



THE PHILOSOPHY OF NEO-NOIR

edited by
MARK T. CONARD

The Philosophy of Neo-Noir

THE PHILOSOPHY OF POPULAR CULTURE

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Introduction

In David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986), Jeffrey (Kyle MacLachlan) allows his curiosity to get the best of him, as he spies on Dorothy Vallens (Isabella Rossellini), has sadomasochistic sex with her, and ends up shooting the vile Frank Booth (Dennis Hopper)—all very noir. In Alan Parker's *Angel Heart* (1987), Harry Angel (Mickey Rourke) is unwittingly sent on a search for himself by none other than Lucifer—also *trés noir*. How about when, in Curtis Hanson's *L.A. Confidential* (1997), police officer Bud White (Russell Crowe) shoots an unarmed suspected rapist or hero cop Ed Exley (Guy Pearce) shotguns Captain Dudley Smith (James Cromwell) in the back? Yep, clearly noir. And you know it's noir when, in Bryan Singer's *The Usual Suspects* (1995), Agent Dave Kujan (Chazz Palminteri) discovers that Verbal Kint (Kevin Spacey), who may or may not be Keyser Soze, has been spinning a tale about an assassination dressed up to look like a drug heist, to the point where at the end of the movie we in the audience don't know if anything we've just been watching is supposed to have happened or not. Indeed, it's all so very noir.

But what does that mean, exactly? What is film noir? And what is neo-noir?

My earlier volume, *The Philosophy of Film Noir* (University Press of Kentucky, 2006), dealt mostly with movies from the classic noir period, which falls between 1941 and 1958, beginning with John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* and ending with Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil*. You know a classic noir film when you see it, with its unusual lighting (the constant opposition of light and shadow), its tilted camera angles, and its off-center scene compositions. But, besides these technical cinematic features, there are a number of themes that characterize film noir, such as the inversion of traditional values (bad guys as heroes, traditional good guys like cops doing bad things) and a kind of moral ambivalence (it's hard to tell right from wrong any more); there's also the feeling of alienation, paranoia, and pessimism; themes of crime and violence abound; and the movies attempt to disorient the spectator, mostly through the filming techniques mentioned above. Some classic examples of films noirs are *Double Indemnity* (Billy

Wilder, 1944), *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Tay Garnett, 1946), *The Big Sleep* (Howard Hawks, 1946), and *Out of the Past* (Jacques Tourneur, 1947).

The term *neo-noir* describes any film coming after the classic noir period that contains noir themes and the noir sensibility. This covers a great deal of ground and a lot of movies since the taste for noir and the desire of filmmakers to make noir films have shown no sign of waning in the decades after the classic era. These later films are likely not shot in black and white and likely don't contain the play of light and shadow that their classic forerunners possessed. They do, however, contain the same alienation, pessimism, moral ambivalence, and disorientation.

In fact, neo-noir films in some ways seem better able to embody the noir outlook. This is for a couple of important reasons. First, the term *film noir* was employed only retroactively, describing a cycle of films that had already (largely) passed. Consequently, the filmmakers of the classic period didn't have access to that expression and couldn't have understood or grasped entirely the meaning or shape of the movement to which they were contributing, whereas neo-noir filmmakers are quite aware of the meaning of *noir* and are quite consciously working within the noir framework and adding to the noir canon. Second, because of the abandonment of government oversight and censorship and the introduction of the ratings code, neo-noir filmmakers can get away with a great deal more than their classic noir predecessors. Whereas, under the censorship of the Hays Office, for example, no crime could go unpunished, in neo-noir the criminals can, and, indeed, very often do, succeed. Good things happen to bad people, and bad things happen to good people (just like in real life!), which seems in line with noir's cynicism and pessimism.

Some examples of neo-noir movies include John Boorman's *Point Blank* (1967) and Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) from the 1960s, Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974) and Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976) from the 1970s, Lawrence Kasdan's *Body Heat* (1981) and David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986) from the 1980s, and Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and Curtis Hanson's *L.A. Confidential* (1997) from the 1990s. More recent examples include the Coen brothers' *The Man Who Wasn't There* (2001) and Robert Rodriguez's *Sin City* (2005).

The present volume investigates the philosophical themes and underpinnings of neo-noir films and also uses the movies as a vehicle for exploring and explaining traditional philosophical ideas. It comprises thirteen essays from scholars in both philosophy and film and media studies. The

essays are written in nontechnical language and require no knowledge of philosophy to appreciate or understand.

Part 1, "Subjectivity, Knowledge, and Human Nature in Neo-Noir," begins with "Space, Time, and Subjectivity in Neo-Noir Cinema," in which Jerold J. Abrams argues that, whereas in classic noir the detective searches the modern cityscape for an external villain, in neo-noir, by contrast, the detective's task is to reorganize a disjointed time continuum, in which what is effectively hidden is the detective's own identity as the villain. Next, in "*Blade Runner* and Sartre: The Boundaries of Humanity," Judith Barad focuses on the question of how we can distinguish human beings from sophisticated computers, thereby raising the question of what it means to be human at all. In "John Locke, Personal Identity, and *Memento*," Basil Smith discusses Locke's theory of personal identity—what makes a person the same over time—and the lessons that Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000) has for such a theory. Last, in "Problems of Memory and Identity in Neo-Noir's Existentialist Antihero," Andrew Spicer claims that the neo-noir protagonist's memory and identity are problematized in a contingent and meaningless world where time is chaotic, and dream and reality intermingle.

Part 2, "Justice, Guilt, and Redemption: Morality in Neo-Noir," begins with "The Murder of Moral Idealism: Kant and the Death of Ian Campbell in *The Onion Field*," in which Douglas L. Berger examines the issue of whether human beings carry an inbuilt conscience, an awareness of right and wrong, in light of a cop-noir rendition of a true murder story. Next, in "Justice and Moral Corruption in *A Simple Plan*," Aeon J. Skoble discusses how Sam Raimi's *A Simple Plan* (1998) dramatizes Plato's claim that being just and virtuous is in one's self-interest and being unjust and vicious is destructive of the self. Donald R. D'Aries and Foster Hirsch argue, in "Saint' Sydney: Atonement and Moral Inversion in *Hard Eight*," that Paul Thomas Anderson's largely overlooked 1996 neo-noir enlarges the discussion of justice and morality by showing that the protagonist's redemption is mired in moral perversity and is, therefore, problematic and partial. Last, in "*Reservoir Dogs*: Redemption in a Postmodern World," I claim that the postmodernism of Tarantino's films undermines the attempts at redemption that his characters always seem to undertake.

Part 3, "Elements of Neo-Noir," opens with "The Dark Sublimity of *Chinatown*," in which Richard Gilmore avers that Roman Polanski's classic neo-noir engages not just the ideas and themes of noir but also those of classic philosophy and aesthetics. Next, in "The Human Comedy

Perpetuates Itself: Nihilism and Comedy in Coen Neo-Noir,” Thomas S. Hibbs claims that the threat of nihilism, often prominent in classic noir, becomes a working assumption in much of neo-noir, revealing the various quests of the noir protagonist to be pointless, absurd, and thus comic, and that the most representative examples of this turn to the comedic in neo-noir are the films of the Coen brothers. In “The New Sincerity of Neo-Noir: The Example of *The Man Who Wasn’t There*,” R. Barton Palmer argues that the Coen brothers’ film attempts to recapture and represent the structure of feeling of the immediate postwar years, including especially the era’s anomic obsession with uncertainty. Jeanne Schuler and Patrick Murray, in “‘Anything Is Possible Here’: Capitalism, Neo-Noir, and *Chinatown*,” investigate from a Marxist perspective how the forms of capitalism shape the characteristic unfolding of noir themes in this classic neo-noir film. Last, in “Sunshine Noir: Postmodernism and *Miami Vice*,” Steven M. Sanders asserts that, as a postmodern noir TV show, *Miami Vice* rejects any foundation on which our knowledge of reality could rest and, instead, provides new and alternative interpretations of the world, rather than a window into reality or a “mirror of nature.”

There is a tremendous wealth of great neo-noir films and TV shows from which to choose for a volume like this, and we believe that the ones we’ve selected are a representative sample. There is, perhaps, one glaring omission: the work of Martin Scorsese, whose noirs are some of the most important and memorable, including *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Mean Streets* (1973), and *Raging Bull* (1980). However, we take Scorsese’s work—which is not limited to noir—to be so important that we’re planning on devoting an entire separate volume to it.

We certainly hope and trust that our analyses of these terrific movies will deepen and enrich your understanding of them and, perhaps, prompt you to engage in a bit of philosophical reflection about the world and human existence. And, if Socrates is right that “the unexamined life is not worth living,” a bit of philosophy and reflection is bound to be a good thing.

Part 1

Subjectivity, Knowledge, and Human Nature in Neo-Noir

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Space, Time, and Subjectivity in Neo-Noir Cinema

Jerold J. Abrams

Much of the time, classic film noir takes place in Los Angeles—but it's always in the city, always a detective looking for clues to unravel the mystery of whodunit. One of the best is Bogart playing Philip Marlowe in *The Big Sleep* (Howard Hawks, 1946), walking dark and lonely streets, interviewing suspects, never believing any of them. This was a grand time in American cinema—the early to late 1940s—but, of course, none of it would last, for classic noir peaked early and fast. And, by 1958, with Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil* it was all too evident: “dark cinema” had become heavy with routine and self-consciousness. Decadence had set in, and the future of noir was a big question mark. But then something new happened: suddenly noir began to reinvent itself from within. This new noir—this “neo-noir”—still had all the old trappings of classic noir, like detectives, labyrinths, and femmes fatales. But then any new growth always bears the marks of its beginnings.

Two things, however, were different and really make neo-noir what it is today. First is setting: what used to be the contemporary “space” of the Los Angeles city now becomes the “time” of the distant future and the distant past. Second is character: rather than looking for a criminal in the city that surrounds him, now the detective's search is for himself, for his own identity and how he may have lost it. Or, to put the same point another way, the classic noir detective is a hardened stoic—not a flat character (mind you), but hardly “conflicted” in Shakespeare's sense. With neo-noir, however, that is precisely the point. The character is “divided” against himself, although not so much emotionally, as in Shakespeare, as epistemologically: divided in time as two selves, and one is looking for the other.

Hirsch and Dimendberg on the Transition to Neo-Noir

The basic categories of noir and neo-noir have been fairly widely writ-

ten up—and no one's better at it than Foster Hirsch. In *Detours and Lost Highways*, Hirsch maps the continuity of the genre and finds neo-noir to be a perfectly natural extension of the same old classic themes. "While there have been many local changes," he writes, "noir's basic narrative molds have remained notably stable."¹ So, again, the detective, the crime, the femme fatale, the maze—it's all right there, right from the very beginning. But there are local changes, as Hirsch notes, and taken together these form the fundamental shift within noir to neo-noir. Important among these changes are the placing of social issues, like race, class, and gender, already latent in noir, at the forefront of dark cinema, basically because they have come to the forefront of contemporary society. Equally important, however, is the change in setting mentioned before. "Neo-noir," writes Hirsch, "is as likely to take place in vast open spaces as in the pestilential city of tradition."² Think of *Touch of Evil* at the very end of classic noir: it moves the action out of Los Angeles and into another country, Mexico, and into the desert, giving noir a new kind of danger.

Edward Dimendberg makes the same sort of point in *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity*. "The end of film noir," writes Dimendberg, "also coincides, and not fortuitously, with the end of the metropolis of classical modernity, the centered city of immediately recognizable and recognized spaces. . . . One might speculate that as spatial dispersal became a ubiquitous cultural reality, centripetal space began to appear excessively archaic."³ In the old noir, the city was centripetal, meaning always tightly organized around a city center; but then, suddenly, after the war—after America was established as a superpower and capitalism moved into high gear—the city seemed to fly apart centrifugally. The point may, at first, seem a little abstract—the very idea that the city somehow "flew apart" at the edges is odd—but really it's not that hard to imagine.

You see it everywhere in the form of "postmodern" architecture. In the modern city you always knew where you were because the architectural styles were so incredibly diversified: how could you miss the Empire State Building or the HOLLYWOOD sign? You *couldn't*. And, of course, these monuments are all still there, but a lot has changed as well. For with post-modern architecture now the buildings look all the same: massive repetition of forms, like some mad architect used a strip mall stencil to design everything from prisons to churches to video stores. So, now, the landmarks are all identical, all mass-produced—and you get lost in space, in the same moment you get found in the universal markers: "Blockbuster," "Wal-Mart," "Gap," "Barnes & Noble." And so fades away the modern city—and with it

both the setting and the cause of all classic film noir. Dimendberg is right, and so is Hirsch.

But there's more to it than that, something else that really signals the birth of the new noir. For, as centripetal space dissolved, so too did the locus of community. Everyone was moving around, leaving one place, going to another: jobs, education, travel as an end in itself (especially in the 1960s: think of the beat generation). Add to all this multiculturalism and the steady dissolution of the nuclear family, and, pretty soon, with all this centrifugal motion, traditional social bonds seemed quaint on a good day, oppressive on a bad day, and everyone agreed: things would never be the same. So, in place of the family, the community, the nation-state, or the church, a new king emerged in the form of the "self": the self as the king of its very own mind.

Fusion of Detective and Villain

And that, as I see it, is what the shift to neo-noir is really all about. Everything takes place in relation to the self: the self is the detective, the self is the villain, and all the clues exist solely within his own mind. Sure, there was some of this in classic noir—just like Hirsch's social issues—in the form of early amnesia noirs, but it *hardly* defined the genre, anyway not like it does today. And the reason is simple: the postmodern conditions of cultural flux and centrifugal space in the second half of the twentieth century simply forced the individual subject to the forefront of culture and, ultimately, to the forefront of the new noir.

And, in my view, this really marks the third development in the form of the detective story. The first form is the classic nineteenth-century version, especially Sherlock Holmes. In that formula, we have the first-person perspective of John Watson, a medical doctor (and really a kind of detective), who is, in fact and quite clearly, looking for the essence of the mind of Holmes. However, this investigation of the self into an other takes place only when the other, namely, Holmes, is looking for another still, namely, the villain.

Everything changes, however, as the nineteenth century becomes the twentieth and Sherlock Holmes, in turn, steadily becomes Phillip Marlowe and Sam Spade. For, now, Watson is gone. And it's the detective himself who is telling the story about his own search for the other as villain. So it's still a first-person-singular detective story, but the degrees between the reader (or the viewer) and the villain have closed by one: namely, the re-

moval of Watson, such that our first-person perspective is, in fact, closer to the actual events of the case. This is the second major form of the detective story, namely, classic noir.

And, if you decrease the degrees even further by one, you get neo-noir as a third form. It's still a first-person narrative—and, like noir, it's still the detective who's doing the talking, but he's no longer looking for some mysterious villain in the city. He's looking for himself: he's looking for himself as an other.

Forms of Neo-Noir Time

Somehow, the detective's mind has divided, typically because of a traumatic event that causes some form of amnesia. This can be in the form of retrograde amnesia, in which the detective cannot remember past events, or anterograde amnesia, in which he cannot form new memories, or lacunar amnesia, which involves the loss of memory about a particular event.

But it can also be caused by hallucinations, multiple personalities, artificial memory implants, a high-tech revealing of the future, or any number of other alterations in the continuum of self-consciousness. In fact, it can even be caused by the detective's conscious or unconscious awareness of his own internal thoughts in dialogue. That is, because thought takes place largely in language and language involves the simultaneous performances of a speaker and a hearer, the detective may divide these roles into characters, taking one of them for "himself" and another for another person existing outside himself.

In all these cases, the key thing to keep in mind is this: one self is always ahead, and the other is always behind. And this is precisely why the idea of time is so very important to the structure of all neo-noir. Indeed, I think it's fair to say that there are really three distinct forms of neo-noir, which correspond to the three parts of the time continuum, namely, past, present, and future. These three forms may be called *past neo-noir*, *present neo-noir*, and *future neo-noir* (or *future noir*, as Paul Sammon calls it).⁴

Past Neo-Noir

Past neo-noir is usually low-tech, contrasting it with the very high-tech future noir, and almost always theological. *The Ninth Gate* (Roman Polanski, 1999) is a perfect example: it's the story of a "book detective," Dean Corso (Johnny Depp), who investigates *The Nine Gates*, a book written in the

Middle Ages by Satan himself. Corso is hired by Boris Balkan (Frank Langella), an expert on the occult and a famed book collector, to investigate two other copies of *The Nine Gates*. Balkan owns one, but he's sure it's a forgery—basically because the devil won't appear on command. Naturally, Corso says yes. Balkan may be totally nuts—no doubting that—but still the job is easy money. So off Corso goes to Europe—a trip that is symbolic of going back into the past, into the Middle Ages—to examine the other two copies.

In investigating the matter, however, Corso soon realizes that Balkan's copy is *not* a forgery and that neither are the other two. In fact, there aren't even three books in the first place: they're all part of a singular text—three books in one, a kind of demonic "trinity" of texts. Now Corso is intrigued, and he's starting to believe. But, as he goes deeper into the mystery of *The Nine Gates*, he soon discovers himself at the center of the plot: the devil has chosen him and not Balkan to find the Ninth Gate to hell, a discovery that Corso is only too happy to make. For Corso has been "converted," and he is now searching for his own demonic salvation—his own otherworldly dark power. And, by film's end, he is, indeed, a full-fledged servant of Satan, prepared to do whatever it takes to unlock the Ninth Gate.

You find the same kind of fusion of historical noir and theological plot as well in *Angel Heart* (Alan Parker, 1987), which is actually a past/theological noir fused with the story of Faust. The very noirish detective Harry Angel (Mickey Rourke) is commissioned by Louis Cypher (as in "Lucifer," played by Robert De Niro), who wants Angel to find Johnny Favorite, whose real name was Liebling. "I gave Johnny some help at the beginning of his career," says Cypher. But Favorite, having been in the war, has shell shock and amnesia and is now a virtual zombie—and, as a consequence, "the contract was never honored." Angel agrees to check it out, in part because he too was in the war and also had shell shock; naturally he's sympathetic to the situation. But what he doesn't know is that he, Angel, is (or was) Favorite—and was Liebling before that. Indeed, Angel is the one with amnesia, which means that he doesn't remember making a pact with the devil. So, in a sense, he's not totally obligated to make good on it: he's not the same person anymore. Of course, that's hardly going to wash with the devil, who still wants Favorite's soul.

And this is why Cypher sends Angel looking for himself: so that he can figure out who he used to be, which he does. In doing so, he begins as all noir detectives do, with a series of typical noir interviews, or at least he thinks he does: in fact, he's actually murdering, without knowing it, each

of the suspects he visits. Here, the devil is using Angel's amnesia and personality split against him, so that, instead of remembering murders, Angel remembers something else, like eating a cheeseburger at a local diner. Effectively, the devil is framing Angel against himself to make him so guilty of other sins as to be worthy of his original Faustian bargain. And, by film's end, Angel is, indeed, a devil—crying, screaming (Mickey Rourke is brilliant here), “I *know* who I am. I know who I am,” as he descends into the fiery depths of hell.

As a third example of past neo-noir—one certainly not typically categorized as noir—*Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Steven Spielberg and George Lucas, 1981) is important to note for its historical and theological place in the tradition. Indiana Jones (Harrison Ford) is a detective, certainly: he investigates lost artifacts, and he's also slightly on the criminal side, something in between a scholar and a grave robber. He wears a gun and a noir fedora, uses clipped Hemingway-like language, strikes a stoic pose, gets beaten up all the time (just like Bogie), and in standard neo-noir fashion goes looking through time for a find of theologically gigantic proportions—nothing less than the Hebrew Ark of the Covenant. At the same time, he is also looking for himself, looking for an experience of the Ark in order to test his faith—or whether he has any. He wants to know who he is: a man of faith or a man of science. And he finds his answer at the end—in a moment, with just the slightest shred of scientific evidence for God. All of a sudden, now he's a believer, and now he knows: the Ark is very deadly indeed. So, when Marion Ravenwood (Karen Allen) wants to see it, he warns her, “Shut your eyes!”—or the light exploding from the Ark will penetrate the windows of her soul.

It's this last scene that really clinches *Raiders's* position in the noir and neo-noir tradition. For it's taken almost directly from the classic film noir *Kiss Me Deadly* (Robert Aldrich, 1955)—also a detective film about a very dangerous box of light. And, again, it all happens right at the end: Dr. G. E. Soberin (Albert Dekker) tells an overcurious woman, Gabrielle/Lily Carver (Gaby Rodgers) (and, of course, here's the link to Marion in *Raiders*): “You have been misnamed, Gabrielle. You should have been called Pandora. She had a curiosity about a box, and opened it, and let loose all the evil in the world.” But Lily/Gabrielle doesn't care: “Never mind about the evil. What's in it?” She just can't help herself, and—BOOM! A massive nuclear explosion. Spielberg and Lucas basically redid this classic noir scene by turning the science into religion—no longer is the dangerous box of light nuclear; now it's an even more dangerous box of spiritual light, “fire of God,” as Indiana puts it.

Quentin Tarantino clearly loved this theme in noir, so, when it came time thirteen years later to do his own neo-noir, *Pulp Fiction* (1994), he simply redid the same theme once again. Here, Jules Winnfield (Samuel L. Jackson) and Vincent Vega (John Travolta) are sent to recover a briefcase, again, a kind of “box,” that, when opened, also gleams hard golden light. We are never told what it is—but clearly the box of fiery light in a noir film and the question “What is it?” asked by Honey Bunny (Amanda Plummer) are reminiscent of Gabrielle’s demise in *Kiss Me Deadly* and Marion Ravenwood’s near miss in *Raiders*.

Future Neo-Noir: Detective Science Fiction and Alien Noir

Now, as we move to the opposite end of the neo-noir spectrum and to future noir, some of the old theological elements will remain, certainly—but really only germinally. Indeed, for the most part, they fade away and are replaced by science and high technology.

In *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982), for example, Detective Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford), an ex-cop, gets called back to do one last job: the extermination of four humanoid “replicants.” Originally, the replicants were built to do manual labor “off-world,” but recently they’ve returned to meet their maker, in hopes of extending their four-year life span. Problem is, they blend in rather well: you can’t just pick them out of a police lineup. In fact, the only way to test them is Voigt-Kampff, a kind of sci-fi Turing test used to tell robots from people, and this is also the future noir version of the classic noir “interview.” On most androids it works pretty easily (maybe twenty or thirty questions, cross-referenced), but there is a new race of replicants, a special line, and Rachael (Sean Young) is one of them—it takes over a hundred questions to figure her out.

Rachael is special—so special, in fact, that she doesn’t even know she’s an android. She doesn’t know her entire cognitive groundwork is artificial: her memories aren’t real. Still, fake as she is, Rachael is no fool—she’s incredibly intelligent, and, being quite human in many ways, she figures out her real identity just by looking into Deckard’s eyes, almost as if she were testing him too. So she goes to Deckard’s apartment, just after her Voigt-Kampff test, with all her false pictures and all her false memories, and forces him to tell her the truth to confirm what she already knows—which he does. By this point, however, Rachael has figured out even more than Deckard has: “You know that Voigt-Kampff test of yours?” she asks. “Did you ever take that test yourself?” Deckard doesn’t answer, but even

later that same evening, while playing piano, he dozes a little and has a brief dream of a unicorn running by. So we know right away: the same program must have been used on the other detective, Gaff (Edward James Olmos), who makes paper and matchstick sculptures of unicorns. Clearly, the two cops were built with the same imagination implants. However, Deckard—being the best of the blade runners—also has something of Rachael in him, and the piano is the clue: Rachael also knows how to play piano, and we are given no good reason why Deckard (a cop) would own one, let alone know how to play in the first place. But, from the perspective of the history of the detective story, really, this makes perfect sense, for his imagination is infused with the same aesthetic creativity you find in all great detectives, from Edgar Allan Poe's Auguste Dupin, to Sherlock Holmes, who plays the violin, even up through James Bond, whose artistic tastes are well refined indeed. And, once you've got this point, it's all too apparent: Deckard doesn't have a past at all. He might as well have been built a week ago—just like Rachael.

It's this way in all future noirs—the detective must find himself, despite high technology, but using those same tools as well. Take, for example, *Minority Report* (Steven Spielberg, 2002). Here, the detective is John Anderton (Tom Cruise), chief of Pre-Crime—an experimental form of law enforcement in Washington DC. The secret of Pre-Crime is “*pre-cognition*”—in the form of three precognitive geniuses, Agatha, Arthur, and Dashiell (whose names refer to three detective writers: Agatha Christie, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and Dashiell Hammett). These “pre-cogs” are kept drugged, to keep them calm—basically brilliant zombies—while visions of an imminent future race steadily through their minds and are then projected onto a screen above them. Once the future crime is viewed, then Anderton's crew can nab the criminal before he even commits the crime.

It's the ultimate form of crime prevention: catch the killer before he can even get to his victim. In fact, the project of Pre-Crime is so successful that it's ready to go national very soon, until a scandal breaks out: the pre-cogs have revealed the name of a new future murderer, Chief Anderton himself. And now Anderton must go on the run, effectively “running from himself”—indeed, from a system he helped create. At the same time, of course, he must also run forward into the future toward a murder that, he knows, he must at once commit and simultaneously prevent—and he doesn't have a clue as to his own motive.

So you get the basic idea: past noir is theological, and future noir is sci-fi. And, in the transition, God and the devil are replaced by science and technology. This is, however, by no means also to say that there is noth-

ing otherworldly about future noir. Quite the contrary. In fact, an important form of the future noir subgenre is what we might call *alien noir*. And *The X-Files*—which is both a television series (created by Chris Carter) and a 1998 film (directed by Rob Bowman)—is certainly one of the most popular examples of this form. Still, as neo-noir as *The X-Files* is, there is also an ever-so-slight return to Conan Doyle's original formula. Dana Scully (Gillian Anderson) is the new Watson: she's a medical doctor and a companion and counterpoint to Fox Mulder (David Duchovny), who is, in turn, the new Sherlock Holmes. Mulder is a brilliant detective with an almost supernatural ability to solve seemingly unsolvable crimes, in large part because he has Holmes's wild imagination.

However, rather than looking for earthly villains, Mulder's looking for aliens, who are plotting with our government to colonize the earth and make humanity into a slave race. And he has one rather large problem in uncovering this conspiracy: the hard evidence against the government, and in support of the existence of aliens, is always just beyond arm's reach. And, whatever evidence he has, he knows it could have been "put there" as part of an elaborate charade intended to lead him on a wild goose chase. Even his own memories, he knows—they could have been manufactured. Did he *really* see his sister Samantha abducted by aliens when they were children? Or was it all staged? Or maybe it's lacunar amnesia: that one memory is simply gone, and Mulder as a boy imposed fantasies about aliens on top of it. Even with intensive regression hypnotherapy, he's never 100 percent sure. And Scully is always there to give him the scientific point of view, as a foil to his madness.

Similarly, *Dark City* (Alex Proyas, 1998) also has aliens plotting against the human race—although, rather than the "little green men" of *The X-Files*, these aliens look like us and wear trenchcoats and fedoras in typical noir fashion. They've taken us from earth and replanted us on a massive spaceship—which we think is a city, although it's really a replica of a typical classic noir Los Angeles cityscape. They're experimenting on us, trying to find the essence of the human soul. And, to do this, they force us to go to sleep each night so that they can rearrange our memories and self-identities. By setting all human memories in flux and giving your memories to me and mine to you overnight—over millions of trials—the aliens believe that the essence of human consciousness will rise to the top. And, in truth, the whole thing goes pretty well—that is, until John Murdoch (Rufus Sewell) begins to figure it out and decides to go looking for the rest of his mind, if it exists at all. As Dr. Daniel Schreber (Kiefer Sutherland) puts it, trying to explain the

whole mess to Murdoch's wife, Emma (Jennifer Connelly): "Wherever your husband is, he is searching . . . for himself."

So, in a sense, the experiment actually works, just not how the aliens expected it to work. And, here again, Dr. Schreber, who functions as a kind of narrator, explains it to the aliens: "Weren't you looking for the human soul? That's the purpose of your little zoo, isn't it? That's why you keep changing people and things around every night. Maybe you have finally found what you've been looking for." Indeed, they have found the essence of humanity—only they don't know they've found it because they don't have the proper tools to identify it. For it's not about the continuity of memory, or pure reason, or free will, or really the human mind at all. It is, rather, our connection to one another that defines us as individuals. It's not what's "inside" us but what's "between us" that makes us what we are.⁵

Present Neo-Noir

Now, when it comes to present neo-noir, these films take place neither in the distant past nor in the distant future. Of course, that's hardly to say that time is not "of the essence"—far from it. In fact, present neo-noir, in my opinion, offers the best of neo-noir—and particularly for its use of time.

For example, in *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000), the sleuth Leonard Shelby (Guy Pearce) is looking for "John G.," the man who killed his wife and bashed in his skull, leaving him with anterograde amnesia. He cannot for the life of him form any new memories. So, every five to ten minutes or so, whoosh: it's all gone. Now he knows where he is—now he doesn't. Apparently, he's chasing someone. No, that's wrong; someone's chasing *him*. And who's on the other end of the phone? Leonard's world is reborn afresh with every paragraph of thought. So he needs to develop a "system," as he calls it, in order to find his way back, or forward, to his wife's killer—and, of course, we are never sure it isn't really him.

The system works like this. In place of natural memories, Leonard creates a well of artificial memories. He tattoos messages all over his body, backward, so he can read them in a mirror—and takes lots of photographs and covers them in notes (a fine homage to *Blade Runner*). He's trying desperately to impose some kind of temporal order, some semblance of causality, on a shattered metaphysical continuum of duration. But it's a hopeless enterprise because of the nature of interpretation, how indeterminate it is. Every time Leonard wakes up with his freshly wiped memory, he simply reinterprets anew all his old tattoos and pictures and then proceeds to put

those new interpretations onto his body in the form of new tattoos and so on, ad infinitum. Indeed, every day he's just drifting further and further into darkness, helplessly suspended by a thin thread of semantic maybes. So it's only natural that, by film's end, we are hardly any closer to the truth. And Leonard the neo-noir Sisyphus of memory can do little else than just keep on going, keep on tattooing and taking pictures—which, of course, he does.

It's the same with *The Bourne Identity* (Doug Liman, 2002), another amnesia noir. Two weeks are gone, all blacked out, and Jason Bourne (Matt Damon) doesn't even know his own name. All he knows is that a fishing boat dragged his unconscious body out of the ocean, with bullets in his back. So now he's got to figure out who he is and who is trying to kill him—and, of course, those two answers are basically the same. But Bourne doesn't even know where to begin. He can't exactly look to his surroundings—nothing's really changed there, and anything he'd find would simply throw him back on himself. So, just as in *Memento*, the detective must rely on clues from his own body to reveal truths about his mind. Only, in *Memento*, the detective self-consciously plants these clues on the surface of his own body, while, in *The Bourne Identity*, the CIA has planted them, unwittingly, throughout Bourne's very behavioral structure.

Engineered with drugs and weaponry and the highest kind of training, Bourne is entirely beyond the rule of law, completely beyond good and evil (as Nietzsche would put it). So, of course, he is totally surprised when his body snaps into action—taking out two policemen with their own weapons in just seconds flat. It's like he's watching himself from above, watching his arms do things he can't remember learning. Effectively, Bourne's body knows more about his identity than he does. And that's the purpose of the film—the ultimate dialectical reconciliation of body and mind, mind guided by body, to higher self-awareness. Who was I? Who am I? Am I a killer? Bourne must find the answers while running from those who already know.

And, again, it's the same sort of theme in *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999)—the narrator (we are not given his name until late in the film) must discover his own identity after a psychological break. Only, rather than getting shot in the back like Bourne, he finds that his mind collapses under the sheer weight of high capitalism and a dizzying disgust at a million swarming manufactured household objects (which perfectly recalls Jean-Paul Sartre's existential novel *Nausea*).⁶ Desperate, he goes to a support group and begins “guided meditation” into his own mind—or what the group leader calls his “cave.” Here, he must find his “power animal,” which

turns out to be a penguin, and really rather a meek self-reflection. Still, as the narrator's psychosis worsens, the power animal becomes powerful indeed—powerful enough to move outside the narrator's own mind and appear to him in the form of another person, Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt).

Now, by no means does the narrator understand this: he thinks Tyler is just another guy, someone he meets on an airplane who happens to have the same briefcase. Naturally, Tyler is sympathetic to the narrator's situation—being the other half of him—and his need for a release, so together they form a new kind of therapy group called "Fight Club." Only their therapy sessions consist not in crying and drinking coffee but in very violent fistfights. And it works pretty well, for a while anyway. But, as more participants join in and the sessions become larger and larger, the once-therapy-oriented Fight Club quickly becomes the terrorist organization "Project Mayhem," with Tyler in the dictatorial lead.

Indeed, the narrator's alter ego, Tyler Durden, is steadily becoming autonomous: so much so that the narrator can even see Tyler both as another person and as himself. So he decides to confront Tyler face-to-face and demand an explanation for what's been going on, which, of course, Tyler is more than happy to give: "People do it every day. They talk to themselves. They see themselves as they'd like to be. They don't have the courage you have, to just run with it. Naturally you're still wrestling with it, so sometimes you're still you. Other times, you imagine yourself watching me. Little by little, you're just letting yourself become . . . Tyler Durden." And now the narrator knows: he simply must eliminate Tyler. But, with seemingly no options left, he goes for broke and shoots himself through the mouth, killing Tyler and somehow saving himself.

As a final example of present neo-noir, you can see once more the same basic framework in *π : Faith in Chaos* (Darren Aronofsky, 1998). Only now, rather than trying to locate himself *in* time, as is typical of a neo-noir detective, Max Cohen (Sean Gullette) is trying to find his way *out* of time—making *π* a distinctly Pythagorean neo-noir detective story. The Pythagoreans were an ancient and elite cult of philosophers, about a half millennium before Christ, who believed that mathematics lay at the foundation of the universe—and that material reality and change and time are simply illusions of the human mind. Max, who explicitly follows Pythagoras, believes this—and believes, too, that, once he has discovered the numerical structure of being, the temporal world of becoming will be rendered readily apparent and simple. Evolution, the stock market, the flow of cigarette smoke—all of it will be seen as simply the illusory effects of a deeper ontological and mathematical cause.

Problem is, Max's computer, Euclid, has reached its upper limit on power and complexity, and he just can't go any further with it: if he's going to unbind reality, he'll need a better system. So, of course, when he's offered a special chip by an unethical corporate investment firm that is interested in his work, he can hardly say no. After all, he's right on the edge, as he tells his mentor: "I'm so close." But, when he gives the chip to Euclid, along with a mathematical translation of the Torah as a data set, it's all too much to handle, and Euclid crashes—just moments after becoming fully self-conscious and spitting out a 216-digit number that renders machines, like ourselves, conscious and is also the name of God. This is the numerical structure of being—and now Max has it. It's inside him: he can see it, and it's beautiful. But somehow it's not staying put—it's moving around, and it's changing him. It's doing to him what it did to Euclid and Max's mentor as well. It's making him omniscient, and it's making him insane, and he knows: soon his mind will crash from the overload of seeing too much of God's universe all at once. So Max has only one choice: he must lobotomize himself to get rid of these ascending divine powers—just as the narrator of *Fight Club* must, when faced with his own ascending powers of madness. However, instead of a gun, Max takes a drill to the side of his skull.

Neo-Noir's Irreconcilable Differences

Of course, in the end, while neo-noir is certainly new, some things never change. For, despite the transformation of space into time and the fusion of the detective and the villain, certain staples will always define the genre as a whole. Obvious among these are the maze, the detective, the femme fatale, and so many other things. But perhaps most important is that key noir element of inescapability. Remember, in classic noir, the detective will catch a criminal or solve a case: those are the basic outlines of any detective story. But what classic noir really reveals is the human condition: that we can never escape it, and the detective knows it; there's no way out of the maze of the noir city. Well, here, too—even though the city may be dissolving before our very eyes—the detective still remains hopelessly trapped, for he can never escape the illusions of his own mind. Indeed, by film's end, it's true, we are a little closer to reconciling parts of the self—but that's never really the point. What's really the point is that total, transparent self-consciousness recedes indefinitely into the future and indefinitely into the past, always to be chased, but never to be caught.

Notes

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1. Foster Hirsch, *Detours and Lost Highways: A Map of Neo-Noir* (New York: Limelight, 1999), 14. See also Foster Hirsch, *The Dark Side of the Screen: Film Noir* (1981; reprint, New York: Da Capo, 2001).

2. Hirsch, *Detours and Lost Highways*, 14–15.

3. Edward Dimendberg, *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 255.

4. On this, see Paul M. Sammon, *Future Noir: The Making of "Blade Runner"* (New York: Perennial, 1996).

5. Other films in this category of future noir use the same techniques. For example, *Paycheck* (John Woo, 2003) is the story of Michael Jennings (Ben Affleck), a "backwards engineer" who has had his memory "wiped" and now must figure out what kind of future he has engineered. He leaves himself clues from the future that he must interpret in the "past" in order to discover what he used to know. Or consider *Vanilla Sky* (Cameron Crowe, 2001). David Ames (Tom Cruise) is cryonically preserved—only he doesn't know it yet. He must figure this out and must figure out too that the life he thinks he's leading is an artificial "lucid dream" (an enhancement added on to his cryonic suspension)—only, now, the dream has become a nightmare.

6. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea* (1938), trans. Lloyd Alexander (New York: New Directions, 1976).

Blade Runner and Sartre

The Boundaries of Humanity

Judith Barad

Blade Runner (Ridley Scott, 1982) combines film noir and science fiction to tell a story that questions what it means to be human, a question as old as Methuselah.¹ However, this ancient question still arises in 2019 A.D. within a setting that pits humans against androids. The humans consider the androids, which they call *replicants*, to be nothing more than multi-faceted machines. Created on an assembly line by the Tyrell Corporation's genetic engineers, they are organisms manufactured to serve as slave labor for exploring and colonizing other planets. As manufactured artifacts, they are thought of as expendable substitutes for their human masters. Since the replicants are accorded neither legal nor moral rights, their expendability is assumed. Although these complex androids look human, act human, and are at least as intelligent as their human designers, they are manufactured to live only four years as a way of ensuring that they will never be equal to humans. Naturally, they lack emotional development, a fact that is used to identify them as replicants.²

The noir film raises some interesting questions: If artificial intelligence were placed in a body that looked and acted human, would such a machine be a human? Would a human, in turn, be nothing more than a machine? In fact, would androids differ in any important way from the humans who created them?

Vive la Différence?

Some philosophers, like Alan Turing, argue that there is no important difference between an android and a human because the human brain is a kind of computer that processes inputs (the things we sense) and generates outputs (our behavior). They believe that computers will soon be able to imitate the input-output processing of the brain. In fact, there are com-

puter programs that can converse with humans so skillfully that it's nearly impossible to distinguish their responses from those of a human. Turing insists that, if we can't distinguish between the answers a computer gives to questions and the answers a human being gives, then the computer has the equivalent of a human mind. If, in addition, a computer has an organic body that is indistinguishable from a human body, then the computer and the human are essentially the same kind of being. In that case, someone would, doubtlessly, start a computer rights movement.

Jean-Paul Sartre disagrees with Turing's argument. According to Sartre, there's an enormous difference between a human artifact, such as a computer, and a human being. In *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, he claims that "existence precedes essence" in human beings alone.³ In other words, we are first born, we first exist, and only later choose the nature or essence we will have. In choosing our essence, we differ from any manufactured thing, a thing in which essence precedes existence. Rather than use Sartre's example of a paper cutter to explain this concept, let's substitute an android. Suppose a genetic engineer decides to manufacture an android. This engineer knows what he is making; that is, he knows the essence of the android, and he knows how the android will be used before he begins creating it. In other words, the android's essence exists in the genetic engineer's mind before the android is actually manufactured. If by the *essence* of the android we mean the procedure by which it's made and the purpose for which it will be produced, then the android's essence precedes its existence.

In Sartre's view, the traditional notion of God leads us to confuse the human with a manufactured item. God is thought of, after all, as the maker of human beings. He knows exactly what He will create before He creates anyone. He knows what each human being will be before He creates him or her, before each one exists. So Sartre insists that the concept of the human in the mind of God is comparable to the concept of the android in the mind of the genetic engineer. Just as the genetic engineer creates each android for a certain purpose, God creates each human for a certain purpose. Neither the human nor the android is a free being; they are determined by their makers.

Sartre, however, was an atheist. Since there is no God, he reasoned, there isn't anyone who can determine the nature of any human being. Human nature can't be determined in advance because there's no one who knows what each human will become in advance. It's only the human being herself who can determine the kind of person she will be. We're simply what we make of ourselves through our choices and actions. In humans,

and humans alone, the fact of existing comes before an individual's own choice of the kind of essence or nature she will develop.

Freedom and Responsibility

Although the replicants of *Blade Runner* are engineered to act and reason as humans, they can't choose their own essence. This inability is, in Sartre's view, what differentiates any manufactured being from humans. The replicants aren't responsible for their condition because they were programmed to fulfill a certain function; as members of a series, they didn't choose their essence. Disagreeing with Turing, Sartre insists that no human is reducible to a programmed, manufactured being. Instead, humans create their own nature through free choices and actions. We can choose our occupation, our level of education, our marital status, our religion or lack of one, our lifestyle, and our attitudes, beliefs, and values. Since we choose our nature, we are responsible for it. We can't blame anyone else for what we are since we can, at any moment, choose to become a new, different sort of person. We are free because we can rely neither on a god nor on society to direct our actions or to program our natures. Our freedom consists mainly in our ability to envision additional possibilities for our condition.

Once we accept our freedom, we must also accept its accompanying responsibility. Since we could have made different choices, we should assume responsibility for what we have become. Sometimes, however, we try to escape responsibility by pretending we're not free. We try to convince ourselves that outside influences have shaped our nature—God, our family, our genes, society. Sartre exposes this belief as a cop-out, claiming that the human is the sum of everything he ever chooses to do. If we choose to believe that we are determined by outside factors, we are responsible for adopting this belief. To be human means to create oneself—the emotions one chooses to feel, the beliefs one chooses to retain, and the actions one chooses to perform.

Since replicants have a maker who programs them, Sartre's view tells us that they, unlike humans, *can* justifiably blame someone else for their essence. In fact, some replicants, having the advanced Nexus-6 design, blamed humans to the point of committing mutiny. As a result, a death sentence was imposed on any that returned to earth. It would be reasonable to suppose that no replicant would want to risk the return trip. But four fugitive replicants are trying to reach their maker, a genetic engineer turned corporate big shot, to plead with him to extend their lives.

The Voigt-Kampff Test

The first fugitive replicant we see, Leon Kowalski (Brion James), looks so human we aren't immediately aware that he's a replicant. Not only does this waste-disposal engineer look human, but he seems acutely nervous and, as he is being tested, shows unmistakable fear. If Sartre's distinction between manufactured items and humans is right, and if the humans depicted in the film are right in claiming that there's a difference between replicant and human, then it should be a discernible difference. If there isn't a discernible difference, then it isn't clear why they should be subservient to human beings.

In *Blade Runner*, the only way to test whether someone is a human or a replicant is by means of the Voigt-Kampff (V-K) test, which monitors emotional response by means of a subject's involuntary iris fluctuations, capillary dilation, and blush response. Not all emotional responses, however, are important in distinguishing between a human and a replicant. The test doesn't try to identify, for example, fear or rage. Fear and rage are basic emotions that even someone who has just four years of life can experience. Just observe a young child, and you'll know this is true. But the emotion of empathy, the power to place oneself in the position of someone else and vividly feel the emotions of that other individual, is on a different level. Unlike more primitive emotions, empathy requires maturity, a maturity that takes more than four years to develop. This emotion is exactly the emotion that the V-K test focuses on by asking hypothetical questions involving human or animal suffering. Since Leon doesn't have this kind of emotional sophistication, the test almost immediately identifies him as a replicant.

Sartre may approve of the V-K test because of the importance he places on human emotions, which, he recognizes, arise from our very being. But, since this being is the one created from the choices we make as free adult humans, we can control them. We can choose the kinds of emotions we want to feel by choosing our beliefs and choosing what we want to focus on. Of course, many people suppose that humans have little control over their emotions. If they're angry, they think, someone has *made* them angry. Sartre argued against this view since he recognized that, if we're angry, we've chosen to be in this condition. If Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford) is remorseful about being a blade runner, a special police officer assigned to track down replicants, he has chosen to be remorseful. Alternatively, he could choose to look at the bright side of his job, or he could simply choose

not to do it. Emotions, Sartre said, are ways in which we freely choose to perceive and respond to the world. Our inability to blame anyone else for what we are is the basis for such emotions as despair, fear, remorse, and anguish.

There's a vast difference between the emotions of an adult, who has the capacity to control his emotions, and the emotions of a child, who hasn't yet developed that capacity. Since four years is the amount of time a replicant has to live, his emotions can develop only as much as those of a four-year-old child. So the V-K test is a reasonable test to administer when trying to separate individuals who have mature emotional responses from those who have immature emotional responses.

While Sartre might appreciate the test, his version of it would focus on the emotions of despair, anguish, and forlornness, rather than empathy. Confronting life alone, without a Creator, produces the emotion of forlornness. We are forlorn, according to Sartre, when we realize that nothing and no one limits our choices. Sartre claims that the absence of God has set us free from His rules. We must then create our own values, our own rules. We're not simply the product of environmental conditioning or the genes we inherit. People end up forlorn in their futile attempts to find certainty and guidelines. We're forlorn when we discover that science doesn't have all the answers. We're forlorn when we realize the emptiness of our excuses: "I didn't have the time." "I was brought up that way." "He made me angry (or sad or happy)." "I couldn't help myself." "Everyone else does it." These excuses can't remove our freedom, and, concomitantly, they can't help us shed our responsibility. Yet many people keep making excuses for themselves because they can't bear the anxiety produced by the full awareness of their freedom and responsibility.

Blade Runner shows us this forlornness and anxiety through Deckard, who, Sartre would say, is attempting to escape these emotions so vital to the human condition. In a voice-over, Deckard explains that he quit his job as a blade runner because he had "a bellyful of killing." He returns only when his former boss threatens him. If Deckard were truly aware of his freedom, he would have refused, threat or no threat. But, at this point in the film, since he doesn't fully appreciate his humanity, he rationalizes that he would "rather be a killer than a victim." Sartre would see his excuse as a futile attempt to flee his anxiety. He would ask Deckard: "What if everyone accepted the job of killing others?" People who are like Deckard, Sartre says, will "shrug their shoulders and answer, 'Everyone doesn't act that way.'" The philosopher then adds: "But really, one should always ask himself, 'What

would happen if everybody looked at things that way?’ There is no escaping this disturbing thought except by a kind of double-dealing.”⁴

Sartre’s next words would certainly apply to Deckard: “A man who lies and makes excuses for himself by saying not everybody does that, is someone with an uneasy conscience.”⁵ As the film continues, Deckard’s conscience does become more and more “uneasy,” to the point where it becomes anguished. But Sartre would admonish us against feeling sorry for him. For Sartre, anguish is a good thing to experience because it means we own up to our responsibility. Only an emotionally mature human can sincerely accept responsibility for his or her choices.

Sartre counsels us that, when we choose, we should restrict our efforts to what is under our immediate control. In other words, why waste time trying to do the impossible? Sartre thinks this realization leads to despair because we can no longer hope that we will be rescued by our Creator, by a prince charming, by winning the lottery, or by an omnipotent manufacturer. No longer hoping that someone will come along on a white horse to save us, we experience despair. Yet, in despairing about things over which we have no control, we can increase our power. This sounds odd, but our despair over knowing we must act for ourselves means that we must use our own power. Rather than focusing our energy on things beyond our control, we concentrate on what we *can* do. Deckard can’t save his society by himself, but it *is* within his power to save an individual.

In sum, Sartre would approve of a test that presents various hypothetical situations and measures an individual’s responses to them. Although he would substitute forlornness, anguish, and despair for empathy, the test would still gauge emotional maturity. After all, one can’t be a mature person without accepting responsibility for one’s choices and actions.

At the same time, the test contains an internal flaw, a major one. The problem is that many human adults *never* develop emotional maturity. Most of us can recall an adult we’ve met who displayed the emotions of a young child. Using Sartre’s perspective, we would acknowledge that such an adult has made herself this way and is responsible for her condition, unlike the child. Yet, if an emotionally immature adult is tested to determine whether she is human, the results may be inconclusive. At best, the test can prove only that the subject is mature; it can’t prove that the subject is human.

But She Looks Human

Although the V-K test works well at the beginning of *Blade Runner*, it

might not have worked near the film's end when Roy Batty (Rutger Hauer), a replicant military model, develops emotional maturity. But first let's examine another scene where the test *is* successful. Deckard is assigned by his former boss, Captain Bryant (M. Emmet Walsh), to see if the V-K test will work on the new Nexus-6 replicants, who so closely resemble human beings. Bryant, who refers to replicants in a derogatory way as "skin jobs," shows Deckard a video of the renegade replicants. Before sending Deckard to the Tyrell Corporation, owned by the omnipotent manufacturer who creates and sells the replicants, Bryant explains to him that the androids "were designed to copy human beings in every way except their emotions. The designers reckoned that, after a few years, they might develop their own emotional responses. . . . So they built in a failsafe device . . . [a] four-year life span." In other words, the designers purposefully designed the replicants so that they could never become the equal of an adult human being. This design kept them in a subservient position.

Arriving in the spacious office of Eldon Tyrell (Joe Turkel), Deckard encounters a replicant owl before he meets Rachael (Sean Young), who appears to be one of the corporation's executives. Deckard wears the kind of trenchcoat that is usually worn by detectives in film noir, and Rachael is the classic femme fatale of film noir. Her lips painted bright red, she wears her dark hair tied up tightly behind her head and frequently wears jackets with the kind of padded shoulders that became Joan Crawford's signature mark. As they wait for Tyrell to show up, Rachael coolly observes that Deckard doesn't seem to appreciate the work of the corporation. Deckard responds indifferently: "Replicants are like any other machine. They're either a benefit or a hazard." In Sartre's terms, Deckard thinks of replicants as things that exist only to fulfill the essence, the purpose created for them by human beings. At the same time, he is unaware that he has allowed his society to program this belief, a prejudice, into his mind.

The film makes it clear that human physical appearance alone doesn't make an individual a human being. René Descartes, a seventeenth-century philosopher, dispels this notion in seeking the essential nature of a human being. He says that, when he observes from a window human beings passing by on the street below him, he sees "hats and cloaks that might cover artificial machines, whose motions might be determined by springs."⁶ In other words, merely looking at someone, or even interacting with someone, doesn't supply sufficient evidence that the individual is human. People often leap to erroneous conclusions on the basis of insufficient evidence.

Aware of this tendency to leap to unwarranted conclusions, Tyrell enters and tells Deckard to administer the V-K test on a human subject—Rachael. Complying, Deckard determines, after an unusually high number of questions, that she's a machine. However, she is unaware of it at this point and leaves before Deckard reveals his findings. Immediately, Deckard's view of her changes, a view that is reflected in his choice of words, as he asks Tyrell: "How can it not know what it is?" She has now become to him an object, an "it," rather than a person.

Wanting to convince Deckard that she's human, Rachael goes to his apartment with a childhood photograph of herself and her mother. But the blade runner, shattering her hopes, says that her memories are simply the implanted memories of Tyrell's sixteen-year-old niece. Although Deckard is cool to her at first, Rachael's tears awaken his deadened empathy. Uncomfortable about his unfamiliar feelings toward an inhuman "thing," he advises her to go home. In a voice-over, Deckard says: "Replicants weren't supposed to have feelings. Neither were blade runners. What the hell was happening to me?" He has now started to question the beliefs that were programmed into him by society. In Sartre's view, he has taken a step toward being more human.

Somewhat later, Deckard calls Rachael from a bar to apologize and invites her for a drink. She hangs up on him. However, she must have changed her mind because she subsequently shows up in the vicinity just in time to blast a hole in Leon's back before he can gouge out Deckard's eyes and kill him.

After Rachael saves his life, Deckard takes her back to his apartment. Never having killed anyone before, she is quite shaken up by her action. Deckard gets a drink and, in the hard-boiled tone of a classic film noir detective, tells her that it's "part of the business." He goes through the motions of life mechanically, while Rachael is anguished by her responsibility for killing someone. Hmmm . . . now who is the real human being?

Awakening from a brief snooze, Deckard hears Rachael playing the piano. Acknowledging her individuality for the first time, the blade runner tells her that she plays "beautifully." Then he tenderly kisses her face. Afraid, she opens the door and tries to leave the apartment. But Deckard, feeling a surge of sexual desire, slams the door and pushes her against the venetian blinds. The shadows cast patterns on their faces that are reminiscent of 1940s noir films. Deckard commands her to say "kiss me," and she complies. Again, he orders her to say "I want you" and to put her arms around him. His use of force prevents her from making a free choice, which is the prerogative of a human.

Meeting Your Maker

Like Descartes, Deckard knows that, no matter how appealing, the physical appearance of being human isn't the essence of actually being human. So he treats Rachael as a parrot that lacks free choice. But, if appearance isn't the essence of the human being, what about the ability to think? Descartes argues affirmatively. His argument is depicted in the film when one of the fugitive replicants, Pris (Daryl Hannah), attempts to convince J. F. Sebastian (William Sanderson), a shy employee of the Tyrell Corporation, that, because she thinks, there's no relevant difference between her and those usually thought of as humans. She isn't like the walking, talking mechanical toys that Sebastian has created to alleviate his loneliness. To help him recognize this, she quotes Descartes: "I think, therefore, I am." But let's *think* about it! Is thinking enough to establish one's humanity? It does, indeed, prove that the one who thinks exists or lives, but it doesn't prove that the thinking thing is necessarily human. There may be a god who thinks, as well as thinking extraterrestrials or nonhuman animals.

Yet Sartre, who was influenced by Descartes, provides another perspective from which to view the statement "I think, therefore, I am." There can be no awareness of "I" without an awareness of others. In discovering the truth of Descartes' statement, Sartre notes that one discovers "not only himself, but others as well." Saying the word "I" implies that there are other centers of consciousness around me. "In order to get any truth about myself," Sartre continues, "I must have contact with another person." Once we acknowledge this fact, we discover a world of "intersubjectivity," for, as Sartre observes: "In discovering my inner being I discover the other person at the same time."⁷ Ironically, it's only the replicants who, through most of the film, display intersubjectivity by caring about each other. All the humans—Deckard, Sebastian, Chew (James Hong), and Tyrell—live alone, without any apparent intimate relationship to anyone else. Lacking the opportunity to develop intersubjective relationships, they don't really seem to care about each other. Intersubjectivity—where the consciousness of individuals is intertwined—is what gives rise to the feeling of empathy.

Two replicants who deeply care about each other and have an intersubjective relationship are Pris and Batty, who are lovers. Batty has accompanied Pris to Sebastian's apartment. He tries to get Sebastian to look at the replicants another way: "We're not computers; we're physical." By contrasting the replicants' physical nature with the nature of computers, Batty implies something more than that the replicants aren't merely material. Both

computers and replicants are made of material, but Batty is affirming that, unlike computers, the replicants are embodied. This embodiment is a necessary condition for experiencing emotions. Only an embodied being can have feelings. Emotions or feelings, insofar as we know them, depend on certain physiological conditions, such as having nerve endings and certain areas of the brain. They result in certain bodily effects, such as a rise in blood pressure, increased respiration or heartbeat, sweating, and so on. As organisms cloned from genetic material, the replicants are embodied, and their embodiment makes them capable of emotional experiences, unlike a computer.

Knowing that their termination dates are imminent, the lovers convince Sebastian to take them to Tyrell, hoping that he will increase their life span. Tyrell, the androids' creator, can be said to be their god. Batty treats him as such when they meet, telling him: "It's not an easy thing to meet your maker." Getting right to the point, he asks his creator to repair them so that they'll live longer. After giving Batty a technical explanation of his limitations, Tyrell informs him: "You were made as well as we could make you." Batty objects: "But not to last." Now surely Batty knows that Tyrell can't make him immortal. He simply wants to add more years onto his life span. But, beyond the innate desire to live that all animals possess, he wants to appreciate his experiences in a fuller way, a more mature way. This intention is corroborated in his last scene.

Seeming to glimpse Batty's motive for desiring more life but knowing that he can't do anything about it, Tyrell tries to appease him: "The light that burns twice as bright burns half as long. And you have burned so very, very brightly, Roy. Look at you. You're the prodigal son." After the "god of biomechanics" exhorts his creation to "Revel in your time!" Batty kisses Tyrell on the lips. Perhaps he is somewhat grateful for Tyrell's advice, for he will soon begin to revel in the time he has left as he toys with Deckard. But, before doing so, he crushes his creator's skull and gouges out his eyes.

Batty's action shows that he agrees with a statement that Sartre quotes: "If God doesn't exist, everything would be permitted."⁸ By killing his god, Batty is reborn, now able to create his own essence. Along with Sartre, he recognizes that no god can determine his fate. With no one to determine his fate, he alone must assume responsibility for himself. He begins to experience the forlornness that Sartre describes. Living outside a replicant's programming, he must create his own rules and continue existing on his own terms. Now he is free—but without any creator to rely on for direction. Tyrell can neither give him more life nor make him human. Batty

must save himself. At the same time, he knows despair, for no one can rescue him from the death that he knows is drawing ever closer. He can't count on anyone else. Yet it's at this point that he would meet Sartre's criteria for being human, for living in the human condition.

An Existential Choice

Meanwhile, Deckard kills Pris, an act that is sure to increase Batty's emotional turmoil. When he discovers her lifeless body, Batty despairs deeply and kisses her tenderly one last time. However, he doesn't have much time to despair since Deckard is continuing his pursuit. Batty, who has superior strength and intellect, soon gets the upper hand—and in more than one sense, since he avenges the deaths of the two female replicants by breaking two fingers on one of Deckard's hands. Shortly afterward, Batty's own hand starts to malfunction, indicating that his termination date is very near. In defiance, he drives a long nail all the way through his hand. Turning his attention to the blade runner, he warns, as he rams his head through a bathroom wall: "Four, five, try to stay alive. Come on, get it up. Unless you're alive, you can't play. And if you don't play [you're dead]. Six, seven, go to hell, or go to heaven." Heaven is life that is reveled in at each moment; hell is being emotionally dead to life. Rather than being malicious, Batty intends to make the blade runner realize that life should be reveled in, that play is essential to being alive.

Batty then pursues Deckard, and it becomes clear that the hunter and hunted have switched positions. Deckard, enduring the pain and disability of his broken fingers, struggles hand over hand up the side of a building, finally making it up to the roof. No rest for the weary, however, since Batty appears from an opening in the roof. Running for his life, Deckard jumps to another rooftop. He miscalculates and falls short, dangling precariously off the side of a tall building.

Before continuing the chase, Batty stands with his arms crossed, apparently lost in thought. He knows that he will face the kind of anguished choice described by Sartre: shall he let Deckard die, or shall he save him? Not only has Deckard tried to kill him, but the blade runner has killed his lover. Batty is also fully aware that Deckard would have killed him had he been given the chance. In his good hand, Batty holds a dove, a real bird that contrasts with Tyrell's artificial one. Shall he side with his impaled hand, representing death, or with the hand in which he holds life, the dove?

Making the leap to the next rooftop effortlessly, Batty says to the terri-

fied blade runner: "Quite an experience to live in fear, isn't it? That's what it is, to be a slave." His words, spoken without vindictiveness, seem to be an attempt to awaken Deckard's empathy. As Deckard loses his grip, Batty grabs his hand and saves him. At last, he has freely chosen his essence by choosing to be a life giver rather than the life-taking combat model he was programmed to be.

Afterward, Batty wearily sits down, still cradling the dove, and says: "I've seen things you people wouldn't believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched C-beams glitter in the dark near Tannhauser gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain." His words, expressing the value of his life experiences, are all the more poignant because these are the last words of his life. At the same time that his allotted four years have expired, the dove is liberated, and Batty is freed. In these four years, he has acquired a unique combination of experiences, experiences that he both remembers and cherishes. It's not in merely seeing objects and understanding what they are that we express our humanity. Rather, our humanity is expressed in the deep emotional appreciation that we bring to what we perceive. Ironically, given Tyrell's final advice to his "prodigal son," Batty knows how to "revel" in the present moment. It is this emotional response, so unique to each individual, that gives a human his or her worth as a human being.

The Authentic Human

Batty has become Deckard's savior in more ways than one. Not only has he saved his biological life, but he also saves his humanity. He has taught Deckard what it means to be a mature, free human being rather than an artificial one, symbolized by Tyrell's artificial, imprisoned bird. Witnessing Batty's death, Deckard muses: "I don't know why he saved my life. Maybe, in those last moments, he loved life more than he ever had before. Not just his life, anybody's life, my life."

The film suggests that Batty's emotional maturity, his choice of empathy and compassion, is what makes a human truly human. In the end, it's not Tyrell or any genetic engineer who can make Batty human—he must create this in himself. Being human isn't a particular DNA configuration but a state of mind, of feeling. By accepting his own death and saving the man who has been trying to kill him, he shows emotional maturity. He would have passed the Voigt-Kampff test.

Batty's love of life contrasts with Deckard's experience of life as routine,

dreary, and uneventful. He had been unable to revel in the present moment. With a new outlook on life, involving a much deeper appreciation of it, Deckard returns to his apartment to find Rachael. Instead of forcing her responses, as he did earlier, he questions her about her feelings for him, and she freely answers. The empathy that both Rachael and Batty have helped him develop leads Deckard to respect Rachael's autonomy and, thus, perceive her as an equal. They no longer have a superior/inferior relationship.

The humans tried to preserve their presumed superiority by making another group inferior. The inferior beings had been animals, but, in the world of *Blade Runner*, animals have become rare. So another kind of being must substitute for animals since maintaining the illusion of superiority depends on perceiving another group as inferior. Superiority, of course, results in slavery or oppression for the group seen as inferior. Only a lack of empathy, of emotional maturity, could permit this kind of hierarchical thinking.

Emotional maturity varies in humans as well as in replicants. Some people lack empathy completely, while others are so empathetic they see no difference between themselves and others. Many individuals who look human, sound human, and have human DNA would fail the V-K test. Just think of the BTK killer! If such individuals fail the test, does this mean they're not fully human? Does the inability to feel someone else's suffering make us more like a machine and less human? There are copious examples in news reports every day about how people behave in an inhuman way. Perhaps *Blade Runner* suggests a way to assess the human depth of those who are biologically human. Since, as Sartre argues, a person can choose the kind of being he is, one who chooses against life, against empathy, and against his responsibility would have no room to complain.

As the film concludes, Batty, Rachael, and Deckard have found the freedom to be truly human. At the moment Batty feels the deep emotion that motivates him to kill his creator, he escapes his genetically engineered programming. Rachael and Deckard too find freedom from their programming—through the love they develop for each other. But someone may object that, since Deckard wasn't a replicant, he wasn't programmed. This objection doesn't take into account that many people allow themselves to be programmed by their families, their societies. *Blade Runner* and Sartre urge us to escape this programming and become authentically human.

Notes

1. There are two issues outside the scope of this essay: Deckard's replicant status and whether androids like those depicted in *Blade Runner* are possible. The conclusion of the essay may render the first question moot. Regarding the second question, I think it highly improbable that such beings can be manufactured, although we may eventually be able to genetically alter human beings.

2. While many philosophers distinguish between a human, as a biological entity, and a person, as a being possessing certain mental states, I am using the term *human* to include both biological and psychological traits.

3. Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism" (1946), in *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1957), 13.

4. *Ibid.*, 18–19.

5. *Ibid.*, 19.

6. René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980), 68.

7. Sartre, "Existentialism," 37–38.

8. *Ibid.*, 22. Sartre is quoting Dostoyevsky.

John Locke, Personal Identity, and *Memento*

Basil Smith

In his *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, John Locke famously offers an explanation of personal identity. In particular, he holds that our conscious memories constitute our identities.¹ Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000) tests this theory of personal identity. In the film, Leonard Shelby (Guy Pearce), an insurance investigator from San Francisco, suffers short-term memory loss as a result of an assault on his wife, Catherine (Jorja Fox), and himself. But now, without his memories, he can hardly function. He insists that his attackers have destroyed his ability to live. Leonard asks: "How can I heal if I cannot feel time?" The question for us, however, is what can *Memento* tell us about personal identity? I address this question while attempting to show that, in some measure, Locke and *Memento* offer similar sets of messages. In particular, I argue that they both provide evidence that memory constitutes personal identity. This is not to say that they offer exactly the same messages or that the messages they agree on are not counterintuitive on many fronts. The point of the comparison, rather, is to delineate what this theory of personal identity implies and how it leads to a theory of survival without identity.²

Locke on Personal Identity

To begin, Locke defines what he means by a *person*. He says that a person is always conscious of what he thinks. The person "can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places." But, so far, this definition does not say what personal identity is. To answer this, Locke notes that, insofar as consciousness always accompanies thinking, identity is a matter of consciousness "extending backwards to unite thought and action" (267). In other words, such identity is constituted by "being able to *repeat* the idea of any past action" in a series and, thus, is a matter of

memory. If something is not retrievable by consciousness ever again, it is not part of that person anymore (268). But this admission entails that personal identity is not static or unified but, rather, a complex set of memories that continually changes. To further argue for his positive thesis, Locke offers some negative observations, supported by various puzzle cases. In fact, his strategy is to offer such cases to indicate what identity is not, which, in turn, provides indirect evidence that his theory is true, that identity is a matter of conscious memories. These puzzle cases should be familiar to anyone versed in science fiction.

To bolster his thesis that personal identity is conscious memory, Locke argues that neither a soul nor a body is necessary for such identity.³ To show this, he postulates that, if one consciousness had used many souls or bodies, as in the case of a contemporary man recalling the memories of an ancient philosopher, that consciousness would be who he is. In this case, it seems that, so long as a person is conscious of, and can remember, a linear series of memories, even if that consciousness is contained in different souls or bodies, those memories constitute that person (270). This seems correct, for, although we cite souls or bodies as evidence of personal identity, the identity itself *is* the series of memories. By contrast, Locke also notes that, if any single soul or body were to be host to different consciousnesses over time—as when, say, one man uses a body or soul by day and another uses the same body or soul by night—then we would say that that soul or body was not one person but two different people. In other words, since there would be two series of conscious memories, there would be two people using that one soul or body (274). This again seems correct, for, in such cases, we would say that there were two persons, not one, who made use of one soul or body. These puzzle cases indirectly suggest that personal identity is a matter of conscious memory.

Locke offers his theory of personal identity for two reasons. The first reason is that, since we are constantly changing as persons, we need an account of what makes us the same person over time. If we did not have such an account, it would be difficult to explain why our lives matter so much to us. In other words, our concern for such identity is “founded on a concern for *happiness*,” which is easier to obtain if we are persons (278). The second reason is to provide a proper understanding of our *responsibility* for our actions. Locke says that, if we think of identity in this way, our consciousness can become concerned and accountable, in that it “owns and imputes to itself past actions” (277). It follows that, when any consciousness happens to lose any memories, when any memories are irretrievable, then they are

no longer part of that person. Locke insists that whatever past actions consciousness cannot reconcile to its appropriate present are as though they have never been done. To his credit, however, he concedes that there is often no way for us to say when this is.⁴

Locke incurs two problems with his theory of personal identity that must be mentioned before proceeding. The first of these, as Thomas Reid notes, is that his theory seems to deny the *transitivity* of such identity. Transitivity is the logical relation that, if A is B and B is C, then A is C. Imagine a boy who stole apples and was punished, who later won an award as a young officer, and who is now a retired general. The young officer remembers the boyhood events, and the general remembers the young officer events but cannot recall the boyhood events. Reid notes that, for Locke, this lack of conscious connection indicates that the boy and the general are not the same person and, thus, transitivity is denied. He insists that, “if there is any truth in logic,” the boy and the general *are* the same person.⁵ Yet this objection is not decisive, for many of the stages from the boy to the general *overlap*, so there is a sense in which the general and the boy are the same person after all. But Locke does not say this, for, if there really are *no* memories that the boy and general share, there is no reason to say that they are the same person. So he admits that personal identity is *not* transitive in the way required here.

The second problem with Locke’s theory is that conscious memories “presuppose, and therefore cannot constitute, personal identity.” In other words, memories seem to be united in a series only because most of them really happened to the same person. If this were not the case, so the objection goes, merely having deluded memories of being someone else would make one into that person.⁶ But, given this possibility, it is more plausible to say that personal identity is constituted by the “thinking substance” (a mind or soul) and is not a matter of conscious memories at all. This objection too is less than decisive. Derek Parfit, a contemporary philosopher, notes that it assumes that the conscious memories in any series really did happen to the same person. To remedy this, Parfit insists, a notion of memory that does not presuppose this is easily developed.⁷ If conscious memories are thought of in this way, we may suppose that they are in a particular series, but not that they happened to any particular person. These two objections indicate that personal identity is not transitive, that our conscious memories don’t have to be true, and that there is no unified or static self underneath memories.

In what follows, I will ignore these common criticisms of Locke on

personal identity because, as we have seen, they do not work—but also for a more compelling reason. This is that *Memento* threatens personal identity in a different way. The film suggests, in the character of Leonard Shelby, the problem of *fusion*, or the problem that two conscious series of memories might be combined. In point of fact, what is unique about *Memento* is the way in which it poses this problem. It is not just that Leonard may have been fused from two consciousnesses, but also that there is no way to discern, either from the inside or from the outside, which elements of the two former persons now exist in the resultant person, and, thus, that nobody knows which beliefs from which series are true or false. Leonard may be constituted by two series of conscious memories in an uneasy mix. But what is really troubling is how his plight may mirror ours.

The Meaning of *Memento*

When Leonard and his wife, Catherine, are assaulted in their home, Catherine is killed, and Leonard is struck on the head, losing the ability to make new memories, which eventually drives him to seek vengeance. Yet this is all on the surface, for underneath this plot lurks the problem of what constitutes personal identity over time, or the issue of what makes a person the same person at two distinct times. Leonard insists that “we all need mirrors to remind ourselves of *who* we are” and endeavors to find or create some memories for himself. *Memento* asks us to question who Leonard is after he is unable to make new memories and, by extension, to ask that of ourselves. But the film is not neutral on the answer to these questions, suggesting that we revise many of our presuppositions about personal identity. In particular, it asks us to abandon the notion that personal identity is transitive, that our memories must be true, but also that such identity is not static or unified. In rough outline, then, *Memento* suggests just what Locke argues concerning personal identity and what Parfit adapts. To explain how this is so, it will be necessary to examine the plot in detail.

Memento is confusing in two ways. The first way is that the film is shot in a disorienting fashion. It has both color and black-and-white scenes. The color scenes are presented in reverse chronological order. They take place, moreover, over a short period of time, such that the end of each new scene is repeated as the beginning of the next one. Interspersed with these color scenes are black-and-white scenes of a single telephone conversation. This conversation is presented in normal chronological order and occurs before the color scenes. Since the color scenes are presented backward and

the black-and-white ones forward, in the beginning of the film, the last chronological black-and-white scene gradually turns into the first chronological color one. *Memento* is also shot with numerous flashbacks, of two principal types. The first type is those that are shot twice, with significant differences, and they suggest different pasts. The second type must be pure fantasy and could not occur in any past.⁸ The point of all these flashbacks is to disorient the audience as much as possible.

However, *Memento* is confusing in a second way, which is more important here. There are two versions of the plot. It is prudent to describe these versions not as we see them but as they occur chronologically. In the first version, Leonard and Catherine are assaulted at home, and the latter dies. During this assault, Leonard is struck on the head, suffers short-term memory loss, and, thus, cannot make new memories. But he remembers the crime and hopes to avenge his wife, the police report having convinced him that there was a second assailant. Because of his phone conversation (the subject of the black-and-white scenes), Leonard infers that the second assailant is named John G. He proceeds to track this person down—by taking Polaroid pictures of everything he will soon forget, by making copious notes, and by tattooing important facts on his body. But he is haunted by the irony that, in his former job as an insurance investigator, he had denied coverage to one Sammy Jankis (Stephen Tobolowsky), who had been, he had suspected, faking the very condition that he now suffers from. Unfortunately, Sammy had a diabetic wife who could not bear the loss of her husband as a person. In her despair, she allowed Sammy to inject her with insulin, killing her, and Sammy was then put in a mental institution.

Leonard is also used by Teddy (Joe Pantoliano), a former cop who worked his case and who presumably is his interlocutor in the black-and-white telephone conversation scenes. Teddy has Leonard kill any number of drug dealers by leading him to believe that those persons are his John G. Leonard eventually realizes this deception and is not pleased. Importantly, he makes a note about Teddy, saying: “Don’t believe his lies.” He spots Teddy in his car and then has a tattoo made of the license plate number, which will later suggest that Teddy may be his John G.⁹ But at the time Leonard *knows* that Teddy is not his man and that he will forget this later. He asks himself: “Do I lie to myself to be happy?” He knows that this lie to himself may result in his committing murder, yet he lies anyway. Leonard also meets Natalie (Carrie-Anne Moss), a barmaid and girlfriend of a drug dealer whom he has just killed. She suspects that Leonard has killed her boyfriend but still uses him to protect herself against Dodd (Callum

Rennie), another drug dealer. She notices that Leonard has a tattoo of a license plate number on his leg and runs the plate for him. Leonard matches up the license plate number with new information and infers that Teddy is his John G. He subsequently lures Teddy to a warehouse and kills him.

In the second version of the plot, events are quite different. In an important conversation between Leonard and Teddy, a different past is suggested. Teddy admits that he was the cop assigned to his case and admits that he now uses Leonard to kill drug dealers. He tells Leonard that, by doing so, he has given him “a reason to live.” Teddy insists that Catherine survived the assault, which fact is hinted at in two ways. In a flashback, after the assault, Catherine blinks. Moreover, the date of death listed on the police report is much later than the date of the assault. Teddy also says that Catherine was the diabetic, and this too is hinted at. In a flashback, we see her being injected with insulin, and then the same scene is replayed with her not being injected. Leonard has apparently transposed elements of his past with the past of Sammy Jankis. In effect, he has *projected* his own memories onto Sammy and *invented* false ones for himself. This explains why he says of his wife that she “was perfect to me.” He is then committed to the mental institution, and this too is hinted at. In a flashback, we briefly see Leonard sitting in the institution, from which he later escapes. Teddy lastly tells Leonard that there really was a second assailant, his John G., and that Leonard has already killed that person.

Understandably, when Teddy tells him all this, Leonard is dismayed at having been turned into a killer. In fact, he does not believe that Catherine survived the assault, that she was a diabetic, or that it is possible that he has transposed any memories. Nor does he believe that he has projected his own memories onto Sammy or that he has invented false ones for himself. Despite this, it seems that he is willing to manipulate the evidence, to create a puzzle for himself, merely to justify his ongoing quest to avenge his wife, even if that puzzle is already solved. He even deceives himself into believing that Teddy is his John G. and, thus, sets up the latter to be murdered. Leonard later meets Natalie, whom he protects from Dodd, but who accidentally puts him onto Teddy, whom he then kills. This version of the plot seems to be what Christopher Nolan intended, but this is hardly the end of the story. Even if this version of the plot is the intended one, it still leaves many elements unsettled, and there may be no way to reconcile them. Yet, for the purposes of this essay, this is no matter. Given these outlines of two different versions of the plot, we can still address our main concern, which is what the film can tell us about the issue of personal identity.

Locke, Parfit, and *Memento*

In the foregoing, I have explained how Locke argues that personal identity is a matter of our conscious memories over time, that Parfit adapts this argument, and that *Memento* tests this general theory. The importance of the film is that it is another puzzle case, although one of a unique sort. Is Leonard Shelby the same person as he was when he could make new memories? If that original person is gone, is he now someone different? To answer these questions, let us distinguish Leonard 1 and Leonard 2, corresponding to the two versions of the plot, cited above. Leonard 1 is the person who suffers an assault, who is trying to avenge his wife who has died in the assault, and so on. He has a linear series of conscious memories with only one gap, that produced by the assault. He makes new memories, which connect onto his old series and are then forgotten. But, actually, Leonard 1 may not sound like a person at all, for his personhood is *not* bound by chronology. The new parts of his series of memories are almost immediately forgotten, regardless of *when* this occurs. But, if we assume that personal identity is a matter of consciousness of memories, dropping any chronological requirement for it should not be that counterintuitive.¹⁰

Leonard 1 is not a multiple person or a person with overlapping but distinct identities. He may seem like a multiple person, for his conscious memories are born and then die, every few minutes, compounding his personhood over time. If this were correct, he would become and then cease to be many persons, with the only overlap being what he can manage with his professed “conditioning,” whatever that amounts to.¹¹ But, although Leonard 1 suffers his memories’ being born and then dying continually, this is harmless here. In fact, it is not as though his entire personhood is born and then dies, with a distinct person taking its place each time. This is because, although his entire series of conscious memories may be reproduced and eliminated every five minutes, in the next five minutes that *same* series comes back to him, except for those few memories that were formed in the previous few minutes. Leonard 1 returns every time, with the exception of those recent conscious memories, and, thus, is just who he believes himself to be. Since this is so, he is not a multiple person, and there is no mystery about his personal identity. Thus, Leonard 1 does not shed light on the issue of personal identity.

The issues are different when we look at Leonard 2. He is the person who suffers an assault and who accidentally kills his wife, who did not die in the assault, with insulin. He then transposes his own past with that of

Sammy Jankis, in that he projects his memories onto Sammy and invents false ones for himself. He then enters a mental institution, escapes, and tries to avenge his supposedly murdered wife. Leonard 2 is a more troubling case for the issue of personal identity, for a myriad of reasons. The main worry is that he should have a linear series of conscious memories but does not. To see why this is, let us create another distinction. Leonard 2a is the person who existed before the assault. This is the person who lived with his wife but whose series of conscious memories halted soon after the assault. Leonard 2a suffers a kind of death when his entire set of memories is infected, is fused with that of another person. In point of fact, there is no way to ascertain the details of this fusion, either from the inside or from the outside, or to decide which of his present memories are true and which false. But this is not really death, for *some* person seems to survive.

Leonard 2b comes into being at this point. He is the person who is created by the assault. This occurred when Leonard 2a took his own conscious memories and projected them onto Sammy Jankis and then invented false ones for himself. But *who* is Leonard 2b? In point of fact, Locke would not find this an easy question to answer, for this person has not a series of conscious memories but only an uneasy mix of two, which are fused together. In Locke's theory, there does not seem to be an answer to this question. Parfit insists: "Any two people fused together will have different characteristics, different desires, and different intentions." The trouble is that some of these states will be compatible and some not. It follows that, in any fused person, when that person is stable enough to have a consistent set of characteristics, some of both persons will be sacrificed. Parfit notes that, afterward, the resultant person will not be wholly similar to either and, thus, that this may seem like a kind of death.¹² In other words, such identity fusion may strike us as death, for our personhood changes. But such partial survival is not really the end either. Leonard 2b is such a person, although the question now is whether such personhood is worth having.

There is no real answer to who Leonard 2b is—only that he bears degrees of resemblance to both his former persons. The message here is that "survival itself can have degrees" yet also that this sort of identity is, in fact, worth having.¹³ Mark Rowlands notes that this revelation can change our expectations, for, as soon as we drop the prejudices that personal identity is transitive, that our memories must be true, and that there must be a static and unified self, we realize that no one is ever identical with himself over time but, rather, that "we are all just survivors, very close survivors, of the persons we were a moment ago."¹⁴ This realization allows us to drop our

vain hopes for anything more from personal identity and to see that we should alter our attitudes about it. But the moral here is that cases of personal identity fusion are not so unusual. The difference between Leonard 2b and us is that he has projected his former memories onto another person and created false ones for himself, which we presumably do not do. But this is an inessential difference, for we are still forced to *reinterpret* our own pasts (our memories aren't like photographs or written chronicles; they're hazy, fragmented, partial), and this activity of reinterpretation again issues in a mixture of true and false memories that become our personal identity. In other words, our true and false memories determine who we will be.¹⁵

Leonard 2b, as well as we, have fused personal identities, at least to some extent. There are two disturbing consequences of this. The first consequence is that, just as Leonard 2a has a special concern for his future, we have a special concern for our futures. Since Leonard 2a counts on not becoming Leonard 2b, and since we count on not becoming anything we do not choose to be, it is *rational* for both to have a special concern for their respective futures. But, if Leonard 2a comes to believe that he will be the fused Leonard 2b, and if we come to believe that we will be fused, then neither of us will count on being the same person in the future. If Leonard 2a and we suspect that our future persons will be entirely unlike us, then neither will have any rational interest in those future persons.¹⁶ But, plainly, this is a problem, for we all care about our futures and do so rationally. However, this problem of concern for our future personhoods may not be so serious after all. We still may have many conscious memories that traverse the former and later persons. Since this is so, we can be optimists about our futures, in the hope that these memories will justify our special concern for them.

The second consequence of our having fused personal identities, at least to some extent, concerns the attribution of responsibility. If we are fused persons to any degree, this renders any attribution of responsibility difficult. The memory theory of personal identity, and its successor in terms of survival, is supposed to explain such responsibility, but does not seem to. Leonard 2b is a mix of Sammy Jankis and invented memories, just as we reinterpret our pasts and become a mix of true and false memories. This consequence spells trouble, for, in such cases of fusion, there seems to be no way to say *who* is really responsible for any action. If we are fused persons, it is difficult to know what *element* of us bears responsibility for our actions. This problem, although difficult, is not completely intractable, for we still do attribute responsibility to fused persons. In attributions, we

just attempt to decrease the amount of responsibility that the present person bears in inverse proportion to any increase in the fusion he suffers. In the end, however, perhaps there can be only conjectures about these difficulties concerning our concern for our futures or about the attribution of responsibility.

Conclusion

So, what can we really glean from this comparison of Locke and *Memento* on the topic of personal identity? The first lesson is that personal identity is constituted by our having a series of conscious memories, at least usually. In most cases, this memory theory seems to be the only plausible candidate for a conception of personal identity. This is so even though there is no chronological constraint on any linear series of conscious memories. The second lesson is that any series of conscious memories can be fused with another, such that the result is a mix of two persons or a mix of the true and false. But, then, it follows that our personal identity is not really identity at all but, rather, a matter of survival, which, in turn, admits of degrees. This may seem like a radical notion, but it is so only because we are used to thinking of personal identity as transitive, of our memories as true, and of identity as static and unified. The third lesson is that, given this memory theory of personal identity, our special concern for our futures, and the attribution of responsibility to such persons, may turn out to have problems after all.¹⁷

Notes

1. In point of fact, many philosophers call this theory of personal identity the *memory theory*. But this is misleading because memories are of many kinds of mental states, such as desires, beliefs, and even long-term goals. It follows that this theory of personal identity in terms of memory is really about psychological continuity over time.

2. John Locke bears this in mind, for he notes that his speculations on personal identity are “apt to look strange to some readers.” This is so, he says, only because of the “ignorance of the nature of that thinking thing that is in us” (*Essay concerning Human Understanding* [1690], ed. Walter Ott [New York: Barnes & Noble, 2004], 278 [page numbers for subsequent quotations will be given in the text]).

3. It does not matter for this account if it is souls *or* bodies that are said to be necessary for personal identity. This is because the postulation of either as neces-

sary for such identity is open to the same criticism, that either souls or bodies may provide evidence for personal identity but are irrelevant to what it actually is.

4. Locke distinguishes between the *man* and the *person*. He says that, since these are usually the same, “human laws punish both,” and rightfully so. He insists that God will have the solution for our errors, for “in the great day, when the secrets of the heart shall be laid open, no one will be made to answer for what he knows nothing of” (278).

5. Thomas Reid, *On the Intellectual Powers of Man* (1785), reprinted in *Personal Identity*, ed. John Perry (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 115.

6. Anthony Flew, “Locke and the Problem of Personal Identity” (1951), reprinted in *Locke and Berkeley: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. C. B. Martin and D. M. Armstrong (New York: Doubleday, 1968), 159.

7. Derek Parfit, “Personal Identity” (1971), reprinted in Perry, ed., *Personal Identity*, 209.

8. In particular, in the end of the film, we see a flashback wherein Leonard has “John G. raped and killed my wife,” yet also “I’ve done it,” tattooed on his chest, with his wife alive, lying beside him. But, if his wife is alive, he would not have either tattoo. This must be part of a dream, perhaps one that mixes his desire for vengeance with his desire to see his wife alive.

9. In this version, Leonard is correct that Teddy lies about many things: about his wife dying during the assault; about Sammy Jankis; and about his not yet having killed John G. Leonard is lied to by Teddy and, thus, is justifiably angry. In this version, Leonard has many reasons to kill Teddy after all.

10. There is a chronological requirement for personal identity on this account simply because all that matters now is continuity. This is easily imagined, e.g., in cases of hibernating for generations and then waking up. In such cases, chronology is broken, but, given the continuity, we would still expect to wake up as ourselves.

11. Mary Litch seems to understand Leonard in this way. In particular, she says that, after the assault, “there are *too many* distinct contenders” to be him (*Philosophy through Film* [New York: Routledge, 1992], 77). But, plainly, even if Leonard is reproduced every few minutes, it does not follow that his personhood is fractured by this.

12. Parfit, “Personal Identity,” 212.

13. *Ibid.*, 215.

14. Mark Rowlands, *Sci-Phi: Philosophy from Socrates to Schwarzenegger* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2005), 118.

15. Leonard 2b and we are still in different positions, however, for his fusion is worse than ours. Even so, his case suggests that, often, we do not know just how bad the fusion is. The trouble is that, without this sort of knowledge, we might be more fused than we think we are and that, because of that, we cleave to a false personal identity. Michael Baur interprets Leonard 2b in this way, yet with more detail

(see his “We All Need Mirrors to Remind Us Who We Are: Inherited Meaning and Inherited Selves in *Memento*,” in *Movies and the Meaning of Life*, ed. Kimberly Blessing and Paul Tudico [Chicago: Open Court, 2005]).

16. Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 307.

17. Theodore Sider notes that, even if the memory theory of personal identity does have such problems, that does not help any other theory. This is especially so, he says, because the problems are the same for other theories. See his “Personal Identity over Time,” in *Riddles of Existence: A Guided Tour of Metaphysics*, ed. Earl Conee and Theodore Sider (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

Problems of Memory and Identity in Neo-Noir's Existentialist Antihero

Andrew Spicer

Most thoughts are memories. And memories deceive.

—Will Graham, *I'll Sleep When I'm Dead*
(Mike Hodges, 2003)

One of the most arresting traits of film noir is its depiction of male protagonists who lack the qualities (courage, incorruptibility, tenacity, and dynamism) that characterize the archetypal American hero and who therefore function as antiheroes. Typical noir male protagonists are weak, confused, unstable, and ineffectual, damaged men who suffer from a range of psychological neuroses and who are unable to resolve the problems they face. Noir's depiction of its male protagonists—what Frank Krutnik calls its “pervasive problematising of masculine identity”—is expressive of a fundamentally existentialist view of life.¹ As Robert Porfirio argues, noir's “non-heroic hero” is such because he operates in a world “devoid of the moral framework necessary to produce the traditional hero.”² In this essay, I wish to argue that the development of neo-noir—which may be loosely defined as films noirs made after the “classic period” (1940–59) by filmmakers who draw consciously on that body of films—intensified these existential characteristics. The two films I focus on—*Point Blank* (John Boorman, 1967) and *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000)—are extreme examples of a pervasive tendency, depicting an antihero whose memory is, or may be, faulty, whose experience of time is confused, and who is deeply uncertain about his past and unsure about the meaning of the present activity he is engaged in and the very fabric of his identity. Both films were made by English writer-directors and show the continued importance of émigré talent to the development of American film noir.

Existentialism and Film Noir

The term *existentialism* was coined toward the end of the Second World War by the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel as a label for the emerging ideas of Jean-Paul Sartre, whose *Being and Nothingness* was first published in 1944.³ As William Barrett argues, it is a philosophy that addresses modern experience and was, therefore, one that could “cross the frontier from the Academy into the world at large.” Barrett defines its central characteristics as “alienation and estrangement; a sense of the basic fragility and contingency of human life; the impotence of reason confronted with the depths of existence; the threat of Nothingness, and the solitary and unsheltered condition of the individual before this threat.”⁴ Because, in Sartre’s famous phrase, “existence precedes essence,” there are no transcendent values or moral absolutes, and man is forever struggling for self-definition, trying to forge an identity from the confusing assault of experience. Although, as Barrett suggests, existentialist ideas began to seem relevant in the uncertain cultural climate of postwar America, one should not ascribe this to the direct influence of Sartre or to an explicit body of philosophical writing. As Porfirio argues, film noir exhibits a “generalized adoption” of existentialist ideas rather than adherence to the work of any specific thinkers, and there is no evidence that American film noir was directly affected by the writings of European existentialists. Porfirio contends that film noir’s adoption of existentialism derives much more directly from the work of the “hard-boiled” school of writers, notably Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and Cornell Woolrich, and from Ernest Hemingway.⁵ This, I suggest, is entirely typical of the ways in which popular culture assimilates ideas and attitudes that are difficult, complex, and challenging.

Porfirio notes valuably that, although existentialism has its positive aspect—emphasizing “freedom,” “authenticity,” “responsibility”—film noir is much more concerned with its darker side, which emphasizes alienation, loneliness, and the fear that any or all activity may be futile and meaningless. Thus, the noir protagonist’s choice is never a real one, never an opportunity to escape the bonds of convention, except through the hollow freedom represented by sex, money, power, and the promise of adventure. The noir antihero often acts from desperation rather than rational choice, reacting to an inchoate, contingent world dominated by blind chance that is always threatening, carrying an undercurrent of violence that can strike at any moment. In a world where the familiar is fraught with danger and a sense of dread, the noir hero tries to make

some order out of what happens, a momentary stay against confusion.⁶ As Steven Sanders suggests, noir is imbued with a strong fatalism that emphasizes not freedom but constraint and entrapment, pervaded by a strong sense of absurdity that stems from the seriousness with which the protagonist views his actions and their ultimate insignificance.⁷ Because, as Alan Woolfolk argues, the noir protagonist is dominated by the past, particularly what the past holds for the present and the future, the stability of linear chronology is undermined, and time becomes discontinuous and fragmented.⁸ The narrative devices—flashbacks, voice-overs, and dream sequences—that are such a striking feature of film noir are attempts to render this discontinuity.

Existentialism and Modernist Neo-Noir

Porfirio's comments relate to "classic noir," and it is possible to argue that neo-noir has been more powerfully pervaded with existentialist ideas, again derived not from philosophical writings but from European film practice. John Orr has identified a neo-modernist "movement" in film that emerged at the end of the 1950s in France and Italy and gradually disseminated outward during the 1960s and 1970s. Neo-modernist films such as Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'avventura* (1960) exhibit indeterminate narratives and complex, enigmatic characterization. European neo-modernism is profoundly existentialist, showing a pervasive concern with problems of identity and memory, depicting unmotivated characters adrift in ambiguous situations that are beyond their comprehension and that they are incapable of resolving.⁹ As Robert Kolker argues, this European neo-modernism encouraged American filmmakers to break with the coherent, character-driven causality of classic Hollywood cinema and develop a modernist American cinema that exhibited the same characteristics as European neo-modernism.¹⁰ The psychologically or emotionally motivated classic hero was replaced by the "unmotivated hero," who, Thomas Elsaesser notes, brought "an almost physical sense of inconsequential action, of pointlessness and uselessness: stances which are not only interpretable psychologically, but speak of a radical skepticism about American virtues of ambition, vision, drive," which had underpinned the classic Hollywood action genres.¹¹ In a period of escalating production costs and shrinking audiences, studios became willing to look to young talent outside the established system, and, for a time, American cinema entered a period of experimentation in which a new generation of filmmakers—such as Arthur

Penn and Martin Scorsese—was given the space to make challenging films. The demise of the Production Code allowed a greater degree of latitude in the depiction of the protagonist's motivations and the possibility of unresolved, ambiguous, "open" endings.

Whereas European directors tended to abandon genre altogether for a more intellectualized and abstract art cinema, American neo-modernists worked, for the most part, within a popular generic tradition but, in the process, undertook a radical generic revisionism, critiquing the cultural myths at the heart of popular genres, exposing them as defunct, inadequate, or even destructive.¹² Although this revisionism occurred across a range of genres, the antitraditionalism of film noir lent itself particularly well to a critique of American values, as Paul Schrader argued in his seminal "Notes on *Film Noir*" (1972), offering itself as ripe for revaluation and reappropriation to a generation disillusioned by the war in Vietnam.¹³ Without abandoning altogether the pulp fiction origins of the crime genre, American neo-noir directors deliberately showed standard narrative conventions—such as the quest, investigation, or journey—collapsing, thereby questioning narrative itself as a meaningful activity. The confusion, alienation, and fragmented identity that characterized the classic noir hero became incorporated into a more extreme epistemological confusion, where any action was shown as both pointless and absurd.¹⁴ In Robert Altman's remake of the classic noir *The Long Goodbye* in 1973, Chandler's "modern knight," the private eye Philip Marlowe, was played by Elliott Gould as a shambling, distracted drifter, his banal or inconsequential actions of a piece with the film's episodic, rambling narrative, in which the drives of the investigative thriller are replaced by an existential uncertainty about the meaning of events.

***Point Blank*: "Did It Happen? A Dream, a Dream"**

These developments in American neo-noir were heralded by John Boorman's astonishing *Point Blank* (1967), which Jack Shadoian identifies as "a serious attempt to bring the genre perceptually and aesthetically up-to-date," Foster Hirsch as "the first truly post-noir noir," and David Thomson as "the first and maybe still the richest merging of an American genre with European art house aspirations."¹⁵ An inexperienced young director, Boorman sensed the possibilities that were opening up, a moment when "there was a complete loss of nerve by the American studios": "They were willing to cede power to the directors."¹⁶ Boorman was helped in

his negotiations with MGM by the star, Lee Marvin, who handed over to Boorman virtually total creative control.¹⁷ *Point Blank* is highly conscious of classic noir; there are echoes of several such films, including Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944). But Boorman was primarily influenced by modernist European filmmakers, including Antonioni's experimentation with color in *Il deserto rosso* (*The Red Desert*, 1964) and especially Alain Resnais' *L'année dernière à Marienbad* (*The Last Year at Marienbad*, 1961), with its exploration of the ambiguities of desire, memory, and identity.

Narrative Ambiguity

In essence, *Point Blank* is an archetypal revenge thriller, but turned inside out. In the opening scene, Walker (Lee Marvin) is shot at point-blank range by his close friend Mal Reese (John Vernon) in a cell on Alcatraz, the location for their hijack of syndicate money. Walker's wife, Lynne (Sharon Acker), now Reese's lover, looks on, so Walker suffers a double betrayal. Reese and Lynne depart, leaving Walker for dead. In an audacious series of discontinuous, elliptical cuts, typical of the film, Boorman shows Walker apparently escaping from Alcatraz, but his figure is photographed from unusual angles to make it appear grotesque, primeval, and in one shot his face is lit from below so that it resembles a primitive mask. As he enters the turbulent waters surrounding the prison, a voice-over intones the history of this "escape-proof jail" from which no one has got away, as a shock cut shows us a besuited, fully recovered Walker aboard a tourist boat that circles the Rock. Thus, Boorman deliberately makes it unclear whether Walker survived the shooting and, thus, whether the events we witness are actually happening or whether they are Walker's compensatory hallucination just before he dies, captured in his mutterings as he collapses: "Did it happen? A dream, a dream." In an interview, Boorman commented: "Seeing the film, one should be able to imagine that this whole story of vengeance is taking place inside his head at the moment of his death."¹⁸ Indeed, as Jack Shadoian argues, Walker's actions are not bound by ordinary logic. He seems able to appear and reappear in different locations, able to obliterate space and time, and is, thus, subject to the dream logic of desire, not of reality: "The narrative mode is imitative of dream because dream is the only mode in which the hero's situation can be put. The film is Walker's dream."¹⁹ However, carefully set against this is *Point Blank*'s frequent emphasis on the quotidian banality of modern life, on the gadgets

that dominate interior spaces, on advertising billboards and radio jingles; in one scene, Walker, slumped on a sofa, channel-hops as he watches television, like any ordinary, “distracted” modern viewer.

Visual Style

It is this *hesitation* between mundanity and fantasy that makes the film so powerful, leaving the viewer constantly unsettled, unsure how to interpret events. Boorman combines the pace and drive of the typical American thriller with a series of distancing devices that encourage critical reflection. The film’s visual style deliberately hesitates between realism (which Boorman felt was an important element of film noir) and abstraction, the environments distorted, but not too violently, to reveal Walker’s state of mind. The famous scene in the discotheque, with its lurid psychedelic colors and screaming black vocalist, was expressive of all the violence seething in his head. Audiences were able, Boorman thought, to accept this device through the fluidity of the editing.²⁰ Boorman deliberately avoided the “garish” color saturations that were the norm at this point, often choosing to shoot at night so that the color was drained out, thereby achieving the “monochromatic intensity” he wanted.²¹ He used a subtle but tightly controlled color palette, gradually changing from cold grays and silvers through blue and green to warmer yellows and reds, the characters’ costumes always reinforcing the dominant color of each scene. By choosing to shoot with a new forty-millimeter Panavision lens, which gave an extreme wide angle but also more depth of field in close-ups, Boorman made his audience aware of some background action without it being too distracting. The score was also experimental, more tonal than melodic—very unusual at this point—which also creates a distancing effect, but without plunging into asynchronous abstraction.

Characterization and Performance

This hesitation also informs the character of Walker himself. On one level, he is a supreme individualist, relentlessly pursuing the two people who have betrayed him and demanding the restoration of the money he is “owed.” But, on another, more mythic level, as established in the opening scene, he is a “force,” an antihero who represents old-fashioned human values in a world of nameless corporations and shadowy, bureaucratic criminal empires where there seems to be no real distinction between legality and

criminality. For Boorman, Walker was “a catalyst who exposes the corruption of their world.” He is possessed by all the nausea and alienation that characterize existential man, expressing, in an exaggerated form, the rage and frustration that ordinary citizens feel in the face of the impersonality of modern life dominated by technology, their desire for direct access to the people in charge, to give a human face to corporate America. Despite studio opposition, Boorman chose to set *Point Blank* in Los Angeles, which his outsider’s eye transformed into the representative city of modernity, anonymous and indifferent, with its vast, vertiginous buildings of steel and plate glass. Boorman commented: “I wanted my setting to be hard, cold and in a sense futuristic. I wanted an empty, sterile world, for which Los Angeles was absolutely right.”²²

As a modernist, Boorman replaced conventional character psychology with a blank mask, using Marvin’s taught, angular frame and expressionless face, what Boorman called his “stony intensity,” to suggest a walking corpse, profoundly alienated from everything and everyone. Marvin’s presence as the antihero is disconcerting because of the menace and violence associated with the actor’s persona, not least from his chilling performance in Don Siegel’s remake of *The Killers* (1964). Boorman, who developed a deep relationship with Marvin, felt that *Point Blank* was also about the actor’s existential estrangement from American society and, indeed, humanity, consequent on his having been brutalized as a seventeen-year-old boy sent to war in 1943. Boorman argued that all Marvin’s performances were underscored by his struggle to recapture the humanity he felt he had lost.²³ Thus, *Point Blank* can be read as part of a representative personal biography of a man who comes back from the dead and tries to find his humanity, thus reinforcing the figure’s mythic status. Although *Point Blank* presents Walker as an indestructible automaton, thrashing assorted hoods, it also endows him with a certain humanity, noticeably in the flashbacks to his courtship of Lynne, his friendship with Mal Reese, and their idyllic if ultimately destructive ménage à trois.

Repetitions and Doublings

However, in the main action, Walker’s fragile humanity is overwhelmed by revenge. In the second scene, Walker bursts into Lynne’s apartment, pushing her roughly aside and firing repeatedly into the empty bed, as if attempting to kill her and Reese in flagrante and, thus, eradicate the hideous memory of them together on Alcatraz. After Lynne talks to him—Walker

does not react—about her drift toward Mal, there is a slow-motion replay of his entry and the shooting, making it almost lyrical, after which Walker appears to come to in an empty room. As he goes into the bedroom, there is an overtly sexual shot of Lynne on the bed, her dress pulled up around her thighs, only for Walker to find that she is now dead, having taken an overdose. *Point Blank* consistently collocates sex, money, and death. Walker takes his wedding ring off and places it tenderly on her hand. Shortly after, when he returns to the bedroom, there is no body, no covers on the bed, and he slumps into the corner of the room, a space now strangely empty, as if he were back in the cell on Alcatraz. Not only does the scene hesitate between dream and reality, but it also exhibits the other key element of *Point Blank*'s style, its use of repetition, often through an innovative deployment of flashbacks that seem more expressive of a character's feeling or state of mind than an objective rendering of the past. Boorman observed that he wanted to create a feeling of "déjà vu": "Everything that happens to Walker has happened to him before. . . . The impression is that he is caught in a revolving door, that his life is repeating itself."²⁴

Part of this repetition is the curious doubling (typical of dreams) of the characters. Angie Dickinson was cast in the role of Lynne's sister, Chris, because of the strong physical resemblance between the two actresses.²⁵ When he first meets Chris, Walker has to rouse her from a death-like sleep, and their relationship seems to replay the earlier one between Walker and Lynne, with Chris used as the bait for Walker's revenge on Mal Reese, who is captured by Walker when he is in bed with Chris in his penthouse apartment. In a later scene when Walker finally sleeps with Chris, as they make love, Boorman cuts to Walker and Lynne in the same position, then Reese and Lynne, and finally Reese and Chris, a seemingly endless repetition of interchangeable couplings. A latent homosexuality in male relationships is a characteristic of crime films, and, as Shadoian points out, the relationship of Walker and Reese has strong homoerotic undercurrents, with Reese dragging Walker to the floor when they meet at a convention, pleading with Walker to help as he lies on top of him. When Walker surprises Reese in the penthouse, he drags him out of bed naked, saying, "I want you this way," only for Reese to die accidentally as he becomes entangled in the sheets, loses his footing, and falls to the street below.²⁶ This homoeroticism is also part of the film's doubling, as Walker and Reese are doppelgängers, Reese representing the conformist side of Walker, a venal dark self, willing to betray and kill and to take his place in the Organization.

It is Chris who questions Walker's whole quest of revenge, calling him

a “pathetic sight, chasing shadows,” but, even after the deaths of Lynne and Reese, Walker clings stubbornly to the task of recovering “his” money. This leads to a return to Alcatraz (the only place where actual money is exchanged within the Organization), where, in a final savage irony, Walker finds that the man who has apparently been helping him (and who seemed to be a policeman) is Fairfax (Keenan Wynn), the head of the Organization, engaged in using Walker as the means to dispose of his rivals. At this point, Walker refuses Fairfax’s offer to join him, recognizing, at long last, how he has been brutalized by his revenge, and the utter futility of his desire to get his money back, and his own ultimate powerlessness: he has changed nothing. He retreats into the shadows of Alcatraz, “gradually melds back into nothingness,” as Boorman puts it.²⁷

Boorman’s “warming” of the film’s colors also delivers another ironic blow, as the rich orange-brown hues of a new dawn envelop the ruined prison, underscoring the redundancy of Walker’s circular story, revealed as an empty spectacle or a recurring nightmare, the delusion of a man already dead. Thus, a story of revenge becomes an existentialist narrative about the nature of desire, the fallibility of memory, and the fragility of identity in the face of a contingent and meaningless world, expressing the blank pointlessness of modern existence.

Existentialism and Postmodern Neo-Noir

Although neo-noir has passed, as I have argued elsewhere, from a radical modernism to a more commodified postmodernism, it remains a form that continues to accommodate complex, difficult ideas and in which existentialist attitudes continue to flourish.²⁸ The development of independent (“indie”) cinema has provided a space that offers more creative freedom than is possible in mainstream filmmaking, where the control of the major studios is more strict, generating thought-provoking pictures in the absence of the widespread distribution of European films. In the 1990s, the boundary between indies and the majors has become increasingly blurred, and many neo-noirs straddle what is becoming a diminishing divide between art house films and mainstream cinema. This blurring of boundaries is partly dependent on shifts in patterns of consumption. As many commentators have pointed out, audiences have become increasingly knowledgeable, cine-literate, capable of accepting and enjoying a degree of uncertainty and an enigmatic quality in characterization and narrative. The massive home consumption of films on video and now DVD has been an integral part of

this process, allowing audiences to inspect films in great detail and enjoy the minutiae of knowing references. Hence the growth of cult films, which “become the property of any audience’s private space” and can be enjoyed in a variety of ways.²⁹

Contemporary neo-noir filmmakers have used these conditions to experiment boldly in both narrative and subject matter. Postmodern noirs often display highly convoluted plots that circle back on themselves and a pervasive uncertainty about the reliability of what is being shown or told and the processes of memory, underscored by an existential fear of meaninglessness. A flashback structure is common, but, as John Orr notes, postmodern flashbacks are more visceral, oblique, and ambiguous than their predecessors.³⁰ In some indie noirs, this unreliability is pushed toward a radical indeterminacy that is profoundly existentialist. In *Romeo Is Bleeding* (1994), directed by the Hungarian-born but English-raised Peter Medak, the confessional flashback narrative of the corrupt New York cop Jack Grimaldi (Gary Oldman) is both self-serving and deceitful as he rearranges chronology in order to disguise or evade his own motives. His recollections are frequently interrupted by dream sequences, which undermine his credibility as a narrator and question the whole basis of his story.

Memento: “Do I Lie to Make Myself Happy?”

Christopher Nolan’s *Memento* (2000) is highly conscious of these developments, but it also reaches back to classic noir and *Point Blank*.³¹ *Memento* also shows the influence of European art cinema and of the complex narrative structures and discontinuous editing of Nicolas Roeg’s films, including *Performance* (1970). Nolan—who is bicultural, with an American mother and English father, and has spent time in both England and the United States—was, like Boorman, an inexperienced director making his debut American film, having earned a reputation in the United States with his first film, *Following* (1998), made for only £7,000 using friends and acquaintances from University College London, where Nolan studied. *Following*, which attracted attention after it won prizes at several festivals, is a thoroughly existentialist film displaying elements that Nolan developed in *Memento*—a fragmented visual style, a complex, often baffling narrative with a triple time scheme, and an unreliable narrator whose confusions about memory and identity remain unresolved. *Memento* was a modestly budgeted indie film whose success allowed it to cross over onto the mainstream circuit and achieve widespread distribution and exhibition. Nolan

set his film in Los Angeles, not because, like Boorman, he saw its futuristic modernity, but because he wanted his setting to have an anonymous familiarity, a world of nondescript bars and impersonal motels that was “quintessentially American,” dependent on being located in a vast country that had a homogeneous culture. Nolan valued, as did Boorman, the realism of film noir and was anxious to ground his complex story in an everyday, mundane world that was palpably recognizable and contemporary.³²

Reverse Chronology

Memento is the story of Leonard Shelby (Guy Pearce), an insurance investigator who has lost his short-term memory through a head injury suffered when he tried to rescue his wife from being raped and murdered. Shelby is determined to take revenge on his wife’s killer, one “John G.” In order to compensate for his affliction, he takes Polaroid snapshots of places and people he encounters, writing captions on those snapshots in order to retain essential information. He also has a series of tattoos inscribed on his body to preserve other facts he finds out, including John G.’s car registration. Although a number of films noirs have protagonists who suffer from amnesia—*Spellbound* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1945), *The Blue Dahlia* (George Marshall, 1946), *Deadline at Dawn* (Harold Clurman, 1946), *Somewhere in the Night* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1946), and *High Wall* (Curtis Bernhardt, 1947), for example—Shelby’s condition is different because he retains his long-term memory, a certainty about who he is, and the circumstances of his wife’s death but cannot make new memories after that trauma. Shelby describes his situation as “like you always just woke up,” and, although he is able to plan ahead, he cannot recall what he has just done. Nolan felt that this gave him the opportunity to explore memory and identity with greater precision: “It’s not like these amnesia movies where there’s no rules, where the guy doesn’t know anything so anything can be true. . . . This is a knot-tier—[Shelby] knows who he was but not who he has become.”³³ It was also the device through which Nolan could “freshen up and re-awaken some of the neuroses behind the familiar elements” and, thus, renew “the confusion and uncertainty and ambiguity that those types of characters used to have, but lost because we’ve come to expect those kind of surprises.”³⁴ In doing so, he breathes new life into familiar existentialist tropes.

Memento employs an innovative and complex narrative structure that reinforces the uncertainty and ambiguity the antihero experiences. Like many noirs, *Memento* begins with a murder: Shelby shoots Teddy (Joe

Pantoliano), the undercover policeman who has been helping him but who he now feels is his wife's killer. But, instead of a conventional investigative flashback in which the events leading up to the murder are then explained and their motivation revealed, *Memento* unfolds in reverse, each scene depicting events that immediately precede the action we have just watched. This constantly undermines the audience's expectations, keeping viewers in the state of heightened attention that Nolan felt was essential to understand the film's ambiguities and the process of memory itself, what we learn in each new scene constantly undermining the knowledge that the previous scene seemed to establish as genuine. It is impossible, as Nolan asserts, for the audience to orient itself to the sequence of events as the structure is a hairpin or widening gyre: "You can never find out where you are in the time-line, because there is no time-line. . . . If it was a straight-backwards film, you could just take that two-dimensional time-line and flip it over, but you can't do that with this film. Later on down the line, you realize that the film doesn't run back; it's a Möbius strip." *Memento* is peppered with flashbacks, direct or indirect repetitions of the same events that are, nevertheless, used to provide a slightly different perspective because of their context, showing "how the same situation can be viewed differently, depending on what information you already know up to that point."³⁵ In addition, *Memento* constantly shifts from color to black and white, a further disorientation, as the two color registers have different resonances for the audience. Initially, the black-and-white sequences—in which Shelby is in telephone dialogue with a confidant (possibly Teddy, but this is never made clear)—seem to provide a more objective, quasi-documentary depiction of Shelby's situation, but gradually, as the pace of the intercutting between the two modes increases, the black-and-white sequences are also revealed as subjective, thus creating the possibility that, as in *Point Blank*, everything is happening inside his head.

Characterization and Performance

These structural ambiguities inform our understanding of Shelby himself. On one level, he is the distraught victim of a hideous and traumatic crime, and his desire for revenge is understandable and even morally justified. His fevered search for his wife's killer makes him an empathetic character, engaged in the search for truth and justice, and his problems of memory loss compound our sympathy and our desire that he should succeed, despite the odds, like any conventional hero. As Nolan comments, the audience

is drawn inexorably into Shelby's consciousness, identifying with him because we never know more than he does as the narrative structure "mirrors the mind-set [he] is trapped in."³⁶ An extreme example of existential man, Shelby is forever engaged in the act of self-creation but haunted by a fear of meaninglessness and a fall into chaos. His condition means that he can be exploited, sucked into the schemes and counterschemes of Teddy, and manipulated by the ostensibly sympathetic but hard and ruthless femme fatale Natalie (Carrie-Anne Moss) so that she might benefit from a lucrative drug deal. The flashbacks that show Shelby together with his wife have an engaging, bittersweet quality. The disturbing scene in which Shelby hires a prostitute to restage his recollections of his final night with his wife is tolerable because it is an attempt to shock him into recovering his memory, an attempt that fails because he cannot remember why he asked her there.

However, the flashbacks to Shelby's time as an insurance salesman reveal a far less engaging figure, a slick careerist, indifferent to the plight of Sammy Jankis, afflicted with a similar short-term memory loss. Shelby rejects Jankis's claims for support because he suspects, or wants to believe, that his condition is faked. Shelby conveys his suspicions to Jankis's diabetic wife, who dies as she attempts to test Sammy through repeated demands that he inject her with insulin. And, as the events unfurl backward toward the opening shooting of Teddy, there is increasing evidence not only that Shelby is capable of exploiting his condition but also that he has a suppressed and easily triggered violence that can erupt at any moment. His brutality is displayed when he punches Natalie, when he beats and ties up Dodd (who may be part of the drug deal), and when he kills Jimmy Grantz, whom he is all too ready to accept as his wife's murderer.

The ambivalence that the audience feels toward Shelby's character is crucial to *Memento's* structure, and Nolan wanted the sense of a dialogue between Shelby's past and present selves as he attempts to bridge the indeterminate gap in time between his wife's murder and his present position. Nolan was fortunate, he admits, in casting an actor who was capable of great subtlety in his performance.³⁷ Guy Pearce manages the difficult feat of being, at the same time, bewildered and cunning, projecting a man haunted by the fear that he may have done something wrong, a man who has a darker side that may even be capable of murder but that his amnesia has allowed him to forget. In a beautiful touch, Pearce conveys how, each time he wakes, Shelby is intrigued by the tattoos that cover his torso, but not shocked by them, as they have become part of his consciousness. Pearce was also a star without a clearly defined persona—unlike Brad Pitt, who for

a time was interested in playing Shelby—and therefore brought to the role an Everyman quality, the attractive but not heroic ordinary guy caught up in a maelstrom of confused feelings and uncertainty.³⁸

An Unresolved Ending

Memento's backward-spiraling narrative ensures that this existential confusion intensifies rather than settling itself, culminating in the chilling final scene that, instead of resolving the issues, provokes a more profound uncertainty. After Shelby kills Grantz in a deserted warehouse on the outskirts of the city (another of *Memento's* archetypal noir locations), Teddy, who has orchestrated the killing, tells Leonard not only that he has used him to kill a series of undesirables but that Shelby's wife actually survived the attack and died later when Shelby accidentally administered a fatal dose of insulin. Shelby has subsequently fabricated this action into the story of Sammy Jankis, who not only had no wife but is a vulgar con man. This disclosure undermines what had seemed to be the only certainty, the veracity of Shelby's long-term memories, and, with that, the whole basis of the romantic revenge quest that he has set himself. Teddy tells Shelby (in what is the closest *Memento* comes to a direct statement) that memories are not records but subjective interpretations, which can be changed or distorted. Distracted, his whole identity in tatters, Shelby replies: "Do I lie to make myself happy?" Shelby, now dressed in the clothes we have always seen him in, which belong to the gangster Grantz, drives off at high speed in Grantz's Jaguar, but not before writing "Don't believe his lies" on Teddy's photograph, an action that proves the fallibility of the system that he has prided himself on and that also condemns Teddy to death in the scene that is now about to take place. Teddy's death will eradicate what Shelby has just been told, and he will be able to continue his quest. But were the dreadful revelations Shelby has just been told true? Or were they the weasel words of a corrupt, manipulative undercover cop under pressure, stalling for time? Is Teddy another unreliable narrator? Like *Point Blank*, *Memento* ends on a note of profound existential ambiguity.

Conclusion

Chris Darke commented: "The real pleasure of *Memento* lies in its openness to re-viewing and hence to interpretation."³⁹ This process was encouraged by the film's detailed Web site, which helped *Memento* quickly attain

the cult status it now enjoys, including a three-disc DVD release. Whether it will achieve, in time, the status that *Point Blank* now commands is an open question, but both can justifiably be called *meta-noirs*, films that radically revise and reconstruct the elements of film noir in order to pose deeper questions about the nature of existence. Through their ambiguous antiheroes, both explore the complex and fraught nature of memory and the problems of identity, demonstrating the powerful undercurrent of existentialism that runs throughout the whole development of film noir.

Notes

I am grateful to my partner, Joyce Woolridge, Alex Ballinger, Dr. Brian McFarlane, and Mark T. Conard for their comments on a draft of this essay.

1. Frank Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity* (London: Routledge, 1999), 99.

2. Robert Porfirio, "No Way Out: Existentialist Motifs in the *Film Noir*," *Sight and Sound* 45, no. 4 (1976): 212–17, reprinted in *Film Noir Reader*, ed. Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight, 1996), 83.

3. David E. Cooper, *Existentialism*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 1.

4. William Barrett, *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy* (1958; reprint, New York: Anchor, 1990), 9, 36.

5. Porfirio, "No Way Out," 80–82.

6. *Ibid.*, 81, 88, 91–92.

7. Steven M. Sanders, "Film Noir and the Meaning of Life," in *The Philosophy of Film Noir*, ed. Mark T. Conard (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 96–97, 102.

8. Alan Woolfolk, "The Horizon of Disenchantment: Film Noir, Camus, and the Vicissitudes of Descent," in *ibid.*, 117–19.

9. John Orr, *Cinema and Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 1993).

10. Robert Kolker, *A Cinema of Loneliness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

11. Thomas Elsaesser, "The Pathos of Failure: American Films in the 1970s: Notes on the Unmotivated Hero," *Monogram*, no. 6 (October 1975): 13–19, reprinted in *The Last Great American Picture Show: New Hollywood Cinema in the 1970s*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser, Alexander Horwath, and Noel King (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004), 282, 290.

12. John Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 227–45.

13. Paul Schrader, "Notes on *Film Noir*," *Film Comment* 8, no. 1 (1972): 8.

14. Larry Gross, "Film après Noir," *Film Comment* 12, no. 2 (1976): 44–49.

15. Jack Shadoian, *Dreams and Dead Ends: The American Gangster/Crime*

Film (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 254; Foster Hirsch, *Detours and Lost Highways: A Map of Neo-Noir* (New York: Limelight, 1999), 17; David Thomson, "As I Lay Dying," *Sight and Sound* 8, no. 6 (June 1998): 17.

16. Boorman quoted in Peter Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex 'n' Drugs 'n' Rock 'n' Roll Generation Saved Hollywood* (London: Bloomsbury, 1998), 22.

17. See Boorman's comments included on the DVD of *Point Blank* (released by Turner Entertainment/Warner Bros. Entertainment in 2005).

18. Boorman quoted in Michel Ciment, *John Boorman*, trans. Gilbert Adair (London: Faber & Faber, 1985), 78.

19. Shadoian, *Dreams and Dead Ends*, 254. I am indebted generally to Shadoian's highly perceptive reading of this film.

20. Boorman quoted in Ciment, *John Boorman*, 73.

21. Boorman, DVD commentary.

22. Boorman quoted in Ciment, *John Boorman*, 79, 73.

23. Boorman, DVD commentary. See also Boorman's film *Lee Marvin: A Personal Portrait* (1999).

24. Boorman quoted in Ciment, *John Boorman*, 78.

25. Ibid.

26. Shadoian, *Dreams and Dead Ends*, 259–60.

27. Boorman, DVD commentary.

28. See Andrew Spicer, *Film Noir* (Harlow: Longman/Pearson Education, 2002), 149–55.

29. Timothy Corrigan, *Cinema without Walls: Movies and Culture after Vietnam* (London: Routledge, 1992), 80–85. See also Barbara Klinger, "The Contemporary Cinephile: Film Collecting in the Post-Video Era," in *Hollywood Spectatorship: Changing Perceptions of Cinema Audiences*, ed. Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby (London: British Film Institute, 2001), 132–51.

30. John Orr, *The Art and Politics of Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 158.

31. The link between the two films was picked up in Philip French's review of *Memento* (*Observer*, 22 October 2000), but Nolan claims not to have seen *Point Blank* (see James Mottram, *The Making of "Memento"* [London: Faber & Faber, 2002], 37).

32. See Mottram, *Making of "Memento"*, 93, 167, 138.

33. Christopher Nolan and Jonathan Nolan, "How *Memento* Began," in *Memento and Following*, by Christopher Nolan (London: Faber & Faber, 2001), 233–34.

34. Nolan quoted in Mottram, *Making of "Memento"*, 40.

35. Ibid., 34, 36.

36. See Nolan's comments included on the DVD of *Memento* (released by Pathé Distribution in 2004).

37. Nolan, DVD commentary. The point is made several times.

38. Tom Charity, "Who's That Guy?" *Time Out*, October 4–11, 2000, 18. For Pitt, see Mottram, *Making of "Memento,"* 106–7.

39. Chris Darke, "Mr. Memory," *Sight and Sound* 10, no. 11 (November 2000):

43. It must be acknowledged that some commentators regard *Memento* as merely showy. See, e.g., Ronald Schwartz, *Neo-Noir: The New Film Noir Style from "Psycho" to "Collateral"* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2005), 78–79.

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Part 2

Justice, Guilt, and Redemption: Morality in Neo-Noir

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The Murder of Moral Idealism

Kant and the Death of Ian Campbell in *The Onion Field*

Douglas L. Berger

The Onion Field and Moral Philosophy

Before Ian Campbell joined the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) and became a plainclothes street felony cop, this reflective, bagpipe-playing son of Scottish immigrants had taken college courses as a premed student at the University of California, Los Angeles, and nurtured an interest in the philosopher Immanuel Kant. Ian was apparently so fascinated by philosophy that his college friends often found the attachment inexplicable and teased him that it got in the way of both his other studies and his life in general.¹ It seems as though, after Ian joined the force, his mother and friends noticed that the work undermined his belief that he could improve society and left him with the impression that all he could do as a policeman was “hold the line.”² Kant was a moral idealist. He thought that all rational beings had a deep sense of their moral duty; even if they did not or could not carry out their duty, people could, he believed, tell the difference between actions they ought to do and those they ought not to do. Ian Campbell was beginning to struggle with this Kantian conviction, although his wish to “hold the line” can still be seen as an effort to preserve this sense of justice and moral duty. On the night of March 9, 1963, this thirty-one-year-old mild-mannered father of two, this Kant buff, was literally shot to pieces by two petty thieves in the farm country of Bakersfield.

In the director Harold Becker’s 1979 neo-noir rendition of *The Onion Field*, former LAPD officer Joseph Wambaugh’s 1973 true-story novel, the events of Ian Campbell’s murder and its almost unfathomable aftermath are dramatized with a chillingly realistic accuracy. In the film, Campbell (Ted Danson) and his partner of only eight days, Karl Hettinger (John Savage),

are kidnapped after pulling over small-time robbers Gregory Powell (James Woods) and Jimmy Smith (Franklyn Seales) in downtown Los Angeles. When they reach a remote onion field off Wheeler Ridge, Powell, wrongly surmising that the kidnapping itself will ensure him a trip to the gas chamber if he is caught, shoots Campbell, and a terrified Hettinger flees for his life as one of the two thieves finishes Campbell off. Both assailants are caught, brought to trial, convicted of first-degree murder, and sentenced to death by the California Superior Court. But, after several U.S. Supreme Court decisions in 1964 and 1965 regarding Miranda rights as they apply to postcrime police interrogations, Powell and Smith are allowed to appeal their convictions and sentences for seven more years. In the course of these bizarre events, an eerie, antimoral tale unfolds. Powell and Smith, presumably both guilty of slaying a man in cold blood for no good reason at all, actually feel no sense of guilt whatsoever. Hettinger, however, because he surrendered his weapon to the robbers when Powell got the drop on Campbell at the original kidnapping scene, is denounced by the police force, and he becomes burdened by a sense of guilt so overwhelming that it leads him to petty thievery, brief stints of child beating, prolonged depression, and at least one attempt at suicide. Neither Powell nor Smith ever suffers the death penalty, and both men even feel contented with their prison lives, while Hettinger never really recovers from blaming himself for his partner's death.

One of the incredible ironies of this true story is how stunning an illustration it is of how wrong Kant seems to have been about human nature—and particularly about human moral consciousness. Kant was convinced that any human being who had any capacity at all for rational decision must be capable of distinguishing right from wrong, must be able to judge on his or her own which actions are moral and which immoral. Apart from the actual murder, the most horrifying thing about *The Onion Field* seems to be that, despite everything Kant says, Powell and Smith, two more or less “rational” criminals, never betray for a moment any sense that their monstrous killing of Campbell was really very wrong. They feel no remorse for the slaying. Hettinger, on the other hand, a levelheaded and sensible cop, a victim of the mortifying experience who realistically could have done nothing at all to prevent it from happening, has his whole life almost totally destroyed by guilt, a guilt that overpowers him and robs him of all his strength. How could a Kantian theory of the inherently moral rational human will possibly explain how the guilty could feel so guiltless and the innocent so responsible?

Kant and the Workings of Moral Conscience

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), a polymath university professor turned seminal philosopher who reportedly never once in his life left his hometown of Königsberg, East Prussia, wrote at the age of sixty-four at the end of *Critique of Practical Reason* that thinking about “the moral law within me” was the most elevating of all natural and human wonders.³ The ability of human beings not only to do good deeds but also to figure out for themselves, apart from any overbearing authority or coercion or influence, what is good is what makes them truly human, truly able to transcend the merely animal passions and desires and be free. Of course, doing the right thing is not always easy. We are not moral gods; we must constantly struggle against our needs, wants, biases, and ambitions in order to act according to moral principles. But it is that struggle, that resistance of reason against the onslaught of the passions and desires, that makes it possible for us to choose the right thing over the wrong thing. Our ability to be both moral and free is, therefore, based on the fact that we can and do reason.⁴ We may not, as rational beings, be born with the knowledge of absolute right and wrong, but we are born, Kant thinks, as rational beings, with the capacity to deduce that knowledge. Every rational being can know the good—and, in fact, as far as Kant is concerned, can know it without great difficulty.

But we might doubt this attractive picture of human reason and moral consciousness as being a rather bold overestimation. Can reason really rise above our passions? A later German philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), otherwise a great admirer of Kant, would, for instance, object that there are such persons as “evil geniuses,” people who can use their reason to achieve utterly diabolical ends, people without the slightest bit of moral conscience.⁵ As far as Schopenhauer was concerned, human reason is more often than not simply the tool of an insatiable and desiring will, helping that will get whatever it wants in the moment. Kant’s picture of reason and willing is certainly less grim, and, in fact, Kant thought that willing itself was proof that people could control their passions with reason. Let’s say, for example, that I want to be rich. Enjoying a life of wealth is the object of my desires, my personal version of happiness. Kant would say that you cannot become rich merely by wanting it, and you certainly won’t be able to become rich if you always spend all the money you have on the most expensive things you can buy. There is only one basic way to increase your wealth, namely, to make sure that you take in more money than you spend. That rule or principle that shows all people the basic path

to increasing their wealth is what Kant calls a *maxim*. Maxims of various kinds instruct a person about how to use certain means to achieve certain ends: "If you want *x*, you must do *y*." When people want things, they learn very quickly that they cannot just acquire them without using any means whatsoever, that they must make their actions conform to the best possible means for the desired acquisition.⁶ Now, this does not entail that being rich is necessarily a good, moral thing, nor does it imply that everyone wants to be rich; it simply means that, should a person want to be rich, he or she ought to follow a basic principle of wealth building. Because people's desired goals are different, Kant calls them *hypothetical*, and he calls the methods of achieving these various goals, the "oughts" of how to attain things, *hypothetical imperatives*. So far, Kant believes that he has shown that, if they are to be successful, the human pursuits of goals must be rational, must, that is, follow certain methodic principles, and, thus, that human will must be subordinate to reason. He has shown, in other words, how what he calls *practical reason* is fundamentally concerned with how to attain what is desired, and it is precisely this same practical reason that is, he will claim, the arbiter of moral judgments. For, as we have seen, Kant wants to go one giant step beyond merely pragmatic considerations and show not only that human beings can figure out through reason how they ought to achieve certain ends in a technical sense but also that they can know for certain which ends they ought to achieve in a moral sense.

To have moral knowledge is, for Kant, to be able to deduce that certain actions are always to be undertaken by everyone, and these actions he calls *categorical imperatives*. A simple test can be run on any action under consideration. When we are pondering whether what we intend to do is genuinely moral, we are to ask ourselves whether we believe that *everyone* should do what we intend to do. Kant's two famous immediate examples of how this test works are those of asking to borrow money from someone with no intention of repaying it and not helping a stranger in distress on the street.⁷ I could not possibly believe that everyone should ask to borrow money with no intention of repaying it because the society that would result would be one in which no one would believe anyone else's promise and this would doubtless yield an unsustainable community. Neither could I possibly believe that no one should ever help strangers in need because, in such a society, no one would help me if I required assistance. Therefore, I can know that making deceitful promises is always morally wrong and that refusing to help others is always morally wrong, which means that, in order to act morally, I must make promises only in good faith and unfailingly

help others to the best of my ability.⁸ The test of whether an act is moral is, therefore, whether its performance ought to be universal, whether it should be incumbent on everyone at all times. What is so special about this kind of certain moral knowledge, what makes it so unique, is that it can be determined by reason absolutely and completely; this moral knowledge can apply to every instance of an action under consideration for everyone. Kant says that this kind of moral knowledge is a *fact of reason*. We can and do have access to such knowledge of universal moral imperatives, all the “oughts” and “ought nots” of life, merely by virtue of possessing the capacity to reason.⁹

This account leads Kant to some fascinating views about feelings or sentiments frequently associated with morality. For instance, we are often moved by our intimacy or affection for others, or out of a generalized compassion for others, to act morally toward them. Kant would say that, while it is certainly a good thing that such emotions provide us assistance in doing right by others, they do not in and of themselves make our actions right. After all, even a bunch of conspiring murderers can feel loyalty to and even compassion for one another. What makes actions morally just is that they conform to what Kant alternatively calls the *moral law* and *duty*. Moral law and duty can be thought of simply as whatever a categorical imperative deduced by reason dictates that we do. A truly morally praiseworthy person is one who helps others or pursues justice not out of some compelling emotion to do so but because he or she judges that the required action is his or her duty and carries it out solely because it is his or her duty. We may experience certain emotions as by-products of conforming to our duty, the pains that a duty may require in ignoring our desires or sacrificing our own needs, for example, or the spiritual elevation that can come with the inward conviction that we are, indeed, doing the right thing, or simply the respect that submission to the moral law entails. However, as Kant argues in *Critique of Practical Reason*, moral sentiments may be poignantly acute should we fail to do our duty and commit an immoral act, for, in this case, no matter how much we lie about, rationalize, or obfuscate our transgression, we will always feel the guilt and shame that are the pangs of conscience. Using a courtroom metaphor, Kant says that a person who has done something wrong is like a convicted criminal before the inner judge of his or her own moral reason, his or her conscience:

With this agree perfectly the judicial sentences of that wonderful faculty in us which we call conscience. A man may use as much art

as he likes in order to paint to himself an unlawful act that he remembers, as an unintentional error, a mere oversight, such as one can never altogether avoid, and therefore as something in which he was carried away by the stream of physical necessity, and thus to make himself out innocent, yet he finds that the advocate who speaks in his favour can by no means silence the accuser within, if only he is conscious that at the same time when he did this wrong he was in his senses, that is, in possession of his freedom. . . . This cannot protect him from the blame and reproach that he casts upon himself.¹⁰

The only way, as far as Kant is concerned, that a sense of guilt or shame could *not* befall a person who had done something wrong is if that person was completely dispossessed, through some horrible disease or trauma, for example, of reason itself. But such a disease would more than likely be utterly incapacitating and would probably result in whoever was afflicted with it being placed in an asylum before he or she could do serious harm to others. Outside of this, so long as a human being is rational enough to figure out how to perform practical actions, such as the merely “technical” skills that would best enable him or her to rob a bank, he or she is also rational enough to feel the inner moral guilt that this crime supposedly elicits. In Kantian language, we would say that anyone who has enough reason to follow hypothetical imperatives also has enough reason to be conscious of categorical imperatives. Regardless of whether he or she is ever caught or convicted, ever confronted with charges by lawyers or victims or made to suffer punishment, the criminal knows very well, Kant insists, that he or she is guilty.

The flip side of such moral assurance is also available to those who do abide by the moral law, even in the face of the painful sacrifices that such obedience may demand. A righteous person may have to suffer great hardship and loss in fulfilling his or her obligation to the good, even to the extent of putting his or her own life at risk. But, in that case, no matter how traumatic the sacrifice, the righteous person will always be comforted by the certainty that his or her actions were right: “When an upright man is in the greatest distress, which he might have avoided only if he could have disregarded duty, is he not sustained by the consciousness that he has maintained humanity in its proper dignity in his own person and honored it, that he has no reason to be ashamed of himself in his own sight, or to dread the inward glance of self-examination?”¹¹

To summarize, Kant believed that the two things that guarantee the real existence of a distinction between moral and immoral acts are the freedom of the human will to behave independently of the impulsive drives of passion and the fact that this same human will is reasonable, that it can deduce different levels of obligation in the actions it undertakes. We do not need to be told what is right or forced to act rightly either by God or by the law of the state, for we can figure out quite readily of our own powers what the differences are between morally right and morally wrong acts by mere virtue of possessing the capacity to reason. This moral knowledge that is the human birthright is fortified and supported by conscience; conscience will inwardly try and convict anyone who is guilty of transgressing the moral law by racking them with feelings of guilt and shame, and at the same time it will vindicate, strengthen, and ennoble a person who has lived up to his or her duty. According to this scheme, then, a guilty man will feel guilty because his conscience will tell him he is guilty, while an innocent man will never feel guilty because his conscience will bear out for him his blamelessness. Kant would consider it utterly impossible for the reverse to happen; that is, he would not believe that a guilty person could feel innocent and an innocent person guilty. Each person's inward sense of duty would either convict her or vindicate her according to her deeds.

Was it this noble vision of duty that inspired the quiet college student, a Korean War veteran, Ian Campbell to become, to everyone else's surprise, and even partly to his own, a police officer in the first place? Was it precisely this inspiration that friends and family alike noticed was beginning to wane as Ian saw what he saw on the real streets of Los Angeles? If so, the claims of that noble Kantian vision were betrayed by the encounter of four men in March 1963 and what came after it. This Kantian moral idealism was shattered just as Ian Campbell's heart was literally shattered by bullets fired from his own .38 caliber Smith and Wesson. For what happened to Karl Hettinger, Greg Powell, and Jimmy Smith seems to fly in the face of all that Kant believed about the human moral conscience.

The Death of Conscience in *The Onion Field*

Harold Becker's neo-noir or cop-noir film is a mostly accurate rendition of Wambaugh's literary investigation into the dreadful crime and its demoralizing aftermath as well as his intense character studies.¹² All the movie's main actors, two of whom were making motion picture debuts, turned in brilliant performances and even bore more than striking physical resem-

blances to the real-life figures they portrayed. In the film's opening dialogue, in what serves as an eerie prolepsis of coming events, the second-generation child of Scottish immigrants, bagpipe-playing Campbell is blowing what he calls the "ancient funeral dirge" "MacCrimmon Will Never Return" in a basement prison cellar as his new partner, Hettinger, introduces himself. On the very same afternoon in downtown Los Angeles, Jimmy Smith, who was just released on a theft conviction from Folsom Prison the previous day and is looking for money to get him by, meets Gregory Powell. Although Smith is immediately intimidated by Greg's chilling looks and not at all fooled by his phony manner, he accepts money from him and agrees to meet him sometime soon, it is implied, to team up as robbers. Later that evening, as Campbell and Hettinger eat and ride their first night together as plainclothes cops on the street, they share family histories and childhood dreams. Hettinger, who has just been transferred from blue-suit traffic-ticket detail to the felony squad, relates his wish to an amused Ian that he always wanted to be a tomato farmer who dwells only with the "smogless sky, clean earth, clean people," and he adds dryly: "Police work is so noisy, tomatoes are so quiet." But, earlier in the evening, Karl laments that the traffic-ticket beat is boring, and he thinks that in the felony squad he might run into "somethin' right around the corner . . . somethin' other folks don't see." Campbell retorts ponderingly: "What if it's something you don't understand?"¹³ Hettinger, despite his seemingly retiring and already mildly depressed personality, wants to see something beyond the pale. He will soon get his wish.

Over the next week Powell and Smith pull a few clumsy armed robberies, with Greg doing the gun pointing and Jimmy doing the driving. The contrast between the two is somewhat surreal. Greg's seething temper and total lack of self-restraint boil over more than once—most notably when, in his apartment, he holds his old partner in robbery, Billy Small, at gunpoint right in front of Jimmy because he suspects that Billy has been stealing from him. Greg comes off as controlling and always ready to lash out in unbridled rage at even the slightest annoyance, with wide and unblinking eyes and almost blue quivering lips when he flies off the handle. Jimmy comes across as quiet, unassuming, and harmless, even though he unhesitatingly has sex with Greg's visibly pregnant wife the minute Greg steps out. Jimmy wants to cut Greg loose because he is utterly spooked by Greg's hair-trigger temper as well as by the fact that Greg is too "touchy": Greg is always placing his hands on Jimmy's biceps or around his shoulders. When Greg buys Jimmy a gun, Jimmy meekly tries to cover his alarm.

But Jimmy is unable to sneak off. By their eighth night together, when they have to leave Las Vegas for a short stint in Los Angeles to rip off another store for more money, we already have a sense that Greg, though overtly more ominous, is soon going to be foiled by his own incompetence while Jimmy, though he is tender and cool, is also smarter, a far better con man, and somehow even more dangerous.

On the night of the murder—and all the scenes were shot by Becker on location—Powell and Smith, wearing idiotically conspicuous matching leather jackets and caps bought by Powell as disguises, are pulled over by Campbell and Hettinger for an illegal U-turn and a broken left taillight that Powell hasn't had a chance to fix. When asked by Campbell to step out of the car, Powell suddenly and impulsively draws his pistol and takes cover behind the taller policeman with the gun in Campbell's spine. Hettinger gets the drop on an unarmed and terrified Smith but hesitates as his partner calmly instructs him: "He's got a gun in my back, give him yours, Karl."¹⁴ Hettinger surrenders his weapon, and the cops drive off at gunpoint in Powell's car into the Bakersfield countryside with the thieves, leaving their abandoned squad car behind with its lights still on. Powell assures Campbell and Hettinger that he will release them when he drops them off a long walk away from the highway, but, when he deduces wrongly that the "little Lindburgh Law" proscribes capital punishment for kidnapping, he hastily changes his plans.¹⁵ After letting the officers out in a farmer's onion field, Powell asks Campbell and Hettinger if they have ever heard of the law. When Campbell answers yes, Powell raises his gun and shoots him right above his upper lip, and he drops straight back, in slow motion, onto the ground like a felled tree. Hettinger screams and makes a run for it, and, as he briefly turns back, he sees someone, he can't tell whom, firing four bullets into the chest of his prostrate friend. He desperately and miraculously escapes to a house with the help of Emmanuel McFaddon, a local farmer working the combine late, with Powell in pursuit. Smith flees in Powell's car, making his own longed-for escape, but too late.¹⁶ Both Powell and Smith are apprehended in short order.

The following few days find Greg and Jimmy being interrogated by the homicide detective assigned to the case, the experienced and savvy Pierce Brooks (Ronny Cox). Greg at first tries to pawn all the shooting off on Jimmy, but, when he has to face questioning in front of Hettinger, he is compelled to fess up that he fired first.¹⁷ He knows at that point that he is destined for the gas chamber but remains defiant and unfazed. Jimmy shows no signs of believing that he fired a single shot.¹⁸ Brooks, who has

already been told by Hettinger that Jimmy was the one who most likely finished Campbell off, makes a play after a drawn-out series of corroboratory questions to break Jimmy's conscience. "Jimmy," he asks gently, "have you ever felt bad when you did something wrong?" "Like how?" Jimmy retorts, nervously puffing a cigarette. "Has your conscience ever bothered you, like feeling guilty?" Jimmy's tone suddenly turns serious, tempered, but with complete conviction. "Mr. Brooks, I believe, I think, that is something that rich white guys dreamed up to keep guys like me down. I honest don't believe there is such a thing, such a feeling. 'Guilty?' That's just somethin' a man says in court when his luck runs out." Jimmy, whose mother was black and father white, is resolved that his plight in life has been determined by white dominance, and, beyond believing in his own present innocence, he rejects the very idea that the emotion of guilt is anything but a trick of the oppressor—and, even for all his own bad luck, he would never be fool enough to fall for that. Indeed, in a previous scene depicting his arrest, when a horde of cops bursts into his room while he sleeps and slams him to the floor, calling him a "cop killer," a weeping Smith bawls: "I ain't no cop killer! They gas people for that!" All the fear that has poured out of Jimmy since his arrest has nothing to do with a gnawing underground sense of guilt; it is prompted only by the specter of execution.

All the while, Karl Hettinger is on moral trial with the LAPD. The word spreads fast that he was responsible for his partner's death because he surrendered his weapon to the thieves. He is asked to make debriefing rounds to morning roll calls for several days, with a fellow officer urging him: "If you just tell them how you guys fouled up, I mean, you can't bring Ian back, but, if you just tell them all the things you guys did wrong, all the things you wish you had done, it just might save the lives of some of those boys in there."¹⁹ The same morning, patrol meetings break out into debates about Hettinger's conduct, with one veteran beat cop, presumably in his sixties and with the experience of surviving after having surrendered his own gun to a robber, defending Karl's decision to give both his partner and himself a chance. At that point, the captain of the downtown department walks in solemnly, with a mean stare, and announces: "Anyone who gives up his gun to some punk is a coward. Anybody who does it can kiss his badge good-bye if I can help it. You're policemen, you put your trust in God." Hettinger has to give repeated testimony about the murder during the first criminal trial, some of it on location, which results in his frequent weeping on the stand, migraine headaches, and hearing his own screams day and night as he relives the killing while looking into his fallen partner's open

eyes and smashed mouth. The first trial finds both Powell and Smith guilty of the shooting and sentences both to death, but the case is retried based on mid-1960s changes in law. Another trial follows, and Hettinger's pain only deepens and worsens. After Smith is convinced of a strategy revealed to him by a "death row lawyer" (Christopher Lloyd) that would allow him and Powell to shield one another from execution by getting separate trials, Smith gives Powell a reconciliation blow job in the jailhouse shower, and a deal is brokered. But, as Hettinger is brought back over and over for more testimony in an endless series of increasingly absurd trial motions and further appeals, his shame at "allowing" Campbell's death overtakes him. It's as if *he* is on trial instead of the murderers. And it starts to become obvious that the perpetrators are going to be spared the death penalty and get off lightly, whereas Hettinger will be serving a life sentence of his own. The killers' guilt is questioned, and then questioned again, and then again, but it is Hettinger's guilt that is never in doubt to others.

Hettinger is reassigned to a detail that has him looking for pickpockets and small-time thieves in department stores, but, ironically, he can control his torturous migraines only by himself stealing watchbands, buckles, and other jewelry from store cases. Predictably, he is caught cold one day and faced with the option of either resigning the force or being prosecuted. When he asks his own interrogator what he should do, he hears back: "Well, officer, if you're guilty, there's only one thing you can do. Are you guilty?" Karl glares at the investigator with a knowing look and immediately signs his resignation. When, shortly thereafter, he tells his wife, Helen, what has happened, she tries to reassure him: "You're the most honest man I've ever known. I don't know a lot, but if you stole, it wasn't Karl Hettinger, it wasn't you. . . . There are reasons people do things." Karl protests: "I deserve to be in jail." A man whose life has been undermined by thieves can find comfort only in being a petty crook. As the appeals drag on and Karl becomes a gardener, his exasperation reaches its nadir when he tries to silence his squealing newborn by hitting her hard in her crib and then slumping down on the couch and putting a long-barreled service revolver in his mouth. His older child interrupts him, protesting that the baby is still crying, and Karl stops himself, but his descent into unassuageable guilt has led him to the brink of suicide, presumably to atone for his partner's having met the same fate years earlier because of his supposed failure.

The crux of this dark tale lies here. That Hettinger might feel great sadness and long-term trauma as a result of being a witness to the murder of a partner and friend is understandable. But why should he feel all this

guilt and shame? After all, were we merely to focus on the circumstances of the kidnapping and murder, we would see that he had no realistic options. Powell was hiding behind Campbell during the initial encounter, his pistol in Campbell's back, and Campbell himself told Hettinger to give up his weapon; had Hettinger tried to force a resolution, the same result, and perhaps worse, might have ensued. The LAPD, however, takes the result to indicate that the surrender of a weapon in such a situation will lead only to loss of life, as if an alternative solution would have had a different outcome. What are we to make, not just of this infantile conclusion, but especially of Hettinger's submission to it and the manner in which his entire life is left in shambles more by his self-mortification than anything else? How can an obviously innocent man feel so guilty? If Kant were right, we should expect Hettinger's inner knowledge that he did the right thing, the only thing that gave him and his partner at least a chance to live, to bolster him, make him "fearless before his inner judge." Instead, even though he knows he did the right thing, he still succumbs to shame. And, at the same time, how can two overwhelmingly guilty thugs, who blasted a man to pieces, depriving his wife and children of him for all time, feel such an utter lack of guilt? Has not what happened to the Kant enthusiast Ian Campbell in *The Onion Field* left Kantian moral idealism utterly defenseless?

Kant's Dreams and Hettinger's Nightmares

What we seem to have in Kantian moral philosophy is a very skillful articulation of a very ancient article of philosophical faith, a faith that stretches back to the Greek martyr Socrates. That article of faith pledges that the good person is the rational person, that all human beings, even when they are doing wrong, are somehow aware that they are in the wrong, that no one would willingly commit an injustice if he knew it was an injustice, that, if human beings are essentially rational, and if rationality is good, then human beings are essentially good. That vision, that dream of the unity of truth and goodness, served as practically the entire justification for dedicating one's life to philosophy for century after century in Western culture and impelled generation after generation to strive for social justice and progress. The stifling, frightening conclusion that we appear to be presented with in *The Onion Field* is that such a dream really is only a dream, that human beings may, in fact, have no inbuilt or inherent moral conscience, and that they can carry out the most self-evidently horrifying of crimes against one another with no checks, no trepidations, and no regrets.

Wambaugh's narrative account tries to ward off this ominous implication, explaining away Smith's and Powell's denials of guilt as clear cases of "sociopathy."²⁰ But we must remember first of all that Kant would have considered a condition like sociopathy impossible. If a person has enough cognitive capacity to make calculated and planned decisions in any arena of her practical conduct, then she possesses reason, and, if she possesses reason, she can distinguish between right and wrong acts. Smith and Powell do possess reason, and they can make plans and carry them out, so Kant would pronounce them quite rational. Second, simply invoking a theory of sociopathy to explain the cases of Powell and Smith would seem to concede that the existence of a moral conscience within any person depends not on nature but on the success or failure of socialization. If I can call a sociopath anyone who does not abide by the norms or agree with the values of a society, then sociopathy is not necessarily a moral disease, just a failure of adjustment to social rules. Neither would this say anything about whether the rules of society were actually moral; it would demonstrate only what means were necessary to compel someone to accept those rules. Merely saying that Smith and Powell had some kind of disease that destined them for social maladjustment really ends up dissolving Ian Campbell's murder in a way that someone with Campbell's Kantian preferences could not accept. After all, even were this alternative view about the merely social nature of moral conscience in the end actually correct, would a man like Ian Campbell have volunteered to fight first in the Korean War and then again on the front lines of the LAPD to defend just that? No, certainly not. Ian Campbell, having been the Kantian that he was, put his life on the line and eventually gave it away to justify a moral idealism that enthroned sacred duty as its commander. Sadly, despite all Campbell's basic decency, a decency grounded in his Kantian convictions, the old philosophers' dream was really an illusion, the falsity of which was proved by Ian Campbell's death and Karl Hettinger's descent into a living nightmare.

But, then again, perhaps we should take another look at that nightmare, the nightmare in which Ian Campbell's death haunted Karl Hettinger. What was all Hettinger's self-imposed guilt and seemingly incomprehensible thievery about? What was it meant to accomplish? Beyond the dimension of his seeming acceptance of the responsibility assigned to him for Campbell's death, another reason that Hettinger takes on the burden of shame is that, in a moral sense, the suffering that it entails has a certain purifying value, expiating or atoning for the lack of guilt exhibited by the perpetrators. Powell and Smith are so busy trying to save themselves from

the death penalty—which means, of course, that they are so busy denying their guilt—that Karl, who has to watch the trials and their utter failure to administer justice, carries the guilt on his own quite literally slumped shoulders.²¹ He keeps saying, almost like a mantra throughout the film, whenever a new trial begins, that his malady will subside once the trial is finally over. In other words, when the actual guilt of the real killers is finally determined, decided, and punished, he will release himself from the feelings of shame that he has agreed to carry with him, but, as long as guilt is not being assumed and proper punishment has not been meted out, he must continue to bear it so that Campbell's death will have some sort of expiation, so that some sense of what he has internalized as justice can be acknowledged. This also explains the other facet of why Karl turns to thievery: it helps him, in its own thoroughly creepy way, assume the role and identity of a real lawbreaker so that the sense of assumed guilt, so in need of being atoned for and redeemed, can be further justified.²² The dream that Karl insists on having is a dream about moral conscience, about the preservation of a sense of justice. If Ian Campbell's faith in Kant's moral dreams was an illusion, it was an illusion that he tried mightily to salvage until the pitch-black and chilly night his life was taken from him in the onion field. And, even though that dream became Karl Hettinger's constant nightmare, it was a shattered dream somehow still worth having, a way he could go on helping his distressed partner, a lease on life that Karl borrowed from Ian and desperately wanted to pay back.

Notes

1. Joseph Wambaugh, *The Onion Field* (New York: Dell, 1973), 24–25, 232.
2. *Ibid.*, 25.
3. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), trans. Thomas Kingsmill Abbot (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2004), 154.
4. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), trans. H. J. Paton (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 81.
5. See Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* (1819), trans. E. F. J. Payne, 2 vols. (New York: Dover, 1969), 1:514–28.
6. Kant, *Groundwork*, 84–85.
7. *Ibid.*, 88–91.
8. Kant did not believe that we should push ourselves to accomplish the impossible, and, thus, obviously we cannot help all human beings at all times. He was very careful to point out that the command “ought” assumes that the commanded action “can” be done. We are, therefore, enlisted by categorical imperatives to do

whatever lies in our ability and are not held responsible for whatever may be beyond it.

9. Kant, *Critique*, 17.

10. *Ibid.*, 87.

11. *Ibid.*, 76.

12. There are, as is always to be expected, a number of important dialogic and dramatic departures from Wambaugh's novel, some of which will be mentioned here.

13. It is interesting that, in Wambaugh's account, these words about running into something right around the corner are put into Ian's mouth, not Karl's (see Wambaugh, *The Onion Field*, 11).

14. The novel's version of events has Campbell telling this to Hettinger twice before Karl surrenders the weapon (*ibid.*, 153).

15. Greg is corrected about his knowledge of the Lindburgh Law when he confesses to shooting Campbell in the face first. "The Lindburgh Law," homicide detective Pierce Brooks tells him contemptuously, pertains only "to cases of kidnapping for ransom with bodily harm. Up until the first shot was fired, the Lindburgh Law didn't apply. It wasn't a capital crime until then." Powell's witless bungling has resulted in an unnecessary death and assured, it would seem, his own execution.

16. Through more than seven years of criminal trials and investigations, it was never determined precisely whether Powell or Smith fired the shots that actually killed Campbell. Hettinger consistently testified that he thought it must have been Smith since it was Powell who began chasing him when he fled. But the darkness prevented him from being able to tell for certain. Wambaugh's novel recounts how all the available physical and psychological evidence pointed to Smith, who was, indeed, convicted and, at the conclusion of the first trial in November 1963, sent to death row along with Powell on one count of first-degree murder (*The Onion Field*, 327). He was convicted again in 1969 at the close of an absurdly prolonged second trial but received only a life sentence when, in return for sexual favors in prison, Powell took the Fifth at Smith's retrial and, thereby, practically obviated the records of past investigations (*ibid.*, 427–28). Powell's death sentence was upheld in 1970, but the penalty was never carried out because the California Supreme Court outlawed capital punishment in the state in 1972 (*ibid.*, 434). Powell and Smith were both released in March 1983, but both soon returned to prison, where they spent the rest of their lives. An entire separate volume could conceivably be written on the absurd permutations of the legal proceedings, whose transcripts by 1970 exceeded forty-five thousand pages (*ibid.*, 375).

17. It is interesting that, in the novel, Wambaugh has Greg admit to shooting Campbell when he is first confronted with Jimmy during the interrogation, before Hettinger ever sees him (*ibid.*, 217).

18. Brooks, Wambaugh tells us in the novel, took special note in his initial questioning of Jimmy that he did not even recount four shots being fired after

Campbell initially fell, nor did he recall a stray shot being fired from the .32 he admitted he was holding. Brooks concluded almost immediately that he was either intentionally or unintentionally blocking his own actions out of his mind but that he had definitely fired the four bullets into Campbell's chest and perhaps let off another blind shot at the fleeing Hettinger (*ibid.*, 211, 217).

19. Once again, there is here an interesting divergence from the novel, which depicts Hettinger as tiring of telling the story over and over to individual cops on his first day back to work, volunteering to speak to the roll calls himself to get it over with (*ibid.*, 215–16).

20. *Ibid.*, 227–28.

21. Wambaugh notes—basing this very odd part of the story on real records of annual physicals—that Hettinger actually lost an entire inch of height (*ibid.*, 339–40).

22. In the novel, Hettinger finds a certain kind of comfort in the crimes he has committed after he is expelled from the police force and has become a gardener, namely, that the memory of his own stealing makes memories and fear of the murder fade away (*ibid.*, 146).

Justice and Moral Corruption in *A Simple Plan*

Aeon J. Skoble

The American Dream in a Gym Bag

At the start of the neo-noir film *A Simple Plan* (Sam Raimi, 1998), Hank Mitchell (Bill Paxton) has a good life and is happy and well-adjusted. When he, his brother, Jacob (Billy Bob Thornton), and their friend Lou (Brent Briscoe) find a large bag of cash from what they deduce was a criminal enterprise, they hatch a “simple plan” that will enable them to keep it and enrich themselves, which they think will increase their happiness. The devastation that ensues, not just in terms of body count, but also in terms of moral and psychological decay, follows Plato’s analysis of justice and corruption in his *Republic* almost exactly, especially his understanding of justice as a kind of psychological harmony in books 2–4 and his analysis of moral decay in books 8–9. For Plato, justice is internal peace or harmony, a rational self-control of emotions and appetites, and injustice is psychological disharmony, when one or another of the passions dominates, when self-control is lacking. On Plato’s theory, people who allow themselves to become unjust in this way will become miserable, literally incapable of happiness. I have found few films that dramatize this theme as effectively as *A Simple Plan*. Let us see how looking at the film and the *Republic* together enhances our appreciation of both.

But is this really a neo-noir film, when bad consequences follow from bad behavior? Isn’t noir really about moral ambiguity or nihilism? First of all, it isn’t obvious how to categorize a film as film noir to begin with,¹ and the category neo-noir seems even more slippery. Many so-called neo-noirs are in color, of course, but being filmed in black and white isn’t really the essential defining characteristic of film noir. It’s the “darkness” of the situations or characters that is the true referent of the word *noir*, and many color films are dark in this way. *A Simple Plan* is dark in precisely this way: it is a

portrait of moral corruption, and the lies and deaths that ensue. *A Simple Plan* also shares many other commonly accepted stylistic conventions of film noir, for example, the unsettling camera angles and the settings that emphasize or suggest isolation and loneliness. By showing an otherwise good man driven to lie, steal, and ultimately commit murder, the film, it might be argued, contains implicit moral ambiguity, which some take to be a hallmark of film noir. On this point, however, I would argue that there is nothing morally ambiguous about the story: it's quite plain that Hank destroys himself through his choices. And, indeed, it isn't obvious that moral ambiguity is a hallmark of film noir at all—many classic noirs turn out to present clear visions of right and wrong and demonstrate the self-destructive effects of vice.²

In the film, the plan is supposed to be simple: hang on to the illicit money rather than spend it right away, to see whether anyone claims it, and, if it remains unclaimed, then begin spending it. But no one can really stick to the plan. Lou needs the money to pay off some debts, Jacob wants to renovate the family farm, and Hank's wife, Sarah (Bridget Fonda), persuades him that they need the money for their new baby. They modify the plan by putting some of the money back, which they think will free them up to spend at least some of what's left. This decision commits them to that classic blunder, returning to the scene of the crime, and, sure enough, this results in their killing a witness to their actions. The killings, the deceptions, and the distrust continue to build: Hank and Jacob first try to blackmail Lou, and then end up killing him. Hank and Jacob are obliged to accompany (what turn out to be imposter) FBI agents to the plane wreck, which results in more killings—including the tragic killing of Jacob by Hank. Just to add insult to injury, when the real FBI agents arrive, they reveal that the serial numbers of the money have been recorded, which means that Hank and Sarah can't even spend it. Hank ends up burning it in his fireplace.

Why does the simple plan turn out to be not so simple after all? Largely because the characters underestimate the ramifications of their actions, and rationalize those actions in myopic ways. Hank's first reaction is the ethical one: this isn't our money; we ought to turn it in. How does he let himself depart from this attitude in so radical a way? We can approach this question by way of considering some of Plato's theories about justice and self-interest. One device that Plato uses to motivate this issue is a story, told by one of the characters in the *Republic*, of a shepherd, Gyges, who finds a magic ring that renders the wearer invisible.³ Eventually, liberated from the constraints of his fear of getting caught, he commits all manner of unjust

acts. The point of this device is to raise the question of whether you would commit unjust acts if you *knew* you would not get caught. If the fear of getting caught is the only reason to avoid injustice, that would suggest that justice is not intrinsically valuable and, indeed, that shrewdness is more valuable than virtue. If this were the case, then cultivating justice for its own sake would be foolish, and one would do better by oneself to care only to seem to be just, while advancing one's own self-interest as much as possible.

Why Be Moral?

Plato's *Republic* is, among other things, a lengthy discussion of this very issue, why one should be moral. Plato has the character Socrates discuss the nature of both justice and self-interest with some earnest young philosophers, Glaucon and Adeimantus, as well as the more blustery and intimidating Thrasymachus, who thinks that talking about "being virtuous" is a waste of time. Socrates has claimed that justice is more profitable than injustice, that "it is never just to harm anyone."⁴ Thrasymachus thinks that this is almost self-evidently absurd, and that what most consider injustice would, in fact, be the more profitable course of action. For instance, if I successfully stole a Lincoln Town Car, I'd be better off, since I would have the satisfaction that comes from driving one without having had to spend the money it ordinarily takes to get one. On this view, as long as I *perceive* a positive change, I'm better off. As Jacob notes: "Hell, Hank, I've never even kissed a girl. You know, if me becoming rich is gonna change all that, you know, I'm all for it." Thrasymachus argues that "those who give injustice a bad name do so because they are afraid, not of practicing but of suffering injustice."⁵ The implication is that moral rules are just an artifice to keep people from predatory pursuit of self-interest. But, toward the end of the *Republic*, Socrates notes that he and Thrasymachus didn't really disagree. What this turns out to mean is that, on Plato's analysis, there is no dichotomy between being just and being self-interested, since being just *is* in one's self-interest, and being unjust is contrary to one's self-interest. To see why this is so, we must note that for a moral realist—one who thinks that morality is objective—self-interest is not identical to subjective desire. For instance, if Smith is a heroin addict, what he desires is another injection of heroin, but this is not actually in Smith's best interests. One can be mistaken, in other words, about what constitutes self-interest. *A Simple Plan* dramatizes this effectively by using Hank's ultimately tragic mistake about the nature of his own self-interest.

Hank tells us in voice-over that his father taught him that what a man needs to be happy is “a wife he loves, a decent job, and friends and neighbors who like and respect him.” As we see him at the outset of the narrative, Hank seems to endorse his father’s claims about the seemingly simple components of the good life and, at worst, is afflicted with small doses of resentment or covetousness. (His wife, Sarah, is more explicitly covetous of a more affluent lifestyle.)⁶ When his friend Lou characterizes finding someone else’s lost (and almost certainly ill-gotten) money as realizing the American dream, Hank protests, championing the value of work. (“You *work* for the American dream, you don’t steal it.”) But, in very short order, he comes to think that he could make a better life with the found money than he could by working at his job. Plato notes that while things like money and fame may be pleasing, they are not constitutive of happiness and will not bring happiness by themselves. The virtuous man who acquires wealth might be happy, but the vicious man will not be made happy by wealth. Virtue may, indeed, facilitate the acquisition of wealth, but, Plato says, the wealth itself will not facilitate the acquisition of virtue and, thus, of happiness. Hank has thus made a calculation about how best to achieve his own interests, concluding that the unjust thing would be the self-interested thing to do. As Plato might have predicted, this turns out to be a mistake: Hank ends up making himself far more miserable. It’s not merely a calculative failure, however: the miscalculation is the product of his failing to understand the nature of his own happiness (specifically, his embrace of the idea that if only he had more money, he would have a happier life).

But why is it a mistake? Could the tragedy have been prevented? Plato argues that the just life is, in fact, the happy life, so if we can figure out what is entailed by pursuing justice, that will be sufficient for pursuing happiness. On Plato’s view, justice is a kind of internal harmony, where all the aspects of the psyche are coordinated toward well-being:⁷ “It does not lie in a man’s external actions, but in the way he acts within himself, really concerned with himself and his inner parts.” By “parts” of the psyche, Plato is referring to our various passions and appetites as well as our rational faculties. Rational self-control, he argues, will be more conducive to psychological harmony than its alternatives—a life dominated by desires for money or fame, or one dominated by fear and hate. It requires wisdom, courage, and moderation in order to bring our passions under the regulating influence of reason, but the life of rational moderation of the passions so achieved is justice, and it will result in a happier life, one free of inner turmoil. The just man “orders what are in the true sense of the word his own affairs well;

he is master of himself, puts things in order, is his own friend. . . . from a plurality becomes a unity.” Justice, then, is “that which preserves this inner harmony and indeed helps to achieve it,” and injustice is “that which always destroys it.”⁸

Virtue Is Its Own Reward

The dichotomy between justice and self-interest evaporates on this view. While others will surely benefit from my being a just person, the *reason* for my cultivating justice, and its most tangible reward, will be my own happiness. If I thought I would serve my own interests better by being unjust, this analysis would quickly reveal such a course of action to be self-destructive: is it even plausible to think that by pursuing ignorance, cowardice, and intemperance I should bring about my long-term well-being? In one sense, rational self-control is the only sort of self-control that is worthy of the name. To be “controlled” by one’s passions is really to no longer have self-control at all. This is because desires are directed solely at their object, whereas reason is that part of our psyche that can adjudicate between conflicting emotions, or balance short-term and long-term interests. For example, my desire for a doughnut won’t be satisfied by anything except eating a doughnut. Reason can result in my not acting on these desires—and even, optimally, in my having them less frequently. For me to be dominated by my desires, on the other hand, is essentially for me to lack autonomy, to eat a doughnut even when this isn’t in my best interests. Thus, just as I can be enslaved by another person, I can also be “enslaved” by my passions: fear, greed, unchecked desires.

More broadly, we can be mistaken about our own happiness because we can be mistaken about what *constitutes* our own happiness. Hank tells us in voice-over that he realizes now that he was, in fact, happy prior to the events related in the film, only he didn’t realize it. People with overprioritized passions for material gain are precisely those who will not be content with what might otherwise seem to be a good life. One consequence of letting one’s passions grow unmoderated by reason is that one might come to think one’s good life isn’t really so good. That is, it is one’s unmoderated desire for acquisition that leads to permanent discontentedness. Hank and Sarah did have a good life prior to the events related in the film, yet when faced with the prospect of a vast accumulation of material wealth, they became dissatisfied. On Plato’s theory, this new dissatisfaction is actually a mistake.

An easy and common misinterpretation of the Platonic theory is to characterize the role of reason as purely instrumental, assuming that one could be, for instance, a “rational thief.” Well, it’s certainly the case that the rational thief will be happier and more prosperous than the irrational one, but this misses Plato’s larger point. On this view, having rational control of the passions implies having sufficient wisdom to see that cultivating vicious lifestyles will, ultimately, be self-destructive—precisely the sort of foresight that Hank lacks. Despite what Hank and his conspirators tell themselves about the simplicity of the plan, is it even remotely likely that such a plan would *not* engender an ever-increasing network of deception and mistrust? Plato explains that it is entirely predictable that the vicious person will make himself suffer by his injustice. For example, he cannot truly have any friends, since genuine friendship is possible only among good people. He cannot have a trusting relationship with anyone, since all others will be regarded either as “flatterers or those in need of flattery”; indeed, he himself becomes a “flatterer of the most wicked men.” Those closest to him become the greatest threats to him, further eroding any chance of tranquility. All of Plato’s predictions apply to Hank, Jacob, Lou, and Sarah: “Is this not the kind of prison in which [the unjust man] is held? His nature is . . . full of many fears . . . he takes refuge in his house.” Hank avoids being sent to prison, but he has, nevertheless, become a prisoner, first of his own greed, and then of the consequences of his actions. Jacob had earlier asked Hank, referring to their scheme: “Do you ever feel evil?” Eventually, Hank clearly does, and he doesn’t like it.

To Know the Good Is to Do the Good

It is a lack of foresight combined with self-deception that facilitates the characters’ descent into corruption. Plato suggests that evil is ignorance: we are always *trying* to do what is best for us, but we might be wrong. In one sense, this claim is the subject of some philosophical controversy, for it raises questions about the nature of culpability and about weakness of will. But, in another sense, it is unobjectionable and illuminative. Why am I robbing the bank? Because I want lots of money. Why do I want lots of money? Because that will make me happy. The bank robber isn’t trying to make himself worse off; he is trying to make himself better off—or, more accurately, better off as he understands it. But his understanding of what constitutes being better off may well be mistaken, either through complete ignorance or through a kind of self-deception, perhaps an unwillingness

to acknowledge or act on difficult realities. Hank rationalizes his lies and criminal actions, deceiving himself about his need for the money, about the circumstances of finding it, about killing people.

Hank's error is twofold. First, by acquiescing in his desire for money and choosing to value it more highly than virtue, he has produced an imbalance in his psyche, one that will necessarily lead to inner conflict as reason can no longer be a moderating influence. Second, by acting on this desire, he has created a situation that will lead to distrust, deception, and violence. Plato anticipates both dimensions of this self-deception in his depiction of the self-inflicted suffering of the unjust. Since he has characterized justice as a state of internal peace and harmony, it follows that the unjust person will be psychologically conflicted, incapable of attaining happiness, and, furthermore, will make himself the enemy of others. Jacob comes to regret what they have done, and even remarks: "I wish somebody else had found that money." Hank loses friends, loses the respect of his wife and brother, and, ultimately, loses self-respect, as he is obliged to kill his own brother, for which he loathes himself. Like Plato's archetypal unjust man, Hank has by his own actions rendered himself entirely unhappy. The days when he isn't tormented by memories of what he has done are "few and far between."

Plenty of films dramatize the theme that crime doesn't pay, but there's more to Plato's theory of justice than that. In many films, the reason crime doesn't pay is that the criminal is unsuccessful, doesn't get away with it, and is, thus, punished. Plato's point is that, even if one were to get away with it in the sense of avoiding capture and punishment, as is the case with Hank, one would nevertheless suffer as a result of one's own corrupted character. This would be less dramatically interesting and less edifying if the "criminal" were a thoroughly despicable character. When the narrative centers on someone who is seeking the good but who fails, as Hank does, owing to intemperate acquisitiveness and a fundamental misjudgment of the nature of happiness, that is the stuff of tragedy.

Notes

I am grateful to Mark T. Conard for his patience with and helpful comments on this essay.

1. See, e.g., Mark T. Conard, "Nietzsche and the Meaning and Definition of Noir," in *The Philosophy of Film Noir*, ed. Mark T. Conard (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 7–22.

2. See my "Moral Clarity and Practical Reason in Film Noir," in *ibid.*, 41–48.

3. For further discussion of the ring of Gyges story, see, e.g., John Pappas, "It's All Darkness: Plato, the Ring of Gyges, and *Crimes and Misdemeanors*," in *Woody Allen and Philosophy*, ed. Mark T. Conard and Aeon J. Skoble (Peru, IL: Open Court, 2004), 203–17.

4. Plato, *Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube and C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1974), 335e.

5. *Ibid.*, 344c.

6. Indeed, the character of Sarah is an interesting twist on the canonical femme fatale of film noir. She is a woman of corrupting influence who induces Hank to get in deeper, yet she's also his pregnant wife. This contrast highlights the fact that she is even less in control of her appetites (to use the Platonic framework) than Hank is of his. Her immediate change of heart upon seeing the money demonstrates that, unlike Hank, she has hitherto paid only lip service to the morals she claims.

7. This conception of justice differs from many ordinary conceptions of justice, not only modern notions of justice's being related to fairness, but also ideas common in Plato's time, such as the idea that justice entails benefiting one's friends and harming one's enemies.

8. Plato, *Republic*, 443d, 443d–e, 444.

9. *Ibid.*, 579e, 579c.

“Saint” Sydney

Atonement and Moral Inversion in *Hard Eight*

Donald R. D'Aries and Foster Hirsch

Imagine James Cagney doesn't die at the end of *White Heat*. Image he lives and it's thirty, forty years later and he's got to pay for what he's done.

—Paul Thomas Anderson

In *Hard Eight* (1996), the first-time writer-director Paul Thomas Anderson offers a distinctly modern interpretation of a character type familiar from the original era of noir. In his contemporary rendering, which is neither reverential homage nor postmodern deconstruction, Anderson offers an elegant, rigorous character study as well as a provocative reexamination of some of noir's central philosophical, thematic, and visual motifs. Confronting universal moral issues—guilt and innocence, crime and punishment—raised by earlier crime dramas, the film investigates the possibilities of salvation within a traditionally treacherous cinematic realm.

Sydney, the film's generous protagonist (played with magnificent gravity by Philip Baker Hall), is a mysterious criminal with a dark and guilty past that he intends to keep secret. In classic noir, Sydney would most likely be an opaque, one-dimensional figure of corruption and vice, like Richard Widmark in *Kiss of Death* (Henry Hathaway, 1947) or James Cagney in *White Heat* (Raoul Walsh, 1949). In Anderson's challenge to genre tradition, however, Sydney is tempted to perform a series of benevolent acts in order to unburden his conscience. Succumbing fully to the opportunity to play savior and saint, he rescues John (the irrepressibly sheepish John C. Reilly), a witless, down-on-his-luck young man. A character like John in traditional noir would be lured into some sort of dubious criminal activ-

ity. Think of initially "innocent" characters like those played by William Holden in *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950), Fred MacMurray in *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944), and Edward G. Robinson in *Scarlet Street* (Fritz Lang, 1945). Here, however, John's overwhelming defenselessness is a catalyst for Sydney's charity, and it is Sydney who is catapulted into atypical action. Essentially, the film is a sentimental tale of an aging career criminal who seeks to repent for his mortal sins by engaging in a loving relationship.

The film begins with Sydney, seen from behind, approaching John outside a roadside coffee shop somewhere along a bleak Nevada highway. Sydney's dark reflection looms in the glass door next to where John is huddled in a corner, and Sydney's flapping black coattails lead us into the scene. The composition of the shot clearly establishes Sydney as the dominant force, the mysterious figure who will guide us through the narrative. Finding John broke and alone, Sydney, with forthright generosity, offers him a cigarette and a cup of coffee. John, though skeptical, accepts Sydney's kindness. After learning that John is without family or friends and in a financial bind, having lost all his money trying to win enough cash to bury his recently deceased mother, Sydney offers the young man the chance to return to Las Vegas. He says: "I think if you need help paying for your mother's funeral, we can work it out. I want you to see that my reasons for doing this are not selfish, only this: I'd hope that you would do the same for me." He promises to teach John some gambling secrets that might reverse his luck. Though still wary, and cynical and sarcastic besides, John accepts Sydney's invitation.

Two years later, close friends and doing rather well for themselves, John and Sydney are in Reno. Sydney refers to John as an "old friend," and there is no doubt that their relationship has evolved from one of mentor and student to that of surrogate father and son. As Sydney says: "I know John, and I love him like he was my own child." Two problematic characters, however, complicate Sydney's plan of redemption: Clementine (Gwyneth Paltrow), a casino cocktail waitress and part-time prostitute, a bargain basement femme fatale who becomes John's love interest, and Jimmy (Samuel L. Jackson), a sleazy casino security guard and generic thug who, much to Sydney's chagrin, befriends John.

Hard Eight's Reassessment of Noir

Taking its *neo* label seriously, *Hard Eight* reinterprets the figure of the femme fatale, who is still a knotty catalyst for trouble, but far from the

devious, rapacious sexpot of classic noir. She is neither fatalistic nor castrating like her classic era counterparts, and little is to be gained from her misguided actions other than the undermining of her own well-being. This witless neo-femme fatale is a damaged yet sympathetic character who does whatever it takes simply to get by within a world of limited possibilities. A lost soul not unlike Sydney, Clementine becomes another provocation to Sydney's awakened conscience. With Sydney's guiding hand, she and John, during their first day together, fall in love and get married. Clementine, however, is not so eager to change her ways and soon involves John, and subsequently Sydney, in a botched hostage situation with one of her "clients." Uncontrollable and difficult to understand, she stands as a potential threat to them all. Sydney saves the hapless newlyweds by covering up their crime and urging them to leave town. Events may not transpire according to Sydney's plan, but he is not deterred from making sure his "children" are safe. Clementine, shocked by her own actions, is remorseful and repentant when confronted with her attraction to decadent behavior, a shameful weakness that threatens the possibility of a better life.

Jimmy, the other blocking character, is a lubricious lowlife who embodies the return of Sydney's repressed criminal past. He is a familiar, rather than reconfigured, character type—a traditional hood of a kind that remains an unaltered element of crime dramas. He's been around and knows about Sydney's days as a high-rolling gangster in Atlantic City. He also knows Sydney's secret: Sydney killed John's father. A low-class opportunist who never has his own cigarettes (a telltale breach of noir etiquette), Jimmy presents a potentially mortal threat to the mobster's treasured secrecy and his newfound family. Confronted with Jimmy's capacity to destroy his identity as a caring patriarch, Sydney feels that there is only one answer to this problem: Jimmy must go.

While the film solicits empathy and understanding for Sydney, it presents Jimmy as unredeemable. The character's callous, misogynistic outbursts and his attempt to extort money from Sydney hinder our sympathy. His death is presented not as a tragic loss of life but as a form of rough vigilante justice. The film makes a distinction between two kinds of immoral characters, with Sydney's integrity contrasted to Jimmy's selfishness. Yes, Sydney may be a killer, but Jimmy is worse. Sydney has a conscience and a code of honor, while Jimmy is rotten through and through. The film protects Sydney, alluding only briefly to his criminal past. Although we are never told why he killed John's father, the detail of his having shot the man in the face is enough to tell us that it was a brutal murder, a heinous

act that contradicts Sydney's bittersweet amiability. Significantly, however, except for one visible murderous act—removing Jimmy, which is presented as an acceptable form of self-defense and as a “sacrifice” that must be made in order to ensure his safety and that of his dependents—Sydney's violence is contained within a backstory that is kept intentionally murky. Jimmy's statement to Sydney while holding him hostage at gunpoint—“You probably think I'm some kind of asshole or something. But I'm not a killer like you”—may be accurate in defining a level of distinction between two immoral characters, and Jimmy's condemnation of Sydney's past may give him a comforting moral edge. But Jimmy is the one who will lose his life, a fate that the film seems to endorse, at least provisionally.

If Jimmy is punished for being the rat that he is, what happens to this fatherly, kindhearted killer? Classic noir often uncovers a dark side buried within bourgeois characters; in Anderson's neo-noir revision, a capacity for good is revealed within a hard-boiled, stone-faced killer. John's innocence and devotion pierce Sydney's plate-glass armor to the point where, at the end, he is able to announce, “I love you,” a virtually impossible declaration from the dark heart of traditional noir. In this ambitious replay, a reversal of the earlier cycle's entrenched pessimism, a killer proves capable of charity and emotional awakening. Nevertheless, Sydney cannot—and must not if the film is to avoid a plunge into moral anarchy—achieve complete transcendence over his criminal past.

Crime and Punishment in *Hard Eight*

In the way that it portrays the criminal's destiny, *Hard Eight* interrogates the concept of punishment as it was conventionally depicted in classic noir. At the same time, in encouraging us to understand Sydney's turmoil and, thereby, to some extent, forgive his moral trespass, the film in a parallel move plays with customary designations of good and evil. After having killed Jimmy in not quite cold blood, Sydney remains seemingly unpunished and on the lam. Fleeing town, he returns to the scene of his first meeting with John and, after a moment of mild contemplation, tucks the cuff of his shirt, stained with Jimmy's blood, under his coat sleeve. The gesture seems to put to rest his latest evil deed, and, once again, Sydney compounds his relegation to a realm of immorality. At the very least, Sydney is a rational man who knows that, like the tarnished patina of his conscience, the stains on his sleeve will linger with him always. In the end, he remains where we found him at the beginning, locked within a moral and

existential prison. Self-reflective moral anguish is both his penalty and his fate. And this self-realization—in the final shot, Sydney notices the small stain of Jimmy's blood on his sleeve with a contemplative grimace—is the uniquely modern moral reprimand that constitutes *Hard Eight*'s conception of justice and punishment.¹ Redemption and transcendence—the gifts that his beneficence bestows on his wards—are, for Sydney himself, beyond reach. Mired in moral conflict, his own salvation is destined to remain problematic.

Part of Sydney's punishment is his always-to-be-frustrated search for atonement, which is not religious penance or a desire to be absolved of his crimes by becoming a target of vengeance. Rather, his quest is to regain his humanity through selfless loving acts and, thereby, to placate his guilty conscience. However, being unable fully to evade his deviant past as well as his criminal psyche, Sydney is damned, and his road toward satisfaction is more like a river of blood. Nonetheless, he is not senselessly unleashing bloodshed on the general public—his crimes are strictly confined to the removal of criminals from depths even lower than his. He is both saint and sinner, tending to those he has chosen to protect with as much money and as much might as he has to give.

Sydney is also, within the enclosed world of *Hard Eight*, both judge and executioner. However dim it may be, his moral sensibility is the ethical compass of the film and its solitary guiding light. His pilgrimage is set within a sumptuous hotbed of sin, a world of perpetual gambling and perpetual night where the law simply does not exist. No police are in sight, and there is no visual allusion to any conventional form of legal or moral authority. The film was shot on location in Reno, an analogue to the classic noir urban landscape, a setting filled with shadows, indulgence, and desire. In the casinos, under the eternal illumination of gaudy chandeliers and bright neon, gamblers play games of chance and tempt fate in ways that reflect the protagonist's high-risk spiritual odyssey. In the hermetic casino suites, sleazy motel rooms, and anonymous gambling floors are the beginnings and endings of many wicked goings-on. Instances of anger and arrogance cut into scenes and interrupt discussions in order to keep us aware that we are in an antagonistic environment that is ever threatened by risk.

The fluid rhythm of organs and xylophones—sounds as dreamy and ethereal as the smoke-filled atmosphere—mimics the sultry jazz of classic noir. The cool, contemplative sound track envelops the film in a sleek twilight mood, ripe with bittersweet melancholy. The inclusion of Christmas music, which plays softly in the background while Sydney has coffee with

Clementine and reveals that he once had a family of his own, emphasizes the film's aura of selfless giving and its underlying theme of familial reunion.

In contrast to the milieu of classic noir that the film evokes, in its restricted night world there is no possibility of a champion of the law coming forward to administer an ethical reprimand. Instead, suspended in a neo-noir limbo, the characters must fend for themselves, and, in the absence of any visible authority, Sydney, the tarnished angel, must negotiate the moral balance, tending to those he has chosen to protect and dispensing with intruders.

Although Sydney dominates every scene and is clearly placed as our guide through the film's narrative and moral maze, there is a subtle yet palpable sense throughout that he is being followed, monitored, by a presence just beyond his view. The external sensation is very much like the fate or destiny that watches over and bedevils the hapless characters in classic noir. The unsteady, whirling, handheld camera that gazes at Sydney with voyeuristic intensity suggests an outside observer, an invisible power or force that judges Sydney as we do. It is this "second author" who compensates for the film's absence of authority figures and restrains Sydney from claiming complete power over a scenario and a setting spinning fearfully out of control. The fact that this story takes place during the Christmas season further evokes, however fleetingly, this theological presence.

If Sydney's redemption is contaminated, if his good deeds cannot fully atone for his crimes, are his compromised actions able to save John and Clementine? Despite his criminal solution, Sydney in a certain sense is a purist and an idealist who kills with the best of intentions and in the belief that his actions are labors of love. From his own limited, and even blasphemous, perspective, he has done the right and only thing he could do in order to protect his surrogate children. His soured blessings seem capable of altering the destinies of two seemingly hard-luck cases like John and Clementine. However, if Sydney cannot escape the consequences of his misdeeds, do the recipients of his generosity have a chance? Tentatively, Anderson implies that they do. While their savior is doomed to remain a perpetual wanderer in a shadowy realm, John and Clementine appear to have been rescued. John is no longer poor and alone, and Clementine is now a loving wife, no longer self-destructive, no longer desperate. With Sydney's assistance, John's and Clementine's lives have been enriched to a degree as plausible and pleasant as any that could be hoped for, given the sordid context of their union. Given a second chance, perhaps they can escape the tentacles of the underworld.

Sydney and *Bob le flambeur*: Contemporary and Classic

Although Anderson has presented his archetypal character in distinctly neo-noir terms, Sydney returns at the end to the world of guns, gambling, eternal night, smoke, and jazz—the *mise-en-scène* of high-classic noir that was the filmmaker's inspiration and his point of departure. Specifically, Anderson has cited his indebtedness to *Bob le flambeur* (1955), a French noir directed by Jean-Pierre Melville.² All Anderson's cues are taken, with respect, from Melville's crime drama. Like *Hard Eight*, *Bob le flambeur* uncovers the humanity lurking within the heart of a compulsive gambler and criminal. As Anderson does, Melville contemplates his protagonist's search for altruistic love amid moral impoverishment, but he arrives at far more pessimistic conclusions.

Bob Montagné (played by the affable yet grim Roger Duchesne) is a well-dressed, well-respected gentleman gambler in the notoriously sleazy Pigalle district of Paris, a place "that is both heaven and hell," as the narrator tells us while we watch a cable car descend from the regal Sacré Coeur cathedral into the depths of Pigalle's gambling quarter below. Bob's world, like Sydney's, is a place where "people pass one another, forever strangers," and victims of chance idle on every corner. Pigalle, like Anderson's Reno, is a den of sin. Bob dresses in formal black suits and has a "fine hoodlum face," as he describes himself while peering into the rusted mirror of a parked car. Unexpectedly gracious, like Sydney, Bob, "an old, young man, legend of a recent past," is also a generous patriarch who has a fatal weakness for high-risk gambles and playing savior to a pair of misanthropic losers, Paolo and Anne. Paolo, Bob's protégé and companion, whom he has groomed into a savvy denizen of the Pigalle underworld, never passes up a chance for risky opportunity. Following Bob's every command and accepting his fatherly advice with the enthusiasm of a young student, Paolo, unlike John, has become completely, irreversibly immersed in the illicit way of life Bob has taught him. He has become a criminal in his own right, a killer. Anne, unlike Clementine, is a traditional *femme fatale*, a conniving narcissist incapable of loving Paolo.

Bob, like Sydney, is a generous, would-be saint who cannot resist the challenge of protecting his damaged children. Yet, as Robert Porfirio points out in his classic essay on noir: "The word 'hero' never seems to fit the noir protagonist, for his world is devoid of the moral framework necessary to produce the traditional hero."³ Despite their "sacrifices," the characters are limited by their criminal education and can never fully succeed as conven-

tional patriarchal heroes, thus standing as dubious. Further complicating Bob's scenario, his "children," unlike Sydney's brood, are beyond reclamation. To Paolo, the lure of crime is greater than that offered by Anne, and, in the film's traditional dispensation of punishment, he must suffer the consequences—during a casino heist, he is killed in a shoot-out with police. And Anne herself, never remorseful, never ashamed, is an irretrievably lost soul who returns to a life on the street, unloved and unchanged. In contrast to Anderson's criminal patriarch, Bob, who is similarly benevolent, caring, ruminative, and selfless, does not become a successful liberator, nor is he left unpunished. He is arrested by the police, who have been trailing him from the beginning (and who have a moral and legalistic presence that Anderson removes from *Hard Eight*).

Although Melville locates a human core in his criminal protagonist, his moralistic conclusions adhere to convention: punishment matches crime; redemption is beyond the reach of characters who inhabit a smoky noir underground. Rewriting the terms and the results of Bob's sought-for sainthood, Anderson's project in *Hard Eight* is to discover the possibility of salvation and transcendence in a kind of story world from which it is customarily banished. Like Melville, Anderson clearly was seduced by the challenge of humanizing a criminal and, thereby, subverting old-fashioned notions of a clear-cut division between good and evil, right and wrong. The dramatic allure of the good/bad guy as a character type has become a current motif in neo-noir—it's one of the ways in which the genre has continued to renew itself.

Hard Eight and The Professional

In this regard, it is instructive to consider the writer-director Luc Besson's *The Professional* (1994), a tale of yet another criminal attacked by conscience. However, the protagonist, Léon (Jean Reno, who has a severe yet boyish charm), is far more deeply entrenched in a moral void than is either Bob or Sydney. Irrepressibly corrupt, he's a crack assassin, "a cleaner" who rids the world of those he is hired to dispose of (when asked whether he "cleans" anyone, Léon replies: "No women, no kids, that's the rules"). Léon is a man with an ambiguous past who goes to see children's films, lives on a diet entirely composed of milk, and makes his living accepting assassination jobs offered by Tony, his only friend. Léon is calculating and cold, and he suppresses any emotions except those for Mathilda (Natalie Portman), a young girl who is left alone and in danger after her family

is ruthlessly gunned down by narcotics agents. When Mathilda arrives at his apartment in total desperation, she becomes the agent of the assassin's moral awakening.

Like Bob and Sydney, Léon is presented as a transgressive character, a bad man who is capable of love and sacrifice and lives by a moral code of sorts. Yet there is far less chance for him than for either of the other saviors. Where Bob's and Sydney's crimes are for the most part confined to the past or to offscreen space, Léon is a killing machine, a lethal weapon who mows down scores of adversaries. Léon is so damaged that he corrupts even the object of his salvation quest—his protectiveness is mixed with sexual perversity, and, in contrast to the father-child pairings in *Hard Eight* and *Bob le flambeur*, the specter of incest taints that in *The Professional*. (When asked by a receptionist about her "father," Mathilda replies: "He's not my father. He's my lover.")

Léon, like the other patriarchs, is romanticized in a way that eludes total condemnation. And, just as Sydney's degree of corruption is alleviated by comparing him to the unregenerate Jimmy, so Léon is contrasted, favorably, to a crooked DEA agent responsible for the death of Mathilda's family. Obsessed with Beethoven and pills, Stansfield (Gary Oldman) is a charismatic demon. He's a man of enigmatic charm who is without any conscience and who commits acts far worse than those of the professional assassin. (He tells Mathilda: "I take no pleasure in taking life if it's from a person who doesn't care about it.") Even so, Léon is depraved beyond any possible recuperation, and, to maintain its moral accountability, the film must annihilate him. When, in the final act, he kills himself and Stansfield with a grenade, Léon is posthumously redeemed: the explosion that consumes both villains is, simultaneously, Léon's atonement for his life and his sacrificial act of protection for Mathilda.

Neo-Noir and Social Responsibility

Because of the social threats that they embody, both *Bob le flambeur* and Léon *the professional* are punished in accord with the codes of conventional justice. For Sydney, however, the purest of these benighted patriarchs, Paul Thomas Anderson proposes a more subtle retribution. Although many revisions have been made in the contemporary continuation of noir, there are few films that allow the criminal to go entirely unpunished. *Hard Eight* is unusual in its ability to both limit and imprison its protagonist while still allowing him to roam "free": Sydney's is a prison without bars and without

escape. The film's existential punishment for its protagonist—unmasking the character's self-loathing—is morally more provocative than any expected form of admonition. Symptomatic of a current turn in noir scenarios, all three films solicit partial forgiveness from the audience in attempting to humanize and to express compassion for their antiheroes. And, in seeking partial absolution for their criminal protagonists, the films engage in a kind of moral relativism that is potentially nihilistic. *The Professional* and *Hard Eight* are representative of a moral and philosophical perspective found in many neo-noir revisions of the code of ethics that underwrote classic noir. Ultimately, the films honor the social contract—they recognize that to present crime without punishment, or sin without atonement, would be irresponsible. But is it possible that their demonstrations of sympathy for the devil, and their moral inversions, could lead to more films like the virulently antisocial *The Minus Man* (Hampton Fancher, 1999) or *Natural Born Killers* (Oliver Stone, 1994)?

In *Hard Eight*, Paul Thomas Anderson presents a straight-faced, deadpan character study that expands the emotional as well as the moral and philosophical parameters of historical crime dramas. Sydney is the result of Anderson's theoretical rumination: "Imagine James Cagney doesn't die at the end of *White Heat*."⁴ The film is a modern-day continuation of the classic criminal archetype, an extension of the black-and-white heavy who lived to see the noir credits roll. Anderson's debut film is a subtle, beautifully crafted, and largely overlooked neo-noir that enlarges the discussion of crime and morality in ways that earlier psychological thrillers, produced under the constraints of the Production Code and of a different cultural and historical context, could not.

Notes

The epigraph to this essay is taken from Paul Thomas Anderson's DVD commentary (see n. 2 below).

1. For more on the concept of justice in neo-noir, see Aeon J. Skoble, "Justice and Moral Corruption in *A Simple Plan*" (in this volume).

2. See Paul Thomas Anderson's commentary included on the DVD of *Hard Eight* (released by Sony Pictures in 1999).

3. Robert Porfirio, "No Way Out: Existential Motifs in the Film Noir" (1976), in *Film Noir Reader*, ed. Alain Sliver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight, 1996), 83.

4. Anderson, DVD commentary.

Reservoir Dogs

Redemption in a Postmodern World

Mark T. Conard

MR. PINK: Did you kill anybody?

MR. WHITE: A few cops.

MR. PINK: No real people?

MR. WHITE: Just cops.

—*Reservoir Dogs* (Tarantino, 1992)

Reservoir Dogs (1992), *Pulp Fiction* (1994), and *Kill Bill* (both volumes: 2003, 2004) are arguably the most successful (and I would say important) of the four full-length feature films that Quentin Tarantino has directed. And each is more or less explicitly about redemption.¹ Further, Tarantino is widely recognized as a quintessentially postmodern neo-noir filmmaker.² His films are postmodern in the artistic sense, insofar as they are, for example, blends of genres and highly allusive. But they're also postmodern in terms of the underlying epistemology and the position on morality and values that they take. That is, they reflect a postmodern sensibility about our ability (or lack thereof) to know and understand the world and about the value and significance (or lack thereof) that our lives and actions have. I argue here that this postmodern sensibility undermines the characters' attempts at redemption in the films. That is to say, in a postmodern world, such as the one depicted in Tarantino's films, there can be no such thing as redemption. While I include discussions of *Pulp Fiction* and *Kill Bill*, the arguments below focus primarily on *Reservoir Dogs*.

Redemption

First, what is redemption? In a strict religious sense, *redemption* refers to

Christians' salvation through Christ's suffering and death on the cross. That is, according to orthodoxy, humans are born into original sin, but God sacrificed his son (and/or himself, if you believe in the Holy Trinity) for the guilt and sin of mankind. People find salvation and redemption from sin, then, when they accept Jesus as their lord and savior and admit their guilt. More colloquially, however, *redemption* can refer to any attempt by a person to change his way of living (from something bad or ignoble to something better and more worthwhile) or to make up for past wrongdoings.

Pulp Fiction, then, is primarily about the redemption of two characters, Jules Winnfield (Samuel L. Jackson) and Butch Coolidge (Bruce Willis).³ Jules believes that he witnesses a miracle when someone shoots at him and his partner, Vincent (John Travolta), at close range and misses. This incident compels him to want to quit being a gangster and get in touch with his spiritual self (he says that he wants to wander the earth "like Caine on *Kung Fu*"). Butch, on the other hand, is a boxer and double-crosses the head gangster, Marcellus Wallace (Ving Rhames), by not throwing a fight when he's supposed to. Through a series of coincidences, Butch and Marcellus end up as prisoners in the hands of sexual perverts who are intent on raping them. Butch's supposed redemption occurs when he is about to escape while the gangsters work over Marcellus and, instead, decides to return and save his former boss. Having thus been saved, and apparently escaping the criminal world, Butch rides out of town with his girlfriend on a chopper named Grace, an obvious reference to Butch's salvation.

Reservoir Dogs is about the bloody aftermath of a botched jewel heist. Philosophically, the most important and fascinating part of the film is the remarkable opening breakfast scene, which occurs prior to the heist, in which the gangsters, all using color code names, sit around a table in a diner talking about the meaning of pop songs and the pros and cons of tipping waitresses. Mr. Brown (Quentin Tarantino) argues that Madonna's "Like a Virgin" is about a woman who is sexually very experienced and who meets a particularly well-endowed man. When they have sex, then, it's painful for her, thus reminding her of the first time she had intercourse. She regains that innocence through pain and suffering. It's a reasonable enough conclusion to say that this is how we're to interpret the rest of the film: that it's about redemption through pain and suffering. As noted above, this is a very traditional and religious view of the matter: that it's through Christ's suffering and death that mankind is saved.

One of the gangsters, Mr. Orange (Tim Roth), is actually an undercover cop who has infiltrated the organization in order to bust its head, Joe

Cabot (Lawrence Tierney). In the course of his escape from the robbery, Mr. Orange is wounded and spends the rest of the film lying on the floor of the warehouse, where most of the action takes place, bleeding profusely. Concluding that the police had to have known about the heist ahead of time, the other gangsters speculate on who betrayed them, who the “rat” in the group is. Mr. White (Harvey Keitel) staunchly defends Mr. Orange against (as it turns out correct) accusations that he, Mr. Orange, is the rat since the two of them have formed a bond in escaping together and since Mr. White witnessed Mr. Orange being wounded and has had to take care of him. I’ll suggest here that Mr. Orange plays the dual role of Judas and Christ in this tale of redemption. In the morally upside-down gangster world, he’s Judas insofar as he’s the betrayer, an undercover cop trying to bust the gang, and he’s Christ insofar as it’s through his bloody suffering that the gangsters are ostensibly redeemed. This is ironically affirmed by his bond with Mr. White, given that the color white is typically associated with innocence, and given that Harvey Keitel, who plays Mr. White, portrayed Judas in Martin Scorsese’s *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988). Mr. White, then, while defending Mr. Orange throughout the film against the rat accusations, to the point of killing the gangster boss, Joe, and his son, Nice Guy Eddie (Chris Penn), unknowingly reflects, and holds the key to, Mr. Orange’s true identity.⁴

“Real People” and Uniforms

So what are Jules and Butch and the gangsters in *Reservoir Dogs* being redeemed *from*? And in what does their second innocence consist? Clearly, they desire to be redeemed from the life of the gangster. In discussing the botched heist, Mr. Pink (Steve Buscemi) refers to civilians (i.e., those who are neither cops nor gangsters, regular folks) as “real people.” The implication here is that cops and gangsters are not “real” people. To be redeemed, then, is, of course, to get out of the life, as Jules and Butch ostensibly did, to become a real person.

It’s interesting to note that, in Tarantino’s films, both cops and gangsters have uniforms that distinguish them from real people. Cops are dressed in typical blue uniforms, and robbers wear the classic black suit, white shirt, thin black tie combination (this is true in *Pulp Fiction* and *Reservoir Dogs* as well as *Kill Bill*).⁵ This is not a hard-and-fast rule, however, and there are some important exceptions. For example, neither of the head gangsters in *Pulp Fiction* and *Reservoir Dogs*, Marcellus Wallace and Joe Cabot—or

Nice Guy Eddie, for that matter—wears the gangster uniform, and, in *Kill Bill*, it's the Crazy 88 (part of the Yakuza, or Japanese mafia) who wear it, while the DiVAS have, as assassins, different, though just as cool, uniforms (e.g., the slick yellow leather outfit worn by the Bride [Uma Thurman] in volume 1).⁶

In *Pulp Fiction*, the transformation from gangster to real person (or at least the desire therefor) is, then, symbolized by the shedding of the uniform and the donning of everyday clothes. Recall that, subsequent to their supposed experience of a miracle, Jules and Vincent are splattered with the blood of Marvin (Phil LaMarr), whom Vincent accidentally shoots. In the process of cleaning up the mess and disposing of the evidence, the two of them get rid of their gangster uniforms and put on Jimmie's (Quentin Tarantino) clothes, T-shirts and short pants. Whether Jules succeeds in reforming and becoming a real person, we don't know. Vincent of course has no desire to become a real person, and, in the narrative ending of the film, which is the second vignette shown, he's back in uniform and is killed by Butch.⁷ Further, in *Kill Bill*, the Bride first attempts to shed her various cool assassin uniforms to put on a wedding dress. She is prevented from leaving the life and becoming a real person when the remaining DiVAS, at the behest of Bill (David Carradine), nearly kill her. By the end of the film, after she's found her redemption through violence and revenge, she succeeds in becoming a real person, wearing a skirt, and taking on the role of mother.⁸

Like Vincent in *Pulp Fiction*, the gangsters in *Reservoir Dogs* do not desire to be real people, and Mr. Orange seems to revel in his role as a detective while in the guise of a gangster. The characters never shed the uniform, never succeed in becoming real people. But they are redeemed from being gangsters, albeit through death.⁹ As I said, it's through Mr. Orange's suffering, his sacrifice, and Mr. White's devotion to him as a result, that every one of them (with the possible exception of Mr. Pink, whose fate we don't know) is killed. Likewise, Marvin Nash, the uniformed cop whom Mr. Blonde (Michael Madsen) kidnaps and tortures, is redeemed through death in the same way.

Modernist Neo-Noir

Critics generally categorize neo-noir films as either modernist (sometimes called neo-modernist) or postmodernist. Andrew Spicer, for example, identifies two distinct periods of neo-noir films: the modernist era, which

ran from roughly 1967 to 1976, and the postmodernist period, which began in 1981 with Lawrence Kasdan's *Body Heat* and in which we still find ourselves today. Before discussing Tarantino's role as a postmodern filmmaker, I want to talk briefly about his modernist predecessors.

Just as classic noir films were influenced by or were a reaction to World War II, the cold war, and the dawning of the atomic age, so modernist films were, in part, a response to similarly disruptive and disillusioning events in later decades, such as the Vietnam War, the Kennedy and King assassinations, and Watergate. Further, now-classic neo-noir filmmakers, like Scorsese, Hopper, and Coppola, knew both American and European film history well and were conscious of where their work fit into that history.¹⁰

In terms of the form and content of modernist noirs, Spicer says: "[There is] in these modernist neo-noirs a self-reflexive investigation of narrative construction, which emphasizes the conventions in order to demonstrate their inevitable dissolution, leading to an ambivalence about narrative itself as a meaningful activity. The misplaced erotic instincts, alienation and fragmented identity that characterized the classical noir hero, are incorporated into a more extreme epistemological confusion, expressed through violence which is shown as both pointless and absurd."¹¹ Part of the outlook or sensibility of classic noir films was paranoia, pessimism, alienation, and moral ambivalence. Further, these movies had the effect of disorienting the spectator, largely through lighting, editing, oblique camera angles, etc. Modernist noirs, says Spicer, embody this same outlook or sensibility, but in a more self-conscious and deliberate way, and, further, they express an even greater "epistemological confusion" or skepticism, meaning that they question deeply our ability as subjects to know and understand the world and ourselves. This skepticism is reflected in a dissolution of narrative construction. That is, straightforward narrative lines (e.g., boy meets girl, there's some sort of obstacle to their being together, they overcome the obstacle and live happily ever after) are abandoned in favor of more and more complex and confusing story constructions.

Just as neo-noir filmmakers are more explicitly conscious of their place in the history of filmmaking than were their classic noir predecessors, so too contemporary audiences are more cine-literate than earlier moviegoers. That is, viewers today have the ability to see a great many more films than people did fifty years ago, through TV, videos, and DVDs of course, but also simply because there are so many more films made each year than there were in the past, both in the United States and abroad.¹² Consequently, today's audiences are much more savvy about the history

of cinema and the techniques involved in filmmaking than earlier moviegoers were. Modernist noir filmmakers, says Spicer, challenged these cine-literate audiences in a way that they'd not been challenged before: "Modernist neo-noirs abandoned the crisp fast-paced trajectory of their predecessors in favour of meandering, episodic and inconclusive stories, circling back on themselves. Above all modernist noir was self-reflexive, drawing an audience's attention to its own processes and self-consciously referring not only to earlier films noirs, but also to the myths that underpinned their generic conventions. Neo-modernist noirs demanded a great deal from their audiences, who were challenged rather than consoled."¹³ So, in addition to abandoning neatly framed and quick-paced narratives, modernist noirs refused to allow audiences one of the great pleasures of earlier moviegoing experiences (and of entertainment generally), the escape of being sucked into a seamless story, and they did this by continually reminding viewers of the techniques and artifices of filmmaking. That is, filmmakers wouldn't allow audiences to forget that they were watching a movie: "The modernist film emphasizes the film's formal exploration of its own medium."¹⁴ Consequently, while disorienting the audience and expressing alienation, pessimism, paranoia, and epistemological skepticism, modernist noirs gave the audiences no neat resolutions and no comforting escape.

Postmodern Art

Tarantino is known as a postmodern filmmaker. But what does that mean, and how are postmodern noirs different from their modernist predecessors?

Arthur Danto famously proclaimed that we've come to the "end of art." He prefers to use the expression *posthistorical* (or *contemporary*), rather than *postmodern*, believing that postmodernism is but one movement or style in the posthistorical period, though his comments about posthistorical art certainly apply to postmodernism as well. In Danto's view, previous periods in art (Renaissance art, expressionism, impressionism, etc.) were governed by an overarching "narrative," a story about what art should and must be in order to be art. This narrative then formed the constraints and rules according to which artists had to work. If you didn't follow the rules, then what you were doing wasn't art. (For example, in the nineteenth century, you'd be laughed at for painting Campbell's soup cans or hanging a urinal on the wall.) However, revolutionary artists who created new movements in art were able to break (some of) the old rules and create new ones, in effect writing a new narrative, a new story, about what art was supposed

to be. What Danto means by the *end of art*, then, is not that there is no more art, that artists can no longer produce art, but, rather, that there is no longer any overarching narrative or story to tell us what art is. In effect, *anything* can be art. He says: “[Contemporary art] is defined by the lack of a stylistic unity, or at least the kind of stylistic unity which can be elevated into a criterion and used as a basis for developing a recognitional capacity, and there is in consequence no possibility of a narrative direction.” There is no longer any criterion by which we can recognize what is or isn’t art. There’s no “narrative direction,” no story to guide us and tell us how we’re supposed to make art. “There is no a priori constraint on how works of art must look—they can look like anything at all.”¹⁵ Further, given this loss of a narrative to guide artistic practice, there is also a loss of any notion of progress and improvement. That is, without a sense of what an artist is supposed to do to create art, there’s no possible criterion to say that he or she is getting better at it, more closely approximating the artistic ideal, since there is no such ideal.

So, given a lack of constraints, a lack of a story to tell them what to do, what do contemporary, or postmodern, artists do? What guides their work? As I discussed earlier, modernist films are defined, in part, by their self-referentiality, the fact that they refer to the history of filmmaking and to the techniques of filmmaking. And this kind of historical referentiality is carried on in postmodern art as well. Spicer says: “As an aesthetic style that derives from this radical relativism, postmodern cultural practices characteristically employ *la mode retro*, which appropriates past forms through direct revival, allusion and hybridity, where different styles are used together in a new mixture.”¹⁶ Postmodern artworks aren’t striving for some telos or ideal and improving on past movements. Rather, they reappropriate past forms by reviving or alluding to them, and they hybridize these past forms and genres into a complex mix. And this is true of postmodern neo-noirs: “The postmodern neo-noirs of the nineties are more overtly allusive and more playful in their intertextual references than the films of the eighties,” says Richard Martin.¹⁷ Spicer goes on to say: “Two basic tendencies are at work in postmodern noir, revivalism, which attempts to retain the mood and atmosphere (*stimmung*) of classical noir, and hybridization where elements of noir are reconfigured in a complex generic mix.”¹⁸ In postmodern neo-noirs, the noir sensibility is revived or retained, and the noir style of filmmaking is hybridized with other genres.

We can easily see now why Tarantino is considered a postmodern filmmaker. His movies are peppered with allusions to popular culture.¹⁹

Reservoir Dogs, for example, contains references to Madonna, “The Night the Lights Went Out in Georgia,” *Beretta*, the *Silver Surfer* comic books, the *Get Christie Love!* TV show, the Thing from the *Fantastic Four* comic books, and the Joel Schumacher film *The Lost Boys* (1987). *Pulp Fiction* has even more pop culture references, including those to Fonzie, *Green Acres*, Flock of Seagulls, Pepsi, Big Macs and Quarter Pounders, and the 1970s TV series *Kung Fu*; Travolta’s dancing is reminiscent of his role in John Badham’s *Saturday Night Fever* (1977); and, of course, the Jack Rabbit Slim’s scene is full of icons like Ed Sullivan, Marilyn Monroe, and Buddy Holly.

Further, Tarantino’s movies very often reference earlier films, and they frequently blend genres in the way described above. For example, his work is highly influenced by French new wave directors such as François Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard, to the point where Tarantino named his production company “A Band Apart,” a reference to Godard’s *Bande à part* (*Band of Outsiders*, 1964); the jewelry store in *Reservoir Dogs* is named “Karina’s” after *Bande à part*’s star, Anna Karina; and Uma Thurman’s hairdo in *Pulp Fiction* is reminiscent of Karina’s.²⁰ James Naremore says: “*Reservoir Dogs* bristles with allusions to Godard, Kubrick, and others.”²¹

Perhaps the most dramatic and extreme example of Tarantino’s allusions to other films and his hybridization of genres is *Kill Bill*. Volume 1 is mainly a samurai revenge story, but it has some western elements and an extended Japanese anime segment showing the childhood formation of one of the DiVAS, O-Ren Ishii (Lucy Liu). Volume 2 is mainly a western with samurai and kung fu elements, and both volumes have other genres mixed in with the main themes, particularly noir, blaxploitation, gangster, and action movies. And these are just the broader allusions, themes, and references that those of us who aren’t as schooled as Tarantino is in the history of pop culture and movies can recognize.

Often, artworks that reference popular culture do so for the purpose of criticism. That is, artists reflect on contemporary culture in order to expose inequalities or injustices inherent in that culture, for example, homophobia, sexism, racism, or the unequal distribution of wealth. Naremore, for one, claims that Tarantino’s references don’t work this way: “For all his talent, Tarantino’s ‘hypertext’ is relatively narrow, made up largely of testosterone-driven action movies, hard-boiled novels, and pop-art comic strips like *Modesty Blaise*. His attitude toward mass culture is also much less ironic than that of a director like Godard. In effect, he gives us Coca-Cola without Marx.”²² That is, whereas a filmmaker like Godard might make ironic

references to Coke products for the purposes of a Marxist critique of capitalist society, Tarantino doesn't mean his references to be ironic. They're straightforward, thrown in because they're amusing and cool. And, indeed, Tarantino's attitude toward popular culture really does seem to be loving and affectionate. The scenes and the dialogue are, no doubt, brilliant and unforgettable—how could you *not* be mesmerized by the spectacle of gangsters sitting around a breakfast table discussing the meaning of a Madonna song or driving in a car talking about what fast-food items are called in Europe, at least the way Tarantino treats them? But, alas, these scenes and references lack any kind of critical element, so anyone who cares about such things will be disappointed that Tarantino's movies at best leave social inequalities and injustices in place and untouched. We'll see below why this is necessarily the case, given the postmodernist attitude about ethics and values implied in his films.

Postmodern Skepticism

But *postmodernism* doesn't apply just to art; indeed, the characterization of postmodern art in terms of narratives, ideals, and the abandonment of the notion of progress sketched above applies more generally to the whole postmodern era and particularly to its knowledge and truth claims, its science and philosophy. In a very influential work, Jean-François Lyotard says: "Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives."²³ That is to say, in earlier periods, our attempts to know things about the world and human existence within science and philosophy were guided (as in art) by a metanarrative, one of those overarching stories that gave sense and structure to our practices and made knowledge claims possible. So, in the Enlightenment, for example, we had the story about a Cartesian rationality that people possessed and an external world with a comprehensible and logical structure that could be discovered, understood, cataloged, and communicated. That is, Descartes believed that human beings were essentially rational minds attached somehow to bodies and that these minds were capable of figuring out completely how the world works. And this was the story that drove scientific and philosophical practices during the Enlightenment. It told scientists and philosophers how to go about learning about the world and human existence.

The postmodern era, however, says Lyotard, is characterized by a rejection of, or an incredulity about, any metanarrative, thus throwing doubt on our ability to know and understand the world and human existence. This

leads to a radical relativism about knowledge. We're reduced to individual perspectives about things, but there are no criteria (no metanarratives) by which to claim that one perspective is better or more accurate than another. Consequently, we can no longer really claim to know anything objectively about the world.

Richard Rorty is a contemporary philosopher who accepts this relativism. Instead of talking about narratives or stories, he uses the term *vocabularies*, by which he means ways of talking about things: "The contingency of language is the fact that there is no way to step outside the various vocabularies we have employed and find a metavocabulary which somehow takes account of *all possible* vocabularies, all possible ways of judging and feeling." There's no overarching vocabulary that takes into account our different ways of talking about things in our different pursuits, as poets, scientists, philosophers, politicians, etc. Thus, there are no criteria or objective standards by which to show or prove that the way a scientist or philosopher talks about the world is any more accurate or true than the way anyone else talks about it: "On this view, great scientists invent descriptions of the world which are useful for purposes of predicting and controlling what happens, just as poets and political thinkers invent other descriptions of it for other purposes. But there is no sense in which *any* of these descriptions is an accurate representation of the way the world is in itself."²⁴ Rorty is a pragmatist: different vocabularies are useful for different pursuits and practices. But he's also a relativist: just because they're useful doesn't mean they're accurate or true since we have no criteria by which to judge such a thing.

This postmodernist relativism, its skepticism about knowledge, is often reflected in postmodern art and films. In a discussion of Bryan Singer's *The Usual Suspects* (1995), Martin says: "Postmodern esthetic constructs promote epistemological failure, constantly fragmenting the boundaries between past and present, fantasy and reality, fiction and history."²⁵ That is, postmodern films often blur or erase the boundaries between reality and fiction, past and present, etc., in order to make it impossible for the viewer to know with certainty what's going on in the narrative, thus reflecting postmodern skepticism about knowledge. *The Usual Suspects* is an excellent neo-noir example of this. The movie shifts back and forth from present to past, and much of the story is told by Verbal Kint (Kevin Spacey), sitting in a police detective's office. However, as we find out at the end of the film, Verbal has been spinning a yarn (the story that we've just been watching) made up of elements that he took from around the office—signs, posters,

and even the detective's coffee mug. Consequently, we the viewers have no way of knowing whether anything we've been watching is true, including the suggestion at the end that Verbal is really Keyser Soze (or whether there really is any such person), given that most of what we learn about Soze is presented to us by Verbal himself in his made-up tale.

This postmodern skepticism is reflected in Tarantino's films in a variety of ways. For example, he has a penchant for rearranging the chronological order of his narratives. They bounce back and forth in time. This happens in *Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction*, and *Kill Bill*. He also often fudges the line between reality and fiction, for example, by presenting a realistic narrative but throwing in surrealistic or cartoonish elements, as when in *Pulp Fiction* Butch takes a cab ride and the background images, what's supposed to be happening outside the cab, are obviously fake, from a different movie, or when in *Kill Bill* the Bride is able to perform samurai acrobatics that are physically impossible, as when she deals with the Crazy 88. Tarantino even has the real-life bank robber Eddie Bunker play one of the gangsters in *Reservoir Dogs*. Further, he sometimes has the story told from several different perspectives. Woods says: "[In *Reservoir Dogs*] cameras pan, perspectives shift—what's out of view is just as important as what's in shot. Reality is a subjective, ever-changing chimera."²⁶ And about *Reservoir Dogs* Tarantino says: "Part of the excitement of the movie comes from the fact you don't quite know exactly what happened, it's just everyone's interpretation." Dawson goes on to elaborate: "Thus, by not actually showing the robbery, the viewer's only take on reality is through having each character recount his own separate version of events. Our perspective is their perspective. And each perspective is a little different."²⁷

Postmodern Ethics and Values

Postmodern skepticism or relativism also extends to the realm of ethics and values and, hence, to the meaning and value of our lives and actions. That is to say, previously, we had an overarching narrative, or metanarrative, to tell us the meaning and value of our lives and our choices. For most people throughout human history, this story has included the idea of a god or gods. Christianity, for example, includes the story of an all-powerful creator God, who made the universe and determined the value of things, handing down commandments to Moses, directions on what to do and what not to do in order to find salvation. Within that story, then, Christians understood what was the right way to live, what was good, what

ought to be done. And, again, this story includes an explanation of how to be redeemed, how to leave a life of sin and find grace.

With its rejection of all metanarratives, then, postmodernism embraces a relativism about values and morality. That is to say, there's no longer any overarching story to tell us what's right and wrong, good and bad, how we ought to live our lives. Thus, any action, any way of living your life, is morally equivalent to any other. There's no god's-eye perspective or absolute commandment to say, for example, that you shouldn't murder people or that you should tell the truth. There are only individual perspectives about these things, and there's no way to argue or prove that one perspective is more correct than another.

As mentioned above, Tarantino's films are ostensibly about redemption, so they suggest that some ways of living (e.g., as a real person) are objectively better in a moral sense than other ways (e.g., as a gangster). However, because the universe that these characters inhabit is a postmodern one, their attempts at redemption are bound to fail, one way of living being, according to postmodernism, morally equal to any other way.

I'd argue that this failure is interestingly suggested (again) in the opening breakfast scene in *Reservoir Dogs*. The head gangster, Joe, is picking up the tab for breakfast, and he tells the others to put in for the tip. "Should be about a buck apiece," he says. While the others offer up the cash, Mr. Pink sits there passively. Nice Guy Eddie calls him on it, insisting that he chip in. Mr. Pink refuses. He says that he doesn't tip because he doesn't believe in it: "I don't tip because society says I have to. All right, if someone deserves a tip, if they really put forth an effort, I'll give them a little something extra. But this tipping automatically, it's for the birds. As far as I'm concerned, they're just doing their job." He says that he too worked minimum wage gigs, but, when he did, he didn't have a job that society deemed "tipworthy." The other gangsters are shocked at his seeming callousness (which is interesting enough in its own right, given that they think nothing of shooting people), but Mr. Pink's refusal reveals the conventionality of our forms of life, our ways of living. Tipping is just something we take for granted. We accept it as natural, as the way things are and have to be. It's the *right* thing to do. But, by pointing out the conventionality of this institution, Mr. Pink shows its arbitrariness. It's not objectively the right thing to do. It's simply something that we've decided is right, and it's right only because most of us consider it to be so:

MR. WHITE: You don't have any idea what you're talking about. These people bust their ass. This is a hard job.

MR. PINK: So's working at McDonald's, but you don't feel the need to tip them. They're serving you food, you should tip 'em. But no, society says tip these guys over here, but not those guys over there. That's bullshit.

If tipping were somehow objectively right, if we had some sort of metanarrative to explain its objective goodness, we'd be able to explain why we tip diner waitresses and not the people who work at McDonald's. It's an arbitrary convention, such that, objectively speaking, tipping a hardworking waitress isn't any more right or good than stiffing her.

As I argued above, part of the symbolism of redemption in Tarantino's films, part of leaving the life and becoming a real person, is the shedding of the uniform of either cop or gangster and donning the clothes of everyday folks. In *Pulp Fiction*, Jules's friend Jimmie is a real person: he's married, brews gourmet coffee in his kitchen, is worried about his wife catching him with gangsters in the house, and appreciates oak bedroom furniture. After disposing of their bloody clothes, then, Jules and Vincent put on Jimmie's clothes, short pants and T-shirts, outfits that you might wear to play beach volleyball. Thus, symbolically, they're on their way to becoming real people. But, when the Wolf (Harvey Keitel) asks Jimmie what they look like wearing those clothes, Jimmie quips that they look like "dorks." ("Ha ha ha, motherfucker; they're your clothes," says Jules.) Thus, symbolically, the value and meaning of living a real life is undermined. Just as tipping a waitress is objectively no different from or better than not tipping her, so too the only real difference between being a gangster and being a real person is that real people are dorks and gangsters are cool. One way of life is not morally superior to the other. Tarantino says: "When you first see Vincent and Jules, their suits are cut and crisp, they look like real bad-asses. . . . But as the movie goes on, their suits get more and more fucked up until they're stripped off and the two are dressed in the exact antithesis—volleyball wear, which is not cool."²⁸ Indeed, in Tarantino's postmodern world, where violence is eroticized and stylized, and where one way of life cannot be morally superior to another, if it's a choice between being a cool gangster and being a dorky real person, who wouldn't choose to be cool? Nobody wants to be a dork.

Notes

I'd like to thank J. J. Abrams and Bill Irwin for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

1. Tarantino's *Jackie Brown* (1997) is well made and contains many of the post-modern elements discussed below, but, on the one hand, it's not as original or brilliant as the other three, and, on the other hand, it's not about redemption.

2. In an interview, Tarantino denies that his films are neo-noir: "It's not *noir*. I don't do neo-*noir*," insists Tarantino" (Paul A. Woods, *King Pulp: The Wild World of Quentin Tarantino* [London: Plexus, 1998], 103).

3. In my "Symbolism, Meaning, and Nihilism in Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*," in *The Philosophy of Film Noir*, ed. Mark T. Conard (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 125–35, I talk about the "transformation" of these two characters. That essay is about their attempts to see beyond post-modern nihilism. The present essay is something of a continuation of that idea, though it concludes that, in fact, they don't (or, more accurately, can't) succeed in escaping that nihilism.

4. Keitel believes that it's really Mr. Orange who is seeking redemption for his betrayal of Mr. White and the other gangsters when he confesses at the end: "And Mr. Orange, who represents the law, has to seek redemption for carrying out what the law demands of him" (Woods, *King Pulp*, 33). I don't think this contradicts what I'm arguing here: both cops and gangsters could need redemption from their way of life, while, at the same time, Mr. Orange might need to be redeemed from an individual act of betrayal (though, if a cop needs to be redeemed for attempting to infiltrate a gang in order to arrest the leader, this might be further evidence of the nihilism inherent in the film, as I argue below). However, since my larger argument is that there's no possibility of redemption in a postmodern world, in the end it doesn't matter who's seeking redemption.

5. About *Reservoir Dogs*, Tarantino says: "You know, you can't put a guy in a black suit without him looking a little cooler than he already looks. It's a stylistic stroke. It looks like I'm doing a genre movie and my genre character's in uniform, like Jean-Pierre Melville's trenchcoats, or Sergio Leone's dusters that he'd have his characters wearing. So it does have that cool jazzy thing" (Jeff Dawson, *Quentin Tarantino: The Cinema of Cool* [New York: Applause, 1995], 78). In his discussion of *Pulp Fiction*, Woods claims that it's Lee Marvin in Don Siegel's *The Killers* (1964) specifically who is "Vincent and Jules' prototype in *Pulp Fiction*: the classic emotionless hitman in thin-lapelled suit and skinny tie" (*King Pulp*, 78).

6. It's interesting to note that the people working at Jack Rabbit Slim's in *Pulp Fiction* wear a sort of uniform as well, dressed as they are as famous pop icons. And there's something decidedly unreal about them: they're hollow representations of real, famous people. Vincent understands this when he refers to the restaurant as a "wax museum with a pulse." The people working there are wax figures,

not real at all. And Vincent knows this because he can identify with them as not being real; he sees himself in them. This is why he's able to correct Mia when she mistakes Mamie Van Doren for Marilyn Monroe. (My thanks to J. J. Abrams for pointing this out to me.)

7. Recall that the movie forms a complete and coherent narrative but is chopped into vignettes and rearranged so that the end of the narrative comes in the middle of the movie.

8. Vernita Green (Vivica A. Fox), Budd (Michael Madsen), and even Bill also seem to have at least attempted to become real people in the four years since their attack on the Bride. Vernita is a wife and mother living in suburban Los Angeles, Budd is an alcoholic bouncer and janitor at a "tittie" bar, and Bill is playing father to his and Beatrix's daughter. Their past catches up with them, of course, as the Bride takes her revenge, thus ultimately thwarting their attempts at redemption (or, alternatively, they're redeemed through death, as are the gangsters in *Reservoir Dogs*).

9. Not an uncommon notion of redemption, historically. The Inquisition typically burned heretics, e.g., after having tortured them into confessing their supposed guilt, believing that they'd be better off dead than living as sinners.

10. Andrew Spicer says: "All these film-makers [Hopper, Coppola, Scorsese, Schrader] were steeped in film history and their films reflect a critical consciousness of both European and American film traditions. The increasingly influential notion of the *auteur*-director as the key creative force in film-making gave them the confidence to experiment and to see their films as vehicles for their own artistic self-expression" (*Film Noir* [Harlow: Longman, 2002], 135).

11. *Ibid.*, 136.

12. Tarantino says: "There were always movie buffs who understood film and film convention, but now, with the advent of video, almost everybody has become a film expert even though they don't know it" (Woods, *King Pulp*, 74).

13. Spicer, *Film Noir*, 148.

14. Madan Sarup, *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), 175.

Such an awareness of the art object as an art object is an important element of modern art generally, which is why these films are labeled *modernist* or *neo-modernist*. Arthur C. Danto says: "Modernism in art marks a point before which painters set about representing the world the way it presented itself, painting people and landscapes and historical events just as they would present themselves to the eye. With modernism, the conditions of representation themselves become central, so that art in a way becomes its own subject" (*After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997], 7). So *premodernist* films are those from the golden age of Hollywood that seek to mimic real life (however faithfully), while *modernist* films are those we've been discussing, films that consciously reflect on the history and techniques of filmmaking.

15. Danto, *After the End of Art*, 12, 16.

16. Spicer, *Film Noir*, 150.

17. Richard Martin, *Mean Streets and Raging Bulls: The Legacy of Film Noir in Contemporary American Cinema* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 1997), 117.

18. Spicer, *Film Noir*, 150.

19. "The most obvious element of Tarantino's films is their obsessive allusions, verbally and visually, to an eclectic range of popular culture" (ibid., 171).

20. Dawson, *Quentin Tarantino*, 88. About the Travolta-Thurman dance scene in *Pulp Fiction*, Dawson reports: "To allay [Thurman's] fears, Tarantino simply took her and Travolta to a trailer and showed them a video of Jean-Luc Godard's *Bande à Part*, with Anna Karina, Sami Frey and Claude Brasseur doing a little synchronized jig to the juke box in a French café. Tarantino liked that scene, not because of how well they danced, but because the characters simply *enjoyed* doing it" (ibid., 187).

21. James Naremore, *More Than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 165.

22. Ibid., 218.

23. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.

24. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), xvi, 4.

25. Martin, *Mean Streets and Raging Bulls*, 124.

26. Woods, *King Pulp*, 37.

27. Dawson, *Quentin Tarantino*, 66.

28. Woods, *King Pulp*, 105.

Part 3

Elements of Neo-Noir

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The Dark Sublimity of *Chinatown*

Richard Gilmore

American film noir was always neo-noir. It was first seen as a genre, first recognized for its genuinely surprising darkness, in 1946 and in France.¹ That is five years after the generally accepted year of the first instances of pure film noir and in another country. That means that the first experiences of film noir as a genre, if it can be called a genre (as a *phenomenon*, if *genre* is too strong), already included a certain distance, a certain level of detachment, a certain re-visionary artfulness. I am not saying that the early noir films were made from this perspective, or even that, before it was identified as a genre, noir was experienced from this perspective, but only that, when films began to be recognized as noir, that recognition included a detour through Europe, especially through France and Germany, a detour that did not occur when one recognized a film as a western, or as a melodrama, or even as a simple detective story. This detour sets up an experience of detachment, a moment of recognition, that engages the concepts of *re-vision* and *neo-noir*.

This detour also engages the concept of philosophy. The dominant post-Enlightenment philosophy of both France and Germany in the early twentieth century was existentialism, a rubric even more argued over than that of film noir. The nineteenth-century continuation of the Enlightenment project looked to the future with a kind of shadowless hope. Science, education, technological progress, all seemed to promise a utopian future for human beings. The dark existentials of Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Dostoyevsky, and Sartre tracked the burgeoning recognition of the inescapable shadows that humanity casts—greed, violence, and anxiety along with the oppression of workers, world war, crime, racial oppression, political oppression, social oppression, colonization, and then the threat of nuclear war. Existentialism was a philosophy that sought to confront the darkest aspects of the human condition. The United States in the 1940s had

plenty of darkness to confront—the devastation of the Depression, world war, and the threat of nuclear destruction, to name just a few of its sources.

A central feature of philosophy is the move to abstract, to generalize, to see in a group of particulars some general pattern. This is also what is involved in identifying or discussing a genre. To talk about film noir or neo-noir is to have already begun to do philosophy. The value of philosophy is the power that is granted to those who can identify the operative patterns that obtain in a given situation. To be able to see the patterns means being able to see the opportunities that a situation offers as well as being able to see the dangers that one might want to avoid. Those who cannot see the patterns will feel like they are in the grip of fate, helpless against the forces that seem to conspire against them.

It is worth pointing out that general patterns can be extremely difficult to see. It is frequently only by some deviation in an established pattern that the pattern itself becomes visible. Why were the French able to see something that Americans could not see in their own films? The French recognized the emergent character of noir in Hollywood movies because they had not been able to see Hollywood movies for five years during World War II. When Hollywood movies became available once again in France, the French were struck by the darkness and strangeness of many of the films they were now seeing coming out of Hollywood.² For Americans, the continuity in the gradual darkening of certain American films occluded the pattern. The genre of film noir itself was doing a kind of philosophy. The narratives of film noir were identifying phenomena that were emerging in society at the time, new forms of anxiety, of violence, of greed, of oppression and resistance to oppression. Neo-noir functions in a similar way, tracking emergent social patterns of its times. Neo-noir, in addition, functions as a kind of philosophy of noir. It is a reflection on, as well as a re-creation of, the genre of noir.

So neo-noir is also something somewhat different from classic noir. It is more general, more detached, more ironic, more philosophical than classic noir. It involves a level of self-reflexivity that classic noir lacked. To use Freudian vocabulary, classic noir tends to be obsessed with the problem of the return, the return, Freud would say, of the repressed. The past returns to haunt the protagonist or the protagonist (and antagonistic) couple. Neo-noir, at least in the movie *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974), which may be the first authentic neo-noir, is more concerned with the problem of repetition.³ A return is still a singular event. There is the sense in a classic noir of the narrative being unique, unique both for the protagonists and

for the spectators. A repetition undoes this uniqueness. The threat of the return still holds out the possibility of an evasion. A repetition, however, suggests an inevitable, inexorable fate, an unevadable fatality. I take the word *Chinatown* to be, in part, a sign for a repetition, the repetition of a particular tragedy, the inevitability of death in a particular kind of situation.

Chinatown, Noir, and Nostalgia

Chinatown begins, after the wistful nostalgia evoked by the opening credits and haunting music, with a black-and-white image of a man and a woman having outdoor clothed sex. That image is replaced by a second, similar image, then a third and a fourth. The sequence is disorienting on several levels. There is the disjunction between the nostalgia of the opening credits and the raw, explicit sex of the photographs. The nostalgia of the opening sequence invokes a time of black-and-white film that seems to be reinforced by the black-and-white images, but then that expectation is immediately undone when the recognition occurs that these are just black-and-white photographs appearing in a color film. More generally, one can characterize the disjunction in terms of the intrusion of the raw into the apparent promise of the sweetly nostalgic, the intrusion of ambiguity into the apparent promise of the predictable and straightforward.⁴

Nostalgia: the word itself invokes the idea of a return. From the Greek *nostos* meaning "return home," *nostalgia* is a word for the sense that something important that one once possessed has been lost. Nostalgia is about the hope of recovery of the lost thing. Nostalgia pervades film noir because it underlies the desperation and violence that pervade film noir. It is the hidden romanticism in film noir. Wild risks are taken because of a desperate faith that the game can be won, that the lost thing can be recovered. The "thing" in the idea of *nostos* is home or, more accurately for film noir, some romanticized idea of what would constitute a sense of finally being home. I am using *home* now as a word for feeling like you are where you belong. The idea of home is the desire for a return of something from one's childhood, when one simply *had* a home. At some point, that home that one had is lost. I take it that the desperate attempts to achieve some object, commit some crime, win some impossible love, are all attempts to achieve some sense of finally returning home, to feel like one is where one belongs. One longs for this precisely because one feels its absence. The feeling of not being where one belongs is the feeling of alienation. Alienation is the great theme of existentialism. It is a feeling that seems to have become pervasive

with the rise of modernity. Home, however, is notoriously hard to achieve in the narratives of film noir. Those narratives are pretty consistently lessons on the moral “Beware of what you wish for.”

Venetian Blinds, Noir, and Suspicion

The photographs in the opening scenes of *Chinatown* turn out to be of Curly’s wife (Elizabeth Harding) having sex with another man. The narrative that emerges is that Curly (Burt Young) has hired Jake Gittes (Jack Nicholson) to spy on his wife to determine whether she is having an affair. The photographs are proof that his worst suspicions are true. He may have had suspicions, but Curly still seems quite surprised and upset by the fact of the matter. In evident torment, he tosses the photographs against the wall, goes over to the blinds, flattens himself against them, and then begins to take a bunch of them into his mouth. Jake says: “All right, Curly. Enough’s enough. You can’t eat the venetian blinds. I just had them installed on Wednesday.”

It is an odd gesture, trying to eat the blinds. Part of what it means to do philosophy, to be philosophical, is to try to be sensitive and responsive to the oddness of things. It is in the odd, frequently, that will be found the signs pointing to the previously unseen patterns that obtain. It was the oddness in the post-1946 Hollywood movies that got the French thinking about a new genre that they would call *noir*. Why does Curly want to eat the blinds? What does this gesture signify? Why do Roman Polanski and Robert Towne, the director and writer, respectively, of *Chinatown*, want Curly to eat the blinds? Blinds are a very significant visual and metaphoric trope in classic film noir. Shadows cast by light through blinds haunt many of the classic films noirs, such as *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, 1941), *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944), *Detour* (Edgar G. Ulmer, 1945), *The Big Sleep* (Howard Hawks, 1946), and *Out of the Past* (Jacques Tourneur, 1947), just to name a few.⁵

For one thing, blinds, venetian blinds, are a sign, especially in the 1940s, of a certain social class, the bourgeois class, as well as of aspirations to that class. The rise of the bourgeoisie is one of the most salient features of modernity. An interesting attending philosophical development is the rise of what Paul Ricoeur describes as the hermeneutics of suspicion.⁶ A *hermeneutics* is just a way of looking at and interpreting some text or phenomenon. The hermeneutics of suspicion will involve looking at some of the things that are most sacred to the bourgeoisie—God, morality, love,

the family, money—with suspicion, suspecting that they may not really be what they are presented as and taken to be.

The great masters of this hermeneutics of suspicion are Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx.⁷ There is a scene in *Chinatown* where Jake is pressing Mrs. Mulwray (Faye Dunaway) with questions while sitting at a table in a restaurant. In particular, he presses her for the name that goes with her middle initial, “C.” She asks him why he wants to know. His question is one that appears to be at once banal and intrusive. Evelyn Mulwray is clearly discomfited by it, and the answer to it will turn out to be at the very center of the mystery of the plot. He says: “I’m just a snoop.” Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx are *real* snoops, asking the most uncomfortable questions and discovering extremely disconcerting answers. Nietzsche will ask about God and morality. He will conclude that God is dead and that morality is just the will to power in disguise. Freud will expose our romanticized notions about love and family. Marx will raise questions about some of our deepest assumptions about justice, what constitutes social fairness, and what money is. The result of these philosophical articulations of the dark side of Western, capitalist, democratic culture is what Sartre called *bad faith* and *bad conscience*. Bad conscience is the state one is in when one continues to act according to the norms and values of the bourgeoisie, even though one’s suspicions about the validity of those norms have been awakened. Bad faith is a kind of refusal to see, a refusal to see that becomes a blind spot that we are no longer aware of but that haunts us with vague feelings of hypocrisy, inauthenticity, and alienation.

Visually, blinds cut and fragment an image. They suggest an inner, darker realm in contrast to an outer, brighter realm. They suggest the presence of obscurities. They hide things in the image. They darken our vision, creating a mood of uncertainty, anxiety, and fear. The word signifies their function—*blinds*. Their function is to blind, to cut off the light because we do not like too much light, cannot bear too much light. If we take light to be a trope for something like truth or reality, then blinds are metaphorically in the service of protecting us from too much truth, too much reality. As T. S. Eliot put it: “Human kind / Cannot bear very much reality.”⁸ Some people, I would say, can bear more reality than others—or, at least, are willing to try to. Part of the paradox of the pain of the bourgeois reality is that it is, at least partially, self-inflicted. It is our very cooperation with the questionable bourgeois norms, our desire to use blinds, that causes our disease, although what alternatives there are to cooperation, to the acceptance of some level of blindness, has always been a bit unclear.

Given this background, an interpretation of the oddness of Curly's attempting to eat the blinds is that he does so because he has had a little too much reality and wants to recover his condition of less painful blindness. He wants to incorporate, by eating, these physical blinds in order to recover a more symbolic blindness so that his pain will be less. This is an expression of a kind of nostalgia, a desire to return to his prefallen home, with his prefallen wife there. Curly has become what, in a sense, we have all become—a man who knows too much. Roman Polanski and Robert Towne want Curly to eat the blinds not just for these reasons but also because they want to invoke this classic image from traditional film noir. They want to announce the themes of the movie, that the movie will be about light and darkness, knowledge and the evasion of knowledge, the search for knowledge and the costs of knowledge, but with an ironic, neo-noir twist.⁹

Labyrinths, Scotomas, and Hubris

The plot of *Chinatown* is convoluted and labyrinthine.¹⁰ The protagonist, Jake Gittes, always seems to be several steps ahead of us, the audience, but a good step behind the unfolding clues of the case. It is often confusing whom Jake is working for at any given moment in the movie. He has within the context of the movie been explicitly hired by three different people for three different cases. He has been hired by the faux Mrs. Mulwray, who is really Ida Sessions (Diane Ladd), to spy on her putative husband Hollis Mulwray (Darrell Zwerling) to see whether he is having an extramarital affair. He is hired by the real Mrs. Mulwray to investigate the death of Hollis Mulwray. He is hired by Noah Cross (John Huston) to try to find the young woman, Katherine Cross (Belinda Palmer), with whom Hollis Mulwray was, apparently, having an affair. He also has his own interests in the case. He is invested in protecting his reputation, but he also seems to be pursuing his own line of inquiry solely for knowledge's sake, maybe even for goodness's sake.

Each case contains a counternarrative, and the revelation of each counternarrative works to destabilize the larger, overarching narrative of the movie itself. The first case starts out seeming to be fairly straightforward. Jake thinks that he is investigating a case of an extramarital affair. This is very familiar terrain for him. He knows how to discover the signs that will reveal this pattern in people's behaviors. The downside to this familiarity is that he tends to find the signs pointing in the direction he expects, whether or not they really are pointing in that direction. Interestingly, the movie

presents us, the audience, with the same seduction. There is a moment, for example, when Jake is spying from a rooftop on Hollis Mulwray with the young woman. Mulwray kisses her, a moment that Jake gets on film as decisive evidence of the affair. We, too, take it to be a definitive sign that this is an affair. That is, we *see* it as an erotic kiss even though, as it will turn out, it is not. The kiss itself, as kisses are, is deeply ambiguous. It could be an erotic kiss, or a paternal kiss, or just a friendly kiss, or some other type of kiss. The danger in reading signs is having a particular expectation of what the sign must mean that occludes its real meaning. The counternarrative is that the woman who hired Jake is not really Mrs. Mulwray and that the whole case is really about not infidelity but water and power, as Jake will eventually discover.

The philosopher Daniel Dennett, in considering some peculiar features of the mind, discusses the phenomenon of the scotoma. The scotoma is the blind spot that occurs in our vision because of the way the optic nerve interrupts the field of cones and rods at the back of our eye. What is most interesting about the scotoma is that we are not aware that it is there. We “see” no blind spot. Why is that? It is because the mind fills in the scotoma on the basis of information, signs, from the area surrounding the scotoma. If we are looking at a tree with a pattern of leaves, the basic pattern of the leaves gets reproduced by our mind to cover the scotoma, with the result that the visual field seems to be full and complete.¹¹

There are, I want to say, conceptual as well as perceptual scotomas. There are situations in which our mind completes the pattern according to our expectations even when the pattern is not complete, even when there may be insufficient information to complete the pattern, even when there are counterindications to the pattern that we are expecting to find. Throughout the movie *Chinatown* Jake Gittes is continually being confronted with the fact of his own conceptual scotomas. He is constantly being surprised by things he failed to see or, rather, things for which he saw the signs but failed to read them properly because of his own preconceived ideas about what the signs must mean. We see this in his initial investigation of Hollis Mulwray’s supposed affair, especially with the photographs of Hollis Mulwray and Noah Cross arguing. We see it in the situation of the “Chinaman” joke. We see it in his attitude toward the information given him by the Chinese gardener about the water. We see it in his attitude toward Evelyn Mulwray. We see it in his investigations throughout the movie until the final revelation of his final scotoma in *Chinatown* itself.

For all that, however, Jake is an excellent investigator. He, better than

almost anyone else, understands how appearances can be deceiving. He expects deviance, perversity, infidelity, and crime behind facades of respectability. This is precisely his problem. His expectations have so frequently been found to be justified that he has come to trust his expectations too much. He understands that he sees more than most people, so he has begun to believe that he sees all there is to see. What he has seen has made him pretty cynical about people's motives, but his cynicism will look naive when it comes to the truth of the matter. His expectations circumscribe the possible patterns that he will be able to see. They will create the scotoma that will prevent him from seeing, from even imagining, the real lineaments of the case. His failure of imagination will lead to the tragedy that occurs in Chinatown.

The Greek word for the source of Jake's scotoma is *hubris*. *Hubris* describes an unwarranted confidence, an overarching arrogance that does not have the proper respect for human ignorance, especially one's own. It is given as an admonition on the wall of the Oracle of Delphi: "Avoid hubris." It is the underlying subject of all the great ancient Greek tragedies. The hamartia, the fatal flaw, of the heroic protagonists can always be framed in terms of a certain rashness, an overconfidence in their own abilities that makes them fail to respect the overwhelming ambiguities that, in fact, surround them. It is this overconfidence that leads them to their doom.

Oedipus, Greek Tragedy, and Guilt

Oedipus is an appropriate figure from ancient Greek tragedy to invoke when thinking about *Chinatown* because the parallels between the two stories are quite striking.¹² Oedipus was the first "detective" in Western literature, investigating the murder of the previous king of Thebes, Laius. Jake is investigating the death of Hollis Mulwray, the water king (as it were) of Los Angeles.¹³ *Oedipus Rex* begins with the city of Thebes experiencing a terrible plague, a situation not unlike the drought in Los Angeles at the beginning of *Chinatown*.¹⁴ Oedipus will discover himself to be involved, unwittingly but somehow culpably, in some fairly complicated family dynamics. His culpability, his guilt, is somehow tied to the tragedy gripping his city. The resolution of the mystery behind the crime that he is investigating is connected to the recovery of the health of his city. Oedipus will discover that he himself is implicated in the crime he is investigating.

In many ways, Jake is much more peripheral to the major events occurring in *Chinatown* than Oedipus is to the events occurring in *Oedipus Rex*.¹⁵

Los Angeles is not Jake's city the way Thebes is Oedipus's (since Oedipus was the king). Nor is it Jake's family that is at the center of the plot the way it most definitely is Oedipus's family. Nor is Jake a direct player in the events that have occurred. He did not kill Hollis Mulwray, nor can he save the city. Yet, given the striking parallels between the two stories, it makes sense to ask whether there is some way in which Jake is culpable, if only very tangentially, in the drought that has gripped the city. More directly, it makes sense to ask whether Jake is somehow, if somewhat unknowingly, culpable in the death of Hollis Mulwray and thus is, like Oedipus, ultimately investigating issues that go to the very core of his own identity.

The new venetian blinds are a sign. The new Florsheim shoes are a sign, as are the tailored suits, the convertible car, the classy secretary, and the well-appointed office. What are they signs of? A counternarrative in Jake's own consciousness, a counternarrative to that of his down-to-earth, truth-searching character. Jake, clearly, has some social aspirations. He aspires, presumably, to wealth and power, to be respected, and, one might say, to leave Chinatown behind him. That is what we think wealth and power can do for us—eliminate the ambiguities and uncertainties of life.

The problem, of course, is that the ambiguities and uncertainties will not go away; they keep, as it were, returning. This return takes the form for Jake, as it does for Oedipus, of the emergence of one counternarrative after another. Every time Jake begins to think that he is getting a handle on what is really going on, another counternarrative emerges that undoes the narrative that seemed to tie everything together, leaving him once again adrift. First, there is the narrative of the suspicious wife who wants to know about her husband's infidelity. That gives way to a narrative about the city water supply and the building of a new dam. That gives way to a narrative about money and land. That gives way to a narrative about the endlessness of the desire for power. That gives way to a narrative about a very complicated, very particular family sexual dynamic. That shifts the narrative to questions about good and evil, innocence and guilt, freedom and compulsion. All these narratives seem to lead inexorably to Chinatown. Chinatown is the place where all the narratives are undone. It is the place that suggests a narrative of its own, the narrative that human beings will never figure out the narrative soon enough or completely enough to avoid the inevitability of tragedy. Jake's guilt, like Oedipus's, is tied to his refusal to acknowledge certain ambiguities in time.

This guilt is signaled in *Chinatown* with a trope that is quite similar to a trope from *Oedipus Rex*. In *Oedipus Rex*, Teiresias is the seer who is physi-

cally blind. Oedipus can physically see but is, as it were, spiritually blind: he cannot see who he himself is or what he has done. A similar play on seeing, but most frequently via glasses, is a recurring trope in *Chinatown*. In *Chinatown*, however, the reference to flawed vision is aimed at only one eye, the left eye. Jake loses the left lens of his sunglasses at the orange ranch in the northwest valley. Evelyn has a flaw in her left eye. Jake knocks the left taillight out on Evelyn's car so that he will be able to recognize it driving at night, making the damaged car a kind of iconic sign of Evelyn herself. The eyeglasses found in the pond at the Mulwray house have a cracked left lens and, we will learn, belong to Noah Cross.¹⁶ I take the fact that it is always the left eye as a reference to *sinister*, from the Latin for "on the left." These are flaws in vision, signs of conceptual scotomas, that will result in terrible things happening. The one character who consistently wears glasses—but without a reference to a flawed vision in his left eye in particular—is Hollis Mulwray, the one who could see the dark events portended from the beginning. That makes him a kind of Teiresias.

Guilt, Alienation, and the Hitchcockian Blot

This is getting at the dark truth of film noir in general. Noir films worked to destabilize the overly cheerful narratives of the typical Hollywood film as well as the overly optimistic narratives that we construct for our own lives. They did this by showing how counternarratives can emerge, by raising questions, in films, about our bourgeois narratives of love, and family, and work, and money. "The bloody paths down which we drive logic into dread."¹⁷ This is a beautiful description of the investigations of Jake Gittes as well as of those of Oedipus. The same could be said of those of Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx. Borde and Chaumeton conclude: "All the films of this cycle [of film noir] create a similar emotional effect: *that state of tension instilled in the spectator when the psychological reference points are removed*. The aim of film noir was to create a *specific alienation*."¹⁸

Are the tension and alienation of neo-noir somehow different from those of classic noir? The answer, I believe, is yes. The anxieties are different because the historical consciousness is different and the philosophy of the time is different. The year 1974 was already well into what would be called *postmodernity*.¹⁹ It was just after the Vietnam War and during the height of the Watergate scandal. It was a time when a considerable amount of anxiety was being created for people simply by an overabundance of competing, contradictory, and incommensurate narratives. Somebody had to be

lying, but who and why, and what would it mean for the future of our country? Philosophy was undergoing twin disruptions, one on the British and American side, and another on the Continental (mostly French) side. In 1967, Richard Rorty published the edited collection *The Linguistic Turn*.²⁰ The “linguistic turn” marked a shift from the high, old way of metaphysical philosophy, in which the question of “truth” was central, to a concern with language, a concern that regarded truth as just another property of sentences. In France, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida were the new hermeneuts of suspicion, attempting a new decoding of modern values but, like the Americans and Brits, paying especially close attention to the properties of language and the disconnect between language and the world. This disconnect undoes the possibility of any absolute truth and allows for the “deconstruction” of any text, of any narrative. Noirs raised doubts about specific narratives; neo-noirs, like *Chinatown*, raise doubts about getting to the bottom of any narrative.

What Jake is striving for, among other things, is to achieve a consistent narrative of what is going on. Each time a consistent narrative begins to form, signs of a counternarrative pop up. Slavoj Žižek—a slippery, post-modern kind of thinker if ever there was one—has identified what he calls the *Hitchcockian blot*.²¹ It is the signifier in a scene in a movie that suggests a counternarrative. Žižek gives as an example the scene from Hitchcock’s *Foreign Correspondent* (1940) in which the protagonist, played by Joel McCrea, finds himself in the Dutch countryside surrounded by windmills. The countryside seems bucolic and beautiful—until he notices that one of the windmills is rotating in the wrong direction. It must be a nefarious signal system. Suddenly, all the values in the scene are transformed from quiet, bucolic beauty to the sense of the dark, pervasive presence of Nazi evil.

There are many Hitchcockian blots in *Chinatown*. Hollis Mulwray’s obviously principled stand against building the new dam is a blot that Jake all but ignores in his pursuit of lurid photographs of Hollis and his supposed mistress. The photo of Noah Cross and Hollis Mulwray arguing is another one. The object in the pond at the Mulwray house that Jake notices but cannot identify is a blot. The fish in the office of Mr. Yelburton (John Hillerman) and the sign of the Albacore are blots. The flaw in Evelyn’s eye is, perhaps, the quintessential blot, the blot that exists for all of us. And, of course, the blinds in Jake’s office are a metablot, a signifier, not for Jake to pick up on, but for us, the audience, to recognize. The concept of “Chinatown” itself is the blot of all blots, the blot that suggests that there is no consistent narrative other than the repeated undoing of every narrative.

Alienation, the Uncanny, and Freud

I associate the sense of a “specific alienation” with the experience of the uncanny. The sense of the uncanny is a sense that there is something more going on, something of which one cannot quite get a glimpse. It is the sense of the pervasive ambiguities that have not yet made themselves explicit. It emerges with the burgeoning sense of a counternarrative to the narrative that one has been assuming obtains. Freud offers a fascinating analysis of the uncanny, an analysis that provides some useful tools for unpacking the emotional power delivered by *Chinatown*.

Freud’s analysis is complicated and largely linguistic, but his surprising conclusion is: “The uncanny is in some way a species of the familiar.”²² The “species of the familiar” with which the uncanny is associated by Freud is our infantile fears and desires. The primary fears are the fear of death and the fear of castration. The fear of castration is, itself, a complex fear because it is a fear associated with the fulfillment of one’s desire. That is, what the infant desires is the complete possession of the love object, the mother. The obstacles and prohibitions to that desire get experienced in the psyche of the infant, according to Freud, as the threat of castration. The uncanniness of Oedipus, says Freud, lies for us in the subconscious recognition of the appropriateness of his self-blinding when he discovers that he has had sex with his mother. Freud reads the destruction of the organs of his eyes as a “mitigated” substitute for the destruction of another organ, his penis. The psychological tension created by this infantile dynamic is that we desire what we fear and fear what we desire. We want what we desire, and we are terrified of actually possessing the object of our desire.

Freud also analyzes the uncanniness of the *doppelgänger*, the double, in terms of primitive and infantile fears and desires. A psychological response to the fears of death and of castration, according to Freud, is the imaginative act of doubling. As Freud says: “The double was originally an insurance against the extinction of the self, or, as [Otto] Rank puts it, ‘an energetic denial of the power of death.’ . . . The invention of such doubling as a defense against annihilation has a counterpart in the language of dreams, which is fond of expressing the idea of castration by duplicating or multiplying the genital symbol.”²³

Let us consider these ideas from Freud about the uncanny in relation to *Chinatown*. I am assuming that, as it does for me, the movie creates in others the sense of something uncanny. First of all, the idea of the destruction of one organ as a symbolic stand-in for castration certainly seems

relevant to *Chinatown*. Jake, himself, frames the point of his ongoing investigation as an attempt to recover the health of his slashed nose. This is in the scene outside the restaurant where he has explained to Evelyn Mulwray that he is "just a snoop." His nose was slashed for, as it were, putting it where it did not belong, at least according to the ideas of some. The other prominent repetition of the genital symbol in the movie is the long-lensed cameras that Jake uses to do his snooping. His strength (the intelligence that informs his snooping, the tools he uses) will also be his weakness. His considerable power to come up with the question that will reveal what is hidden will lead him to answers to questions he would rather not ask.

There are at least two doppelgänger relationships suggested in the movie. The first is the doubling between Jake and Hollis Mulwray. Jake seems to be Hollis's double, following him wherever he goes, lurking in the shadows as Hollis conducts his own investigations. This doubling is most strikingly suggested by the identical loss of each's left shoe, which may also serve as an additional reference to Oedipus. Oedipus's name, in Greek, means "swollen foot." This name has the literal significance of referring to a wound that Oedipus received when he was abandoned as an infant and, in the process, his feet were bound. The name may also have a more symbolic significance in relation to his foot—as a stand-in for an organ that will be the source of some trouble for Oedipus (and, in a way, for Jake).

Although the second doppelgänger relationship in the movie is more ambiguous, I take it that Noah Cross serves as another kind of double for Jake. Jake's aspirations to move up in social class, his evident hunger for more money, his impassioned commitment to appear more respectable, represent a theme emphasized throughout the movie. These aspirations are most tellingly revealed in Jake's speech. He seems most awkward when he tries to use words (like *métier*) that he seems to associate with wealth, power, and respectability and most himself when he describes something moving as fast as "the wind from a duck's ass," a comment for which he apologizes, as he always does when his real self emerges through the veneer that he is trying to construct. Noah Cross, not to mention his daughter Evelyn, represents an extreme form of these very things to which Jake aspires.

Hollis Mulwray, then, would be a kind of best-self version of Jake, and Noah Cross a worst-self one. Jake is caught in the middle, aspiring to some kind of moral goodness and, simultaneously, to greater wealth and power. He occupies a kind of nether region between the two, desiring both and neither. Interestingly, Evelyn Mulwray is trapped in the same gray region between Hollis and her father, Noah Cross. Jake and Evelyn, no doubt, are

attracted to one another because of the recognition of this shared condition and, thus, serve each other as doubles. The desire each has for the other must include the desire to find in the other some way out of the terrible prison of these ambiguities. To find in the other, to find with the other, some way "home."

These ambiguities are based on mutually exclusive desires. It seems clear that it is Jake's perception that his desire for goodness can come only at the price of giving up his desire for wealth and power, and vice versa. The fear of castration that Freud emphasizes is really just the fear of a loss of one's power, a fear that will be realized if Jake achieves either desire. Evelyn loves the goodness of her husband, Hollis, but clearly has contempt for his lack of passion. She seems genuinely, weirdly, to feel a passion for her father even as she is horrified by his evil. Can one be good and have social power? Can one find a love that is both good and passionate? These are the questions that Jake and Evelyn want answered in the affirmative by the other. These are questions that most of us want answered in the affirmative. The uncanniness of *Chinatown* derives from our more or less dim sense of these doublings, these desires and fears, these questions lurking in the background of the story of the movie as it unfolds.

Aristotle, Tragedy, and the Sublime

The first, and best, analysis of *Oedipus Rex* is by Aristotle in the *Poetics*. Aristotle's *Poetics*, it can be argued, has as its central theme the problem of the sublime. The *sublime* is an aesthetic category that refers to an experience that begins with the experience of fear or terror but ends with the experience of joy or awe. The central theme of the *Poetics* is explaining the power of, and our love for, dramatic tragedies. A paradox of dramatic tragedy is that what we enjoy watching as theater, as a fiction, we would be horrified to see in real life, things like murder, death, and incest. At the theater, we do feel horror while watching these things, but we also love watching them and feel a kind of joy and awe afterward. This is precisely the trajectory of the experience of the sublime.²⁴ Aristotle intends to explain why we have this experience when we watch a dramatic tragedy.

Aristotle's explanation of this phenomenon depends on his analysis of catharsis. A *catharsis* is a purging, a release. In a somewhat ambiguous description of how tragedy works, Aristotle says: "By means of pity and terror we experience a catharsis of such emotions."²⁵ The idea is that, through experiencing a surfeit of fear and pity in the controlled context

of a dramatic narrative, we are freed of a certain amount of fear and pity that we ordinarily carry around with us, and we experience this release with something like joy. How does an increase in fear and pity free us of fear and pity? The answer must be that there are different kinds of fear and pity. I take our ordinary fear and pity to be of one order, generated by the self-preoccupied anxieties that develop in our regular lives. And I take the fear and pity that we experience in a dramatic tragedy to be of a different order, getting us to see, by comparison, the triviality of our daily concerns. A peek into the abyss makes worrying about having too small of an office or about how to afford a big-screen television seem pretty trivial. To be able to see the triviality of some of our daily anxieties because we are able to see them in the context of a larger picture, a larger narrative, is, I take it, a sign of wisdom.

The Way to Wisdom

“Chinatown” is the abyss. It is the postmodern abyss of the endless repetition of narratives. We will die before we get to the bottom of the narratives because there is no bottom. That is the tragic wisdom. It is a wisdom to make us not just more sympathetic toward the futile strivings after a coherent narrative of our fellow human beings, but more understanding toward our own futile strivings for this. The tragic wisdom is the awareness of this futility. The only truth is this truth, that every truth is pregnant with the alien body of its own counternarrative. The scotoma is structural and inherent in the fact of sight itself. This is a sad truth, but even sadness can be a basis for human companionship, for shared understanding, for the possibility of love.

Chinatown has a structure that is very similar to that of an ancient Greek tragedy. It begins with a man who is essentially good, but flawed, who is in a position of some power and authority, but who is forced to learn the limits of his authority and power in this world, and it ends with terrible revelations and death. Several critics complained on the film’s release about its ending, its darkness.²⁶ As a matter of fact, it was originally meant to have a happier ending, with Evelyn killing Noah Cross and Jake, Evelyn, and Katherine escaping to Mexico. Polanski changed the ending to the much darker one that the movie actually has. He said that the movie would have been “meaningless” with the happier ending.²⁷ Why meaningless? Aristotle’s suggestion is that meaning emerges only when we are confronted with radical ambiguities in our accepted narratives. Meaning

begins to emerge when we are able to begin to see counternarratives, when we begin to be aware that there are larger narratives, narratives that put our own overinvested narrative into perspective. Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx are saying something similar. To begin to see a counternarrative, to begin to see that there is more going on, larger issues at stake, is always to enter a realm of darkness, where all one's previous guideposts will now serve only to heighten the ambiguity. Seeing more, however, is the way of wisdom, even if there is a dark side to this wisdom. It is a difficult way, not, perhaps, the way for everyone, but it is important for us all that there are some willing to take it. We can get a glimpse of that way through great art and great movies. We can get a sense of that dark wisdom, and experience some of the power of that wisdom, in the dark sublimity of *Chinatown*.

Notes

I would like to thank Mark Conard for many helpful suggestions on the original and subsequent drafts of this essay.

1. The first articles in French identifying noir as something like a genre were Nino Frank's "Un nouveau genre 'policier': L'aventure criminelle" (*L'écran français* 61 [1946]: 8–9, 14) and Jean-Pierre Chartier's "Les Américains aussi font des films 'noirs'" (*Revue du cinéma* 2 [1946]: 67). See the discussion in James Naremore, *More Than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 15.

2. This point is made in several of the seminal essays on film noir, starting with Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton's "Towards a Definition of *Film Noir*" (1955), and also including Raymond Durnat's "Paint It Black: The Family Tree of the *Film Noir*" (1970) and Paul Schrader's "Notes on *Film Noir*," all of which are included in Alain Silver and James Ursini, eds., *Film Noir Reader* (New York: Limelight, 1996).

3. That *Chinatown* is the first authentic neo-noir is a claim made in Nicholas Christopher, *Somewhere in the Night: Film Noir and the American City* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997), 241. Naremore (*More Than Night*, 206–7) argues a similar case in his contrast of *Chinatown* with *The Long Goodbye* (Robert Altman, 1973)—that, although *The Long Goodbye* was made a year earlier, it was more a "hallucinatory" parody of noir than a real return to something profoundly noir, as *Chinatown* was.

4. Fredric Jameson also makes the connection between *Chinatown* and nostalgia, but to a somewhat different end. See his "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983–1998* (New York: Verso, 1998), 8–9. Jameson also talks about nostalgia and film in "Film: Nostalgia for the Present," in *Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 279–96.

5. My thanks to Tony McRae for some technical assistance in tracking down the use of blinds in some of the classic films noirs. For more on noir, see <http://www.film-trip.com>.

6. Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970), 32–33.

7. *Ibid.*, 32.

8. T. S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton,” from *Four Quartets*, in *Collected Poems, 1909–1962* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970), 176.

9. Some of the neo-noir twists in *Chinatown* include explicit references to the first classic noir, *The Maltese Falcon*. The whole opening sequence can be read—and has been by several commentators on the film—as a reference to the opening of *The Maltese Falcon*: a woman comes to a detective’s office with a bogus story to get him involved in a very complicated plot for her own personal reasons, etc. There is also an explicit reference to the scene of scraping Miles Archer’s name off the door with a similar scene in *Chinatown* in which Hollis Mulwray’s name is being scraped off a door. A nice Ozymandias-ish comment on the briefness of our tenure on earth. There is also, most strikingly, the appearance of the director of *The Maltese Falcon*, John Huston, in *Chinatown* as the antibiblical Noah Cross. For more on the references to *The Maltese Falcon* in *Chinatown*, see Christopher, *Somewhere in the Night*, 242, and Naremore, *More Than Night*, 207–8.

10. For more on labyrinths in noir, see Jerold J. Abrams, “From Sherlock Holmes to the Hard-Boiled Detective in Film Noir,” in *The Philosophy of Film Noir*, ed. Mark T. Conard (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 69–88.

11. Daniel C. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1991), 324–25.

12. This has frequently been remarked on. Some very good essays on the parallels between the two are John Bolton, “Language, Oedipus, and *Chinatown*,” *MLN* 106, no. 5 (1991): 933–50, and Vernon Shetley, “Incest and Capital in *Chinatown*,” *MLN* 114, no. 5 (1999): 1092–1109. This connection is also made in Michael Eaton, *Chinatown* (London: British Film Institute, 1997), 67.

13. This idea is explicitly remarked on by Bolton (“Language, Oedipus, and *Chinatown*,” 940).

14. A point also made by Eaton (*Chinatown*, 67).

15. This is a point made by Shetley (“Incest and Capital in *Chinatown*,” 1094).

16. Mary-Kay Gamel refers to these as “images of flawed sight” (“An American Tragedy: *Chinatown*,” in *Classical Myth and Culture in the Cinema*, ed. Martin Winkler [New York: Oxford University Press, 2001], 155).

17. This line is quoted in one of the earliest and most influential works on film noir, Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton’s *Panorama du film noir américain (1941–1956)* (Paris: Minuit, 1955). It is taken from the presurrealist writer Isidore Ducasse, Count Lautréamont. I found it in excerpted form in Borde and Chaumeton, “Towards a Definition of *Film Noir*,” 19.

18. Borde and Chaumeton, "Towards a Definition of *Film Noir*," 25.

19. The classic text on postmodernism—identifying it, naming it, and describing it—is Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). See also Mark T. Conard, "Reservoir Dogs: Redemption in a Postmodern World" (in this volume).

20. Richard Rorty, ed., *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

21. Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 88.

22. Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (New York: Penguin, 2003), 134.

23. *Ibid.*, 142.

24. I have in mind here Kant's concept of the sublime. For a more complete explanation, see Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: Prometheus, 2000), secs. 23–29.

25. Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Richard Janko (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 7 (49b25).

26. See, e.g., James Kavanagh, "Chinatown: Other Places, Other Times," *Jump Cut* 3 (1974): 1, 8; Andrew Sarris, "Chinatown and Polanski-Towne: Tilting toward Tragedy," *Village Voice*, November 7, 1974, 85; and Murray Sperber, "'Do as Little as Possible': Polanski's Message and Manipulation," *Jump Cut* 3 (1974): 9–10.

27. See Roman Polanski's comments included on the DVD of *Chinatown* (released by Paramount Pictures in 1999).

The Human Comedy Perpetuates Itself

Nihilism and Comedy in Coen Neo-Noir

Thomas S. Hibbs

BUNNY LEBOWSKI: Ulli doesn't care about anything. He's a nihilist.

THE DUDE: Ah. Must be exhausting.

—*The Big Lebowski* (Joel Coen, 1998)

From their inaugural film, the 1984 *Blood Simple*, through the film blanc of the 1996 *Fargo*, to the 2001 *The Man Who Wasn't There*, the Coen brothers have exhibited a preoccupation with the themes, characters, and stylistic techniques of film noir. By the time they made *Blood Simple* in 1984, neo-noir was already established as a recognized category of film.¹ Prior to Quentin Tarantino's darkly comedic unraveling of noir motifs in *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994), the Coens were already making consciously comic use of noir plots and stylistic techniques. Without Tarantino's penchant for hyperactive and culturally claustrophobic allusions to pop culture, the Coens focus, instead, on traditional noir character types and intricate plots whose complexity is bizarre.

Because it is so often characterized by self-conscious deployment of the techniques of classic noir, neo-noir evinces a strong inclination toward pastiche and the satiric. This makes comic themes more at home in the world of neo-noir than they were in the founding era of noir. Classic noir avoids overt moral lessons and leaves little room for well-adjusted, happy, virtuous types of Americans. The world of classic noir proffers a "disturbing vision . . . that qualifies all hope and suggests a potentially fatal vulnerability," against which no one is adequately protected.² Classic noir has

deeply democratic instincts: no one wins; the unforgiving laws of the human condition apply universally to every individual. The grim pessimism of classic noir is hardly congenial to the sorts of comic films that flourished in America during the same time period.

This does not mean, however, that comedy is utterly alien to classic noir. The depiction of characters as trapped in a labyrinth at the mercy of a hostile fate can transform the tone of the action from the gravely tragic to the absurdly comic. What initially seems serious and ominous can, over time, come to seem humorous. Angst and fear can be sustained for only so long; endless and pointless terror becomes predictable and laughable. But the shift to a comic perspective involves more than the mere passage of time; comedy is more than tragedy plus time. What matters is the passage of time without any prospect of hope or intelligibility. Life in an absurd universe is rife with comic possibilities. Struggle and striving begin to appear superfluous and foolish. A classic noir film such as *Detour* (Edgar G. Ulmer, 1945) toys with its main character to such an extent that his continued gravity can come to seem a self-inflicted farce. Similarly, the degradation of affection—the perverse erotic attractions in which noir often wallows—lends itself to wry, detached irony, the dominant tone in *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950).

The baroque sensibility of noir has always contained the seeds of stylistic excess, even of the celebration of style for its own sake. In neo-noir, the accentuation of hopelessness and the overtly self-conscious deployment of artistic technique make the turn to dark comedy nearly inevitable. By contrast with classic noir films, whose style is reserved and less self-conscious, neo-noirs almost inevitably draw attention to their style, going so far in some cases as to make style itself the subject of the film. In the very act of recognizing the artifice, we are in on the joke, on the sleight of hand performed by the filmmaker. The result is amusement, even laughter.

As Foster Hirsch points out, one of the distinguishing features of neo-noir is a “cavalier amorality” that can steep viewers in a “depraved point of view.”³ Jean-Pierre Chartier’s early and negative reaction to noir seems to apply more aptly to certain neo-noir films. Chartier lamented noir’s “pessimism and disgust toward humanity”; void of even the most “fleeting image of love” or of characters who might “rouse our pity or sympathy,” noir, he felt, presents “monsters, criminals whose evils nothing can excuse, whose actions imply that the only source for the fatality of evil is in themselves.”⁴

Nietzsche and Nihilism

There are, then, important links between neo-noir and nihilism. According to its most trenchant analysts, nihilism involves the dissolution of standards of judgment; for the nihilist, there is no longer any basis for distinguishing truth from falsity, good from evil, noble from base action, or higher from lower ways of life. Nietzsche thought that nihilism would be the defining characteristic of the twentieth century, an epoch in which “the highest values” would “devalue themselves” and the “question ‘why?’” would find “no answer.”⁵ Nietzsche is most famous for proclaiming the death of God. He certainly does not mean that a previously existing supreme being has suddenly expired; instead, he holds that the notion of God, created by humans to serve a variety of needs, is becoming increasingly less credible. But Nietzsche does not limit the effects of nihilism to religion; nihilism undermines all transcendent claims and standards, including those underlying modern science and democratic politics. The great questions and animating visions—those regarding truth, justice, love, and beauty—that previously gave shape and purpose to human life no longer resonate in the human soul. All moral codes are seen to be merely conventional and, hence, optional.

For most human beings, decline, diminution, and despair accompany nihilism. The bulk of humanity falls into the category of the *last man*: “Alas, the time of the most despicable man is coming, he that is no longer able to despise himself. Behold, I show you the last man. What is love? What is a star? Thus asks the last man and blinks. The earth has become small and on it hops the last man who makes everything small.” The contented, petty last men create a society that is ruthlessly homogeneous (“everybody wants the same, everybody is the same”) and addicted to physical comfort (“one has one’s little pleasure for the day and one’s little pleasure for the night; one has a regard for health”).⁶ These are the passive nihilists, the pessimists, the representatives of “the decline and recession of the power of the spirit.”⁷

But nihilism is “ambiguous.” If, in one sense, nihilism is the “unwelcome guest,” it is also an opportunity, clearing a path for “increased power of the spirit.”⁸ Active nihilists see the decline of traditional moral and religious systems as an occasion for the thoroughgoing destruction of desiccated ways of life and the creation of a new order of values. Active nihilists, the philosopher-artists of the future, will engage in the “transvaluation of values.” They stand beyond good and evil and engage in aesthetic self-creation, a project that is an affront to society’s religious and

democratic conventions, rooted, as they are, in moral absolutes or democratic consensus.

At times, Nietzsche's remedy for the nihilistic epoch, his path beyond nihilism, promotes a particularly virulent form of aristocracy. As he puts it frankly in the chapter "What is Noble?" in *Beyond Good and Evil*:

Every enhancement of the type "man" has so far been the work of an aristocratic society—and so it will be again and again—a society that believes in the long ladder of an order of rank and differences in value between man and man, and that needs slavery in some sense or another. With that pathos of distance that grows out of the ingrained difference between strata . . . keeping down and keeping at a distance, that other, more mysterious pathos could not have grown up either—the craving for an ever new widening of distances within the soul itself, the development of ever higher, rare, more remote, further-stretching, more comprehensive states . . . the continual "self-overcoming of man."⁹

What Nietzsche calls the *pathos of distance* is at work in a variety of neo-noir dramas, from *Body Heat* (Lawrence Kasdan, 1981) and *Cape Fear* (Martin Scorsese, 1991) and *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992) to *The Usual Suspects* (Bryan Singer, 1995).¹⁰ In these neo-noir films, certain characters rise above the noir labyrinth, not by passing through it or learning to navigate its shifting waters, but by acts of diabolical will. Impervious to the laws of the human condition, these characters get away with lives of criminality. This shift constitutes a movement in the direction of nihilism and a recoiling from the fundamentally democratic world of classic noir. The human condition is no longer universal; the noir trap is no longer seen as an indelible feature. Instead, it constrains only those who lack the will-power, or will to power, necessary to rise above, and control, conventions. Neo-noir's greatest departure from classic noir consists in a turn to aristocratic nihilism. The most resourceful of these characters are in control of the noir plot, using their cunning and artistry to ensnare others. Were it not so cumbersome, we might call this the *nihilistic myth of the American super-antihero*.

Nihilistic comedy has no limits on the targets of its humor; it turns the most atrocious of human acts—rape and beating in *Cape Fear*, cannibalism in *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991), and maiming in *Reservoir Dogs*—into quasi-comic expressions of exuberant amoral energy.

It mocks our longing for justice, for the protection of the innocent and the punishment of the heinous criminal, and for truth and understanding. The comic unraveling of the horror genre from within begins with the celebration of the evil antihero as beyond good and evil, as more interesting, attractive, and complex than the purportedly good characters in a story. Once this nihilistic move has been made, it is quite natural to repudiate and mock properly human longing for justice, truth, and love. Nihilism, as Nietzsche saw, entails the diminution of human aspiration to the vanishing point; it involves the death of man.

These are the consequences of the nihilistic turn in neo-noir, which repudiates justice, love, and truth in favor of aesthetic self-creation. Criticisms of conventional conceptions of justice, truth, and other ideals are not necessarily nihilistic. Indeed, the very notion of a critique presupposes that one has, implicitly at least, an awareness that things are not as they should be, that it would be better for things to be otherwise. As Shakespeare writes in *King Lear*: "This is not the worst, so long as we can say 'this is the worst'" (4.1). But thoroughgoing nihilism eviscerates any such standards or, what is more to the point, even the intelligibility of the quest for such standards. Gravity cannot be sustained. Audiences are entertained by the demonic superheroes who put on a good show and are much more clever and wittier than other, conventional characters. A character such as Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins) in *The Silence of the Lambs* is at first terrifying, then entertaining, and finally humorous as, in the film's final frames, he responds to a question as to his plans by saying, wryly, that he'll be having an old friend for dinner.

Noir, Nihilism, and Comedy in *The Big Lebowski*

The comic denouement of *The Silence of the Lambs* signals the unraveling of the hero genre from within, a point driven home with great gusto in such spoofs of the genre as *Scream* (Wes Craven, 1996) and *Scary Movie* (Keenan Ivory Wayans, 2000) and their sequels. If the gravity of the quest to understand and fend off evil produces no great insight about good or evil, just the surface aesthetics of the evildoer, then the audience, having become jaded, anticipates the aesthetics of evil and sees the whole drama as a farce. There is, thus, an opening for a democratic rejoinder to the sort of angst-ridden nihilism that celebrates the tragic heroism of the loner who faces the meaninglessness of life with gravity. The democratic and comic response is: Why bother? What's all the fuss about? If there is no meaning,

then why get worked up about anything? And what, in a pointless universe, could possibly provide a basis for distinguishing, as Nietzsche wants to, between noble and base ways of facing the abyss? This sort of comedy mocks radicals of all sorts, whether they be nihilists or zealous reformers. Such is the inspiration for the Coen brothers' comic leveling of nihilism in the *The Big Lebowski* (Joel Coen, 1998).

The Big Lebowski begins and ends with the noir commonplace, voice-over narration. As a tumbleweed blows down the streets of Los Angeles and over a beach, the narrator introduces "the Dude," a name no one else would "self-apply." "Our story," he relates, is set in the early 1990s, at the time of our national "conflict with Saddam and the Iraqis." Sometimes, the narrator continues, "a man is, I won't say a hero, but sometimes a man is just right for his time and place." That man is the Dude, the "laziest man in LA County," an achievement that puts him high in the "running for laziest worldwide." The camera turns to the Dude, wearing shorts and a bathrobe and shopping for groceries. A television in the store plays President George H. W. Bush's speech about the Iraqi threat: "This aggression will not stand."

Later that day, the Dude is attacked at home by intruders who call him Lebowski, stuff his head in the toilet, and demand that he repay the money his wife owes Jackie Treehorn. A perplexed Dude objects that no one calls him Lebowski and that he's not married—gesturing to the raised toilet seat as confirming evidence. The intruders suddenly come to their senses and one of them asks: "Isn't this guy supposed to be a millionaire?" In a parting gesture, they urinate on the rug—an act of defilement that the Dude regrets because "that rug really tied the room together."

These opening scenes introduce readily identifiable neo-noir themes. There is the theme of the loner, certainly not the hero of the old westerns, but rather the uprooted drifter, symbolized in the tumbleweed blown by chance forces beyond its control or comprehension. Then there is the motif of a shallow and artificially constructed political culture, suggested in the television coverage of the Gulf War. As we shall see, the film replays 1960s themes of the establishment versus the antiestablishment, especially in the contrast between the two Lebowskis. Finally, there is the noir staple of the "wrong man," the chance misidentification of an ordinary man as a culprit or criminal of some sort, a misidentification that sparks a series of trials on the part of the wrongly accused. Comic incongruity arises from the theme of the wrong man and from the repeated presence of the Dude in settings where he clearly does not belong, what the Coens call the *anachronism of incompatibility*.

The Dude's social life revolves around bowling with his friends Walter

(John Goodman), a Vietnam vet and recent convert to Judaism, and Donny (Steve Buscemi), a pleasant, shy follower. Learning about the intruders, Walter insists that the issue is not the rug but the other Jeff Lebowski, whom the men were after. The Dude decides to visit the Big Lebowski (David Huddleston), a man confined to a wheelchair as a result of injuries suffered in the Korean War. When the Dude asks for remuneration for his destroyed rug and proclaims, "This aggression will not stand," Lebowski taunts him, saying that, when he lost his legs in Korea, he did not ask for a handout. He "went out and achieved": "Your revolution is over. The bums lost." Soon after this encounter, a humbled and weepy Lebowski invites the Dude back to the house and shows him a ransom note, indicating that his wife, Bunny, has been kidnapped. The Dude takes a drag off his joint and says: "Bummer, man." Lebowski offers the Dude \$20,000 and his own beeper to act as a courier. An incredulous Dude asks Lebowski's assistant: "He thinks the carpet pissers did this?"

Throughout much of the film, someone in a blue car follows the Dude. Late in the film, he runs up to the car and yanks out the driver, who explains that he is a "private dick," working on the same case as the one the Dude's working on. He then admits fawningly: "I admire your work. The way you play one side against the other." Here, the Dude once again plays the wrong man role; this time he is misidentified as a professional, a private detective with the knowledge and cleverness to manipulate human character types for his own ends.

This is, of course, a complete illusion; to underscore the Dude's impotence, the Coens immediately shift to a scene in which a group of Germans break into his apartment and find him in his bath. As he complains that this is a "private residence," they drop a marmot into the tub just between his legs and announce: "We want the money. We believe in nothing. If we don't get the money, we will come back tomorrow and cut off your johnson." Walter shares the Dude's dislocation, but he, unlike the Dude, is troubled by his rootlessness. The Dude is often irked at Walter's strange Jewish devotion. When the Dude accuses him of living in the past, Walter responds: "Three thousand years of beautiful tradition from Moses to Sandy Koufax, you're goddamn right I'm living in the fucking past!" Walter wants to have an identity, to define himself in relation to a way of life, a tradition, larger than himself. How badly he wants this is clear from his willingness to rate National Socialism above nihilism on the "ethos" scale. Yet his own embrace of Judaism, a result of his marriage to a Jewish woman from whom he is now divorced, serves to underscore the absurdity of attempting to

introduce an ethos into a fragmented contemporary culture. His Judaism is an incoherent mixture of various elements, dislocated from contexts in which they originally may have made a kind of sense. Walter ranks bowling on about the same level as his religious devotion. Concerned about the Dude's preoccupation with the case of the missing wife, Walter exclaims: "We can't drag this negative energy into the tournament."

Without any direct contribution from the Dude, the case wraps up nicely. It turns out that Bunny was just on an unannounced vacation. Outside the bowling alley, the Germans, who think that Bunny is still missing, torch the Dude's car and demand money, claiming that, if they are not paid, they will kill Bunny. A timid Donny asks: "Are these the Nazis?" Walter replies: "No, these men are nihilists. There's nothing to be afraid of. . . . These men are cowards." When the Dude tells them that Bunny is alive and there will be no financial transaction, one of the Germans complains: "It's not fair." Walter taunts them: "Fair? Who's the fucking nihilist here? What are you, a bunch of fucking crybabies?" In the ensuing conflict, Donny has a heart attack and dies.

Walter here puts his finger on the problem of self-described nihilists and of the incompatibility between nihilism and human life, no matter how debased. Nihilism cannot, strictly speaking, be lived. An utterly amorphous and completely pointless life would deprive an individual not just of any inspiring sense of purpose but even of the basis for deliberating and pursuing anything whatsoever. Moreover, everyone complains about something, and this is rooted in some sense, however misguided and self-interested, of injustice or wrongs suffered. Full-blown nihilism cannot be lived; it can only be approached asymptotically.

Although the Dude is not foolish enough to proclaim himself a nihilist, his life borders on nihilism. He is skeptical of large-scale beliefs such as those to which Walter assents. He does not need an ethos, except insofar as that is mere style, which is about what the Jewish religion is for Walter. But the Dude has beliefs. He believes, for example, in private property, at least for himself. He thinks of himself as a respectable citizen; he is a low-class, minimally ambitious version of what the social critic David Brooks has called a *Bobo*, a bourgeois bohemian, someone who combines elements of 1960s counterculture with degrees of bourgeois conformity and standards of success.¹¹ Brooks's new social standard-bearers are much more bourgeois than bohemian; inversely, the Dude is more bohemian than bourgeois. He is little concerned with societal standards of success and insouciantly repudiates the work ethic. But, like Walter, he is also passionate about bowling

and is deeply concerned with how his team will perform in the upcoming competition.

The Dude accepts the basic absurdity of the cosmos, of life in the most advanced civilization ever to grace the face of the earth. His way of life affirms the equal significance or insignificance of all human endeavors, but none of this stops him from judging certain things to be unseemly. The Dude has not so much an ethos as a style, a way of taking it easy, living lightly. Despite his lack of conscious planning and his absence of ambition, he manages to contribute to ongoing natural processes. At one point, he has sex with Maude, the Big Lebowski's libidinous and artistically rebellious daughter. Afterward, she asks a number of questions about his life and his habits of recreation. The zenith of his life was organizing campus protests in the 1960s; his recreation consists in car cruising and the occasional acid flashback. He gets out of bed and notices that Maude remains on her back cradling her legs, a strategy designed to increase the chances of conception. "What did you think this was all about?" she asks. When he expresses worries about the responsibilities of fatherhood, she explains that a deadbeat dad is exactly what she wants.

The Dude is a kind of comic hero, at least for our narrator (Sam Elliott), who shows up onscreen in the final scene at the bowling alley, where he and the Dude exchange pleasantries. The cowboy matter-of-factly reiterates the Dude's own self-referential proclamation, "The Dude abides," and offers some reflective, concluding observations:

The Dude abides. I don't know about you, but I take comfort in that. It's good knowin' he's out there, the Dude, takin' her easy for all us sinners. Shoosh. I sure hope he makes the finals. Welp, that about does her, wraps her all up. Things seem to've worked out pretty good for the Dude 'n' Walter, and it was a purt good story, dontcha think? Made me laugh to beat the band. Parts, anyway. Course—I didn't like seein' Donny go. But then, happen to know that there's a little Lebowski on the way. I guess that's the way the whole durned human comedy keeps perpetuatin' itself, down through the generations, westward the wagons, across the sands a time until—aw, look at me, I'm ramblin' again. Wal, uh hope you folks enjoyed yourselves.

The Dude's abiding signals an escape, or at least a reprieve, from the world of noir; in spite of the threats to his life, the Dude emerges from the noir

plot, from its labyrinth, unscathed. The tone of the ending, the suggestion that the human comedy perpetuates itself through the ongoing birth of new humans, strikes a comic note different from that of mere satire or denunciatory cynicism. Here, the impulses and resources of nature toward reproduction and survival are seen as more powerful than the destructive forces of noir. As Pascal puts it (a sentiment later stolen by Hume): "Nature backs up helpless reason and stops it going so wildly astray."¹²

Basic Familial Instincts in Coen Comedy

As one critic has noted, *The Big Lebowski* is about "friendship and surrogate families."¹³ This strikes a note of comic affirmation absent in even the most complex noir films, wherein the family is nearly always a source of the noir trap, and marriages and the begetting of children provide no way out. If surrogate families are at the heart of *The Big Lebowski*, real families figure prominently in other Coen films, especially in the brothers' most critically acclaimed neo-noir, *Fargo*. With a plot akin to that of *A Simple Plan* (Sam Raimi, 1998), *Fargo* features criminals undone by their own futile, criminal plans. The characters are *blood simple*, a phrase that the Coens borrowed from Dashiell Hammett, who borrowed it from police talk to describe the way criminals lose control of full rationality at the moment of committing the crime and, thus, inevitably leave incriminating clues behind. Apparently cold and calculating, they nonetheless act without adequate foresight; the consequences of their acts quickly swirl out of control. Called a *film blanc* because of the near-whiteout conditions that prevail in the film's setting in the flatlands of North Dakota, *Fargo* features criminals who suffer "snow blindness," the self-deceiving illusion of infallibility.¹⁴ As in *Blood Simple*, so too here criminals are subject to a comedy of errors. Yet *Fargo* is a very different film from *Blood Simple*; it inscribes the comedy of criminal error within a more traditional structure of the detective who affirms the goodness of conventional mores, a married and pregnant female detective named Marge Gunderson (Frances McDormand in an Oscar-winning performance).

In the final scenes of *Fargo*, Marge's role as commentator eclipses in significance her role as investigator. Indeed, the criminals seem destined to destroy themselves. Marge's comments about her expected baby affirm a certain way of life as making sense, as bearing fruit, and as something worth preserving and handing on to the next generation. Her domestic life is void of the sort of calculating, radically individualist spirit that infects

the families of the criminals in the film and the typical families that inhabit other noir films.

Despite its gruesome violence and somber tone, *Fargo*'s conclusion calls to mind certain features of classical comedy, which often ends with a wedding, an affirmation of order, especially of the marital bond as the cornerstone of hope in society. Affirming the reasonableness of conventions, classical comedy mocks radicals—be they criminals or well-intentioned reformers. Marge does not seek deeper meaning beneath the surface; committed to a conventional understanding of justice, she is not on a great quest to discern the nature and causes of evil. The causes, if there are any discernible (greed for a “little bit of money”), are readily available on the surface of criminal action; yet, given the risks, the cost, and the affront to natural goodness (“It’s a beautiful day”), evil remains inexplicable: “I just don’t understand it.” Marge witnesses at close range the noir trap of criminality, but it does not destroy her—or even tempt her.

In a review of *Fargo* entitled “The Banality of Virtue,” Laura Miller observes the “dullness of the Midwestern characters” and the essential emptiness of their values. She wonders: “In the universe of *Fargo*, where virtue is a kind of ignorance and wickedness a nullity, where do real people fit in?”¹⁵ Indeed, the Coens’ alternatives to nihilists, the characters who avoid entrapment by the noir vices of lust and greed, seem not so much virtuous as incapable of the complexities of vice. They seem to suffer from a sort of Forrest Gump syndrome, a sort of banality of goodness, a strange and comic counterpoint to Hannah Arendt’s famous thesis concerning the banality of evil.¹⁶ If this line of interpretation were correct, then we might see the substance, or lack thereof, in the Coens’ films as a “knowing, highly allusive” form of filmmaking that is no more than “pastiche.”¹⁷

Yet the gentle levity with which the Coens treat these characters and the way the characters embody natural tendencies, which they cannot themselves articulate, suggest the presence of something more than mere banality. Foster Hirsch, for example, describes McDormand’s character as “a cockeyed optimist, wide-eyed but hardly stupid.”¹⁸ Indeed, the interweaving of comedy and fertility harks back to pagan and Shakespearean comedy, with the celebration of rites of fertility and marriage, of an order of nature that overcomes human vice and frailty and reconciles opposing forces and conflicting wills. No such complete reconciliation is possible in neo-noir, not even in the Coens’ comic neo-noir. Yet the Coens’ penchant for presenting fertility and, in some films, familial fidelity as ways of avoiding entanglement in the noir traps of lust and greed points in the direction of such comic reconciliation.

The themes of family and procreation are the preeminent issues in the Coens' early pure comedy, *Raising Arizona* (1987), the story of a recidivist petty thief, Hi (Nicholas Cage), and a female prison guard, Ed (Holly Hunter). Over a number of years and many return trips to prison, Hi falls in love with Ed, and she accepts his proposal of marriage. The film includes a number of noir themes—crime, repetition, entrapment, and the spoiling of the future by deeds committed in the past. Yet here those noir themes are, ultimately, inscribed within an overarching comic structure that contains both the theme of fertility and that of hopeful reconciliation. Throughout much of the film, Hi appears incapable of learning or altering his behavior. He admits in a voice-over that he is not sure where folks stand on the incarceration issue, whether it is about rehabilitation or just revenge. As we watch him being arrested yet again, he comments that he has begun to believe that revenge is the only possibility that makes any sense.

His marriage to Ed seems to have a salutary effect, at least until Ed is diagnosed as barren. Hi comments that her “insides were a rocky place where my seed could find no purchase.” Seeing the announcement of the birth of the Arizona quint, born to the wealthy Nathan Arizona and his wife, Ed suggests that they kidnap one of the boys since the Arizona family has more than it can handle. Hi scales a ladder, enters the boys' bedroom, and takes Nathan Jr. In a surprise twist, Hi is the one who cannot live with the thought of their deed. His conscience exacts revenge in a dream where he is pursued by the “lone biker of the apocalypse,” a vengeful giant of a man sporting a tattoo: “Mama Didn't Love Me.” The tattoo is a whimsical statement of the core theme of the film, that familial love is the essence of human life. The crimes that Hi and Ed commit are but a perverse pursuit of properly human goods, one in which there is a twisted acknowledgment of the primacy of familial bonds.

The few noir elements in the film are subordinate to a larger narrative, a story of fidelity and the hope for fertility. Hi and Ed eventually come to their senses and return the baby. Relieved of their burden of conscience, Hi has another dream, which may, he concedes, have been just wishful thinking, a dream of the future in which Nathan Jr. is happy and successful and Hi and Ed gather around a dinner table with their numerous offspring. What the Coen brothers hint at in a number of their noir films they explicitly embrace in *Raising Arizona*: the resilience of human nature's basic instincts, not the instincts for lust and domination of others, but those for love, affection, and procreation, instincts that steer human beings toward a happy ending, in spite of the damage done and the detours caused by their calculative misjudgments.

Notes

1. For a nice discussion of neo-noir and a division of it into modernist and postmodernist stages, see Andrew Spicer, *Film Noir* (Harlow: Longman, 2002), 130–74. Also indispensable is Foster Hirsch, *Detours and Lost Highways: A Map of Neo-Noir* (New York: Limelight, 1999).
2. J. P. Telotte, *Voices in the Dark: The Narrative Patterns of Film Noir* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 218.
3. Hirsch, *Detours and Lost Highways*, 10.
4. Jean-Pierre Chartier, “Les Américains aussi font des films ‘noirs,’” *Revue du cinéma* 2 (1946): 67.
5. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1968), bk. 1, “European Nihilism,” no. 2, p. 9.
6. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1968), 129.
7. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, no. 22, p. 17.
8. Ibid.
9. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1966), no. 257, p. 201.
10. For further discussion of the relation between Nietzsche, nihilism, and noir, see Mark T. Conard, “Nietzsche and the Meaning and Definition of Noir,” in *The Philosophy of Film Noir*, ed. Mark T. Conard (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 7–22.
11. See David Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise: The Upper Class and How They Got There* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).
12. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin, 1966), no. 131, p. 64.
13. James Mottram, *The Coen Brothers: The Life of the Mind* (Dulles, VA: Brassey’s, 2000).
14. Ibid., 124.
15. Laura Miller, “The Banality of Virtue,” *Salon.com*, <http://archive.salon.com/09/reviews/fargo1.html>.
16. I have discussed *Gump*, nihilism, and comedy in great detail in *Shows about Nothing: Nihilism in Popular Culture from The Exorcist to Seinfeld* (Dallas: Spence, 1999). On the banality of evil, see Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963; rev. and enlarged ed., 1965; reprint, Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1994).
17. See Spicer, *Film Noir*, 149, and James Naremore, *More Than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 214–15.
18. Hirsch, *Detours and Lost Highways*, 245.

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The New Sincerity of Neo-Noir

The Example of *The Man Who Wasn't There*

R. Barton Palmer

Old Noir and New Noir

If one truth has emerged from the intense scholarly debate during the last two decades over the nature of Old Hollywood, it is that the writing of American film history must avoid the essentialist trap of considering the so-called classic text of that era as an undifferentiated flow of product whose watchwords were sameness and conformity. A correlative of this truth is that, even with its emphasis on package production (with each film in some sense a unique entity unto itself), New Hollywood filmmaking still offers regular forms of textuality that differ from those of the studio era only in subtle rather than fundamental ways. Thus, the two distinct periods of Hollywood history are characterized by complex forms of continuity and discontinuity, as exemplified by the film noir phenomenon, whose two periods (classic and neo-noir) mirror larger changes in the industry.

An exemplary neo-noir film is Joel and Ethan Coen's *The Man Who Wasn't There* (2001), which, in ways that have come to be accepted as typically postmodern, recycles key narrative and thematic elements of classic film noir (and the *série noire* fiction that, in complex senses, provided the cinematic series with material). But the film also breaks decisively from the models of the Hollywood past by probing deeply the social history of the early postwar years, as it self-reflexively explores the concept of that era that has developed during the last half century in a film culture that has become fascinated by noir. An obsession with returning to, yet also remaking, the studio past deeply marks neo-noir films such as *The Man Who Wasn't There*. Here is a film that reflects not only larger trends within contemporary culture (particularly postmodernism) but also the develop-

ment of Hollywood as the purveyor of those evolving forms of textuality. It is to that development that I turn first.

Old Hollywood and New Hollywood

The functionalist analysis offered in the much-cited and controversial study *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* offers powerful evidence and compelling argument supporting the emergence of a group style in the American film industry during the first half of the twentieth century. This was, in sum, an aesthetic that developed inevitably from standardized modes of production at all levels within Hollywood and served well the assembly-line aspects of studio work.¹ Yet such centripetal tendencies toward identity and regularity (natural enough forces in a business based on the efficient, rapid manufacture of a product that needed to fit the stabilized needs of the exhibition sector) were from the outset necessarily balanced by an equally strong commitment to difference and diversification. Studio-era productions, to put it simply, needed at a fairly general level to be as interchangeable as practically possible (in order to take advantage of economies of scale and to keep the exhibition sector running smoothly), but, in terms of specific appeals to the audience, Hollywood's releases had to be seen as interestingly and significantly distinct from one another. This fact offers one explanation for the emergence of film noir, a series that exhibits a strong sense of difference from other studio varieties produced under identical conditions for the same market.

In Old Hollywood, consumption was modulated by a dialectic of identity and nonidentity. Audiences went to theaters week in and week out to have essentially the same experience (popularly conceived as *going to the movies*), but each time with a never-before-seen film. As Murray Smith points out, moreover, filmgoers needed to be encouraged in their attendance habit not so much by singular as by multiple (and constantly shifting) appeals to their interests of the moment: "The variety of genres and the range of stars testified to and catered for a range of different audience tastes; and . . . the individual film is distinctive to a degree that most mass-produced commodities are not."²

Forces of convergence were matched by equally powerful forces of divergence during the studio era. Yet, as Michael Storper has convincingly shown, the pre-1948 Hollywood industry (i.e., commercial filmmaking before the end of vertical integration) was essentially Fordist, that is, catering in terms of product, pricing, and service to a mass public largely conceived

as undifferentiated.³ Classic Hollywood was certainly not post-Fordist in the sense of providing specialized products for a cluster of divergent markets.⁴ Whether the New Hollywood of the last three decades is thoroughly post-Fordist is currently much debated. Blockbusters, a central element of New Hollywood textuality, are arguably Fordist in their calculated appeal to huge, mass audiences. Yet it is undeniable that the American industry, at least in part, now seeks to develop and control profitable niches in the exhibition sector through the production of radically different kinds of films.⁵

This postclassic strategy is, perhaps, most visible in the New Hollywood treatment of what might be called the *film genre system*, an essential element of classic Hollywood filmmaking that provided producers and filmgoers alike with one way to negotiate the dialectic of similarity and difference effectively. In the studio era, genre films were defined by a shared identity; that is, their claims to uniqueness, established by the fashion in which they inevitably modified the conventions of the genre, were simultaneously compromised as those same conventions were referenced and perpetuated by the very act of redefinition. During the studio period, individual genres (musicals, detective stories, women's pictures, and so forth) might be more attractive to some (theoretically) identifiable element of the mass audience, but—and this was crucial—every genre was thought to have some appeal to all filmgoers. This was, of course, true also for the film type (or genre, or series, or discursive formation) that we retrospectively identify as film noir, whose emergence and (always limited and minoritarian) success with audiences of the time had its sources in the “irregular” or “creative” permeability of Hollywood to an unlimited number of literary, cinematic, and cultural influences. The stylistic, thematic, and narrative difference that so marks these films for scholars today should, thus, be understood as a predictably unpredictable divergence from the template that was the “classic text.” Never produced for or marketed to an identified niche, film noir was “for everyone,” even if these dark tales of urban malaise, which offered versions of the contemporary national experience that challenged the optimism that was then more generally a feature of Hollywood films, did not suit every taste every time.

In contrast, film noir's contemporary reflex, usually referred to as *neo-noir*, is not “for everyone,” and this change in the nature of the noir phenomenon has everything to do with the conditions now prevailing in the American industry. A singular quality of New Hollywood production is that there has been, as Smith puts it, “a return to genre filmmaking” after the brief period in the late 1960s and early 1970s when an American art

cinema held sway. This return to genre establishes a continuity with the studio past, but with the crucial difference that this production strategy, as Smith observes, is “now marked by greater self-consciousness.”⁶ In part, this self-consciousness manifests itself in a rhetoric of metagenericism; genre is referenced in these films so as to comment pleasurably on genre. Instead of simply informing and shaping the viewer’s experience, genre is foregrounded as theme and as textuality, in gestures of self-reflexivity not unknown to classic Hollywood films, though much more common and forcefully present now. More important, however, self-consciousness today manifests itself also in product differentiation; in other words, genre is inflected diversely in the films designed for separate niche markets.

Thus, New Hollywood metagenericism becomes a key element, on the one hand, in the deliberate playfulness and “knowing” escapism of such B-movie extravaganzas as the *Jurassic Park* or *Indiana Jones* franchises and, on the other, in the intellectually compelling contemplation of the workings of intertextuality, including generic conventions, that is such an attractive feature in current commercial/independent productions such as Todd Haynes’s *Far from Heaven* (2002), which resuscitates in an exaggerated yet “realistic” fashion the 1950s melodramas of Douglas Sirk in order to dissect and correct their gender, sexual, and racial politics. Today’s “event” franchises are also connected to readily identifiable genres (among other aspects of popular culture such as comic books and graphic novels), built on special effects, and designed to hasten the flow of adrenaline for huge audiences of largely youthful filmgoers. The event film finds its other in the commercial/independent (or “Indiewood”) production, put together on a modest budget and marketed to a relatively small coterie of cognoscenti and film buffs whose expected pleasures are more dependent on notions of artistry, style, wit, and intellectually engaging themes.

These tastes are especially catered to by many neo-noir productions, those that not only recycle studio-era conventions but take the idea of classic film noir (as inferred from valued texts and critical works) as their subject matter, thus solidifying the claims of those films to be of a genre (and, more broadly speaking, something like a worldview that we might call *noirness*). Richard Martin has aptly characterized this central aspect of the transition to neo-noir: “The industrial assimilation of the term film noir . . . has contributed to its establishment as a contemporary Hollywood genre irrespective of how one is inclined to define the generic status of the classic films of the forties and fifties.”⁷ I would add only that, like many of the texts it generates, this assimilation is thoroughly self-conscious, a studied and deliberate

return to a classic type that, through the attention paid to it by French new wave and Hollywood renaissance directors, has become much valued in the more sophisticated areas of contemporary film culture.

Noir is an element of contemporary filmmaking and consumption comparable in some ways to auteurism (now said by many to have entered a self-conscious, "neo" phase as well), for it connects complexly to particular forms of viewer taste that we can legitimately label *highbrow*. Noting the growing popularity of neo-noir in the early 1990s, James Naremore opines that "the dark past keeps returning."⁸ Or, to put it a bit differently, New Hollywood filmmakers keep returning to the dark past, if for different reasons than their Old Hollywood predecessors.

Metagenericism, the self-conscious and critical return to the cinematic past, is one of the most important of the features of contemporary noir, and it marks this stage of the phenomenon as radically different from its classic phase. These earlier films exist within the boundaries of an emerging, if unorganized, group practice; neo-noir films, more often than not, take that practice as their subject matter, as the "meaning" that they intend to express and deconstruct for a narrowly defined audience knowledgeable about, and fascinated by, Hollywood history, which such filmgoers are eager to see recognized and commented on. This is one of the differences between modernist and postmodernist versions of cultural production, or between Fordist and post-Fordist senses of product.⁹

As one might expect, given the general appeal to cinematic "knowingness" of the contemporary commercial/independent film, neo-noirs of the Indiewood variety self-consciously reflect a central thematic preoccupation of the genre: the domination of the present by the past (put another way, the failure of a future for the characters to emerge from the machinations of the plot). But, if noir heroes, like Jeff Bailey in *Out of the Past* (Jacques Tourneur, 1947), are recalled from their plans to make a new life and forced to relive who they once were, suffering disappointment and destruction as a result, neo-noir films draw representational and thematic strength from cinematic and literary history, which, in the spirit of a creative archaeology, they reconstruct, revise, and always, in one way or another, celebrate. Such metagenericism demands to be carefully anatomized; it reflects complex, even contradictory cultural currents.

The New Sincerity

The cultural critic Jim Collins has interestingly pointed out that contempo-

rary Hollywood production emphasizes two distinct kinds of genre films that hardly fit into the category *blank parody*, Fredric Jameson's dismissive description of the postmodern resuscitation of once-vital but now exhausted cultural forms. On the one hand, genre hybrids such as *Back to the Future Part III* (Robert Zemeckis, 1990), which are "hyperconsciously intertextual," play their knowingness of forms like the western and the science fiction film for laughs. Their "eclectic irony" exploits the "dissonance" produced by the unpredictable yoking together of disparate, irreconcilable elements, which are drawn not from the real but from the ready-mades of the cultural past. This is the effect that Collins describes as "John Ford meets Jules Vernes and H. G. Wells," and it is usefully exemplified in *Back to the Future Part III* by the sequence in which Marty (Michael J. Fox) and Doc (Christopher Lloyd) find themselves transported back, not to the Old West, but to the Old West of Hollywood film.¹⁰ At one point, their DeLorean "time machine" is hauled across Monument Valley like a buckboard, an incongruous (and, of course, antirealist) invocation of many Ford movies, most notably *Stagecoach* (John Ford, 1939). On the other hand, "new sincere" explorations of classic genres aim at conveying some kind of "missing harmony," some transcendent significance that the celebrated exemplars of the genre allude to but never fully express or properly configure. Thus, the western, as the director Kevin Costner has shown in *Dances with Wolves* (1990), can be reshaped through an engagement with real as opposed to cinematic American history, revealing what, for either ideological or institutional reasons, has hitherto been confined to its margins or simply unexpressed. The new western can occupy itself with the struggle for control over the land between native peoples, who, no longer demonized as Indians, emerge as representatives of a natural, self-sustaining, and peaceful society. Opposed to them are the rapacious white settlers bent on extracting wealth from the land through its mindless destruction.

Collins concludes that these two types of genre film "represent contradictory perspectives on 'media culture': an ironic eclecticism that attempts to master the array through techno-sophistication; and a new sincerity that seeks to escape it through a fantasy technophobia."¹¹ We might add to his analysis that, at least in his two examples, eclectic irony and the new sincerity are both deployed with a view toward recovering valued pasts (the end of the frontier, the advent and flourishing of teen culture in the 1950s), imagined as distinct from the flat and unsignifying present, as, in fact, vanished realms of plentitude (however problematic that richness might eventually be seen to be as it suffers the fall into being narrativized and

represented). Perhaps the unrealizable aims of recovering the unmediated truth of history and defying the omnipresent regime of representations through an ironic probing of their depth in time, if strategies opposed in their stance toward media culture, equally reflect what many have identified as a central theme of postmodernism: its archaeological fascination with resurrecting a past that is always already seen nostalgically, that is, as impossibly beyond the irresistible urge toward its reconstitution. Here is a form of pleasure that neo-noir is ideally positioned to engage, what with its connection to bygone forms of both representation (cinematic, televisual, and literary) and culture (the fashions and mores of wartime and early postwar America, which now seems to many a kind of golden age of the national experience).

The Man Who Wasn't There: Filling in the Blanks

In his history of postclassic noir filmmaking, Richard Martin observes: "By the early seventies . . . there was in coexistence two distinctive neo-noir traditions, the revisionist and the formulaic." The latter, which I would term *noir redivivus*, is "a manifestation of renewed cinematic interest in a popular narrative pattern that had temporarily [in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s] been relegated to the small screen and other art forms."¹² This series represents a continuation of classic film noir more or less as such, that is, un-self-consciously, as customary narrative patterns and themes are updated, occasionally even provided with a contemporary twist, but not connected to the understanding of noirness that has been emerging in American film culture since the 1960s. The category *noir redivivus* even includes remakes of well-known noir releases that avoid any reference to the original film, postwar culture, or noir visual style, costuming, and art design; the trend is exemplified by *Night and the City* (Jules Dassin, 1950; Irwin Winkler, 1992), *Kiss of Death* (Henry Hathaway, 1947; Barbet Schroeder, 1995), *Out of the Past* (1947)/*Against All Odds* (Taylor Hackford, 1984), and numerous other classic/neo-noir pairings.¹³ For Martin, revisionist neo-noirs are, in contrast, "inspired by the *nouvelle vague*'s experimental/investigative approach to film," an aesthetic energized by a pronounced *nostalgie* for the recent Hollywood past, which is resurrected with both wit and reverence in key new wave films such as Jean-Luc Godard's *À bout de souffle* (*Breathless*, 1959). The American revisionist neo-noir films "self-consciously investigate the generic traditions [they] invoke" and, often, "eschew postmodern pastiche for a more integrated, if no less self-conscious, use of generic

convention, with *a return to textual depth instead of just a play of surfaces*" (emphasis added).¹⁴

Martin finds in neo-noir a somewhat different contrast than does Collins between two types of New Hollywood genre productions: not the eclectic irony of postmodern pastiche, but a straightforward refitting of classic conventions, and not an attempted escape from generic boundaries in the spirit of the new sincerity but an integrated investigation of those traditions, whose truths are deepened rather than discarded. Though the revisionist recyclings are not defined by the new sincerity in the same sense that *Dances with Wolves* can be said to be, they are, however, exactly what we should expect in the particular case of neo-noir, which, unlike the western (which aims in some sense to signify the American West), has no world as such to demystify and authenticate. Instead, neo-noir's restorative objective is a complex nexus of representations, primarily literary and cinematic, that cluster around a modern *idée fixe*: the dark, threatening city. In the revisionist neo-noir tradition, then, integration creates textual depth through the self-conscious turn of investigative gestures, invoking the real of postwar culture through a reembodying and historicizing of noir conventions, which are not discarded but rather fulfilled, that is, provided with contextual depth. The end result is that the revisionist neo-noir offers the nostalgic spectator something along the lines of what Collins calls *missing harmony*, with noir conventions (and, especially, intertextual references) now thoroughly naturalized and authenticated through their deep grounding in cultural themes.

The difference between what Martin calls *formulaic* and *revisionist* neo-noir can be readily seen in two Indiewood productions of the Coen brothers, Joel and Ethan: *Blood Simple* (1984) and *The Man Who Wasn't There* (2001).¹⁵ Like most of the films of the early stages of the noir revival in the 1980s, *Blood Simple* updates classic conventions but does not attempt to identify the truth of the genre by giving expression to what it should have said but never could; with its contemporary setting, the film also offers little more than superficial references to the cultural and representational past, especially the sordid world of plotting, betrayal, and ironic reversal limned in the fiction of James M. Cain, a founding influence on classic film noir.

But *The Man Who Wasn't There* does something quite different with Cain's most noteworthy tales of sexual mischief and murderous plotting, the novels *Double Indemnity* (1936) and, especially, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934), which are deliberately invoked not just to further what

the postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard terms the *recycling* of the cultural remains of a discarded and discredited earlier epoch.¹⁶ Instead, the Coens use these quotations as a framework on which, in the spirit of the new sincerity, they reconstruct the noir universe—or, perhaps more accurately, attempt to produce for the first time its true version. Cain's two novels unfold in the early years of the Depression and reflect that era of social breakdown and economic scarcity. But the original Hollywood versions (Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* [1944] and Tay Garnett's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* [1946]) are set in a vaguely contemporary America; neither film attempts to update Cain's narratives in order to explore deeper currents within contemporary culture, including and especially the profound changes being brought about by the war.

The Man Who Wasn't There, in contrast, offers a deeply particularized context, with textual depth created by pervasive and connected thematic references, closely linking a resurrected noir narrative à la Cain to the era that shaped it and, thus, making present the cultural history hitherto mostly unexpressed in the genre. *The Man Who Wasn't There* is set in 1949, when the revelation that the Russians now possessed the atomic bomb began to mark profoundly what in retrospect seems truly the *age of doubt*, as the historian William Graebner terms it. This was a time that, in Graebner's formulation, was strongly colored by "the anxiety of the lonely, fragmented individual," of which the Coens' protagonist is a striking example. Unlike Cain's scheming adulterers, who are trapped by limited economic horizons and oppressive institutions, especially marriage and social class, all the characters in *The Man Who Wasn't There* suffer from a vaguer but perhaps deadlier malaise, the deep feeling of the age that, as described in Graebner's apt account, "like life itself, values seemed to come and go, without pattern or reason."¹⁷ This anomie produces a strong sense of disconnection, even absence, to which the characters react in various ways, seeking either to "make it big" in the tradition of the American dream or to withdraw from the struggle by numbing themselves with alcohol or music. They settle in the end for neither success nor escape, but for death, which haunts and frustrates all their aspirations yet paradoxically offers as well the opportunity for transcendence.

Neo-Noir Uncertainty

The main character of *The Man Who Wasn't There* is Ed Crane (Billy Bob Thornton), a barber *malgré lui* who is frustrated in his plans to make it big

in the dry-cleaning business and comes to see life as a series of sudden, inexplicable, and irretrievable losses, his thoughts haunted by the memory of the thousands of “Nips vaporized at Nagasaki.” His boss’s wife is haunted by an even more bizarre and gloomier “metaphysics,” her belief that she and her husband were briefly abducted by aliens, an incident that they report to the proper authorities, only to be persecuted, she thinks, by the government, which for reasons unknown is reluctant to admit the truth—all this an evocation of the mass paranoia that gripped America in the course of the great UFO panic, which began in 1949 and extended throughout the next decade.

Printed (but not filmed) in a flat black and white that avoids all forms of glamorizing, including, at least for the most part, the stylings that have been in the last four decades codified as noir (including low-key lighting, pronounced chiaroscuro effects, disjointed editing, a *mise-en-scène* as well as camera framings that suggest entrapment, and so forth), *The Man Who Wasn't There* offers itself more as a rich period piece. Here is a new sincere version of film noir in which Cain’s explorations of lust and greed, the discontents of violation, and the ironic, horrifying ends toward which criminality relentlessly drives the characters yield a meaning that is perhaps closer to the everyday truth of noiriness, this *weltanschauung*’s evocation of the uncertainty of human life, its fascination with the loathing, disgust, and horror of the abject that haunts everyday experience. Cain’s materials are deliberately existentialized, accommodated to Camusian absurdism and Sartrean nausea, in a thematic move that reflects the way in which scholarly discussions of film noir have intellectualized the phenomenon by providing it with philosophical underpinnings. This existentializing, one might add, is also yet another way to deepen the context of the story by locating it within forms of thought popular in the postwar era. In fact, unlike classic noir, the film does not focus on the identification of, and then a bare escape from, the threat to orders both sexual and cultural posed by an underworld of temptation and rapacious criminality. *The Man Who Wasn't There* is actually more about the hope for spiritual growth, the leap of faith made possible by the embrace of meaninglessness, a concept for which the Coens also discover a historical explanation in the spirit of the new sincerity.

In a Cainian tangle of illegitimate motives and ironic misconceptions, Ed in self-defense kills Big Dave (James Gandolfini)—the employer and lover of Ed’s wife, Doris—whom he had blackmailed in order to get the money necessary to get started in the dry-cleaning business; he escapes the

scene undetected. Doris (Frances McDormand) is mistakenly put on trial for the crime (which she had plausible reasons to commit), and Ed half-heartedly confesses his culpability to her hotshot attorney, Riedenschneider (Tony Shalhoub), who does not think that the jury will believe him. As the lawyer explains it, though the legal system is officially committed with its seemingly forensic proceedings to the discovery of the truth, it is really concerned only with credibility, the issue at the thematic center of the film. Doris's fate hangs on what the jurors and judge can be made to believe or, rather, what they can be persuaded not to believe through the evocation of reasonable doubt. "There's a guy in Germany," the lawyer says, who maintains that, when you want to understand something scientifically, you have to look at it, but "your looking changes it." Applied to human affairs, this means that you can never truly know "the reality of what happened" as you explore actions and motivations. Thus, Riedenschneider places his concern about alibis and workable defenses (a motif derived directly from *The Postman Always Rings Twice*) within a broader context of ideas through these meditations on the Heisenberg uncertainty principle (which is never named as such). For it no longer seems the case that lawyers like Riedenschneider are simply being cynical when they ignore getting at the truth of the case as they search for an explanation that will work rhetorically, as it were, to convince jurors that they do not, in fact, know what happened.

Viewed from the perspective of universal and inescapable uncertainty, reasonable doubt is no more than the admission that provisional certainty (a certainty subject to only minimal doubt) is often a mirage. In the courtroom, the provisional certainty needed to convict is easily undermined by the demonstration that there is a plausible alternative, some other way of construing the facts. This plausible alternative, however, does not require absolute and detailed proof; it does not require, in fact, provisional certainty. It must point only toward the improbability of knowing for sure. Thus, the lawyer's profession, as Riedenschneider explains, occupies itself with the serial demonstration of a central epistemological axiom, of whose ineluctability he must persuade jurors. As he puts it, "there is no what happened," and the ironic correlative of this postulate is that, "the more you look, the less you know." An inescapable paradox rules human affairs; the "only fact," the only certainty, is uncertainty. Not only does uncertainty undermine the all-too-human search after determinate knowledge. It also reveals an unknowability that deepens as the desire to know and, thereby, master experience grows stronger.

The lawyer understands, if in a partial and self-serving fashion, some of the larger implications of Heisenberg's theorizing (whose ultimate point is quite the opposite of what Riedenschneider maintains, it being to identify a provisional form of certainty, the relative probabilities in the tracking of the position and momentum of subatomic particles). But Riedenschneider deceives himself that the uncertainty principle offers him mastery over Doris's plight. And this is because he falls victim to another paradox, his own certainty about uncertainty, the mistaken notion that the chain of "unknowing" must end somewhere in an unshakable predictability of which he may take advantage, that, in short, there are no surprises in store. Riedenschneider's detective has discovered what the lawyer thinks is the key to the successful defense of Doris. Big Dave, it turns out, was not the war hero he always bragged of being; though drafted, he was never stationed anywhere but stateside. His fabrications provide the blackmailer that Doris said approached Dave (it was, of course, Ed) with an exploitable weakness. Big Dave would have been easy prey to anyone who learned the truth of his service record, which would not have been hard to do. And, as Riedenschneider points out, the fact that Big Dave had lied to the very people sitting on the hometown jury means that they would be more likely to see such a blackmailer as a real possibility. He exults that the jurors will feel reasonable doubt about the state's version of Dave's death. Doris will, thus, be acquitted.

Yet it is not to be. We should not forget that, "the more you look, the less you see." Big Dave's continual self-revelation, his incessant bragging, actually concealed unexpected secrets. But the exposure of these lies offers only a slim point of certainty with regard to him. And, most important, that Dave has been unmasked does not mean that either Doris or Ed is now knowable. Riedenschneider, as it turns out, hasn't even learned all there is to know about Dave. But knowledge, even the immediate kind that flows from one's own experience, is of dubious value. The knowledge that the lawyer thought would assure his client's deliverance actually drives her to suicide, making any question of legal proceedings irrelevant. Riedenschneider never takes the trouble to determine whether Doris and Dave were actually having an affair, even though Ed's confession offers his jealousy about their relationship as his motive, which Doris never disputes. Thus, the revelation about Big Dave's past has an effect on Doris that Riedenschneider in no way foresees. Doris's attraction to her lover was, as Ed had earlier surmised, based on, first, the he-man image that he presented to the world (so much of a contrast to the slightly built, unassuming, and depressive Ed, who

proved unfit for war service because of fallen arches) and, second, the promise that Dave offered her of a deliverance from economic marginality and sexual boredom. Dave was going to expand his department store operation by building an “annex” where Doris would be comptroller. The blackmailer deprived them of this hope by taking the money Dave needed for the new enterprise and put them in jeopardy by forcing Doris, who was the bookkeeper, to betray her profession and embezzle money (“My books were always perfect”). Then, in an ironic turning borrowed straight from Cain, Doris, who had sacrificed herself to save Dave, stands accused of his murder.

But the revelation that Dave’s “bigness” was, in the final analysis, only a mirage proves too much for Doris to bear. She commits suicide in her cell the night before the trial is scheduled to begin. Shocked, Riedenschneider still fails to understand, thinking that Doris had despaired of his ability to get her off. Because he does not even consider the truth of Ed’s revelation that Dave and Doris were having an affair, the lawyer never thinks that getting off might no longer matter to her once she has learned the truth about Dave. Sometimes knowledge is, indeed, a curse, a truism that echoes interestingly throughout the remainder of a narrative built on misunderstanding, misdirection, misreading, and misconnection.

The Man Who Wasn’t There offers a series of variations on the uncertainty principle (“there is no what happened”) and its twin, though opposed, correlatives: unknowability (“the more you look, the less you know”) and the discontents of knowing (“sometimes knowledge is a curse”). What animates the characters’ experience with uncertainty and (un)knowing is a vague, numbing dissatisfaction with the absurdity of things that gives rise to an inchoate malaise and, finally, a desperate desire for change (or, perhaps better, self-refashioning). Doris, Ed, and Big Dave all regret their too easily granted acquiescence to mediocrity and ordinariness. Yet, true to the noir vision of human experience, they prove unable to change their circumstances. Only in extremis does Ed feel the desire for spiritual transcendence, as, about to be executed, not for killing Big Dave, but for killing his erstwhile business partner (whom, in yet another ironic turning, Big Dave had actually murdered), he admits that “seeing it whole gives you some peace,” offering yet another parallel to Camus’ stranger, Meursault, who likewise experiences a profound preexecution *éclaircissement*.

Cain’s Influence

In the spirit of the new sincerity, *The Man Who Wasn’t There* resuscitates

generic conventions (the narrative of get-rich schemes, sexual misadventure, and fateful coincidences popularized by Cain and the film adaptations of his novels), but it does not do so self-consciously, at least in the usual sense. What I mean is that these elements are not ostentatiously identified as borrowings, to be ironized or celebrated as forms of representation; instead, they are naturalized (invoked more or less realistically) even as they are provided with depth and context, including both an appropriate intellectual schema (the meditations on uncertainty) and an authentic historical context (the great UFO scare, anxiety about the atomic bomb, the secular musings of Heisenberg on human curiosity and its inevitable weakness, as well as the postwar imperative to make it big in an era of expanding opportunity).

The Cainian influence is, of course, meant to be obscure yet also palpably there in order to appeal to the knowingness of the well-informed noir aficionado, who would naturally not fail to see it clearly, enjoying how the Coens have reworked (and, in some ways, much improved on) their borrowed materials. *The Man Who Wasn't There*, however, is not at all, properly speaking, a remake or adaptation; it is structured by no rhetoric of identity despite its hauntingly referenced sources. But these occulted quotations are more than a form of flattering puzzle meant to be decoded by those well versed enough in matters cinematic and literary. Contextualized, integrated, and provided with depth, this network of intertextual references also offers a resurrected and a now fully represented world, a version of the American structure of feeling of the late 1940s, an element of that era's ideology only hinted at (or, perhaps better, referenced) by classic film noir.

This is not to say that the Coens' film rejects entirely an ironic view of the cinematic past. In a scene once again derived from Cain (Frank Chambers on the eve of his execution for a crime he did not commit, contemplating the meaning of his life with the prison chaplain in Garnett's *Postman*), the anticipated last moments of Ed's life play out in an execution chamber whose abstract, minimalist design comes right from a German expressionism as Walt Disney might imagine it. As a whole, however, the film eschews such eclecticism (carried to a humorous extreme in Carl Reiner's *Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid* [1982], an ingenious pastiche in which Steve Martin plays a detective literally inserted into the narratives of a number of classic noir films). Instead, *The Man Who Wasn't There* attempts to locate the "missing harmony" of classic noir, that structure of feeling that in some sense animates the earlier movement but the full evocation of which has hitherto escaped representation.

Evoking spiritual malaise rather than, in the classic noir tradition, the criminality of the dark city, the film's title refers to Ed Crane, whose lack of passion makes him absently present. Like Meursault, he is a man both alienated and anomic, but he becomes, at least retrospectively, self-analytical, the possessor of knowledge that separates him from others who live happily unenlightened about life's bitter ironies and impenetrable strangeness. At first saying not yes but only all right to life and, afterward, refusing to reconnect with the epistemological limitations of his fellows, Crane is never fully there, and this alienation sets him both apart from and over others. After his encounter with the absurd (the chain of events that lead him involuntarily to kill Big Dave and bring about the deaths of Doris and his erstwhile business partner), Ed refuses the easy embrace of unreflective meaninglessness that full immersion into everydayness brings. But the title can also be taken as usefully characterizing the film's cultural archaeology: the attempt of the Coens to bring to life the noir protagonist such as he never was but should have been. Shaped for a niche audience of knowledgeable cinephiles, the film exemplifies not just the interesting intellectual project of revisionist neo-noir but the concern more generally of New Hollywood commercial/independent filmmaking with the critical resurrection of the institutional past.

Notes

1. See David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge, 1985).

2. Murray Smith, "Theses on the Philosophy of Hollywood History," in *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Steve Neale and Murray Smith (London: Routledge, 1998), 8. This point is also made usefully, if in a different way, by Richard Maltby, who argues: "Hollywood functions according to a commercial aesthetic, one that is essentially opportunist in its economic motivation. The argument that Hollywood movies are determined, in the first instance, by their existence as commercial commodities sits uneasily with ideas of classicism and stylistic determination" (*Hollywood Cinema*, 2nd ed. [Oxford: Blackwell, 2003], 15).

3. Vertical integration of the film industry involved, for the five major studios, the organization of production, distribution, and exhibition activities under the same corporate structure, a powerful business arrangement that was ended by Supreme Court action at the close of the 1940s.

4. See Michael Storper, "The Transition to Flexible Specialisation in the US Film Industry," in *Post-Fordism: A Reader*, ed. Ash Amin (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), esp. 216–17.

5. In addition to Smith's "Theses on the Philosophy of Hollywood History," a useful contribution to this ongoing discussion comes from Richard Maltby, "Nobody Knows Everything": Post-Classical Historiographies and Consolidated Entertainment," in Neale and Smith, eds., *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, 21–44.

6. Smith, "Theses on the Philosophy of Hollywood History," 11.

7. Richard Martin, *Mean Streets and Raging Bulls: The Legacy of Film Noir in Contemporary American Cinema* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 1999), 5.

8. James Naremore, *More Than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 277.

9. The model developed by the French theorist Jean Baudrillard to describe the radical transition from modernity to postmodernity might be usefully invoked to characterize the change from classic noir to neo-noir. For Baudrillard, the project of modernity is the analysis of cultural phenomena utilizing a "hermeneutics of suspicion" that allows (as in the classic examples of Marx and Freud) undiscovered, "deep" layers of meaning to be recognized and acknowledged. Postmodernity, in contrast, rejects such sweeping claims for meaning and is occupied with "playing with the pieces" of a rejected, discredited, yet still fascinating culture. In such a project of restoration lies, in Baudrillard's view, the only hope for cultural rebuilding. See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (New York: Semiotext[e], 1983).

10. Jim Collins, "Genericity in the Nineties: Eclectic Irony and the New Sincerity," in *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, ed. Jim Collins, Hilary Radner, and Ava Preacher Collins (New York: Routledge, 1993), 243.

11. Ibid., 262.

12. Martin, *Mean Streets and Raging Bulls*, 27.

13. For further discussion, see Constantine Verevis, "Through the Past Darkly: Noir Remakes of the 1980s," in *Film Noir Reader 4: The Crucial Themes and Films*, ed. Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight, 2004), 306–22.

14. Martin, *Mean Streets and Raging Bulls*, 27, 33, 32.

15. These comments draw on the fuller discussion of the two films in R. Barton Palmer, *Joel and Ethan Coen* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 15–35, 62–79. I thank the University of Illinois Press for permission to reprint some of the material that first appeared in that book.

16. For a useful discussion of Baudrillard's theorizing of the postmodern, see Douglas Kellner, *Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989), 60–121.

17. William Graebner, *The Age of Doubt: American Thought and Culture in the 1940s* (Boston: Twayne, 1991), 19–20.

“Anything Is Possible Here”

Capitalism, Neo-Noir, and *Chinatown*

Jeanne Schuler and Patrick Murray

Is not justice the specific virtue of man?

—Plato, *Republic*

Classic noir crests, according to Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton, in the late 1940s, when the uplift expected from entertainment during the war effort ends. Noir, in Borde and Chaumeton’s view, is inextricable from the mood of disillusionment. As James Naremore describes their thinking about noir films: “Such pictures functioned as a critique of savage capitalism.”¹ This essay considers how the everyday, if unseen, compulsions of capitalism shape neo-noir and distinguish it from classic noir. Art may express the defining shape of its world, as Hegel teaches, but historical materialism reminds us that human life is conditioned by historically changing needs and ways of organizing society to transform nature in order to meet those needs.² Water is one of the most prominent and pressing of human needs, and *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974) is all about how an expanding Los Angeles is going to meet its needs for water. The desire for private gain in the meeting of common needs, which lies at the root of the capitalist system, is put in the limelight here. As Plato long ago showed in the *Republic*, the drive to make money poses a threat to justice. We draw on Plato and Marx to see how this drive runs through Roman Polanski’s masterpiece.

Neo-Noir and the Compulsions of Corporate Capitalism

In the 1970s, neo-noir renewed the theme of mistrust amid the Vietnam debacle, the Watergate scandal, and the receding postwar boom. Shadowy streets are replaced by the labyrinth of corporate bureaucracy and International-

style high-rise office buildings, like the glass box that Harry Caul (Gene Hackman) tries to force his way into at the end of *The Conversation* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974), and compulsion appears as the daily routine. What earlier appeared savage increasingly pervades ordinary life, as if there is no way out. The noose at the end of the noir highway still hangs. The blacks and whites of classic noir change into sepia and sand, but social unease persists. *Chinatown* is shot in color, but, in homage to noir, Polanski fills the screen with shades of tan, not by use of filters so much as by choice of clothes and wall coverings. The Los Angeles desert speaks for itself. The opening credits establish the palette; as we hear the trumpet's blue notes, we see tones of brown.

Neo-noir inhabits a social world where wealth has lost its glitter and takes the abstract form of value. Conveying the power of abstractions over human lives poses a challenge that *Chinatown* addresses in artful ways. Hegel reminds us that art employs concrete forms, such as image or story.³ It is left to philosophy to delineate truth in pure abstractions, not particular embodiments. Hence, art communicates widely in visceral ways, while philosophy divulges wisdom to the few. Hegel also observes that modern society pushes art to its limits, for abstractions, notably value that is expressed in money, have *become* actuality.⁴ How are these real abstractions to be depicted in concrete ways? What constitutes injustice, conspiracy, or corporate crime can be so complex as to elude your average juror or moviegoer.

Crime is a staple of classic noir. Noir's depiction of social rot got past the censors by putting the focus on the criminal element, not the better sort. Small-timers hunt crooks, tunnel after jewels, track exotic treasure from city to city, spin the roulette wheel in search of the "great whatsit."⁵ The denizens of noir don't soar to the heady heights of Holmes or Moriarty. The femme fatale exerts her deadly appeal on lonely, inept losers. Inevitably, the dreams of such inconsequential men shatter.

J. J. (Jake) Gittes (Jack Nicholson) in *Chinatown* meets and exceeds the scale of the genre. His humor is rude, his temper short, and his reading of Evelyn Mulwray (Faye Dunaway) flawed. His rash confrontation with Noah Cross (John Huston) sets up Evelyn's death, a repetition of an earlier disaster that he provoked in Chinatown. Gittes may be noir, but the heist has changed. Water, not diamonds, becomes the stuff of dreams. Capitalism's alchemy can turn anything into gold.⁶ Wealth loses its sensuous, palpable character. The "whatsit" no longer lies in the armored safe but in routing the competition. Information, secrecy, zoning, annexation, law, land titles,

news coverage, opinion polls, environmental policy, political leverage, and lobbying become sources of power. Closing the deal, like blowing the safe, takes expert timing. Now, its leaders double-cross an entire city.

The market in traditional society was a face-to-face place visited to secure food and sundries. Today's capitalist market isn't a place down the street; it pervades our world. Seldom are we outside its reach. Marx and Engels describe the expansive and transformative power of capital: "The bourgeoisie, during its rule of scarce one hundred years, has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together. Subjection of Nature's forces to man, machinery, application of chemistry to industry and agriculture, steam-navigation, railways, electric telegraphs, clearing of whole continents for cultivation, *canalization of rivers, whole populations conjured out of the ground*—what earlier century had even a presentiment that such productive forces slumbered in the lap of social labor?" (emphasis added).⁷ A modern audience barely notices the Promethean dimensions of everyday life. Don't we taunt the gods daily without consequence? The idea that "anything is possible" takes root in capitalist society. In neo-noir, nature doesn't loom as an invincible presence; it is not the mysterious or dream-like other; it doesn't set limits to our grasping. Nature shrinks before capital and takes its orders. Why not build the country's largest urban sprawl in a desert? Why not cut channels from Alaska to the American Southwest to guarantee water supply?⁸ Why not build cities on fragile river deltas and floodplains, line the beaches with condos, and bury the horizon with skyscrapers? If it is conceivable, it can be done.

Chinatown's Los Angeles is a triumph of capital's dominion over nature. Money, lots of money, is made of sand and water. Dams are built, rivers rerouted, lakes drained; away from the city, land returns to desert. The natural care of parent for child is perverted. The femme fatale of noir is replaced in neo-noir by a victim. Evelyn Mulwray is not the deadly siren, and Chinatown is not in the grip of a dragon lady. The scarlet covering Evelyn's lips and nails is that of a wounded creature desperate not to be crushed entirely. What is unspeakable must be shown. In poignant ways, she repeatedly touches her neck and face as if to reclaim them from some powerful grip, and she stumbles over the epithet *father*. Nature proves no match for the aggressive force of capitalism and its patriarchs.

For Edward Dimendberg, different spaces capture the contrast between noir and neo-noir. From Frank Lloyd Wright, Dimendberg borrows the contrast of centripetal and centrifugal tendencies. Noir inhabits the built

city of downtown, streets, sidewalks, store windows, dingy alleys, cheap hotels, pedestrians, bars, railroad stations, shadowy corners, and short taxi rides. This centripetal space comprises a dense visual center of “skyline, monuments, recognizable public spaces, and inner-city neighborhoods.” Noir unfolds in cities of yesterday before the flight to the suburbs. In the postwar decades, downtown declines as suburban peripheries expand. The walk down the street, the hop on the streetcar, is replaced by the commute through a grid of highways. Populations are dispersed, and generic construction makes one sprawling development indistinguishable from the next. Los Angeles epitomizes the space of neo-noir: a city without a center crisscrossed with freeways. The centrifugal space of neo-noir “can be located in a shift toward immateriality, invisibility, and speed”: “Separation replaces concentration, distance supplants proximity, and the highway and the automobile supersede the street and the pedestrian. Where centripetality facilitates escape or evasion by facilitating invisibility in an urban crowd, centrifugality offers the tactical advantages of speed and superior knowledge of territory. Frequently lacking visible landmarks, centrifugal spaces substitute communication networks and the mass media to orient those who traverse them.”⁹

Contrasting spaces can be compared to views of a home. Noir is lived space; it takes in the rooms, halls, windows, and ceilings as they appear to those who dwell there. Neo-noir takes the builder’s view, a gutted house with pipes, ducts, wires, grids, circuit breakers, pumps, furnaces, compressors suddenly in view. In the closing scene of *The Conversation*, Harry Caul provides such a view of his apartment by futilely ripping it apart to find a listening device. Dimendberg cites the French theorist Lefebvre’s observation “that an apparently solid house is ‘permeated from every direction by streams of energy which run in and out of it by every imaginable route: water, gas, electricity, telephone lines, radio and television signals.’” Largely invisible technologies edge out face-to-face encounters. What happens at a distance—an error made by a utility worker in another state—can plunge your city into darkness. The older sense of distance yields to the simultaneity of new technologies.¹⁰

The action of neo-noir unwinds within social systems that differ from the world of classic noir. In place of the head hoodlum looms an organization of indeterminate form. Like the hydra, the corporation survives regardless of how many members of the criminal corporate hierarchy are killed, which they are, for example, in *Point Blank* (John Boorman, 1967), as the protagonist, Walker (Lee Marvin), relentlessly pursues the \$93,000

owed him. Information is fragmented since no observer takes in the whole process. Despite being the best operator in the surveillance business, *The Conversation's* Harry Caul can't piece together the clues to avoid being complicit in murder. And, in the film's bleak ending, he cannot keep the big corporation from bugging *him*. *Chinatown* portrays the makings of centrifugal space in the history of Los Angeles. Drama focuses on the unusual topic—a public utility thriller—and the pipes, trenches, and dams that supply the city's water. The land and water fraud is a many-headed hydra whose visible face is the treacherous Noah Cross. Unseen are the leading citizens of Los Angeles who bought into the conspiracy and the politicians and police who protect them. Appearance and reality blur until the distinction itself comes into question: Does reality exist to challenge these appearances? Complex systems invite relativism: Are perceptions so contextual that they render judgment impossible? Where is the yardstick that can judge an Enron? Is it fraud or just business as usual? The neo-noir landscape, says Dimendberg, is "devoid of landmarks and centers and is often likely to seem permanently in motion."¹¹

The Shanghai Gesture

In classic noir, the site of transgression was often the casino or dive. The land deals at the heart of *Chinatown* push speculation outside the red-light district to society at large. Seeds of *Chinatown* were sown in its noir predecessor *The Shanghai Gesture* (Josef von Sternberg, 1941), which takes up the themes of land speculation and parental violence against a daughter.¹² The desperate young woman, Poppy (Gene Tierney), immediately embraces the Shanghai gambling palace as a Xanadu, marveling: "Anything is possible here." Separated from her Chinese mother—Mother Gin Sling (Ona Munson)—since birth, Poppy is undone by the descent into corruption at the roulette wheel in what she does not know to be her mother's casino, while her wealthy, permissive father schemes to buy and raze the entire neighborhood. Two forms of speculation clash: the drunken haze at the gambling table and the calculated effort of the British capitalists to force out the locals and redevelop the red-light district. Mother Gin Sling trades in human weakness and obsessive dreams; Poppy's capitalist father pursues money wherever it leads. In the casino—a brothel in the original play but changed by the film censors—the temptations are visceral: gambling, drink, drugs, and sex. A capitalist society chases after abstractions: the return on the investment, more money. Speculation becomes as rou-

tine as the Sunday circuit from church to brunch to cruising new subdivisions in the afternoon with an eye to an upward trade before the housing bubble bursts. Unlike Cio-Cio-San in *Madama Butterfly*, Mother Gin Sling is anything but naive and self-sacrificing; she faces down the Western money men with the implacable justice of the Chinese New Year dinner, at which all debts must be paid, including the respect that an insolent, drunken daughter owes to her mother. Poppy pays with her life as Mother Gin Sling shoots her dead with Poppy's own pistol. Outside, Mother Gin Sling's strongman (Mike Mazurka) leers, "You likey Chinese New Year?" to Poppy's father, moments after he hears the two shots disguised by fireworks. This cruel coda ends with a tracking shot that descends into the casino in full Babylonian revelry.

For Foster Hirsch, key elements of noir are not subject to revision by neo-noir. Characters should not be outfitted with complex psychological motivations. Noir sensibility is summoned from cardboard characters. For the most part, remakes of classic noir, such as *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Bob Rafelson, 1981), explain too much.¹³ *Chinatown* succeeds in moving beyond stereotypes to a complexity of plot and character without losing the noir effect. Postmodern irony is checked; the noir noose stays in place. Gittes mocks the Chinese in tasteless jokes and complains about the seediness of the Chinese district, where years earlier he made his big mistake. At the end of the film, the police officer uncuffs Gittes, and his colleague tells him to go home and forget the whole bloody incident; after all, "it's Chinatown." The myth of the decadent Chinese thrilled Tierney's Poppy on entering her mother's casino: a place where anything is possible. Despite its talk about Chinatown, Polanski's film belies the myth. In the film, the Chinese have nothing to do with moral turpitude; Chinese servants shelter Evelyn and Katherine on their flight, while the city's finest, not its lower ranks, are at the center of the conspiracy. After a policeman shoots Evelyn through the eye on the streets of Chinatown, the Chinese stolidly gather to witness the disaster.

Money-making and Moral Order

Plato's *Republic* can be read as an anxious meditation on the consequences for society of the spread of money-making.¹⁴ The dialogue opens at the Piraeus, the commercial port of Athens, and the action soon moves to the home of a rich arms merchant from Syracuse, Cephalus. The topic of justice first turns up in the conversation between Cephalus and Socrates. Each

of Socrates' three partners in the dialogue—the elderly Cephalus, his son Polemarchus, and the Sophist Thrasymachus—is identified with money-making. Their definitions of justice grow more disturbing: telling the truth and paying your debts; helping your friends while harming your enemies; and imposing your boundless wants on everyone else. These three definitions reflect three familiar phenomena of commercial life: the seemingly benign exchanges in the marketplace; the dog-eat-dog world of capitalist competition; and the formation of monopolies, which tyrannically impose prices. The sequence suggests that moneymaking has the dangerous tendency to devolve from the benign but narrowly self-interested activity of trade, to gloves-off competition, and, finally, to despotism. The association of money with tyranny continues into book 2. There, the shepherd who discovers the power of the ring of Gyges to make its wearer invisible uses it to sleep with the king's wife and then kill the king. The Lydian king Gyges was known in the ancient world as the first to coin money and as a tyrant. Money, invisibility, and tyranny are joined together in Plato's imagination.¹⁵ Moneymakers abide by the minimal justice of the marketplace when they feel that they have to. But they love money, not justice. And the love of money knows no limits. They are incipient tyrants who must be held in check by the law and its power to punish wrongdoers. When they convince themselves that they can act unjustly by making their misdeeds invisible, they will do so. No wonder, then, that Plato's myth of the metals excludes the ruling classes from moneymaking lest its boundlessness take over.

Thrasymachus asserts that limits are illusory; only strength is real. Reality has no form; meanings are provisionally bestowed by the powerful. Plato warns of the threat posed by the unlimited. Without proper limits, human existence unravels. The remainder of the *Republic* offers Plato's reply to Thrasymachus and his defense of the forms inherent in reality. For Plato, justice is the peculiarly human virtue: "And is not justice the specific virtue of man?"¹⁶ Without justice, you're a beast—like Thrasymachus or like Noah Cross, pawing his daughter-granddaughter in the terrible final moments of *Chinatown*. A society or an individual without proper limits breeds violence and destruction. Justice is not a luxury; it makes human life possible.¹⁷

Capitalism contravenes Plato's notion of justice as reasonable self-limitation. A society organized as capitalist must grow continuously; capital is self-valorizing value. Staying ahead of the competition is where money is made. Individuals must determine what is enough for their well-being. An individual without any sense of *enough* can be judged greedy or pathetic. But

what does *enough* mean to a society founded on endless accumulation? While *enough* traditionally signifies virtue for individuals—for Aristotle, virtue is largely a matter of striking a mean between extremes—it spells destruction for this type of society. In capitalism, this unending compulsion to accumulate permeates everyday life—everyone’s life. The dynamic at its core may be abstract, but it is routine: the point is always to make more money. When his partner asks him why water is being diverted in the middle of a drought, Jake Gittes knows the answer immediately—“Money”—even though he admits to not knowing how the money will be made. The boundlessness championed by Thrasymachus is business as usual here. Dante consigned usurers to the edge of the hot, barren sands of the seventh circle of hell and charged them with crimes against nature. By its nature, money is an inert thing; it doesn’t grow. Yet, somehow, in the hands of the usurer and, more generally, of the capitalist, money breeds money. Where Dante paired the usurers with the infertile sodomites, *Chinatown*’s screenwriter, Robert Towne, pairs the Los Angeles capitalists who contrive to make a city spring from coastal sand with the strange fruit born of incest, the sister-daughter.

“Of Course, He Has to Swim in the Same Water We All Do”

Jake’s angry barbershop exchange with the man in the next chair shows how explosive the topic of justice can be. Scanning the headline story of Hollis Mulwray (Darrell Zwerling), caught in apparent adultery, the man provokes Gittes with the remark: “You’ve got a hell of a way to make a living.” Jake goes off like a firecracker. Hearing that the man works in the mortgage department of the bank, Jake shoots back: “I don’t kick families out of their houses like you bums at the bank.” Hot to defend himself, Jake protests: “I make an honest living . . . an honest living, you understand.” Jake recoils at the challenge to his human decency.

Noah Cross asks whether Gittes—or “Mr. Gitts,” as Cross keeps calling him—thinks that Police Lieutenant Escobar (Perry Lopez), with whom Gittes had worked in Chinatown, is honest. Gittes responds: “As far as it goes.” But he then adds the reminder: “Of course, he has to swim in the same water we all do.” A man with a taste for low humor, Jake may savor the thought that, like fish, we all have to live with our own and everyone else’s shit. But Jake exposes a truth that takes us back to Plato and Aristotle: gauge your expectations of individuals by the justice of the social orders they inhabit.¹⁸ What pond we swim in matters. Expect to be disappointed

by those who dwell with slavery, religious war, racial apartheid, adultery, patriarchy, castes, poverty, or corruption. Don't get your hopes too high when, behind the scenes, the mayor, heads of public utilities, newspaper editors, and leading financiers con the public for big bucks.

In the Los Angeles of *Chinatown*, Plato's fears have been realized. The film opens with an act of common adultery caught in a photograph. While showing an honest face to the people, the city fathers secretly engage in deception, coercion, and even murder in order to make a killing selling real estate in the soon-to-be-water-rich San Fernando Valley. When fraud assumes these proportions, who is left to pursue the criminals? In Thrasymachus's view, injustice on a massive-enough scale gets recognized as justice.

As the showdown nears, Gittes confronts Cross, genuinely perplexed. What drives the powerful in their boundless pursuit of more? "Why are you doing it? How much better can you eat? What can you buy that you can't already afford?" Cross's answer is simple: "The future." Gittes uncovers the fraud, but, when the showdown comes, he doesn't have backup. He pleads with Escobar to stop Cross: "He's rich; he gets away with anything." Evelyn rebukes Jake with the truth of his own statement: "He owns the police." And Cross crushes him like a bug.

The Rape of the Owens Valley

Hollis Mulwray, Los Angeles's chief waterworks engineer, waits on the beach through the night to witness tons of freshwater secretly dumped into the ocean. Mulwray had been Cross's partner in owning the Los Angeles waterworks; the upright Mulwray insisted that they sell the utility to the city. He has a sense of limits and considers water a resource that belongs to the public, not a commodity to monopolize. Cross manipulates public officials and valley growers to orchestrate panic over a water shortage and secure the municipal vote in favor of the new reservoir. Mulwray, like Gittes, lives with the guilt of a disastrous judgment out of the past. A man of integrity—Mulwray went to Evelyn Cross's aid in Mexico and married her—he refuses to repeat the disaster. As chief engineer, he won't build a dangerous and unnecessary dam. Convinced that he poses a major obstacle to his plans, the old tyrant Cross drowns Mulwray in his own backyard tidal pool in what is made to appear an accident. On the very day that the vote secures water rights to the valley, the powerbrokers involved in the conspiracy closes their land deals, turning worthless tracts into a "Cadillac

desert” overnight.¹⁹ Los Angeles’s residents didn’t know a cross when they saw one.

The future growth of Los Angeles was ensured by what is called the rape of the Owens Valley. The building of a twelve-foot-diameter aqueduct over the period 1908–13 rerouted the Owens River over two hundred miles to the south and sparked a land boom. Real estate fortunes were made in Los Angeles, while, back in the Owens Valley, ranches and farms were abandoned as the battle over water rights spurred the great westward migration. The dynamics of corporate capitalism contribute to the conflict, secrecy, and compulsion of *Chinatown’s* plot. In particular, capitalist culture fosters neo-noir moral ambiguity. Did the survival of the great city require the destruction of the lowly valley? If so, then perhaps no rape occurred. If necessity drives events, then moral judgment sputters.

The futility of the little guy confronting the corporate giant can be heard in a desperate letter written to President Theodore Roosevelt by a farm woman of the Owens Valley:

Now as president if the U.S. do you think that is right? And is there no way by which our dear valley and our homes can be saved? Is there no way by which 800 or 900 homes can be saved? Is there no way to keep the capitolist from forcing the people to give up their water right and letting the now beautiful alalafa feilds dry up and return to a barren desert waist? Is there no way to stop this thievering? As you have proven to be the president for the people and not the rich I, an old resident who was raised here, appeal to you for help and *Advice*.²⁰

Roosevelt sided with Los Angeles, citing the utilitarian calculus: seek the greatest good for the greatest number.²¹ Counting votes put the needs of Los Angeles for water ahead of those of the Owens Valley farming community. Who is in the right, as Thrasy-machus held, comes down to who is stronger.

Robert Towne’s Oscar-winning script for *Chinatown* is informed by the history of Los Angeles. The film, released in 1974, is set in 1937 but concerns events that occurred decades earlier. The dates matter. The aqueduct that brought water to the San Fernando Valley was finished by 1913, and the dam that Mulwray regrets building, the St. Francis, collapsed in 1928, with 450 lives lost.²² A group of wealthy and influential citizens of Los Angeles did buy up land in the valley and made a fortune. Even the name

of the chief engineer in the film—Hollis Mulwray—derives from William Mulholland, the man who, from 1886 to 1928, ran the privately owned Los Angeles City Water Company, which became the publicly owned Los Angeles Department of Water and Power District, and designed the aqueduct. In his book on the water wars, John Walton sums up the historical inaccuracies and the deeper truth of *Chinatown*:

The decisive events occurred from 1903 to 1906 and involved no conspiracy or contrived water shortage. City voters overwhelmingly approved repeated bond measures for aqueduct construction without the inducement of panic. A land syndicate of prominent business interests did purchase San Fernando Valley real estate for subsequent profit, but that was known and little regarded by the public, which shared in the spirit of boosterism. . . . The significance of *Chinatown* is that despite factual inaccuracies it captured the deeper truth of the rebellion. Metropolitan interests appropriated the Owens Valley for their own expansionary purposes through the use of blunt political power.

Chinatown was released during a struggle in the 1970s to save the endangered habitat at Mono Lake, to which the Owens River aqueduct had been extended to supply Los Angeles with yet more water. The film contributed to this environmental activism, which ended with a court order in 1983 preserving the lake.²³ The city finally was forced to respond to the environmental impact of its thirst for water.

Towne crystallizes the intricacies of California's water wars in the crime of incest. Evelyn Mulwray's struggle with Cross over Katherine—"my sister and my daughter"—mirrors the rape of the Owens Valley, nature at the mercy of human excess. The two mysteries are exposed together. Incest—the graphic violation—illuminates the background maneuvering that tore a river from its natural bed and sent it coursing two hundred miles south to soak suburban lawns. The city—like the predatory father—knows no limits.

Water, the source of wealth, also symbolizes the milieu of making money and getting by that engulfs us all. Good and bad alike swim in it, in the end making it difficult to distinguish one from the other. Noah Cross's "future" only repeats the past: more schemes to make money. Access to water turned the San Fernando Valley overnight into rich parcels that would, first, become the country's leading agricultural county and, then,

in a second boom, house the bedroom communities of Los Angeles: "The aqueduct led to rapid real estate development. . . . The result, before and after the First World War, was one of the largest, most profitable, and most sustained land booms in American history. The rise of values in a boom-town like Glendale, for example, where land sold for \$2.50 an acre in 1906 and \$1,500 a lot in 1908, was created by the magic of promotion and the availability of water."²⁴

Anything is possible.

Marking the End of the Post–World War II Golden Age

Somewhere in or around 1973, for reasons that few could explain, America went into a slump from which it has never recovered. That year featured the push to withdraw from Vietnam, the end of the gold standard, the Watergate scandal, the first OPEC-engineered oil shock, General Augusto Pinochet's overthrow of Salvador Allende's government in Chile, and the demolition of the huge St. Louis public housing project Pruitt-Igoe. Both *Chinatown* and *The Conversation* appeared in 1974, accurately warning that the mounting disillusionment in America would settle in. Looking on the bloody body of Evelyn Mulwray, Jake murmurs his final, despairing words in the film, "As little as possible," recalling what his police supervisor expected him to do in Chinatown. Faced with unexpectedly implacable foes and forces, the 1960s movement of social and cultural protest had irretrievably lost steam by 1973. "Forget it, Jake, it's Chinatown." President Jimmy Carter's sour, soul-searching address to the "stagflating" nation in July 1979—which spoke of the unspeakable, a generation of Americans with lowered expectations—made it official. Ronald Reagan's 1980 campaign slogan, "It's morning in America," only flouted reality with wishful thinking. The optimistic spirit of the Kennedy and Johnson years had been squelched. The terrible military adventure in Vietnam that later expanded to Cambodia had torn America apart while devastating Southeast Asia. Though American troops would not evacuate Vietnam until 1975, President Nixon had already given up on winning the war. "Vietnamization," the handing off of the war to South Vietnamese troops, was an exit strategy that failed to provide cover for American defeat. Around 1973, the remarkable golden age that had followed World War II petered out, and a long, still-continuing period of economic stagnation began. During the quarter century ending in 1973, real wages of private nonagricultural, nonsupervisory workers rose 60 percent, hitting a level never again reached, despite the country's longest stretch

without a recession, during the Clinton—"It's the economy, stupid"—presidency. While the poverty rate fell during the 1990s, it never went as low as 11.1 percent, the rate in 1973. The minimum wage was never higher than in 1968. In the three decades following the mid-1970s, while the wages of individual workers slipped, household incomes went up almost a third, thanks to the massive entrance of women into the paid labor force. In the seventeen years between 1979 and 1996, the average number of hours that women worked for pay increased by 37 percent.²⁵ It appears that the grace period sponsored by that rapid social transformation has played itself out and that—without fanfare or explanation—we have entered a new, more disheartening period. Though a four-year expansion followed the short recession of 2000–2001, for the first time in American history median *household* incomes went flat for five consecutive years.²⁶ The postwar party is over, but, largely on the strength of the dollar, Americans keep reveling in consumption, reaching for their credit cards, and running up a yearly negative balance of trade pushing a trillion dollars.

By the early 1970s, many critics of American domestic life and foreign policy had come to a sobering conclusion: America was not as innocent and well-meaning as they had once imagined. In the five years from 1963 through 1968, John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy were all assassinated. A "police riot" at the Democratic national convention in Chicago in the summer of 1968 spawned an unsuccessful show trial of antiwar leaders for conspiracy to incite a riot. The leading national organization of radical students, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), splintered at its Chicago convention in 1969, with some factions embracing violence and going underground. The shooting to death of six students by national guard troops at Kent State and Jackson State in May 1970 during a nationwide student strike protesting the U.S. invasion of Cambodia tore the fabric of civility. Perhaps the American governing class was, as Noah Cross ejaculates, capable of "Anything!"

Tom Hayden's 1972 book *The Love of Possession Is a Disease with Them* marked the sea change that had taken place.²⁷ Hayden, a baby boomer born into a modest Catholic family in Michigan, was radicalized at the University of Michigan and was the chief author of the 1962 New Left manifesto of the SDS, the Port Huron Statement.²⁸ That hopeful amalgam of nuclear age existentialism and economic democracy gave way, ten years later, to a much darker forecast. Hayden's 1972 thesis was that the same "love of possession" that animated the Indian Wars drove American policy in Southeast Asia and around the world. In a similar vein, the seemingly

inescapable repetition of past tragedies for which they held themselves responsible crushes Hollis Mulwray, Jake Gittes, and Harry Caul. In this embittered post-1960s political climate, Noah Cross's words to Gittes, the same words that Jake heard from the district attorney in Chinatown, ring like a bell: "You may think that you know what you're dealing with, but, believe me, you don't."

Notes

1. James Naremore, introduction to Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton, *The Panorama of American Film Noir: 1941–1953* (1955), trans. Paul Hammond (San Francisco: City Lights, 2002), viii.

2. See the developmental, historical approach to art that Hegel takes in his *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. 1, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975).

3. See *ibid.*, 91–105 ("Introduction: Position of Art in Relation to the Finite World and to Religion and Philosophy").

4. See *ibid.*, 593–611 ("Dissolution of the Romantic Form of Art").

5. The term is used in Robert Aldrich's *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955).

6. On capitalism's alchemy, see Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin/New Left Review, 1976), 208, 229.

7. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, in Karl Marx, *Selected Writings*, ed. Lawrence H. Simon (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 163.

8. Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1986), 126.

9. Edward Dimendberg, *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 177, 178.

10. *Ibid.*, 141 (quote), 211.

11. *Ibid.*, 171.

12. The land-speculating father in *The Shanghai Gesture*, Sir Guy Charteris, is played by Walter Huston, the real father of John Huston, who plays Evelyn's father, Noah Cross, in *Chinatown*. John Huston is widely considered to have fathered film noir with *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), his debut as a director.

13. Foster Hirsch, *Detours and Lost Highways: A Map of Neo-Noir* (New York: Limelight, 1999), 56–57.

14. "Ancient society . . . denounced money as tending to destroy the economic and moral order" (Marx, *Capital*, 230).

15. See Marc Shell, *The Economy of Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

16. Plato, *Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube and C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1974), 10 (335c) (translation modified).

17. For further discussion of Plato's view of justice and its relation to neo-noir, see Aeon J. Skoble, "Justice and Moral Corruption in *A Simple Plan*" (in this volume).

18. Two thousand years after Plato, Immanuel Kant writes: "A people's good moral condition is to be expected only under a good constitution" (*Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, trans. Ted Humphrey [Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983], 124).

19. Marc Reisner coined the term in his *Cadillac Desert*.

20. John Walton, *Western Times and Water Wars: State, Culture, and Rebellion in California* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 147.

21. Reisner, *Cadillac Desert*, 84–86.

22. *Ibid.*, 103.

23. Walton, *Western Times*, 231–32 (quote), 267–68.

24. John H. M. Laslett, "Historical Perspectives: Immigration and the Rise of a Distinctive Urban Region, 1900–1970," in *Ethnic Los Angeles*, ed. Roger Waldinger and Mehdi Bozorgmehr (New York: Sage, 1996), 47.

25. James Heintz and Nancy Folbre, *Field Guide to the U.S. Economy* (New York: New Press, 2000), 34.

26. David Leonhardt, "Poverty in U.S. Grew in 2004, While Income Failed to Rise for 5th Straight Year," *New York Times*, August 31, 2005, A1, A14.

27. Tom Hayden, *The Love of Possession Is a Disease with Them* (Chicago: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1972).

28. Tom Hayden gives this passage from the Port Huron Statement as an epigraph to his *Reunion: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1988): "We are people of this generation, bred in at least modest comfort, housed now in universities, looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit. . . . We would replace power rooted in possession, privilege, or circumstances by power and uniqueness rooted in love, reflectiveness, reason and creativity. As a social system, we seek the establishment of a democracy of individual participation. . . . If we appear to seek the unattainable then let it be known that we do so to avoid the unimaginable."

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Sunshine Noir

Postmodernism and *Miami Vice*

Steven M. Sanders

This is Miami, pal, where anything can happen and usually does.

—Sonny Crockett to Ricardo Tubbs, *Miami Vice*

From Classic Noir to Neo-Noir

Film noir by now has achieved not just familiar but totemic status. Brand noir is utilized in editorials, magazine articles, advertising campaigns, and music videos. Its suggestive power evokes a mood, style, or sensibility redolent of certain predominantly black-and-white films of the 1940s and 1950s such as *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944), *Out of the Past* (Jacques Tourneur, 1947), *Criss Cross* (Robert Siodmak, 1949), *D.O.A.* (Rudolph Maté, 1950), and *Kiss Me Deadly* (Robert Aldrich, 1955). As other commentators have noted, the suitability of film noir for variation and adaptation makes it both unproductive and unnecessary to try to provide a precise definition of the genre. It is most fruitfully approached by means of examples and best understood as a way of not just *seeing* but *being in* the world.

It is widely agreed that the classic film noir cycle lasted from *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, 1941) to *Touch of Evil* (Orson Welles, 1958). In the years that followed, American cinema underwent significant changes in style, sensibility, and audience appeal. The term *neo-noir* is used to denote films noirs that came after the classic period, and I shall follow Andrew Spicer in referring to the years from 1981 on as the *postmodern* phase of neo-noir.¹ As a comprehensive intellectual and cultural movement, postmodernism consists of theses in metaphysics, epistemology, and aesthetics that include antirealism and a rejection of truth; skepticism about knowl-

edge according to which there is no secure, indubitable foundation on which our knowledge of reality rests; and a studied emphasis on contingency, irony, self-reflexivity, and enigmas of personal identity. Postmodernists reject the rationalist tradition of Descartes and Kant as a framework for addressing the perennial questions of philosophy. Instead of seeking the foundations of our knowledge, postmodernist epistemology stresses the contingent, conventional, historically conditioned context of our knowledge claims. Rather than positing a substantial metaphysical self, postmodernists find a contingent, historically conditioned, and socially constructed nonsubstantial self.²

The postmodern noir filmmaker emphasizes the subversive power of film and rejects the rationalist and realist traditions that privilege aesthetic disinterestedness and the omniscient approach to narrative. This postmodernist approach has had a hardy cinematic half-life and can be found in episodic crime drama produced for television as well. It is clearly in evidence in the 1980s television series *Miami Vice*.³ The casual viewer may remember *Miami Vice* primarily for its music, fashion, and location sites and for a visual style epitomized by ambitious traveling shots where the night lights of Biscayne Boulevard moved smoothly across the hood of Sonny Crockett's black Ferrari while Phil Collins sang "In the Air Tonight" on the sound track. But, as a vehicle of postmodernist meanings and neo-noir style, *Miami Vice* at its best was a harbinger of things to come in televised crime melodrama. The inexplicable and the ironic often found their way into the details of story and plotline, happy endings and facile moral uplift were conspicuously absent, and camera placement and movements took on far greater significance than they previously had in episodic crime drama. In this essay, I offer an interpretive commentary on exemplary instances of the postmodernist turn in *Miami Vice*. Three episodes in particular illustrate the postmodern noir approach, according to which narrative is essentially expressive, perspectival, interpretive, and value laden rather than descriptive, factual, referential, and objective. In the world of "sunshine noir," we find new, alternative, and diverse interpretations and perspectives rather than a mirror of nature.

Neo-Noir Comes to Miami

We Miamians have a saying: "Once, a philosopher. Twice, an arrest record." The saying epitomizes both the forbearance we have for anybody who wants to try anything once and the determination of law enforcement to restrain those who go too far. Of course, Miami has long been famous as

a resort where “too much is never enough,” a saying of another Miamian, the architect Morris Lapidus, whose Fontainebleau Hotel is a midcentury Miami Beach icon. But, beginning in the 1970s, economic collapse made the cities of Miami and Miami Beach vulnerable to urban degeneration and cultural stasis. By the early 1980s, things were even worse. Crime and racial unrest cast a pall over the once-vibrant metropolis. In 1984, Dade County reportedly had the highest murder rate in the United States. To this one must add drug smuggling on a massive scale and the intense pressure of the Mariel boatlifts, which brought tens of thousands of Cubans, many from Castro’s prisons, to Miami’s shore. At the same time, perhaps no other American destination was so passionate about transfiguring the commonplace. With its genius for self-promotion on full display, metropolitan Miami went about remaking itself. Miami Beach, “the place where neon goes to die,” in the words of comic Lenny Bruce, began restoring its Art Deco District with its eclectic mix of deco, streamline, and Mediterranean architecture. The area would one day be rife with clubs, restaurants, retail shops, and photographers’ models. As real estate developers made speculative investments throughout Miami and its beaches, movie and television professionals sought out locations.

Against this background of transition, *Miami Vice* creator Anthony Yerkovich and the show’s executive producer, Michael Mann, sensed that the quintessentially telegenic Greater Miami, with its cycle of decline, decay, redevelopment, and renewal (invariably followed by further repetitions of the cycle), affirmed the indeterminacy and contingency of postmodern noir. In the words of Nicholas Christopher: “The noir city, forming and reforming itself endlessly, . . . is inevitably on a road to dissolution, the knowledge of which ticks at every moment in the hearts of its inhabitants.”⁴ *Miami Vice* premiered on NBC in September 1984 with an approach to episodic crime drama that combined a noir sensibility with South Florida locales and extravagant production values. Sunshine noir was born.⁵ Instead of simply reproducing classic noir’s urban chiaroscuro, *Miami Vice* represented metropolitan space as a highly colored, brightly lit zone of fast-paced activity with grand prix racing, powerboating, jai alai, and the like, as illustrated in the kinetic montages that followed the pre-credits grabber that opened every episode and accompanied the closing credits. “The important thing,” Michael Mann said about the philosophically contested relation between the actual city of Miami and its televised reconstruction, “is to create a situation which lets the viewer see what the viewer wants to see.”⁶

Over the course of the series, the demographic, economic, political, and cultural transformations that South Florida was undergoing were reflected and refracted in the lives and fortunes of its protagonists, vice detectives Sonny Crockett (Don Johnson) and Ricardo Tubbs (Philip Michael Thomas). Long a bilingual (English and Spanish) city, Miami experienced rapid multiculturalization that was due largely to immigration from Cuba, Haiti, and Central and South America and was woven into the program's plots and themes.⁷ *Miami Vice* registers an awareness of these changes and represents the city not only as a place where, as Crockett informs Tubbs, "you can't tell the players without a program," but also as itself a character. This city-as-character aspect of *Miami Vice* is, in fact, one of the most prominent film noir motifs.⁸

A combination of inspired scriptwriting, jaunty direction, and tour de force performances in guest-starring roles by Ed O'Neill, Bruce Willis, Dennis Farina, William Russ, John Glover, Liam Neeson, Brian Dennehy, Bruce McGill, and others assured that *Miami Vice* exhibited a wide range of sharply delineated characters (in addition to the central figures) throughout its five-year run. The character actor Martin Ferrero, in a recurring role (Izzy Moreno), injected fortifying doses of humor, as did Charlie Barnett (Noogie Lamont) and, in supporting roles, Michael Talbott (Stan Switek) and John Diehl (Larry Zito). Cameo appearances by Ed Lauter, Jeff Fahey, Walter Gotell, and Timothy Carhart, among many others, added texture to the atmosphere. Nearly every episode featured quirky, off-center performances. Second leads and character actors (Ray Sharkey, Pepe Serna, Joe Dallesandro, Keye Luke), celebrities (Miles Davis, Bill Russell, Phil Collins, Frank Zappa), stars in the making (Julia Roberts, Bill Paxton, Ben Stiller, Wesley Snipes), and talented newcomers (Steve Buscemi, Larry Joshua, Ned Eisenberg, Chris Rock) were cast as drug dealers, cops on the take, corrupt politicians, porn performers, con artists, and other shadow figures of the noir demimonde.

The metamorphosis of classic film noir with its dark portent, enveloping paranoia, and sense of doomed fatefulness into the South Florida neo-noir for which I have coined the term *sunshine noir* preserved many of the narrative elements found in classic noir: crime, featuring a contest between good and evil in which the protagonists, as often as not, are seen as antiheroes; betrayal and violence; plot twists and reversals; and a cinematic style (the early seasons of *Miami Vice* were shot on film rather than videotape).⁹ Against the classic noir grain, but very much in keeping with the sunshine noir sensibility, designs, colors, and locations em-

phasized South Florida's iconography, both natural (the Atlantic Ocean, Biscayne Bay, the Everglades) and man-made (I. M. Pei's CenTrust Tower on Miami's imposing skyline, Arquitectonica's postmodern private residence, Spear House, and the Atlantis condominium with its signature sky court on Brickell Avenue). Consistent with its site-specific format, *Miami Vice* often decoupled its film noir elements from the low-rent atmospherics associated with classic film noir: location shoots included sites known for their beauty, such as Key Biscayne, Coral Gables, and Coconut Grove. Jan Hammer's deeply saturated music sound track replaced the jazz of classic film noir, while pop, reggae, soul, and new wave singles established a contemporary mood. With songs like "Tiny Demons" (Todd Rundgren), "Voices" (Russ Ballard), "Smuggler's Blues" (Glenn Frey), and "What Is Life?" (Black Uhuru), *Miami Vice* achieved an almost uncanny fit between music, sensibility, and theme week after week.

The Noir Way of Seeing Things

Additional continuities between the noir films of the classic period and the postmodern neo-noir of *Miami Vice* can be summarized in terms of five features that make up the film noir way of seeing things.¹⁰ First (for the most part, because there are some notable exceptions), the protagonists in film noir are men whose pasts involve a range of indiscretions, problems, bad judgments, and character flaws. Illustrative of this basic element of male protagonists with troubled pasts are Crockett's Vietnam War experiences and impending divorce, Tubbs's vengeance-motivated impersonation of a New York undercover detective as he seeks out his brother's killer, and Lieutenant Martin Castillo's (Edward James Olmos) shadowy DEA background in Southeast Asia. The feature is also found, for example, in disturbing episodes such as "Out Where the Buses Don't Run," where Bruce McGill is cast as a deranged ex-detective whose obsession with bringing an acquitted drug dealer to justice conceals an unspeakable act from his past, and "No Exit," where Bruce Willis is cast as a sadistic, wife-abusing arms dealer. It figures prominently in the episode "Back in the World," featuring a central character with a war background similar to that of the eponymous figure in *The Third Man* (Carol Reed, 1949) (different wars, of course). G. Gordon Liddy is cast as an army infantry officer who is trying to sell his rapidly decomposing cache of Vietnam War-era heroin to addicts, killing them in the process, just as Harry Lime, the Orson Welles character, is selling diluted penicillin to hospitals whose patients are dying from it.

Second, most of the drama of film noir is enacted against the backdrop of a godless world. Events of significance grow out of the exercise of human choice rather than from divine providence. Religion plays no determinative role in the lives of any of the protagonists in *Miami Vice*, although a number of episodes deal with religious themes. “Evan” in the first season is a meditation on guilt, atonement, and redemption as Evan Freed (William Russ), an undercover ATF agent and former pal of Crockett’s, must deal with the way he taunted and tormented a gay fellow officer who subsequently committed suicide; “Whatever Works” and “Tale of the Goat” (in the second season) and “Amen . . . Send Money” (in the fourth) feature Santeria, Voodoo, and feuding televangelists, respectively. However, the existence of a divine creator and the possibility of an afterlife are rarely, if ever, mentioned either as sources of strength or as solutions to the problems of the central characters.

Third, film noir is permeated with enigmas of personal identity—its meaning, fragmentation, partial recovery, and ultimate loss. In *Miami Vice*, Crockett, Tubbs, Gina, and Trudy must maintain a precarious balance between their actual identities and their undercover masks, a problem that can rise to tragic pitch, as I discuss below in connection with the episode “Heart of Darkness.”

Fourth, while film noir protagonists must make choices and are free in some vague sense, their actions are, nevertheless, products of and constrained by troubled pasts, an idea reinforced by the voice-over narration and flashback structure of classic film noir and by flashback and other techniques of character exposition and backgrounding in *Miami Vice*. In the pilot episode, “Brother’s Keeper,” Crockett’s partner (Jimmy Smits) is killed in a car bomb explosion as he attempts to make a routine buy from a drug dealer. Tubbs witnesses the killing of his brother, an undercover police detective, by agents of a drug kingpin. Both events recur in flashback in subsequent episodes. These events, together with subsequent developments that fill out each character’s backstory, lay the foundation for the “deterministic tyranny of that past.”¹¹ It is as if the events and patterns in the lives of each exert a controlling impetus, impelling them toward what Butler describes as “the core dilemma of *Miami Vice*”: whether Crockett and Tubbs “will surrender themselves to the world of vice.”¹²

Fifth, there is a self-protecting code of amoral self-interest among film noir protagonists that tends to erode in connection with their encounters with the femme fatale and subsequent betrayal by her. In *Miami Vice*, women are cast primarily as nurturers or redeemers and rarely as femmes

fatales. Gina Calabrese (Saundra Santiago), with whom Crockett has an intermittent affair, offers him comfort when he is served his divorce papers and support when he is investigated by Internal Affairs. Crockett's and Tubbs's romantic interests are more frequently depicted as victims (of drug addiction, shoot-outs, and strong-arm tactics by loan sharks, to mention three examples) than as scheming, treacherous villains. In 1985, it was plausible for Butler to observe: "*Miami Vice* still lacks one key *noir* character: the sexy, duplicitous woman. . . . Surprisingly, all of the women with whom Crockett and Tubbs have become involved have functioned as redeemers."¹³ Nevertheless, the episodes "The Great McCarthy" in the first season and "Definitely Miami," "Little Miss Dangerous," and "French Twist" in the second offer us chilling examples of the femme fatale type as, respectively, a woman playing Tubbs off against her drug-smuggling boyfriend, a woman attempting to manipulate Crockett into a drug deal with her homicidal lover, a psychotic prostitute–serial killer who makes a play for Tubbs and nearly costs him his life, and a seductive French Interpol agent.

Three Exemplary Episodes

As Butler observes, style is not the only element linking *Miami Vice* and film noir.¹⁴ Not only atmosphere and detail but also story line and theme make the series work as postmodern noir. The fractured identities of "Heart of Darkness," the oneiric overdetermination of "Shadow in the Dark," and the shifting allegiances and paranoia of "Lend Me an Ear" should be understood as indicating postmodern noir's fundamentally indeterminate universe of dislocated values, dissociated identities, and loyalties ever on the verge of dissolution. Even Crockett's Daytona Spyder can be seen as a target of the postmodern critique of personal identity since it is for the purpose of posing as the fast-living "Sonny Burnett" that he has been provided with the Ferrari, the cigarette boat, the sloop *St. Vitus Dance*, the Rolex watch, and the stylish wardrobe. If he is stripped of these things, it is impossible to know what, if anything, remains of his core personhood or whether, indeed, there is an enduring self at all. At the end of the fourth season, Crockett suffers a concussion while undercover and metamorphoses into Sonny Burnett. The white linen jackets and pastel silks give way to dark colors and coarser fabrics. Over the span of the series, we witness many challenges and shocks to the identities and values of the central figures. Let us therefore look at three character-driven, theme-intensive episodes as if they were three postmodernist neo-noir films writ small.

"Heart of Darkness"

It was a risky venture to follow the brisk, action-oriented two-hour *Miami Vice* pilot with an episode that achieves almost Conradian bleakness. The aerial establishing shot of a bright, sunny, and beautiful downtown Miami is an ironic comment on the sordid pretitle sequence that opens "Heart of Darkness."¹⁵ Crockett and Tubbs, working undercover as out-of-town porn theater owners looking to buy product, have been assigned to bring down the operation of the South Florida porn impresario Sam Kovics (Paul Hecht). On the set of a porn film in the making, the buy is actually a set-up for a prearranged bust to establish the pair's credentials as legitimate buyers. (Observing the action on the set, Crockett quips: "If all else fails, we can always bust 'em for felony bad dialogue.")¹⁶ The ruse works, and they're sprung from jail in a matter of hours by Kovics's right-hand man, Artie Rollins, who seems to be running interference for the elusive Kovics. Rollins is in reality Arthur Lawson (Ed O'Neill), an undercover FBI agent. A typical neo-noir protagonist, Lawson has become so proficient in his undercover role that he has begun to identify with Artie Rollins. In a violent sequence, he nearly beats to death a customer who is late with a payment to Kovics. Crockett and Tubbs learn that, over the past six weeks, Lawson has cut himself off from the bureau, abandoned the wired apartment in which he had been set up, and moved into a luxurious waterfront condo. He has stopped filing reports and calling his wife. This has generated suspicion among his superiors at the bureau that he has gone over to the other side.

Lawson is, indeed, a man in the middle, caught between a quotidian life and marriage and a world of money, sex, and criminal activity that he is not only investigating but also participating in. Morally speaking, his position is precarious. His aim is to gather enough evidence against Kovics to guarantee an airtight conviction, but, while he is undercover, he doesn't want anyone to question his methods. "Are you trying to get me killed? I'm on an investigation here!" he shouts at Crockett and Tubbs after he has learned that they are vice detectives. He tells the dismayed pair: "If I make a strategic decision to cut corners, to throw the book away, it's my decision, 'cause it's me out here and nobody else."

Crockett is determined to use Artie to bring down Kovics's operation, but Tubbs is increasingly skeptical about the usefulness of the unpredictable agent. Much of the power and appeal of the episode comes from trying to answer questions that arise about both Artie's reliability and Crockett's motivation to defend him. One way to interpret the episode is, therefore, to

see it in terms of people who have taken on roles and responsibilities that they are neither entirely satisfied in assuming nor entirely free to escape. This gives the episode its philosophical dimension, for, by the episode's end, Arthur Lawson realizes that his undercover intrigues have all been attempts to give his life meaning, a realization that he expresses when he tells Crockett and Tubbs: "I don't know if I can go back to my wife and that life. It's like I've been riding an adrenalin high, all that money and all those women. And after a while, all of the things that went before, it got like a . . . it's like a . . . I don't know."

The changes that Arthur Lawson undergoes in the ways he feels about his wife and "that life" are manifestations of his ambivalence and anxiety. He seems unable to either reject or wholly accept those drives and desires that are expressed through the persona of Artie Rollins. Part of the explanation of this is the typical noir one of the far-reaching effects of the past; another part is the existentialist idea of freedom. The roles, relations, and commitments in terms of which Arthur Lawson has defined himself reach back into his past and are not easily forsaken. They need not be continuously affirmed because they are sustained by the inertial forces of habit and convention, forces that are now breaking up as Lawson recognizes the dreadful freedom of choice open to him. Jonathan A. Jacobs, discussing Andre Gide's existentialist novel *The Immoralist* (1902), observes that the realization of such freedom produces anxiety and may, indeed, estrange one from oneself. Lawson is in a state of "unrelieved tension" between opposites, each side of him at once vying for dominance and restrained by the other.¹⁷

There is, in fact, a double realization at the heart of "Heart of Darkness," for Tubbs realizes that Crockett's compassion for Artie has its motivational source in a profound identification with the undercover agent. It reflects his own ambivalence about the undercover life that he, Crockett, must live in his guise as Sonny Burnett. When Lieutenant Lou Rodriguez (Gregory Sierra) wants to pull Lawson in, Crockett comes to his defense, insisting that they can count on Artie's help, but Tubbs remains skeptical: "Artie doesn't know what he's doing from one second to the next. You can't see that right now. You know why? Because you don't see Artie, you see yourself." Nevertheless, in a showdown with Rodriguez, Tubbs sides with Crockett: "Leave Artie on the streets, and he'll deliver Kovics," he tells Rodriguez. Tubbs thus defends his partner's judgment against his own better judgment, ushering in an often-repeated series motif of bonding between the two.

A disturbing coda consolidates the episode's bleak vision. A midnight drug deal with Kovics results in the vice detectives' covers being blown and their lives being put on the line. They are saved by Artie, who executes (there is no other word for it) Kovics and his bodyguard, themselves murderers, in the process. As Lawson is taken downtown for debriefing by FBI personnel, an overlapping sound track, George Benson's "This Masquerade," extends into the next scene inside a cop bar, where Crockett and Tubbs are trying to unwind after the evening's harrowing events. The ensuing dialogue foregrounds and underscores the theme of "This Masquerade": the multiple roles that each of the central figures perform must play and the erosion of identity entailed by such masquerades. "You know those mirrors at amusement parks," Crockett asks Tubbs, "the ones that warp everything out of whack? I feel like I've been staring at myself in one for the past three days." The association of the masquerade with disguising identity is obvious. But Arthur Lawson's masquerade, his embrace of the fantasy life of Artie Rollins, with its sexual enticements and excitement and its casting off of conventional morality, is also a flight from an identity that he can neither embrace nor disown. Ultimately, "Heart of Darkness" signals a postmodernist skepticism about the unity, coherence, and continuity of the *subject*, the preferred critical term for the self in postmodernist thought.

The pair is joined in the bar by Lou Rodriguez, who tells them that he has just received a phone call from the federal agent who has been debriefing Lawson for the past three hours: "[Lawson] stepped out for a breather, made a call to his wife, went into the men's room, and hung himself." This news is delivered in reaction shots that conclude with Crockett in close-up, his eyes widening in shock, followed by a shot of Crockett, Tubbs, and Rodriguez that ends the episode in freeze-frame as the haunting lyric of "This Masquerade" bears grim witness to Artie's suicide.

"Shadow in the Dark"

"Shadow in the Dark," from *Miami Vice*'s third season, brings together the itinerary of a demented cat burglar (Vincent Caristi), the dysfunction of Police Lieutenant Ray Gilmore (Jack Thibau), who is driven to a breakdown trying to capture him, and the unraveling of Crockett as he tries to pry inside the identity of the burglar. All this is set in a claustrophobic, nightmarish universe of intersecting encounters patterned on the leitmotif of shared and, ultimately, shattered identities. The dark style is an indication of things to come when scriptwriter Chuck Adamson would become

the cocreator of the celebrated, if short-lived, series *Crime Story* (1986–88). The episode handles its multiple ironies with verve and imagination: An enigmatic central figure who has police baffled is caught only after Gilmore, conferring from a psychiatric lockup, confirms Crockett's intuitive sense of when and where the next home invasion will occur. Of course, Crockett's determination is itself the product of an obsession to crack the case.

The intruder works an enclave of expensive, multilevel homes with lots of glass. We observe him once he is inside one of these homes. He covers his face with flour, takes cuts of raw meat from the kitchen refrigerator, and bites into them. He leaves bizarre drawings on the walls. Throughout the episode, he wears ragged clothing to indicate his status as an outsider, an interloper in the upper-middle-class milieu he is terrorizing. The character's derangement, which has congealed into the set of behaviors seen on the screen, is so clouded in ambiguity that we must simply accept it since it is never given hard propositional form. It is something *felt*, its eerie quality conveyed by a haunting Jan Hammer score. "He's a cat burglar who specializes in pants—no jewels, no hoops, no currency," Gilmore tells the perplexed Crockett and Tubbs when they are commandeered by the burglary division to help with the investigation. "And he never wakes anyone up." But what is clearly on Gilmore's mind, and increasingly on Crockett's as he enters these proceedings, is what is going to happen when the intruder *does* wake someone up.

Key sequences bring out the episode's epistemological themes. Gilmore, who has finally gone over the edge, is found in the kitchen of a home where he believes he has cornered the intruder. He fires his weapon five or six times into the freezer unit, where he insists the intruder is hiding. Of course, Gilmore has gone mad. Police officers arrive on the scene to take him into custody as he continues raving: "To catch these guys you gotta think like 'em, feel like 'em, walk like 'em, talk like 'em, see like 'em. . . ."

Crockett is drawn deeper into the investigation, and his obsession with the intruder is a confusing mix of hatred, fear, fascination, and desire. He tries to decode the burglar's malevolent pattern by circumventing normal investigative procedures and putting himself into the intruder's mind-set. "Shadow in the Dark" is given a look that echoes and comments on these disorienting and disturbing aspects of Crockett's behavior. For example, everything is slightly askew and shot at a tilted angle in the scene in which Crockett, looking into a mirror and applying flour to his own face, attempts to mimic the cat burglar's persona.

Crockett photographs houses in the city's northeast grid and tries to

pick out the site of the next home invasion. "There's something about these houses . . . certain kinds of houses, a certain vibe. There's something about these drawings, Gilmore was cueing in on them. I can't explain," he tells Castillo, "but I think I'm on to it." He patrols the area at night in a scene in which deep blacks predominate, as in much of film noir. In a riveting sequence, he sees the bizarre drawings of the intruder on a neighborhood sidewalk. He enters a backyard. In a series of quick cuts shot from low angles, there's a sudden, startling, high-pitched screech as the intruder comes at Crockett at close range, followed by another quick cut to Crockett at his desk at headquarters as he abruptly wakes from this nightmare, knocking over the desk lamp. This fast cutting gathers up all the intensity of the scene and disperses it into the scene that follows as Crockett calls in Tubbs, Switek, Gina, and Trudy for an impromptu midnight search of the neighborhood where he believes he has just "seen" the intruder. They find nothing, but the shot of Crockett and Tubbs driving away from the neighborhood reveals the intruder lurking in the darkness. The effect of this stunning bit of foreshadowing will be fully realized later in the episode.

The investigation begins to take its toll on Sonny. Castillo finds him having an after-dinner drink as the early morning sun pours through the window of the street-front restaurant. "It's funny when you work all night," he tells the vice lieutenant. "The whole world seems like it gets out of synch with you. It's like you can sneak up on it." The ominous comment is delivered with a note of menace as Castillo orders two cups of coffee and Crockett signals to the waiter that he'll have another shot instead:

CASTILLO: Just think straight.

CROCKETT: I don't *need* to think straight. I need to think like *him*.

CASTILLO: Thinking undercover, sometimes you can't stop when you need to.

CROCKETT: The answer we need is not in the book, it's in his head.

The illusory and oneiric aspects of "Shadow in the Dark" are indicative of a postmodern challenge to the idea that science is the only valid method of human knowing. Crockett realizes that he cannot catch his adversary by means of rational deduction or any other conventional use of rationality. Instead, he employs a process of reenacting the mental life of the intruder, a method reminiscent of the *Verstehen* approach associated with the German

philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey.¹⁸ Once he has achieved this understanding, Crockett manages to trap his man in the process of a break-in, knife in hand, as he is about to assault his victim. He beats the man bloody before officers arrive on the scene to take him into custody. But the effect that the fiend has had on Crockett is palpable. He taunts the vice detective as he is led away by police: "You live with me, don't you?"

"Shadow in the Dark" is not only the account of Crockett's unrelenting search through the dark and damaged world in which he must move if he is to find the deranged intruder. It is also Crockett's vigil as a spectator of his own story. In an interrogation sequence, Crockett sits on the observer's side of a two-way mirror, and, for a moment, we have a side view of both men. As we cut to Crockett's point of view, we see the prisoner and hear his non sequitur responses through the thick plate glass of the interrogation room. With this visual mnemonic recalling Jean-Paul Sartre's remark in his "Explication of *The Stranger*" that the Camus novel was written as if through plate glass, transparent to facts and opaque to meanings, we are reminded that we are dealing with a postmodernist, skeptical sensibility, where even the facts are opaque.¹⁹ The episode as a whole is filled with references to and images of glass, as if scriptwriter Adamson and director Christopher Crowe were intent on revealing the dislocations and distortions that all attempts to interrogate or discover the truth impose on their subject matter and disavowing once and for all the realist assumption that the camera gives us reality as if shot through a pane of glass.²⁰

A close-up shot of the intruder's face as it is reflected in the glass window that separates him from Crockett is followed by a quick cut as the man suddenly smashes the glass, then another quick cut to Crockett the moment he awakes in confusion on board the *St. Vitus Dance*, echoing the earlier waking nightmare sequence. The representation of the transition from Crockett's sleep to his wakefulness as a sudden break is designed to subvert our confidence in his ability to distinguish delusion from reality, and this reversal of the episode's narrative assumptions is, therefore, epistemologically destabilizing since the ending strongly suggests that it has all been Crockett's dream. (And, if it has *not* been his dream, we are left to wonder at what cost Crockett has purchased his triumph. The price of his victory is bound to be many nights of troubled sleep.) We fade out on Crockett, face in hands, trying to rub the memory out of his head. "Shadow in the Dark" thus ends with a deliberate distancing effect, keeping us in suspense and making us observers of and participants in Crockett's confusion.²¹ As a postmodern device for calling into question the reliability

of what we've been shown all along, it is an effective way of undermining the realist metaphysical assumptions and epistemological certainties that belong to an earlier, modernist period.

"Lend Me an Ear"

In "Heart of Darkness," the self is built on a fantasy life to which Arthur Lawson is so drawn that he is finally consumed by it. "Shadow in the Dark" depicts an implosion of the self on itself. But fantasy and isolation are not the only sources of jeopardy to the self. There is also a potent element in both classic noir and the neo-noir variations that follow—paranoid fear, with its obvious potential for cognitive impairment and emotional fracture. In "Lend Me an Ear," an episode from the third season, the paranoia theme is used to great effect as it confirms the saying, attributed to poet Delmore Schwartz, that even paranoids have (real) enemies.

Steve Duddy (John Glover), an ex-cop and electronics expert, is contracted by the vice squad to do "offensive sweeping" (i.e., surveillance bugging) of a suspected drug dealer, Alexander Dykstra (Yorgo Voyagis), a client for whom Duddy does "defensive sweeping" (i.e., debugging) and who, under the guise of laundering drug dealers' profits, is exporting their cash and killing them in the process. All this is abbreviated nicely in a striking angled shot of the interior of Dykstra's posh home at the episode's opening that conveys Duddy's topsy-turvy moral universe. Duddy's loyalties are equivocal and conflicted, and, in consequence, they are problematic both to himself and to those in whom he must place limited trust. In a remarkable set piece reminiscent of *The Conversation* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974), a film that "Lend Me an Ear" resembles for its ultimate collapse into moral solipsism, Duddy tells Crockett and Tubbs: "Everybody wants to know what everybody else is doing, but nobody wants to be the other guy."²² Duddy then concedes the downside to his occupation: "It's paranoia. I know a million ways to watch somebody, to listen to somebody, to peel open his secret lives. . . . And now I'm always wondering when *I'll* be the target and how they're going to get *me*."

Duddy seeks to fulfill his responsibilities and heed the call of conscience, on the one hand, and to satisfy the needs of prudential self-interest, on the other. Of course, these need not come into conflict; we are speaking here of what is possible, not what is inevitable. But Duddy is clearly in conflict when, while debugging Dykstra's home, he witnesses a cold-blooded killing. Interrogating his girlfriend with Duddy's own voice-stress analyzer,

Dykstra believes he has caught her in a lie and shoots her. ("I cannot tolerate dishonesty," he tells the stunned electronics wizard.) Duddy reports the murder by placing an anonymous phone call to the police. The tape of the call is sent to Crockett and Tubbs, who, in turn, take it to Duddy for analysis. "This voice has been electronically altered," he tells them. "No way you're going to get a voiceprint. Why don't you just pick him up? You've got your tip."

But they have no evidence with which to charge Dykstra, they complain in exasperated tones. Duddy prepares an edited tape—based on surreptitiously recorded phone conversations that are innocuous in themselves but devastating in the doctored version—in which Dykstra appears to have revealed his entire operation. Of course, Dykstra really *has* done the things the doctored tape has him disclosing, but there's no way the vice detectives can *know* that. Duddy feeds this cut-and-paste "conversation" to vice surveillance, giving them sufficient "evidence" out of Dykstra's own mouth to arrest him. Crockett, however, sees through Duddy's machinations. He and Tubbs converge on Duddy's house, but not before Dykstra and his gunmen have arrived. Duddy, anticipating Dykstra's discovery of the burst transmitters with which he has bugged his home, kills Dykstra and one of his men in a shoot-out. Crockett promptly arrests Duddy, but the district attorney refuses to press charges. Crockett is furious and welcomes a chance to give Duddy a taste of his own medicine.

The final scene opens on Duddy at his workstation, where half a dozen television monitors show identical images of Crockett, who tells the startled Duddy: "Steve, I know what you did, and you'll have to live with that. But just remember, I'll be watching." Thus, Duddy has become what he fears most, the subject of surveillance, caught in the web of forces from which he cannot free himself. The message is more than tit for tat, the price he must pay for divided loyalties. It is also one of paranoia, a common theme in film noir and in 1970s suspense thrillers like *The Anderson Tapes* (Sidney Lumet, 1971), *The Conversation*, and *The Parallax View* (Alan J. Pakula, 1974).²³ The atmosphere of fear and suspicion in which Duddy lives is epitomized by his maxim: "Always leave yourself a way out." This reflects Duddy's choice of individual assertion as well as his opportunism, and it is an application of the postmodernist idea that our ethical decisions are not privileged by agent-neutral reasons or an objective good. Our values have nothing to do with objective constraints or good reasons but are fictions, shaped and altered by those in power for their own interests, which might well include inducing us to make an accommodation to the status quo.

Miami Vice and Postmodern Noir

A hallmark of *Miami Vice* and a feature that it shares with films that go back to the classic noir cycle is the accumulation of details to convey not only a sense of time and place but also a mood. *Miami Vice* is proof, to borrow a phrase from Philip Gaines, of the undeniable through-line of film noir sensibility—filtered, I have argued, through a postmodernist prism.²⁴ The pervasive doubts about the meaning of life, the continuity of personal identity, and the possibility of knowledge of reality that are found in the exemplary episodes considered here are indicative of a postmodern noir subtext that runs through *Miami Vice* like a dark thread. The doubts reflect, as well, a grasp of Miami itself as a city on the edge, a place whose disruptive and destructive elements can be partially contained but never eliminated.

The perspectivist approach of postmodern philosophers was anticipated by Nietzsche, in whose work it was, no doubt, articulated most brilliantly.²⁵ As a philosophical doctrine, it nullifies the idea that there can be a final or best description of reality or an objective standpoint from which conflicting conceptions of knowledge, value, and the self can be evaluated. While this position is defended by postmodern philosophers, it is often simply a working assumption made by those in the arts who are more concerned with techniques for giving it form than with philosophical arguments in its defense. Of course, the constraints of commercial episodic television and the network structure that sustained them were far too rigid in the early to mid-1980s to permit anything like the transgressive meta-narratives now found as a matter of course on cable television. Even the episodes of *Miami Vice* that attack the bourgeois institutions of law, politics, and art in typical postmodernist fashion, or that convey the message that there is no epistemologically favored position or metaphysical center, did so within these constraints. Nevertheless, “Shadow in the Dark,” for example, with its attention to the cat burglar’s marginalized identity and its dreamlike confusion, went fairly far in disrupting coherent narrative and suggesting a postmodernist skeptical and relativist critique of knowledge and personal identity.

To the extent that its 111 episodes constitute chapters of “The Book of *Miami Vice*,” it is a radically underdetermined text, for there will always be more than one ending consistent with its stories. The final episode, “Free Fall,” seems to provide at best only a highly ambiguous answer to what Butler identified as the core dilemma of *Miami Vice*—whether Crockett and Tubbs would succumb to the lure of vice. Having reached the end of

their tether in a thoroughly politicized and corrupt international police operation, Crockett and Tubbs are looking for a way out. Tubbs thinks he'll return to New York; Crockett plans to keep driving south. In the guise of providing narrative closure, the show executes a stunning backward arc, looping back on itself at the end of the two-hour series finale with the same exchange between Crockett and Tubbs that five years earlier had closed out the pilot episode:

CROCKETT: Ever consider a career in Southern law enforcement?

TUBBS: Maybe . . . may-be. [Laughter.]²⁶

Notes

I am grateful to my colleague and fellow *Miami Vice* aficionado Aeon J. Skoble for helpful discussions and to Mark T. Conard for comments on an earlier draft.

1. Andrew Spicer, *Film Noir* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2002), 130, 149–65. A clear and concise account of postmodernism and its application to aesthetics generally is provided in the introductory discussion in John W. Bender and H. Gene Blocker, eds., *Contemporary Philosophy of Art* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1993), 1–9. Stephen R. C. Hicks provides a lucid study of the historical background, themes, assumptions, and consequences of postmodernist thought in *Explaining Postmodernism: Skepticism and Socialism from Rousseau to Foucault* (Tempe: Scholargy, 2004). See also my review essay on Hicks's book in *Reason Papers* 28 (Spring 2006): 111–24.

2. For further discussion of postmodernism and its relation to neo-noir, see Mark T. Conard, "Reservoir Dogs: Redemption in a Postmodern World" (in this volume).

3. I am indebted to Jeremy G. Butler's perceptive "*Miami Vice: The Legacy of Film Noir*" (1985), in *Film Noir Reader*, ed. Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight, 1996), 289–305.

4. Nicholas Christopher, *Somewhere in the Night: Film Noir and the American City* (New York: Free Press, 1997), 88.

5. There are anticipations in the Miami Beach-based neo-noir pastiches *Tony Rome* (Gordon Douglas, 1967) and *Lady in Cement* (Gordon Douglas, 1968), in Elmore Leonard's novels *Stick* (New York: Arbor, 1983) and *La Brava* (New York: Arbor, 1983), and in Charles Willeford's pulp-noir hybrid novels *Miami Blues* (New York: St. Martin's, 1984) and *New Hope for the Dead* (New York: St. Martin's, 1985).

6. Michael Mann quoted in T. D. Allman, *Miami: City of the Future* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1987), 97. Lawrence Grossman claims: "*Miami Vice* . . . is all on the surface. And the surface is nothing but a collection of quotations

from our own collective historical debris, a mobile game of Trivia. . . . The narrative is less important than the images" (quoted in Marc O'Day, "Postmodernism and Television," in *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, ed. Stuart Sim, 2nd ed. [New York: Routledge, 2005], 108). Grossman here sets up a false alternative. Why should we deny that *Miami Vice*'s striking images *complement* strong narratives? As I argue below, *Miami Vice* succeeds as an example of postmodern noir in both dimensions.

7. In this respect, the episodes discussed below are unrepresentative.

8. For an absorbing discussion and numerous illustrations of this theme, see Christopher, *Somewhere in the Night*. I discuss Las Vegas noir in "No Safe Haven: Casino, Friendship, and Egoism," in *The Philosophy of Martin Scorsese*, ed. Mark T. Conard (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007).

9. Sharon Y. Cobb provides a useful overview of film noir elements in "Writing the New Noir Film," in *Film Noir Reader 2*, ed. Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight, 1999), 207–13.

10. I discuss the first, second, and fourth features in "Film Noir and the Meaning of Life," in *The Philosophy of Film Noir*, ed. Mark T. Conard (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 91–105.

11. The phrase is Spencer Selby's. See his *Dark City: The Film Noir* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland Classics, 1984), 43. He uses it to refer to the idea found in Ernest Hemingway's short story "The Killers," an idea preserved in Robert Siodmak's 1946 film noir of the same title.

12. Butler, "*Miami Vice*," 296.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid., 298. Butler does not identify a specifically postmodern phase of film noir as I do, following Spicer (see n. 1 above); nor does he discuss the three episodes of *Miami Vice* that I examine below.

15. As Spicer notes: "The panoramic establishing shots [in postmodern noir], often arresting in their beauty, serve only as an ironic contrast to the sordid dramas that unfold" (*Film Noir*, 158).

16. The teleplay for "Heart of Darkness" was written by A. J. Edison.

17. Jonathan A. Jacobs, *Virtue and Self-Knowledge* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1989), 79–80.

18. Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) is known for the view that, in order to fully understand an individual's thoughts, motives, feelings, and intentions, as they are expressed in gestures and actions, we must go beyond the type of causal explanation found in the empirical sciences. What is needed is a special kind of understanding of meanings, values, and purposes, an understanding that Dilthey called *Verstehen*.

19. Jean-Paul Sartre, "An Explication of *The Stranger*," in *Camus: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Germaine Bree (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962), 108–21.

20. The image of the writer whose books “give us reality as it really is, through a pane of glass,” goes back to Zola, as James Wood points out in his discussion of literary realism and its postmodernist critics in “The Blue River of Truth,” *New Republic*, August 1, 2005, 24.

21. Andrew Spicer calls Orson Welles’s noir masterwork *Touch of Evil* a “deliberately disorienting, confusing film” with a “sense of a waking nightmare,” a description that applies to “Shadow in the Dark” as well (*Film Noir*, 61).

22. The teleplay for “Lend Me an Ear” was written by Michael Duggan from a story by Dick Wolf.

23. For an acute discussion of the paranoid thriller and its resemblance to film noir, see Mark Feeney, *Nixon at the Movies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), chap. 9.

24. According to Philip Gaines: “The through-line of film noir is undeniable” (“Noir 101,” in Silver and Ursini, eds., *Film Noir Reader 2*, 341). Gaines mentions *Miami Vice* as an example of “TV noir,” not postmodern noir.

25. Nietzsche’s perspectivism is found, among other places, in his 1882 *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974).

26. The teleplay for “Brother’s Keeper,” the *Miami Vice* pilot episode, was written by Anthony Yerkovich. A testament to the vitality of *Miami Vice* is this list, prepared by Aeon Skoble pretty much off the top of his head, of the large number of familiar faces who appeared in the series: Bruce Willis, Michael Richards, Laurence Fishburne, John Leguizamo, Melanie Griffith, Penn Jillette, Gene Simmons, Ving Rhames, Benicio Del Toro, Helena Bonham Carter, David Strathairn, Michael Madsen, Charles S. Dutton, Stanley Tucci, Esai Morales, Viggo Mortensen, Paul Guilfoyle, Annette Bening, Dean Stockwell, Lou Diamond Phillips, Willie Nelson, Miguel Ferrer, Penelope Ann Miller, Kelly Lynch, Alfred Molina, Xander Berkeley, R. Lee Ermey, Dylan Baker, Chris Cooper, Melissa Leo, Pruitt Taylor Vince, Amanda Plummer, Michael Chiklis, John Pankow, Eartha Kitt, Jon Polito, John Santucci, Pam Grier, Reni Santoni, John Turturro, Laura San Giacomo, Kyrá Sedgwick, Mykel T. Williamson, and Clarence Williams III.

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