

Riordan pipes up, "You ought to have given a dinner party" (242). Frye has taught us that concluding feasts are the hallmarks of social equilibrium restored. Anne is society's "appropriate other" for Marlowe, though not his own choice. They drink, banter, and recount the ways in which life has improved since Malloy's death: Chief Wax has been fired; Red got his police job back. But social reintegration has its dark side. Neither reconciliatory feasts nor comedy according to Frye preclude paying the costs. Velma takes up the prodigal's mantle now. She has provided herself an escape route from Los Angeles, a "little hideout where she could change her clothes and appearance" (242). The imputation of an ongoing double life to Velma and the imagery it is couched in are striking, for a double life on the margin of the sea is exactly what Marlowe has had.

The fabula requires that Velma be returned to her origins. That is why, in a striking coda, Lieutenant Randall tells Marlowe that Velma has been discovered singing in a Baltimore nightclub. Marijuana smoke wafted from her dressing room, and the ambience seems to indicate black musicians, perhaps jazz clubs. Velma was a "torcher who could sing as if she meant it." Figuratively, though, she has returned to the smoke and fog of the Central District. Discovered by a detective, Velma shoots him and then commits suicide, which puzzles Lieutenant Randall. He figures that her money and connections could have gotten her off if she had stood trial in Los Angeles. Marlowe thinks she ended her life in the East to avoid embarrassing Mr. Grayle. He imputes a scrap of sentimentality to her, a desire to "give a break to the only man who had ever really given her one. . . . An old man who had loved not wisely, but too well" (249).

But Mr. Grayle is no Othello, himself a prodigal of notable initial success. He is rather another declining father, an enfeebled General Sternwood, almost a joke, about to be retired by society's organization man, Lieutenant Randall. The Othello here, as the trope about the tarantula revealed, was Malloy. And this is actually Desdemona's story, told by a conniving Iago-like detective named Marlowe. Why else would the novel end thus: "It was a cool day and very clear. You could see a long way—but not as far as Velma had gone" (249). If the prodigal knows how to leave, the schizoid knows how to keep on going.

Landscape in the Los Angeles novel is always weighted with symbolic meaning. The fact that the writers, as outsiders, were playing the region contrapuntally against a home territory accounts to a large extent for the symbolic quality it acquired in fiction. The landscape offered itself readily to a vision of being cut off from a familiar sense of space.

—David Fine, *Los Angeles in Fiction*

6

From Roman Noir to Film Noir

The debt of film noir to the novels of Hammett, Cain, and Chandler may by now seem clear, but it is challenged by film scholars. Film is visual, a highly technical medium whose optical qualities create its effect as much as its narrative does, they say. These effects set film noir apart, they contend, either as a style or a genre, from any literary origin.¹ This style-versus-genre debate, like the one over the term *film noir*, is tangled and can only be touched on here. Lost in the debate is the fact that film noir derives from the same techno-economic matrix that produced the roman noir, as a comparison of their narrative uses of setting reveals. Technological and economic imperatives simply cloak themselves

better in film, while literature's anxiety about such influences makes them palpable. In this comparison, we will see that film noir is even more metonymic, its voice-over and flashbacks the logical step beyond Chandler's schizophrenia.

Let's begin with an admission: literary investigators seldom notice that the American roman noir is set mostly in California, principally Los Angeles, or remark that its authors were outsiders. This odd conjunction goes completely unexamined in films derived from the novels, because film criticism contends that setting is just not as important as lighting, tracking shots, or *mise-en-scène*. In American literary scholarship, however, setting has been the meat of the canonical stew, and cooks from Perry Miller through Leo Marx and Alfred Kazin have corrected the ideological seasoning according to the era. Native sons or daughters extolling the virtues or the complexity or, more recently, the limitations of a rural landscape have been the stock of a scholarship showing that beneath such bucolic or positivist surfaces, difficult negotiations with progress were taking place. That California, conceived by the reading (and viewing) public as among the world's beautiful places, should be selected by outsiders as the locus of "alienation" and "depravity"—this would have seemed a disparity to the cooks that required explanation. Landscape and region, they held, were significant in the American ideological complex, especially in its favored narratives about progress, technology, success, and integrity. Might not film noir be an example of the effects technology induces into narratives about social and economic change? Is it not probable that the technique of film noir continues a trend established by the technique of the roman noir, expanding upon the "invisibility" that technology creates for itself?

The narrative debt was originally clear. When French critic Jean-Pierre Chartier wrote "Les américains aussi font les film noirs" in *La Revue du Cinéma* in 1946, World War II had prevented his countrymen from seeing *The Maltese Falcon*, *Double Indemnity*, and other such films. Chartier found these films as dark as *Pepe le Moko* (1937) and *Quai des brumes* (1938). In coining the term *film noir*, he brought readers up to date on American tough-guy trends, which since the 1920s had attracted the French, especially writers (Camus was an early fan of Hammett). The comparison implied by *aussi* in Chartier's title appears to be "American roman

noir," for as Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward point out, "the majority of the *serie noir* [detective novels published in France] were translations of . . . such authors as Hammett, Chandler, James M. Cain and Horace McCoy" (1). So the source of American film noir was clear to Chartier. He didn't imply that the American films derived from French films, yet this is the *faux pas* attributed to him by scholars dating the coinage to moviemaker Nino Frank before 1946. Such quibbling led to radical disavowals of the form's parentage, as in Silver and Ward's comment that "the narrative of these noir films possessed an economy of expression and a graphic impact substantially different from the hard-boiled novels or the pulp stories of the *Black Mask* magazine" (1).

The source of film noir still seemed obvious to French critics Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton in their pioneering 1956 genealogy of the genre. The "immediate source," they wrote, "is clearly the American or English detective thriller novel. . . . Hammett, Chandler, Cain, W. R. Burnett." These two said film noir was "a total submission by the cinema to literature" (quoted in Telotte 5). Indeed, in Silver and Ward's 1980 reference volume, of the thirty-six examples of film noir listed for the 1940-45 period, twenty-seven are based on published works, seven on unpublished works. Only two are original film scripts (see Telotte 6). Yet the authors write that "*noir* films have no precise antecedents either in terms of a well-defined literary genre or a period in American history." They propose an immaculate conception: that film noir is a "self-contained reflection of American cultural preoccupations" and "the unique example of a wholly American film style" with "no express chain of causality leading up to it" (Silver and Ward 1, 3).

Even David Bordwell, in otherwise magisterial scholarship, deprecates the literary sources of film noir: "We inherit a category constructed *ex post facto* out of a perceived resemblance between continental crime melodramas and a few Hollywood productions" (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 243). But Bordwell then goes on to enumerate the "particular patterns of nonconformity within Hollywood" that make these noir films similar as narratives: they all assault the classic Hollywood construction of character through psychological causality, offering unstable heroes concerned with internal conflicts; they challenge the predominance of heterosexual

romance, with the hero often finding that a woman bars him from success; they attack motivated happy endings; and their innovative visual techniques constitute a criticism of the classic "neutral and invisible" style (76). Bordwell implicitly acknowledges more literary debt than do most commentators, beginning with Paul Schrader, who see film noir as only a "style" (Schrader in Denby 278-90).² Bordwell prefers to consider it a genre, but rather than cite narrative sources, he posits a rebellion against Hollywood's "classic construction," which is conventionally narrative, that somehow avoids narrativity, as though no repertoire of narrative events and techniques had ever created "unstable heroes" before.

Most debate about the canonicity of film noir depends on retrospects about style, rather than on genealogies of plot, character, or other features. Beguiling techniques in *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) seem to lead to *The Big Sleep* (1946) and thence to *Chinatown* (1980). Thus discussion about film noir has become a debate about whether it was a genre or a style and has implicitly privileged technique over other narrative aspects.

There is a broad clue to the distinctness of film noir in Bordwell's argument about "classic" film, for in it the "causes" of character are external, usually deriving from events and other characters. The noir protagonist is, in fact, conceived by both the genre and the style camps to be pre-conditioned by setting; hence they give importance to establishing shots of cityscapes, the use of shadow, high- and low-angle shots, and the "alienating" effect of character position in the mise-en-scène. They agree that depiction of such "internalized" characters lends itself to energetic camera work. Hence they emphasize technique, which supposedly conveys "internal conflict" in and of itself, without narrativity or ideology. Silver and Ward offer an example of such assumptions:

Fritz Lang, in discussing the camera movement in *The Blue Gardenia*, asserted that the film's fluid tracking shots, which relentlessly pursue his guilt-ridden heroine, could not have been executed without the compact crab dolly. The detailed exterior night work in *Kiss Me Deadly*, repeatedly framing its protagonists against drab structures and flashing street lights, is a conspicuous example of expressive implementation of higher speed lenses and film stock. Hand held camera work in that same film, or ten years earlier in the fight sequences of *Body and Soul*, under-

scores at yet another level that sense of instability so central to the noir vision. (3)

This seems to give technology its due, but it ignores such fundamentally narrative meanings as "guilt-ridden." The heroine is not guilt-ridden because of tracking shots any more than Stephen Daedalus has an Oedipus complex because of interior monologues. But if new technology creates new means of stylistic expression, a new arena for technique, which then create a new kind of character in film noir, isn't a relation between the technology and the character likely? Doesn't technological determinism rear its head? Could there be a link between the explosion in the means of making films and the nature of the films made? Could film noir be an example of the effects technology induces into narratives about social and economic change? Doesn't a sequence of film techniques create a figurative meaning?

The figuration of setting in film noir is unapparent. Silver and Ward describe the typical locale as "contemporaneous, usually urban, and almost always American in setting. The few exceptions involve either urban men in a rural locale or Americans abroad. There is a narrative assumption that only natural forces are at play; extraordinary occurrences are either logically elucidated or left unexplained—no metaphysical values are adopted" (3). Let us ask how contemporary, urban American settings lead to a "narrative assumption" of rational explicability—and how this judgment squares with the equally common one that characters in noir sense a determinism at work.

While no deity reigns, there are certainly metaphysical values present in film noir's settings. Rather than a neutralized setting, place and nature are always rationally explicable because they are managed by technology. We can see this clearly by contrasting noir settings to those of films made before 1930, the era of DeMille and Griffith. Hollywood then shared the older American practice of surveying the place where it found itself and liberating its subject from the pressures of time and locale. Whether the narrative was set in Babylon or at Bull Run, the "world elsewhere" created by technique and style in film, as Richard Poirier has noted of the novel, concerned the "creation of America out of a continental vastness" (4).

Even the most naive moviegoer knew this "world elsewhere" was Los

Angeles. In the work of Sennett, Chaplin, Keaton, and Harold Lloyd, the viewer saw the wide, clean streets of Los Angeles, pleasant suburban bungalows, palm trees, and distant mountains. There were no clouds, no dark alleys, no claustrophobic rooms; nature was benign, and the light was special. In fact, bright light illuminated every corner. The harried Los Angeles life of Lloyd in *Safety Last* (1923) must have appeared idyllic to audiences in Iowa. The setting in a Keystone chase or even in Chaplin's most polemical films was potentially liberating. This tradition of "idyllic, pastoral treatment," as Louis Giannetti has pointed out, extends from the hundreds of films made by the influential D. W. Griffith virtually unbroken through his disciples John Ford and Frank Capra (Giannetti, *Masters* 74).

The revision of this setting in literature owes, as Poirier notes, to naturalism. In popular literature, it owes to Hammett, Cain, McCoy, Chandler, and others, who rendered a new socioeconomic California in which no expansion of self was possible. This did not have any substantial basis in reality; they were consciously involved in closing off, by technique, outlets to a world elsewhere. Scholarship by Starr and other historians of California shows that between 1900 and 1950 there was abundant, reasonably priced housing, relatively honest government, and little crime.³ As David Fine notes, the figure of California as noir that these authors created was "contrapuntal," a reaction especially against two fatigued metaphors observed by Starr. The romantic metaphor, exemplified by Helen Hunt Jackson's *Ramona* (1884), was rooted in the Spanish-American pioneer era and influenced D. W. Griffith and his generation, as is evident in the "Mediterranean" and "Babylonian" premises of many of their films. This was followed by the "Progressive" view of Charles Arthur Loomis, Arroyo culture, and the Good Government movement, typified by Mary Austin's novels. Cain and McCoy then, notes Fine, focus on the finiteness of "the man-made landscape—the roadside motor court, the dance hall at the edge of the ocean, the car on the Coast Highway—as images of deception, metaphors for betrayed hope" (18).

These authors and the directors who filmed their work moved to California in midlife with high expectations, just as Iowans had a decade earlier, and they lived a good life. Twenty years before they would have labored

for a penny a word in Greenwich Village's dime novel ghetto, but they now lived opulently. So what exactly was betrayed? When Cain reported on "Paradise" for *American Mercury* in 1933, he rhapsodized about California's cleanliness, quality of education, roads, and recreation, and "unfailing friendliness and courtesy" (266–80). There was no alienation in his initial, reportorial account.

When Cain and McCoy went on to portray what the reading public conceived to be a Valhalla of "sunshine and oranges" as the locus of deceit, murder, and treachery, they inverted, for a national audience, long-standing American themes of westward movement, progress, and self-improvement. Setting, especially nature, had played a part in such themes as the raw material, the stuff out of which protagonists created (or, tragically, did not create) themselves. Whether they mechanically subdued it or spiritually revered it, the heroes and heroines had significant relations to setting. Such a tradition is evident among California writers as late as Steinbeck, a native son, who focused on technology's impact on landscape even in the 1960s.

The inversion of this theme by outsiders appears due to their perception that California lacked something, something their places of origin had, namely conflict and technology. This lack was usually identified as an "industrial base," evidence that *things being made* sustained the good life. As Poirier remarks, these writers "ask us to believe that the strange environments they create are a consequence, not of their distaste for social, economic and biologic realities, but of the fact that these aren't more abundant in American life" (9). They cry "More reality!" Perhaps this explains why Hammett, in *Red Harvest*, opened a narrative that figures California politics and wealth in front of "smelters whose brick stacks stuck up tall against a gloomy mountain" (4). Cain wrote explicitly in "Paradise" that he missed the conflict of eastern labor disputes: Californians, he said, "suffer from the cruel feebleness of the play which the economy of the region compels them to take part in" (275). There was no "voltage" (a telling metaphor), wrote Cain, without economic conflict, which he associated with heavy industry. Similar critiques are offered by other writers and directors involved in film noir, all discomfited by the "vacuity" or "phoniness" of the first postindustrial U.S. economy.

The narrative emplotment of this anxiety was less a rebellion against material satiety, as most critics have assumed, than an instance of American perceptive habits in the throes of synecdochical withdrawal. The absence of a visibly mechanized economy must mean something—that the apparently polite Californian had been forced by the environment to internalize economic conflict. The representation of this internalization, after modernism, was to be accomplished through technique. It is in this sense that Fine's remark about the California novel's being "cut off from a familiar sense of space" is so valuable (18). Outsiders were specially equipped to suggest the contrapuntal home territory, in literature or film, by defamiliarizing the California setting through technique. The absent, mechanized economy could be immanentized, represented by technique.

The early narratives of Dashiell Hammett exemplify the way things were before the paradigm shifted, when setting was still an explicit topic. As a boy Hammett read "trash, mysteries" and esteemed the hunting stories of his maternal grandfather, as well as "stories about the West" heard "down at the railroad yard" (Johnson 39). His writing through *Red Harvest* employs the conventions of such sources: lone cowboys, rival gangs, trackers, gold miners, and dance hall whores drift down from the Sierra to San Francisco. The Continental Op depends on his tracking talent ("The Scorched Face"), shoots it out in an arroyo ("The Golden Horseshoe"), and fights off outlaw gangs ("The Gutting of Couffignal," "The Big Knockover"). In *Red Harvest* he is a just gunslinger who cleans up a corrupt town.

In *The Maltese Falcon* Hammett gave few descriptions of his setting, and many of those still derive from the Western. Most action takes place in the confined spaces of apartments, a new form of residence only notable, among California cities before 1930, in peninsular San Francisco. But that turns out to be one reason why *The Maltese Falcon* made such a good film noir: interiors. Lack of a world elsewhere, of sunshine, can be emphasized. There are few guns or cars in the novel, but many telephone calls, newspapers, and doorways, though none egress on a world of natural space. Their number was to grow in the film, as John Huston perceived the potential of what Silver and Ward gingerly term "certain relationships between elements of style—not icons—and narrative events or character sentiments" (5). This is the threshold of an insight: style can render char-

acter motivation figuratively. All of the clues necessary to this realization are, in fact, present in Hammett's famous objective style—in the passage about Spade's cigarette rolling, for instance.

Cain and Chandler continued this transformation of the world elsewhere into technique, but in opposed ways. Cain aligned California with national ideas about prodigality, using a metonymic, minimalist style. In contrast, Chandler attempted a prodigal style, universalizing local geographic figures about internalization and alienation. His embellishments actually aim to overturn the received impression of his setting, but they culminate in the "celibate machine."

Examples will make this clearer. Cain opens *Postman* with this celebrated passage: "They threw me off the hay truck about noon. I had swung on the night before, down at the border, and as soon as I got up there under the canvas, I went to sleep. I needed plenty of that, after three weeks in Tia Juana" (1). A national audience in the 1930s could not fail to perceive Cain's narrator as one of the drifters who roamed the nation seeking work. But Cain initially didn't know California well, so he chose settings already familiar to a national audience: the roadside restaurant and gas station, Spanish-style houses, "exotic" Mexico, and orange groves. His is an *already read* setting. His mountains and beaches are elements of a known pattern; his California is a metonymic reduction.

Chandler did not know national taste as Cain did, but he knew California. In the first sentence of his first novel he attempted to make a minor aberration in local climate into a synecdoche: "It was about eleven o'clock in the morning, mid October, with the sun not shining and a look of hard wet rain in the clearness of the foothills" (*Big Sleep* 1). The unseasonable rain, recalling but overturning Austin's *Land of Little Rain* (1903), refutes preconceptions about the land of sunshine. Chandler attempts to expand this aberration by tropes, allusions, and romantic embellishment, but his counterfigures are lost today. We don't grasp the "organic" bizarreness of unseasonal rain in Los Angeles. No film version of *Postman* or *The Big Sleep* uses setting for such pointedly figurative purposes. But while the counterpoint between California and an "other, previous" landscape—for Cain, the coalfields of West Virginia; for Chandler, the England of his youth—was lost, the projection of a world elsewhere by technique was not.

After the introduction of sound and the Mazda tests in 1928 that standardized film stock, lighting, and makeup, "character" became a site of burgeoning technological opportunity. When Chandler became a screenwriter, he noted that "the most important part is what is left out, because the camera and the actors can do it better and quicker" (MacShane, *Selected Letters* 298). Much of the diegesis in written characterization could be assumed by technique, for every shot had psychological implications. David Bordwell, Bill Nichols, and Barry Salt, among others, have argued variously that a progression of film techniques creates imaginative relations that suggest meaning: that a series of such figures creates a way of seeing things, an ideological position (see Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 234; Nichols, *Ideology* 112-34; and Salt 343-54). The qualities that Hammett had suggested in *Spade* by his cigarette rolling could be appropriated by film technicians. *Homo faber* became the cameraman, rather than the character, who would no longer understand, representationally or figuratively, the forces that made him.

Film scholarship, however, has been chary of cataloging a grammar of such techniques.⁴ It exhibits a disingenuous refusal to recognize how audiences create narrative causality with even the barest hints, and it ignores, as Paul Kerr and James Damico point out, the advent of film noir at a time of massive economic and technical change in the means of production (Kerr in Denby 134-49; Damico 48-57).⁵ The law of technology—Eliminate steps!—had already dislocated the perceptive habits of audiences from synecdoche to metonymy in other fields: a sequence of shots could become a metonymic reduction of motivation or character as well as of an event.

The advent of sound led the way. As sound became a competitive necessity, production shifted to sets and studio lots. There noise could be controlled, making purposeful sound as important a production value as light. The advance of film into musicals, into stories of hard-working chorus girls and ambitious young tenors, was not coincidental. It exploited the medium's new resources. Heroes and heroines who broke into song without provocation, ignoring psychological motivation, hardly stand apart from "production values." They are technologically blessed: they have diegetic power, as well as mimetic skill, will and opportunity. In the romantic

comedies of the 1930s, as Elizabeth Kendall has argued (34), techno-economic opportunity even helps to create an emerging feminist heroine.

The conventions and figures of sound grew out of its technology. As Salt shows, a single microphone connected to a camera in a blimp gave poor cognitive cues to viewers, and it was replaced by the boom mike and then by multipoint recording, which opened up a world of dialogue (256-81). But early cutting techniques resulted in silent spots or muddy overlays, until the adoption of synchronized sound on film in 1928-30. The sound overlap solved this problem with one or two frames of sound playing over the new scene and creating a sensation of seamless temporal unity. But shots had to be planned for these "dialogue cutting points": Whose words would cover what visual? This cutting point was a physical elision of reality, an opportunity to make metaphors, metonymies, and other figures, and the dictum that "sound leads" was broadly adopted by 1930. Bordwell writes that by 1930 "for every cut from point to point there must be an auditory shift as well. 'I can give you a closeup of sound, just as I can give you a closeup of a person' [said an engineer]. In the late 1920s, there was considerable controversy about whether it was more 'natural' for a closeup's volume to be louder than the volume for a long shot, but by the early 1930s, it was evident that volume should be in rough proportion to shot scale" (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 302). Soon repartee appeared in film. Also in evidence were off-frame sound effects that prefigured the visual cut to another scene. As sound editing became more sophisticated, sound was conceived to have depth, and "virtual soundscapes" created another new diegetic quality—suspense through sound.

Such proportion and suspense are figurative, as artificial as Renaissance "laws" of visual perspective. But as it evolved, sound created a similar virtual reality: it was fast, smooth, and clear. It was instantly intelligible, patterned yet always new and bright. The film industry now calls this "production value." It was exactly what the emerging techno-economic climate required.

A glance at the troubles of sound's pioneer, Warner Brothers, a maker of movies for the working classes, suggests how economic factors may have contributed to film noir's figurative habits. Warner, as John Baxter

writes, was "a desperate company that, casting around for some gimmick to boost sales, hit on the idea of putting more money and work into the then primitive sound cinema concept. The successful premiere in 1926 of *Don Juan*, with its synchronized sound effects and music, not to mention a film introduction spoken by Will Hays . . . encouraged Warners to produce *The Better 'Ole* and *When a Man Loves* (1926), both with synchronized music. . . . In 1927 it released *The Jazz Singer*" (50-51).

The capital investment required by sound was enormous and probably could only have been amassed in the giddy stock market of the late 1920s. Simply to enter this new technology, Warner had to issue four million dollars in debentures, buy Vitagraph, build a new film processing lab and a new studio, buy two radio stations (for publicity), expand foreign operations, and agree to buy twenty-four hundred sound systems by 1931 from Western Electric, which levied an 8 percent royalty fee on Warner's gross revenues for the period. Having mortgaged the future, Warner posted a one-million-dollar loss in March 1926. According to J. Douglas Gomery, "By the time Warner's brought out *The Jazz Singer* on October 6, 1927, it had invested \$5 million in sound, including \$500,000 in its first release. Quarterly losses declined from the \$300,000 range to the \$100,000 level and in 1928 Warner's made \$2 million. In 1929 Warner's profits were an astonishing \$14 million, more than double those of any other film company" (in Balio 209; see also 199-202).

The big studios, which had planned to wait for a mature technology, were forced to adopt Western Electric's Movietone system in February 1928. By autumn of the following year, "the dominance of the talkies was virtually complete, with only small towns and rural areas still showing silent pictures. A myriad of technical problems were solved: studios were sound-proofed, armies of technicians were hired to service the delicate equipment, and theaters were wired. Scriptwriters were replaced by playwrights skilled in writing dialogue. Actors without stage experience took voice lessons, and those unable to correct foreign accents, faulty diction, or unpleasant voices soon found themselves unemployed" (Gomery in Balio, 193). This was probably the most rapid change in narrative technique in history. By 1930, 80 percent of the nation's theaters were wired for talkies, a figure that rose to 98 percent by 1932. From a \$5-million

company, Warner grew in five years to a \$230-million giant. Sound forced mergers among competing studios and created enormous economic and technological momentum, resulting in five companies (Warner, Loew's, Paramount, RKO, and Fox) that produced 50 percent of American films, 75 percent of all class A features. They received 70 percent of all box office receipts.

The borrowing that funded this growth pushed studios to the edge during the Depression, but moviegoers' enthusiasm for sound staved off collapse. In 1931 and 1932 all five posted losses, ranging from Fox's three million dollars to Paramount's twenty-one million. In 1933 Paramount went into bankruptcy, RKO went into receivership, and Fox was reorganized. Only Warner and Loew's made a modest profit. Tino Balio describes the situation:

Admission prices were slashed, audiences shrank—average weekly attendance dropped from an estimated eighty million in 1929 to sixty million in 1932 and 1933—production costs more than doubled because of sound, and revenues from foreign markets dwindled, but these factors in themselves did not cause the collapse. . . . the common stock value of these majors was reduced from a 1930 high of \$960 million to \$140 million in 1934. Theater after theater went dark. Paramount found it cheaper to close many of its unprofitable smaller houses than to pay overhead costs. The company also shut down its Long Island studio and laid off almost five thousand employees who had been earning between \$35 and \$50 a week. The number of unemployed and underpaid extras in Hollywood became a national scandal. Wages for those lucky enough to find work dropped from \$3 a day to \$1.25. (215-16)

Independent studios produced more films too and promoted them with games such as Bingo, Banko, and Screeno and, above all, with the double feature. Until the Depression, a single feature and short subjects prevailed, but in 1931 eighteen hundred theaters adopted the new format; by 1947 two-thirds of all theaters did so. As with other commodities in the Depression, increasing production of films failed to stop losses. The double feature "put a heavy burden upon production facilities," and "in the long run it did not affect attendance figures," writes Balio. "Few exhibitors could afford

to pay the rentals of two quality pictures on a single bill. . . . Hollywood, in turn, lowered its production budgets and geared itself for the most part to quantity rather than quality" (220). Paul Kerr has shown that the second feature was not only a box office rival but also a production challenge to the A feature film: "To take two examples: Val Lewton's films at RKO had tight, twenty-one day schedules whilst Edgar G. Ulmer's at PRC were often brought in after only six days and nights. (To achieve this remarkable shooting speed night work was almost inevitable and Ulmer's unit used to mount as many as eighty different camera set-ups a day.) Props, sets and costumes were kept to a minimum, except on those occasions when they could be borrowed from more expensive productions, as Lewton borrowed a staircase from *The Magnificent Ambersons* for his first feature" (222). Bordwell has also noted that the Depression forced filmmakers to cut set construction and to reuse scenery when possible. Subsequent "war-time limits on set construction and the 'realism' of combat documentaries" even made location shooting desirable again and cheaper, now that sound problems were solved (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 77).

The way to disguise reused sets and props was to shoot them differently. B directors, one cameraman told Kerr, "pick new angles and redress the foreground . . . [and] agree to shoot at night" (223). Light was expensive: the less used the better. Studio streets plunged into shadow not only were not recognized as the settings of feature films, but they also did not need to be detailed. Expensive three-point lighting gave way to "high key" (main and a small amount of fill) or single-source illumination. Directors avoided spectacular action sequences: "You can't shoot a first-rate crime wave on short dough, so you borrow or buy about twenty pieces of thrilling moments from twenty forgotten pictures," said cameraman Nick Grinde (46-47). Crowd scenes were avoided or borrowed, and casts were kept to a minimum, which reduced the number of titles. Technicians avoided the union ban on overtime by working straight time on contract for the tightly scheduled B units. Unclear scripts and poorly motivated characters were simply shot and later edited into coherence. Plot complexity, Kerr argues, actually increased.

In 1943 the government reduced the studios' raw film stock by 25 percent, with B films absorbing the brunt of the shortage. Again they turned

economic necessity into stylistic virtue. The B film shrank from eighty minutes to sixty minutes. Average shot length, as Salt has shown, decreased, imparting a sense of action (256-81).⁶ Shorter shots allowed even more film to be recycled, and exhibitors got to show these shorter films an extra two or three times per week. "Such economies as B units practised," concludes Kerr, "were not related to fixed assets like rents and salaries but to variable costs like sets, scripts, footage, casual labor and, crucially, power" (229).

The trend toward deep focus, a convention of film noir, began when 20th Century-Fox instituted a policy of shooting all films on interior sets at *f*3.5 to take advantage of a new standard film. Fox films from 1938 on have greater depth of field and sharper focus, features copied by other studios. Fox cameraman Gregg Toland, often cited as the pioneer of depth shooting (in *Citizen Kane*), developed the potential of deep focus, but the technique was based on technology adopted to save money (Salt 256-81). Deep focus required wider-angle lenses, incompatible with older cameras, especially those in soundproof blimps (Salt 259). In 1939 Fox introduced a camera with built-in soundproofing that accepted wide lenses, weighed only eighty pounds and had two thousand-foot film magazines. This led eventually to handheld shooting and the "subjective camera" of *Murder, My Sweet* (1944), *The Lady in the Lake* (1946), and *Dark Passage* (1947) (Salt 260). The repertoire of shots expanded when cranes built for filming musicals were borrowed by B units. Soon Bell and Howell began to manufacture small, highly maneuverable dollies, which had been handcrafted for earlier movies like *The Front Page* (1931).

Not only techno-economic factors but also the gangster movies of 1928-34 are slighted in most accounts of film noir's origins. They pioneered many techniques identified with film noir, and their narratives were often based on a story of two brothers or friends, usually members of a neighborhood gang from which one emerged to rise in crime. The conventional, stay-at-home brother foiled the criminal, as in *The Public Enemy* (1931). Crime was often figured as a new organization in an increasingly bureaucratic society. These films already showed a shift in film's underlying paradigm about technology. One has only to remember films of the 1920s—Keaton's *Our Hospitality* (1923) or *The Navigator* (1924), for example—to realize

the extent to which technology as the butt of popular humor was replaced by technological positivism. This shift is already evident in *Little Caesar*, Warner's success of 1930 that spawned more than fifty imitations in three years. None shows the trend in relations between film and technology as well as Warner's follow-up, *The Public Enemy*, directed by William Wellman and starring James Cagney.

The Public Enemy opens with a high-angle shot of downtown Chicago in 1909. Antlike people thread a maze of daily existence, the quality of which is suggested by a subsequent high-angle shot of the stockyards. This is the sort of crowd scene that was recycled from older films. Then beer, the evil soporific that makes this life bearable, rolls out of a brewery on wagons and fills the sloshing pails of workmen. The Dreiserian crudeness of this 1909 Chicago is intended; in fact, it evokes D. W. Griffith's moralizing and his temperance melodramas. The opening montage also bears a message: by zooming back from these details to another long shot, the camera not only establishes the setting but also cues the viewer to three-dimensional space, centers attention, delays some information (suspense), and provides a parallel for future reverse zoom and tracking shots. Andrew Sarris saw early that Wellman's "images tend to recede from the foreground to the background," giving a sense of depth (Salt 252). This is a film figure set up by the opening montage. Wellman used few close-ups and many medium and long shots in this film. But few of his shots were stationary, as his camera zoomed, tracked, and panned. His technique also provides the audience with a diegetic résumé of recent American history. As film time passes, the number of sets increases, and the number of exterior shots decreases: technological progress becomes an implied actor in the narrative.

The second segment of *The Public Enemy* is set in 1917. It opens with a dolly shot, giving the impression that Cagney's good brother, Mike Powers, and his fiancée have established a channel of personal vision and calm planning on the eye level of the viewer. Life has become more rational than it was on the anthill. The third segment, set in 1920, opens with a long shot of a theater exterior that is apparently a set, on which the pandemonium that supposedly attended the beginning of Prohibition is organized by a sequence of mini-narratives in the repetitive rhythm of establishing, medium, and close shots. Each three-shot "story" makes the

same figurative point: that old temperance melodrama about life deteriorating was silly. Technique clarifies history, and oddly enough, as technology increases, life gets better—and misfits like Cagney are eventually eliminated.

The Public Enemy returns to exterior locations only once more, to introduce Jean Harlow, who plays Cleopatra to Cagney's Caesar. Unlike other exterior scenes, this one is strikingly unglamorous. A modern Standard Oil station appears in the background, apparently on a Los Angeles street. The camera angle foreshortens Harlow, the light is hard and flat, and the sidewalk setting suggests she is a streetwalker. By contrast, in later nightclub scenes the set design, props, lower camera angles, and three-point lighting emphasize Harlow's sensual allure.

Sets replace exteriors completely late in *The Public Enemy*. Both the depiction of a Prohibition bombing and the sniper execution of Matt Doyle clearly occur on studio back lots. The second event demonstrates the additional artistry available to the director who controls every production element. Wellman used the camera point of view, the framing device of the window, and deep focus—three techniques specifically associated by scholars with film noir—to put his audience in the shoes of the assassins, suggesting viewer complicity in Prohibition and also the thrill of illicit violence.

The Public Enemy reaches its climax when Cagney, in a studio rain-storm notable for its torrential volume, the water's failure to puddle, and the equidistant raindrops, arrives at his rivals' hideout to kill them. By mixing the rain noise, the gunplay, and Cagney's voice, by employing dramatic lighting, and by using doors, windows, and the camera aperture as framing devices, Wellman created a soundscape and sense of spatial depth far superior to reality. His city street is particularly superior to the antlike reality in the opening scene, of which viewers may be reminded by tracking shots that suggest the parallel. This subsumption of setting to technique becomes more conscious in film noir in the 1940s.

During the rest of the Depression, the genre developed sporadically. Aside from *Scarface* (1932) and *The Glass Key* (1935), based on a Hammett novel, most of the films adapted from novels relied on the lighter English detective tradition. But the style of the earlier gangster movies, in which

technology figured history, was not forgotten. Moviemakers clung to the new technology and hemorrhaged money, but their anxiety infiltrated the narratives they produced. The musicals that endorsed sound repeated insistently the economic conventions of Algerism, and concluded happily. So did many of the gangster films, as David Cook and Jon Tuska have pointed out. This accorded with the movie moguls' visions of their own success. But in the mid-1930s, when attendance plummeted, the gulf between the consumer and this narrative of improvement became evident. The decline in the economy affected patrons, and these narratives had to be redressed.

Sex was the first, tentative answer. Figuring to build on permissive attitudes in the 1920s, producers "began to introduce salacious subject matter into their pictures in an attempt to attract patrons," writes Balio (221). By 1934 protests against sexual content from religious groups forced the Hays Commission to rewrite the Production Code of 1930. A new Production Code Administration was created under Joseph Breen, whose department scrutinized all *scripts* for sex. By 1937 nearly 98 percent of all films exhibited had PCA approval. This did not mean that sexuality disappeared from films but that it ceased to be textual—part of dialogue. Salacious events had to be figured in icons, symbols, gestures, stage business, costuming, lighting, expression, and intonation. The manipulation of cigarettes and lighters, telephones and guns, doors and windows, soon developed the desired diegetic overtones for an audience accustomed to what Bordwell has termed "generic motivation" (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 20). While economically unconscious, this response is today recognizable as a major mediation by which film noir developed. It introduced a double discourse, linking Chandler's schizophrenia to noir's voice-over. As Bordwell notes in regard to lighting, the figurative power of technique could be understood quite apart from representation: "After the mid-1920s, lighting was coded generically as well. Comedy was lit 'high-key' (that is, with a high ratio of key plus fill light to fill light alone), while horror and crime films were lit 'low-key.' The latter practice was considered more 'realistic,' since one could justify harsh low-key lighting as coming from visible sources in the scene (e.g., a lamp or candle). By means of this generic

association with 'realism,' filmmakers began to apply low-key lighting to other genres" (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 20).

Figures of sexuality, from proffered cigarettes to come-hither smiles, turned out to have the same transferability as lighting, plus an enticing ambiguity, dovetailing perfectly with the "assault on psychological causality." This allowed a narrative level to the sexual politics so long buried in the fabula. The tale of two brothers could focus, as Egyptian papyri had, on the younger brother and the older brother's wife. In fact, James Damico has described film noir just this way:

Either because he is fated to do so by chance, or because he has been hired for a job specifically associated with her, a man whose experience of life has left him sanguine and often bitter meets a not-innocent woman of similar outlook to whom he is sexually and fatally attracted. Through this attraction, either because the woman induces him to it or because it is the natural result of their relationship, the man comes to cheat, attempt to murder, or actually murder a second man to whom the woman is unhappily or unwillingly attached (generally he is her husband or lover), an act which often leads to the woman's betrayal of the protagonist, but which in any event brings out the sometimes metaphoric, but usually literal destruction of the woman, the man to whom she is attached, and frequently the protagonist himself. (54)

Damico notes this pattern in a dozen of the canonical noir films made between 1941 and 1949, such as *Double Indemnity*, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, *The Blue Dahlia*, *Murder, My Sweet*, and *The Maltese Falcon*.

Compared with the parable of the prodigal son, Damico's version of the fabula may seem unbalanced, narrating only the prodigal's adventures in a far country. In the parable, remember, alienation is embedded within a greater narrative of improvement. And the brief period of films castigating gangsters in the late 1930s (*Bullets or Ballets*, 1936) did reintroduce the function of the elder brother briefly and boringly. But with new techniques, the destruction of the prodigal and his female counterpart could be caused by an actantial force representing improvement, without the narrative of improvement's being told. The latter could be immanentized,

transubstantiated into a diegetic voice. This immanent improvement is sometimes overt, a technological representation of society (the insurance offices that open *Double Indemnity*), but it is often manifest only in the death of the prodigal, the sign of the elder brother, by which we know the fabula's implied third point of view and actant.

The ways in which such narratives can be delivered through technique is the subject of recent scholarship by J. P. Telotte, Sarah Kozloff, and others.⁷ Telotte approaches a description of the narrative devices of film noir as actantial when he writes that the "retrospective approach . . . retained for the screen versions of the novels" produces a sense that the protagonist is "violated" by a kind of diegetic narrative presence. This arises from the mix of classic third person, voice-over and flash-back, subjective camera, and documentary style. The mix of these narrative voices in a classic like *Double Indemnity*, Frank Krutnik observes, can produce an "intermittent" third-person actor whose "voice-over does not have the same authoritative hold in the channeling of the discourse of Truth" that the novel's simple first-person narrator did (in Telotte 22). Telotte adds, "The Cain novel had established the potential for this focus, although it subordinates a concern with discourse to the threatening power of desire itself. What inspires the film's voice-over narration and its added complications, though, is the novel's structure as a written statement, a notarized confession of murder by its protagonist" (45). In other words, film can make manifest technically the diegetic quality of confession that Foucault described.

Kozloff argues not only that voice-over is *not* the "voice" of the protagonist but also that it creates something other than the counterpoint to image that has long been presumed. Rather, voice-over is an example of the "double time demand" of film described by Seymour Chatman. Since film contains an overabundance of visual detail, we do not know what to absorb unless some aspect of the narrative calls it to our attention. Devices like voice-over tell us what details matter and how to connect them in patterns, how to figure the visual surfeit. Kozloff points out that such a film noir staple as the dark rainy street can suggest culture and romance if overlaid with a graceful calligraphic title reading "Vienna, About 1900" (73).

A film like *Double Indemnity*, with its voice-over, third-person "actual"

voice, third-person "confessional" voice, and visually objective modes, is for Kozloff like a series of embedded narrators who progressively focalize a narrative in symphony with the repertoire of the camera. This gives rise to a more sophisticated kind of understanding, as Kozloff details in an account of *Mildred Pierce*:

Mildred's narrating voice remarks, "At first it bothered Monte [her lover] to take money from me, then it became a habit with him." The shot accompanying this statement does not show Monte taking a check from her; instead, we see a sheaf of bills from fancy men's clothing stores. The unspoken implication is that these are Monte's bills, that this is what he's spending her hard-earned money on. The combination of picture and narration forcefully reveals Monte's profligacy without stating it explicitly on either track: it quietly leads the viewer to make the connection himself or herself. (106)

In this example, voice-over clearly impels a metonymic reduction, making bills stand in a part-to-part relation to profligacy. More forcefully and concisely than if Monte had been seen at his haberdashers, such a figure elides setting and substitutes technique for motivation. This is immanent focalization.

Feminist critiques of this focalization are partially responsible for unmasking it.⁸ Janey Place noted that

the femme fatale ultimately loses physical movement, influence over camera movement, and is often actually or symbolically imprisoned behind visual bars (*The Maltese Falcon*), sometimes happy in the protection of a lover (*The Big Sleep*), often dead (*Murder, My Sweet, Out of the Past, Gun Crazy, Kiss Me Deadly*), sometimes symbolically rendered impotent (*Sunset Boulevard*). The ideological operation of the myth (the absolute necessity of controlling the strong, sexual woman) is thus achieved by first demonstrating her dangerous power and its frightening results, then destroying it. (in Kaplan 45)

Obvious but unmentioned is that such control is achieved by technique, the more invisibly the more powerfully. But this analysis presumes that women are the subject of the fabula of deterioration, when they are usually

secondary, the object or helper or opponent of a male actor enacting a more comprehensive narrative that can readily have other objects, such as money, murder, or power. To understand film noir as concerning only the control of strong, sexual women is to underestimate its ambition and to accept the self-cloaking operations of technological ideology. Salacious content, or sexuality, as Telotte and Kozloff show, has to be specified out of the visual plenitude. Rather than what is specified, we must attend to what specifies.

The immanent focalization of technique in film noir becomes clearer in the 1940s. Although the mid-1930s was a period of prodigious production of the American roman noir, Hollywood did not revive its interest until 1941. Then it returned to filming on location, with new technological options that could remake setting. *High Sierra*, directed by Raoul Walsh in 1941, is a stunning example of this change. W. R. Burnett (author of *Little Caesar*) teamed with John Huston to write the script. The Sierra Nevada appear, rugged and untamable, under the opening credits. Then a montage of increasingly tighter shots shows the power of nature's opponent, mankind, as figured by government, prison, and a governor's pardon. Accompanied by music rather than voice-over, this diegetic frame prepares us for Roy Earle (Humphrey Bogart), who, on his release from prison, goes to commune with a bucolic version of nature in the local park. Then he begins a trip to California, and a new narrative about nature takes shape. Stopping at the old family farm in Indiana, he finds that the catfish no longer bite at the fishing hole and the farmers are hayseeds. But since the yokels recognize his face (apparently they're newspaper readers), this "old nature" becomes a threat to Earle, and he flees. The landscape changes from lush Indiana to Mojave Desert, emphasizing nature's harshness. The rest of America is elided. Unconventional in film noir, the bright, flat light of desert recalls earlier U.S. history—here perished the pioneers—as it did in *The Public Enemy*.

When Bogart arrives at the Sierra Nevada, however, even Walsh's best shots of the mountains seem bland, and we see that they were a specifically cinematic as well as a larger technological problem. The Sierra Nevada resisted the infusion of production values that could be added by technique on a set. This problem Walsh solved for most of the film by treating his

landscape like an interior. The gangsters pass the time in the mountains inside cabins, and when Walsh uses locations, he treats them like complex interiors. The trees in his campground scenes would be obstacles, except that Walsh can use them, like the pillars in the lobby of a building, to enhance the film by flourishes such as reverse point of view, dollying, and deep focus. These trees are challenges to his technical mastery.

Only in the final scenes does Walsh use the dark palette typical of film noir. There his positivist rendering of technology becomes unmistakable. A montage of shots depicts the communications and police grid closing down on Bogie, whom we now understand to embody an archaic notion of nature's goodness and nobility, like the park that initially delighted him. Walsh worked hard to subsume the Sierra Nevada to technique in a celebrated car chase (a double 360-degree shot following Earle, then the police, as they drive up a hairpin curve in a mountain road), but the swirling dust only emphasizes his battle for control. When Bogie reaches the "Road Closed" sign and scrambles up the cliff with a machine gun, we understand that nature is no refuge. There are no Earle family farms; there is no world elsewhere. The technological matrix that traps Earle is constituted by police lines, the radio reporter, the searchlight, and the report of an airplane coming to bomb him. Earle may be living a romantic narrative of alienation, but the Folks in this film, who have turned out to see him die, live a narrative of technological improvement, against which Earle rebels. Nature is not only no sanctuary for Earle, but it can be reduced to rubble by a phone call from the Folks.

Walsh avoids the darkness of this implication by summoning nature's avatar, a Hawkeye figure—the man with "the queer-looking gun"—to wipe out the "injustice" that is Roy Earle. This reveals an astonishing aspect of *High Sierra*, for the film reprises much of James Fenimore Cooper's *The Pioneers* (1823) with respect to technology. Like the novel's Oliver Edwards, Roy Earle has been pardoned. Like Edwards, he meets an upright family (the Temples, the Goodhues). The patriarchs of both families suffer technological trouble: Edwards pulls Judge Temple's wagon off a cliff; Earle fixes Mr. Goodhue's car. Edwards falls in love with Elizabeth Temple, Earle with Velma Goodhue. As Judge Temple is frustrated by the ravages of progress on nature, so is Earle surprised by the decline of



Humphrey Bogart (Sam Spade) sends off Gladys George (Iva Archer) in John Huston's version of *The Maltese Falcon* (1941). Huston emphasized such icons of technology as the Golden Gate Bridge, not finished until six years after Hammett's novel. (©1941 Turner Entertainment Co. All rights reserved.)

his Indiana homestead. But Cooper salvaged from such forebodings the hope of a fair future by marrying Edwards into the Temple clan. His protagonist lives an overt narrative of improvement, symbolic of that expected for all American society. In *High Sierra*, a similar positivism operates, but by sleight of hand. The "bad" Earle (expert with a machine gun) is removed by marriage to his gun moll and by death, while the "good" in Earle is figured by his funding the medical procedure on Velma's clubfoot—an endorsement of technology for the Folks. The world elsewhere that Cooper suggested lay to the west now resides in technology's transforming possibilities, if it exists at all.

Such a perspective on *High Sierra* focuses the same issue in *The Maltese Falcon*, also filmed in 1941. Shot almost exclusively on sets, John Huston's first solo effort as director was a model of planning and economy. Recognizing that little needed to be done to Hammett's novel to turn it

into a screenplay, Huston changed only the exterior scenes and added telephone calls and spinning tires as transitions between interior sets. Setting is minor. As Bruce Crowther notes, the novel could have taken place in any harbor city (28). But a technological conception of San Francisco *becomes* important in the film.

The film opens with a wide shot of the Golden Gate Bridge, which was not even a gleam in the collective eye of civil engineering when Hammett wrote his novel in 1928–29. A montage of San Francisco scenes follows, then the bridge again, and a reverse zoom that leaves us in the offices of Spade and Archer, who are thus connected to this icon of technology, which remains visible in their windows during most office scenes. Completed only four years before, the bridge celebrates a particular kind of technology, like Hoover Dam and the California Aqueduct, all massive and geographically transforming, located in California and viewed popularly as New Deal remedies for the Depression.

Following Brigid's visit to Spade's office, Huston created a celebrated noir sequence. A telephone rings in a darkened room, and Spade, answering but never visible, hears of his partner's death. The effect is of Spade voicing-over his own absence-as-presence, for the camera remains focused on the base of the phone, behind which a curtain blows languidly over a window opening on city lights and night sounds. No cigarette rolling here—Huston took Hammett's hint, making technique stand for character.

Spade takes a cab to Stockton and Bush streets, where Archer's body lies at the bottom of a slope. By alternating high-angle shots (down on Archer) with low-angle shots (Spade looking up to the place where Archer was shot), Huston establishes not only the urban equivalent of the Western's box canyon but also Archer as dead prodigal brother. On three sides buildings rise up, while the far end is enclosed by a hill, trees, and the lights of distant buildings. The setting is surprising, initially because of the trees and natural elements but also because of Spade's unease. (Hammett had ironically described detectives hunting futilely under a billboard at this scene.)

Huston shot most of the middle of the film on beautifully lighted sets that could have served any musical or Philo Vance detective film. The scenes between Bogart and Mary Astor employ conventional camera angles

and three-point lighting. What is unusual is the number of telephone calls (a dozen) and the tightly framed shots of the phone itself. Telephones not only deliver more information than in the novel but also become transitions to cut from scene to scene: telephones are used figuratively, and we soon understand that they entail the plot.

Toward the film's end, Huston returns to exteriors, once to replicate the novel's wild goose chase to Burlingame, another time to depict fire-fighting equipment that saves the ship bearing the falcon. In the first scene, Spade walks down a deserted wooden sidewalk, past shuttered stores with archaic wares, giving an impression of time travel back in the economy. He ends up between buildings in a vacant lot with a small "For Sale" sign, a "box canyon" that pairs neatly with the earlier one. As in the first, Spade turns from the scene, and a taxi whisks him away. Nothing like this happens in the novel, in which Spade searches an empty house in Burlingame. In the second scene, the fire-fighting equipment, absent from the novel, presents us with production values, "nature" out of control, and apparently very effective technology.

In the film's final scenes at Spade's apartment, Huston laid great emphasis on the fabula of the prodigal son. Hammett had typed Gutman as Arbuckle by his abuse of an adolescent daughter. Huston eliminated the daughter and clarified Gutman as the symbolic father, forced by Spade to choose either Cairo or Wilmer as fall guy. Gutman tells Spade that he "feels toward Wilmer exactly as if he were my own son." Whereas Hammett elected Wilmer as the scapegoat because of his homosexuality (though Cairo is homosexual too), Huston specified the economic basis of the fabula by having Gutman say to Wilmer, "I couldn't be fonder of you if you were my own son. But if you lose a son it's possible to get another. There's only one Maltese falcon." Temporarily in the position of the elder son, Cairo rages at Gutman for being an "imbecile" and "incompetent" when the falcon turns out to be a fake. But no member of this prodigal family can finally command our sympathy. That must rest with Spade, who has acted as diegetic facilitator of their unmasking. He alone resists the allure of foreign travel and of a beautiful woman, to conserve society as it is.

The only problem with the novel as a movie script would seem to be the

question of Spade's honesty with Brigid, hidden by the third-person "objective" point of view. As Robert Edenbaum pointed out, if Spade knows that Brigid killed Miles, then he strings her along immorally. He would be a vehicle of allegory, and Brigid would be truly the wronged party (Edenbaum in Madden, *Tough Guy Writers* 80-103). But Huston took much of Spade's "objective" complexity and transferred it by technique to the diegetic frame. Bordwell points out that Huston abandons Spade's point of view early by showing the death of Miles Archer but "declines to show the killer (we see only a gloved hand)" (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 40). The "film," rather than Spade, knows whodunit, suggesting that whatever diegetic force affects him affects us as viewers too.

This diegetic sharing of hero and audience is balanced by misdirection in the film's clues. The opening titles that scroll over the falcon suggest that its value is established fact, but in the novel the tale of pedigree is delayed until late and never certain, coming from Gutman. The novel's statuette is unseen until it is finally unwrapped, and it dupes the crooks, not Spade. The film's statue, coming first, dupes us too. In this way Huston maintains Hammett's equivocation about the relation of sheathing to content, but without the "objective" point of view that made such focalization retrospective. The mystery of the novel concerns who Spade really is, but the mystery of the film is how the actors and audience could be duped into believing that this art moderne statue is "concealing" anything. The novel warns about the costs of being Spade, but the film presents his elder brother-ism as the only intelligent position.

Double Indemnity (1944) is regarded by many as film noir's masterpiece. As a conjunction of eccentric talents, it is probably unrivaled: James M. Cain's novel as scripted by Raymond Chandler, who said Cain was "every kind of writer I detest, a *faux naïf*, a Proust in greasy overalls, a dirty little boy with a piece of chalk" (MacShane, *Selected Letters* 23), and directed by Billy Wilder (who called Chandler "a virtuoso alcoholic"). But Wilder's casting—he hounded Fred MacMurray, who had never played any but personable roles, until he consented to play Walter Huff—and his outsider's eye for the unique in California settings combined in a work of genius. It is at once a distinctly Los Angeles film and one that embraces technology's position in the fabula.

Only five minutes into the film does Wilder allow the sunny Hollywood hills of Cain's first page to appear. The Nirdlinger house is as Cain described it outside, but inside it is cool and gothic, rather than the tacky Tijuana decor that Cain satirized. The initial meeting between Huff and his femme fatale lasts much longer than in the novel, and when MacMurray departs he stops first at a drive-in, where he orders a beer, and then at a bowling alley, to "roll a few lines and calm my nerves." These scenes are not in the novel—Cain sent Huff to his office—but they are brilliant additions, expanding on a secondary theme in Cain, the extent to which marketing seems to have anticipated his protagonist's desires. For Wilder (and Chandler), the California landscape had become marketing, so Huff operates in a consumer setting that prefigures even his leisure.

Cain's idea of a good California setting was a nationally known oddity, such as a moonrise over the Pacific, but Wilder discarded such scenes, dispensing with nature altogether. He substituted a supermarket, where MacMurray and Barbara Stanwyck meet repeatedly to discuss their crime amid pyramids of cans and boxes of baby food. Murder, the film suggests, is a series of marketing decisions combined with lucky breaks, such as whether your product appears at eye level. A passing patron, in fact, complains to MacMurray about her difficulty in reaching baby food on a high shelf, as though he were a store employee.

Wilder also discarded Cain's ending (Huff and Phyllis commit suicide on a cruise ship) and made the technological theme overt: first he filmed MacMurray dying in the Folsom gas chamber, a set that cost Paramount \$150,000 and took five days of shooting. Then he decided to make the same statement less emphatically: Huff completes his confessional Dictaphone roll just as his boss and pursuer, Keyes, walks in. Keyes allows Huff to flee, predicting that he "won't make it as far as the door," where indeed the salesman collapses. Wilder, following the predictive, statistical portrait of life in Cain's novel, simply technologized the novel's retributive elder brother.

Wilder allows no world elsewhere, only obedient techno-economic consumerism or technological death. All settings may be subsumed by technology, just as all directors control films by technique. We may optimize, but we may not escape. Most earlier film noir, whether *The Public Enemy*



Technology's control of Fred MacMurray (Walter Huff) and Barbara Stanwyck (Phyllis Nirdlinger) is emphasized throughout Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944) by deep focus, single-source lighting, deep shadow, hallucinatory patterns, and mechanical icons. Here the two murderers arrange the evidence of her husband's "suicide." Copyright by Universal City Studios, Inc. Courtesy of MCA Publishing Rights, a Division of MCA Inc.

with its good brother or *High Sierra* with its lovable cripple and devoted dog, offered some way out of technological determinism. *Double Indemnity* does not. It is a pure endorsement of technology's momentum. Instead of man creating himself from or against a landscape, technology composes or reduces character on the field of its possibilities. In such a state, as Foucault noted, the internalization of surveillance is the foreseeable outcome.

Why did film noir arise? Film scholarship offers us simplified and confusing answers. After World War II "customers had a different attitude toward personal violence," writes Crowther, "a change engendered in part by the exposure of servicemen to fear, disablement and the

bloody reality of sudden death" (157). It's also fashionable to point to the spread of communism and the backlash against it: "While McCarthy held his kangaroo courts in Washington, out in Hollywood others followed his example" (158). One critic even reads director Edward Dmytryk's *Farewell, My Lovely* in light of his subsequent involvement in the Hollywood Ten (Clark 55). Such explanations, as Janey Place and Lowell S. Peterson note wryly, exude a "claustrophobia, paranoia, despair and nihilism" more reminiscent of French existentialism in the mid-1950s than of events in the 1940s (Nichols, *Movies and Methods* 327).

But is the answer to abandon history, as Place and Peterson do, and view film noir as merely a "style," while alluding generally to "fear of the bomb" and "the repressive nuclear family"? The banality of such phrases aside, it is difficult to understand how film scholarship since Schrader could be so limited in its historic understanding. At least Schrader understood that historic judgments are figurative, that they consist of two parts. Though he elected "style" himself, his evaluation was comparative: "The acute downer which hit the U.S. after the Second World War was, in fact, a delayed reaction to the Thirties. All through the Depression, movies were needed to keep people's spirits up, and, for the most part, they did. The crime films of this period were Horatio Algerish and socially conscious. Toward the end of the Thirties a darker crime film began to appear . . . and, were it not for the War, *film noir* would have been at full steam by the early Forties" (in Denby 280). But after positing World War II as an interruption in an already pessimistic trend, Schrader goes on to cite it as the source of "sardonic" "bite" that leavens the "amelioristic cinema" built up (for propaganda purposes, he implies) during the war. There are clearly problems with such a reading, not the least of which is an implied model in which film responds primarily to film.⁹ But Schrader's inclination was to compare periods; figuration of history can only happen after history, and its only material is previous history. Does film noir somehow compare World War II and the Depression? Or does it, like American roman noir, figure the Depression against the Roaring Twenties?

Paul Fussell's scholarship and Studs Terkel's oral histories permit us to understand something of public attitudes in these periods. The assumption about film noir, remember, is that external causality was out, and unstable,

individualized protagonists with "internal conflicts" were in. But we learn from Fussell's book that the war reduced individuals to faceless anonymity. It "soon revealed itself as less a struggle of men with men than a contest in methods of mass production with which to debase the intrinsic value of martial daring," remarks Vera Britain (Fussell 67). The subjects of Randall Jarrell's wartime poems have no names: they are "just collective Objects, or Attitudes, or Killable puppets," writes James Dickey (in Lowell 44). "To recall the sights and sounds and smells of the war is to invoke the memory of crowds everywhere," writes Fussell. "The bus, indeed, can be thought of as the Second World War's emblematic vehicle" (69). This facelessness, he argues, created a hunger for "fiction, memoirs and plays [that] swarm with bizarre male individualists. They are doubly welcome as lost ideals in this drab culture of anonymity and uniformity" (70). Clearly the noir hero is not a mimetic reflection of the war years that deepened the trend toward anonymity of the Depression. But individualism had been a prominent feature of life in the 1920s.

The most prevalent kind of characterization in popular narrative during the war was typecasting, at the bottom of which was "the most despised of categories, the 4-F or physically unfit and thus defective, the more despicable the more invisible the defect" (Fussell 116). But Dick Powell, a well-known 4-F, was the *hero* of several canonical films noirs, in which he portrayed highly individualized and unconflicted detectives (such as Philip Marlowe in *Murder, My Sweet*, 1944). Other actors playing similar roles avoided the war entirely or performed only propaganda functions (Clark 49). German émigré directors like Fritz Lang, Joseph von Sternberg, and Billy Wilder not only avoided the war but grew rich making noir classics.

The war itself was boring, plotless, and random. Writes Fussell,

Waiting itself and nothing else becomes a large element in the atmosphere of wartime, for both soldiers and civilians. You are waiting for induction into the services, waiting for D-Day, for someone to come home on furlough, for a letter, for a promotion, for news, for a set of times, for the train, for things to get better, for your release from POW camp, for the end of the war, for your discharge. Attention—as always, but with a special wartime intensification—focuses not on the present

but on some moment in the future. . . . If you were a civilian, daily life was boring. If you were a soldier, daily life was very boring. (75-76)

In film noir, of course, there is always mystery and tension. The present is all: characters act for immediate gratification, and something unexpected occurs. Not only is film noir dense with event, but it packs the story with information about times, places, and possible motives, with visual information in new and arresting styles, with the complexities of voice-over, multiple voices, and embedded voices. It redoubles the importance of information by suspending certainty.

"Sex seemed often in short supply," notes Fussell of the 1940s (105). The most explicit magazine was *Esquire* with its Vargas girls. Women's fashion had retreated from short skirts, sheathing, and form-fitting fabrics to become boxy and unsuggestive. In film noir sex is anything but scarce. Not only is it present in the icons and double discourse discussed earlier, but it is overt in Mae West, in the daring swimwear of John Garfield and Lana Turner in *Postman*. Sexual opportunity floods the screen, despite the Hays Commission.

Between 1930 and 1950 alcohol was an important part of American life, especially after the repeal of Prohibition in 1933. "By the time of the Second World War," Fussell writes, "the notion that everyone has a perfect, even a Constitutional, right to a binge was thoroughly established in the United States" (96). James Jones wrote that his unit in the Pacific "got blind asshole drunk every chance we got" (in Fussell 102). This response to life appears in Hammett and Chandler, but with some exceptions, it does not figure in film noir.¹⁰ True, the Hays Commission forbade the positive portrayal of alcoholism, but films from *The Thin Man* to *From Here to Eternity* got around that.

A final disparity between film noir and reality is material deprivation. During and after the war, gas and food were rationed in the United States. New cars were unobtainable. Suits, shirts, skirts, and shoes were patched and reused. People learned to roll their own cigarettes from little bags of Bull Durham. But none of this privation appears in the world of film noir. Its protagonists have new cars and never wait in gas lines. Indeed, the Fred MacMurray character, in its darkest film, lives in a consumer cornucopia.

If film noir is not a reflection of society, then what is it? In some aspects it is the antithesis, excited rather than bored, acting rather than waiting, affluent instead of deprived, libidinous rather than celibate. But a number of elements do not invert. The rationalization of the workplace, the "legalization" of society, the growth of the media, public relations and propaganda functions, the jobs in statistics, insurance, and service industries—these aspects of film noir depict the emerging economy more accurately.

This mixture is clearly a reconciliation of two forces. But the period from the 1929 stock market crash to 1945 can provide only one term, because those years were similarly dark. How did film noir attract viewers who recently "needed [films] to keep their spirits up"? The comparative period must be further in the past: the depiction of individualism, of sexual freedom and material excess, can only draw on a collective consciousness of the 1920s, retrospectively interpreted as a decade of indulgence. This understanding existed in the 1930s. But newer, straitening elements, such as the increasingly legalistic aspects of life, urbanization and technology, statistics, the annual model change, the mutual suspicion of the Depression, had never been figured into the narrative. To see them, writers and directors held them up against the 1920s for contrast; hence flashback and voice-over in film noir played a special role as focalizing devices. The technologization of perception—the metonymic revolution—increasingly relegated organic understanding and synecdochical storytelling to the category of the "old-fashioned." The new meanings of the 1930s had to take form metonymically, as technique and its qualities rather than as events or persons. The tale of excess that film noir tells, still the historiography of the elder brother, is sometimes about a prodigal, but it is always about prodigality's danger.