How, therefore, to prove that one is ‘real’ (i.e., a Man) while simultaneously evading the mimetic trap of Europe? Simple: ‘The rebel’s weapon is the proof of his humanity.’ And that means combat: ‘The native cures himself of colonial neurosis by thrusting out the settler through force of arms. When his rage boils over, he rediscovers his lost innocence and comes to know himself in that he himself creates his self.’

So, just as with the paranoid man of noir (and here noir as ‘blackness’ acquires all of the attributes of a metaphysically bleak double-entendre) so too must de-colonized man undergo the supreme (and doubtful) moment of masculine testing—the hidden transcript with a vengeance. It is not pretty.

Make no mistake about it; by this mad fury, by this bitterness and spleen, by their ever-present desire to kill us [the Whites], by the permanent tensing of powerful muscles which are afraid to relax, they [the Blacks] have become men: men because of the settler, who wants to make beasts of burden of them—because of him, and against him. Hatred, blind hatred which is as yet an abstraction, is their only wealth; the Master calls it forth because he seeks to reduce them to animals, but he fails to break it down because his [economic] interests stop him half-way [...] there are those among [the de-colonized] who assert themselves by throwing themselves barehanded against the guns; these are their heroes. Others make men of themselves by murdering Europeans, and these are shot down; brigands or martyrs, their agony exalts the terrified masses.

I kill therefore I am—which, in a nutshell, is a brilliant explication of the ‘death wish’ of the paranoid man; the questor-seeker descends into the underworld because he wants to kill, or, more precisely, wants to prove that he is a killer (but he fails miserably and remains a symbolic castrate). In a similar manner, the de-colonized ‘knows that he is not an animal; and it is precisely at the moment he realizes his humanity that he begins to sharpen the weapons with which he will secure his victory.’ De-colonizing wars of national liberation are acts of political unification and nation-building, no doubt; but in psycho-sexual terms they are nothing less than the recovery of the unified, masculine Self of the native—which, up until now, has been missing.

[This] new man [the de-colonized] begins his life as a man at the end of it; he considers himself as a potential corpse [...] But this weariness of the heart is the root

150 Fanon, Black Skins, 4.
151 Fanon, Black Skins, 128.
152 Sartre, 19.
153 Sartre, 18. Emphases added.
154 Sartre, 15; see Fanon, Wretched, 47 and 48.
155 Fanon, Wretched, 33.
156 ‘Decolonization unifies [the] people by the radical decision to remove from it its heterogeneity, and by unifying it on a national, sometimes a racial basis.’ Fanon, Wretched, 35.
of an unbelievable courage. We find our humanity on this side of death and despair; he finds it beyond torture and death. We have sown the wind; he is the whirlwind. The child of violence, at every moment he draws from it his humanity. We were men at his expense, he makes himself a man at ours: a different man; of higher quality.  

But most important of all—the violence of de-colonized man is not an act of revenge but the fulfilment of the quest for existential authenticity.

Racialism and hatred and resentment—‘a legitimate desire for revenge’—cannot sustain a war of liberation. Those lightning flashes of consciousness which fling the body into stormy paths or which throw it into an almost pathological trance where the face of the other beckons me on to giddiness, where my blood calls for the blood of the other, where by sheer inertia my death calls for the death of the other—that intense emotion of the first few hours falls to pieces if it is left to feed on its own substance.

So noir’s greatest literary (and cinematic) conceit can now finally be revealed.

It is not the Woman-With-a-Gun.

It is the Black-Man-With-a-Gun.

But, curiously, not an Indonesian.

**Conclusion: Not in Indonesia**

‘Film noir is noir for us; that’s to say, for Western and American audiences of the 1950s. It responds to a certain kind of emotional resonance as singular in time as it is in space.’—Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton [5]

The thesis of this essay is very simple: noir literature is a sub-branch of post-colonial literature and that the single most useful critical methodology for the formal literary analysis of crime writing is post-colonialism. This is not only because so much of contemporary crime literature comes from the Developing World (Jamaica; Haiti; Trinidad and Tobago; Nigeria; the Philippines) but that the historical evolution of the archetypal form of American noir can only be understood within the terms of a profound crisis within the Modern World-System—that global process of de-colonization that yields us the Babylon shitstem. The persuasiveness of this claim arises from a true understanding of how remarkable a development the ‘paranoid man’ was within American film and letters, particularly the former. The decisive proof is nothing other than the Hollywood pleasure principle itself—that films, whatever else they are must act as a source of enjoyment (and, therefore, profit). The tough guy requires no explanation—the phallus-enhanced bearer of Hollywood’s ‘narcissism and narcissistic identification [that] involve phantasies of power, omnipotence, mastery and control’ is virtually self-explanatory. But the shift towards the paranoid man and the noir thriller with their characteristic moods of ‘claustrophobia, paranoia, despair, and nihilism [that constituted] a world view that is expressed not through the film’s tense, elliptical dialogue, nor through their confusing, often insoluble

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157 Sartre, 20.
158 Fanon, Wretched, 111.
159 Naremore, Chapter Six, 220-53. See Diawara on the ‘black’ ghetto as an ‘internal’ colonialis on the noir novels of Chester B. Himes.
160 Steve Neale, cited in Krutnik at 90.
plots, but ultimately through their remarkable style¹⁶¹ almost defies explanation. If we employ Ockham’s razor—that the simplest possible explanation for the largest number of facts is always the preferred solution—then post-colonialism emerges as the single most ‘economic’ explanation not only of noir but of contemporary crime writing, much of the best of which is today coming from the peripheral zones of the Babylon shishetmen (Marlon James and Eka Kurniawan are outstanding examples). In the late 1940s the American literati both ‘discovered’ and ‘invented’ noir as the cultural remedy (placebo?) for unbearable neo-colonialist realities; many other war traumatized countries (France; Italy) and militarily occupied nations (Japan) did the same. The pleasure principle at work in noir, I argue, is essentially identical with the one at work in Horror—a therapeutic catharsis for adults. An added bonus: we can also use post-colonialist critique to explain not only the birth but the demise of film noir, which ‘officially’ ended in 1958 with the release of Orson Welles’ magisterial ‘border town’ noir hell Touch of Evil. The date neatly coincides with the transition of the early Cold War (Truman-Eisenhower) to its ‘middle’ phase (Kennedy-Johnson), which, cinematically, witnessed a dramatic re-valourization and hyper-masculinization of both the White Man and frontier ‘combat’ coming in the improbable form of an English adaptation of an extremely late American hard-boiled hero, Mickey Spillane’s Mike Hammer: none other than Ian Fleming’s James Bond.

As at the beginning so at the end. If so many national literary traditions within the Babylon shishetmen have opted for noir—or at least some extremely ‘dark’ form of crime film and writing—why have both Malaysia and Indonesia largely opted out? I believe that there are two reasons. The first is that neither Malaysian nor Indonesian popular culture underwent that pathological crisis of masculinization so expertly mapped out in both the core and the periphery by David Goodis and Franz Fanon respectively (this is one thing that makes Kurniawan’s work so interesting to me as an American—not only are all of his heroines strong, but all of his so-called heroes are phallically ‘challenged’¹⁶²). The second is that in much of Southeast Asia other cultural tropes were adopted as vehicles for the expression of the cultural anxieties of de-colonization. In Malaysia, possibly because of the particular characteristics of a strongly secularist form of Islamic Modernity, crime literature tended to favour the more British style of traditional ratiocination. In Indonesia, it appears that folkloric supernaturalism and the ubiquity of Horror as a veritable master-trope of popular culture was appropriated, at least in part, to convey neo-colonialist ‘truths’ that were otherwise to be repressed. I think that this is a very fruitful line of inquiry, as I have already demonstrated the similitude between the horror film and the dark crime film in American cinema, which continues to this day (The Silence of the Lambs, for example).

There is, after all, more than one way to bury—or reanimate—a corpse.

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¹⁶¹ Place and Peterson, 65.
¹⁶² A ‘foreign import’ perhaps?


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