

# Re-examining the Maladjusted Text: Post-war America, the Hollywood Left and the Problem with *Film Noir*

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## **Re-examining the Maladjusted Text: Post-war America, the Hollywood Left and the Problem with *Film Noir***

*Film noir* is a term created after fact and applied back to films from a previous period and studies have often conflated very different films and privileged some facets over others in an endeavour to structure a definition. Some scholars have identified that a relatively small group of films came to be seen by the Hollywood Left as highly significant; and that their discussions of these films were the products of deeper anxieties faced by this group in the immediate post-war period. Subsequent conclusions were made that the Hollywood Left was opposed to this generalised categorisation similar to contemporary understandings of *film noir*.

The thesis examines those films now considered as *film noir* in their original contexts. Studying the reception of films generally considered to be representative of contemporary understandings of *film noir*, such as *Boomerang* (Elia Kazan, 1947) *The Big Sleep* (Howard Hawks, 1946) and *Crossfire* (Edward Dmytryk, 1947) shows how they were parts of very different cycles at the time and not seen critically as a homogeneous group. The thesis also examines the work of key filmmakers who were making films with pertinent social messages, before concluding with an examination of an incredibly divisive political film, *The Iron Curtain* (William A. Wellman, 1948).

This study investigates the debates of the post-war period relating to the films currently seen as *film noir* to highlight the distinctions between the films and how their positionings were understood. Analysing key writings from journals, the trade press and newspapers, this research shows how and why specific films caused concern for certain leftist personnel and how particular genres of films are seen now as similar to one another, yet were once understood as starkly opposed.

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This thesis is dedicated to my mother, Dawn Manning (1949-2002), who instigated my love of film.

## Introduction

*“For each age is a dream that is dying,*

*Or one that is coming to birth”<sup>1</sup>*

Arthur O'Shaunessy

### **Film Noir: Definitions and Problems**

A cursory glance through a recent edition of the British film magazine *Sight and Sound* shows how *film noir* has impacted the film glossary: James Bell writes that *Ju Dou* (Zhang Yimou, 1990) “owes more to the guilt-laden, *noir-ish* fatalism of James M. Cain.”<sup>2</sup>; in her review of *Sullivan's Travels* (Preston Sturges, 1941), Kate Stables writes of certain parts of the film that “are the distinctly *noir-ish* work of cinematographer John F. Seitz”<sup>3</sup>; Michael Atkinson writes in his review of *Cry Danger* (Robert Parrish, 1951) that it is “A mean-tempered yet emotionally suppressed number from the seemingly inexhaustible *noir* storehouse”<sup>4</sup>; Kim Newman, in his review of *The Incident* (Larry Peerce, 1967), states that the film “opens with *noir-ish* black-and-white intensity”<sup>5</sup>; and Nick Pinkerton writes in his review of the book *Edgar G. Ulmer: A Filmmaker at the Margins*, of Ulmer's “*film noir* trilogy of *Detour* [1945], *Ruthless* [1948] and *Murder Is My Beat* [1955]”<sup>6</sup>. Taking their overused term *noir-ish* to mean that something is like *film noir*, it is difficult to instantly see the connection between a 1990 Chinese drama film, a 1941 American comedy adventure film, a

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Music and Moonlight’, 1874, Arthur O'Shaunessy (1844-1881)

<sup>2</sup> Bell, James, in Berry, Michael ‘Deep Focus: The Fifth Generation’, *Sight and Sound*, Vol.24, Issue 8, August 2014, p.50.

<sup>3</sup> Stables, Kate, ‘Home Cinema: Travelling Light’, *Sight and Sound*, Vol.24, Issue 8, August 2014, p.95.

<sup>4</sup> Atkinson, Michael, ‘New Release: Cry Danger’, *Sight and Sound*, Vol.24, Issue 8, August 2014, p.96.

<sup>5</sup> Newman, Kim, ‘Rediscovery: Hell On The El’, *Sight and Sound*, Vol.24, Issue 8, August 2014, p. 98.

<sup>6</sup> Pinkerton, Nick ‘A Life In The Shadows’, *Sight and Sound*, Vol.24, Issue 8, August 2014, p.104. Pinkerton reviews: Isenberg, Noah, *Edgar G. Ulmer: A Filmmaker at the Margins*, University of California Press, Ltd.: London, 2014.

1967 American crime film and the four other films they mention. However, it does show that the term *film noir* has entered the vocabulary, conjuring a meaning without needing further explanation. For such an overly used term it is interesting that so many film academics have attempted a definition, which always results in being subjective and unstable.

However, the problematic nature of a definition has not hindered copious studies about the general topic of *film noir*, such as Andrew Spicer's *Historical Dictionary of Film Noir*<sup>7</sup> which also extensively covers the modern neo-noir; William Park's *What is Film Noir?*<sup>8</sup> In which Park asserts that *film noir* is a genre; Foster Hirsch's *The Dark Side of the Screen: Film Noir*<sup>9</sup> which particularly concentrates on the styles and themes of *film noir*, and Michael F. Keaney's *Film Noir Guide: 745 Films of the Classic Era, 1940-1959*<sup>10</sup> in which Keaney seeks to exhaustively list all of the films that can be considered *film noir*. Alongside such books, there are also plenty of studies specialising in particular aspects of *film noir* and widening the scope of the topic, for example, studies of women in *film noir*, particularly the *femme fatale* has been covered by Helen Hanson in *Hollywood Heroines: Women in Film Noir and the Female Gothic Film*<sup>11</sup> and *Women in Film Noir* by E. Ann Kaplan.<sup>12</sup> Also covered are topics such as *The Philosophy of Film Noir*<sup>13</sup> by Mark T. Conrad; *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity*<sup>14</sup> by Edward Dimendberg; and *European Film Noir*<sup>15</sup> by Andrew Spicer. In short, *film noir* studies has been extensively covered, with scholars adding valuable understandings to the films they perceive as *noir*.

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<sup>7</sup> Spicer, Andrew, *Historical Dictionary of Film Noir*, Scarecrow Press Inc.: Plymouth, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Park, William, *What is Film Noir?*, Bucknell University Press: Plymouth, 2011. See Chapter 2: pp.19-30 where Park justifies his stance of *film noir* being a genre.

<sup>9</sup> Hirsch, Foster, *The Dark Side of the Screen: Film Noir*, Da Capo Press: Philadelphia, 1981

<sup>10</sup> Keaney, Michael F., *Film Noir Guide: 745 Films of the Classic Era, 1940-1959*, McFarland & Company, Inc.: North Carolina, 2003.

<sup>11</sup> Hanson, Helen, *Hollywood Heroines: Women in Film Noir and the Female Gothic Film*, I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd: London, 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Kaplan, E. Ann, *Women in Film Noir*, BFI Publishing: London, 1998.

<sup>13</sup> Conrad, Mark T., *The Philosophy of Film Noir*, The University Press of Kentucky: Kentucky, 2006.

<sup>14</sup> Dimendberg, Edward, *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity*, Harvard University Press: USA, 2004.

<sup>15</sup> Spicer, Andrew, *European Film Noir*, Manchester University Press: Manchester, 2007.

Whilst the definition may be a subjective one applied to any type of film nowadays, the films this descriptor is mainly retrospectively applied to were mostly cited as melodramas or thrillers at the time of production; but that is not to say that darker themes had not gone entirely unnoticed at the time. American films had been banned during the war in France and during the post-war period numerous American films were shown in quick succession. Seeing the output in a short space of time, French critic Nino Frank noticed that the tone and lighting of certain films was darker than pre-war films and that the characters were becoming more fatalistic. Frank labelled these films “noir”<sup>16</sup>. Writing in 1946 Frank looked at seven contemporary American films: *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941); *The Little Foxes* (William Wyler, 1941); *How Green Was My Valley* (John Ford, 1941); *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944); *Laura* (Otto Preminger, 1944); *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, 1941); and *Murder, My Sweet* (Edward Dmytryk, 1944); honing on the latter four Frank details that they can be labelled “criminal adventures” or “criminal psychology” films.<sup>17</sup> Frank goes on to observe that these films are different to the previous police dramas in that they have “psychological plots” and display the “truth of the characters” and that “today’s viewers are more responsive to this stamp of verisimilitude”<sup>18</sup>.

Frank’s original observation of *film noir* has evolved somewhat over the intervening years. In the passing years this term has gained an almost ‘genre-like’ status and this has led to many writers tackling a definition, mostly all deviating from the elements Frank noted in 1946. For example, Paul Schrader defines *film noir* as “those Hollywood Films of the 1940s and early 1950s that portrayed the world of

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<sup>16</sup> Frank, Nino, ‘A New Kind of Police Drama: The Criminal Adventure’, (Translated from French by Alain Silver) in Silver, Alain & Ursini, James, (Eds.), *Film Noir Reader 2*, Limelight Editions: New York, 1999, pp.15-19.

<sup>17</sup> Frank, Ibid, p.15.

<sup>18</sup> Frank, Ibid, p.18.

dark, slick city streets, crime and corruption”<sup>19</sup>; Bruce Crowther says that it is the pessimistic mood that defines *film noir* and it contains “an intense anxiety; obsession, usually sexual; and above all a tension created by the fear of violence and the inevitability of death”<sup>20</sup>; And R. Barton Palmer argues that *film noir* “offers a bleak vision of life in American cities, which are presented as populated by the amoral, the alienated, the criminally minded, and the helpless”.<sup>21</sup> The list of writers continues with differing observations to justify their definitions, such as Andrea Gronemeyer who states, in reference to *film noir*, that “the first films of this type emerged at the beginning of the 1940s, and reflected the mood of hopeless resignation and disillusionment which dampened American optimism during the war.”<sup>22</sup> Similarly, for Dominic Strinati, *film noir* “dealt with the dark side of the American psyche and the bleak and forlorn nature of American society.”<sup>23</sup> Mike Chopra-Gant suggests that *film noir* is “emblematic not only of the cinema culture, but also the tone of American culture generally in the period of postwar readjustment.”<sup>24</sup> Sheri Chinen Biesen highlights that the earlier *film noirs* were “Striking for their sophisticated “black” visual style and thematic duplicity”.<sup>25</sup> More specifically for Ralph Willett, who calls *film noir* a genre, the films highlight the consequences of deviation and he states: “these films are pessimistic explorations of what opportunities exist for human actions not committed to the war effort and ‘democratic’ values, and for personal and sexual relationships outside the conventional family.”<sup>26</sup> The list of explanations and definitions is endless with many writers conscious of later arguments they wish to

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<sup>19</sup> Schrader, Paul, ‘Notes on Film Noir’ in: Belton, John, (Ed.), *Movies and Mass Culture*, The Athlone Press: London, 1999, p.154.

<sup>20</sup> Crowther, Bruce, *Film Noir: Reflections in a Dark Mirror*, Virgin Books: London, 1990, p.8.

<sup>21</sup> Palmer, R.Barton, *Hollywood’s Dark Cinema: The American Film Noir*, Twayne Publishers: New York, 1994, p.6.

<sup>22</sup> Gronemeyer, Andrea, *Film: A Concise History*, Laurence King Publishing: London, 1999, p.98.

<sup>23</sup> Strinati, Dominic, *An Introduction to Studying Popular Culture*, Routledge: London, 2000, p.116

<sup>24</sup> Chopra-Gant, Mike, *Hollywood Genres and Postwar America: Masculinity, Family and Nation in Popular Movies and Film Noir*, I.B. Tauris: London, 2006, p.2.

<sup>25</sup> Biesen, Sheri Chinen, *Blackout: World War II and the Origins of Film Noir*, The Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, 2005, p.1.

<sup>26</sup> Willett, Ralph, ‘The nation in crisis: Hollywood’s response to the 1940s’, in: Davies, Philip, and Neve, Brian (Eds.), *Cinema, Politics and Society in America*, Manchester University Press: Manchester, 1981, p.66.



make so as to not be too selective in their definitions. Taking just the first three descriptions, there are three differing ideas regarding what constitutes a *film noir*, focussing on very different aspects: Schrader's location, Crowther's mood and Palmer's characters. This highlights that one of the key problems of defining *film noir* is that despite the terminology being first used in 1946, the term *film noir* was not widely used in writings about the period until the 1970s. With the term gaining full usage 25 years later, often writings conflated very different films that at the time of release may have been understood in very different ways in terms of reception and production. Certainly *film noir* sits easier as a sub genre, as a descriptor of the tone of the film rather than defining the genre of the films in question. As Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton<sup>27</sup> have suggested in their study of the films, the term *film noir* is awkward and therefore segregation enables a meaningful analysis to be completed. Adhering to this, they were selective in their criteria for positioning films in the category of *film noir* and they break it down into six sub-categories: Film Noirs, Criminal Psychology films, Crime Films in Period Costume, Gangster films, Police documentary films, and Social tendency films. This method enables them to produce a comprehensive study of the films, but is, by no means, exhaustive.

A similar approach was adopted by Raymond Durgnat who wrote a seminal essay on *film noir* entitled 'Paint It Black: the Family Tree of the Film Noir'<sup>28</sup> in which he considers the *film noirs* by theme; many subsequent studies like, for example, *Film Noir* by Alain Silver, James Ursini and Paul Duncan,<sup>29</sup> *Film Noir* by Jennifer Fay and Justus Nieland<sup>30</sup>; *Hollywood's Dark Cinema: The American Film Noir* by R. Barton

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<sup>27</sup> Borde, Raymond, and Chaumeton, Etienne, (Translated by Hammond, Paul), *A Panorama of American Film Noir 1941-1953*, City Light Books: San Francisco, 2002, pp.161-163.

<sup>28</sup> Durgnat, Raymond, 'Paint it Black: The Family Tree of the Film Noir' in: Silver, Alain, and Ursini, James, (Eds.), *Film Noir Reader*, Limelight Editions: New York, 2006, pp.37-51.

<sup>29</sup> Silver, Alain; Ursini, James, and Duncan, Paul (Ed.), *Film Noir*, Taschen GmbH: Koln, 2004.

<sup>30</sup> Fay, Jennifer, and Nieland, Justus, *Film Noir*, Routledge: Oxon, 2010.

Palmer<sup>31</sup>; and *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity* by Frank Krutnik<sup>32</sup>, all follow suit with a similar way of investigating *film noir*. Whilst this method has the advantage of being able to examine themes and how they change or progress over a time period, it does not highlight the non-thematically similar films that might provide an interesting comparison and further insight into the period. This aspect has been addressed in Richard Maltby's fascinating account of *film noir*: 'Film Noir: The Politics of the Maladjusted Text.'<sup>33</sup> Maltby discussed a broad range of texts from the post-war period to highlight how politicized films had become. Maltby goes on to state that disillusioned liberals were expressing concern at films now known as *film noir* and that:

What they seemed to see in *film noir* in particular was their own worst nightmare enacted on the screen for the casual titillation of the urban transient audience: the maladjusted veteran in full paranoid flight from the broken wartime dream of liberal rationalism.<sup>34</sup>

Maltby's account raises many interesting points regarding the politics surrounding those films now considered to be *film noir*. However, a particular aspect is problematic in that, as will be demonstrated throughout the thesis, although the Hollywood liberals did indeed have concerns about some of these films, *film noir*, as a term, did not exist at the time of their production, so the situation was not as clear-cut as Maltby's assertion might imply. Indeed, many of the films that are considered

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<sup>31</sup> Palmer, *ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Krutnik, Frank, *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity*, Routledge: London, 1991.

<sup>33</sup> Maltby, Richard, 'Film Noir: The Politics of the Maladjusted Text', *Journal of American Studies*, Vol 18, 1984, pp.49-71

<sup>34</sup> Maltby, *Ibid*, p.66.

as *film noir* by critics today were actually promoted by the Hollywood Left<sup>35</sup>. Therefore it can be assumed that any problems concerning these films were much deeper than Maltby's statement would suggest. The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the films that have become known as *film noir* in their original contexts and show how the films were, far from the homogeneous group suggested by modern understandings of the term, parts of differing post-war cycles and were mobilised politically.

As highlighted above, *film noir* can be considered a contentious term used to retrospectively conflate films using sometimes tenuous similarities. Whilst the term has become particularly useful for suggesting stylistic, tonal and historical qualities relating to film, it has created some confusion as to how the films were seen at the time of production. Certainly academics have noted that they were not seen as a homogeneous group until much later and Richard Maltby does make the important point that there is an array of writings about *film noir* discussing what the common facets are and questioning which films belong in the category. He states that "The usefulness of such questions depends in large part on what the critic is seeking to establish".<sup>36</sup> He goes on to position the films in their political context and using the same method he cites as being problematic in other studies, he claims that liberals, like John Houseman, were concerned with *film noir* by suggesting that Zeitgeist theory was applied to the films. In other words, he argues that the liberals saw that the *film noirs* had captured the spirit or mood of the period on screen, generalised as

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<sup>35</sup> At this point it is vital to note that the thesis will constantly refer to the 'Hollywood Left', this is, in fact, Frank Krutnik, Steve Neale, Brian Neve and Peter Stanfield's terminology. Whilst political affiliations can change over time and the thesis does not set out to pigeon hole any of the critics, filmmakers and commentators into any political persuasion, the term is used merely as a collective noun to describe those actually affiliated with leftist politics at the time, those writing for leftist publications, or those that showed sympathy through their writings to leftist causes. This enables the writing of the thesis to not get embroiled in disputable statements regarding individuals' political inclinations. See: Krutnik, Frank; Neale, Steve; Neve, Brian; and Stanfield, Peter (Eds.), "*Un-American*" *Hollywood: Politics and Film in the Blacklist Era*, Rutgers University Press: London, 2007. Krutnik et al frequently use the terminology 'Hollywood Left' throughout their book.

<sup>36</sup> Maltby, *Ibid*, p.51.

“postwar malaise”, and this “gave rise to the traditional mode of interpreting *film noir* as particularly revealing of its historical moment.”<sup>37</sup> Herein the crux of Maltby’s argument can be extracted. For Maltby the likes of Houseman were concerned with future retrospective, or indeed international, examinations of the films as being mistaken for realistic portrayals of life in America in the post-war 1940s. However, what Maltby neglects is the fact that, initially at least, realist elements were not only promoted by the Hollywood Left, but John Houseman, central to his argument, was actually producing films that are now certainly considered to be *film noir* by today’s understanding of the term. A particular problem this causes is that many others have added to Maltby’s claim that the Hollywood Left had a problem with *film noir*. For instance, John Bodnar writes of *film noir* that “If there was a politics at all in the world they created, it was a dark and dangerous illiberalism disinterested in building a better life by either democratic or liberal means.”<sup>38</sup> Speaking more generally about the critical reception, Jane Root, who also considers *film noir* a genre, states that the “Critics’ dislike was compounded by economic snobbery: the low budgets and B-film status of many film noirs were seen as priori proof that the films were ‘trash’.”<sup>39</sup> And Mike Chopra-Gant goes so far as to say that the “tough” movies that John Houseman discussed was a “contemporary phrase for what film scholars would later understand as film noir.”<sup>40</sup>

With *film noir* being a fluid term and with attempts to examine the post-war films that many place in this category often built upon prior conclusions, this area is worthy of re-examination. This study aims to examine those films now known as *film noir* in their original contexts to provide an understanding of why it has been wrongly

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<sup>37</sup> Maltby, *Ibid*, p.58.

<sup>38</sup> Bodnar, John, *Blue-Collar Hollywood: Liberalism, Democracy, and Working People in American Film*, The John Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, 2003, p.115-116.

<sup>39</sup> Root, Jane, ‘Film Noir’, in: Cook, Pam, (Ed), *The Cinema Book*, British Film Institute: London, 2007, p.305.

<sup>40</sup> Chopra-Gant, *Ibid*, p.13

assumed that some post-war films represented the “broken wartime dream of liberal rationalism” whilst displaying “a dark and dangerous illiberalism” which incurred the “Critics’ dislike” and which we now “understand as film noir”. Whilst Maltby’s problematic assertions provide a key basis for this study, there are also many other studies, such as those outlined above, that have contributed to today’s understanding of the term. In order to understand this further it is worthwhile highlighting background information which will help to expand the study and also provide vital understanding to the issues that were being debated at the time of these films production. Firstly, it is important to understand how this thesis positions *film noir* amid the myriad of understandings; secondly to cover what Thomas Schatz suggests is the *film noir* style “cross-fertiliz[ing] with other emerging postwar strands.”<sup>41</sup> Whilst one might disagree with Schatz’s assessment, there certainly was a noteworthy strand of films in the immediate post-war period, namely the semi-documentaries. The issues relating to the semi-documentaries, such as realism and violence will be introduced as they are aspects which were recurring in the debates during the period. Following this there will be details of the methodology used for this study and a chapter breakdown of the thesis. However, prior to this, in order to understand Maltby’s work further and what has led to the assumption that the liberals had a problem with *film noir*, it is necessary to look at the historical context of the Hollywood Left’s issues with film in general and their hopes for its progression. This also serves the purpose of contextualising the environment which would encourage films that would become known as *noir*. These issues will be outlined in sections below.

The Screen Writers Guild had members from all political persuasions, but as Thomas Schatz has detailed, it was “left-leaning”.<sup>42</sup> With a history of internal battles<sup>43</sup> the

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<sup>41</sup> Schatz, Thomas, *History of the American Cinema, Volume 6, Boom and Bust: American Cinema in the 1940s*, University of California Press, Ltd.: London, 1999, p.379.

<sup>42</sup> Schatz, *Ibid*, p.167.

Guild did, as Ceplair and Englund have detailed, “have a highly politicized left wing which was to have a significant impact on the Hollywood community and the rest of the nation in the late thirties and forties.”<sup>44</sup> Contributing to this impact was the Guild’s publication *The Screen Writer*, which is referred to throughout this thesis. Below is a very brief summary of the formation of the Screen Writers Guild and the following section will consider some of the issues relating to film that the Guild raised in their publication *The Screen Writer*.

### **The Screen Writers Guild and *The Screen Writer***

A background of the Screen Writers Guild is of note because it enables the reader to contextualise the debates and the circumstances that are outlined later in the Introduction and in subsequent chapters. Throughout parts of the thesis the screenwriter is sometimes referred to as often as the director and because of the relevance of their role, the writers are included in the filmography at the end of the thesis.

Prior to the war, screenwriters had a problematic relationship with Hollywood studios. Following the Wall Street Crash in 1929, Roosevelt’s election in 1933 and subsequent economic policies, MGM used this as an opportunity to cut salaries of their workers, including the screenwriters, who lost 50% of their salaries<sup>45</sup>. Furthermore, in the early 1930s writers contractually had to be willing to rewrite their work in accordance with the producer’s wishes, or risk being replaced by someone

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<sup>43</sup> See: Schwartz, Nancy Lynn, *The Hollywood Writers’ War*, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.: New York, 1982 and Ceplair, Larry, and Englund, Steven, *The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community, 1930-1960*, University of Illinois Press: Chicago, 2003, for detailed descriptions of the factions within the Screen Writers Guild.

<sup>44</sup> Ceplair and Englund, *Ibid*, p.46.

<sup>45</sup> Biskind, *Ibid*. p.6.

else who would rewrite their work.<sup>46</sup> This relinquishing of authorship often led to multiple writers being credited for the script, or often some not being credited at all. These harsh conditions did lead to a stronger bond between the writers but also necessitated the creation of a union, or some such organisation. With the unified support of the writers, the opportunity to form a Guild (there was reluctance to call it a union) was in place and John Howard Lawson was a leading figure in establishing the Screen Writers Guild in 1933. In 1977, with hindsight, but little regret, Lawson would go on to say that “the case of the Hollywood Ten goes back to the formation of the Screen Writers Guild in 1933”,<sup>47</sup> highlighting the potential threat that the Guild was seen to be. This thinly veiled union potentially had the power to cause many problems between the producers and writers and was seen as the most disruptive of the Guilds<sup>48</sup> in that period.

Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund in *The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community 1930-60* have convincingly detailed that the main concern of producers and writers was of gaining control of the filmmaking, that of the actual creative decision making when producing movies. The screenwriters, with the power of the Guild behind them, soon instigated a battle of content and authorship with the producers and the studios. However, as Ceplair and Englund have noted, the intellectual and educational backgrounds of the screenwriters led to differing ideological stances and therefore the Guild was internally divided from the outset.<sup>49</sup> This division would undoubtedly weaken the Guild, but a further factor weakening the Guild was its segregation from the other unions. This segregation was never more apparent than in 1945 when there was a significant dispute with the Conference of

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<sup>46</sup> Ceplair and Englund, Ibid, p.6.

<sup>47</sup> Biskind, Ibid, p.8.

<sup>48</sup> Ceplair and Englund, Ibid p.18.

<sup>49</sup> Ceplair and Englund, Ibid pp.16-17.

Studio Unions (CSU).<sup>50</sup> Throughout the 1940s, the CSU was involved in several strike actions and in 1945 took an eight-month strike action. The Screen Writers Guild voted to cross the picket lines rather than strike alongside the CSU and thus found itself weakened by its lack of association with the other unions.

As Nancy Lynn Schwartz, Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund have reported, the Screen Writers Guild was notorious for having a number of factions with noticeable differences in ideologies. When America joined the war this instigated a brief unity within the different factions in the Guild and Schwartz has stated that from 1942 “All of the factional in-fighting was abandoned for the larger good” and that “The communists, fellow travelers, liberals, and right-wingers threw aside their differences and pitched in.”<sup>51</sup> Another reason for the writers to be unified at this time was that shortly after its formation in 1944, the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals, made up of mainly conservative members of Hollywood, issued a “Statement of Principals”, in which they highlighted their belief that Communists and Fascists were using subversive methods to change the American way of life. They went on to declare:

*In our special field of motion pictures, we resent the growing impression that this industry is made of, and dominated by, Communists, radicals, and crackpots. [...] As members of the motion-picture industry, we must face and accept an especial responsibility. Motion pictures are inescapably one of the world's greatest forces for influencing public thought and opinion, both at home and abroad. In this fact lies solemn obligation. We refuse to permit the effort of Communist, Fascist, and*

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<sup>50</sup> The Conference of Studio Unions was formed in 1941 and represented five smaller unions that were mainly related to the technical positions within the industry.

<sup>51</sup> Schwartz, *Ibid*, p.181.



*other totalitarian-minded groups to pervert this powerful medium into an instrument for the dissemination of un-American ideas and beliefs.*<sup>52</sup>

Upon reading the extract from the Motion Picture Alliance's statement, especially the emphasis on "*influencing public thought and opinion, at both home and abroad*", it is clear that the role of the screenwriter could be seen as particularly influential, not just with regard to any Communist ideals, that might be portrayed in the films, but any other message that the cinema-goer may have left the cinema with. Interestingly, much has been written about the supposed Communist infiltration of Hollywood, but the main threat in their statement seems to be the view that others have of America based upon the representations in film. This highlights that there was a distinctive duality in concerns with the films being saleable and profitable, as well as a concern with the image that people have of America, or indeed Americans.

Unsurprisingly the Motion Picture Alliance had prominent directors and producers among its members, possibly because it would give them the opportunity to publicly denounce any affiliation with Communism. As discussed earlier the producers had a difficult relationship with the Screen Writers Guild because the Guild was constantly pressing for changes to conditions that caused ongoing problems for the studios. A further contributing factor was the residual bitterness on the behalf of the screenwriters that had ensued following the Depression years, when the producers had not taken the pay cuts that the screenwriters had.<sup>53</sup> With the post-war resurgence in anti-Communism it was unsurprising that the Motion Picture Alliance would use this opportunity to invite the House of Un-American Activities Committee

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<sup>52</sup> Terra Media Reference Documents, 'The Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals', 1944, reproduced at:

[http://www.terramedia.co.uk/reference/documents/motion\\_picture\\_alliance.htm](http://www.terramedia.co.uk/reference/documents/motion_picture_alliance.htm) [accessed 14-09-14]

<sup>53</sup> Navasky, Victor S., *Naming Names*, The Viking Press: New York, 1980, p.175.

to investigate Hollywood for signs of Communist activity. This could be seen as an attempt to curb the influence, albeit diminishing, of the Screen Writers Guild, either by decreasing their problematic activities, or to assist with removing them completely. Victor S. Navasky in his book *Naming Names* has suggested that the Guild did not support its members which were under attack from the HUAC and that “Arguably their performance was consistent with the values of the culture which gave birth to them”.<sup>54</sup> In other words, the Screen Writers Guild was primarily concerned with protecting their own rights and gaining power over the producers and studios, rather than maintaining the equilibrium throughout the industry.

*The Screen Writer*, the publication of the Screen Writers Guild, was generally assumed to be populated by Communists,<sup>55</sup> owing to the affiliations of its editorial staff,<sup>56</sup> and during its lifetime it gave a voice to members of the Guild to express their concerns regarding the changes within the industry. Throughout the mid 1940s writers and commentators were using *The Screen Writer* to highlight a direction forward for films in the post-war era with many promoting the documentary style and their right for freedom to include what they wanted to in films. Also, typical topics that were appearing in *The Screen Writer* after the war were: ‘The Historical Film – Fact and Fantasy’ an article related to historical films and their portrayal of events as fact and representations of truth;<sup>57</sup> ‘The Soviet Film Industry’ which provided an analysis of how the film industry works in Russia with an emphasis on unions and pay;<sup>58</sup> and ‘A Question of Morals’, in which the author suggests that the Production Code was affecting filmmaking negatively;<sup>59</sup> as well as many regular articles relating

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<sup>54</sup> Navasky, Ibid, p.174.

<sup>55</sup> Ceplair and Englund, Ibid, p.68.

<sup>56</sup> Ceplair and Englund, Ibid, p.250. Ceplair and Englund state, in particular, Dalton Trumbo and Gordon Kahn as being Communists who edited *The Screen Writer* between 1945 and 1947.

<sup>57</sup> Koch, Howard, ‘The Historical Film – Fact and Fantasy’, *The Screen Writer*, January 1946, pp.1-10

<sup>58</sup> Simonov, Konstantin, ‘The Soviet Film Industry: An Analysis by Konstantin Simonov’, *The Screen Writer*, June 1946, pp.17-30.

<sup>59</sup> Salemsen, Harold J., ‘A Question of Morals’, *The Screen Writer*, April 1946, pp.1-7.

to writer's credits and rights. In 1947, a special section was produced in *The Screen Writer* dedicated to the freedom of the screen,<sup>60</sup> in which the likes of Bosley Crowther (Motion Picture Editor of the New York Times), Elia Kazan (Motion Picture Director) and Dore Schary (Production Head at RKO) wrote in to share their views on censorship.<sup>61</sup> Also, tired with the staple entertainment that was rife during the war years, many writers were pressing for the more graphic, no frills, approach as seen in the emergence of European films such as *Rome Open City* (1945, Roberto Rossellini)<sup>62</sup>. However, this preference was not exclusive to the post-war period and in the late 1920s screenwriter John Howard Lawson, one time president of the Screen Writers Guild and later a victim of the blacklist,<sup>63</sup> was promoting the same conception that "art should be connected with social issues",<sup>64</sup> and Hollywood's concern with focussing on commercial projects had contributed to his disillusionment with the industry. As with many of Hollywood's concerns, the issue of how society was portrayed on film was sidelined during the war years, but came to the fore during the immediate post-war period after America's role in the war brought a global interest in the country.

### **The Hollywood Left, Freedom and Realism**

As outlined by the brief summary of the Screen Writers Guild, there were particular recurring issues that the Hollywood Left were raising with regard to films. It is important to note that the film industry was in a significant period of change in the mid 1940s, as Thomas Schatz writes "World War II [was] the defining event of the decade

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<sup>60</sup> '\_\_\_\_', 'The Freedom of the Screen: Foreword', *The Screen Writer*, July 1947, pp.8-9.

<sup>61</sup> '\_\_\_\_', 'Symposium on a Question Asked', *The Screen Writer*, July 1947, pp.16-17.

<sup>62</sup> Mayer, Arthur L., 'An Exhibitor Looks at Hollywood', *The Screen Writer*, June-July 1948, pp.6-7 and pp.18-19.

<sup>63</sup> John Howard Lawson was one of the original Hollywood Ten that was blacklisted for refusing to provide information to the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1947.

<sup>64</sup> Biskind, Peter, 'Organizing The Screen Writers Guild: An Interview with John Howard Lawson', *Cineaste*, Fall 1977, 8, 2, p.5.

for the movie industry and for the nation at large. Never before had the interests of the nation and the industry been so closely aligned, and never had its status as a national cinema been so vital.”<sup>65</sup> If the initial post-war optimism in the film industry brought hopes for more meaningful films, it was soon to face challenges with investigations from the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) (which, as Lary May argues, also was used to “alter the structure of power and ideology permeating the film capital”<sup>66</sup>) and the advent of the Cold War. These factors also had a direct relationship to the propaganda element within films and there were many voicing concerns about the international perceptions of America gained through films. Whilst relevant to the whole thesis, these points will be discussed in Chapter Two.

To investigate the Hollywood Left’s view regarding post-war realism that was a feature in many films now labelled *noir*, a relevant starting point is the debates relating to film content that were occurring contemporaneously with the production of these films. This will then establish the stance that was taken toward realism - the realism and “Zeitgeist theory of film as cultural history” that Maltby claims so worried the “disillusioned liberals”. The debates actually cover a crucial period whereby it is apparent that the recovery from the war and the growing popularity of television was causing Hollywood to search for its niche and justify itself. This is noticeable in the move away from glamour toward social reflection. Thomas Schatz has noted that “film noir also had a significant impact on two other postwar cycles: the semi-documentary crime film and the social problem drama (or message picture)”<sup>67</sup> adding that these cycles overlap. Furthermore, Peter Roffman and Jim Purdy have argued that these cycles “appear to be dramatizing the country’s ability to question itself, to

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<sup>65</sup> Schatz, *Ibid*, p.1.

<sup>66</sup> May, Lary, *The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and the Politics of the American Way*, The University of Chicago Press: London, 2000, p.197.

<sup>67</sup> Schatz, *Ibid*, p.378.

confront problems and work toward resolving them in an open and free society.”<sup>68</sup> Maltby, too, notes the similarities between the semi-documentary films and those films that were to become known as classic *film noirs*, when he states that “The investigative narrative dominates the crime film of the 1940s, in both *film noirs* and the stylistically and thematically related private eye and semi-documentary films.”<sup>69</sup> Roffman and Purdy also add that the audience’s expectations of film change significantly during times of national crisis or upheaval. Consequently they suggest that it is “demanded that filmmakers give at least token recognition to the ever-pressing social realities of the time.”<sup>70</sup> These social realities and the concern the filmmakers were showing for their depiction can be found in the contemporaneous debates.

An example of the ongoing debates relating to realism can be found in *The Screen Writer’s* article ‘Town Meeting Comes to Hollywood’,<sup>71</sup> in which Paul Trivers provides an account of a radio forum debate in September 1945 concerning the content of motion pictures and their ability to influence the cinema-going public. James Kevin McGuinness, a screenwriter and producer, adapted a line from Arthur O’Shaunessy’s ode to highlight his stance regarding what he saw as the role of the film industry. He stated: “We are the makers of music, we are the weavers of dreams”<sup>72</sup>, and went on to say that he believed the film industry should “restore laughter to the world”<sup>73</sup>. McGuinness was indicating that he believed that the types of films that offered escapist fun to their audiences during the war years should now become the norm in the post-war period. However, film genres were not the key issue being debated during the meeting. The key point of discussion was indeed “Should Hollywood

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<sup>68</sup> Roffman, Peter, and Purdy, Jim, *The Hollywood Social Problem Film: Madness, Despair, and Politics from the Depression to the Fifties*, Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1981, p.228.

<sup>69</sup> Maltby, Ibid, p.53.

<sup>70</sup> Roffman and Purdy, Ibid, p.11.

<sup>71</sup> Trivers, Paul, ‘Town Meeting Comes to Hollywood’, *The Screen Writer*, October 1945, pp.8-16.

<sup>72</sup> Trivers, Ibid, p.16.

<sup>73</sup> Trivers, Ibid, p.9.

make pictures designed to influence public opinion?" One side was headed by those in favour of limiting the issues films should portray, McGuinness and actor/director Donald Crisp, and their opposition was headed by screenwriter Robert Riskin and actress Constance Bennett. From Trivers' account much of the debate was centred on the film industry's tackling of social problems, the resolutions portrayed in the film, and the influence they were seen to have. With the two being naturally interlinked, the issue of social problems soon turned to political issues and Fred Niblo Jr. asked Riskin "do you think Hollywood should make a picture which would influence public opinion in favour of Communism for America?"<sup>74</sup> Riskin's simple answer was "No".

Central to the debate was the international perception of America gained from the export of films. The speakers were divided into those believing that the films should not influence the public and those who thought this ideology would limit creativity and also provide audiences with a less fulfilling experience of cinema-going through regular output of "ineffectual" and "lifeless" films. *The Screen Writer's* account, as given by Trivers, gives a typically leftist view of the debate, which *The Screen Writer* had become renowned for, and is particularly cynical of the whole proceeding. However, it does provide an example of the types of divisions that were appearing within Hollywood with regard to the issues portrayed in film and indeed the types of films that were being produced.

The issue of film offering realistic portrayals of life were also reiterated in the *New York Times* report on the 'Do our Movies Influence Foreign Relations?' forum which included the request that the producers should encourage movies representing the American way of life rather than films portraying "opulent splendour"<sup>75</sup> and John Howard Lawson, onetime president of the Screen Writers Guild, went so far as to say

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<sup>74</sup> Trivers, *Ibid.* p.15.

<sup>75</sup> '\_\_\_\_\_', "Social Integrity' in Movies Sought', *New York Times*, November 7, 1945, p.21.

that commercial Hollywood films had a “corrupting influence” going on to specifically address Hollywood’s “false glamour”.<sup>76</sup> This “false glamour” was clearly perceived quite differently by other factions in Hollywood and referred to as “dreams” by James Kevin McGuinness in ‘Town Meeting Comes to Hollywood’. For him, the dreams involved the splendour for people to aspire to. And with an increasing number of films being exported to other countries, he was keen for America to continue to be portrayed in a positive light as a prosperous country where good triumphs over evil. The impact of this was highlighted by a British participant in a later forum who was quoted by the *New York Times* as saying that she was very frightened about coming to America because the films made it look “so smart, so slick and so modern”.<sup>77</sup> The image of America gained from films was also a topic for Tudor Edwards in the summer 1946 issue of the British publication *Sight and Sound* in which he wrote disparagingly about the realistic portrayal of contemporary society in films. He claimed “We have had seven long years of reality, and the truth is that the public are becoming sick of it” adding that “if, in short, cinema is going to devote itself to contemporary sociological problems, the public will soon sicken of cinema.”<sup>78</sup>

These sorts of debates and articles intended to influence audiences and filmmakers were common in the post-war period in Hollywood, appearing in not just film publications, but also further afield in lifestyle and general interest publications, or non-film related publications, such as *Vogue*, *The Saturday Review of Literature* and *Life*. For example, Wolcott Gibbs wrote a particularly brutal article about the state of Hollywood films in *The Saturday Review of Literature*, in which he stated that “it is my indignant opinion that ninety percent of the moving pictures exhibited in America are so vulgar, witless, and dull that it is preposterous to write about them in any

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<sup>76</sup> Lawson, John Howard, *Film in the Battle of Ideas*, Masses and Mainstream Inc.: New York, 1953, p.91. and p.101..

<sup>77</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, ‘“Social Integrity” in Movies Sought’, *Ibid*, p.21.

<sup>78</sup> Edwards, Tudor, ‘Film and Unreality’, *Sight and Sound*, Vol.15, No.58., Summer 1946, p.59.

publication not intended to be read while chewing gum.”<sup>79</sup> Gibbs does go on to detail the types of films that populate his remaining ten percent; he adds one of the exceptions is “the documentaries, which have, of course, only very limited opportunities to distort life.”<sup>80</sup> Gibbs’ assessment raises another feature that was also discussed contemporaneously within *The Screen Writer*, and which is relevant to the freedom of film debates, that of the importance of the documentary film. This issue could also link in with the social problem film in terms of them both depicting real life issues. Noel Meadow detailed a case in his article in “*The Documentary Film Era*”<sup>81</sup> that there was potentially money to be made from the medium and that it would be of vast historic and educational interest. Another advocate of the documentary film was Wesley F. Pratzner, who was vocal about the need for Hollywood to back documentary films.<sup>82</sup> His argument, however, was based on the importance of the documentary films during the war as a way of educating and informing the public in ways that the other mediums could not reach, and he referred to and expanded upon ideas that Meadow had been presenting in *The Screen Writer*. Both Pratzner and Meadow agreed that whilst the war provided an interesting and exciting backdrop for film, documentary still had a place in post war cinema as well. Pratzner returned his argument to Hollywood not wanting to back documentaries because there was less money to be made and that because of this Hollywood was not interested in promoting them. At the same time Meadow, in his article in *The Screen Writer*, stresses the importance of the documentary film in terms of educational interest, but does not mention the types of issues that would be ideal for documenting in the films. He does, however, go to great lengths to promote films for children – to be shown in schools and Saturday matinee clubs. Whilst this could be seen as a tool to lessen the influence of television, it could also be seen as a way of

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<sup>79</sup> Gibbs, Wolcott, ‘The Kingdom of the Blind: An Ex-Moving Picture Reviewer considers his Ex-Job’, *The Saturday Review of Literature*, Volume 28, No. 46, Saturday, November 17, 1945, p.7.

<sup>80</sup> Gibbs, *Ibid*, p.7.

<sup>81</sup> Meadow, Noel, ‘The Documentary Film Era’, *The Screen Writer*, July 1946, p.32-33.

<sup>82</sup> Pratzner, Wesley F., ‘Problems of Public Enlightenment: What Has Happened to the Documentary Film?’, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Volume 11, No. 3, (Autumn 1947), pp 394-401.



accessing the voters of the future. In this respect Pratzner reinforces the issue of propaganda by stressing how important it is for the documentary to educate people, but goes the stage further to explicitly state that they can influence “*future citizens of the world*”<sup>83</sup> and change their way of thinking.

Bosley Crowther had been a prominent commentator of issues surrounding the film industry as well as being a prolific critic: his articles in the *New York Times* give a telling insight into the factors that concerned leftist Hollywood at this time. A recurring theme of his articles was to cite the double standards of the Production Code and the filmic scenarios that it prohibited. Indeed, he wrote in 1945 that the Code appeared “futile and absurd”<sup>84</sup> in its decisions relating to what was permissible in films; a sentiment Crowther reiterated in an article the following year after the banning of *Scarlet Street* (Fritz Lang, 1945). He wrote that it had “once again hauled into the limelight the absurd and medieval state of affairs which exists in our great, enlightened country in the matter of film censorship.”<sup>85</sup> Aside from the freedom from the outdated restrictions of the Production Code, Crowther was also advocating for significant films, or as he puts it: “when you come right down to it, it isn’t so much that we demand “significance” in the movies. Let’s not put it just that way. But we do resent “insignificance,” which is characteristic of all too many films.”<sup>86</sup> Crowther had also been a supporter of the “adult” film, and by “adult” film Crowther’s definition can be garnered from an example of the types of film he was talking about. He cited the British film *Love on the Dole* (John Baxter, 1941) as an example and said that it was “blunt and uncomfortably real, uncompromised by the usual sop of a “happy end.” And it puts some political posers which disturbingly charge the atmosphere. But it is

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<sup>83</sup> Pratzner, *Ibid*, p.401.

<sup>84</sup> Crowther, Bosley, ‘Getting Away With Murder’, *New York Times*, Sunday, August 26, 1945, p.X.

<sup>85</sup> Crowther, Bosley, ‘The Censors Again’, *New York Times*, January 13, 1946, p.X1,

<sup>86</sup> Crowther, Bosley, ‘That Old Question: Mr. Dietz’s Thoughts on Film ‘Significance’ Are Put to a Practical Test’, *New York Times*, Sunday, February 3, 1946, p.X.

an honest and interesting drama, provocative of feeling and thought.”<sup>87</sup> Moving on from the honesty and realism that Crowther was promoting, he was also advising the public to demand factual films from the exhibitors. In 1946 he wrote that “If we want to see fact in our theatres, we must tell the exhibitors so – we must put community pressure on them to use their playhouses for such public good.”<sup>88</sup> Crowther’s issues can be summarised by Ruth A. Inglis’ statement in her study of the freedom of the movies, in which she stated “there is increasing recognition that the movies have an essential role to play in social life and that the freedom of the screen is important because of what the film can do.”<sup>89</sup> V.J. Jerome also wrote a book length study regarding his opinion about creating a significant art form, albeit a specifically Marxist one. He had been satisfied by the wartime increase in “mature” films, but lamented their decline. Mirroring some of Crowther’s comments, he stated that post-war “escapism in films, characterized by saccharine romanticism, not only re-established its full norm, but began to take on new aspects.”<sup>90</sup> The new aspects Jerome spoke of was brutality in films and that, unlike the gangster films of the 1930s, there was now no attempt to show the brutality as related to society – it was purely for entertainment. Leftist commentators clearly had a vision for the future of film and if movies were seen as a vital communication and education tool, then the right format needed to be found to achieve this. Whilst the brutality without any other reason other than to titillate was frowned upon by some, an aspect where violence was permissible, indeed was seen as necessary to educate and encourage America, was the war film.

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<sup>87</sup> Crowther, Bosley, ‘The ‘Adult’ Film’, *New York Times*, Sunday, October 21, 1945, p.X.

<sup>88</sup> Crowther, Bosley, ‘In Favor of Factual Films’, *New York Times*, Sunday, July 7, 1946, p.X.

<sup>89</sup> Inglis, Ruth A., *Freedom of the Movies: A Report on Self-Regulation from The Commission on Freedom of the Press*, The University of Chicago Press: London, 1947, p.1.

<sup>90</sup> Jerome, V.J., *Culture in a Changing World: A Marxist Approach*, New Century Publishers: New York, 1947, p.29

As William Hare has written in his study of early *film noir*, “deep frustrations and grave doubts about where America and the world stood at the end of World War II were reflected in films”.<sup>91</sup> Film-wise, this uncertainty could be considered as reflected in the role of the veteran returning to a new society. As well as capitalising on the popularity of the war films, many films appeared dealing with veterans returning to life in America or Nazi criminals; such as *Cornered* (Edward Dmytryk, 1945); *The Blue Dahlia* (George Marshall, 1946); *Crossfire* (Edward Dmytryk, 1947); *The Chase* (Arthur Ripley, 1946); *Nobody Lives Forever* (Jean Negulesco, 1946); *Notorious* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1946); *Somewhere in the Night* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1946); *The Stranger* (Orson Welles, 1946); *The Best Years of Our Lives* (William Wyler, 1946) and *Till the End of Time* (Edward Dmytryk, 1946). The feeling of disillusionment and the period of readjustment of war veterans returning to America post-war were common themes within these films and is also a theme that many subsequent writers have attributed to *film noir*. The realistic tone of these films portrayed characters that the audience could associate with, rather than aspire to. A change in audience tastes and thus in American film was evident.

If William Hare saw *film noir* as a reflection of society, others have expanded upon this which, whilst adding to the literature on *film noir*, also can become quite complex. For example, Michael Walker, in his introduction in *The Movie Book of Film Noir*, details that he sees the key features of *film noir* as: “Narrative and Character Types” (highlighting the adaptations of, and influences of the literary works of Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain and Cornell Woolrich; as well as noting the overlooking of some of Alfred Hitchcock’s films); “Character Relationships” (detailing the prevalence of sexual triangles in *film noir*); “Visual Style and Iconography” (focussing on night scenes, off-angle camera compositions, and so on);

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<sup>91</sup> Hare, William, *Early Film Noir: Greed, Lust and Murder Hollywood Style*, McFarland & Company Inc. Publishers: Jefferson, 2003, p.8.

and “Social and Industrial Determinants” (the historical background; utilisation of Freudian symbolism; employment of contemporary fears in the narrative; and the influence of semi-documentary filmmaking).<sup>92</sup> Whilst Walker’s summary is very useful to begin a study of *film noir*, it also highlights how cumbersome it can be to definitively justify a film as *film noir* and how it is possibly easier to say what films are *not film noir*; it also shows how a necessarily subjective and discriminative approach is required for applying this term retrospectively.

### ***Film Noir***

With so much being written about *film noir* it is necessary to examine the term in some more detail and for the author to offer an understanding beyond the general genre-like status. The understanding, for the purposes of this thesis, is not that *film noir* is a genre or even particularly a cycle, but constituted by shared overlapping discourses from this period. There is certainly grounds for an argument that *film noir* is an overlapping of cycles from the period, such as the semi-documentary; the social problem film; the hard boiled detective films; and the prestige male melodrama; and widening the circle further, the women’s films; and the anti-communist film cycle. This is in alignment with many scholars who consider *film noir* to be a cycle, namely Andrew Spicer,<sup>93</sup> Gene D. Phillips;<sup>94</sup> Jim Hillier and Alastair Phillips;<sup>95</sup> Jack Shadoian;<sup>96</sup> and James Naremore<sup>97</sup> among others. However, within each cycle as

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<sup>92</sup> Walker, Michael, ‘Film Noir: Introduction’ in Cameron, Ian (Ed.), *The Movie Book of Film Noir*, pp.8-38.

<sup>93</sup> “The label ‘film noir’ designates a cycle of films that share a similar iconography, visual style, narrative strategies, subject matter and characterisation.” Spicer, Andrew, *Film Noir*, Pearson Education Limited: Essex, 2002, p.4.

<sup>94</sup> “Specifically, film noir was a cycle in American cinema that first came into prominence during World War II” Phillips, Gene D. *Out of the Shadows: Expanding the Canon of Classic Film Noir*, Scarecrow Press Inc.: Maryland, 2012, p.ix.

<sup>95</sup> Hillier, Jim, *100 Film Noirs*, Palgrave Macmillan on behalf of the British Film Institute: London, 2009, p.88.

<sup>96</sup> Shadoian, Jack, *Dreams and Dead Ends: The American Gangster Film*, Second Edition, Oxford University Press, Inc.: New York, 2003, p.307.

they describe them, it becomes difficult to exclude particular films from the period because of the way cycles, and genres for that matter, can overlap. Steve Neale calls this phenomenon a 'genre hybrid' and that it blurs the boundaries of the genres concerned.<sup>98</sup> Furthermore the privileging of certain films over others relies heavily on subjective inclusions, making *film noir* a discursive category that has shifted and changed throughout time according to each specific use.

As discussed, many have stated that *film noir* is a cycle. Amanda Ann Klein has written extensively about film cycles and suggests that "Like film genres, film cycles are a series of films associated with each other through shared images, characters, settings, plots, or themes. However, while film genres are primarily defined by the repetition of key images (their semantics) and themes (their syntax), film cycles are primarily defined by how they are used (their pragmatics)."<sup>99</sup> She goes on to add that film cycles longevity is directly related to "their financial viability as well as the public discourses circulating around them".<sup>100</sup> This is noteworthy because it is difficult to view *film noir* as a cycle because the public discourses surrounding the films were related to various aspects that some of the films contained. For example, the level of violence, morality or indeed the social message. Also labelling *film noir* a cycle suggests that there were common themes and genres that united the films. Indeed, contemporary understandings have strayed so far from Nino Frank's original discussion of what he understood *film noir* to mean that it is difficult to pinpoint definitive themes uniting all the films often considered in this category.

Barbara Klinger has outlined in her work about 'local' genres, that "Critics routinely identify formulas and conventions as a means of elaborating the shared

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<sup>97</sup> Naremore, James, *More Than Night: Film Noir in its Original Contexts*, University of California Press: London, 2008, p.40.

<sup>98</sup> Neale, Steve, *Genre & Hollywood*, Routledge: London, 2000, p.3.

<sup>99</sup> Klein, Amanda Ann, *American Film Cycles: Reframing Genres, Screening Social Problems, & Defining Subcultures*, University of Texas Press: Austin, 2011, pp.3-4.

<sup>100</sup> Klein, *ibid*, p.4.

characteristics of a body of films.”<sup>101</sup> Referring to the adult melodramas, Klinger asserts that “The adult film was a ‘local’ genre, in the sense that it was a historically specific and transitory category that gained steam during the post-war years and faded from view in its Hollywood usage after the 60s.”<sup>102</sup> Whilst specifically talking about melodramas in the 1950s, Klinger’s observations also apply to studies of *film noir* in that many insist that *film noir* had a limited lifespan (many have stated that the classic *film noir* phase ended in 1958 with *Touch of Evil* (Orson Welles)<sup>103</sup>) and the terminology used by the critics at the time (such as “tough”) did indicate that differentiations were occurring at the time. However, such descriptors were only applied to a small segment of what became known as *film noir*.

Whilst “local genre” may be too precise a term to use for *film noir*, and “cycle” may be too rigid a term, Lee Grieveson, Esther Sonnet and Peter Stanfield highlight that “Cycles are small nuanced groupings of films that are not transhistorical and often not only operate within one or two seasons of production, whereas trends are broad and inclusive categories made up of interconnected cycles.”<sup>104</sup> For the sake of positioning the films, the term local-trend could be useful in that it combines Klinger’s terminology with Grieveson, Sonnet and Stanfield’s term. The reason for this is that the films now known as *film noir* were historically specific and transitory in that they are relevant to the post-war period in terms of themes, filmic techniques and social messages, yet, as Stanfield et al highlight, trends are made up of many different cycles; such as the semi-documentary, the social message film, and hard-boiled

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<sup>101</sup> Klinger, Barbara, “Local’ Genres: The Hollywood Adult Film in the 1950s’ in Bratton, Jacky; Cook, Jim; & Gledhill, Christine, *Melodrama: Stage Picture Screen*, BFI Publishing: London, 1994, p.134.

<sup>102</sup> Klinger, *ibid*, p.135.

<sup>103</sup> Many writers have cited *Touch of Evil* as the final *film noir* from the classic period, or at least one of the final memorable film noirs. See: Mayer, Geoff, & McDonnell, Brian, *Encyclopaedia of Film Noir*, Greenwood Press: Westport, 2007, p.421; Walker, Michael, *ibid*, p.8; and many others who cite Paul Schrader’s article: ‘Notes on Film Noir’, *Film Comment*, Spring 1972, 8, 1, p.12.

<sup>104</sup> Grieveson, Lee; Sonnet, Esther; and, Stanfield, Peter, (Eds), *Mob Culture: Hidden Histories of the American Gangster Film*, Berg: Oxford, 2005, pp.3-4.

detective films. Therefore, for the sake of positioning *film noir*, it was a local-trend applicable to particular film cycles which can be identified by overlapping post-war discourses. Looking individually at the cycles often included in *film noir* studies, it becomes easier to find evidence of such discourses and understand where many assumptions about *film noir* originated. Many studies have highlighted that the semi-documentary was a forerunner to *film noir* and in this respect an influence on the local-trend.

### **The Semi-documentary**

With the decline in popularity of the documentary, lamented by the likes of Meadow and Pratzner in *The Screen Writer*, the realist films were emerging as a successor. As outlined above, many of those films cited as semi-documentaries and realist fictional thrillers, are often considered now as part of the *film noir* canon. Indeed, whichever definition of *film noir* is accepted, both cycles of films have many similarities – they lack glossiness, they maintain a sombre mood and often tackle crime in its many guises, and both often use narration giving an authoritative tone. If the depictions of societal change and adaptation can be considered to be partly attributed to the Hollywood Left's desire for realism and the changing tastes of the audiences, it comes as no surprise that tomes like *The Screen Writer* and *Hollywood Quarterly* would defend the freedom to convey, what they saw, as topics which Irving Pichel stated “have the greatest contemporary interest for us.”<sup>105</sup> In his article Pichel calls claims of subversion about the likes of *The Best Year of Our Lives* “stupid and

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<sup>105</sup> Pichel, Irving, ‘Areas of Silence’, *Hollywood Quarterly*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Autumn, 1947), p.52.

silly”<sup>106</sup> and states the case for freedom of the movies to portray issues that were addresses in such films. He argues that if a film:

deals with one of the more urgent problems of contemporary life, it can only have come into existence because the vigilant censors and the conscientious guardians of an important big business believe that the American public has reached something close to unanimity in its thinking and feeling about the particular problem.<sup>107</sup>

Whilst Pichel is simplifying the complexities of varying messages a film can have, and seems to speak about mainstream studio films, he does show how passionately members of the Hollywood Left cared about this topic.

As highlighted above, both during and after the war, there was a considerable promotion of realism from leftist personnel and publications. Most had referenced the wartime propaganda films and how they had shaped public opinion. *Rome Open City* had left an impact on critics who sought to promote the emulation of its truth, style and realism. Therefore, if Maltby, as we have seen, saw the Left as being hostile to *noir*, this was certainly not the case (at least initially) with its response to the semi-documentary films. As this thesis will demonstrate, leftist critics championed the semi-documentary thrillers and the realist techniques that they employed. According to Will Straw, the Left were seeing the films as a response to their “call to filmmakers to take the lessons of wartime documentary production back to Hollywood, and to make documentary the core of a moral and aesthetic

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<sup>106</sup> Pichel, *Ibid*, p.53.

<sup>107</sup> Pichel, *Ibid*, p.54.



transformation of mainstream, commercial filmmaking.”<sup>108</sup> Indeed, 1945 was a crucial point in the history of Hollywood in which the values of realism were not only transforming the style of Hollywood films, but also seeming to add to their social and political justification. It was a period in which Hollywood sought to justify itself as not just harmless entertainment but as a vital social organ for the moulding of public opinion.

As well as being deemed as an alternative to the glamour heavy spectacle films, another reason for the popularity of this filmic style was that the realism synonymous with the semi-documentary style was conducive to providing an effective social message in a convincing manner. Inasmuch that citing a film as ‘semi-documentary’ could be a tool for avoiding strict censorship rules like those applied to non-documentary style films in the same period; if the horrors of war could be portrayed in some detail during the war-time documentaries then so could other graphic topics, as long as they were based on fact. With Communism historically being fought by the American government and closer attention being paid to scripts with regard to stamping out Communist propaganda, or indeed anything considered to be un-American, the semi-documentary film would give an ideal in-road into representing real problems within America. Jonathan Munby has suggested that there is an argument that “the so-called noir style was a result of sophisticated ways of negotiating [the Production] Code restrictions about representations of America’s seamier side.”<sup>109</sup> This could certainly be the case because at the time they were not viewed collectively and also formed a relatively small percentage of the Hollywood

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<sup>108</sup> Straw, Will, ‘Documentary Realism and the Postwar Left’, in: Krutnik, Frank; Neale, Steve; Neve, Brian; and Stanfield, Peter (Eds.), *“Un-American” Hollywood: Politics and Film in the Blacklist Era*, Rutgers University Press: London, 2007, p.132

<sup>109</sup> Munby, Jonathan, *Public Enemies, Public Heroes: Screening the Gangster from Little Caesar to Touch of Evil*, University of Chicago Press: London, 1999, p.171.

output. Indeed, as Steve Neale has summarised, the output of *noir* production was between 2.9% and 4.9% annually between the years of 1941 and 1958.<sup>110</sup>

In relation to Munby suggesting that the semi-documentaries negotiated restrictions, Stephen Prince has highlighted in his study of classical film violence, that “Violence in classical Hollywood film was less the issue than the behaviors to which it was attached and the moral example that these provided to viewers.”<sup>111</sup> He continues that “By contrast, the violence that occurred in war films or Westerns [...] did not seem as subversive as the violence in crime or horror pictures.”<sup>112</sup> The points that Prince makes apply to those films considered to be *film noir*, not just in the respect of crime genre films, but also in relation to the types of arguments that were surfacing in relation to violence. One of the people who was vocal about this and is key in subsequent chapters of this thesis is John Houseman who, long before *film noir* was used as a regular descriptor of the films, said something similar in his article on violence in the movies.<sup>113</sup> This differentiation between the types of violence is a key aspect in the issues that were being raised by concerned parties at the time and this caused many disagreements between filmmakers and the censor boards and pressure groups who associated violence with immorality and as an influencer of public behaviour. This topic will be expanded upon particularly in Chapter Two.

## **Purpose of the thesis**

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<sup>110</sup> Neale, *Ibid*, p.156. Neale examines various studies and depending on which films are to be considered *film noir* and the time period considered, the percentage changes considerably.

<sup>111</sup> Prince, Stephen, *Classical Film Violence: Designing and Regulating Brutality in Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1968*, Rutgers University Press: New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London, 2003, p.33.

<sup>112</sup> Prince, *ibid*, p.33.

<sup>113</sup> Houseman, John, ‘Violence 1947: Three Specimens’, *Hollywood Quarterly*, Vol. 3, No.1, (Autumn 1947), pp.63-65.

Throughout the brief summary of *film noir* and issues the Hollywood Left were raising; the obvious conclusions can be drawn that much has been written about the subject and that the term is subjective, in that after years of academic writings, there is still no definitive definition of *film noir*. However, as the writers in *Sight and Sound* have proved, it is a very useful term for suggesting a style, tone or ethos; a term which possibly leads to the reader to imagine one of Borde and Chaumeton's 'Classic Noir' films and apply whatever images or sentiments that creates to the film in question. What is apparent is that the fluidity of the term *film noir* is, in some cases, counterproductive; for example, Maltby's statement that the liberals found something alarming in *film noir* is then problematized by the reader assuming that it was *film noir* as a whole. Therefore the purpose of this thesis is to return to the original writings of the left-leaning commentators of films in the post-war period to understand which films they were alarmed about and what aspects of the films caused them such concern.

It is evident that alongside the genre films that continued throughout and after the war that there were three relatively small, but distinct, categories of films that were present in the immediate post-war period. They were: the semi-documentaries which utilised aspects of the war-time documentary format to tell a story with reconstructions of real events; the "tough" films, to use the critic's descriptor, which were often using realist techniques, but telling fictional stories with, for their time, an increase in violence; and the prestigious films which were dominated by the male lead's story and portrayed contemporary social messages. All three of these categories have subsequently been amalgamated under the *film noir* banner in studies, but with the occasional deliberate exclusion of those individual films not considered dark enough in tone to prove the point the writer is trying to make. Therefore an examination of these three cycles will form the first part of the thesis. The second part of the thesis will examine key personnel and films that utilised these

cycles after the immediate post-war period. Henry Hathaway continued with the semi-documentary style that he had pioneered, but moved into the thriller format which also merged with the tough films. Abraham Polonsky and Robert Rossen had been key figures in the Hollywood Left and then continued with the social problem film format, but with added political bias and across a variety of genres. Also, taking Polonsky and Rossen's bias a stage further *The Iron Curtain* took filmic political propaganda to a new high. It is relevant to use these six areas as topics for investigation because, whilst these cycles are not exhaustive, they do cover examples of the films in this key period and provides an interesting and unique way of examining the films in question. In order to understand what part of *film noir*, as Maltby claims, the leftists had a problem with, it will be revealing to examine the writings of the critics and interested parties to hone in on the facets that they found problematic with which films. As demonstrated by a preliminary summary of the topics covered by *The Screen Writer* and Bosley Crowther's articles in the *New York Times*, such publications were very vocal about the film industry and this will be reflected in the critical reviews of the films. The films selected for investigation all fit in with Borde and Chaumeton claim that 1946-1948 were "the glory days" of *film noir*, in that these years "mark both the ascension and the apogee of film noir in the United States."<sup>114</sup> Whilst the main films that they consider span the years 1940-1954<sup>115</sup> and they list 82 films in what they consider to be the "main series" of *film noir*, and although many writers concur that some films from the early 1940s do fit into their studies of *film noir*, they mostly agree that they were signifiers of what was to come and focus their studies on the rich post-war period.<sup>116</sup> As Borde and Chaumeton

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<sup>114</sup> Borde and Chaumeton, *Ibid*, p.53.

<sup>115</sup> Borde and Chaumeton, *Ibid*, pp.161-163.

<sup>116</sup> Andrew Spicer produced a table comparing three different studies of films that fit into the film noir canon by year of production. He uses Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward's *Film Noir: An Encyclopaedic Reference to the American Style*, Overlook Press: New York, 1993; Jon Tuska's *Dark Cinema: American 'Film Noir' in a Cultural Perspective*, Greenwood Press: London, 1984; and Spencer Selby's *Dark City: The Film Noir*, McFarland: North Carolina, 1997. The table shows that the number of films considered film noir varies substantially by author, but comparing the three they show a consistently

have stated “the postwar period posed a number of disturbing problems [...] As a statement on society, the new series came at just the right moment.”<sup>117</sup> The decision not to continue the study into the 1950s is partly to provide depth to those films considered, but also because of the impact of the HUAC indictment of the ‘Hollywood Ten’ in late 1947 and the subsequent advent of McCarthyism which affected the freedom of Hollywood, or as Victor S. Navasky states “It weakened American culture and it weakened itself.”<sup>118</sup>

Therefore, this thesis will examine the writings and reviews applicable to films within Borde and Chaumeton’s ‘classic *noir* period’ in which significant smaller cycles formed a larger trend. Some of the films considered are neglected by today’s studies of *noir*, because of the reasons listed above, that is, they become casualties of selective inclusion. This approach will hopefully provide an insight into how the films were not seen as a homogeneous group and that the Left were promoting key concerns through their writings about these films.

## Critical Reception

If understandings of those films now collectively referred to as *film noir* are somewhat clouded through, as Steve Neale suggests, scholars who “stress the repetitive, ‘stereotypical’ aspects of genres, setting aside the differences within and between them in order to provide themselves with a stable corpus”;<sup>119</sup> then the original reception would provide an insight into the how the critics perceived the films (or mobilised them) and how, through their writings, they could have generated

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significant number of film noirs being produced in each of the years from 1945 to 1951. See: Spicer, *Ibid*, p.28.

<sup>117</sup> Borde and Chaumeton, *Ibid*, p.54.

<sup>118</sup> Navasky, *Ibid*, p.333.

<sup>119</sup> Neale, *ibid*, p.65.

expectations in the audiences. Certainly it will emphasise the key point of the films not being seen as a homogeneous group at the time of their release.

Richard Maltby attempted to unpick *film noir*, but in doing so he made the assumption that the Hollywood Left had a problem with the films. Discussing John Houseman and Siegfried Kracauer, Maltby asserts that the “tough” movies of the period embodied a particularly virulent form of postwar malaise, establishing a tradition within which *film noir* has continued to be interpreted.”<sup>120</sup> However, by utilising the original reception and debates, the thesis will show that the problem was not with *film noir*, but with features that were appearing in certain thrillers/melodramas in the immediate post-war period. The Hollywood Left, reflective of the country as a whole, had put up a united front during the war years; however the post-war evolution of the film industry also offered the potential for films to become more meaningful and substantial. Will Straw highlights a new freedom and realism was found in the semi-documentary films which were advocated by many of the Hollywood Left, however his study limits itself to these films without acknowledging the fact that the realism was seeping into other films. The thesis will continue with looking at how the realism impacted the perception of violence and morality in the ‘tough’ films and how some of the Hollywood Left began expressing concern, whereas others found them harmless entertainment. In this respect looking at the reception of these films adds to Stephen Prince’s work on classical film violence. Prince does refer to many films that are now considered *film noir*, but without looking at the Hollywood Left’s reception of the films. Also noted for their realism were some of the social message films that fall into the category of prestige melodramas. These dealt with a variety of post-war problems, but the main focus here is that what should have been relatively safe and unifying films celebrating American values, soon highlighted deeper problems within the

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<sup>120</sup> Maltby, *ibid*, p.58.

Hollywood Left. Whilst they were contemporaneously called liberal message movies<sup>121</sup> the debates grew larger concerning films being too political, to not being political enough.

In order to demonstrate the problematic nature of using the term *film noir* and examine the issues that the Hollywood Left were raising that have since been attributed to *film noir*, the thesis will use reception studies as the most appropriate methodological approach to be able to see how the films were perceived by the critics at the time of release. This approach has been useful and productive for many academics when examining *film noir*, such as Janet Staiger, Steve Neale, Stephen N. Lipkin<sup>122</sup> and Will Straw. For example, Janet Staiger has detailed how *film noirs* can be considered as 'fallen man' films (in reference to the more well known fallen-woman films) in that they concentrate plot devices that "lure a man into wayward paths because of his lack of self control."<sup>123</sup>; thus, Staiger highlights, many *film noirs* were in fact taken to be melodramas when they were released.<sup>124</sup> Steve Neale also uses this methodology for discussing how terms like 'psychological drama', 'psychological melodrama' and 'psychological thriller' were regularly applied to those films now known as *film noir*.<sup>125</sup> Indeed, this links back to Nino Frank's original explanation of his terminology. Likewise, Will Straw has utilised reception studies to highlight leftist reactions to the post-war documentary realism.<sup>126</sup> All of these studies have been convincing and added to the existing scholarship relating to *film noir*.

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<sup>121</sup> Kracauer, Siegfried, 'Those Movies With a Message', *Harper's Magazine*, June 1, 1948, p.567-572.

<sup>122</sup> Lipkin, Steven N., 'Real Emotional Logic: Persuasive Strategies in Docudrama', *Cinema Journal*, Vol.38. No.4, (Summer, 1999), pp.68-85.

<sup>123</sup> Staiger, Janet, 'Film Noir as Male Melodrama: The Politics of Film Genre Labeling' in Geraghty, Lincoln, and Jancovich, Mark, (Eds.), *The Shifting Definitions of Genre: Essays on Labeling Films, Television Shows and Media*, McFarland & Company, Inc.: North Carolina, 2007, p.73.

<sup>124</sup> Staiger, *ibid*, p.77. Staiger takes *Double Indemnity* (1944) as an example and examines the terminology used by the critics when reviewing the film.

<sup>125</sup> Neale, *ibid*, p.169.

<sup>126</sup> Straw, *ibid*, pp.130-141.

Indeed, they provide a unique understanding of the films in their original contexts as opposed to studies which seek to argue the case for certain films being a *film noir*.

Using films that were regularly debated at the time as a key case studies, the thesis is re-investigating the debates of the post-war period relating to the films currently seen as *film noir* to highlight the distinctions between the films and how their positioning were understood. This has required an examination of how these categories and groupings were mobilised within larger political contexts, and became the subject of political debate, both with the Hollywood Left and by those opposed to them. Analysing the writings of John Houseman, Bosley Crowther, James Agee, Manny Farber and Siegfried Kracauer, among others, the thesis will consider the discourses through which specific films, and sub-genres of films, were categorised within the 1940s and the ways in which their contexts, seen now as similar to one another, were once understood as starkly opposed

Studying films from 70 years ago, that were retrospectively labelled a cycle, presents significant problems, not least the amount of research that has been conducted regarding *film noir* in the intervening years. The quotations from *Sight and Sound* listed in the opening paragraph highlight the problem of how an idea was suggested and added to many times until the assumed meaning has somewhat deviated from the original conception. Acknowledging this phenomenon, this study will utilise original writings, namely critical reviews of the films and relevant writings from interested parties. As Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery have expertly detailed:

A study in the critical discourse of the cinema at a particular point in film history is valuable to the film historian in that [...] it tends to establish the critical vocabulary and frames of reference used not only by



reviewers, but by film audiences as well. [...] Critical discourse also helps the historian to establish the normative limits of the dominant style of cinema at a given point in the past.<sup>127</sup>

It will also be useful to refer to the subsequent studies, particularly when there is an overlapping of research interests. For example, Richard Maltby's article 'Film Noir: The Politics of the Maladjusted Text' from 1984 is a key reference point not only because of his excellent observations, but also because his work highlights one of the key difficulties of *film noir* in that it is hard to not refer to the films collectively and subsequently provide general conclusions.

Such an approach has been utilised by Barbara Klinger who has written extensively about reception studies. Drawing from work by Janet Staiger she writes that "The historical case study is a crucial instrument of [...] investigation, as it reveals the social conditions and institutions that help constitute contingent meanings for texts as they circulate publicly."<sup>128</sup> In this respect the critical reception is not taken to speak for the audience and the meanings that were understood after seeing the film, nor is it to make assumptions regarding the text in question, but it does give an indication of points that critics raised either because of their own agenda, or because of the information that they were provided with. Either way the reviews, especially relating to films from the 1940s (that is, 70 years ago) can give a valuable insight into the spirit or the mood at the time. Whilst the film text can be revaluated using a variety of methods, the historical critical reception of films can be telling in that, as Klinger added, "the films assume different identities and cultural functions, fueling debates

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<sup>127</sup> Allen, Robert C., and, Gomery, Douglas, *Film History: Theory and Practice*, McGraw Hill, Inc.: New York, 1985, p.90.

<sup>128</sup> Klinger, Barbara, *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture, and the Films of Douglas Sirk*, Indiana University Press: Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1994, p.xvi.

about the origins and conditions of textual signification.”<sup>129</sup> In regards to *film noir*, obviously, the term was not used in critical terms in the 1940s and was applied retrospectively. Obviously, as previously mentioned, trends, cycles and genres, need an established and recurring (even if for only a limited time) set of themes to be examined together to for their classification to be justified. This might be much easier when there is a clear classifier for such studies, such as the ‘singing cowboy’ films of the 1930s,<sup>130</sup> or the ‘nunsploitation’ sub-genre of European films in the 1970s, to the ‘torture porn’ extreme slasher films of the early 2000s; but in relation to *film noir*, which most academics struggle to conclusively and harmoniously define, it does become problematic. If it is taken that the annual Hollywood production of films now considered *film noir* was between 2.9% and 4.9% between the years of 1941 and 1958<sup>131</sup> with new films continually being appraised as such, and films from subsequent years often being termed neo-noir, then it can be seen to be complex descriptor that serves the purpose of being what the observer wants it to be. Obviously this basic descriptor has exceptions and it is important to note that it is only relevant when considered alongside contemporaneous social and political milieu and indeed contemporaneous standards in films. With this in mind, whatever definition one chooses, it could be argued that it is somewhat easier to grasp an understanding of contemporary neo-noirs than it is to re-examine the classic *film noirs*. Standards of what is socially, morally and politically acceptable nowadays are so different that it can be difficult to understand the boundaries that were being pushed during the classic period of *film noir*. Therefore, the original critical reception is a key source for identifying what made this trend so noticeable and noteworthy; and this is addressed by considering the films within their original cycles, or by director.

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<sup>129</sup> Klinger, *ibid*, p.xvii.

<sup>130</sup> See: Stanfield, Peter, *Horse Opera: The Strange History of the 1930s Singing Cowboy*, University of Illinois: Illinois , 2002.

<sup>131</sup> Neale, *ibid*, p.156.

As Janet Staiger has stated, “reception studies in not textual interpretation. Instead, it seeks to understand textual interpretations as they are produced historically.”<sup>132</sup> Staiger argues that “the history of cinema might very well be radically rewritten if you pursue it, not solely from the perspective of the production of films, but equally from their reception.”<sup>133</sup> However, Staiger highlights some cautions with regard to reporting on reviews from critics that are taken into consideration throughout this thesis; she states that they are “subject to the problem of retrieval, as well as to language, schemata, or representations of the subject that mediate perception, comprehension, and interpretation.”<sup>134</sup> Staiger also adds that “When considered from the perspective of reception studies, a number of traditional approaches to film and television studies take on a new life. Specifically, notions such as auteurism, national cinemas, genres, modes, styles, and fiction versus nonfiction become significant historical *reading strategies*.”<sup>135</sup> By this Staiger means that whilst these notions can be vital tools for understanding and analysing films, the critical reviews can highlight how they have been used to understand and interpret the film. Staiger concludes with a pertinent point relevant to this study, she states that “Genres themselves might be redefined, not on the basis of textual features, but by reader activities, with contextual factors producing a historical dimension to generic definition.”<sup>136</sup> Indeed, many of those films now routinely discussed as *film noirs* belies the fact that they were often referred to by the critics at the time as melodramas, thrillers or crime films. Whilst the critics may, or may not, have had access to press kits and promotional material which could influence their categorisation, they often clearly stated which genre they saw the film as. In the absence of the *film noir* label, their reviews highlighted many facets that have the potential to aid scholars should they attempt a

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<sup>132</sup> Staiger, Janet, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema*, Princeton University Press: Princeton, New Jersey, 1992, p.8.

<sup>133</sup> Staiger, *ibid*, p.12.

<sup>134</sup> Staiger, *ibid*, p.80.

<sup>135</sup> Staiger, *ibid*, p.95.

<sup>136</sup> Staiger, *ibid*, p.95.

definition of *film noir*; such facets as an increase in violence, the changes in protagonist's behaviour and morals, the increasing use of documentary style realism, and often the political and social messages that can be garnered from the film.

The very fact that some of the critics were dismissive of some of the films at the time of release and thought some of the films to be lowbrow, yet are now considered to be key representatives of what a *film noir* is, is particularly noteworthy. Take, for example, James Agee's and Manny Farber's points about *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. Agee states that "The Postman Always Rings Twice is mainly a terrible misfortune from start to finish."<sup>137</sup> and Farber believes that it is "is almost too terrible to walk out of."<sup>138</sup> The film was popular at the box office and is ranked 49<sup>th</sup> in the AFI's Greatest Love Stories of All Time<sup>139</sup> and *The Guardian* and *The Observer* ranked it the 23<sup>rd</sup> best crime film of all time.<sup>140</sup> Likewise with *The Big Sleep* (Howard Hawks, 1946), which Jack D. Grant dismissed as a "picture is not worthy of the skill Hawks always demonstrates. He could only have regarded it as an amusing exercise".<sup>141</sup> *The Big Sleep* was named one of the '10 Great American Film Noirs' by Samuel Wigley at the BFI<sup>142</sup> and the 15<sup>th</sup> best crime film of all time in *The Guardian* and *The Observer*.<sup>143</sup> These were respected critics who wrote for respected publications and now with reappraisals, they are heralded as 'great' or at least significant films representing as phase in film history. This does raise an interesting point with regards to how the meaning of films can change over time and how

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<sup>137</sup> Agee, James, 'Films', *The Nation*, May 11, 1946, p.580.

<sup>138</sup> Farber, Manny, 'Hamburger Hell', *New Republic*, May 20, 1946, p.732.

<sup>139</sup> See the full list at: <http://www.afi.com/100years/passions.aspx> [accessed 09-07-2015]

<sup>140</sup> Patterson, John, 'Crime: The 25 best Crime Films of All Time – The Postman Always Rings Twice: No. 23 Best Crime Film of All Time', Sunday 17 October 2010. See:

<http://www.theguardian.com/film/2010/oct/17/postman-rings-twice-crime> [accessed 09-07-2015]

<sup>141</sup> Grant, Jack D., "Big Sleep' Hits BO Hard; 'Show-Off Laughably So-So: Hawks Does Right By Bogart, Bacall', *The Hollywood Reporter*, Tuesday, August 13, 1946, p.3.

<sup>142</sup> Wigley, Samuel, 'Ten Great American Film Noirs', BFI, 15-04-15. See: <http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/news-bfi/lists/10-great-american-film-noirs> [accessed 09-07-15]

<sup>143</sup> Patterson, John, 'Crime: The 25 best Crime Films of All Time – The Big Sleep: No. 15 Best Crime Film of All Time', Sunday 17 October 2010. See: <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2010/oct/17/big-sleep-crime> [accessed 09-07-15]

studying the films in their original contexts can give a totally different perspective to contemporary understandings and accepted interpretations.

Indeed, as Mark Jancovich has argued, some of the films now taken to be *film noir*, such as *Double Indemnity*, *Laura* and *The Woman in the Window* (Fritz Lang, 1944) were discussed by critics using terms usually reserved for horror or thriller films<sup>144</sup> and this highlights how using the almost genre-like status that *film noir* has achieved nowadays often neglects to inform the reader very much about the genre of the film and certainly even less about the type of film it was intended to be. Whilst this does not demean studies which have added a wealth of knowledge to 1940s and 1950s cinema history studies whilst using the term *film noir* to highlight post-war trends and film topics, it has somewhat detracted from the boundaries that some of these films pushed, the messages they conveyed and certainly the fact that whilst some of these films were held up as beacons shining a light on the directions the film industry should be taken; whilst other films, now placed in the same category, were seen as unsuitable in terms of morals and portrayals of American society.

As a source to learn more about film history it is important to note that the critics and commentators do not speak for the audience as a whole and, as some of the reviews used in this thesis show, film discussion is often used as a platform for farther reaching observations regarding politics and society. Whilst this can often detract from the film in question, this provides an immensely valuable insight into the context that these films were produced and the environment in which they were being released. Furthermore, utilising this method will fill in the gaps of 'forgotten' film history, as Klinger states, studying the reception provides a sense of:

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<sup>144</sup> Jancovich, Mark, "Thrills and Chills": Horror, the Woman's Film, and the Origins of Film Noir', *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 2, June 2009, p.164.

“not of *the* ideology had in historical context, but its *many* ideologies. By placing a film within multifarious intertextual and historical frames – the elements that define its situation in a complex discursive and social milieu – the film’s variable, even contradictory, ideological meanings come into focus.”<sup>145</sup>

Using Klinger, Staiger and Jancovich’s work as a template for gaining an understanding of the historical reception of films, this study will consider the critical reviews and articles in the trade and popular press as well as the debates occurring in journals of the same period.

Whilst a variety of sources will be used, predominantly this study will consider, amongst others, *Hollywood Quarterly*, which was at one time accused of Communist affiliations,<sup>146</sup> and as Eric Smoodin has written “For its entire life Hollywood Quarterly steadfastly held to the leftist utopianism”.<sup>147</sup> John Houseman, who was central to Maltby’s study, was on the advisory board of the *Hollywood Quarterly* and regularly used its pages to vent his concerns with the film industry. *The Screen Writer*, the publication of the Screen Writers Guild, too, contained many valuable articles relating to the way leftist writers saw film as a way of influencing culture and society and was seen by some as being controlled by the left wing.<sup>148</sup> Also of interest is the liberal weekly magazine, the *New Republic*, which in the immediate post-war years was under the editorship of William A. Wallace a member of the Progressive party. The majority of the reviews from the *New Republic* considered in this thesis are by Manny

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<sup>145</sup> Klinger, Barbara, ‘Film History\Terminable and Interminable: Recovering the Past in Reception Studies’, *Ibid*, p.110.

<sup>146</sup> Houseman, John, *Unfinished Business: Memoirs 1902-1988*, Applause Theatre Book Publishers: New York, 1989, p.269.

<sup>147</sup> Smoodin, Eric, & Martin, Ann, (Eds.), *Hollywood Quarterly: Film Culture in Postwar America, 1945-1957*, University of California Press, Ltd.: London, 2002, p.xxi

<sup>148</sup> Schwartz, *Ibid*, p.264

Farber<sup>149</sup> and Robert Hatch who was a constant advocate of movie realism. The liberal magazine *The Nation* contained many reviews from one of “the great postwar arbiters”<sup>150</sup> James Agee, who also wrote for *Time* magazine. Agee’s reviews are of vast interest because he had great insight into Hollywood having worked as a screenwriter. Finally, articles and reviews in the left leaning *New York Times* will also be considered, mainly for the writings of its chief reviewer Bosley Crowther, who was well known for his comments on the social responsibility of film.<sup>151</sup> As outlined above, Crowther wrote many articles outside of his usual reviews and these provide a comprehensive summary of issues with films and the industry. Also referred to regularly are the film industry trade papers featuring reviews (by various critics) and articles about the industry. These include: the *Motion Picture Herald*, *Variety* and *The Hollywood Reporter*. Often the trade papers used their reviews to give details on expected box office performance and ways in which to exploit the marketing of the film, but they did also make very interesting points about the film content too, particularly in terms of positioning the films in terms of genre. It is particularly interesting to look at the critical reception from this era because of the restrictions that were imposed on film topics and how meanings could often be implied but not explicitly stated. This was certainly the case during the McCarthy era when the film industry was being scrutinised for any signs of un-American activity. Aside from this, genres have changed significantly over the intervening years. Publicity material will be referred to throughout the thesis, this is used to back up claims from the critics and to reinforce how the studios intended to market the films.

The key case studies are all from the years 1945 to 1948. There were numerous reasons for selecting this period, not least being able to extensively discuss the films

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<sup>149</sup> Farber had once tried to join the Communist Party in San Francisco. See: Polito, Robert, *Farber On Film: The Complete Film Writings of Manny Farber*, The Library of America: New York, 2009, p.xxviii

<sup>150</sup> Roberts, Jerry, *The Complete History of American Film Criticism*, Santa Monica Press LLC: California, 2010, p.15.

<sup>151</sup> Roberts, Ibid. p.72

within the word limitations of a thesis. It was also important to have a complete picture of the types of films that are often discussed as *film noir*. Many scholars have indicated that the glory days of *film noir* began in 1945 after the war.<sup>152</sup> Whilst this could be debated, depending upon ones definition of *film noir*, what is of great importance is that the immediate post-war years did bring a change in film making. Having utilised many documentary techniques to produce factual or propaganda films to keep cinema audiences informed of news from the war, these techniques had an influence on films that were produced just after the war. The most obvious example is the semi-documentary style of filmmaking that was advocated by Darryl F. Zanuck at 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox. However, it was also a topic for discussion by critics and interested parties who favoured the new realistic approach because of the freedom it provided to the filmmakers and mature stories that lent themselves so well to such a format. This new style filtered through into other films of the period and location shooting became more commonplace. It was certainly considered a marketing tool and something noteworthy which can be deduced from the number of films that began with the opening spiel regarding how it was shot on location. Whilst the Hollywood Left appeared to welcome this new style, as it filtered into other cycles some saw this as problematic. The added realism seemed to give the films a different meaning. The reception to this shall be discussed in the subsequent chapters.

There were limitations with regard to what publications were used to gather research. This was partially dictated by what American publications were available in the UK. Unfortunately few are available digitally so the process involved research undertaken at Cambridge University Library, the British Library and the British Film Institute

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<sup>152</sup> See, for example, Andrew Spicer's list of film noirs in: Spicer, *Ibid*, p.28; and Borde and Chaumeton's chapter entitled 'The Glory Days (1946-1948)' in: Borde and Chaumeton, *Ibid*, pp.53-81.



Special Collections. Having started the research examining many of the different publications that were available, it soon became evident that there were particular publications, critics and cultural theorists who regularly provided critical reviews and commentaries on the film industry during this period. Whilst many of the publications or critics and commentators that were prolific during this period were either left-leaning, or at least displayed sympathy towards leftist sentiments, they were deliberately sought because of Maltby's claim that the Hollywood Left disliked what became known as *film noir*; therefore it was vital to gain an understanding of their viewpoints. It can be noticed that at this time the Hollywood Left were not only seeking more freedom for the screen, but were also vocal with ideas for the way the film industry should progress. As noted, *The Screenwriter* provided a multitude of articles promoting educational films for schools and favouring documentary films; as did other publications like *New Republic* and *The New York Times* which provided supplementary reports outside of their standard film reviews; they shall also be referred to throughout the thesis.

## **Chapter Breakdown**

The intention is to provide a comprehensive study of a group of post-war films that the Hollywood Left found significant and debate worthy; these films later formed part of an (often) larger group of films that are now understood as *film noir*. Using a diverse collection of reviews, articles and press releases it became evident that there were particular films within post-war cycles that drew attention from the Hollywood Left. Furthermore it was noticeable that some films, whilst not always labelled *film noir* nowadays, were discussed and compared in articles in the same way.

Part One of the thesis will consider the reception of three interlinked types, or cycles, of films appearing in post-war America: the semi-documentary films, the tough guy films and the prestigious male melodrama films. Part Two will continue by considering filmmakers key to the post-war period of *film noir*, or individual films; that is, the social message films of Abraham Polonsky and Robert Rossen; the realist thrillers of Henry Hathaway and finally the first anti-Communist film, *The Iron Curtain* (William A. Wellman, 1948).

It has already been noted that many leftist personnel commenting on Hollywood were promoting realism and it is generally accepted that the post-war period has been labelled the “Glory Years” of *film noir* by Borde and Chaumeton and others; therefore a relevant starting point would be the post-war semi-documentaries that started in 1945 with *The House on 92<sup>nd</sup> Street* (Henry Hathaway, 1945). These films were instigated by the likes of Henry Hathaway and Darryl F. Zanuck and were received amicably by critics; whilst they may have been sceptical of the storylines they gave a great deal of encouragement to the format. Chapter One considers the Hollywood Left’s viewpoint on documentary realism and then goes on to examine the critical reception of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox trilogy of films that started the brief cycle: *The House on 92<sup>nd</sup> Street*, *13 Rue Madeleine* (Henry Hathaway, 1947) and *Boomerang* (Elia Kazan, 1947). Also worthy of consideration is *The Street With No Name* (William Keighley, 1948), considered by many to be a form of sequel to *The House on 92<sup>nd</sup> Street*. Being made three years later, it will allow comparisons to be drawn with regard to how the cycle progressed. Chapter One expands upon Will Straw’s work on post-war semi-documentary films in that it utilises a broader range of discourses.

If the semi documentaries brought more freedom in terms of locations and subject matters, then this was also detected in the “tough” crime based films where realism and violence found a natural place to merge. Chapter Two looks at the films considered to be “tough” thrillers. The descriptor “tough” was used frequently in the post-war period, noticeably by Bosley Crowther and John Houseman in their articles. *The Big Sleep* (Howard Hawks, 1946), based on the novel of the same name by Raymond Chandler, is a typical example of the film that contains a movie “tough” and it endured vitriolic criticism from both Crowther and Houseman. However, the Houseman produced *The Blue Dahlia* (George Marshall, 1946), written by Chandler and featuring similar tough characters, did not. The noticeable difference in the critical reception of these two films enables it to be determined why films like *The Big Sleep* were, as Maltby describes it, the liberals “worst nightmare”<sup>153</sup>, yet *The Blue Dahlia* was not berated in the same way. Also considered in this chapter are *Brute Force* (Jules Dassin, 1947) and *The Killers* (Robert Siodmak, 1946) which suffered similarly caustic attacks from Houseman and Crowther, respectively, as they questioned the morality of the ‘tough’ films and expressed concern at the sensationalising of violence. In this respect Chapter Two builds on Stephen Prince’s work on the use of film violence, as it highlights that violence was mentioned frequently in the reviews, but the issue was more concerning the types of films that the violence was being used in. The reception of these films shows the fractures that were beginning to appear in the, once united, Hollywood Left. Aside from their ‘tough guy’ similarities, and their release dates being similar, the most pertinent reasoning for these films being considered together is that they signify a time when violence in films was increasing and this caused differing opinions within the Hollywood Left. Aside from various opinions about the type of violence, there were also debates bringing forth differing ideologies relating to the positioning of films and with respect to how America would be perceived abroad.

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<sup>153</sup> Maltby, Ibid, p.66.

At the same time as the movie toughs were populating the screen so too were the prestigious<sup>154</sup> films that are examined in Chapter Three. All films in this section were based on novels which examined social problems. They can all be considered male melodramas and were timely in that they were relevant to post-war America. The *Best Years of Our Lives* deals with soldiers returning home from the war; both *Crossfire* and *Gentleman's Agreement* (Elia Kazan, 1947) deal with anti-Semitism, and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Tay Garnett, 1946) has its social message toned down, but was sensationalised in other areas of the plot. However, similarities were not drawn at the time with *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and the other films. Though well meaning and well received, *The Best Years of Our Lives* was also heavily criticised by Abraham Polonsky, the filmmaker with Communist affiliations; his concern was that the film did not take the message far enough. Both *Crossfire* and *Gentleman's Agreement* were seen as worthy message films, but they too were under attack from the likes of Siegfried Kracauer who believed that such message films were heavy handed and he extended his criticism to speak generally about liberal message films. *The Postman Always Rings Twice* is undoubtedly a male melodrama which is a perfect case study for highlighting Staiger's 'fallen man'. John Houseman was again unhappy with the morals of the protagonist in this film, specifically with the way an international audience would view America based on the film. Interestingly, Houseman compared the film to *Rome Open City*, which shows how he believed that realism in films could lead to audiences garnering different messages. The male-centred melodramas that were released in the immediate post-war years centred on post-war problems and when compared it is possible to notice conflicting views of American representation. Whilst there are countless films that are considered *film noir* that could also be male melodramas, these four films

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<sup>154</sup> To use Curt Siodmak's terminology, the "prestige" film one that is "made to create respect for Hollywood, and to please the highbrows." See: Siodmak, Curt, 'In Defense of the Ghouls', *The Screen Writer*, February 1946, p.1.

specifically highlight the differing opinions of the Hollywood Left. The film messages were highly praised by some, but criticised by others for either being too obvious or too lame; and the use of realism in fictional films became an area for debate.

Whereas Part One of the thesis has intended to show the trajectory of the Hollywood Left's unity through to areas which they had substantially differing views, Part Two of the thesis begins with looking at the particular works of certain personnel involved with films now considered *film noir* and how their films evolved in the immediate post-war period. The criticism of *The Best Years of Our Lives* by Abraham Polonsky leads smoothly to Chapter Four, which considers the reception of the post-war films of Robert Rossen and Abraham Polonsky. Both had been vocal about the direction that they wanted to take films and both made films for the independent production company Enterprise Studios which was formed in 1946. Chapter Four follows their career through *The Strange Loves of Martha Ivers* (Lewis Milestone, 1946) and *Johnny O'Clock* (Robert Rossen, 1947) on to their collaboration on *Body and Soul* (Robert Rossen, 1947). Following on from the social messages portrayed in films in the previous chapter, Polonsky and Rossen's films were more political in that anti-Capitalist messages were apparent. None more so than in Polonsky's *Force of Evil* (Abraham Polonsky, 1948), which contained explicit political messages and which Robert Sklar has suggested received "a certain excess of praise"<sup>155</sup> from the critics. Robert Rossen and Abraham Polonsky had both been linked with the Communist party and their films from this period are often called *film noir*. Thom Andersen sought to differentiate the films of Polonsky and Rossen from *film noir*, labelling them *film gris*.<sup>156</sup> Chapter Four will add to Andersen's work in that it highlights how some

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<sup>155</sup> Sklar, Robert, *City Boys: Cagney, Bogart, Garfield*, Princeton University Press: Oxford, 1992, p.207.

<sup>156</sup> The term *film gris* will be discussed in Chapter Four. See: Andersen, Thom, 'Red Hollywood', in Ferguson, Suzanne, and, Groseclose, Barbara (Eds.), *Literature and the Visual Arts in Contemporary Society*, Ohio State University Press: Columbus, 1983, pp.141-196, for a full definition.

critics saw Polonsky and Rossen's work as overly political. Interestingly their films from this period fall into different genres yet are all considered *film noir* in contemporary studies. Using critical reception, this chapter highlights the inadequacies of *film noir* in being able to signify a genre, but importantly it shows how the far left were utilising the realism, so common in post-war films, to push their own political messages.

Continuing with the style, which he developed in *House on 92<sup>nd</sup> Street*, Henry Hathaway made a series of realist thrillers in the mid to late 1940s. Chapter Five considers these films and the critics' response to the maturing format of the semi-documentary. Hathaway's *The Dark Corner* (1946), whilst praised for its realism, received attention from cultural critic Siegfried Kracauer who sought to apply psychoanalysis to a selection of films and considered the level of violence to be disturbing.<sup>157</sup> Kracauer's exercise was then criticised by the likes of James Agee. Hathaway's next two thrillers were based on true stories and gave sympathetic portrayals of criminals, or wrongly accused innocents dealing with the legal system. *Kiss of Death* (1947) used realist elements consistent with Hathaway's work in this period, but was not without criticism for violence. Finally, *Call Northside 777* (1948) used more documentary elements and emphasised its connections with the true story. Utilising critical reception will add to the observations Stephen N. Lipkin<sup>158</sup> has made regarding semi-documentaries in that it will highlight how the Hollywood Left, specifically, were approaching the documentary style with caution and realising its potential to misinform the public.

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<sup>157</sup> Kracauer, Siegfried, 'Hollywood Terror Films: Do They Reflect an American State of Mind', reprinted in *New German Critique*, No.89, Film and Exile, (Spring – Summer, 2003), pp. 105-111. First printed in *Commentary* 2 (1946): pp.132-36.

<sup>158</sup> Lipkin, Steven N., *Ibid*, pp.68-85.

Chapter Six studies the reception of *The Iron Curtain*, often labelled as Hollywood's first anti-Communist film and adds to Daniel J. Leab's<sup>159</sup> existing work on the anti-Communist cycle of films. *The Iron Curtain* was based on the memoirs of a former Soviet spy in Canada and filmed in the same semi-documentary style that 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox had been employing at this time. There was a noticeable split in the reception of this highly political film with some calling it troublemaking and others of the opinion that it was an important story that needed to be told. Furthermore, the film received a lot of attention from parties outside Hollywood with protests and picket lines being organised. As a fitting concluding chapter, the reception of *The Iron Curtain* shows a large rift in parties that were once unified and highlights the hypocrisy surrounding many of those who had been so vocal about freedom for the movies.

The chapter breakdown covers a unique period of American cinema in that it is sandwiched between the post-war optimism and the Cold War pessimism of the late 1940s. The study will enable a thorough investigation of some of the key films that are now crudely bundled into a category called *film noir* which obscures their original meaning and history. Many of the films that caused concern to Bosley Crowther, John Houseman and Siegfried Kracauer, all advocates of liberal and progressive messages in films, have been included. This will enable conclusions to be drawn with regard to which aspects of the films they were promoting and which they were trying to discourage. With the dark cloud of HUAC hanging over the industry, it was an exceptionally difficult time for the filmmakers. No one could have foreseen the extent of what was to come, but it was certainly a bad time to bolster their political affiliations in print. To return to the words of Arthur O'Shaunessey, the immediate

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<sup>159</sup> See: Leab, Daniel J., "The Iron Curtain' (1948): Hollywood's first Cold War movie, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 8:2, pp.153-188.

post-war period heralded an age that dreams died and gave birth to a new age of filmmaking, albeit a dark one that was about to evolve into something much darker.



## Part One

### Semi-documentaries, Tough Films, and Prestige Male Melodramas

## Chapter One

### Murder From Without: The Semi-Documentaries 1945-48

*“To some extent Hollywood has succeeded in imposing its own vision of life on the world, so that a cocktail party on Park Avenue need no longer be entirely mysterious to an Eskimo. However, while the cocktail party has gone far beyond life in gaiety and magnificence since people can be taught to accept almost anything visually, it has been necessary to scale it down almost to imbecility in behaviour since nobody can be expected to recognise a system of conduct or conversation that has its roots in a more elaborate background than his own. The result of all of this is that very little seen or heard on the screen is precisely a picture of anything.”<sup>1</sup> Wolcott Gibbs, 1945.*

### Introduction

In 1945 Henry Hathaway's *The House on 92<sup>nd</sup> Street* was released and its success established a cycle of what have become known as semi-documentary thrillers. Drawing on techniques of documentary filmmaking developed during the war these films were often presented as dramatic re-enactments of real events regularly shot in the locations where the actual events took place and featuring a blend of Hollywood performers, original participants and 'ordinary' people.

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<sup>1</sup> Gibbs, Wolcott, 'The Kingdom of the Blind: An Ex-Moving Picture Reviewer considers his Ex-Job', *The Saturday Review of Literature*, Volume 28, No. 46, Saturday, November 17, 1945, p.7.

Andrew Sarris, writing with reference to Henry Hathaway's films in his study of directors in American cinema, states that the "semi-documentary surfaces of *House on 92<sup>nd</sup> Street*, *13 Rue Madeleine* and *Call Northside 777* can be dismissed as a passing fancy of the American cinema"<sup>2</sup> and in relation to Hathaway, he asserts that "The conventional distinctions between realism and romanticism are irrelevant to Hathaway's career."<sup>3</sup> Clearly Sarris underestimates the key role of the semi-documentary in the evolution of *noir* and this is perhaps a reflection of how the subsequent studies of *noir* have concentrated on subjective points of interest when positioning the films. This oversight has been recognised by Will Straw, who has suggested that the emergence of the semi-documentary film has been a topic neglected by film academics, he states that it "still inspires only the loosest of explanatory gestures. In the late 1940s, observers saw the semi-documentary in the vaguest of relationships to Italian Neo-Realism, the newsreel, the 1930s social documentary, and the wartime government instruction film."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, like the term *film noir* itself, semi-documentary is a fluid term encouraging selective justification for any films to be included in this category and Straw's point about how 1940s observers saw the semi-documentaries highlights how this could encourage a debate about the status of the semi-documentary in relationship to *film noir*. In writings since the 1950s their status is equally blurry and it is now the case that they are often seen as crucial to the formation of the *noir* canon of films, whilst not always labelled *film noir* as such. For example, Andrew Spicer sees the semi-documentaries as a vital part of the evolution of the *noir* style<sup>5</sup> and Thomas Schatz has observed that the semi-documentary and *film noir* "clearly began to intermingle as soon as the

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<sup>2</sup> Andrew Sarris, *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968*, Da Capo Press, Inc.: USA, 1996, p.179.

<sup>3</sup> Sarris, *Ibid*, p.179.

<sup>4</sup> Straw, Will, 'Documentary Realism and the Postwar Left', in Krutnik, Frank; Neale, Steve; Neale, Brian; and Stanfield, Peter (Eds.), *"Un-American" Hollywood: Politics and Film in the Blacklist Era*, Rutgers University Press: London, 2007, p.133.

<sup>5</sup> Spicer, Andrew, *Film Noir*, Pearson Education Limited: Harlow, 2002, p.45.

semidocumentary veered from war-related spy films to crime thrillers after the war.”<sup>6</sup> Raymond Durgnat places the semi-documentary cycle well within *film noir* under the “Crime as Social Criticism” category of films,<sup>7</sup> whereas Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton, do not cover the cycle extensively, instead they highlight the features that the semi-documentary share with their definition of *film noir*; they specify “realistic locations, carefully crafted supporting roles, extremely brutal scenes, and bits of bravura in the final chase sequences”<sup>8</sup> as similarities. However, Borde and Chaumeton do note an important difference between the two cycles: “The documentary considers the murder from without, from the official police viewpoint; the film noir from within, from the criminals.”<sup>9</sup> Frank Krutnik positions the semi-documentary firmly within *film noir* and for his study they fit in the category of “The ‘Semi-Documentary’/Police-Procedural Thriller”; and he calls them “A hybrid of fiction film and documentary conventions”.<sup>10</sup> Paul Schrader also includes the semi-documentary films in his exploration of *film noir*; breaking *film noir* into three phases he includes them in what he sees as the second phase “the post-war realistic period”<sup>11</sup> and considers them as films which “tended more toward the problems of crime in the streets, political corruption and police routine”. All of these studies have provided a retrospective analysis of the films, which, thus, needs to be examined with caution. For example, publications have since linked the emergence of the semi-documentary (or realist films) to the budget cuts enforced by the studios causing a shift to location filming (see Keith Reader and William Lafferty for example)<sup>12</sup>. Whilst this factor has to be taken into consideration, as it has been well documented that

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<sup>6</sup> Schatz, Thomas, *History of the American Cinema, Volume 6, Boom and Bust: American Cinema in the 1940s*, University of California Press, Ltd.: London, 1999, p.380..

<sup>7</sup> Durgnat, Raymond, “Paint it Black: The Family Tree of the *Film Noir*” (1970), in Silver, Alain, & Ursini, James, (Eds.) *Film Noir Reader*, Limelight Editions: New Jersey, 2006, p.40.

<sup>8</sup> Borde, Raymond, and Chaumeton, Etienne, (Translated by Hammond, Paul), *A Panorama of American Film Noir 1941-1953*, San Francisco: City Light Books, 2002, p.6..

<sup>9</sup> Borde and Chaumeton, Ibid, p.6.

<sup>10</sup> Krutnik, Frank, *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity*, Routledge: London, 1994, p.202.

<sup>11</sup> Schrader, Paul, “Notes on *Film Noir*” (1972), in Silver, Alain, & Ursini, James, (Eds.) *Film Noir Reader*, Limelight Editions: New Jersey, 2006, p.59.

<sup>12</sup> See: Reader, Keith, *The Cinema: A History*, Hodder & Stoughton: New York, 1979, p.91, and: Lafferty, William, ‘A Reappraisal of the semi-Documentary in Hollywood, 1945-1948’, *Velvet Light Trap*, Issue 20 (Summer 1983), p.24.

post-war cinema suffered budget constraints, it does not wholly explain the genre of the films that this technique was applied to. Indeed, at the time, the critics made little comment of the budgetary factors and constraints when reviewing the films and saw this new style of realism as noteworthy and something to promote.

If Richard Maltby, as we have seen in the introduction, saw the Left as being hostile to *film noir*,<sup>13</sup> this was certainly not the case (at least initially) with its response to the semi-documentary films. As we will see, leftist critics championed the semi-documentary thrillers and the realist techniques that they employed; filmic techniques that, as Will Straw has demonstrated, were “hailed as ways of seeking after truth.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, this seeking of truth was an important point in the history of post-war Hollywood in which the values of realism were not only transforming the style of Hollywood films, but also their social and political justification. The recent war had exposed the possibilities as well as the responsibilities of film as a medium of mass communication. It was a period in which Hollywood and its commentators sought to justify itself as not just harmless entertainment but as a vital social organ for the moulding of public opinion; one such study which sought to encourage this and offer solutions as to the direction of film was *Freedom of the Movies* by Ruth A. Inglis; she wrote that “There is no easy way to force the screen to realize its artistic and social potentialities. [...] Ultimately, progress depends upon the enlightenment and public spirit of those who control the movie industry”.<sup>15</sup> Such debates would continue throughout the remainder of the 1940s with similar suggestions being raised in a *LIFE* magazine debate about the types of films Hollywood was producing. At the debate Massachusetts Institute of Technology dean, John Ely Burchard, argued that

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<sup>13</sup> Maltby, Richard, ‘*Film Noir: The Politics of the Maladjusted Text*’, *Journal of American Studies*, Vol 18, 1984, p.66.

<sup>14</sup> Straw, *Ibid*, p.137.

<sup>15</sup> Inglis, Ruth A., *Freedom of the Movies: A Report on Self-Regulation from The Commission on Freedom of the Press*, The University of Chicago Press: London, 1947, p.24.

he thought “Hollywood’s social responsibility is that of being a consistently honest reporter.”<sup>16</sup> And in some way towards a solution, the film scholar, Professor Siepmann added that he believed that Hollywood “has underrated the diverse responses possible to films much more varied than those it produces.”<sup>17</sup>

The semi-documentaries set during wartime, such as *The House on 92<sup>nd</sup> Street* and *13 Rue Madeleine* (Henry Hathaway, 1947), successfully, for the Left at least, bridged the chasm which the debates regarding realism versus glamour were creating. Strengthening the obvious comparisons to the wartime documentaries, both films were about Nazi spies and were able to capitalise on the previous interest in the war documentary, yet attract other audiences with the popular stars. Realism, at this time, had become a key selling point, at least with the critics, many of whom noted and praised this in their reviews and great emphasis was placed on this in many of the preambles of the films; either by stressing that the films were based on real-life incidents or that they were filmed in actual locations.<sup>18</sup> Will Straw, writing about the post-war Left has highlighted that publications, such as the *Daily Worker*, welcomed the “lack of pretension” and “honesty” of these films.<sup>19</sup> From observing the critical reception of some of the semi-documentary films in the *Daily Worker*, Straw concludes that the reviewers, as representative of the Left, disliked glamour and melodrama, indeed they were suspicious of it, preferring the stark realities of the documentary style films of the period.

Whilst Hathaway’s two entries in the first phase of the post-war semi documentary films, *House on 92<sup>nd</sup> Street* and *13 Rue Madeleine*, are not conventional crime films,

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<sup>16</sup> Hodgins, Eric, ‘A Round Table on the Movies: Hollywood and LIFE thrash out the tough problems of making the films you see – or hope to see’, *LIFE*, June 27, 1949, p.91.

<sup>17</sup> Hodgins, Ibid, p.92.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, the opening prologue of the following films: *13 Rue Madeleine* (Henry Hathaway, 1947); *T-Men* (Anthony Mann, 1947); *Call Northside 777* (Henry Hathaway, 1948); and, *The Street With No Name* (William Keighley, 1948)

<sup>19</sup> Straw, Ibid, pp.133-134.

they do deal with criminal activity and to a certain extent follow the template of detective stories whereby a deductive process is used to catch the spies. This investigative style continues in both *Boomerang* (Elia Kazan, 1947) and *The Street With No Name* (William Keighley, 1948). *Boomerang*, like Hathaway's films, also placed great emphasis on realism. Harry Brand, Director of Publicity at 20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox, wrote in his press release that "'Boomerang' is the true story of a young state's attorney, who refused to prosecute a man accused of murder, because he was convinced of the man's innocence."<sup>20</sup> Adding that "In order to tell this story realistically and with a complete authenticity, 20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox sent the cast and crew to Stamford, Connecticut, where the entire picture was filmed." In the press release Brand goes on to state that "[Kazan] felt that the only way it could be done was with a minimum of acting and a maximum of naturalness and realism" and "Both producer de Rochment and Director Kazan were determined to make the picture as authentic as possible". Brand concludes that "'Boomerang' will cause more than a ripple in the art of the motion picture, because it brings to the screen a true story, told with a realistic technique never attempted before." Whilst Brand's role was to market the film and it is clear that 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox saw the style as something to promote, he gives little attention to the importance of telling the story as of a miscarriage of justice which is of national interest and there is no mention of any political message that can be derived from it. In this respect, Brand saw the film as an artistic step forward in motion picture history and a selling point was the filming styles and techniques.

In relation to this, Amanda Ann Klein writes that film cycles are a "mold placed over the zeitgeist, which, when pulled away, reveals the contours, fissures, and

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<sup>20</sup> Brand, Harry, 'Vital Statistics on "Boomerang"', 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox publicity material, November 7<sup>th</sup> 1946, BFI Special Collections: Boomerang 1947

complicated patterns of the contemporary movement.”<sup>21</sup> By this she means that they capture the ethos of society and are particularly relevant to the time in which the films are produced. Going on from this Peter Stanfield notes that “cycles are always located within their production and exhibition contexts and are defined by charting their evolution, consolidation, and diffusion over a measureable period of time.”<sup>22</sup> This is particularly relevant for this study of the post-war semi-documentaries in that whilst its influences can be noted in other genres and cycles at the time, it did have a limited lifespan. Both Klein and Stanfield agree that the best way to understand such cycles is to examine their original critical reception. The following examination of the reception of the semi-documentaries will expand upon Will Straw’s study by expanding the sources and engaging with the critical debates that were concurrent with their release which have generally been attributed to *film noir*.

Examining the critical reception of these films will provide a further insight into facets of filmic realism that were celebrated at the time and enable a closer inspection of what the Hollywood Left actually did consider problematic in *film noir*, as per Maltby’s claim. With the term semi-documentary being as fluid as the term *film noir*, the films considered shall be the initial trilogy of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox semi-documentaries: *The House on 92<sup>nd</sup> Street*, *13 Rue Madeleine* and *Boomerang*. Fox is generally accepted to have pioneered this style and all three films were produced by Louis de Rochement.. De Rochement had previously produced the wartime *The March of Time* series of semi-documentary show-reels which, according to Raymond Fielding, chronicler of the series, contained left leaning subject matters. Fielding states that “Implicit in all *March of Time* issues was a kind of uncomplicated American liberalism – general good intentions, a healthy journalistic scepticism, faith in enlightened self-

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<sup>21</sup> Klein, Amanda Ann, *American Film Cycles: Reframing Genres, Screening Social Problems, & Defining Subcultures*, University of Texas Press: Austin, 2011, p.20.

<sup>22</sup> Stanfield, Peter, “Pix Biz Spurts with War Fever”: Film and the Public Sphere-Cycles and Topicality’, *Film History*, Volume 25, Issue 1-2, p.219.



interest, and substantial pride in American progress and potential.”<sup>23</sup> De Rochement had encouraged this format when he joined 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox and the first three features he produced at Fox formed this unofficial trilogy. The three films were often compared to each other in the press and also grouped together by Darryl F. Zanuck and within a number of industry memos Zanuck had actually referred to them as a way of describing a style<sup>24</sup>. The reception of these films can indicate what was seen to be so different about them and at the same time highlight concerns within the film industry as to their content or themes. Released slightly later, was *The Street With No Name*; this film shall also be considered in this chapter because it is often considered to be a follow up to *The House on 92nd Street* and because of its release date the reception gives an understanding of how the cycle panned out and whether it was how the Hollywood Left had hoped it would develop.

### **The House on 92<sup>nd</sup> Street (1945)**

*The House on 92<sup>nd</sup> Street*, as with many of the semi-documentaries that would be released subsequently, begins with details of the events and production: “This story is adapted from the cases in the espionage files of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Produced with the FBI’s complete cooperation. It could not have been made public until the first atomic bomb was dropped on Japan.” The on-screen script continues:

“The scenes in this picture were photographed in the localities of the incidents depicted – Washington, New York, and their vicinities; wherever possible, in the actual place the original incident occurred.

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<sup>23</sup> Fielding, Raymond, *The March of Time, 1935-1951*, Oxford University Press: New York, 1978, p.87.

<sup>24</sup> Behlmer, Rudy, *Memo from Darryl F. Zanuck: The Golden Years at Twentieth Century Fox*, Grove Press, New York, 1993, p.113, 122, & 155.

With the exception of the leading players, all FBI personnel in the picture are members of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.”

The film starts with the FBI recruiting Bill Dietrich (William Eythe) to train with spies in Germany before returning to America to work on the ‘Christopher Case’ which concerns a stolen message relating to Process 97 – the formula for the atomic bomb. Upon his return to America Dietrich is to work for a Nazi group, headed by Elsa Gebhardt (Signe Hasso), to obtain information for the FBI. His office is monitored and his radio messages go straight to the FBI before being forwarded, after alteration, to Germany. The Nazi group find out about Dietrich falsifying his credentials and try to extract information from him. The FBI raids the house and the Nazis are captured or shot.

Many of the reviews drew the obvious parallels between the film and the wartime documentaries and concentrated on the new format being used, particularly the style and the realism; the reviewer in *Variety* stated that “Twentieth-Fox, employing somewhat the technique of “The March of Time”, has parlayed the latter with facilities and files of the FBI” and that it has produced ‘an absorbing documentation that’s frequently heavily-steeped melodrama. This film will do biz because of its excellent exploitation possibilities.’<sup>25</sup> This reference to the melodrama and reality is reiterated in the Thomas M. Pryor’s review in the *New York Times*: ‘The story is a composite account of Nazi espionage, based on official records, and is told in a simple, terse manner which rings true and is, therefore, highly dramatic’.<sup>26</sup> The review goes on to emphasise that the filmmakers ‘have achieved a most successful blending of the documentary and conventional techniques, thus proving that realism can be entertaining, too’. Quite expectedly, the reviews highlight the documentary approach

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<sup>25</sup> Kahn., ‘Film Reviews: The House on 92<sup>nd</sup> Street’, *Variety*, September 12, 1945, p.16.

<sup>26</sup> Pryor, Thomas M. ‘The House on Ninety-Second Street’, *New York Times*, September 27 1945, p.24

to a filmic procedure, and it is interesting to note that even though this was the first in Fox's cycle of semi-documentaries, Pryor chooses to broadly state that realism can be entertaining; as if to confirm the points discussed in the Introduction of this thesis that Wesley F. Pratzner and Noel Meadow had made in their articles about factual films having the ability to be entertaining and educational.<sup>27</sup> Bosley Crowther also made similar points in an article two months later and continued his pressure for more real life films. He argued that there was never a better time for the factual film and that the war-time *The March of Time* series of short films contributed to the demand; he states that "New talent has been developed, new interests have been aroused and this potent device for persuasion has been revealed to many movers of men's minds."<sup>28</sup> This sentiment was also shared by Ruth A. Inglis who wrote about the freedom of the movies and raising the level of public taste through exploiting the interest raised in the wartime documentaries. She wrote "let us welcome appreciatively the many fine pictures which have come from Hollywood recently [...]. A new realism is apparent in *The House on 92<sup>nd</sup> Street*, *G.I. Joe*, *The Southerner*, and *Lost Weekend*. What we need is more of them."<sup>29</sup> The critics and other commentators were seemingly doing all they could to promote this new style and to take it further.

The critic in *The Hollywood Reporter* views this new technique more sceptically by detailing that there is a good story to tell, but adding that "The only quarrel is with the method, which whips back and forth between documentary, newsreel and feature film techniques."<sup>30</sup> They add that "Norbert Brodine's photography is graphic and to the point and gives the picture the good quality of a newsreel and never stoops to glamour." In conclusion the critic highlights the propagandistic potential of the film:

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<sup>27</sup> Pratzner, Wesley F., 'Problems of Public Enlightenment: What Has Happened to the Documentary Film?', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Volume 11, No. 3, (Autumn 1947), p.400.

<sup>28</sup> Crowther, Bosley, 'The Iron is Hot', *New York Times*, Section 2, Sunday, November 25, 1945, p.X

<sup>29</sup> Inglis, Ibid, p.194.

<sup>30</sup> '\_\_\_, \_\_\_', '92<sup>nd</sup> ST.' Timely FBI Yarn; Propaganda Tinges 'Diary', *The Hollywood Reporter*, Wednesday, September 12, 1945, p.3.

“the FBI boys get a break and they’re terrifying enough in their omniscience and methods to be used as baby frighteners, ‘cause the FBI will get you if you don’t watch out.” Much of Red Kann’s review in *Motion Picture Herald* reads like a review of an educational documentary; lineage was dedicated to techniques and processes the FBI uses and he states the film “has combined silent film, actual film, narrative track and acted film against authentic New York backgrounds to vitalize this tribute to FBI efficiency in the days immediately preceding the war.”<sup>31</sup> He adds that “‘The House on 92<sup>nd</sup> Street’ makes sense. It has about it an air of the factual. It is never overplayed and is managed with full believability from one end to the other.” Indeed, the format and story are received well as being timely and relevant. However, James Agee, writing in *The Nation* was less sure of the way the topic was handled and appears to believe that the film was not real enough, he stated: “Convincing inadvertent suggestion that the FBI functions efficiently less through intelligence than through doggedness plus scientific equipment.”<sup>32</sup> And that in spite of effective performances “none of whom, however, manage to suggest how spies, counterspies, and traitors who look and act like that are not identifiable to those interested at five hundred paces.” He concludes: “Unpersuasive, often skilled, generally enjoyable.” Regardless of Agee’s criticisms, his opinion does fit in with the common theme within the reviews, that of realism being something to be encouraged.

Kenneth MacGowan in *Hollywood Quarterly*, however, played down the documentary style, advising that the content was more important however the story was told. He stated that “Beyond the techniques of documentary photography and any question of real streets or simulated ones lies the meaning of the film itself, the plot that it is trying to tell.”<sup>33</sup> He uses this point as an inroad to discuss his main issue that, of the

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<sup>31</sup> Kann, Red, ‘The House on 92<sup>nd</sup> Street: 20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox-FBI in Action’, *Motion Picture Herald*, September 15, 1945, p.2645.

<sup>32</sup> Agee, James, ‘Films’, *The Nation*, October 13, 1945, pp.385-386.

<sup>33</sup> MacGowan, Kenneth, ‘A Change of Pattern?’, *Hollywood Quarterly*, Vol.1, No.2, Jan 1946, p.149.

films he mentions, *The House on 92<sup>nd</sup> Street* is a true product of the movies in that it was written for the medium. Throughout the article he discusses how the documentary style adds atmosphere, but he would like this coupled with a truth of character and finally how Hollywood should take more risks with original works instead of just relying on adaptations.

Overall the reception was positive with praise given for the style. Taking into consideration Raymond Fielding's summary of *The March of Time*, the association with this series, as noted by the critics, can be read as politicized and certainly a key theme of the film is anti-fascism. The reviews give a clear indication that realism was something to promote and that this format was educational and was an antidote to the glamour associated with Hollywood.

### **13 Rue Madeleine (1947)**

*13 Rue Madeleine* begins with the patriotic preamble, this time in relation to the good work of the U.S. Army. The usual details about the 'realism and authenticity' follow. After the attack on Pearl Harbor a secret intelligence group was established and led by Bob Sharkey (James Cagney). Bob learns that there is a German spy in his group, Bill O'Connell (Richard Conte). They plan to feed him mis-information for him to pass to Germany. Jeff Lassiter (Frank Latimore), Suzanne de Beaumont (Annabella) and Bill are parachuted into Holland on a mission to capture a collaborator, Duclois (Marcel Rousseau), who is designing rockets to be used to attack England, but Bill cuts Jeff's parachute so he dies in the jump. Upon arriving in Holland Bill goes missing. Bob is sent to replace Jeff and soon begins working with the resistance. After sending Duclois to England Bob is captured and tortured and Suzanne is shot. Back in England, headquarters take the decision to bomb 13 Rue

Madeleine, the German Gestapo base, with Bob in it. Bob is killed in the explosion and the base is destroyed.

Bosley Crowther in the *New York Times* writes that “the initial phase of the picture describes with newsreel exactitude the fabulous organization and training of members of the O.S.S. The characters [...] are introduced in the sharp and factual manner”.<sup>34</sup> However he does criticise some of the plot devices as being “undisguised “Hollywood”” saying that it drifted “into full-blown melodrama after a neat “documentary” approach.” And he concludes the overall film by producer and studio “is a let down of their authority over an uncommon type of film”. Crowther was a key critic in the reception of the semi-documentaries and he gave much column space to the desirability of “factual” films. Days after his review Crowther wrote a critique of *13 Rue Madeleine* where he hones in on the style of the film. In the *New York Times* he wrote “We are sure that a more impressive picture could have been made, if the calculated style, so well displayed in the beginning, had been maintained throughout.”<sup>35</sup> He also shows disappointment that the promising style and format has been manipulated, adding “we have to observe that the technique known as “semi-documentary” has been botched and that the opening feint at giving us a true look at the OSS is a bluff.” His concern is that too much fiction, or old style Hollywood, has crept into a semi-factual piece of work. Shirley O’Hara in the *New Republic* shared this praise for the first part of the film: “The first part of this picture, the training of Group 7 of our Secret Service for overseas duty is even more exciting and informative than the second half, when the actual mission is being carried out.”<sup>36</sup> She goes on to praise the staff as “excellent” and in keeping with identifying how different the semi-documentaries are, she adds “For fun, and for a refresher course and to

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<sup>34</sup> Crowther, Bosley ‘The Screen: Louis de Rochemont Film, ‘13 Rue Madeleine’, at the Roxy – ‘Perfect Marriage.’ Wallis Production, at the Paramount’, *New York Times*, January 16, 1947, p.30.

<sup>35</sup> Crowther, Bosley, ‘Slugging Spies: ‘13 Rue Madeleine’ Again Gilds the OSS’, *New York Times*, January 19, 1947, p.XI

<sup>36</sup> O’Hara, Shirley, ‘Movies: None But the Brave’, *New Republic*, January 27 1947, p.42.

see a movie in which no one is in love with anyone, go see "13 Rue Madeleine."". Both Crowther and O'Hara emphasise the informative and factual approach and clearly had higher expectations for this film and their disappointment with the amount of melodrama is apparent in their reviews. Highlighting the factualness of the film, *Variety* offered the view that "The training methods, as indoctrinated into the plot's development, are arresting stuff".<sup>37</sup> And the reviewer adds that the type of film will be of historical importance when the audience is further distanced from the war in years to come, stating "And it is more of this sort of celluloid cinematurgy, as the years roll away from today's peace parleys, that will take on greater values with the passing of time." James Agee in *The Nation* mentions the exterior shots and wonders how much the success of the film can be down to that, adding "These are selected and photographed with such intelligence, and gives the film such vitality".<sup>38</sup> Going on to criticise some plot devices in the film, he concludes "But the backgrounds more than make up for this kind of tarradiddle. Louis de Rochemont, the producer, is not the only man making movies in this country who knows the great value of getting outside the studio and shooting in highly specific places; but he is getting more of it done, more effectively, than anyone else".

Despite several of the critics not being particularly positive about the overall film, it is interesting to note that they go to great lengths to praise the O.S.S. and this depiction of it, as with the FBI in *The House on 92<sup>nd</sup> Street*. With the enemy in both films being the Nazis and being based on true events it would be difficult to be critical in any way. As the wartime documentaries had been used as a form of propaganda, so too were these films showing America in a particularly positive light and to provide educational information. Also the lineage spent detailing praise for this technique of making films is apparent. It is clear that the progressive types in Hollywood were

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<sup>37</sup> Abel., 'Film Reviews: 13 Rue Madeleine', *Variety*, December 18, 1946., p.14

<sup>38</sup> Agee, James, 'Films', *The Nation*, March 1, 1947, p.257.

very keen to promote this style even if the material in the second half of the film was met with criticism for reverting back to old-style Hollywood in the form of melodrama and generic plot devices.

### **Boomerang (1947)**

*Boomerang* opens with the details of authenticity; however this time the story has moved away from highlighting the good work of an institution and instead portrays a miscarriage of justice and an individual who fights a system to get the miscarriage corrected. The story opens with the shooting of Father Lambert. The police have no suspects and the State Attorney is concerned that this will cause political problems with the forthcoming election. Public interest in the case reaches fever pitch and the police deprive their only suspect, John Waldron (Arthur Kennedy), of sleep until he signs a confession. Henry Harvey (Dana Andrews) risks his career and the wrath of Paul Harris (Ed Begley), a developer keen to win the election, by running with the belief that the suspect is not guilty. Upon deeper investigation Henry proves that the witnesses are unreliable and that John's gun could not have been used to commit the crime. Paul kills himself in the courtroom and John is freed. The case was never solved. In a reversion back to real life we are informed that Henry's character was based on Homer Cummings who went on to become the Attorney General of the United States.

The shift in theme was noted by Bosley Crowther in his review in the *New York Times*. He stated:

[T]his style of presentation has resulted in a drama of rare clarity and punch [...] They have used an unseen narrator to describe many of the



comprehensive scenes, intercut with realistic dialogue, thus achieving, a news-view effect. And, to heighten the illusion of actuality, they have photographed most of it in legitimate communities adjacent to that in which the basic case occurred.<sup>39</sup>

Mentioning the impact of local politics upon the clamour for a scapegoat, he adds that “the film opens up as a comment upon social justice and the integrity of one man.” And with this Crowther, comparing the real life case to those presented on screen, issues a warning: “Movie-makers should positively remember that a public story is a public trust.” The issue that Crowther is concerned with is the fact that the real life lawyer, Homer S. Cummings, was, in fact, more advanced in his career and heavily involved in politics, especially New Deal Liberalism; whereas the hero of *Boomerang* was just starting out in his career. Although it is clearly a film which criticises the legal system and local politics, Crowther seemed to wish for an accurate portrayal of Cummings, which would have made the political leanings of the film more apparent. The actual reasoning for the reduction of age of the main character was because Darryl F. Zanuck wanted Dana Andrews for the role.<sup>40</sup> However, Crowther was to develop his criticism further in a later article warning about the potentially misleading semi-documentary style. He warns that some producers were passing particular films off as fact, and shot in the technique the public had become accustomed to as indicating reality, when they actually contained fictionalized accounts. The two films he draws attention to are *The Beginning or the End* (Norman Taurog, 1947) and *Boomerang*; however he points out that the latter is less guilty than the former. Again he reiterated the differences between Homer S. Cummings and the character portrayed by Dana Andrews in the film in terms of

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<sup>39</sup> Crowther, Bosley, “Boomerang! a Factual-Style Film of Connecticut Slaying, Opens at the Roxy Theatre – Dana Andrews Heads the Cast”, *New York Times*, March 6, 1947, p.36.

<sup>40</sup> In a memo dated October 30, 1946 from Daryl F. Zanuck to the director and producer of *Kiss of Death*, Zanuck promotes the idea of casting Victor Mature because of his bankability. He cites that the same thing was done with Dana Andrews in *Boomerang* and that they simply reduced the age of the character to fit the actor. Behlmer, *Ibid*, p.114.

stages of career, adding that he need not have been named as Cummings. Crowther goes on to state something pertinent to understanding his deeper concerns about the semi-documentaries:

Real names are not essential to the conveyance of authenticity [...] the citing of identities in these semi-factual films can be misleading, confusing, inaccurate and potentially dangerous. For the nature of Hollywood production is such that its so called reportage, when coupled with actual personalities, usually runs into astronomical praise. The remembrance of "Mission to Moscow" is a sufficient reminder of this fact.<sup>41</sup>

Interestingly, Crowther heaps praise on *Boomerang* (if not *The Beginning or the End*), with great emphasis placed on his one criticism. It is clear from his comparison to *Mission to Moscow* (Michael Curtiz, 1943), a film Crowther heavily criticised for being arbitrary and because Warner had not been entirely faithful to the book it was based upon,<sup>42</sup> that he was concerned that the films could soon fall into the propaganda category; it is also apparent that Crowther had a clear vision of the importance of these films and the direction they should take. Similarly Siegfried Kracauer had his own version of how such films should be used. He highlighted a particular issue with *Boomerang* and other films of its ilk. He suggested that these films actually do reflect reality and that to highlight the liberal message big problems in society come to the fore before the message can be understood. Stating that "Films mirror our reality" he goes on to say that:

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<sup>41</sup> Crowther, Bosley, 'Fact Or Fiction?: Hollywood Manifests Confusion in Using 'Documentary Technique', *New York Times*, March 9, 1947, p.XI

<sup>42</sup> Crowther, Bosley, 'Missionary Zeal: The Ecstasies in 'Mission to Moscow' Raise Doubts on Political Films, *New York Times*, May 9, 1943, p.X3.

“Boomerang” details the shady dealings of small-town politicians with the obvious purpose of emphasizing the integrity of the protagonist. [...] A story originally intended to feature an exceptional individual turns, by sheer dint of documentary treatment, into a vivid comment on our present *mores*.<sup>43</sup>

In effect, he considered the liberal message to be lost in a portrayal of a broken America, or at the very least that it is difficult to be good in a bad world. To highlight his point further Kracauer later compares the American social message films to the contemporaneous Italian equivalent, namely *Paisan* (1946, Roberto Rossellini)<sup>44</sup>. In his comparison he writes that “Throughout the six episodes there is not a single pep talk, not the slightest verbal hint of promise or a hope. Profoundly concerned with the actual existence of humaneness, the film never so much as mentions the “cause” of humanity.”<sup>45</sup> Kracauer’s summation is similar to that of Robert Hatch’s who writes that *Paisan* is “Like most Italian films these days, it pleads moral integrity of the Italian people; it is nationalist, thus, but not ideological.”<sup>46</sup> These critiques portray the sentiment that whilst the semi-documentary was heralded as a new praiseworthy approach, it was beginning to settle into a position of becoming preachy, too concerned with messages, and, more of a concern, showing America in a bad light.

Labelling the production by Louis De Rochemont as “painstaking and realistic”, William R. Weaver, in the *Motion Picture Herald* highlights both the realism and also the unbiased approach of the film by adding “Against a background of machine politics, police methods of obtaining confessions are shown impressively but without

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<sup>43</sup> Kracauer, Siegfried, ‘Those Movies With a Message’, *Harper’s Magazine*, June 1, 1948, p.567-569

<sup>44</sup> *Paisan* (1946, Roberto Rossellini) is an Italian Neo-Realist film and was released in America in March 1948. The film contains six episodes and deals with six different settings and the events after the Allies arrive in Italy while some parts of the country are still under German control.

<sup>45</sup> Kracauer, *Ibid*, p.571.

<sup>46</sup> Hatch, Robert, ‘Movies: Director’s Picture’, *New Republic*, March 29, 1948, p.31

expressed indictment.”<sup>47</sup> Also praising the style of filmmaking, Jack D. Grant in *The Hollywood Reporter* calls *Boomerang* “a novelty inasmuch as not a foot was filmed in Hollywood, or any studio, but all of it on location.”<sup>48</sup> Grant reiterates the style by adding that it “has followed the format of a documentary film in making commercial entertainment.” and that “the power of the story and the freshness of its presentation” should be an equal selling point to that of any star name. The documentary style is again highlighted in Shirley O’Hara’s review in the *New Republic*’s review: ‘Boomerang is a murder yarn, loaded with politics and told like a documentary.’<sup>49</sup> Interestingly, she points out that it is told like a documentary rather than being a semi-documentary and with her comment about politics it is an indication that the format was straying too far away from the informative style that she had praised in *13 Rue Madeleine*.

Interestingly the reception of *Boomerang* signifies something of a turning point for the cycle. Whilst the critics are still full of praise for the technique, certain critics were beginning to note that this could be used as a front for political messages. The concern was evident in Bosley Crowther’s reminder that the filmmakers must not abuse the public’s trust when telling a supposedly factual story.

### **The Street With No Name (1948)**

Although not concurrent with the timeline of the initial phase of semi-documentaries, at this point it is worthwhile considering *The Street With No Name*. Often considered a follow-up to *The House on 92<sup>nd</sup> Street*, the film opens with a similar spiel to the

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<sup>47</sup> Weaver, William R., ‘Boomerang: 20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox – Factual Melodrama’, *Motion Picture Herald*, February 1, 1947, p.3446.

<sup>48</sup> Grant, Jack D., “Boomerang’ Absorbing as Drama and Sock Boxoffice: Kazan, Andrews, deRochemont Tops’, *The Hollywood Reporter*, Friday, January 24, 1947, p.3.

<sup>49</sup> O’Hara, Shirley, ‘Movies: Fact and Fancy’, *New Republic*, February 17 1947, p.39.

opening of its predecessor. After a series of killings a man is arrested, his bail paid by John Smith, but he is later found murdered. Gene Cordell (Mark Stevens) is recruited to infiltrate the juvenile gang suspected of terrorising the city. He is given the fake identity of George Manly and soon meets the head of the gang, Alec Stiles (Richard Widmark), in a boxing club. Ingratiating himself into the gang 'George' is informed of a planned robbery and he passes the information on to the FBI. Alec gets a tip off from a contact in the police and the job is cancelled. George goes to the lockup where the guns are stored and gets a fired bullet from Alec's gun to incriminate him in the previous killings. Alec, realising his gun has been fired, gets his contact to check his guns for fingerprints. When he finds out George had fired his gun he plans to have him shot during a robbery. The FBI has the gang followed and Alec is shot and the corrupt Police Commissioner (Howard Smith) is apprehended.

The critics' reception gives perspective to how the, now, not so new format evolved and was being perceived. Furthermore, *The Street With No Name* interestingly forms a neat bridge between semi-documentary and "tough" films demonstrating a melding of two cycles in the eyes of the critics; as the sub-heading of the *Hollywood Reporter's* collection of reviews from other publications highlights: "FBI Documentary Called 'Tough' Film".<sup>50</sup>

Bosley Crowther in the *New York Times* uses a large part of his review lamenting how Richard Widmark's gangster character has been 'toned down' when compared to Tommy Udo in *Kiss of Death* (1947, Henry Hathaway). Full of praise for Widmark, Crowther adds that "For it must be ruefully admitted that he is not quite as picturesque in this present cops-and-robbers thriller as he was in that other one" and that "His timing and tension are perfect and the timber of his voice is that of filthy

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<sup>50</sup> Hoffman, Irving, "N.Y. Critics Rave About 'Street'; Praise 'Illegals': FBI Documentary Called 'Tough' Film", *The Hollywood Reporter*, Monday July 19, 1948, p.6.

water going down a sewer.”<sup>51</sup> Moving away from Widmark, Crowther highlights that the film “is done in the currently popular “documentary” style, with the crime haunts and dumps of “Central City” looking quite as literal as the laboratories of the FBI.”<sup>52</sup> It is interesting to note that three years after the first, seemingly official, semi-documentary, that this style is still being mentioned as significant. It is also mentioned in the *Variety* review, which states that ““The Street With No Name” ranks at the top of the list of documentary-style productions which have been rolling out of the 20<sup>th</sup>-Fox lot.” Adding later that “Down the line, the cast plays with documentary authenticity.”<sup>53</sup> However, *Variety* highlights the social-political message that the film was pushing, they observe that “According to the preface, this pic is presumably pegged on a campaign to combat a current crime wave set in motion by a new group of teenage hoodlums. No time at all, however, is spent on sermonizing.” This point is expanded upon by George H. Spires in his review in *Motion Picture Herald*. He writes: “Again tapping the newsworthy topics of the times for another subject in the growing list of semi-documentary pictures, Twentieth Century Fox offers “The Street With No Name” [...] which will receive the full support and endorsement of civic groups combating juvenile delinquency and lawlessness.”<sup>54</sup> And setting it aside from the usual gangster films, he adds that “There is none of the artificial heroics which Hollywood has long considered a vital part of such pictures.”

Spire’s points are interesting to note, because he portrays a faith in the film and its effectiveness in a social-political level and adds later in the review that “To add to the story’s authenticity, director William Keighley has skilfully incorporated scenes made with FBI personnel at Bureau headquarters in Washington.” At this time the House Committee on Un-American Activities had begun blacklisting entertainment

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<sup>51</sup> Crowther, Bosley, “Street With No Name,’ Story of FBI’s Pursuit of Thieves, New Feature at Roxy’, *New York Times*, July 15, 1948, p.26.

<sup>52</sup> Crowther, July 15, 1948, *Ibid*, p.26.

<sup>53</sup> Herm., ‘Film Reviews: The Street With No Name’, *Variety*, 23 June 1948, p.6.

<sup>54</sup> Spires, George H., ‘The Street With No Name: Twentieth Century-Fox – FBI Semi-Documentary’, *The Motion Picture Herald*, June 26, 1948, p.4213.

employees and were working with the FBI, so it was timely for an encouraging portrayal of the FBI although the omission of this detail in the reviews belies this fact.

*Variety*, however, in their review of *The Street With No Name* add that “Beneath its documentary exterior there lies a straight melodrama that harks back to the great gangster films of the 1930’s.”<sup>55</sup> This uncovers an aspect that Zanuck, himself, had encouraged. In reference to films, such as *The Street With No Name*, Zanuck said:

The great value of any semi-documentary picture, such as *The House on 92<sup>nd</sup> Street*, *Call Northside 777* and *Street With No Name*, lies in the fact that while the story need not be true in every case, it must be presented in such a way that the audience *thinks* the whole story is true [...] You can dramatize and take certain liberties and licences as we did in the pictures mentioned above provided you start out with a convincing opening.<sup>56</sup>

Zanuck’s admission shows the extent that the format could be manipulated in a social or political context, and how it could be used within most genres of films, including the gangster or tough films.

Highlighting the point that Kracauer made regarding *Boomerang* and how it showed the high level and rife corruption in America, Robert Hatch wrote in *New Republic* that “The alarming message sent to us by J. Edgar Hoover in the preface to “The Street With No Name” is that America is threatened by gangsterism of unprecedented ferocity.” In a reverse of the presumably desired impact of the film, Hatch concludes that “I don’t know how effective “Street” will be in discouraging

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<sup>55</sup> Herm., Ibid, p.6.

<sup>56</sup> Memo dated November 7, 1950 from Darryl F. Zanuck to personnel involved with the production of *Operation Cicero* [later known as *5 Fingers* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1952)]. Behlmer, Ibid, p.194.

crime. I came out of the theatre myself arrogant in the knowledge that my heater was safely strapped beneath my double-breasted pin-stripe jacket. If I'd been a few years younger, I think I'd have gone rat-a-tat-tat at a passing patrol car."<sup>57</sup> Whilst it can be assumed that Hatch was joking, it does highlight the potential reverse message that could be garnered from the film and considering Kracauer's points regarding *Boomerang* outlined above; these films might not have promoted the liberal cause, in fact they might be encouraged the opposite effect.

Hatch's review perfectly captures the overall attitude shown by some critics with regards to this stage in the cycle. There was now a distinct shift in promoting the realistic style, as had been the case with its predecessors and as political messages crept in, it was perceived in a less serious manner. Zanuck himself even noted the exploitation potential of this particular format.

## Conclusion

The prosperity of post-war America hid the isolated experience of the war-affected individuals and this encouraged filmmakers to explore niches relevant to the new market; this was further necessitated by the growing popularity of television. Television provided escapist entertainment and films shown in cinemas needed to be taken more seriously if they were to be in a position to compete. As demonstrated in the critical reception of the initial films that tried to adopt a more serious and documentary style approach, many critics were welcoming to this new style. Some critics went so far as to promote the realism and educational benefits that this style

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<sup>57</sup> Hatch, Robert, 'Movies: Troubled Times', *New Republic*, July 26, 1948, p.29.



could provide; for them, it was a step closer toward a more truthful art form that would provide a good historical document for years to come.

In its attempt to cater for the 'new' audience that had changed significantly during the wartime period, one particularly small, but significant, output of this period was the semi-documentary film. Initially seen as an extension of the wartime documentary, this format gradually moved into more timely and topical areas, tackling issues such as crime and injustices, indeed human interest stories. The Hollywood Left's intention was for the films to be well meaning, educational and real. Considering the critical reception of, what are considered, the initial three: *13 Rue Madeleine*, *House on 92<sup>nd</sup> Street* and *Boomerang*, as well as the *House on 92<sup>nd</sup> Street* companion piece, *The Street With No Name*, gives an insight into how these films were sold to and perceived by audiences and critics. The heavy emphasis on the documentary style and how factual the films were fitted in with the huge push that the Hollywood Left were giving the documentary at this time. These films can also be considered a product of the numerous debates and writings at this time about audiences wanting more from the film industry than the glamour that Hollywood had been renowned for portraying. Mostly these films were given a great deal of support by the critics at the time, and if not fully supporting the story in the film they certainly endorsed the style and format, with the initial phase of documentary realism receiving universal support. However, as Zanuck highlighted in his writings behind the scenes, it is apparent how interconnected the film industry was with politics and social messages, and it is easy to see how the format could be manipulated.

Towards the end of the three year period of semi-documentaries there was a significant shift in how the films were spoken about; as the cycle changed from dealing with war spies to social message stories, some of the critics were referring to

the films as a 'documentary style' rather than a 'semi-documentary'. Unsurprising at this time and with the topics tackled, the issue of politics began to be mentioned in the reviews and the general stance was that this was something to be deterred. Finally Kracauer's points about how *Boomerang* could be seen as a criticism of American local politics, and indeed Hatch's comments about how *The Street With No Name* promoted violence, shows how this well meaning cycle could develop into something more controversial. The initial accounts of true-to-life stories had progressed into using the similar techniques to tell part fictional stories. With filmmakers from both ends of the spectrum at odds with regard to which political and social messages should be portrayed in film, the semi-documentary's evolution into fictional films and the blurring of the two 'genres', their inevitable similarities would undoubtedly encourage further concern with regard to the underlying ideology that would be understood from audiences in America and overseas. As demonstrated by the points some of the critics made about *The Street With No Name*, many stories, no matter how true-to-life, had the potential to be classed as "tough" films, highlighting a distinct overlap. The tough films shall be considered in the next chapter, albeit ones that did not base their stories on fact.

## Chapter Two

### Muscular Stupidity: The Tough Guys 1946-47

*'Oh, dear Heaven!' I cried, 'you make me tremble. If there were no crimes against Nature, where does that insuperable repugnance come from that we feel for certain transgressions?'*

*'Such repugnance is not dictated by Nature,' the rogue quickly replied, 'it comes only from a lack of habit'*<sup>1</sup> The Marquis de Sade, 1791.

### Introduction

The post-war period provided a myriad of movie tough guys not dissimilar to those featured in gangster films of the 1930s. However, audiences were accustomed to repentance or punishment by the final reel for the gangsters, or at least signifiers to show that the gangster's world was very different to their own. In a cycle of films in the 1940s tough guys maintained their hardboiled demeanour, but now they were the lead of the film, or the hero, so to speak. Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton have noted the lasting influence of genres and cycles in their study of *film noir*, they write that "From the "filmological" point of view, series have their origins in a few old movies, a few scattered titles. Afterwards, they reach their climax; that's to say, a moment of their exceptional purity. Following that, they fade and die, their after-effects felt in other genres."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Marquis De Sade, *Justine, or the Misfortunes of Virtue* (Translated by John Phillips), first published 1791, Oxford University Press: London, 2012, p.143.

<sup>2</sup> Borde, Raymond, and Chaumeton, Etienne, (Translated by Hammond, Paul), *A Panorama of American Film Noir 1941-1953*, City Light Books: San Francisco, 2002, p.1-2.

When considering the hardboiled characters whose appearances were prolific in the mid to late 1940s, Steve Neale, writing about genre, noted that adaptations of hardboiled fiction emerged in the 1920s with key adaptations taking place during the 1930s (for example, *The Maltese Falcon* (Roy Del Ruth, 1931), and *The Glass Key* (Frank Tuttle, 1935); both of which were remade in the 1940s that were more fitting, time-wise, within what is now considered to be the classic *film noir* period.<sup>3</sup> Frank Krutnik has also highlighted *film noir*'s links with the hardboiled detective novels stating that it was a cycle within *film noir* and that it "is a more dynamic mode of crime fiction. Whereas the classical detective is often at one remove from the milieu which gives rise to the socially disruptive act of murder, the 'hard-boiled' investigator immerses himself in this milieu."<sup>4</sup> He goes on to say that the detective "operates as a mediator between the criminal underworld and the world of respectable society [...] without really being part of either."<sup>5</sup> Considering Krutnik and Neale's observations about certain films from the 1940s, *The Big Sleep* (Howard Hawks, 1946) provides a prime example of the movie tough guy with Humphrey Bogart's performance as Philip Marlowe. *The Big Sleep* has been labelled a classic *film noir*<sup>6</sup>; even "definitive *noir*";<sup>7</sup> and invariably features in studies about *film noir*..

Borde and Chaumeton, have suggested that *film noir* is a fluid term and a film's inclusion in the *noir* category is a particularly personal choice derived from the stylistic, atmospheric or subject matters featured that the individual deems to represent *noir*; surmising that "Film noir is noir *for us*".<sup>8</sup> In their study of the films they broke the *noir* into sub-categories drawing from Nino Frank's seminal article 'A New

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<sup>3</sup> Neale, Steve, *Genre and Hollywood*, Routledge: Abingdon, 2000, p.165.

<sup>4</sup> Krutnik, Frank, *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity*, Routledge: London, 1991, p.39.

<sup>5</sup> Krutnik, Ibid, p.39.

<sup>6</sup> Phillips, Gene D., *Creatures of Darkness: Raymond Chandler, Detective Fiction, and Film Noir*, The University Press of Kentucky: Kentucky, 2000. p.93.

<sup>7</sup> Langford, Barry, *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond*, Edinburgh University Press Ltd: Edinburgh, 2005, p.215

<sup>8</sup> See: Borde and Chaumeton, Ibid, p.1 & p.5.

Kind of Police Drama: The Criminal Adventure<sup>9</sup>; where Frank stated that *noir* films had superseded the Western with “the dynamic of violent death and dark mysteries, as well as the change in background [...] to a “fantastic” social order”<sup>10</sup>. Borde and Chaumeton go on to add that “few series in the history of cinema have, in just seven or eight years, accumulated so many hideous acts of brutality and murder.”<sup>11</sup> The war-related semi-documentaries during 1945-48, discussed in the previous chapter, had featured deaths which were based on factual events or deemed appropriate to the story; whereas the films featuring the tough individuals took a somewhat darker turn with deaths being used as a simple and inconsequential plot device and the enemies were somewhat closer to home than the Nazis. This Chapter will consider the critical reaction to the increasing levels of violence and in this respect will expand upon Stephen Prince’s study of classical film violence. Prince has argued that violence was more acceptable in some genres than others<sup>12</sup> and this was certainly the case with the “tough” films which caused many debates concerning the influence on the public and the international perception of America.

Chaumeton and Borde’s detailing of violent deaths being a key feature in *film noir*, was also an aspect being discussed at the time of their production. Film Producer, John Houseman, wrote a series of articles for *Hollywood Quarterly* in 1947 in which he detailed a concern about violence and the new types of heroes in film. Houseman’s articles were not about the level of violence being portrayed; instead his primary concern was with the instances in which it was used. In one such article he linked violence to crime using three examples of film from this period: the prison thriller *Brute Force* (Jules Dassin, 1947), the boxing drama *Body and Soul* (Robert

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<sup>9</sup> Frank, Nino, ‘A New Kind of Police Drama: the Criminal Adventure’, translated by Alain Silver and reprinted in Silver, Alain and Ursini, James, (Eds.), *Film Noir: Reader 2*, Limelight Editions: New York, 1999, pp.15-19.

<sup>10</sup> Frank, Ibid. p.15.

<sup>11</sup> Borde and Chaumeton, Ibid, p.5.

<sup>12</sup> Prince, Stephen, *Classical Film Violence: Designing and Regulating Brutality in Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1968*, Rutgers University Press: New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London, 2003, p.33.

Rossen, 1947) and the detective drama *Crossfire* (Edward Dmytryk, 1947). Houseman said of his selection of films: "All three concern themselves with American men facing men's problems in the American world of today; in all three the tender passions play only a minor role; all three are unmistakably Hollywood-made."<sup>13</sup>

Each of the films Houseman considers feature portrayals of murder, but in relation to *Brute Force*, he speaks of his revulsion towards the motivations of such crimes. He details that no truth and conviction can be found in the characters' misadventures. In discussing *Body and Soul* Houseman speaks of a tired formula upon which an extra layer of violence has been added, but argues that the result is effective and justified by its genre. Finally, in relation to *Crossfire* he adds that the level of violence is necessary to portray the message that the film seeks – that of the problem of racial hatred, in *Crossfire's* case anti-Semitism. Whilst it must be noted that Houseman himself was of Jewish descent, which increases the possibility of a personal affinity with the film's subject matter, his conclusion is that the increasing levels of violence in post-war films was in accordance with the public's demands and tastes. All three of these films mentioned – *Brute Force*, *Body and Soul* and *Crossfire* - were later labelled *film noir* and whichever definition you follow, they are all very similar in terms of production date, tone, style, acting methods and characters; as too was *The Blue Dahlia* (George Marshall) which Houseman produced in 1946. Houseman's criticism of the other films shows clearly that the films were not seen as a homogeneous group at that time, which the term *film noir* would imply, and were perceived quite differently in political and reception terms. What has later become a useful way of grouping the post-war film for analytical purposes, has, over time, distorted understandings of the context in which they were produced.

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<sup>13</sup> Houseman, John, 'Violence, 1947: Three Specimens', *Hollywood Quarterly*, Vol. 3, No.1. (Autumn 1947), pp.63-65.

Indeed, this difference in the original perception of the films violent imagery has been explained by Stephen Prince. Prince argues that this differentiation was related to the morality of the violence; he states that “The violence in Westerns and war films is typically presented as a kind of righteous violence, carried out by heroes of strong moral purpose rather than the dubious role models supplied by gangsters and other criminals or monsters. Accordingly, the PCA was relatively more permissive and less worried about the shootings or killings that occurred in these genres.”<sup>14</sup> The implication that the good characters commit a moral type of violence is quite basic and many of the characters on the receiving end of this ‘moral violence’ in war films or Westerns are not privileged with a back story other than being labelled the enemy to justify being assaulted or killed. With the PCA giving less scrutiny to these types of films it meant that there was a disproportionate level of freedom afforded to certain genres, which would naturally filter through in time. However advancements in filmic techniques enabled filmmakers to imply, rather than depict, varying levels of violence. As Richard Maltby has stated, since film censorship began the concerns about violence actually “formed part of a broader disquiet about the representation of criminality as a pleasurable spectacle.”<sup>15</sup> This does indeed link to Prince’s argument that the morality of violence was a key concern. In reference to the semi-documentary films, considered in Chapter One, any violence depicted had clear-cut good and bad characters, whether they are Nazis, corrupt politicians or gangsters. Whilst some similar realist filmic techniques were maintained in those films considered “tough”, the stories often featured a microcosm of society; a society populated by unsavoury sorts, giving the violence a new meaning and alarming the likes of John Houseman.

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<sup>14</sup> Prince, *Ibid*, p.33.

<sup>15</sup> Maltby, Richard, ‘The Spectacle of Criminality’ in Slocum, J. David, (Ed.) *Violence and American Cinema*, Routledge: London, 2001, p.121.

Houseman did not only express concern about the types of violence being depicted on screen, he was much more scathing when it came to expressing his opinion relating to certain types of movie hero. Earlier in the same year Houseman had also written a provocative article about the heroes of films, namely Philip Marlowe, in what is now considered by many to be a classic *film noir*, *The Big Sleep*. Central to his study about film heroes was the concern of how Americans would be viewed by other countries based on the type of protagonists Hollywood portrayed in certain films. Houseman describes *The Big Sleep's* Marlowe as:

His dress is slovenly. His home is a hall bedroom [...] He makes a meagre living doing perilous and unpleasant work which condemns him to a solitary life. The love of women and the companionship of men are denied him. He has no discernable ideal to sustain him-neither ambition, nor loyalty, nor even a lust for wealth. His aim in life, the goal toward which he moves and the hope which sustains him, is the unravelling of obscure crimes, the final solution of which affords him little or no satisfaction.<sup>16</sup>

*The Big Sleep* was based on the novel of the same name by Raymond Chandler, who had commented that he was happy with the casting of Humphrey Bogart and, having attended shoots, claimed Bogart to be “the genuine article”.<sup>17</sup> What makes Houseman’s attack more pertinent is that in his memoirs he claims that he was a friend of Chandler’s; he states: “our friendship was formed, based on the astonishing premise that he and I alone, of all those currently employed at Paramount Studio, were British public-school men – and, consequently, gentlemen.”<sup>18</sup> This sentiment

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<sup>16</sup> Houseman, John, ‘Today’s Hero: A Review’, *Hollywood Quarterly*, Vol.2., No.2 (Jan 1947), p.162.

<sup>17</sup> Hiney, Tom, *Raymond Chandler: A Biography*, Random House: London, 1997, p.161.

<sup>18</sup> Houseman, John, *John Houseman: Unfinished Business*, Applause Theatre Book Publishers: New York, 1989, p.258.



was reiterated by Chandler's biographer, Tom Hiney, when detailing Chandler's involvement with the film *The Unseen* (Lewis Allen, 1945) he writes that "the only redeeming aspect of the project was that he met and liked the film's young English producer, John Houseman".<sup>19</sup> However, it is clear that Houseman saw a leading character with some sort of personality disorder in Humphrey Bogart's Marlowe. He depicts him as a loner, with no ambition and a lack of social skills; and with an indeterminable future - a future which the character cares little about. Houseman adds that "The moral of our present "tough" picture, if any can be discerned, is that life in the United States of America in the year 1947 is hardly worth living at all."<sup>20</sup> Taking this concern about how American society would be viewed from the films it produced, Marlowe, like many film protagonists at the time, did not fit easily within the liberal's view of post-war America. However, in his continual discussions of how the protagonists were bad representatives of the American male, Houseman and his supporters drew attention to a relatively small group of films that were being produced. Some of them had low budgets and would perhaps have remained unnoticed when discussing the year's cinematic output. Indeed, Steve Neale states the films now considered *film noir* constituted 2.9%<sup>21</sup> of Hollywood's output at that time; therefore the films within this category that Houseman found to be problematic were even less. What may have just been considered darker than usual melodramas or crime films now became noticed and highlighted as something much more significant.

Houseman's articles are indicative of the divisions that were appearing between the way films were perceived and manoeuvred at the time; his articles considered alongside the films he was producing show that films grouped together as *film noir* nowadays were considered very differently at the time of production and even within

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<sup>19</sup> Hiney, *Ibid*, p.147.

<sup>20</sup> Houseman, 'Today's Hero: A Review', *Ibid*, p.163.

<sup>21</sup> Neale, *Ibid*, pp.155-156.

the cycle of tough films there were varied opinions on the perceived messages that they portrayed. Throughout his critique of the way heroes were being portrayed in films at that time, Houseman expresses concern that they “coincide too closely with other symptoms of our national life”<sup>22</sup>. In other words, they highlight facets of American life that he did not believe ought to be presented on screen. Houseman goes on to stress that it is not the violence in the tough films that he finds so distasteful; it is their “absolute lack of moral energy, their listless, fatalistic despair.”<sup>23</sup> The rejection of violence as a part of his dislike of the tough movies needs to be explored further because of Houseman’s involvement with other films which have since been grouped as *film noir* by subsequent writers about the post-war films. For example Borde and Chaumeton cite the Houseman produced *The Unseen*; *The Blue Dahlia*; and *On Dangerous Ground* (Nicholas Ray, 1952) as *film noirs* in their filmography of the films.<sup>24</sup> In the three aforementioned films the male lead, however flawed, is humanized by the love of a woman which clearly Houseman saw as preferential to, what he saw as, the problematic, hopeless and moral-less hero of the films. Deborah Thomas has studied the way which Hollywood deals with the deviant male; she argues the case for the schizophrenic nature of the male in post-war Hollywood; that is the good soldier evoked norms such as “close male companionship, sanctioned killing, and ‘easier’ and more casual sexual behaviour”;<sup>25</sup> but placing these norms into the context of post-war American society, the male becomes a deviant and quite different from the portrayal the liberals wished for. This deviance is considered a different way by Michael Walker who suggests a subtext of Marlowe being portrayed as homosexual in *The Big Sleep*.<sup>26</sup> Whilst it is unclear that

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<sup>22</sup> Houseman, ‘Today’s Hero: A Review’, *Ibid*, p.163.

<sup>23</sup> Houseman, ‘Today’s Hero: A Review’, *Ibid*, p.163.

<sup>24</sup> Borde and Chaumeton, *Ibid*, pp.165-228.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas, Deborah, ‘How Hollywood Deals With The Deviant Male’ in Cameron, Ian, (Ed.), *The Movie Book of Film Noir*, Studio Vista: London, 1992, pp.59-60.

<sup>26</sup> Walker, Michael, ‘The Big Sleep: Howard Hawks and Film Noir’, in Cameron, Ian, (Ed.), *The Movie Book of Film Noir*, Studio Vista: London, 1992, pp.191-202.

Houseman shared this reading, it is clear from his articles that he saw significant changes in some of the post-war movie heroes.

Looking at the critical reception of some of the tough films it will be clear to see what particular facets within the films might have been noted as concerning. As highlighted in Chapter One and in Richard Maltby's article<sup>27</sup>, opinions were being expressed with regards to what types of films should be made. Maltby claims that the differing opinions were a considerable issue at the time; indeed many discussions on the subject appeared in non-film specific journals or periodicals,<sup>28</sup> and Maltby goes on to imply that the issues had perhaps become more sociological with concerns raised about the "extent of the motion picture's harmful influence".<sup>29</sup>

As previously mentioned, Houseman had heavily criticised *The Big Sleep*, so it will be interesting to examine the reception of this film alongside the Houseman produced *The Blue Dahlia*, which some critics had also singled out for its toughness. This comparison should highlight what Houseman specifically saw as differences between the films and show that, far from Maltby's claim that the liberals, like Houseman, had a problem with *film noir*<sup>30</sup>, that the problems related to something within some of the films now understood to be *film noir*. Houseman had also criticised *Brute Force*, so it will be relevant to see if the critics also shared his views. Also, in their list of the main *noir* series, Borde and Chaumeton list *The Killers* (Robert Siodmak, 1946) as the first post-war gangster *noir*<sup>31</sup> and many critics also commented on the toughness depicted in *The Killers*, so it will make a worthwhile comparison in this study.

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<sup>27</sup> Maltby, Richard, 'Film Noir: The Politics of the Maladjusted Text', *Journal of American Studies*, Vol 18, 1984, p.55-56.

<sup>28</sup> These articles will be referred to throughout the thesis, but as an example, articles from 1945 to 1949 relating to the direction of Hollywood film appeared in the likes of *Vogue*, *LIFE*, *Harper's Magazine*, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, and *The Saturday Review of Literature* among others.

<sup>29</sup> Maltby, Ibid, p.55.

<sup>30</sup> Maltby, Ibid. p.66.

<sup>31</sup> Borde and Chaumeton, Ibid, p.163.

## **The Big Sleep (1946)**

Private Detective Philip Marlowe (Humphrey Bogart) is employed by General Sternwood (Charles Waldron) to put a stop to his daughter Carmen (Martha Vickers) being blackmailed by Arthur Geiger (Theodore von Eltz). The General's eldest daughter Vivian (Lauren Bacall) also asks Marlowe to find Sean Regan, her father's friend who has disappeared. Following Geiger home Marlowe hears gunshots in his house and goes in to find Carmen high and Geiger dead with the film from a hidden camera removed. After taking Carmen home Marlowe returns to see Geiger's body gone and Vivian tells Marlowe that someone wants \$5000 for the photos of Carmen. Carmen insists that Joe Brody (Louis Jean Heydt), who had previously blackmailed the General, shot Geiger and has the photos of her. Marlowe visits Brody and Agnes Lowzier (Sonia Darrin) who used to work for Geiger; and whilst there Brody is shot in his doorway. Vivian is cagey when asked about Regan running off with casino owner Eddie Mars' (John Ridgely) wife, so she pays Marlowe and says he is no longer required. Visiting Mars' casino he finds Vivian there and when she wins a large amount of money someone attempts to rob her and Marlowe realises that her win was set up. Vivian later calls Marlowe and says Regan has been found in Mexico and she is going to see him. Harry Jones (Elisha Cook Jr.), who is engaged to Agnes, arranges to meet Marlowe and take him to Agnes who can tell him where Regan is for a price. When arriving Marlowe sees Jones being poisoned by Lash Canino (Bob Steele) and he dies. Agnes tells Marlowe where he can find Regan, but upon arriving Marlowe is knocked out and tied up. He awakens to find Mars' wife Mona (Peggy Knudsen) and Vivian there and learns that Mona had made herself scarce after Regan disappeared to mislead the police. Convincing Vivian to untie him, Marlowe shoots Canino. Realising Carmen killed Regan and Mars hid the body and subsequently blackmailed her, he calls Mars and asks to meet him. At Geiger's house Marlowe shoots at Mars forcing him to make a run for it and he is shot

accidentally by his own henchmen. Marlowe then calls his police contact and tells him Mars killed Regan.

*The Big Sleep* was directed by Howard Hawks and released for the cinema going public in 1946. The film was a distinct change of pace for the films that the public had been used to from Hawks. Walker has commented on the fact that there are two distinct differences from other Hawks works; the first being that there is no best friend or group for the hero to belong to<sup>32</sup> and the second is the close friendship between other characters is portrayed as in the past. Walker calls it 'a loss',<sup>33</sup> and it is this loss that Marlowe is hired to investigate. Much has been written about *The Big Sleep* and its confusing plot developments have often been attributed to the censorship of the period; indeed Annette Kuhn has stated that "a surface reading of *The Big Sleep* yields a morass of contradiction, inconsistency and 'disturbance in the sphere of sexuality'"<sup>34</sup>. Kuhn concludes that there is much going on sub-textually because of Chandler's novel being so rich in material that The Production Code would prohibit if displayed explicitly in the film.<sup>35</sup>

Generally the critical reception of *The Big Sleep* was positive, but with two common themes being emphasised: the violence and the convoluted plot. Jack D. Grant in *The Hollywood Reporter*, as with many of the other reviewers, chose to emphasise the two murders that Marlowe witnesses and the four killings that he takes part in. Comparing Bogart to the other actors who have played Marlowe on film he concludes that "nobody socks these guys better than Bogart."<sup>36</sup> Grant goes on to state that the "picture is not worthy of the skill Hawks always demonstrates. He could only have

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<sup>32</sup> Walker, Ibid, p.194.

<sup>33</sup> Walker, Ibid, p.195.

<sup>34</sup> Kuhn, Annette, *The Power of the Image: Essays on Representation and Sexuality*, Routledge, 1985, p.75.

<sup>35</sup> Kuhn, Ibid, pp.94-95.

<sup>36</sup> Grant, Jack D., "'Big Sleep' Hits BO Hard; 'Show-Off Laughably So-So: Hawks Does Right By Bogart, Bacall', *The Hollywood Reporter*, Tuesday, August 13, 1946, p.3.

regarded it as an amusing exercise". William R. Weaver in the *Motion Picture Herald* reiterates the violence aspect of the film, stating "This is such a picture, conceived and executed strictly and forthrightly for the adult consumer, and it's hard to see how it can do less than top business."<sup>37</sup> His review implies that whilst the content is risqué, the audience demand this style of film. The violence is again mentioned when he adds that Marlowe "takes and gives more bodily and mental punishment than mere human beings are constructed to survive." Also Weaver specifically mentions the "six killings are accomplished in a variety of ways, all violent". Interestingly he states "It also has, in common with some other melodramas of recent date, no spotless characters." This comment is significant in that before known as *film noir*, and whatever definition one takes, *The Big Sleep* always appears in studies of *film noir*; Weaver noted a pattern forming within the melodramas; the pattern that Houseman was commenting on in his criticism of the same film. Whilst being positive about the film, Weaver was referring to one of the aspects that *film noir* became known for – the flawed protagonists that the audience, in the absence of a good guy, are willingly empathising with. Manny Farber in the *New Republic* also notices the recurring theme in his review. Like Grant he states "Coinciding with the special prominence of the private detective in Hollywood movies, he [Marlowe] has been tagged with that special name of "shamus".<sup>38</sup> [a slang term for private investigator] Like Grant, Farber also mentions the violence, stating that "most of the men in Hollywood's underworld are murdered". And again, the number of murders gets mentioned: "With six murders in the plot, this nightmarish affair becomes less vital as you try to decide what motivates the people". He also goes on to add that this is a "realistic portrayal of big city life" and that "the chief impression you get of their world is that the pay is rotten, the people – especially the women – are uninhibited and no one lives to middle age." It is interesting that Farber considers this view of America as "realistic";

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<sup>37</sup> Weaver, William R., 'The Big Sleep: Warners (1946-47) – Bogart, Bacall and Murder', *Motion Picture Herald*, August 17, 1946, p.3149.

<sup>38</sup> Farber, Manny, 'Journey into the Night', *New Republic*, September 23, 1946, p.351.

especially considering the previous emphasis of realism in the semi-documentaries and how they were perceived, and begins to explain why the likes of John Houseman were getting agitated at the realistic portrayals being so glum. With the semi-documentaries being praised as realistic and similar praise being given to fictional films with violent heroes, this innovative style and method of filmmaking was taking an unwanted diversion to those envisaged by the Hollywood Left. At this point it is worth noting at this time that Farber had been particularly critical of the liberals' view of America and at times critical of the left-wing filmmakers who pushed the social commentary in their films;<sup>39</sup> therefore such a film employing the methods of other films of the period to provide realism, yet with the absence of a positive social message would have appealed to him.

Continuing with the toughness theme, the reviewer in *Variety* highlights the relentless violence and the murders: "providing [a] full load of rough, tense action most of the way" and "There are six deaths to please whodunit fans".<sup>40</sup> *Variety* maintains a matter of fact approach to the film as if it was commonplace; however Bosley Crowther goes a stage further in his review in the *New York Times*. As others mentioned he states that there is so much "involved and devious plotting that the mind becomes utterly confused".<sup>41</sup> Crowther adds that there is much "toughness" in the film and that most of the people in the film "seem to carry guns, which they use at one time or another with a great deal of flourish and éclat. And fists are frequently unlimbered, just to vary the violence." And commenting about the morality of the film he states that "it has a not very lofty moral tone." For Crowther the violence,

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<sup>39</sup> See: Polito, Robert (Ed.), *Farber on Film: The Complete Writings of Manny Farber*, Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 2009, p. XXVIII. Polito selects various examples of Farber's criticisms of the Left's filmmaking, but none are more telling than Farber's comments on *Come Back, Little Sheba* (Daniel Mann, 1952) in *The Nation*, November 8, 1952: "the twisted sentimentality of left-wing writing that tries to be very sympathetic toward little people while breaking its back to show them as hopelessly vulgar, shallow, and unhappy."

<sup>40</sup> Brog., 'Film Reviews: The Big Sleep', *Variety*, 14 August, 1946, p.10.

<sup>41</sup> Crowther, Bosley, 'The Screen: 'The Big Sleep,' Warner Film in Which Bogart and Bacall Are Paired Again, Opens at Strand – 'Step by Step' at the Rialto', *New York Times*, August 24, 1946, p.6.

toughness and morality of *The Big Sleep* seem questionable and were the same themes that caused John Houseman much distress in his 'Today's Hero: A Review' article for the *Hollywood Quarterly*. Houseman's comments on *The Big Sleep* had not been restricted to *Hollywood Quarterly*, indeed, his debate continued in wider circles. In January 1947 Houseman wrote an article for *Vogue* in which he used *The Big Sleep* as a central case study about tough movies and he did detail more specific problems relating to the style and content of films in general. Speaking of the current fashion in films he wrote that "Even a superficial examination of their style and content gives a fascinating reflection of the nation's psyche. I'm afraid it is not that of a serene or self-confident people."<sup>42</sup> Houseman again states that he does not have a problem with the violence that is exhibited in the film but rather the film character's reaction to it. He clarifies that "It is not the act of brutality that is repellent but the indifference with which it is regarded by those who commit it and those whom it affects."<sup>43</sup> Interestingly Houseman goes on to compare the tough movies with *Rome Open City* (Roberto Rossellini, 1946) and this gives a key indicator of how he perceived *The Big Sleep*. To him films clearly needed to be obviously frivolous entertainment, or factual entertainment with two distinct styles and the merging of styles could potentially cause confusion and, thus, give mixed messages. To him the toughness, if required, was to be put to better use as with *Rome Open City* whereby the violence was true to life and had meaning.

In reference to Houseman's articles, which criticise *The Big Sleep*, Frank S. Nugent in the *New York Times* took a less serious look at the character of Marlowe. He summarised the two current arguments about Hollywood thus:

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<sup>42</sup> Houseman, John, 'What makes American movies tough?', *Vogue*, January 15, 1947, p.120.

<sup>43</sup> Houseman, 'What makes American movies tough?', *Ibid*, p.120



There are two major schools of thought about Hollywood. One asserts that movies create and mold public opinion, set the styles, whether plumbing or hair dress, and by their example, are responsible for everything from juvenile delinquency to the jumping divorce rate. [...] The second school argues that Hollywood is merely a response mechanism, a reflex to our life and times.<sup>44</sup>

Nugent concludes that “Marlowe [...] is a neat composite”<sup>45</sup> of all the phases of types of leading men that had gone before him. Whilst Nugent appears to not agree with either school of thought with regards to Marlowe, it is noteworthy that within his light-hearted critique of the issue Houseman was making, he does acknowledge that the tough films, such as *The Big Sleep*, were the beginning of a new cycle; one that would not last indefinitely. He concludes that “[For] the one sure thing about Hollywood is that it changes its styles in leading men at least once every seven years.”<sup>46</sup>

Another critic who was less concerned about the characters in *The Big Sleep* was James Agee. Writing in *The Nation* he passed comment on the realism of the *The Big Sleep*. He stated that “Humphrey Bogart and several proficient minor players keep anchoring it to some sufficient kind of reality.”<sup>47</sup> Agee adds that the film has portrayed a “new high in viciousness; but I can’t bring myself to mind this sort of viciousness, far less feel that it shouldn’t be shown”; he then adds an unusual comparison: “beside the really bottomless vileness of films like, for instance *To Each His Own*, which walk the streets unchallenged and never even pass a serious medical inspection, it seems to me about as toxic as a package of Tums.” The film

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<sup>44</sup> Nugent, Frank S., ‘Cavalcade of Hollywood Heroes: It all started with callow Charlie Ray and brings us – so far – to hard Humphrey Bogart.’, *New York Times*, May 4, 1947, p.SM12.

<sup>45</sup> Nugent, Ibid, p.SM61.

<sup>46</sup> Nugent, Ibid, p.SM13.

<sup>47</sup> Agee, James, ‘Films’, *The Nation*, August 31, 1946, p.250.

he highlights as being vile is the romantic drama *To Each His Own* (Mitchell Leisen, 1946) in which an unmarried woman gives her child up for adoption and then watches his life from afar. Agee wrote two other criticisms of this film and by looking at the aspects he found so vile, it does give an insight into why he thought *The Big Sleep* was less of a problem. He wrote “I cannot recommend *To Each His Own* highly enough to those who can still bear to be interested in what goes on in the cerebral powder-rooms of middle-class American women [...] But if you lack my all but necrophilic kind of interest in such stuff, you have fair warning.”<sup>48</sup> Later Agee would write that *To Each His Own* struck him as “one of the most false and unpleasant movies in years”,<sup>49</sup> because, he adds, that it displays “premises of cowardice, cynicism and the rottenest kinds of sentimentality.” Herein it is possible to deduce that whilst *The Big Sleep* may have been violent, it was realistic and lacked pretension insofar as it did not claim to carry a message or influence. However the film he compared it to, according to Agee, was pretentious, sentimental and glamorous meaning it was something to aspire to and at the same time tried impart some sort of social message regarding unplanned pregnancies. Agee’s opinions are interestingly similar to issues raised in Hollywood debates that are discussed in the Introduction.<sup>50</sup>

The impact of *The Big Sleep* was to be imparted further afield by Herman G. Weinberg writing from America for the British film publication *Sight and Sound*. He uses *The Big Sleep* to attack the censorship rules in America and speaks of “the good old days – before the Legion of Decency and the so-called Hays-Code”<sup>51</sup> and “how idiotically inconsistent are the censors”, going on to comment on the double entendres used to *The Big Sleep* to suggest sex and immorality, and concludes that

<sup>48</sup> Agee, James, *The Nation*, July 6, 1946, in Agee, James, *Agee on Film: Volume One*, Grosset & Dunlap: USA, 1967, p.206-207.

<sup>49</sup> Agee, James, *The Nation*, October 26, 1946, in Agee, James, *Agee on Film: Volume One*, Grosset & Dunlap: USA, 1967, p.225.

<sup>50</sup> See, for example, ‘\_\_\_\_’, ‘Social Integrity’ in Movies Sought’, *New York Times*, November 7, 1945, p.21.

<sup>51</sup> Weinberg, Herman G., “Atmosphere Erotic”, *Sight and Sound*, Vol. 15, No.59, Autumn 1946, p.85.

the film “is hardly worth all the trouble unless you have a clinical interest in aberrations.” However, that is where his similarity to Houseman and Crowther’s criticisms end as he adds that “Films like *The Big Sleep* and *The Killers* remind me of the cynical last paragraph in the Marquis de Sade’s *Justine* in which he sheds crocodile tears over the misfortunes of virtue in a wicked world. Who says that crime doesn’t pay?”<sup>52</sup> Here Weinberg implies that he believes that films such as *The Big Sleep* are a reflection of society, and cynical as they may be, show very little to the audiences of post war America that perhaps they did not understand already in terms of justice.

### **The Blue Dahlia (1946)**

Johnny Morrison (Alan Ladd), Buzz Wanchek (William Bendix) and George Copeland (Hugh Beaumont) return from fighting in the South Pacific during World War II. Johnny finds his wife Helen (Doris Dowling) has been having an affair and during an argument she reveals that their son did not die of diphtheria, like she wrote him, instead he died in a car accident while she was driving drunk. Johnny leaves and Helen calls Buzz and George at their new apartment prompting Buzz to leave to find Johnny, instead he meets Helen in a bar not knowing she is Johnny’s wife and goes back to her apartment with her. Eddie Harwood (Howard Da Silva), owner of the club the Blue Dahlia, with whom Helen has been having an affair speaks to Helen on the phone wanting to call off their relationship. Helen says that she has a good reason for him not to. Walking in the rain Johnny is picked up by Joyce (Veronica Lake), Harwood’s estranged wife, and she drives him to a hotel. In the morning Helen is

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<sup>52</sup> Weinberg, *Ibid.*, p.85. Weinberg refers to the novel *Justine*, by the Marquis de Sade and the closing paragraph concerns the readers’ reaction to the events that have befallen the lead character Justine. de Sade invites the readers, who feel sorry for Justine, who had striven to do well, to derive benefits from the message that “true happiness is found in the bosom of virtue alone, and that if, for reasons which it is not ours to divine, God allows it to be persecuted on Earth, it is to make up for it in Heaven with the sweetest rewards.” The Marquis de Sade, *Ibid*, p.264.

found shot and Johnny hears on the radio that he is wanted for questioning. When the photo frame containing a picture of his son is accidentally broken, Johnny sees a note from Helen on the back of the photo saying that if anything ever happens to her Harwood used to be called Bauer and is wanted for murder. Johnny is picked up by Harwood's men. During a struggle Harwood and his men are killed. Buzz is suspected of killing Helen during a memory blackout, but when the police question everyone they realise that 'Dad' Newell (Will Wright), the Night Watchman at the apartment complex, had killed Helen. Having previously been blackmailing Helen, Newell tries to escape but is shot.

*The Blue Dahlia*, produced by John Houseman and directed by George Marshall, also drew many comments about its violence. Jack D. Grant in *The Hollywood Reporter* called it "Paramount's latest contribution to the hard-boiled kick-'em-in-the-teeth murder cycle"<sup>53</sup> Once again the realism is a noted aspect in the atmosphere of the film with Grant mentioning "Los Angeles is a natural locale for the yarn" and the sordidness is alluded to when he comments that "Doris Dowling hits the baseness of the drunken wife a little harder than need be". Manny Farber, in the *New Republic* also comments on the level of violence and sordidness in *The Blue Dahlia*. He states "'The Blue Dahlia' is a tight movie about Los Angeles chislers, coppers, cabaret-owners, peepers, husband-deserters [and] just discharged Navy fliers who do violence to each other with the dispatch and unconcern of a person stamping an envelope."<sup>54</sup> He adds further detrimental descriptors when he states that:

The two big notions "The Blue Dahlia" gets across are that (1) people today are living more destructively than ever, and killing, infidelity, hating and being hated all the time have become run-of-the-mill and all

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<sup>53</sup> Grant, Jack D., "Blue Dahlia' Crack Drama; 'Well Groomed Bride' Fun: Ladd, Cast Hit With Hard-Bitten Meller", *The Hollywood Reporter*, Monday, January 28, 1946, p.3.

<sup>54</sup> Farber, Manny, 'Crime Without Passion', *New Republic*, June 3, 1946, p.806.

but boring, (2) the war veteran has been perfectly schooled to operate in a society similar to the one from which he was discharged.<sup>55</sup>

If it was another critic writing these seemingly disparaging criticisms of the harsh realities portrayed on screen, it could be considered a distasteful objection; however Farber revels in the unsanitized realism appearing on screen. He goes on to praise the film adding that it is “well acted from top to bottom and especially in the in-between roles” concluding that “It is the neatest treatment that has been done on a Raymond Chandler novel”. So whilst Farber does note the portrayal of undesirable elements of society, the morals of the heroes are not brought into question. Similar aspects were noted by William R. Weaver in the *Motion Picture Herald* who comments on the “tip top performances.”<sup>56</sup> And of the violence he adds that the lead is an “indestructible hero who survives beatings, and bruising enough to lay low a corporal’s guard, but the customers love this.” His last point indicates the reception of the film and how he believes that the audiences were ready and willing for this type of film that graphically and violently portrays the sordid side of life. Finally Weaver’s concluding comment relates to the realism, stating that “George Marshall’s direction makes every actor’s every word and movement look like the real and very earnest thing.”

Bosley Crowther in the *New York Times* called *The Blue Dahlia* “a honey of a rough-‘em-up romance” where “bones are being crushed with cold abandon, teeth are being callously kicked in and shocks are being blandly detonated at close and regular intervals on the Paramount screen.”<sup>57</sup> Adding that it will appeal to “those lovers of the brutal and bizarre.” Whilst Crowther questions the tact of the onscreen exploits, he

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<sup>55</sup> Farber, Manny, ‘Crime Without Passion’, Ibid, p.806.

<sup>56</sup> Weaver, William R., ‘The Blue Dahlia: Paramount – Murder Melodrama’, *Motion Picture Herald*, February 2, 1946, p.2829.

<sup>57</sup> Crowther, Bosley, ‘The Screen In Review: “Blue Dahlia,” at Paramount, With Alan Ladd and Veronica Lake in the Leading Roles, Proves an Exciting Picture’, *New York Times*, May 9, 1946, p.35.

comments on the “able performances” and concludes that “it does make a brisk, exciting show.” However, unlike his criticism of *The Big Sleep*, Crowther sees *The Blue Dahlia* as representative of real life and it actually had a message in its portrayal of the less savoury characters. The questioning of the tact that Crowther mentions is also addressed in James Agee’s review in *The Nation*; however, he adds that *The Blue Dahlia* does not suffer from self-importance and that it does carry a certain amount of social criticism and that it seems to him “to reflect, however coolly, things that are deeply characteristic of this civilization.”<sup>58</sup> Commenting on criticisms of *The Blue Dahlia* relating to such films not providing interest or influence, Agee mentions “I feel that there is at least as much to be dreaded as desired in American films taking up such editorial “responsibilities” [...] and I hope there will be more films of the quality of “The Blue Dahlia,” rather than fewer.” For Crowther and Agee, *The Blue Dahlia* lacked pretension and managed to convey moral people fighting against the bad people in society.

At this point, having looked at the reception of both *The Big Sleep* and now *The Blue Dahlia*, it is interesting to return to John Houseman’s articles. Having produced *The Blue Dahlia* written by his friend Raymond Chandler, he then heavily criticised *The Big Sleep*, based on a book written by Raymond Chandler and released in the same year; yet on the surface, both films, as shown in the critical reception, had similar themes that the critics noticed. However, Bosley Crowther, along with John Houseman, both saw something disturbing in *The Big Sleep* that they thought was problematic. Houseman argues that “The book was cynical, hardboiled, and quick-moving – a slick, atmospheric job of detective fiction written by Chandler with a fine contempt for his characters and the sordid world they inhabit.”<sup>59</sup> However, Houseman’s issue is that the film is “romantic” insofar as Marlowe is portrayed by

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<sup>58</sup> Agee, James, ‘Films’ *The Nation*, June 8, 1946, p.701.

<sup>59</sup> Houseman, ‘Today’s Hero: A Review’, *Ibid*, p.161.

Humphrey Bogart, a star who had previously made a name starring as a romantic lead<sup>60</sup> and he adds that “He makes love to a rising and very lovely star [thus] Marlowe’s exploits become the stuff of contemporary American Legend.”<sup>61</sup> Clearly Houseman is referring to the danger of the audience aspiring to be like the lead couple in *The Big Sleep* as they possibly would in the more traditional romantic fare. Houseman goes on to tackle the filming technique by listing many other films often conflated under the contemporary heading of *noir*, such as *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944), *Lost Weekend* (Billy Wilder, 1945), and *Murder, My Sweet* (Edward Dmytryk, 1944); he then states that *The Big Sleep* “marks a violent and deplorable regression”<sup>62</sup> from its predecessors’ realism. It is this point which proves somewhat revealing of the crux of Houseman’s argument. The films Houseman chose as comparators were considered as violent and dealing with, for their time, risqué subject matters; but what, in Houseman’s eyes, made this forgivable, was the fact the realism in those movies provided a distinction in that it made them grittier and the realism was used to give more of an impact to the moral of the story. He adds that *The Big Sleep* portrays an unreal “fairylane of studio back lots and sound stage exteriors”<sup>63</sup>; which implies that the film would be perceived solely entertainment. Furthermore, the films he uses as comparators provide a resolution, a moral or message, in *The Big Sleep* the anti-hero Marlowe sinks to the depths of the criminals he is fighting, yet still gets the girl in the end; and for Houseman, this aspect glamorises Marlowe’s lifestyle. In Houseman’s opinion it seems that there was no struggle between good and bad in the film; it was more a struggle between the bad and the worse and a distinct lack of personal drama for the average audience to empathise with. This implies that the film is violent for the sake of entertainment, rather than justifiable in any way; for example, if it was the actions of a war

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<sup>60</sup> Whilst Humphrey Bogart had made many action, adventure and war films, he had also relatively recently starred in two popular films with a romance theme: *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942) and *To Have and Have Not* (Howard Hawks, 1944).

<sup>61</sup> Houseman, ‘Today’s Hero: A Review’, *Ibid*, p.162.

<sup>62</sup> Houseman, ‘Today’s Hero: A Review’, *Ibid*, p.163

<sup>63</sup> Houseman, ‘Today’s Hero: A Review’, *Ibid*, p.163

traumatised veteran trying to adjust to a new, much harder, life than the one he had prior to the war, such as those depicted in *The Blue Dahlia*.

The differences implied by Houseman were also shared by Bosley Crowther who appeared equally antagonised by the impact of *The Big Sleep*. Whilst he was less vehement in his actual review of the film, referring more to the convoluted story, but he did express a grave concern of the moral implications on society in a later article outside of his usual reviews. He states that *The Killers* (Robert Siodmak, 1946) and *The Big Sleep* “are not only unprogressive pictures but they indicate a most disturbing bent. And whether this bent is reflective of impoverished thought in Hollywood or a distorted taste of the public, it bodes no particular good.”<sup>64</sup> Commenting on the character of Marlowe, he adds that “you might almost suppose that he is just as vicious as the criminals whom he apparently outsmarts in the end.” He emphasises that the violence is not used for any constructive use and as a harsh warning concludes that “we grimly recall that it was such films that predominated on the German screen between the two wars.” Crowther’s comparative portent highlights how passionate he was about the dangers that he was seeing in the films that were shown around this period and the significance and potential effect of the societal messages that he had observed. He clearly shared John Houseman’s concern, but whilst Houseman’s issues with these films were more current - in how America would be perceived abroad; Crowther appeared more concerned with the detrimental effect on morality and potential hazards that this posed for society. In short, it could be said that they were both concerned about fascism – either America being perceived as fascists, or fascism becoming a norm in everyday American life.

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<sup>64</sup> Crowther, Bosley, ‘Violence Erupts Again’, *New York Times*, September 1, 1946, p.X.



## **Brute Force (1947)**

The film opens with Westgate Penitentiary operating at its full capacity and with a history of trouble. Inmate Joe Collins (Burt Lancaster), from Cell R17, plans to escape because his wife will not have her life saving operation without him there. Through a series of flashbacks we learn how some of the prisoners came to be in prison, sometimes through trying to do the right thing. Inmate Tom Lister (Whit Bissell) had embezzled money to keep his wife in fine things and the sadistic Captain Munsey (Hume Cronyn) tells him his wife now wants a divorce resulting in Lister hanging himself in his cell. Lister's suicide leads to a loss of privileges, cancelled parole and his cellmates are sent to work in 'the drainpipe' a tunnel that is being excavated. Munsey finds out about the escape plan from his informer and wants the escape plan to go ahead because it will mean the Warden (Roman Bohnen) will be dismissed and he will be promoted; he uses the opportunity to torture one of the prisoners for further information. The Warden is coerced into resigning and Munsey takes his position. The men overpower the guards and begin their escape. Firebombs are thrown at guard towers and the guards open fire on the prisoners. Collins' team are shot, but he manages to throw Munsey over the balcony. A truck blocks the main gates and the reinforcements get the prison under control again. Collins dies from his wounds and Cell R17 is empty; the film closes with the sympathetic prison Doctor (Art Smith) saying that "Nobody escapes, nobody ever really escapes."

Another film which portrayed the toughness, so criticized by Houseman in his 1947 article 'Violence, 1947: Three Specimens', was *Brute Force*. *Brute Force* was directed by Jules Dassin and released in 1947. William R. Weaver in the *Motion Picture Herald* hints at the melding of social commentary with violence that he saw in *Brute Force*: "Violence and its suppression, bloodshed and its penalties, hate and

suffering are key ingredients”<sup>65</sup> and he goes on to conclude that “Although the film is, in a sense, an argument for tempering justice with mercy, the emphasis is on opposite policy throughout.” Here Weaver highlights the social message that can be read in the film and certainly the film portrays the key inmates sympathetically through their flashbacks and the circumstances that led to them being incarcerated. *Variety* takes this point and more explicitly extracts a social message from the film: “The aspect of an audience rooting for the prisoners plotting a jailbreak is given a sharp turnabout, at the proper time, to point up that brute force by prisoners is as wrong as the brute force exercised by their keepers.”<sup>66</sup> In considering both the *Variety* and *Motion Picture Herald* reviews, they both see *Brute Force* as a continuation of the semi-documentary. For example, Weaver opens his review with “Producer Mark Hellinger supplies here another examination of criminals and what makes them tick, concentrating this time on convicts within a penitentiary, dominated by an administrative policy of brute force which collides with man’s insatiable thirst for freedom”. Weaver refers to the film as an “examination of criminals” and brings in society as a whole when referring to “man’s insatiable thirst for freedom”. These aspects are tellingly reiterated in *Variety*’s review, where they state that *Brute Force* is “A closeup on prison life” and add that it uses “sociological exposition” and is “plausible and realistic”. In a similar vein, Jack D. Grant, in *The Hollywood Reporter*, enthuses about the film, calling it “a grim and honest prison yarn with an impact that is sure to get it talked about.”<sup>67</sup>

Bosley Crowther, in the *New York Times*, also highlights that “audience sympathy is directed entirely to the prisoners when they make their big break for freedom”<sup>68</sup>; but

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<sup>65</sup> Weaver, William R. ‘Brute Force: *Universal* – Penitentiary Melodrama’, *Motion Picture Herald*, June 28, 1947, p.3702

<sup>66</sup> Abel, ‘Film Reviews: Brute Force’, *Variety*, June 18, 1947, p.8.

<sup>67</sup> Grant, Jack D., “Brute Force’ Boxoffice Prison Drama Of Merit: Playing Powerful; No Punches Pulled’, *The Hollywood Reporter*, Wednesday, June 18, 1947, p.3.

<sup>68</sup> Crowther, Bosley, ‘The Screen: ‘Brute Force,’ Prison Thriller, With Hume Cronyn Marked as Villian, Bill at Criterion – New Melodrama at Palace’, *New York Times*, July 17 1947, p.16

he views the film in a different context – that of entertainment. After highlighting that “Not having the intimate knowledge of prisons or prisoners, we wouldn’t know whether the average American is so cruelly victimized as are the principal prison inmates in ‘Brute Force,’” he views the film sceptically and adds that the “inferential parallel seems to be a concentration camp”. A key point of note for Crowther is the violence used in the film and he writes: “assuming you have a fancy for violence and rough stuff on the screen, you will find a sufficiency of it in this deliberately brutal film.” Crowther had not yet finished with his consideration of the violence in *Brute Force* and later that same month wrote an article for the *New York Times* examining the influence of the film. Outside the constraints of his usual reviews he was able to highlight points he considered pertinent: violence, morality and propaganda. He states that “‘Brute Force’ deliberately goes in for abrading the emotions with sheer brutality – and you can’t make us believe that’s good.”<sup>69</sup> He then poses the question of the potential influence of such a film on “the under-privileged youngster, [and] the borderline juvenile” when faced with seeing heroic inmates and villainous jailers, before considering the detrimental influence in his rhetorical question: “And how about the kid of normal instincts who is made to feel toward the prisoners in this film that they are all good and noble fellows and that the authorities are incompetents or brutes?” Finally, commenting on the foreign audiences, Crowther concludes “What a sweet piece of propaganda for the American way of life!” The issues Crowther raises present a problem with articles such as his in that he underestimates the general public’s ability to view a film objectively. His article covers a spectrum of youth categorisations: “the under-privileged youngster”, “the borderline juvenile”, and “the kid of normal instincts” yet maintains that they are all impressionable and this somewhat contradicts the message gained from his review. Indeed, his review takes the stance that the film is violent and to watch it if you like that kind of thing but he

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<sup>69</sup> Crowther, Bosley, What of It?: Gauging the Influence of Such Films as ‘Brute Force’ and ‘The Hucksters’, *New York Times*, July 20, 1947, p.XI

concludes that “The moral is: don’t go to prison; you meet such vile authorities there.”<sup>70</sup> This sentiment is then overlooked in his later article, but with reference to the propaganda Crowther mentions, it does expose striking similarities to John Houseman’s concern with how the foreign market would view America based on the films it makes.<sup>71</sup> Houseman, too, thought that *Brute Force* was article worthy when he criticised it in his article about the use of violence in films in *Hollywood Quarterly*. He explicitly cites his stance by stating that “Brute Force is, by almost any standard I value, a deeply immoral picture – immoral chiefly by reason of its complete unreality.”<sup>72</sup> And he adds that he has “tried hard to analyze the unrelieved revulsion with which this picture filled me.” After considering *Body and Soul* and *Crossfire* in his article, he goes on to imply that the creators of *Brute Force* lacked the honesty and intensity of motivation for making a film; that is they made a violent film for entertainment rather than to educate the public. Both Crowther’s and Houseman’s articles, both similar in concerns, highlight the seriousness with which they viewed films and clearly sought to criticise them on the basis of not being in line with their subjective outlooks. America was looking for a post-war identity and this was not the one they wanted the, perceived unquestioningly subjective, world seeing.

James Agee, writing in *The Nation* has a somewhat dismissive view of *Brute Force*. Unlike Crowther and Houseman, he did not criticise the violence, however he did imply that the message of the film was biased. He suggested that the film, with its sympathetic portrayals of some criminals would appeal to those audience members who have experience of prison, but concludes, in reference to the real-life prisoners, that “I am sure they were never like the men in this picture, even in their youth; but I am also reasonably sure that they think they were, and think people still are.”<sup>73</sup> Also

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<sup>70</sup> Crowther, Bosley, ‘The Screen: ‘Brute Force,’”, *Ibid*, p.16.

<sup>71</sup> Houseman, ‘Today’s Hero: A Review’, *Ibid*, p.163.

<sup>72</sup> Houseman, ‘Violence, 1947: Three Specimens’, *Ibid*, p.63.

<sup>73</sup> Agee, James, ‘Films’, *The Nation*, September 13, 1947, p.264.

Agee's comments highlight that whilst he was not positive about the film he had not taken the film as seriously as Houseman and Crowther, much like his previous consideration of *The Big Sleep*.

### **The Killers (1946)**

*The Killers* opens with two hit-men arriving in town looking for Pete Lund/Swede (Burt Lancaster). Upon hearing this Swede says that he cannot run anymore and awaits them in his room. Lund is shot dead in a shower of bullets. The life insurance investigator, Jim Riordan (Edmond O'Brien), sets about investigating Lund's case and via a series of flashbacks from different perspectives we learn the series of events that led to Lund's death. Lund's old friend Lilly Lubinsky (Virginia Christine) reveals that he had been a boxer before injuring himself and they had dated until he became fixated with a girl he met at a party, Kitty Collins (Ava Gardner). Lilly's husband, Sam (Sam Levene), had arrested Lund when he took the blame for Kitty wearing stolen jewellery and Lund served three years in prison. Upon release Lund gets involved with Kitty's lover 'Big Jim' Colefax (Albert Dekker) and plans a payroll robbery. After the robbery Kitty lies to Lund telling him that he is going to be double crossed and lose his share, so Lund steals all of the money and flees with Kitty. She later leaves Lund and takes the money with her. In the present day Riordan tracks down Kitty wanting to recover the stolen \$250,000. Kitty is now married to Colefax and they had both planned the scheme to keep all of the stolen money. Colefax is shot by the other gang members and Kitty is arrested.

*The Killers* was directed by Robert Siodmak and released in 1946. William R. Weaver writing in the *Motion Picture Herald* called the film a "melodrama in the

violent vein”<sup>74</sup> and highlights the trend in the toughness of recent films stating that: “In common with other recent melodramas of violence, this one escapes the “gangster picture” label by placing emphasis on the characters in the right rather than upon those in the wrong”. As with the critical reception of the previous three films, for the critics, violence can be appropriate in films if it is for the better good, that is, if the characters are morally right to do so. Most interesting was Manny Farber’s review of *The Killers* in the *New Republic*. In spite of opening his review with “The latest in the weekly succession of Hollywood bullet orgies is Mark Hellinger’s production, ‘The Killers’”<sup>75</sup>; he goes on to say that “Besides its brutality, it has the noise, the jagged, tormenting movement of keyed-up, tough, flashy humanity that you get from a walk through Times Square”; adding later on in the review that the film has a “solid documentary style”. Farber’s particular review is fascinating in that he treats the film as a semi-documentary, highlighting its style and real life portrayals of characters you would see in Times Square. Farber also emphasises the violence shown in this film by using descriptive terms such as “blood-bath”; “sadism”; and “menacing action”.

Bosley Crowther in the *New York Times* also comments on the sadism portrayed in the film by stating that “the producer and writer have concocted a pretty cruel and complicated plot”<sup>76</sup> which he later dismisses as “mere movie melodrama [...] diverting, that is, if you enjoy the unravelling of crime enigmas involving pernicious folks.” Further to his, rather mild, review of *The Killers*, Crowther also wrote an article highlighting the concerns he saw in the film. Opening his critique he states that “pictures of crime and violence, of vicious and lawless folks, are open to serious social question when they are made for none save mere sensation’s sake.”<sup>77</sup> He considered that *The Killers* was sensationalising violence that had no moral point and

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<sup>74</sup> Weaver, William R., ‘The Killers: *Universal* – A Mark Hellinger Hit’, *Motion Picture Herald*, August 17, 1946, p.3150.

<sup>75</sup> Farber, Manny, ‘Caper of the Week’, *New Republic*, September 30, 1946, p.415.

<sup>76</sup> Crowther, Bosley, ‘The Screen: ‘The Killers’’, *New York Times*, August 29, 1946, p.36.

<sup>77</sup> Crowther, ‘Violence Erupts Again’, *Ibid*, p.X.

that the lead, Burt Lancaster was “a picture of muscular stupidity”. Crowther’s comments are in line with his reviews at this time where he clearly sought to distinguish between movies with a message and pure entertainment. Where he saw the line between them being blurred he was quick to dismiss them as “mere movie melodrama” and the like. James Agee, in *The Nation*, takes a different stance to that of Crowther in that he likened *The Killers* to the “old gangster films”<sup>78</sup> adding that it had “jazzed-up realism”. However, Agee further commented on *The Killers* at length in his review of the films of 1946. Starting off with a comment about the Johnston office, he observed that “It remained impossible, as before, to say anything whatever, without sneaking it, which might move or interest anyone past the moral age of five.”<sup>79</sup> He continues by saying that *The Killers*, *The Big Sleep* and *The Dark Corner* (Henry Hathaway, 1946) were “harmless little slumming parties”, but “were treated by a number of critics, reviewers, and editorial writers as if they were a sinister mirror of American morals, psychology, society, and art.” Agee’s comment reiterates the sentiment that he shared with regards to *Brute Force* in that whilst he might not like some of these films, the morals in the film are not worthy of note because he believed that they do not particularly have an impact. Agee argues that all movies are a reflection of real life to a certain extent and in this respect analysis of films by the likes of Siegfried Kracauer, the culture critic and film theorist, have some merit and worth. However, Agee states that to him, “the most sinister single thing that happened during the movie year was the emergence of this kind of analysis-or rather, was the way in which it was indorsed by those incapable of it.”<sup>80</sup> And he concludes that:

I am deadly alarmed to find that the function once performed, harmfully enough, by clubwomen and the nastier kinds of church pressure groups

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<sup>78</sup> Agee, James, ‘Films’, *The Nation*, September 14, 1946, p.305.

<sup>79</sup> Agee, James, ‘Films: Movies in 1946’, *The Nation*, January 25, 1947, p.109.

<sup>80</sup> Agee, ‘Films: Movies in 1946’, *Ibid*, p.109.

is now taken over, without a murmur or even sign of divided consciousness, by the kind of people who used most earnestly to oppose priggishness.

It is impossible not to consider John Houseman's writings and those of Bosley Crowther as part of his attack. Kracauer, too has criticism with praise in Agee's article. However, if some were keen to dismiss their concerns, others were just as keen to promote them. For example, anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker expands on Houseman's reasoning regarding *The Big Sleep*:

It is possible that a succession of movies in which violence is portrayed by glamorous stars and in which there is no sense of inner morality, even though the "sinners" are punished at the end, may not be cathartic at all but, instead, give this behaviour a kind of permissiveness.<sup>81</sup>

Whilst the critics writing for leftist publications had been more unified in their praise over the techniques employed with the semi-documentaries, there seemed to be disagreement over when films should use violence and the morals of the characters and many wrote with urgency that this should be redressed.

## Conclusion

From the critical reception of the four films in this chapter that all portray tough guys it is clear to see that there was an influence from the semi-documentary approach to film making that became popular in post-war Hollywood. The reviewers mention that

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<sup>81</sup> Powdermaker, Hortense, *Hollywood, the Dream Factory: An Anthropologist Looks at the Movie-Makers*, Secker & Warburg: London, 1951, p.325.



there is a realistic feel to the films, like that of a documentary. However, the audience, like the reviewers may receive a heightened movie-going experience, but there were concerns being raised by the likes of John Houseman over how these movies would impact society and how they may be received abroad. Much consideration was given to how these portrayals would mould a foreigner's view of America insofar as the films, with their added realism, could be taken to be a social or political documentary on the state of post-war America. For example, the critics highlighted that *Brute Force* had a social message at the heart of the film, but it was open to interpretation as to whether the dominating message was anti-prison or pro-criminals. Also noteworthy was that the good guys were sometimes bad and the bad guys were sometimes good. We have a detective who is prepared to act like a criminal (*The Big Sleep*), the sympathetic prisoners (*Brute Force*) and the criminal who has done wrong for understandable reasons (*The Killers*). This blurring of the traditional movie types was perhaps refreshing for the audiences, but some saw these as lacking the morals expected in films.

One of the key reviewers of these films who made no attempt to hide his discomfort with them was Bosley Crowther writing in the *New York Times*. He was at times scathing about the direction he saw these films taking cinema. His, and Houseman's, concerns were not always with the level of violence shown in the films, but the types of violence. If the film were to be based on a true story, or to portray a particular social message, then they considered this justifiable. If, however, the violence was to thrill the audience and had, what they considered, no moral message, then this was something unacceptable.

It seems that one of the key differences that the leftist commentators singled out within the tough films was that of the motivation of the protagonists. Despite their fights for the freedom of the writers in terms of creativity and their favouring of

realistic social dramas, they were less keen to support certain melodramas. For Houseman this new wave of films showed a lack of morals and indeed a lack of everything that Americans should aspire to. Whilst there had been some unity with the critics with regard to favouring the portrayal of realism and wishing for more freedom within the movies, there was now a division appearing in that the likes of Bosley Crowther and John Houseman were getting particularly vocal about how some films were not portraying good morals and in criticising these films they were actually being counterproductive by stating what should and should not be shown. James Agee, on the other hand, had a different approach and considered these films as harmless and not warranting a great deal of column space; instead he directed criticisms towards films that encouraged aspiration through fake glamour, which he saw as more detrimental to the film industry.

The fatalistic despair and actions of some of the leading characters, which Houseman refers to as a movie tough could actually be read as fascist or sadist – the complete opposite of liberal ideals. But the potential impact of these films was nothing compared to what the open criticism of them led to. Houseman's, and his contemporaries', criticism of these films helped to lay them bare to be discussed in much wider circles. Indeed in 1947 the *Hollywood Reporter* reported that the rough stuff in the movies was to be eliminated as per the Production Code. They said "The move is calculated to advance American foreign policy and make American films more acceptable to overseas audiences."<sup>82</sup> In response to this they quote Mark Hellinger, producer of *The Killers*, as saying "Why try to dodge actuality on the screen." With pressure growing for the rough stuff to be eliminated, but still a market for male-oriented films, it seemed it was appropriate to focus on prestige male melodramas containing messages to contemporary American society and would be more acceptable for exporting to overseas markets.

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<sup>82</sup> '\_\_\_\_', 'Rough Stuff to be Eliminated', *The Hollywood Reporter*, April 24, 1947, p.1 & p.4.

## Chapter Three

### Blackness is Everywhere: The Prestige Male Melodramas 1946-7

*“He was known in Hollywood as an earnest and conscientious man, an active liberal Democrat, and a filmmaker with the ability to produce intelligent commercial entertainment. Schary has a Sunday schoolteacher’s taste for stories with a message, movies that climaxed with a little civics lesson or humanitarian kicker.”<sup>1</sup>* Lee Server, 2001

#### Introduction

In the previous chapter we saw that different critics responded to the tough movies in different ways. While some like James Agee and Manny Farber were positive towards the films, others, particularly those more associated with the Hollywood Left, saw them as morally vacant, or took exception to them on the grounds films lacked integrity and realism.

The films considered in this chapter all deal with social problems caused by the returning soldier to varying degrees, yet differ in their level of explicitly using this scenario as means of propelling the plot. As detailed in Chapter One, the semi-documentaries can be linked to the war-time documentaries and this had an effect on the tough-guy films, not only on the motivations of the characters, but also visually and stylistically. Also following on from the semi documentaries that were being made in the immediate post-war period, the Hollywood Left had mobilised itself to

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<sup>1</sup> Server, Lee, *Robert Mitchum: “Baby, I Don’t Care”*, Faber and Faber Limited: London, 2001, p.131.

convey social criticisms and indeed social activism through some of the films it was producing. Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund have claimed that as early as 1936 unities were being formed between Communists and the Hollywood Left (socialists and liberals). They state that “by 1936 it became increasingly clear to some of these left-wingers that joining the [Communist] Party was the most serious and effective means of attaining their goals.”<sup>2</sup> Whilst this unity gave strength to the Hollywood Left, in terms of larger numbers fighting for a shared cause, it was not without its disadvantages. John Houseman, fully aware of the Communist influences amongst The Writers Mobilization (of which he was a participant in the councils of), states that the Communist influences led to The Writer’s Mobilization being cited for radicalism<sup>3</sup> and indeed led to *Hollywood Quarterly*, which Houseman was on the advisory board, being branded a Communist organ.<sup>4</sup> But for now, in the mid 1940s, this union gave the Left a united front with which to push their ideals.

Many of the semi-documentaries had shown America in a positive light, but the films were now beginning to have a vein of darkness running through them. Whereas films like *House on 92<sup>nd</sup> Street* (Henry Hathaway, 1945) and *13 Rue Madeleine* (Henry Hathaway, 1947) were, in many ways, pro-American in that they show the efforts that contributed to winning the war and the heroes are virtually flawless, the Hollywood Left now sought to employ similar methods to push their ideals. The desire to bring about change was a particularly difficult manoeuvre without being seen as radical, or at the very least, critical of the current situation in America; a feat potentially polarizing opinions as much as the discussions like the ‘Town Meeting’<sup>5</sup> did (see Introduction). As Richard Maltby has argued, during the post war years “The

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<sup>2</sup> Ceplair, Larry, and, Englund, Steven, *The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community 1930-1960*, University of Illinois Press: Chicago, 2003, pp.68-69.

<sup>3</sup> Houseman, John, *Unfinished Business: A Memoir*, Applause Theatre Book Publishers: New York, 1989, pp.268-269.

<sup>4</sup> Houseman, Ibid. p.269.

<sup>5</sup> Trivers, Paul, ‘Town Meeting Comes to Hollywood’, *The Screen Writer*, October 1945, pp.8-16

inclination to avoid any examination of social problems was widespread.”<sup>6</sup> He argues the reasons as being reluctance by some producers to antagonise certain pressure groups and widespread uncertainty of how America should be depicted in post war films. Perhaps in relation to the soldiers returning home there was a noticeable increase in the, as Thomas Schatz labels them, “prestige-level ‘male melodrama’”<sup>7</sup>. To be more precise, during the war years and immediate post war period there were many popular ‘women’s films’ that told stories from the female perspective and neglected to portray a contemporaneous view of war time life, such as *Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, 1945), *Rebecca* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1940) and *Now Voyager* (Irving Rapper, 1942), which all gained critical and popular acclaim. As Molly Haskell observed about the period: “The large number of woman’s films, war and otherwise, was a practical way of handling the shortage of men in Hollywood and the nation at large during the war.”<sup>8</sup> But also it provided an escapist fare for those left at home whilst family members were at war. However, the post-war years marked a significant shift in the market with a rise in male melodramas. Janet Staiger has highlighted how considering *film noir* as male melodrama, or ‘fallen man’ films has challenged scholars of *film noir* in that it “foregrounds the politics of gendering genres.”<sup>9</sup> She suggests that returning to the films original generic label, instead of calling them *film noir*, assists with changing the academic association of melodrama as “low feminine”.<sup>10</sup> Certainly looking at the social message films that are often associated with *film noir*, one can see that they were originally referred to as melodrama. Removing the *film noir* term, which, as shown throughout the thesis, is a

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<sup>6</sup> Maltby, Richard, ‘*Film Noir: The Politics of the Maladjusted Text*’, *Journal of American Studies*, Vol 18, 1984, p.65.

<sup>7</sup> Schatz, Thomas, *History of the American Cinema, Volume 6, Boom and Bust: American Cinema in the 1940s*, University of California Press, Ltd.: London, 1999, p.369.

<sup>8</sup> Haskell, Molly, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*, University of Chicago Press: London, 1987, p.192.

<sup>9</sup> Staiger, Janet, ‘Film Noir as Male Melodrama: The Politics of Film Genre Labeling’ in Geraghty, Lincoln, and Jancovich, Mark, (Eds.), *The Shifting Definitions of Genre: Essays on Labeling Films, Television Shows and Media*, McFarland & Company, Inc.: North Carolina, 2007, p.87.

<sup>10</sup> Staiger, Ibid, p.87.

term with an elusive meaning, it is easier to understand how certain films were perceived at the time.

This cycle had a new audience altogether, one which Schatz goes on to identify as often centred “on the efforts of a vaguely despondent male beset by post war angst”.<sup>11</sup> Four films that can be considered prestige level male melodramas are *The Best Years of Our Lives* (William Wyler, 1946), *Crossfire* (Edward Dmytryk, 1947), *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Tay Garnett, 1946) and *Gentleman’s Agreement* (Elia Kazan, 1947). *Crossfire* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* are now considered to be *film noir* in many subsequent studies; however *The Best Years of Our Lives* and *Gentleman’s Agreement* are often seen as being on the border of most people’s definitions of *film noir*. Certainly the stars of the films were well known for starring in *film noir* in the same period and the directors were all making films considered *noir* throughout the period too (Elia Kazan – *Boomerang* (1947); *Panic in the Streets* (1950); William Wyler – *The Letter* (1940); *Detective Story* (1951)). Furthermore both films, without a doubt, are ‘social problem’ films in that they address current issues that criticize the state of American society. Some studies go so far as to include them as *noir*, but they are certainly always mentioned even if not as part of the core *film noir* canon. At the time of production there was little difference noted between *Crossfire* and *Gentleman’s Agreement*<sup>12</sup> indeed, before the term *film noir* became used they were both seen as films tackling the problem of anti-Semitism. Both were considered social message films taking on a worthy issue. Whilst there are fewer similarities between *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *The Best Years of Our Lives*, they too had a moralistic tale to tell.

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<sup>11</sup> Schatz, *Ibid*, p.369.

<sup>12</sup> For example, comparing the headlines of Bosley Crowther’s articles on *Gentleman’s Agreement* and *Crossfire*, it can be noted that he uses similar wording and tone. *Gentleman’s Agreement*: ‘Something About It: Anti-Semitism Assaulted Boldly on the Screen’, *New York Times*, Nov 16, 1947, p.X1. *Crossfire*: ‘Straight to the Point: ‘Crossfire Puts the Fact of Bigotry on the Screen’, *New York Times*, July 27, 1947, p.X1.

The 'vaguely despondent male' that Schatz describes gave the Hollywood Left a perfect platform to air their ideologies. By using the backdrop of a country in adapting to the post-war reality and with these adjustments taking place in most homes across the country, the liberal films were able to indicate political or societal messages to a nation perceived as in need of guidance. Some films, as Barbara Deming has highlighted, chose to focus on the individual and their new position in society after being scarred (emotionally and/or physically) by the war and concerned the male lead being assisted by the heroine to integrate back in to society and addressed his "fears concerning one's own identity".<sup>13</sup> She cites such films as *Pride of the Marines* (Delmer Daves, 1945), *Spellbound* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1945), *Lost Weekend* (Billy Wilder, 1945) and *State Fair* (Walter Lang, 1945) as dealing with the returning soldier in this way. However, the films in this chapter deal with wider society, and in this respect, cannot be detached totally from politics. To state that the social messages were supplanted in the films about post-war males is to oversimplify the matter, but by emphasising realism and writing central characters that struck a chord, the 'prestige' films carried a more serious influential message, like those of the informative documentaries of the war years. One of the first prestige post war films to portray the societal changes was *The Best Years of Our Lives*, directed by the liberal William Wyler and released in 1946. Prior to *The Best Years of Our Lives* being released, John Grierson in *Hollywood Quarterly* was highlighting the benefits of such films. In his article entitled 'Postwar Patterns' he identifies the possibility of *The Grapes of Wrath* (John Ford, 1940) being considered a documentary. He states "some of us would not object to its being called a documentary, because in the re-enactment little of Steinbeck's original and direct observation was lost. The studios [...] filter was permissive rather than preventative of reality."<sup>14</sup> Whilst he goes on to say that not all of the films he considered were

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<sup>13</sup> Deming, Barbara, *Running Away From Myself*, Grossman Publishers: New York, 1969, p.53.

<sup>14</sup> Grierson, John, 'Postwar Patterns', *Hollywood Quarterly*, Vol. 1. No. 2, (Jan. 1946), p.159.

great, they were, in his opinion, “authentic and honest”.<sup>15</sup> This sentiment was being reiterated in the *Screen Writer* later that year where Judith Podselver was commenting on the Cannes Film Festival. She states “Europeans expect life to be portrayed as it is - and most of them have recently seen it at its worst. The absence of certain aspects of life from Hollywood films gives the American output an artificial atmosphere which largely invalidates it.”<sup>16</sup> Thus she highlights her belief that more real life problems should be portrayed in films.

Contemporary understandings of the prestige films have diverged from earlier considerations, leading to them being seen very differently in academia, for example, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *Crossfire* appear continually in studies of *film noir*, yet *The Best Years of Our Lives* and *Gentleman’s Agreement* more regularly appear in considerations of social problem films. *The Best Years of Our Lives* has retained its status by being considered 37<sup>th</sup> in the AFI 100 best films of all time<sup>17</sup> and recently justified an in depth study as part of the ‘BFI Film Classics’ book series, in which Sarah Kozloff states that she believes it “is an extraordinary film, noteworthy for how it weaves realism into classical Hollywood filmmaking conventions and for the profound depth of feeling it achieves.”<sup>18</sup> Leonard Maltin maintains this sentiment stating that the script “perfectly captured the mood of post-war U.S.; still powerful today”<sup>19</sup>, while *The Postman Always Rings Twice* is cited as “The best version of James M.Cain’s torrid, hard-hitting romance” and a “*film noir* classic” in Virgin’s film guide.<sup>20</sup> Whilst these subjective positionings of the films often encourages them to be seen differently, there were links at the time of their release in 1946.

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<sup>15</sup> Grierson, Ibid, p.165.

<sup>16</sup> Podselver, Judith, ‘The Lessons of Cannes’, *Screen Writer*, November 1946, p.10.

<sup>17</sup> AFI’s ‘100 Years...100 Movies’, 2007, <http://www.afi.com/100years/movies10.aspx> [accessed 03-02-14]. *The Best Years of Our Lives* was also 37<sup>th</sup> in 1998.

<sup>18</sup> Kozloff, Sarah, *BFI Film Classics: The Best Years of Our Lives*, Palgrave Macmillan: London, 2011, p.9.

<sup>19</sup> Maltin, Leonard, *2007 Movie Guide*, Penguin Books Ltd.: London, 2006, p.109.

<sup>20</sup> Fox, Ken, and, McDonagh, Maitland (Eds.), *The Thirteenth Virgin Film Guide*, Virgin Books Ltd: London, p.570.



One of the main features of this thesis is to highlight that the films now considered *film noir* were not seen, at their time of production, as a homogeneous group; this has been highlighted through the critical reception and writings of interested parties at the time of the films' distribution. However, for the purposes of this chapter it is interesting to show how the reverse can also be true. Two of the films considered are *The Best Years of Our Lives* and *Gentleman's Agreement*. Contemporary academics have taken care to highlight the differences between *film noir* and the social problem film. Deborah Thomas in her essay 'How Hollywood Deals With the Deviant Male' states "A film like *The Best Years Of Our Lives*, (William Wyler, 1946), though obviously not a *film noir*, may be of interest here."<sup>21</sup> And Matthew C. Ehrlich, when discussing *Gentleman's Agreement* in the context of journalism in films, states that, "*Gentleman's Agreement* was not by any conventional definition a film noir."<sup>22</sup> Most academics have carefully not been so explicit as to state which film is and which film is not a *film noir*, instead agreeing that both films in question fall into the social problem film. Whilst *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *Crossfire* are both frequently considered in studies of *film noir*, their status has been elevated somewhat in terms of lineage in the field of academia in comparison to the other two films; possibly because they too can be considered social problem films. Penelope Houston noted this pertinent point when she stated that in the post-war period "realism was promptly and intelligently commercialized by the Americans. The new thing in the cinema, in these years, became the location-made thriller [...], and the problem picture which overlapped it."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Thomas, Deborah, in Cameron, James (Ed.), *The Movie Book of Film Noir*, Studio Vista: London, 1994, p.62.

<sup>22</sup> Ehrlich, Matthew C., *Journalism in the Movies*, University of Illinois Press: Urbana & Chicago, 2004, p.91.

<sup>23</sup> Houston, Penelope, *The Contemporary Cinema*, Penguin Books: Middlesex, 1964, p.44.

Both *The Best Years of Our Lives* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* were released in 1946, the immediate post-war period. Whilst the theme of *The Best Years of Our Lives* is explicitly stated as being the problems facing the returning soldiers, and as the critical reception will explore, it was widely regarded as worthwhile and a success. However, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* was regarded as problematic by some critics. Whilst the setting of the James M. Cain novel, upon which the film was based, was in the 1930s, it has often been reported that the Production Code caused a ten year delay in making a film version.<sup>24</sup> If adapted in its original context the character of Frank would have been drifting to find work during the depression, and with the lack of money, his desperation would have been palpable. In the context of the more prosperous post-war America, Frank's decision seems a lifestyle – one which the viewer could easily attribute to the readjusting post-war soldier.

The critical reception of these four films will show how *Crossfire* and *Gentleman's Agreement*, in spite of contemporary understandings, were perceived as similar, not just thematically. Whilst with *The Best Years of Our Lives* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* some critics tried very hard to differentiate between them, yet others did in fact see the morals as similar.

### **The Best Years of Our Lives (1946)**

*The Best Years of Our Lives* opens with three war veterans returning to America. Homer (Harold Russell) has lost both hands during the war and is returning to his

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<sup>24</sup> See Erickson, Steve in *Los Angeles Review of Books*: "Nothing More American: On James M. Cain", December 12<sup>th</sup> 2012, at <http://lareviewofbooks.org/essay/nothing-more-american-on-james-m-cain> [accessed 14-02-14]; and Krutnik, Frank, *A Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity*, Routledge: London, 1991, p.36.

girlfriend; Fred (Dana Andrews) had married shortly before the war and now suffers psychological damage from his wartime experience; and Al (Fredric March) is a family man who had led a life of relative comfort and happiness before the war. During the return journey they express concerns that people will try to 'rehabilitate' them and show respect for their former enemy, considering how Japanese place a lot of importance on 'the family', unlike Americans. For different reasons they all end up in a local bar and sombrely reflect on how things are. Fred struggles to find work, finally taking a job as a soda jerk, which he swiftly loses after attacking a man who criticises America assisting the Allies. In contrast Al is rewarded with a promotion at the bank, which had kept his job open for him while he was away. Fred's wife who was unfaithful during the war wants a divorce and he starts a relationship with Al's daughter Peggy (Teresa Wright) and Homer marries his girlfriend Wilma (Cathy O'Donnell).

*The Best Years of Our Lives* tackles the issues affecting three very different men when they return home to America after the war. Each of them finds a very different life to the one they left behind and the audience follows their journeys of readjustment. Throughout the film there are key references to what the Left saw as the unjust nature of American society; these range from the overt – Al's fight to encourage his bank to lend money to the returning veterans without collateral; and Fred's encounter with a fascist who believed America should have been on the other side during the war - to the more subtle criticisms like when Al mentions that the Japanese place great value on the family, "unlike us". Furthermore the friendship between the three veterans highlights the war's impact of the social classes and how the shared experience of war acted as a leveller to those involved.

Many of the reviews of *The Best Years of Our Lives* confounded the Hollywood Left's hope of realism being portrayed in films. Tackling a timely issue of the returning

veterans and the problems they faced was ideal for their cause and the critical response was very positive. Praise for William Wyler came from Jack D. Grant in *The Hollywood Reporter*, stating 'No one could have bettered its direction' adding that "the screen is filled with emotional dynamite. Audiences' feelings are never spared when truths need to be told."<sup>25</sup> Further praise came from Bosley Crowther in the *New York Times*, where he speaks of the subject being "cut, as it were, from the heart-wood of contemporary American life [...] It gives off a warm glow of affection for everyday, down-to-earth folks." He goes on to comment on portrayals of the servicemen:

In working out their solutions Mr. Sherwood and Mr. Wyler have achieved some of the most beautiful and inspiring demonstrations of human fortitude that we have had in films. And by demonstrating frankly and openly the psychological blocks and physical realities that go with prosthetic devices they have done a noble public service of great need.<sup>26</sup>

Crowther and Grant both consider the film to be truthful, and thus, real. Crowther, as well as steeping praise on the film and Wyler, indicates an agreement with the social message that film portrays; throughout his review he says that the film "covers a lot of humanity" and "it fully reflects the delicate tensions, the deep anxieties and the gnawing despairs that surely have been experienced by most such fellows who have been through the same routine." He concludes that film is "irresistibly affecting and eloquent of truth."<sup>27</sup> As with the "tough" pictures in the previous chapter, Crowther is consistent with his ideology that films should contain the truth and the most

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<sup>25</sup> Grant, Jack D., "Best Years of Our Lives' Pure Emotional Dynamite: Wyler's Job Great With Splendid Goldwyn Casting", *The Hollywood Reporter*, Friday November 22, 1946, p.3.

<sup>26</sup> Crowther, Bosley, 'The Screen in Review', *New York Times*, November 22, 1946, p.34.

<sup>27</sup> Crowther, 'The Screen in Review' Ibid, p.34

prominent theme highlighted in the reviews, thus far, was that of realism exemplified in *The Hollywood Reporter* review by labelling the style 'an almost documentary quality'<sup>28</sup>.

Crowther also wrote a further article in the *New York Times* highlighting facets that he found appealing in *The Best Years of Our Lives*. He wrote that it deals very well with the "veteran problem", as he calls it, and that:

it is done with such sense and sensibility, such naturalness and tact – and with such genuine fidelity to the American nature , humorous and sentimental – that it should be not only delightful but revealing and instructive to everyone who knows an ex-serviceman.<sup>29</sup>

For Crowther the film was honest and meaningful and based on his criticisms of other films it seemed to fulfil the need to have relevance and is educational. Crowther highlights this in his article in which he emphasises how the film can be entertaining yet also educational.

As with Crowther's comments, the *New Republic* and *Variety* take their comments on realism a stage further by likening the film to the public's lives. Manny Farber in the *New Republic* claims *The Best Years of Our Lives* is "an extremely sensitive and poignant study of life like your own". He concludes that "The work in every department is so realistic and serious that "The Best Years of Our Lives" doesn't seem at all like a Hollywood job."<sup>30</sup> This remark highlights how different these films were seen and how, at least to Farber, Hollywood was not renowned for producing

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<sup>28</sup> Grant, "Best Years of Our Lives' Pure Emotional Dynamite: Wyler's Job Great With Splendid Goldwyn Casting', *Ibid*, p.3.

<sup>29</sup> Crowther, Bosley, 'Superior Film: 'The Best Years of Our Lives' Rings the Bell', *New York Times*, November 24, 1946, p.81.

<sup>30</sup> Farber, Manny, 'Nervous from the Service', *New Republic*, December 2, 1946, p723.

films that would have such a stark social message, possibly even social criticism. However, Farber does highlight one point of criticism, that “the movie bites off more than it can chew (it never has sufficient nerve to hit hard-headed business [...]).” His point, though minor, is quite revealing in that he implies that the film could have gone further with the social criticism to highlight the considerable difficulties facing the returning soldiers or, perhaps, the fact that people of the American mainland, unaffected physically by the horror of the war, were ill equipped to deal with the returning soldiers. Abel, in *Variety*, also strengthens the link between audience and film by stating that “‘Years’ is right out of your neighbors’ lives. Or, maybe, even your own.”<sup>31</sup> Interestingly Abel starts his review stating that the film belies Samuel Goldwyn’s (*The Best Years of Our Lives*’ producer) recent interview about British films being more realistic. The interview Abel mentions took place at Goldwyn’s Radio City New York offices on Monday 18<sup>th</sup> November 1946. During the interview Goldwyn was quite critical of formulaic American films and said that “To maintain its place, Hollywood must set aside the old formulas. It must find honest stories, stories with something important to say, stories that reflect these disturbing times in which we live.”<sup>32</sup> From his speech, just before the release of *The Best Years of Our Lives*, clearly Goldwyn thought he had achieved such a story in his film; and mostly critics seemed to be in agreement.

However, as an early indication of the larger factions that were to come, Abraham Polonsky dedicated a whole article to *The Best Years of Our Lives* in *Hollywood Quarterly*. Whilst indicating that the film has its merits, for example the understanding that social reality assists such films and highlighting that, in comparison to the novel upon which it is based, Wyler and Sherwood “move the story progressively toward realism”, a key issue for Polonsky was that the film was “a

<sup>31</sup> Abel., ‘Film Reviews: The Best Years of Our Lives’, *Variety*, Wednesday, November 27, 1946, p.14.

<sup>32</sup> ‘\_\_\_’, ‘U.S. Pix Carbons, British Fresher,’ Chides Goldwyn’, *Variety*, Wednesday. November 20, 1946, p.4 and p.32

pattern of reality as Wyler and Sherwood see it".<sup>33</sup> Polonsky adds that "Director and writer were intensely interested in these three men, but the same understanding was not brought to bear on their social problems."<sup>34</sup> And he goes on to say that "Unfortunately, in the *Best Years*, as in most social-problem fiction, the artist falls into the trap of trying to find the local solutions in existence for the social conflicts."<sup>35</sup> Here Polonsky indicates that the situations in the film were real, but the solutions for the characters' problems are formulaic. This perhaps suggests that, for Polonsky, the social messages are watered down by their contrived happy endings; and for such a widespread and personal issue, this contrivance seems crass. This is exemplified in Polonsky's closing paragraphs: "Greatness was possible for the *Best Years*, but this meant examining Fred Derry where society hurts hardest. It was not done."<sup>36</sup> Polonsky's comments indicate that whilst the Liberals and Communists were united in their stance of films being a valuable tool for promoting societal change, it was becoming difficult to find a consensus regarding how graphic the films should be and how, in his opinion, the working class character needed more attention in order to increase awareness and empathy. Certainly Polonsky puts forward his vision of how this type of film, as an extension of the semi-documentary, should be utilised to push social messages that encourage a change in idealism amongst the audience; he stated:

The lesson for directors and writers is evident: writing for the movies is writing under censorship. The censorship forces stereotypes of motive and environment on the creators, and the problem is to press enough concrete experience into the mold to make imagination live.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Polonsky, Abraham, "'The Best Years of Our Lives': A Review", *Hollywood Quarterly*, Vol. 2. No. 3, (Apr. 1947), p.257.

<sup>34</sup> Polonsky, Ibid, p.257.

<sup>35</sup> Polonsky, Ibid, p.258.

<sup>36</sup> Polonsky, Ibid, p.260.

<sup>37</sup> Polonsky, Ibid, p.258.

In other words his argument is that censorship, provided by The Production Code and coupled with the financially driven studios, makes films lack uniqueness; in effect, they become watered down so as not to challenge or offend anyone, and in order to encourage the audience to think, the characters need to be influenced by real life so as to provide meaningful insight. Polonsky's vision for films was clear in that realism in complex characters and situations were vital for truth to be told and this has to be done within the confines of censorship. His gripe is also that *The Best Years of Our Lives* favours the affluent Liberal consensus rather than providing encouragement for the working classes, those that he argues the director and writer are less familiar with. Polonsky concludes that in some ways the film has "sharpened social conflicts"<sup>38</sup> by portraying that the upper class has the power to solve the misfortune of the working classes and how swiftly social problems can be solved. This view is quite a contrast to that of Wyler who said that he felt "the picture was written by events and imposed a responsibility upon us to be true to these events and refrain from distorting them for our own ends."<sup>39</sup> Writing in the *Screen Writer* Jay Richard Kennedy was in agreement with Wyler's filmmaking, but takes it a stage further to highlight the unwritten messages contained in the film. He summarises that in the pre-war period the documentary technique was enjoyed by just a few; then in wartime the techniques were used to "educate and inspire" the millions; post-war semi-documentaries, such as *The House on 92<sup>nd</sup> Street*, he believed, lacked deep characterization in its attempt to emphasise the dramatic situation. However, Kennedy is keen to promote the new style found in *The Best Years of Our Lives* – that of "raising of the *human* document to the same level as the *situational* document".<sup>40</sup> He goes on to use the character of Homer as an example and suggests that he is emblematic of the whole film and it's style "Because a true

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<sup>38</sup> Polonsky, Ibid, p.260.

<sup>39</sup> William Wyler quoted in: Kennedy, Jay Richard, 'An Approach to Pictures', *The Screen Writer*, Vol 3, No.1, June 1947, p.7.

<sup>40</sup> Kennedy, Ibid, p.8.



balance was struck between *who* he was (documentary characterization) and *what* he faced (authentic situation) he stands out as something new in picture making.” This appears to be a, perhaps convoluted, reasoning to justify the new style of realism that he was supporting, but it is very interesting to note the aspects that writers were emphasising. As with John Houseman’s criticisms of the lead character in *The Big Sleep* (as outlined in Chapter Two), Kennedy was detailing the facets of characters that added strength and conviction to the story. In other words, no matter how strong or realistic the story, it was the performances and the characterisation that carried that all-important message.

Interestingly James Agee, in *The Nation*, wrote a lengthy two-part review spread over two weeks and, in effect, provides a very good summary of the reviews for *The Best Years of Our Lives*. Agee highlights, pertinently, the faults he sees in the film, yet goes on to give it a great deal of praise. Pointing out the aspects of the film he finds problematic, he states “At its worst this story is very annoying in its patness, its timidity, its slithering attempts to pretend to face and by that pretense to dodge in the most shameful way possible its own fullest meanings and possibilities.”<sup>41</sup> Agee explains this with reference to the unlikeliness of the bar where the three men from different classes meet and the convenience of Dana Andrew’s character’s wife being a “bag” and wanting a divorce, thus enabling him to pursue another romance. The conclusion of the first part of Agee’s review is particularly scathing. He concludes “In fact, it would be possible, I don’t doubt, to call the whole picture just one long pious piece of deceit and self-deceit, embarrassed by hot flashes of talent, conscience, truthfulness, and dignity.”<sup>42</sup> followed by “a good deal which might have been very fine, even great, [...] is here either murdered in its cradle or reduced to manageable good citizenship in the early stages of grade school.” However, interestingly, his final

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<sup>41</sup> Agee, James, ‘Films: What Hollywood Can Do’, *The Nation*, December 7, 1946, p.673.

<sup>42</sup> Agee, ‘Films: What Hollywood Can Do’, *Ibid*, p.673.

sentence is: "Yet I feel a hundred times more liking and admiration for the film than distaste or disappointment." Having harshly highlighted the film's problems, he does then give it a great deal of praise in relatively few words and this last sentence reveals a great deal about the context of the film. With the film being used as a liberal realist film to highlight social problems, in effect, a prestige film, the critics were being extra critical if the message was not handled in the manner they saw appropriate. Agee's review exemplifies this trend by actually really liking the film, but being bold enough to spend a large proportion of the (unusually long) review stating what could and should have been portrayed in the film. The subsequent part of Agee's review mentions that the key weakness of the film is the script, but attributes that to "the writer's knowledge of all that he would have to go easy on as part of the rather remarkable bargain by which he got away with all that he managed to."<sup>43</sup> Here Agee is alluding to the censorship that Polonsky also spoke of in his critique. Agee goes on to steep high praise on the screenwriter, photography and direction, concluding that "If the picture had none of the hundreds of other things it has to recommend it, I could watch it a dozen times over for that personality and its mastery alone."<sup>44</sup> This is noteworthy because, like Polonsky's summary, it shows how personally these films were taken; as if in spite of the film heading in the right direction they were keen to take it further. In many ways it highlights the excitement felt at this new direction and style that films were adopting and while in its infancy interested parties were keen to help with suggestions of improvement, to ensure it matures in the correct way.

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<sup>43</sup> Agee, James, 'Films', *The Nation*, December 14, 1946, p.708.

<sup>44</sup> Agee, James, 'Films', *The Nation*, December 14, 1946, p.710.

## **The Postman Always Rings Twice (1946)**

Frank Chambers (John Garfield) drifts into town and picks up a job at a drive-in cafe. He soon falls in love with his boss's wife, Cora Smith (Lana Turner) and she suggests they kill her husband Nick (Cecil Kellaway). After making Nick have a fall in the bathroom, their plan goes wrong when he makes a full recovery. Nick decides to sell the drive-in and for him and Cora to move in with, and take care of, his paralysed sister. Cora is about to kill herself when Frank stops her and they decide again to kill Nick. Whilst out in the car Nick hits Frank with a bottle and they push the car over a cliff. Frank gets caught in the car and is injured, but the crash kills Nick. The District Attorney, who was following them, starts an investigation because Nick had just taken out a life insurance policy. After Frank and Cora double cross each other, Cora eventually pleads guilty to manslaughter and gets a suspended sentence. Because of all the talk in the town, Cora and Frank get married, but he soon has a fling with another woman. Frank accidentally crashes the car and Cora is killed. Frank is found guilty of murder and is given the death sentence.

James Agee wrote an unfavourable review of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* in *The Nation*. He said "The Postman Always Rings Twice is mainly a terrible misfortune from start to finish."<sup>45</sup> He goes on to state that the main problem is that the film takes itself too seriously; however, he does indicate that, alongside other films, it potentially constitutes the start of a new cycle "which represents the Law as an invincibly corrupt and terrifying force before which mere victims, whether innocent or guilty, can only stand helpless and aghast." When commenting about the corruption in the Law depicted in the *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, Agee writes that it is "contemptuous of organized justice" and he expresses a desire that this is the beginning of a trend, suggesting that whilst he might not particularly like the film,

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<sup>45</sup> Agee, James, 'Films', *The Nation*, May 11, 1946,, p.580.

he does hope that there are other films that are going to likewise challenge the system. Manny Farber concurs stating that the film “is almost too terrible to walk out of.”<sup>46</sup> And goes on to state that “the result has been to take the anger out of the story and make the lunchroom people so grotesque that their rotten life doesn’t make you feel anything.” He goes on to explain that the set is too “sumptuous” and costumes are too glamorous, singling out the “best bobby-sox touch [is] the white turban that Cora wears to wash dishes” suggesting a lack of grittiness and realism. However, like Agee, Farber expresses sympathy for the characters’ predicament, and he adds “Underneath all of the white surfacing of the MGM production [...] is a story about two people having trouble achieving some kind of happy love set-up, beating each other’s brains in at every turn, and this part of the story makes sense a lot of the time.”<sup>47</sup> Interestingly, Farber’s main problem with the film seems to be the glamour-laden set and production values bestowed on the film by MGM. Also, similarly to Agee, Farber singles out the appearances of Hume Cronyn and Leon Ames as lawyers later in the film; he says “Their part of the movie, which has to do with showing lawyers and courts to be five times more unprincipled as either of the defendants, is a funny culmination to prove that blackness is everywhere”<sup>48</sup>

Bosley Crowther writing in the *New York Times* gives a positive reaction to the film. Whilst he takes great care to mention several times the source novel upon which the film is based and in quite a contradiction to Manny Farber’s review, he praises the reality of the film in relation to the technique and the lead performers. A key aspect of his review is that the film is “another demonstration [...] that crime does not pay.”<sup>49</sup> For Crowther the message of the film is summed up in his concluding sentence “For the yearning of weak and clumsy people for something better than the stagnant lives

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<sup>46</sup> Farber, Manny, ‘Hamburger Hell’, *New Republic*, May 20, 1946, p.732.

<sup>47</sup> Farber, ‘Hamburger Hell’, *Ibid*, p.732.

<sup>48</sup> Farber, ‘Hamburger Hell’, *Ibid*, p.732.

<sup>49</sup> Crowther, Bosley, ‘The Screen: ‘The Postman Always Rings Twice,’ With Lana Turner in a Star Role, Makes Its Appearance at the Capitol’, *New York Times*, May 3, 1946 p.15.

they live is revealed as the core of the dilemma, and sin is shown as no way to happiness.” It is possible to see that unlike the moral-less violence depicted in films that Crowther had contemporaneously been criticising (as outlined in the previous chapter), *The Postman Always Rings Twice* was granted an exception to the rule because of it being based on a popular novel and the fact that the moral of the film, that crime does not pay, is blatant. Crowther expanded on his critique in a further article in the *New York Times*, where he again reiterated that it gives a “great deal of insight into the natures of wretched characters. Passion and greed quite obviously drive the two conspirators to their deed, but the frustrations of their social milieu are partly responsible for their acts.”<sup>50</sup> However Crowther’s main point is that the guardians of the Production Code need to have more tolerance with certain issues in film and that it made a mistake discouraging the adaptation of Cain’s novel for so long. Early in the article Crowther calls *The Postman Always Rings Twice* a “moral” film and alongside his review of the film, it indicates that the fact that the characters were portrayed as wretched, then made mistakes in life and were punished for it; means that he saw the film as having a moral to the story. Compared with his review of *The Big Sleep* in the previous chapter, it is clear that Crowther did not want films to portray immoral characters who did not suffer for their actions.

However, this same message of morality eluded John Houseman who used *The Postman Always Rings Twice* as an example of what was wrong with the tough Hollywood films. He speculated that in 20 years people will take *The Postman Always Rings Twice* as representative of how America was in the post-war period, and that they would imagine that it was a land of “enervated, frightened people with spasms of high vitality but a low moral sense – a hung-over people with confused objectives groping their way through a twilight of insecurity and corruption.”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Crowther, Bosley, ‘For Better and For Worse’, *New York Times*, May 5, 1946, p.X.

<sup>51</sup> Houseman, John, ‘What Makes American Movies Tough?’, *Vogue*, January 15, 1947, p.125.

Houseman's speculation obviously underestimates the intelligence of future film-goers to be able to separate fact from fiction but in his comparison with *Rome Open City* (Roberto Rossellini, 1945), which he says is "a clear struggle between good and evil"<sup>52</sup>, he implies that entertainment ought not be portrayed with realism. Taking into consideration Bosley Crowther's understanding of the morals of the film, Houseman clearly had different hopes for the way that realism was to be used in film and a very different perspective of what messages would be garnered from certain films.

Jack D. Grant in *The Hollywood Reporter*, gives a positive review of *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, but also highlights concerns about the morality of the film. He states "The picture, like the novel, is based on adultery, not even slightly apologized for, and murder, which even though paid for in the denouement, is so blatantly presented in detail and planning that it is an open invitation to try your hand at the game yourself."<sup>53</sup> Here Grant feeds the likes of Houseman's concerns by, albeit light-heartedly, suggesting that it might influence the public into committing similar crimes. And again in line with the issues Houseman had with the film, Grant goes on to add that "There is no character from the idiotic café-owner husband of Lana Turner, through the district attorney to the "hero" and "heroine" who has any of the qualities an audience likes well enough to wish them well." Interestingly William Weaver gives an uncharacteristic review in the *Motion Picture Herald*. Adopting earthy language he gives a full synopsis of the film, including spoilers. His opening and closing paragraphs have a resigned tone that suggests he might not like this type of film, but it is the way the industry was heading, stating that it is based on Cain's book "which some have called literature but none have designated

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<sup>52</sup> Houseman, 'What Makes American Movies Tough?', Ibid, p.125.

<sup>53</sup> Grant, Jack D., 'Postman Rings Twice' Sexy; 'Ideal Girl' Bright Comedy: Dynamic Story Has Power, Star Appeal', *The Hollywood Reporter*, Wednesday, January 30, 1946, p3.

decorous.”<sup>54</sup> He adds that “In common with other camera studies of evil coming from the production line recently, this one features sinful characters and probes with elaborate painstaking the objectives and the processes, even the ways and means, of their sinning.” His conclusion of “It’s got the PCA seal, Number 11240, right on the main title”, again suggests his distaste and perhaps an indication that the promoters were selling the film as something daring and controversial. This point is reiterated in the review in *Variety*, in which the reviewer states that the film is “almost certain to be marked with controversy over such a frank display of adultery and the murder to which it leads.”<sup>55</sup> Certainly this was how some critics perceived the film at the time.

### **Crossfire (1947)**

*Crossfire*, could be deemed a hybrid of *The Best Years of Our Lives* and *Gentleman’s Agreement*. Like *The Best Years of Our Lives* it deals with the returning soldier back from the war and like *Gentleman’s Agreement* it deals with anti-Semitism. *Crossfire* opens with the murder of a Jewish man, Samuels (Sam Levene) at the hands of a soldier and employing flashbacks the viewer can piece the story together. After the police begin their investigations, they begin to suspect Mitchell (George Cooper) a drunken soldier who was at Samuels’ flat prior to the murder. Their suspicions are encouraged by Montgomery (Robert Ryan), who was also at Samuels’ flat that evening, and throughout the investigation Montgomery makes various anti-Semitic remarks. Through the flashbacks the viewer learns that Montgomery did commit the murder and his friend Floyd (Steve Brodie) was there when the murder happened. Floyd starts to panic and Montgomery kills him to make

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<sup>54</sup> Weaver, William R., ‘The Postman Always Rings Twice: MGM – Hot Stuff’, *Motion Picture Herald*, Match 16, 1946, p.2893-2894.

<sup>55</sup> Brog., ‘Film Reviews: The Postman Always Rings Twice’, *Variety*, Wednesday, March 20, 1946, p.8.

it look like a suicide. The detective in charge of the investigation, Finlay (Robert Young), develops a plot to catch Montgomery. When he places him under arrest Montgomery makes a run for it and is shot dead in the street.

Adrian Scott was the producer of the film and Edward Dmytryk was the director. Just months after the film was released at the cinema both became unfriendly witnesses during the HUAC investigations and both, ultimately, became part of the Hollywood Ten. The trailer of the film took the unusual measure of containing a message from Dore Schary, Head of Production, urging the public to see the film, stating that the theme was “timely and important”.<sup>56</sup> Taken in its historical context, the filmmakers saw the film as controversial and throughout the trailer Schary stresses how he faced opposition to get the film made, quoting one memo received as reading “This is very outspoken – are you sure we have the nerve to make it?”. As with the PCA seal being used on *The Postman Always Rings Twice* poster, Schary’s comments throughout the trailer can be used as a marketing tool, it also indicates there was a specific intention to make more challenging and adult films at this time.

At this time the impact of the social messages that the films were conveying became a topic for study by sociologists. One such study conducted by Louis E. Rath and Frank N. Trager was entitled ‘Public Opinion and Crossfire’ and was published in 1948.<sup>57</sup> Two of their main concerns were if the social message films were effective and also if the audience would be encouraged to sympathise with the murderer, possibly because of their own anti-Semitic attitudes. One question in their survey questioned people before and after a screening of *Crossfire* and asked if motion pictures were far from satisfactory at giving “accurate, truthful pictures of life as it is,

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<sup>56</sup> The trailer of *Crossfire* can be viewed using the following link:  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qf\\_tJx9SwMk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qf_tJx9SwMk) [accessed 09-09-14]

<sup>57</sup> Rath, Louis E, and, Trager, Frank N., ‘Public Opinion and Crossfire’, *Journal of Educational Sociology*, Vol. 21, No.6, (Feb. 1948), pp. 345-368.



and do they use their influence to make our society a better one for all people?" The writers concluded that after watching *Crossfire* the responses "may indeed indicate a favourable response to motion pictures like *Crossfire*."<sup>58</sup> Surveys such as this, coupled with the feedback Schary got regarding the film, could only have encouraged the Hollywood Left to continue to make such films as a response to the critics of their messages not being taken far enough and the intellectual attention they were attracting. However, what actually could be established is that *Crossfire* was another example of the Left's reluctance to push their messages in their films because in the original book which *Crossfire* was based on, '*The Brick Foxhole*' by Richard Brooks, the murder victim was homosexual instead of Jewish. Robert J. Corber argues that this switch is problematic in that by interchanging minorities the murder came across as the most important part of the story, rather than issues surrounding the murder victim.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, this could result in losing some of the impact of the intolerance message generally in the film, but also, perhaps shows the cautiousness of the Left by making the character part of a minority group and highlights that tackling religious intolerance was seen as a safer issue.

*Crossfire* opened to good reviews with emphasis being placed on the realism of the film. Bosley Crowther in the *New York Times* commented that *Crossfire* "advances the realistic techniques of the screen."<sup>60</sup> He also praises the filmmakers for their efforts in bringing such a tale to the screen, and speaks of religious bigotry and its problems. He states "they have come right out and shown that such malice – in this case, anti-Jewish – is a dark and explosive sort of hate which, bred of ignorance and

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<sup>58</sup> Rath and, Trager, *Ibid.* p.361. The survey asked respondents to indicate if young people felt that motion pictures were satisfactorily addressing social problems. Whilst, with hindsight, the survey could be considered flawed in many respects, that is it asks respondents to speak on behalf of others and the questions try to encompass too many factors, the results were clearly different before and after the screening and could be taken to show that the film actually made the respondents think about the topics raised in the film.

<sup>59</sup> Corber, Robert J., *Homosexuality in Cold War America: Resistance and the Crisis of Masculinity*, Duke University Press: Durham & London, 1997, p.86.

<sup>60</sup> Crowther, Bosley, 'The Screen: 'Crossfire,' Study on Tolerance, Starring Robert Young and Robert Ryan, Opens at Rivoli – Autry and Rogers at Rialto', *New York Times*, July 23, 1947, p.19.

intolerance, can lead to extreme violence.” Crowther wrote a further article regarding *Crossfire* and used it to speak more generally about bigotry. He writes that “it boldly comes out and names a canker which festers and poisonously infects the very vitals of American democracy – anti-Semitism, in this case”.<sup>61</sup> He adds, in more general terms, that Robert Ryan plays the villain perfectly and is instantly recognisable: “Here is the bigot, the fanatic – loud-mouthed, self-assertive, narrow, cruel. Here is the Klansman, the bundist, the lynch mobster – the American fascist in the flesh.”<sup>62</sup> It appears Crowther utilised this article to decry fascism in its many forms and used *Crossfire* as an example of how intolerance of any kind was to be discouraged. This became a recurring theme with the articles that Crowther wrote outside of his standard film reviews; that is, he was using these articles to use films as talking points to tackle problems and put his liberal viewpoint across. Indeed many of the articles were either stating what is wrong with particular films and what needs to be done to improve films in general, or strongly promoting issues that certain films raise.

Shirley O'Hara in the *New Republic* also uses her review to speak about bigotry in general, she comments: “It is a story of intolerance growing into bigotry and breeding murder; of dislike becoming prejudice and, with the help of idleness and drink, evolving into crime.” She also thought that the realism was worthy of comment and taking her stance a stage further states: “Dore Schary has an intelligent, active integrity as a producer and I have come to expect of him honest portrayals and stories containing the ring of truth.”<sup>63</sup> Both *New Republic* and *Variety* can be seen to use their reviews for their own personal statement on anti-Semitism in America. *Variety* states that one of the characters in the film “is part of the same hate or derision by one American for another; the prejudices born of ignorance, frequently

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<sup>61</sup> Crowther, Bosley, ‘Straight to the Point: ‘Crossfire Puts the Fact of Bigotry on the Screen’, *New York Times*, July 27, 1947, p.X1.

<sup>62</sup> “Bundist” refers to members of the German American Bund which was an organisation established in 1936 with a primary aim of promoting Nazi Germany.

<sup>63</sup> O'Hara, Shirley, ‘Movies: Good News’, *New Republic*, August 11, 1947, p.34.

are germinated by an unconscious fear of something he can't comprehend."<sup>64</sup> However, the *Motion Picture Herald* comments on the film as if it were a documentary; Ray Lanning writes: "As directed by Edward Dmytryk, the picture is factual, explanatory and quiet, sticking to its theme of anti-semitism tenaciously."<sup>65</sup>

James Agee, in *The Nation*, praises the film for its acting, directing and writing, but does add that "In a way it is embarrassing to see a movie Come Right Out Against Anti-Semitism as it would to see a movie Come Right Out Against torturing children."<sup>66</sup> Suggesting that it is an issue that nobody could really disagree with and its points should not really need to be raised in a civilized country. This point is reiterated in his comment that the issue is handled with "safe fearlessness". Agee's review was one of the few to highlight that the original novel, '*The Brick Foxhole*', on which *Crossfire* was based, had different motivations for the crime to those shown in the film. He highlighted that "The murdered Jew in *Crossfire* was a murdered homosexual in the original novel, Richard Brook's *The Brick Foxhole*, and I learn from a reliable source that this quick shift was made".<sup>67</sup> Robert J. Corber would suggest, much later, that "[Adrian] Scott seems to have misunderstood the point of the novel's examination of homophobic violence [...]. Although he was right that the novel tried to show that, like African Americans and Jews, gays were persecuted as a group, this does not mean that it treated minoritized groups as interchangeable."<sup>68</sup> However problematic this change might be, the censorship at the time would have prevented maintaining the book's original incentive for murder. Indeed, Edward Dmytryk said "At the time censorship ruled, and any mention of homosexuality, whether the noun or the life-style, was strictly taboo [...]. We could tell the story of bigotry as it relates to anti-Semitism, and by analogy and implication, the story of all

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<sup>64</sup> Abel., 'Film Reviews: *Crossfire*', *Variety*, Wednesday, June 25, 1947, p.8.

<sup>65</sup> Lanning, Ray, 'Crossfire: *RKO* – Anti-Semitism', *Motion Picture Herald*, June 28, 1947, pp.3701-3702.

<sup>66</sup> Agee, James, 'Films', *The Nation*, August 2, 1947, p.129.

<sup>67</sup> Agee, James, 'Films', *The Nation*, August 2, 1947, p.130..

<sup>68</sup> Corber, Ibid, p.86.

racial hatred as well.”<sup>69</sup> In effect, Dmytryk was reinforcing the points made by Agee, whereby the message was similar whatever the minority positioned as the victim. As highlighted in O’Hara’s and Crowther’s reviews, the main message of the film was to attack bigotry in whatever its guise.

In spite of the generally positive reviews, Siegfried Kracauer criticises the characterisation in *Crossfire*. He describes the murder suspect in the film as typical portrayals in liberal films. He states that they are “Visionless, at the mercy of any wind, benumbed even in their love-making, they drift about in a daze bordering on stupor.”<sup>70</sup> And he describes the District Attorney in *Crossfire* by saying that “He seems [...] to be overwhelmed by a mood of resignation, as though he had discovered that the struggle for enlightenment is a Sisyphean task. Hence the all but melancholy aloofness with which he confines himself to defending the liberal position.”<sup>71</sup> For Kracauer the characterisation is unsatisfactory for conveying the liberal message and they show weaknesses in liberalism as opposed to the strengths that it has to offer. In other words, the liberal characters seem tired and resigned to prejudiced attitudes rather than being positive figures that spread enlightenment for the liberal cause. Kracauer concludes that “our postwar films present a common man reluctant to heed the voice of reason and a liberal spokesman unable to run the emotional blockade around him.”<sup>72</sup> Kracauer’s view does seem to be in agreement with Agee’s review in that the issues tackled were not particularly daring and the deeper messages not glaringly apparent. Furthermore it shows how commentators appeared to be getting impatient with the level progress being made.

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<sup>69</sup> Dmytryk, Edward, *Odd Man Out: A Memoir of the Hollywood Ten*, Southern Illinois University Press: Carbondale and Edwardsville, 1996, p.30.

<sup>70</sup> Kracauer, Siegfried, ‘Those Movies With a Message’, *Harper’s Magazine*, June 1, 1948, p.570

<sup>71</sup> Kracauer, Ibid. p.569.

<sup>72</sup> Kracauer, Ibid. p.571.

## **Gentleman's Agreement (1947)**

*Gentleman's Agreement* was directed by Elia Kazan and explored the issue of anti-Semitism. Phil Green (Gregory Peck) is a journalist who has moved to New York with his son and his mother. In his role he is asked to write a series of articles on anti-Semitism. He decides that the best way to give the articles credibility is if he poses as Jewish and sees the opposition he faces. The articles were suggested by his editor's niece, Kathy (Dorothy McGuire), with whom Green starts a relationship. Green's secretary, Elaine (June Havoc), is Jewish, but hides her religion having had a previous application rejected because of her origins. Throughout his everyday life and employment he faces anti-Semitism. He even accuses his Jewish secretary of anti-Semitism when she criticises some types of Jews. Further anti-Semitism is exposed when Green tries to book a hotel for his and Kathy's honeymoon and when her sister screens friends she has invited to a party so as not to offend Phil. When his son Tommy is upset at being bullied at school for being Jewish, Kathy reassures him that he is not. Phil criticises Kathy, saying "You just assured him that he is the most wonderful of creatures: A white Christian American" complaining that she said it as if to make Tommy feel superior to the Jews. Phil and Kathy's relationship breaks down. Kathy meets Phil's Jewish friend Dave (John Garfield) and he makes her realise that by remaining silent in the face of anti-Semitism she is helping it along. Phil finishes his articles and he gets back together with Kathy after she has vowed to change her attitude.

Whilst *Gentleman's Agreement* is certainly a message movie, it is interesting that it chooses to not just attack the bigots, but goes a stage further to criticise the liberals who are aware of the anti-Semitism problem, but choose to do nothing about it. At times it seems like a movie for liberals instructing them how to behave, rather than getting to the root of the problem and addressing it head on. One is left feeling that

anti-Semitism is not a universal problem, but merely restricted to liberals. Either that or they were trying to equip the liberals with a way of thinking to send them out to tackle the problem in society; either way, the movie seems quite preachy nowadays and perhaps a little misguided.

In 1947 *Gentleman's Agreement* was clearly seen as a worthy film, tackling the social problem of anti-Semitism. Almost all of the reviews sought to cite its worthiness and timeliness, guiltily stating any filmic faults as an aside in their good reviews. Indeed *Variety* said it was a "brilliant and powerful film version" of the popular book, summing up that "'Gentleman's Agreement' is more than a top-drawer adaptation of a successful book and a worthy treatment of a vital subject - it is a credit to the screen."<sup>73</sup> *The Hollywood Reporter* gives, perhaps, the most insightful remarks as to the impact of *Gentleman's Agreement* as a social message film. It states "'Gentleman's Agreement' will do more to advance the cause of tolerance than a thousand books."<sup>74</sup> And calls it a "fantastic accomplishment of a picture which is proud of its social contribution" implying that it has the weight to challenge and maybe change public opinion. Moreover the message is highlighted explicitly by addressing the audience: "You may wear a swastika outwardly on your sleeve or secretly in your heart, but the fact remains that the very drama of this mighty plea for racial and religious tolerance will draw you to the edge of your seat." Furthermore, *The Hollywood Reporter* review draws attention to the realism of the film by saying that Elia Kazan is "Working against the authentic panorama of New York" and uses "documentary style photography [...] singularly appropriate to the story".

However, both the *New Republic* and the *Motion Picture Herald* give generally good reviews, but are sceptical of the impact of the film. R.L.H. in the *New Republic* says

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<sup>73</sup> Hobe., 'Film Reviews: Gentleman's Agreement', *Variety*, 12 November, 1947, p.8.

<sup>74</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, 'Power, Impressive Drama in 'Gentleman's Agreement'', *The Hollywood Reporter*, Monday, November 10, 1947, p.3.

that “By dispassionate critical standards, “Gentleman’s Agreement” is not a success. It is a tract rather than a play and has the crusader’s shortcomings.”<sup>75</sup> This indicates that they perceived the film as containing overly political-social messages. The critic even suggests that “One wonders, finally, if talking about it doesn’t just make the evil that much worse.”, suggesting that with the film’s theme of attacking liberals and Jews themselves, whose particular actions (or lack of) could be classified as anti-Semitic, is counter productive. The critic also comments, in relation to the prejudices affecting Jews, that “Right-minded people readily deplore the abnormalities, but “Gentleman’s Agreement” goes on to the right-minded people themselves. It forces them into a corner where their code of acceptable behaviour will no longer shield them.” Tellingly this implies that rather than using the film to emphasise similarities and understand race and religion, it encouraged pity for Jews and preached to the converted, but telling them they were not converted enough. This particular criticism was increasingly becoming representative of the small, but potentially damaging, differences in ideology relating to the handling of film in post-war America.

Red Kann in the *Motion Picture Herald* remained unsure of the point of the film by saying “Whether “Gentleman’s Agreement” solves its issue is highly debateable. Perhaps it was never planned as anything further than a pointing up of a fester on the American scene”.<sup>76</sup> Interestingly, both the *Motion Picture Herald* and *The Hollywood Reporter* highlight that three politically linked and alleged anti-Semites were mentioned in the film, Gerald L. K. Smith (America First Party), John Rankin (Democrat) and Theodore Bilbo (Democrat), showing the political message that the film contained. Bosley Crowther also mentions the political figures in his review in

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<sup>75</sup> R.L.H, ‘Movies: Gentleman’s Agreement’, *New Republic*, 17 November, 1947, p.38

<sup>76</sup> Kann, Red, ‘Gentleman’s Agreement: 20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox – A Blow at Prejudice’, *Motion Picture Herald*, November 15, 1947, p.3929.

the *New York Times*; for him their mention “give it realism and authenticity”.<sup>77</sup> In a generally positive review, Crowther does note the shortcomings of the film; while these are mostly related to the role of the journalist and his naivety, he does cite that a weakness is the focus of the expose that is “narrowly confined to the upper-class social and professional level”. Furthermore, Crowther wrote an article specifically about *Gentleman’s Agreement* for the *New York Times*, which expanded on points raised in his review; in the article he steeps praise on the film and highlights the importance and timeliness of this production. His article also goes some way to explaining why the upper classes were attacked in the film. He writes “Too many good-hearted people would rather not bring the subject up, finding it highly distasteful, since some of their best friends are Jews.”<sup>78</sup> Crowther adds :

That’s why it’s so important that Darryl F. Zanuck and Twentieth Century-Fox have had the courage to produce “Gentleman’s Agreement” and to hawk it across the nation’s screen – to challenge the spirit of inertia, to talk about prejudice against Jews.

Indeed, this was the viewpoint that Darryl F. Zanuck had hoped to portray. In a memo to Elia Kazan discussing the finer points of certain scenes in the film, he stressed that the character of Kathy is not to be portrayed as an anti-Semite, but that “she makes the mistake that 99 percent of people make by conforming to the custom and unconsciously observing the gentleman’s agreement.”<sup>79</sup> Later in another memo to the writer, Moss Hart, Zanuck disagreed with Hart’s opinion to emphasise the message in the film, as opposed to the love story, in the publicity. He states “I think this would be a disadvantage to the picture and also an incorrect presentation of the

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<sup>77</sup> Crowther, Bosley, ‘Gentleman’s Agreement,’ Study of Anti-Semitism. Is Feature at Mayfair – Gregory Peck Plays Writer Acting as Jew’, *New York Times*, Nov 12, 1947, p.36.

<sup>78</sup> Crowther, Bosley, ‘Something About It: Anti-Semitism Assaulted Boldly on the Screen’, *New York Times*, Nov 16, 1947, p.XI.

<sup>79</sup> Darryl F. Zanuck’s memo to Elia Kazan, dated June 18, 1947, in Behlmer, Rudy, (Ed.), *Memo from Darryl F. Zanuck: The Golden Years at Twentieth Century-Fox*, Grove Press: Canada, 1993, p.134.



values of the picture because it would only tell *half* the story” adding, “I also do not believe that Peck could sell a ticket to anybody if he got up and talked *only* about the intellectual side of the picture and how much good it will do.”<sup>80</sup> Interestingly this shows the belief Zanuck had in the project that it was an intellectual film and about the changes it could make to society. This viewpoint was taken a stage further in a later communication with Kazan when discussing the type of people he would like at the preview screenings and the content of the scenes to be included in the trailer. He opines “It is a ticklish business to know how far to go and where to stop. If you could have one trailer for the intellectuals and one trailer for the [others] our problem would be simple.”<sup>81</sup> The points Zanuck makes suggest that he intended the message to be almost subliminal; that the intellectuals would be interested in a blatant ‘message picture’, yet the non-intellectuals would need the persuasion of a love story to see the film. Either way, the intention was to change public opinion and this, when coupled with the box office appeal of the stars and director, problematizes the statements made by academics such as Peter Roffman and Jim Purdy that the success of *Gentleman’s Agreement* “indicates the high level of audience receptivity to the theme of anti-Semitism in 1947.”<sup>82</sup>

Returning to Crowther’s article, his viewpoint suggests that while anti-Semitism was not restricted to the upper classes, they actually had the power to influence society with their behaviour; this is detailed in his conclusion where he states: “And although they may only scratch the surface of a complex social sore [...] this scratch may astonishingly reveal the basic principles of true democracy that any form of anti-Semitism enshrouds.”<sup>83</sup> Here Crowther broadens the scope of tackling anti-Semitism to it actually making way for total equality via democracy. Without explicitly stating it,

<sup>80</sup> Darryl F. Zanuck’s memo to Moss Hart, dated September 8, 1947, Behlmer, *Ibid.*, p.134-135.

<sup>81</sup> Darryl F. Zanuck’s memo to Elia Kazan, dated September 12, 1947, Behlmer, *Ibid.*, p.137. The ‘[others]...’ abbreviation is Rudy Behlmer’s, not the author’s.

<sup>82</sup> Roffman, Peter, and, Purdy, Jim, *The Hollywood Social Problem Film: Madness, Despair, and Politics From the Depression to the Fifties*, Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1981, p.238.

<sup>83</sup> Crowther, ‘Something About It: Anti-Semitism Assaulted Boldly on the Screen’, *Ibid*, p.XI.

it is apparent that films such as *Gentleman's Agreement* were being used as political tools to show Americans the way to live. Moreover Kazan himself later said, in 1971, that the film was intended as an attack on the middle and upper middle classes. Calling the film a “cop out” and that the upper middle class was still as it was portrayed in the film, he added that “All I did was try to make the message come across in a form that the middle class, whom I was accusing of anti-Semitism, would accept. They accept the story and thereby the guilt.”<sup>84</sup> These examples of the varying target audiences and messages, especially those mentioned by Kazan, highlight the divergence of opinions within the Hollywood Left and how personal motivations were detrimental to producing effective message movies that could assist democracy.

A further example of this fracture can be highlighted in the writing of the Marxist influenced Siegfried Kracauer. Writing in *Harper's* magazine he was very critical of *Gentleman's Agreement*, implying that it did not tackle the subject matter head on; he said it “boldly touches on a tabooed theme-and at the same time leaves it undisturbed.”<sup>85</sup> He adds “the makers of the film - as if frightened by their own boldness – omit any action that might bear out their message.” He concludes that “Liberal reasoning in “Gentleman's Agreement” results not so much in reforms as in magazine articles pretending to initiate such reforms – a mountain of dialogue bringing forth a mouse.” For Kracauer, the message was there, but it was too tame to bring about any significant change. He adds that “All these fighters for democracy are talkers rather than doers. They are reminiscent of those commentators in the war documentaries, who indulged in flowery statements about the brave new world to come.”<sup>86</sup> It is interesting that Kracauer mentions the link to the wartime

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<sup>84</sup> Young, Jeff, *Kazan: The Master Director Discusses His Films*, Newmarket Press: New York, 1999, pp.46-51.

<sup>85</sup> Kracauer, *Ibid*, p.569.

<sup>86</sup> Kracauer, *Ibid*. p.570.

documentaries; here he implies that the propaganda films were used for something entirely different. The films could be seen as 'flowery' because they needed to be motivational and needed to contain an element of bias as a way of helping with the war effort. Kracauer suggests that this method of filmmaking is not appropriate for influencing public opinion in the post-war period, particularly in terms of politics. As Jim Hillier has argued, in *Gentleman's Agreement* "the central characters solve their problems but leave the problem largely untouched, left to pious assertions of optimism for the future. This optimism, however, ultimately over-rides the explicit criticism of American society".<sup>87</sup> Hillier's assertion reiterates Kracauer's argument that the films were not going far enough to promote their desired changes.

## Conclusion

*Gentleman's Agreement* and *The Best Years of Our Lives* are often neglected in studies of *film noir*, but they certainly fit into the social problem films that some *noir* also fall within. In fact, it is hard to find a source that when discussing *Crossfire* does not at some point also mention *Gentleman's Agreement* because of their obvious similarities. Ralph Willett also comments on the similarities with the *noir* series and *The Best Years of Our Lives*,<sup>88</sup> but looking at them in terms of the political messages that they portray gives them more meaning. Many of the liberals who had worked on wartime documentaries had gone on to make the social problem films and many of them had appeared to be quite preachy in tone. The scenarios presented were quite mild, yet their criticisms within the films quite harsh in relation to the situations.

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<sup>87</sup> Hillier, Jim, 'Out of the '40s', *Movie*, No.19, Winter 1971-72, p.16.

<sup>88</sup> Willett, Ralph, in Davies, Philip, and Neve, Brian (Eds.), *Cinema, Politics and Society in America*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1981, p.71-72

The films did well at the box office and were well rewarded at awards ceremonies, with *Crossfire* being nominated for five Oscars (including Best Picture); *The Best Years of Our Lives* winning eight Oscars (including Best Picture and Best Director); and *Gentleman's Agreement* winning three Oscars (including Best Picture and Best Director); indicating the impact they had and the prestige that they were held in.

Looking at the critical reception of the films it is clear to see how well received they were by all press sources investigated. Many of the reviewers talked about these films with an excitement for their freshness at tackling issues previously neglected in popular entertainment and the majority of the reviews for all films continually reiterate the documentary style and realism portrayed, even going so far as to call it the 'truth'. The reviewers also seemed well aware that the films deliberately contained a 'social message' by ways of educating the public. However, the far Left were less positive about the films, as shown by the comments from Abraham Polonsky and Siegfried Kracauer, who were the most critical of the films. They indicated that although the message is clear, they were aimed at those liberals like the makers of the films – those of the middle classes, while the working class problems were totally neglected. To them the messages were not bold enough and offered no solutions, or indeed, if solutions were offered they were tepid, in favour of happy endings.

As James Naremore has stated "Crossfire was certainly not the last nor even the best social-problem movie, but it marked the close of a distinctive phase in the national history."<sup>89</sup> The social problem movie was going to evolve from criticism of groups of people to how the state of the country affected individuals. A particular part of this cycle was going to be placed in the hands of the far Left and accordingly the

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<sup>89</sup> Naremore, James, *More Than Night: Film Noir in its Original Contexts*, University of California Press: London, 2008, p.123.

next chapter will consider the films of Robert Rossen and Abraham Polonsky to highlight this change.

## Part Two

Abraham Polonsky & Robert Rossen,  
Henry Hathaway's Thrillers, and  
*The Iron Curtain* (1948)

## Chapter Four

### Neither Fish nor Fowl: Abraham Polonsky and Robert Rossen 1946-48

*"For quite some time they'll hold their heads up high.  
and grind the others under heavy weights,  
however much, for shame these weep and writhe.  
Of this lot, two are honest yet not heard.  
For pride and avarice and envy are  
the three fierce sparks that set all hearts ablaze."*<sup>1</sup>

Dante Alighieri.

## Introduction

During the post-war period Abraham Polonsky and Robert Rossen were involved in four films considered key to the *noir* canon; *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* (1946, Lewis Milestone, written by Robert Rossen); *Johnny O'Clock* (1947, written and directed by Robert Rossen); *Body and Soul* (1947, Robert Rossen, written by Abraham Polonsky); and *Force of Evil* (1948, written and directed by Abraham Polonsky). All four films deal with similar issues of class in that the hero is from a working class background and the characters find themselves tempted by money and power, or are exploited by people with money and power. As discussed in the previous chapter, the issues that Polonsky found relevant at this time were

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<sup>1</sup> Alighieri, Dante, *The Divine Comedy 1: Inferno*, (translated and edited by Robin Kirkpatrick), Penguin Group: London, 2006, p.53.

addressed in his review of *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946, William Wyler), in which he criticised the film for 'find[ing] it impossible to deal with people who work for a living in factories and on farms.'<sup>2</sup> He went on to state that these sorts of characters should have been explored more in the film: "Greatness was possible for the *Best Years*, but this meant examining Fred Derry where society hurts hardest. It was not done." As well as being critical of the content of the film, Polonsky is also quite critical of the personnel involved in producing *The Best Years of Our Lives*. Taking the review a stage further he states that he "suspects that Wyler and Sherwood [director and writer] are not really emotionally conscious of the Derrys, the majority of the veterans."<sup>3</sup> Polonsky goes on to say that they better understand and sympathise with the 'good banker' in the story.

The points that Polonsky makes are certainly redressed in *Body and Soul* and *Force of Evil* by making such working class characters central to their plots. Polonsky and Rossen had more control over these two films as they were produced by Enterprise Studios. Jonathan Munby has asserted that such studios "attracted prominent left-liberal film talent such as Abraham Polonsky, Robert Rossen and John Garfield" because of working outside the studio system and offering personnel a share of the profits.<sup>4</sup> Further to this Paul Buhle and Dave Wagner cite that establishing Enterprise Studios gave Polonsky and Rossen the opportunity to not be "bound by the conventions of genre and the narrative syntax hammered out by decades of studio production."<sup>5</sup>; this explains somewhat how the films were able to be made in accordance with their more personal viewpoints on society. In both *Body and Soul* and *Force of Evil* the central character comes from a working class background and

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<sup>2</sup> Polonsky, Abraham, "The Best Years of Our Lives': A Review', *Hollywood Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 3, (April 1947), p.260.

<sup>3</sup> Polonsky, Ibid, p.259.

<sup>4</sup> Munby, Jonathan, *Public Enemies, Public Heroes: Screening the Gangster From Little Caesar to Touch of Evil*, University of Chicago Press: London, 1999, p.124.

<sup>5</sup> Buhle, Paul, and, Wagner, Dave, *A Very Dangerous Citizen: Abraham Lincoln Polonsky and the Hollywood Left*, University of California Press: London, 2001, p.109.



is seduced by the world of capitalism and ultimately his conscience makes him return to his roots.

Alan Casty, in his consideration of Robert Rossen's films has stated that Rossen's body of work:

parallels the growth of the art of the film itself. It is a body of work that reflects a consistent, yet changing and deepening, personal point of view, and one that reflects, also, a willingness to grow, change and even dare in extending the technical means used to embody that point of view.<sup>6</sup>

Casty goes on to add that Rossen's leading men have a special élan – one which when coupled with a corrupt society “turns aggressive, perverse, destructive.”<sup>7</sup> Casty's summation could well describe many leads of the films generally accepted to be *film noir*. Consider, for example the drifters in *Detour* (Edgar G. Ulmer, 1945), *The Killers* (Robert Siodmak, 1946) and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Tay Garnett, 1946). It is true that it is a female who has a role to play in the lead character's crime, but also money and circumstance; all three are facets of society. Casty continues by quoting Rossen himself saying that “Real life is ugly...but we can't make good pictures until we are ready to tell about it.”<sup>8</sup> This interesting quote returns us to the debates outlined in Chapter One referring to the documentary realism and the Left's push for dispensing with the glitz and glamour that Hollywood had been providing for the public. Rossen clearly wanted realism within his art form and to tell stories that were taken seriously; films that had something to say. An issue that Casty makes central to his article is that Rossen's filmic themes rose from

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<sup>6</sup> Casty, Alan, 'The Films of Robert Rossen', *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 20, No.2, (Winter, 1966-67), p.3.

<sup>7</sup> Casty, *Ibid*, p.3.

<sup>8</sup> Casty, *Ibid*, p.3.

his personal convictions. Certainly, as a member of the Communist Party in the late 1940s, his films can be, and often have been, read as anti-Capitalist. During this period Rossen was involved in three films now considered *noir*. He wrote the screenplay for *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers*, wrote and directed *Johnny O'Clock* and directed *Body and Soul*. Each of them portrays the effect of Capitalism on the working classes and each of them has a sympathetic working class hero.

Taking a different look at *film noir* in the late 1940s, Thom Andersen, in his essay on 'Red Hollywood', noted the work of Polonsky and Rossen as being different to the other *film noirs* of the era. Labelling them "*film gris*" he suggests that there was a brief phase of films between the first HUAC hearings in 1947 and the second hearings in 1951 that he noted had a "greater psychological and social realism"<sup>9</sup>. Andersen's list of thirteen films in this 'genre' includes *Body and Soul* and *Force of Evil* and he adds that these films were all made by "Browderite Communists and left-liberals" who believed that "the energies harnessed to win the war could be utilized to build a better society."<sup>10</sup> Andersen also adds that "the concept of director as author is too simplistic for the kind of film history I want to propose. In some instances the contribution of a writer or an actor is more significant."<sup>11</sup> Andersen states that *film gris* needs further attention than he had given it in his essay, but the points he makes interestingly highlight the significance of these works that were being produced at a time that Hollywood was under investigation. This chapter, in line with Andersen's comments about the director and writer being significant, looks at Polonsky and Rossen's post-war films as writer and director that have all since been considered as part of the *film noir* canon. The reception will highlight the critics response to the

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<sup>9</sup> Andersen, Thom, 'Red Hollywood', in Ferguson, Suzanne, and, Groseclose, Barbara (Eds.), *Literature and the Visual Arts in Contemporary Society*, Ohio State University Press: Columbus, 1983, p.183.

<sup>10</sup> Andersen, Ibid, p.187. Browderite refers to the former chairman of the National Committee of the Communist Party USA, Earl Browder.

<sup>11</sup> Andersen, Ibid, p.184.

political messages and will also challenge William Park's assertion<sup>12</sup> that *film noir* is a genre.

A distinct difference is noted in the explicitness of the 'message' within the films considered in this chapter. The first two, *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* and *Johnny O'Clock* have a more formulaic structure that enables them to fit more easily within categories of other films being made at the time. For example, *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* could be considered a women's picture and *Johnny O'Clock* a crime film. Yet the following two, produced by Enterprise Studios are more explicit with their political messages and can be considered more of a character study; and the critical reception will go on to show that this was apparent at their time of release. The Hollywood Left had taken the message picture as far as they could and the baton was now being passed on to those, not just accused of, well known to be affiliated with the Communist Party.

As Victor S. Navasky and others have documented, Polonsky and Rossen were both members of the Communist Party.<sup>13</sup> By the end of the 1940s Rossen's association with the Communist Party would be over. Edward Dmytryk details how Rossen came to leave the Party, which also highlights a point when divisions had become so fractured that irreparable damage was being done to the Party. John Howard Lawson, according to Dmytryk, had launched an attack on Rossen for "exposing the evils of dictatorship, the rock on which the Communist Party was founded"<sup>14</sup> in his film *All the King's Men* (1949). Rossen, who had directed, produced and written the screenplay for the film, then left the Communist Party for good. However, Polonsky was keen to stay with the party and Paul Buhle and Dave Wagner place a great deal

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<sup>12</sup> See: Park, William, *What is Film Noir?*, Bucknell University Press: Plymouth, 2011, p.133.

<sup>13</sup> Navasky, Victor S., *Naming Names*, The Viking Press: New York, 1980. See pages 421 & 348 respectively.

<sup>14</sup> Dmytryk, Edward, *Odd Man Out: A Memoir of the Hollywood Ten*, South Illinois University Press: Carbondale Edwardsville, 1996, p.115.

of status on Polonsky as leading the way for his fellow left-wing film intellectuals; going so far as to call him “sui generis”<sup>15</sup> and that Polonsky was admirable “as an intellectual and artist, an important model for future left-wing screenwriters (and directors)”. They add that “Abraham Polonsky’s 1940s films *Body and Soul* (1947) and *Force of Evil* (1948) quite simply embody the highest achievement of the American Left in cinema before the onset of repression.”<sup>16</sup> This slightly biased adulation seems a little heady nowadays when both of these films have a limited audience, but at the time they were treated as landmark films in terms of critical reception. In their biography of Polonsky, Buhle and Wagner provide an extensive quote from Polonsky’s 1962 essay first published in *Présence du Cinéma*, which they call Polonsky’s film manifesto. Applying his manifesto to his earlier works they steep high praise on *Force of Evil* stating that it “had transcended the “paralysis of naturalism” by realizing naturalism completely”.<sup>17</sup> They also imply that in better political and societal environments it could have influenced a new generation of artists and critics as Dante’s *Inferno* once had.<sup>18</sup> Whilst it is true that the blacklist would hugely affect leftist filmmaking in the late 1940s, the critical reception of *Force of Evil* was noticeably mixed suggesting that in spite of the political environment it still had, like any film, the power to influence only those that were susceptible or those that shared similar ideologies. Indeed, as Ruth A. Inglis detailed in her study, the impact of political messages in films was somewhat hindered by the fact that “Some Exhibitors point out that patrons pay their money for entertainment and that if they get “propaganda” instead, they are being cheated and will not return.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Buhle and Wagner, *Ibid*, p.95. Sui generis: Latin for something with very special characteristics, of its own kind.

<sup>16</sup> Buhle and Wagner, *Ibid*, p.108.

<sup>17</sup> Buhle and Wagner, *Ibid*, p.197.

<sup>18</sup> Buhle and Wagner, *Ibid*, p.197-98.

<sup>19</sup> Inglis, Ruth A., *Freedom of the Movies: A Report on Self-Regulation from The Commission on Freedom of the Press*, The University of Chicago Press: London, 1947, p.12.

Polonsky saw the crime film as a way of portraying his political messages in that his lead characters could convey the messages that Polonsky wanted to make without needing to be vocal about it. It could be argued that the conflicts of the characters encouraged the audience to think about the situations and with them being sympathetic characters that the audience might be able to identify with. As Peter Roffman and Jim Purdy summarised “there is no distinction between society and individual since social values are what makes up the individual.”<sup>20</sup> Polonsky used realism, which we have seen was employed in the films now known as *film noir*, as a way of escaping the Code, but it was impossible not to note the amount of leftist personnel involved with their productions. For example, using *Body and Soul* as a prime example, Robert Sklar has noted that “the left had practiced preferential hiring and boosted each other’s careers in studio work”.<sup>21</sup> Certainly there were a lot of leftist personnel involved in the production and the “preferential hiring” that Sklar speaks of would ensure that the messages would be more obvious when portrayed by ideologically united personnel. However, John Bodnar suggests the hypocrisy of Polonsky’s ideology, stating that he “professed to enjoy the good income he made from the film industry even while he indicted capitalism”.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the pious preaching, at this stage was beginning to reek of superiority, as if the ‘intellectuals’ took it upon themselves to educate an ignorant public, the working class public, that they seemed to be the self appointed vocalists for.

It has been well documented that Polonsky and Rossen failed to agree on an ending for *Body and Soul*. Polonsky, as in his script, wanted the happy ending, Rossen, however, wanted the lead character Charley to be killed. In the end Polonsky got his wish and the film had a happy ending, but when both known Communists working for

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<sup>20</sup> Roffman, Peter, and Purdy, Jim, *The Hollywood Social Problem Film: Madness Despair, and Politics from the Depression to the Fifties*, Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1981, p.273.

<sup>21</sup> Sklar, Robert, *City Boys: Cagney, Bogart, Garfield*, Princeton University Press: Oxford, 1992, p.183.

<sup>22</sup> Bodnar, John, *Blue-Collar Hollywood, Liberalism, Democracy, and Working People in American Film*, The John Hopkins University Press: Maryland, 2003, p.113.

the same company, both wishing to insert their political ideals into their films cannot agree on what the overall message of the film is to be, it does somewhat show the conflicts in ideology that the Hollywood Left was becoming known for. This is further reiterated by Rossen walking out of the Party after messages in his films were criticised. The disagreement could indicate the difference in how Rossen and Polonsky perceived the film in that the death of Charley would have distilled the message to more black and white terms of 'crime does not pay', however, as John Bodnar has highlighted, Polonsky's vision of "Capitalist America creates not opportunity but a moral dilemma for this lowborn male".<sup>23</sup> Taking this analysis, Polonsky's version educates the viewer of the seduction of Capitalism, but then gives hope because the 'right' path has been taken in the end. Indeed, the films of Polonsky and Rossen from the mid to late 1940s, unlike films considered in previous chapters, deal with the conscience of the characters experiencing a crisis in their morality. The differences were noted by Richard Maltby who argued that there was a change in hero types; he stated that "The hero became a victim of the need to defy generic conventions in the name of a greater dramatic force and complexity, and emphasized psychological realism."<sup>24</sup> No longer was location realism and authenticity enough for the likes of Polonsky and Rossen, they now sought to show psychological realism in making the characters more human, indeed, a step towards the 'naturalism' Polonsky spoke of.

The following study of the critical reception of the films Polonsky and Rossen were involved in during the mid to late 1940s will consider how their films were perceived at the time of their release and how the social message films were melded with the popular realistic style into a new phase within the trend of films now considered *film*

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<sup>23</sup> Bodnar, Ibid, p.111.

<sup>24</sup> Maltby, Richard, *Harmless Entertainment: Hollywood and the Ideology of Consensus*, The Scarecrow Press, INC.: Metuchen, N.J. & London, 1983, p.259.

*noir*. It will be interesting to examine how critics responded to their messages which were presented more boldly as time progressed.

### **The Strange Love of Martha Ivers (Lewis Milestone, 1946), Written by Robert Rossen**

*The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* begins in Iverstown 1928 with Martha (young Martha played by Janis Wilson) attempting to run away from her wealthy aunt with her friend Sam. After returning Martha catches her aunt hitting her cat and when she hits Martha with her stick her aunt falls down the stairs and dies. Sam left seconds before and her friend Walter witnesses the scuffle. Martha convinces Walter to lie with her and say her aunt fell. By 1946 Martha (Barbara Stanwyk) has inherited her aunt's wealth and married Walter (Kirk Douglas). Sam (Van Heflin) passes through Iverstown and after pranging his car has to stay overnight leading to him meeting a girl, Toni (Lizabeth Scott), who has just been released from prison. Toni is arrested for breaking her probation, so Sam goes to see Walter who is now a district attorney and asks for his help in getting Toni released. Walter believes Sam has returned to blackmail him and as a condition for helping Toni he asks her to help him organise for Sam to be beaten up to make him leave Iverstown. Martha tells Sam that she still loves him and when she talks about the night her aunt died, she does so thinking that Sam saw what happened and is surprised when he says he didn't see anything that night. Walter asks to see Sam and tells him that Martha coldly sent a man to the gallows for what she did to her aunt. When Walter drunkenly falls down the stairs Martha asks Sam to kill Walter and blame it on the fall. Martha threatens to shoot Sam when he refuses to kill Walter, but Sam just leaves. Through the window he sees Walter shoot Martha and then kill himself.

Manny Farber in the *New Republic*, gave *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* a positive review, singling out the writer and director and highlighting the exceptionalness of the film: “Its gaudy people are ten times more arresting than those in the average picture [...]. The chaotic scenes are written with unusual ability and directed so well that they boil and seethe as movie scenes rarely do.”<sup>25</sup> In an allusion to what *film noir* would become known for, Farber also stated that:

More and more movies are turning up which show life as constantly hair-raising – an affair of the hard knocks, hard drinking, hard smoking, sadism, greed, unhappy marriages, bad parents, bad district attorneys, seedy hotel rooms. They are on the right path in trying to show modern life as a battlefield, but they make each second of living more violent than seems possible.

Farber, whilst not mentioning the underlying political message of the film, does pick up on the ‘wronged working class hero’ theme that he cites as being a recurring theme in the contemporaneous films. He also adds that “Van Heflin, in an extraordinary job of acting, gives the role a meatiness and individuality that it’s never had before.”, referring to a type of role that “usually [...] gets on one’s nerves with his self-pity and the too frequent implication that the world has done him wrong.”<sup>26</sup>

T.M.P. writing in the *New York Times*, stated that there was an emphasis on the harshness of *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers*, calling it a “homicidal melodrama”<sup>27</sup> and a display of “violent passions”; the writer further highlights the social and political message that the film portrays noting that it is “at times quite [a] harrowing exposition of moral and, to a somewhat lesser extent, physical decay.” Rossen also gets a

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<sup>25</sup> Farber, Manny, ‘Iverstown Slaughter’, *New Republic*, September 9, 1946, p.293.

<sup>26</sup> Farber, ‘Iverstown Slaughter’, *ibid.* p.293.

<sup>27</sup> T.M.P., ‘The Screen in Review’, *The New York Times*, July 25, 1946, p.18.



mention as the author of the film and is complimented on bringing the plot together “expeditiously”. *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* is sometimes neglected in contemporary studies of *film noir*<sup>28</sup> and is perhaps a victim of the selective inclusion by some authors. This point is highlighted by the consideration of the writer in the *New York Times* reviewer that “Miss Stanwyck is twice the hard-boiled lustful vixen that she played in “Double Indemnity””<sup>29</sup>, a film that is frequently considered in studies of *film noir*, particularly when considering the role of the *femme fatale*.

Interestingly in both the reviews, the critics mention the writer of the film and what a good job he has done and both also mention the issue of morality that is key to the plot of the film. As is usual with his reviews, Farber delighted in the lack of morals to be found in the characters, but the writer in the *New York Times* approaches the film with more caution noting the moral and physical decay apparent in the lead characters; highlighted when Sam’s path crosses with the amoral power hungry characters of his past, which can easily be read as a criticism of what Capitalism could do to society. This particular sentiment is shared by *Brog*, writing in *Variety*, who also chose to single out Robert Rossen’s writing stating that the “Story is a forthright, uncompromising presentation of evil, greedy people and human weaknesses. Characters are sharply drawn in the Robert Rossen script.”<sup>30</sup> It is interesting to compare these sorts of reviews with the discussions in previous chapters; for example, Martha let an innocent person hang for her crimes and, as *Variety* goes on to outline, is “evil”, yet the morality is less criticised – she spent the most part of her life actually being evil, but there is a safety, for the critics, that she is a clear cut bad character who gets her comeuppance. Yet characters like Philip

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<sup>28</sup> James Naremore does not mention it in his comprehensive study: *More Than Night: Film Noir in its Original Contexts*, University of California Press: London, 2008; and Frank Krutnik mentions it in passing (*In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity*, Routledge: London, 1994, p.196.); as does Wheeler Winston Dixon, who labels it a “noirish story”, *American Cinema of the 1940s: Themes and Variations*, Berg: Oxford, 2006, p.164.

<sup>29</sup> T.M.P, *Ibid*, p.18.

<sup>30</sup> Brog., ‘Film Reviews: The Strange Love of Martha Ivers’, *Variety*, Wednesday, March 13, 1946, p.10.

Marlowe in *The Big Sleep* (Howard Hawks, 1946) are criticised at length for lacking morals; indicating again how differently the films were perceived by the critics depending upon the film's conformity to genre. Little is made of *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers*' reality and perhaps the critics felt more secure knowing that there would be no doubt that overseas audiences could confuse Iverstown with a realistic portrayal of life in America.

In his review of the year, James Agee mentions that he had not yet seen *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers*, but he mentions it whilst writing about *Rome Open City* (Roberto Rossellini, 1945). He states "Of the films that I have seen this year Open City is by all odds the best; and I beg leave [...] to doubt that *The Razor's Edge* or even *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* is likely to be as good."<sup>31</sup> Whilst it is likely that *The Razor's Edge* (Edmund Goulding, 1946) which was released in December 1946, had not yet been released at the time he was writing his review of the year, it does contain a similar commentary on morals to that of both *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* and *Rome Open City*. Its plot can be summarised well by the opening paragraph of Manny Farber's review: "'The Razor's Edge' deals in an artificial way with the depressing story of some vital young Chicagoans of the twenties who lead self-centred, destructive, loveless lives while their elders either stand by and watch or work against their happiness."<sup>32</sup> It is interesting that Agee chose to single out *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* (released in the Summer of 1946) in a comparison with a film that he calls "socially and politically hot under the collar" and a "semi-documentary". This, in some way implies the political and societal message that Agee, having not seen the film, had assumed that it carries because of the advance promotion.

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<sup>31</sup> Agee, James, 'Films: Movies in 1946', *The Nation*, January 25, 1947, p.108.

<sup>32</sup> Farber, Manny, 'Never Sharp', *New Republic*, December 9, 1946, p. 764.

## **Johnny O'Clock (1947)**

*Johnny O'Clock* was written and directed by Robert Rossen. Johnny (Dick Powell) is a partner at an illegal casino and had been having an affair with Nelle (Ellen Drew), the wife of the senior partner at the casino, Guido Marchettis (Thomas Gomez). Johnny's date, Harriet Hobson (Nina Foch), is found dead in her flat seemingly having committed suicide. Harriet's sister, Nancy (Evelyn Keyes), flies into town to meet with the police and begins to fall in love with Johnny. The night Harriet died Nelle had given Harriet a gift of an engraved watch to pass on to Johnny. Johnny asked Harriet to return it and unbeknownst to Johnny, the detective finds it at her flat. Johnny goes to the flat to look for the watch and finds a Mexican coin on the floor, linking the crime scene to Marchettis who has just returned from Mexico. Marchettis comes to realise that Nelle is in love with Johnny and tells her to leave, also stating that Johnny is now dead. Johnny's car is shot at, which causes him to crash, so he decides to go and get his money from the casino and leave town with Nancy. At the casino Johnny confronts Marchettis with the evidence that he killed Harriet; he shoots Marchettis and takes a shot in the process. Nancy convinces Johnny to hand himself in to the police.

*Johnny O'Clock* was the directorial debut of Robert Rossen who also worked on the screenplay. The earlier themes demonstrated in *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* are also shown here; corruption through power as shown through Capitalists in the previous film, are also present in the characters of Marchettis and Jim Bannon, the crooked policeman who deals with anyone that crosses Marchettis. It is easy to extract the underlying links between power, money and corruption. The reviewers of *Johnny O'Clock* steep high praise on Rossen for his accomplished debut. Jack D. Grant, in *the Hollywood Reporter* states that Rossen and the other personnel involved "had their hearts in what they were doing, and their pains make a world of

difference in the final result. This is exceptional picture-making by any standard” and going on to add that “he demonstrates that he unmistakably has what it takes to become a ranking member of the SDG [(Screen Director’s Guild)] if he is so inclined.”<sup>33</sup> *Variety* reiterates the attention to detail by stating that “This is a smart whodunit, with attention to scripting, casting and camera-work lifting it above the average.”<sup>34</sup>; and goes on to note the effective combination of the personnel involved: “Strong teamplay by Robert Rossen doubling as director-scripter and Milton Holmes, original writer and associate producer.”<sup>35</sup> The performances were highlighted in the reviews too in *The Hollywood Reporter* saying that “Powell has never played a tough guy more effectively. Lee J. Cobb is brilliant as the honest detective.”<sup>36</sup> This sentiment is also observed by *The Motion Picture Herald*, which states that the film is “an exciting, expertly acted thriller”<sup>37</sup>. *Variety* also highlights the same two performances: “Ace performances by Dick Powell [...] and Lee J Cobb” going on to comment on “Cobb’s excellent job as a tough, realistic cop”.<sup>38</sup> In spite of the glowing reviews received for the characters and performances, it is these very facets that Bosley Crowther draws attention to as negative in his review in the *New York Times*. Crowther implies the lead is a stereotype when he describes the titular character as “Another of those underworld smarties who are as hard and shiny as brass on the outside but who muffle hunks of goodness within their little-boy hearts” calling him an “unoriginal hero”.<sup>39</sup> With Crowther’s review, this fits in with the pattern of dislike for the ‘tough guys’ that he so criticised in films like *The Killers* and *The Big Sleep* (see Chapter Two). In his review of *Johnny O’Clock* Crowther adds to his previous criticisms by stating that Dick Powell “does the usual business of talking coldly and sarcastically to cops, treating the females disdainfully and sparring shrewdly with his

<sup>33</sup> Grant, Jack D., ‘Johnny O’Clock’ Ticks Off 95 Minutes of Sock Drama’, *The Hollywood Reporter*, Thursday, January 16, 1947, p.3.

<sup>34</sup> Bron., Film Reviews: Johnny O’Clock’, *Variety*, Wednesday, February 5, 1947, p.12.

<sup>35</sup> Bron., *Ibid*, p.12.

<sup>36</sup> Grant, Jack D., ‘Johnny O’Clock’ Ticks Off 95 Minutes of Sock Drama’, *Ibid*, p.3.

<sup>37</sup> F.H., ‘Johnny O’Clock – Columbia – Mystery Thriller’. *Motion Picture Herald*, January 4, 1947, p.3397.

<sup>38</sup> Bron. *Ibid*, p.12.

<sup>39</sup> Crowther, Bosley, ‘Screen Review’, *New York Times*, March 27, 1947, p.39.

underworld pals.”<sup>40</sup> Here Crowther highlights what he found repugnant about the ‘tough guys’ and it can be seen that far from disliking those films now considered *noir*, or solely the morality of the films, it was more to do with the characteristics of the leads that were expected to gain the audience empathy. It was their apathy and lack of consideration for the establishment that he considered problematic and not the direction he liked to see the films take. Crowther also mentioned Johnny O’Clock in a later article regarding attacks on films for influencing the public’s morals. In the article he explains his stance on the position of movies as “they are a vital and extensive social force and are thus responsible to society for something more than diversion and escape.”<sup>41</sup> Crowther goes on to detail some of his criticisms of films throughout the year and he says that there has been a range of films featuring stereotypes and “such morally offensive shockers as “Nora Prentiss” and “Johnny O’Clock.””<sup>42</sup> Again, Crowther details the morals of the characters rather than the levels of violence and clearly had standards that were not being met by such movie heroes.

### **Body and Soul (1947)**

*Body and Soul* was written by Abraham Polonsky, directed by Robert Rossen and released in 1947. The film is about a Jewish boxer, Charley Davis (John Garfield), who becomes involved with corrupt managers in boxing. So that the bets can be fixed, Charley is told to make his latest fight last 15 rounds with no overall winner. Through a series of flashbacks the audience is shown the events that have led to Charley being in this position. After Charley’s father dies in an attack on his shop, his

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<sup>40</sup> Crowther, ‘Screen Review’, Ibid, p.39.

<sup>41</sup> Crowther, Bosley, ‘Blame the Movies! Comment on Some Recent Critical Blasts’, *New York Times*, April 13, 1947, p.65.

<sup>42</sup> Crowther, ‘Blame the Movies! Comment on Some Recent Critical Blasts’, Ibid, p.65.

mother applies for a loan to ensure Charley gets a good education. Throughout his early career we see (and his friend Shorty (Joseph Pevney) even tells him) that money begins to destroy Charley, resulting in his relationship with Peg (Lilli Palmer) ending and Shorty dying as an indirect result of Charley's actions. In spite of earning sufficient money Charley begins to live beyond his means and owes his manager lots of money. Back in the present Charley learns that he has been double-crossed during the fight and is told he must take a dive. To rebel against the corruption that is going to ruin his career, Charley goes on to win the fight and defies his manager. He then leaves with Peg.

With the combination of Abraham Polonsky as writer and Robert Rossen as director a pattern was clearly being seen in the films they made. Explicit messages could easily be drawn, yet interestingly few critics highlighted the message of the film within the reviews. James Agee was one of the few to note the political stance of *Body and Soul*; he opened his review in *The Nation* with the following: "Body and Soul, which gets very bitter and discreetly leftish about commercialism in prize fighting, is really nothing much, I suppose, when you get right down to it."<sup>43</sup> However, he goes on to add, whilst comparing it with *Nightmare Alley* (Edmund Goulding, 1947), that:

in both there is a quick satirical observation, a sense of meanness to match the meanness of the worlds they are showing, a correct assumption of cynical knowledge in the audience that relieves them of the now almost universal practice of drawing diagrams for the retarded.

This is particularly noteworthy because it summarises Agee's stance on the direction of films and places him in a different camp to John Houseman and Bosley Crowther. For Agee this was the realism he favoured – that of an honest representation of parts

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<sup>43</sup> Agee, James, 'Films', *The Nation*, November 8, 1947, p.511.

of America that existed. However, the 'meanness' that Agee mentions, which John Houseman found so distasteful in some other films such as *The Big Sleep* (See Chapter Two), was not as apparent to Houseman in *Body and Soul*. Writing in 1947, he uses *Body and Soul* as one of three case studies relating to the depiction of violence in films. Whilst Houseman highlights that certain aspects of the film are formulaic, he goes on to add that "*Body and Soul* emerges as an absorbing piece of entertainment. This is attributable in part to its high technical quality [...] its craftsmanship is sufficiently high to convince and hold you almost continuously."<sup>44</sup> Here it is evident that Houseman is referring to the realism of the picture and he goes on to conclude that his case studies "vary in quality in direct ratio to the honesty and intensity which animated their creation."<sup>45</sup> In other words Houseman did not like to see violence being used for exploitative purposes yet on another level he was approving of violence used when the underlying message matched his ideology.

Other publications chose to highlight different aspects of the film, seeing it less than formulaic. In a comparatively brief review in the *New Republic*, the reviewer chooses to highlight that the film is well written and well acted, but goes on to add "There's a scene in which a Negro tells a white man to go to hell, which takes real daring by cinema standards. In some sections of the country this one scene will stir up more fuss than all of *Gentleman's Agreement*."<sup>46</sup> It is interesting that Canada Lee's relatively minor character, Ben Chaplin (the 'Negro' the review mentions), should warrant such an observation, but it does serve to highlight that the inclusion of such a character meant that the film was compared like for like with *Gentleman's Agreement* (Elia Kazan, 1947) in terms of social messages. Furthermore it shows how the Hollywood Left's films were perceived, at the time, as daring, something that Rossen

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<sup>44</sup> Houseman, John, 'Violence, 1947: Three Specimens', *Hollywood Quarterly*, Vol. 3, No.1 (Autumn, 1947), p.64.

<sup>45</sup> Houseman, Ibid, p.65.

<sup>46</sup> R.L.H., 'Movies: Less Than Kin', *New Republic*, December 1, 1947, p.35.

was unafraid to be labelled. His stance was outlined in a 1949 *Life Magazine* 'A Round Table on the Movies' during which he said:

We know that certain groups in certain towns will insist on their own special moralities. We may not agree with them, but they have the right to exist. But I am afraid they have no recognition that their own prohibitions are playing havoc with the American mind. If the mass medium is to give back to the public the best things there are, these restrictions should be stopped at their source.<sup>47</sup>

This daringness is also highlighted in The *Motion Picture Herald* review in which William R. Weaver states that "It is a picture to stir comment perhaps even controversy, and it makes the prize fight industry look pretty bad."<sup>48</sup> Weaver goes on to show respect for the commitment of the personnel involved into bringing to attention the social problems depicted, adding "Producer Bob Roberts, director Robert Rossen and screen-playwright Abraham Polonsky worked together with rare unity of purpose in turning out an impressively professional job." Furthermore, the reviewer in *The Hollywood Reporter* writes about the relevance of the film, they write that "With newspapers splashing these sordid stories all over its pages, the subject is plenty timely and also boxoffice."<sup>49</sup> What begins to emerge is a sense of how Rossen and Polonsky's films were seen as a continuation of the prestigious social message films that were discussed in the Chapter Three; films with integrity, a message to be highlighted and films that they hoped would have an impact on current American life.

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<sup>47</sup> Hodgins, Eric, "A Round Table on the Movies", *LIFE*, 27 June 1949, p.103.

<sup>48</sup> Weaver, William R., 'Body and Soul: UA-Enterprise – The Story of a Pugilist', *Motion Picture Herald*, August 16, 1947, p.3781.

<sup>49</sup> '\_\_\_\_', "Kiss of Death' Hair-Raiser; 'Body, Soul' Packs Wallop: Fight Yarn Gets Rugged Treatment', *The Hollywood Reporter*, Wednesday, August 13, 1947, p.3.



In terms of realism, the critics in both *Variety* and the *New York Times* highlighted that the story portrayed by Abraham Polonsky in *Body and Soul* was familiar, but *Variety* states that “It’s the telling, however, that’s different, and that’s what will sell the film.”<sup>50</sup> In stressing the *realism* the reviewer characterises the film as “authentic” saying “This might have been the real-life story of any one of a flock of New York eastside or Brooklyn street fighters.” Bosley Crowther in the *New York Times* writes that “Still he’s written his story with such flavour and such slashing fidelity to the cold and greedy nature of the fight game, and Robert Rossen has directed it with such an honest regard for human feelings and with such a searching and seeing camera.”<sup>51</sup> The reviews here centre on the script and also, again, the reality of the story with *Variety* likening it to a documentary and the *New York Times* highlighting the human element of the film indicating that Polonsky and Rossen had been successful in creating a hybrid of the social and political message film with a documentary realism style.

### **Force of Evil (1948)**

*Force of Evil* was written and directed by Abraham Polonsky and released in 1948. Joe Morse (John Garfield) is a lawyer who works for a gangster called Tucker (Roy Roberts) and Joe’s brother Leo (Thomas Gomez) runs a numbers racket. Tucker wants to merge all of the local rackets into a nationalised lottery and, knowing that many people bet on 776 (the old liberty number) on the 4<sup>th</sup> July, plans to rig the result in a bid to bankrupt the smaller local rackets making them easy to buy out. Knowing that the authorities are clamping down on the rackets, Joe organises for his brother’s offices to be raided so Leo will accept his offer to merge with the nationalised lottery.

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<sup>50</sup> Kahn., ‘Film Reviews: Body and Soul’, *Variety*, Wednesday August 13, 1947, p.15.

<sup>51</sup> Crowther, Bosley, ‘The Screen in Review: ‘Body and Soul,’ Exciting Story of Prizefighting, Starring Jon Garfield, at Globe – Two British Films Also Open’, *New York Times*, November 10, 1947, p.2.

His plan works and Leo accepts his offer, but is raided again and decides he wants out. Joe is having an affair with Tucker's wife and soon realises that he is to be double-crossed. Tucker organises for Leo to be killed, which causes a confrontation with Joe. Tucker is killed in a shootout and Joe hands himself in to the police.

*Force of Evil* caused a noticeable split in the critics' reactions. Those that were negative, were extremely so and those that were positive seemed over eager to praise the film. *Variety* noted that there were "poetic, almost allegorical"<sup>52</sup> moments in the film, but lament that these moments were "intruding on the tougher elements of the plot" concluding that it winds up as "neither fish nor fowl". The political inclinations of the film are hinted at in the review, as is the authenticity, which is attributed to the location shooting. The sentiment expressed in *Variety* is also shared in *The Hollywood Reporter* which goes a stage further to say that *Force of Evil* is a "posturing, overwritten screen drama whose preoccupation with high sounding phrases mitigates against its entertainment values."<sup>53</sup> The critic in *The Hollywood Reporter* goes on to add that Polonsky was:

more interested with plugging the verbose dialogue than achieving action and dramatic values. In substance the spectator at "Force of Evil" has the feeling that he is sitting in on a debate among John Steinbeck, Clifford Odets, and William Saroyan".

It is an interesting choice of examples for the debate the reviewer mentioned, both Steinbeck<sup>54</sup> and Odets<sup>55</sup> did, at one time, have associations with the Communist

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<sup>52</sup> Brog., 'Film Reviews: Force of Evil', *Variety*, Wednesday, December 29, 1948, p.6.

<sup>53</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, "Force of Evil" Dreary, Talky, But Exploitable: Story Overwritten, Picture Confused', *The Hollywood Reporter*, Monday, December 27, 1948, p.3.

<sup>54</sup> See Railsback, Brian, & Meyer, Michael J. (Eds.), *A John Steinbeck Encyclopaedia*, Greenwood Press: Westport, 2006, p.259 & 429. Although Railsback and Meyer state that Steinbeck was not a communist himself they state that he was often mistakenly suspected of being one.

Party and Saroyan has become known for the Humanist nature of his writings, whilst not political.<sup>56</sup> It is worth mentioning that at this stage, late 1948, the HUAC investigations were well underway, and disassociation with Communists and Communism was commonplace.

The review by Red Kann, appearing in the *Motion Picture Herald*, also highlighted the dialogue stating that “Their writing effort is cluttered with muddled and confused dialogue presumably designed to be worldly and philosophical with something allegedly poetic added,”<sup>57</sup> continuing that “For most of its distance, it is so excessively talky and so loaded down with conversational mumbo jumbo that it appears to run far beyond its length.” Kann concluded that the film “might have been convincing and tighter dramatically if it had been played off as a hard-hitting straightaway gangster melodrama.” It is fascinating that all three of the aforementioned reviews highlight the script as being verbose and preachy, and the ‘gangster melodrama’ is not the place for this kind of preaching; giving the impression that Polonsky, high on the success of *Body and Soul*, seemed to have misjudged the market for his ‘intellectual’ script.

Not all of the reviews were critical of *Force of Evil*, Robert Hatch in *New Republic* called it “the best crook drama of the year,”<sup>58</sup> adding that it is a “combination of excellent acting, direction and photography”. However, perhaps the highest praise in the publications considered came from Bosley Crowther in the *New York Times*. He states that:

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<sup>55</sup> See Ceplair, Larry & Englund, Steven, *The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community, 1930-1960*, University of Illinois Press: Urbana and Chicago, 2003, p.307.

<sup>56</sup> Lee, Lawrence, & Gifford, Barry, *Saroyan: A Biography*, London: University of California Press, Ltd., 1998, p.223.

<sup>57</sup> Kann, Red, ‘Force of Evil: M-G-M - Enterprise – The Numbers Racket’, *Motion Picture Herald*, January 1, 1949, p.4442.

<sup>58</sup> Hatch, Robert, ‘Movies: Fair to Maudlin’, *New Republic*, January 10, 1949, p.23.

it must be said that this film is a dynamic crime-and-punishment drama, brilliantly and broadly realized [...] it gathers suspense and dread, a genuine feeling of the bleakness of crime and a terrible sense of doom. And it catches in eloquent tatters of on-the-wing dialogue moving intimations of the pathos of hopeful lives gone wrong.<sup>59</sup>

He further goes on to greatly praise Polonsky: “Mr. Polonsky and Mr. Wolfert [the co-writer] have some real things to show about the practical operation of the psychology of crime” and “Mr. Polonsky here establishes himself as a man of imagination and unquestioned craftsmanship [...] we have a real new talent in the medium, as well as a sizzling piece of work.” Crowther seems to appear in tune with the intellectual product that Polonsky was creating in that he considers the film as an educational piece in relation to criminal psychology.

## Conclusion

Throughout the late 1940s Abraham Polonsky and Robert Rossen made four films that portrayed similar anti-capitalist messages. As the films became more overt in their political nature some critics noted their role as propaganda more and this began to divide opinions. Many reviews noted the authenticity and realism of the films that were being made and highlighted their social message whilst also adding that there was no doubt of the technical skills of the people involved. Furthermore it was appealing to many that they were using formulaic stories that had been told before in various guises, but the key point of interest was that they were, in their eyes, adding a human element. Commentators at the time stressed the impact of what was to be

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<sup>59</sup> Crowther, Bosley, ‘At Loew’s State’, *New York Times*, December 27, 1948. p.16.

known as Italian Neo-Realism and relished its influence on American films, noticeable in the works of Rossen and Polonsky in this period.

Far from being grouped together in what is now often referred to as *film noir*, the films, at their time of release, were seen as significantly within different genres. For example, considering the publications referenced in this chapter, Polonsky and Rossen's mid to late 40s canon was actually quite diverse. *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* was referred to as a Melodrama<sup>60</sup>; *Johnny O'Clock* a Thriller<sup>61</sup>; *Body and Soul* a Sports Film<sup>62</sup>; and *Force of Evil* a Crime Drama<sup>63</sup>. However, in spite of the different genres, the themes were seen to be increasingly explicit.

Rossen presented his viewpoint on his preference for the direction of Filmmaking in his round table discussion for *Life* Magazine and likewise Polonsky highlighted his preferences in his critique of *The Best Years of Our Lives*. Rossen criticized the constraints that some groups were placing on filmmaking and argued for more freedom and Polonsky had expressed concern at *The Best Years of Our Lives* for not portraying the effects of the war on the working classes. It is clear from their reviews that the critics saw the films as portraying the realism that was noted in the films considered by many as *noir*, yet they aspired to add a human element by moving away from portraying individuals who were considered problematic, to showing flawed individuals who were so because of society. This can be highlighted by the fact that their supporters specifically mentioned the human element of the stories, exemplified in such articles as Bosley Crowther's review of *Force of Evil* and John

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<sup>60</sup> See: "Homicidal melodrama" in: T.M.P., 'The Screen in Review', Ibid, p.18.; and "Adult Melodrama" in: Brog., 'Film Reviews: The Strange Love of Martha Ivers', Ibid, p.10.

<sup>61</sup> See: "Whodunit" in: Bron., 'Film Reviews: Johnny O'Clock', Ibid, p.12; and "Mystery Thriller" in: F.H., 'Johnny O'Clock – Columbia – Mystery Thriller', Ibid, p.3397

<sup>62</sup> See: "Topical yarn taking advantage of recent sport fixing" in: Kahn., 'Film Reviews: Body and Soul', Ibid, p.15.; and: "Prizefight Picture" in: Crowther, 'The Screen in Review: 'Body and Soul,' Exciting Story of Prizefighting, Starring Jon Garfield, at Globe – Two British Films Also Open', Ibid, p.2.

<sup>63</sup> See: "Crook drama" in: Hatch, 'Movies: Fair to Maudlin', Ibid, p.23.; and: "Crime and punishment drama" in: Crowther, 'At Loew's State', Ibid, p.16.

Houseman's verdict on the violence in *Body and Soul*. This particular filmic content was labelled by Thom Andersen *film gris*. Whilst useful in defining a sub-section of the *film noir* canon it also can be considered as problematic as the term *film noir* insofar as it leads to a subjective inclusion of films and adds another element to the already complex array of films discussed in *film noir* studies.

Before Andersen's *film gris* was used as a term, and while making a similar point, Richard Maltby highlights *Body and Soul* along with *Boomerang* (Elia Kazan, 1947) as examples of "the social realist school of the late 1940s" where "Mythic perfection gave way to human frailty".<sup>64</sup> Maltby summarises that "The hero became a victim of the need to defy generic conventions in the name of greater dramatic force and complexity, and an emphasized psychological realism." Certainly this phenomenon was noted in the critical reception of Rossen and Polonsky's films, however, by the late 1940s, with the release of *Force of Evil*, some critics had found the psychological realism, for want of a better phrase, of the films to be too intrusive in the plot. Furthermore it was being noted that this psychological realism was providing a platform for political ideologies.

The films of Polonsky and Rossen do show how left-leaning critics were united in their agreement for the authentic realism that was portrayed in their films, and thought the filmic techniques were praiseworthy in their reviews, but there was less agreement with regard to the blurring of social and political commentaries. The realism theme was continued in films directed by Henry Hathaway, this time moving away from semi-documentary war films (as discussed in Chapter One), to realist thrillers featuring criminals; and these films shall be explored in Chapter Five.

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<sup>64</sup> Maltby, *Ibid*, p.259.

## Chapter Five

### Sinister Mirrors: Henry Hathaway's Thrillers 1946-48

*"The only thing that everyone seems to agree upon is that "documentary" film is supposed to be "true" and seems to have something to do with "reality"."*<sup>1</sup> Raymond Fielding, 1978.

#### Introduction

Henry Hathaway made a series of thrillers during the same period as the Abraham Polonsky and Robert Rossen films discussed in the previous chapter. Whereas Polonsky and Rossen had focussed on fictitious stories relating to Capitalism corrupting the individual, Hathaway's thrillers were loosely based on true stories and contain themes such as sympathetic criminals and their struggle against a society filled with corruption and in some cases portrayed a negative view of an unsympathetic establishment.

Hathaway had been attracted to the use of exterior filming from his time spent working on westerns throughout the 1930s. Although he was initially unsure if the public wanted such a documentary style<sup>2</sup> applied to urban films he liked the idea - similar to that used in *The March of Time* - of "telling a story with half-narration that could work over scenes so you didn't have to have on-camera people talking so much."<sup>3</sup> Two of his films have already been discussed in Chapter One – *The House on 92<sup>nd</sup> Street* (1945) and *13 Rue Madeleine* (1947); these two films, along with

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<sup>1</sup> Fielding, Raymond, *The March of Time 1935-51*, Oxford University Press: New York, 1978, p.69.

<sup>2</sup> Behlmer, Rudy, (Ed.), *Directors Guild of America Oral History: Henry Hathaway*, Scarecrow Press, Inc: Maryland, 2001, p.209.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p.209.

*Boomerang* (Elia Kazan, 1947), were considered by many as a type of semi-documentary trilogy which signified the beginning of a new style of film-making that 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox started. The three films discussed in this chapter, *The Dark Corner* (1946), *Kiss of Death* (1947) and *Call Northside 777* (1948), do contain many of the stylistic elements common to the original semi-documentaries, but, as demonstrated by some critics' reaction to the true stories, are somewhat problematic because of their inclusion of fictionalised elements. Indeed, much like many films that are grouped together under the heading of *film noir*, the labelling of these films is further problematised by the fact that the themes were subjective; some critics chose to highlight the social commentary, some mention the terror aspect contained in them and some fitted them in with the "tough" cycle of films (discussed earlier in Chapter Two).

Whatever labelling is applied, the three Hathaway films considered in this chapter, do have a semi-documentary style in the sense that realism was something universally noted and Hathaway referred to the influence of Italian Neo-Realism on his style when he stated: "They were influenced by the success of films like *Bicycle Thieves* – De Sica was a brilliant director and the films had a tremendous influence on all of Hollywood."<sup>4</sup> 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox's Director of Publicity, Harry Brand, explains the reasoning for using this style in terms of making a social commentary to inform the public; he said of *Kiss of Death* in promotional material: "Shooting with the realistic, on-the-spot documentary technique perfected [in previous works] this back-to-actuality method of filming a story in real homes, stores and backgrounds, completely away from studio and studio sets, "Kiss of Death" achieves the greatest possible measure of realism".<sup>5</sup> He goes on to add that "Henry Hathaway [...] has had more experience with the new type of away-from-Hollywood direction than any other

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<sup>4</sup> Nogueira, Rui, 'Henry Hathaway: Interview by Rui Nogueira', *Focus on Film*, No.7, Summer 1971, p.16.

<sup>5</sup> Brand, Harry, 'Vital Statistics on "Kiss of Death"', 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox [no date], BFI collections, p.1.



Hollywood picture-maker”<sup>6</sup> and finally points towards the social message behind the film stating that it “tells the story of modern criminals as seen through the district attorney’s eyes. In it the American public will see how these people live, how and what they think, and get a much truer picture of their philosophy than has ever been seen on the screen before.”<sup>7</sup> Brand clearly saw the style as a key selling point and to remind the audience of this the opening note at the beginning of *Kiss of Death* states that actual locales were used. Similarly in *Call Northside 777* the opening credits inform the viewer that the film is a “true story” and that locales associated with the story were used in the film. Taking the opening statement of *Call Northside 777* Steven N. Lipkin has highlighted that the “connections to actuality” ask the audience to grant “that these events might have happened in much the ways we are about to see them.”<sup>8</sup> Taking this a stage further, with reference to *Call Northside 777* being about a miscarriage of justice, it does enable social messages to be conveyed more easily if the audience is of the mindset that what they are seeing presented in the film is based on fact, irrespective of the filmmakers not being sure that what they presented on screen was not even a possibility in real life.<sup>9</sup>

Continuing with the social message theme, Jack Shadoian has detailed that “*Noir* bile stains both *Kiss of Death* (1947) and *Force of Evil* (1948), but their narratives assert a desperate hope in the social activism and moral enlightenment of individuals. Both films say you can climb up out of the hole.”<sup>10</sup> His statement could be taken further and applied to all of the three films considered in depth in this chapter in that moral behaviour, though often faced with corruption, is shown to triumph in the end; and in

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<sup>6</sup> Brand, *Ibid*, p.3.

<sup>7</sup> Brand, *Ibid*, p.3.

<sup>8</sup> Lipkin, Steven N., ‘Real Emotional Logic: Persuasive Strategies in Docudrama’, *Cinema Journal*, Vol.38. No.4, (Summer, 1999), p.68.

<sup>9</sup> In an interview with Polly Platt, Henry Hathaway stated that he invented scenarios in *Call Northside 777* for dramatic purposes, unsure if such a scenario would legally happen in real life. See: Behlmer, (Ed.), *Directors Guild of America Oral History: Henry Hathaway*, *Ibid*, p.219.

<sup>10</sup> Shadoian, Jack, *Dreams and Dead Ends: The American Gangster/Crime Film*, The Massachusetts Institute of Technology: Massachusetts, 1979, p.115.

this respect, all deal with reformed criminals or wrongly convicted individuals trying to put things right. In his explanation of politics in *film noir*, John Bodnar states: “If there was a politics at all in the world they created, it was dark and dangerous illiberalism disinterested in building a better life by either democratic or liberal means. [...] Indeed, they envisioned a world without a future.”<sup>11</sup> Interestingly Bodnar’s summary takes a one sided look at the films and there are certainly characters within Hathaway’s films who could be described in this way. However, in *Kiss of Death*, in particular, we have the character of Udo who takes this route as opposed to Bianco’s seeking of redemption and it is Bianco’s character who succeeds in the end while Udo is gunned down. And as another example, Frank Krutnik addresses the lack of reliance of formal political power in *Call Northside 777*, writing that “Call Northside 777 manages to offset its criticism of the legal institutions with a belief in the more unofficial institutions of liberal democracy – the power of the press as legal guardians of morality, the force of human values”.<sup>12</sup> In this respect Hathaway’s thrillers in some way redress the “lack of moral energy [and] listless, fatalistic despair”<sup>13</sup> in the heroes that John Houseman so objected to in his writings (see Chapter Two).

As Will Straw has noted, the semi-documentaries have been overlooked in post-war studies of cinema, and he highlights that “Our understanding of the progressive response to postwar cinema has long been clouded by film scholarships’s later enshrining of the film noir as the most vital expression of a postwar sensibility.”<sup>14</sup> This chapter examines three of Hathaway’s films, all often considered *noir*, from the mid to late 1940s and looks at the critical reception of the films to see what facets were noted by the critics. In particular what trends were noted regarding the films

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<sup>11</sup> Bodnar, John, *Blue-Collar Hollywood: Liberalism, Democracy, and Working People in American Film*, The John Hopkins University Press: Maryland, 2003, pp.115-116.

<sup>12</sup> Krutnik, Frank, *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity*, Routledge: London, 1994, p.205.

<sup>13</sup> Houseman, John, ‘Today’s Hero: A Review’, *Hollywood Quarterly*, Vol.2., No.2, (Jan, 1947), p.163.

<sup>14</sup> Straw, Will, in Krutnik, Frank.; Neale, Steve; Neve, Brian; and Stansfield, Peter (Eds.), “*Un-American*” *Hollywood: Politics and Film in the Blacklist Era*, Rutgers University Press: New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London, 2007, p.132.

and their messages and their use of a documentary style. *Call Northside 777* is often grouped with *13 Rue Madeleine* and *House on 92<sup>nd</sup> Street* as Hathaway's docudrama trilogy for 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox<sup>15</sup> as opposed to the aforementioned Fox trilogy. However, thematically it sits easier with *The Dark Corner* and *Kiss of Death* in terms of featuring sympathetic criminals, or indeed wrongly accused individuals. In this respect, this chapter adds to Lipkin's work by not only considering *Call Northside 777* alongside Hathaway's more thematically similar films of the same period, but also positioning them within the ongoing debates and criticisms of the period. It will be interesting to see how the critics noted the change in the way the criminals were being depicted and the exposing of wrongdoings in establishments. In previous chapters the social message films had emphasised minority issues, fights against fascism and showed people turning to crime and receiving an appropriate redemption or punishment. In some respect these films pick up where those films left off and they consider what happens to the individuals who have been convicted.

This chapter will also consider how Hathaway, who had worked with the semi-documentary from their inception, applied the technique to films not always now considered semi-documentaries by contemporary scholars, such as *The Dark Corner* and *Kiss of Death*, even though the films may have been loosely based on fact. As outlined above, Hathaway was more concerned with making successful dramatic films in this way rather than sticking to the facts of the original story. The critical reception will show what the critics thought of his tendency to change the story for dramatic purposes. Furthermore this will show what the critics considered noteworthy in Hathaway's thrillers and how they fitted in with their long held wish for films to be more mature and realistic.

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<sup>15</sup> Lipkin, *Ibid*, p.74.

## **The Dark Corner (1946)**

The first of the films is *The Dark Corner*, which was released in 1946. Bradford Galt (Mark Stevens) is a private investigator who had previously served two years for manslaughter because his ex-partner, Tony Jardine (Kurt Kreuger), had set him up in a car accident where a driver was killed. Galt goes on a date with his secretary, Kathleen (Lucille Ball), and they notice that they are being followed. After luring his follower down an alleyway Galt takes him to his office and is told that he works for Tony Jardine. He takes the man's wallet and finds out he is called Fred Foss (William Bendix). Jardine is having an affair with Hardy Cathcart's wife Mari (Cathy Downs). Cathcart (Clifton Webb) owns a gallery in the city. Galt goes to see Jardine who denies that he had anything to do with him being tailed. The two men fight and Mari calls the police. Jardine is then forced to tell the police who had attacked him and it transpires that Foss is actually working for Cathcart, who is aware of his wife's affair and had hoped that Galt would kill Jardine after finding out he had had him tailed. Foss arranges to meet both Galt and Jardine at Galt's apartment. There he knocks out Galt and kills Jardine framing Galt for the murder. Cathcart meets Foss to give him his payment, but instead pushes him to his death out of a window. Galt finds out that Foss was using a fake ID and that he had been meeting Cathcart, so he heads to his gallery to meet him. There Cathcart is about to kill Galt when Mari overhears their conversation and shoots Cathcart.

For T.M.P. in the *New York Times*, *The Dark Corner* was a "sizzling piece of melodrama".<sup>16</sup> In the review he highlights the abilities of Henry Hathaway, complimenting his ability to draw "superior performances" adding that Hathaway made skilful use of the New York backgrounds. However, in a comment about the

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<sup>16</sup> T.M.P., 'The Screen In Review: 'The Dark Corner,' in Which Mark Stevens, Lucille Ball Appear, Seen at Roxy – 'Little Giant' in Debut at Leow's Criterion', *New York Times*, May 9 1946, p.35

realism of the film, the critic concludes that “His fine craftsmanship is very evident throughout “The Dark Corner”, and it is regrettable that he had to mar the atmospheric realism by resorting to scene-faking in a few sequences.” Whilst the review overall from *Variety* was not as favourable, they do single out Hathaway’s contribution: “Cast, steered in the right direction by director Henry Hathaway, does much to keep the picture running as smoothly as it does.”<sup>17</sup> As with the review in the *New York Times*, *Variety* refers to *The Dark Corner* as a melodrama,<sup>18</sup> which separates it from the documentary-style films set during the war that Hathaway was producing at this time. Linking the film with those discussed in Chapter Two, they refer to *The Dark Corner* as “Starting off as another slambang private investigator story”. Unlike the character facets that were considered noteworthy in the films of Abraham Polonsky and Robert Rossen discussed in Chapter Four, thus far no comments were made about the morality of the characters, such as Galt’s past or Jardine and Cathcart’s corruption. However, an interesting review from James Agee in *The Nation* hints at another agenda. He notes the recent increase in dark melodramas by stating that the film itself appears formulaic, but goes on to add the following:

But once in a while slickness and derivativeness persist so far in their folly that they develop a kind of vitality of their own – not to mention the fact that in movies, especially, people of real talent have sometimes to succumb wholly to those vices or to use them as still another kind of leverage for surreptitious quality.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Stal., ‘Film Reviews: The Dark Corner’, *Variety*, Wednesday, April 3, 1946, p.12.

<sup>18</sup> Stal. Ibid, p.12. The critic refers to *The Dark Corner* as “meller”, an abbreviation of melodrama in their Miniature Review.

<sup>19</sup> Agee, James, ‘Films’, *The Nation*, September 14, 1946, p.305.

It is interesting that he implies that Hathaway's involvement in a film such as *The Dark Corner* was to convey something 'secret'. Clearly the obvious messages taken from the film is that there is evil lurking in people who are rich and powerful (Jardine and Cathcart); and, of course, the miscarriage of justice where Galt went to prison after being set up and subsequently labelled as having had 'an impulsive youth', as the detective in the film calls it. However, Agee's reference could be an indication that established personnel used this format to convey messages that would be out of place in other genres.

Richard Maltby speculates that Siegfried Kracauer, as representative of the Hollywood liberal intellectuals, took movies such as *The Dark Corner* as "being symptomatic of a social condition they themselves were desperately in need of discovering."<sup>20</sup> And by drawing attention to specific social problems it would potentially enable social change. In his article 'Hollywood's Terror Films: Do They Reflect an American State of Mind?'<sup>21</sup> Siegfried Kracauer argues that films such as *The Dark Corner* highlight the contemporaneous leaning toward "films saturated with terror and sadism".<sup>22</sup> He argues that the post-war period in cinema employed such terror to convey the threat of Nazism and his primary concern was that the ruthless violence and cruelty depicted in film lacked a message. He states that "most of the current thrillers do not even pretend to motivate or excuse or rationalize the introduction of sadistic terrors."<sup>23</sup> In this respect Kracauer, in his summary, likens the thrillers, such as *The Dark Corner* to horror films, therefore differentiating them from the social message films, and crime melodramas that were a key movement within the post-war period and, in future studies, form a significant part of the *noir* canon.

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<sup>20</sup> Maltby, Richard, 'Film Noir: The Politics of the Maladjusted Text', *Journal of American Studies*, Vol 18, 1984, pp.68-69.

<sup>21</sup> Kracauer, Siegfried, 'Hollywood Terror Films: Do They Reflect an American State of Mind', reprinted in *New German Critique*, No.89, Film and Exile, (Spring – Summer, 2003), pp. 105-111. First printed in *Commentary* 2 (1946): pp.132-36.

<sup>22</sup> Kracauer, Ibid, p.105.

<sup>23</sup> Kracauer, Ibid, p.108.

By doing this it is clear that certain films once seen as prestigious in that they aimed at educating and informing the public were beginning to slip out of favour with the Hollywood Left as they evolved into something much darker and more sinister. Depictions that were once considered gritty and human had become horror films used to terrorise the audience.

Kracauer's writings were noted by James Agee, who, writing in the *The Nation*, argued that films such as *The Dark Corner* "were treated by a number of critics, reviewers and editorial writers as if they were a sinister mirror of American morals, psychology, society and art."<sup>24</sup> Whilst acknowledging that Kracauer and others may find this analysis interesting, he adds that "the most sinister single thing that happened during the movie year was the emergence of just this kind of analysis". Agee concluded thus:

I am deadly alarmed to find that the function once performed, harmfully enough, by clubwomen and the nastier kinds of church pressure groups is now taken over, without a murmur or even a sign of divided consciousness, by the kind of people who used most earnestly to oppose priggishness.

Agee makes a very interesting point, which could highlight the factions that were appearing within the Hollywood community. Kracauer, through his analysis which highlights the concerns that he had about a relatively small group of films that were being made, which differed in a layman's eyes very little to the films he had been promoting, was now being labelled priggish. Furthermore, Kracauer, through his articles, was drawing attention to characters that were lacking morals and did not

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<sup>24</sup> Agee, James, 'Films', *The Nation*, September 14, 1946, p.305.

conform to expected behaviour, or to use a popular phrase that was being used at that time, characters which were 'un-American'.

### **Kiss of Death (1947)**

*Kiss of Death* was released in 1947 and employs a voiceover, maybe as a persuasive tool, indicating where the audience sympathies should lay. Nick Bianco (Victor Mature) has a criminal record and has been out of work for a year. On Christmas Eve he robs a jewellery store, but is caught and he refuses a deal with the District Attorney, which would involve turning his criminal partners in. In jail he meets Tommy Udo (Richard Widmark). After three years Bianco learns that his wife has killed herself because of money problems and his two daughters are placed in an orphanage. Nettie (Coleen Gray), his former child minder, visits Bianco and tells him that his former criminal partner Rizzo had been having an affair with his wife. Bianco decides to then make that deal with the District Attorney and tells him that Rizzo robbed the jewellery store with him. Bianco tells his lawyer, Howser (Taylor Holmes), that he believes someone has been informing on him and he thinks it is Rizzo. Udo goes to Rizzo's apartment and pushes his wheelchair-bound mother down a flight of stairs. Bianco is released and sets up home with Nettie, whom he marries, and his two daughters. The District Attorney says that Bianco must now help them convict Udo as payment for his early parole so Bianco meets Udo and then reports back to the police about the murder he has admitted to committing. Bianco has to testify against Udo in court but the evidence is not enough to convict him so he is released. Bianco then meets Tommy and goads him into shooting him, at which point the police arrive and shoot Udo.



*Kiss of Death* draws more distinct lines regarding morality than *The Dark Corner* in that the lead character, Bianco, has done wrong, but is trying to right that wrong. Two particular issues raised in the film are about giving people who have done wrong second chances and at what point is it justifiable to turn 'stoolie'. This is noted in the *New York Times* review of the film where T.M.P states "For once sympathy is piled on the side of a man who recognizes the error of his way and is willing to make peace with society, even though he realizes that the price will be life itself."<sup>25</sup> T.M.P also adds that because Bianco has been in prison, the stigma "closed his chances of making an honest living and, in desperation, he pulls a jewelry store robbery". It is noteworthy that, for T.M.P., the criminal lead was seen as sympathetic and turned to crime because of the circumstances he found himself in. Comments are also made regarding the filming locations and how the "atmosphere is [...] authentic, and it is surprising how much authority this background contributes to the over-all effect of the picture." Fisk. in *Variety* also comments on the realism of the film even going so far to say that it is more realistic than the semi-documentaries, which were based on real life events. Fisk. states that the filmmakers use "the same semi-documentary treatment that 20<sup>th</sup>-Fox used in its three fact dramas, "The House on 92<sup>nd</sup> Street", "13 Rue Madeleine" and "Boomerang." [...] Though some of those were good this one tops them in realism, suspense and dramatic interest."<sup>26</sup> The *Variety* review states that the film is well acted and well directed, producing an overall excellent film. Though it mentions that the key lynchpin of the plot is Bianco's decision to inform on his friends, it makes no moral judgement regarding this decision and immediately backs it up by his children being the motivation. Also singled out is Richard Widmark for his performance as Udo being "just about the most shuddery menace of the year as the dimwit, blood-lusty killer."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> T.M.P., 'The Screen: 'Kiss of Death,' Fox Melodrama, With Victor Mature in Lead, Arrives at Mayfair – Italian Musical New Bill at Golden', *New York Times*, August 28, 1947, p.28

<sup>26</sup> Fisk., 'Film Reviews: Kiss of Death' *Variety*, Wednesday, August 13, 1947, p.15.

<sup>27</sup> Fisk., *Ibid*, p.15.

James Agee, writing in *The Nation* was less impressed. He said: “The script, though expert, is certainly not inspired, and I can’t believe that the director and cameraman are better than thoroughly competent, either.” Adding “I don’t care as much for this film as for the much more lively *Boomerang*.”<sup>28</sup> Whilst other critics were referring to this cycle of films as semi-documentaries, Agee, during his review of *Kiss of Death* defines them as “locale” movies. He describes this term as follows: “Possibly that word will do: what I mean by it is that the picture is shot mainly or wholly in actual places; the story, as a rule, is based on fact, though that seems to me less important.”<sup>29</sup> However, in *Time* magazine, Agee calls *Kiss of Death* a “clean knockout” adding that “This bleakly beautiful actuality is so valuable to the movie that the writing (by Ben Hecht and Charles Lederer), the direction (by Henry Hathaway) and the playing all take their measure against it. With hardly a moment’s exception, they measure up.”<sup>30</sup> Agee also uses this opportunity to stress what it is that he likes about the “locale” movies; he states that “One of the best things that is happening in Hollywood is the tendency to move out of the place-to base fictional pictures on fact, and, more importantly, to shoot them not in painted studio sets but in actual places.” In other words Agee was keen for real life to be represented on the screen and to move away from the artificial glamour, as had been a main objective of the Hollywood Left in the post-war period. It is interesting to note that the slightly more positive review comes from Agee’s writing in *Time* magazine compared to his writing in *The Nation*. With *Time* being renowned for its anti-Communist affiliations<sup>31</sup> and *The Nation* being described by its publishers as the “flagship of the left”<sup>32</sup> it could be

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<sup>28</sup> Agee, James, ‘Films’, *The Nation*, September 13, 1947, p.264.

<sup>29</sup> Agee, James, ‘Films’, *The Nation*, September 13, 1947, p.264.

<sup>30</sup> Agee, James, *Agee on Film: Volume One*, Grosset & Dunlap: USA, 1967, pp.376-377.

<sup>31</sup> *Time* magazine’s editor-in-chief was Henry Luce was known to be a member of the Republican Party and had stated that he did not want any Communists working for Time Inc. See: Herzstein, Robert E., *Henry R. Luce, Time, and the American Crusade in Asia*, Cambridge University Press: New York, 2005, p.58.

<sup>32</sup> The publishers of *The Nation* cite on the Amazon.com webpage for subscriptions that “Founded in 1865, *The Nation* is America’s oldest weekly magazine, the flagship of the Left, and now the country’s

argued that Agee thought that the “locale” films needed less promotion in left-wing publications.

*The Hollywood Reporter* gave *Kiss of Death* a positive review highlighting, as with other reviews, how:

The point on which the adroitly contrived screenplay hinges is a hoodlum’s affection for his two young daughters. Basically a decent young man he nevertheless succumbs to the underworld code and refuses to save his own hide by identifying the other participants in the holdup.<sup>33</sup>

This is an interesting point, which shows how the semi-documentary style was effective in manipulating moral viewpoints. With the use of the voiceover, often a tool in documentaries, the audience is encouraged, through the subjective point-of-view narration, to feel empathy for Bianco from the outset. Whatever reasoning and explanation given, Bianco is essentially a criminal who holds up a jewellers with other criminals whose back story is not explained. His relationship with his daughters is, in the eyes of the filmmakers, enough to justify his actions. The other participants in the holdup, and in particular Rizzo is not shown to be as sympathetic, despite living with his wheelchair bound mother in a meagre apartment. It is interesting to note this aspect of bias and how the lines of liberal social problem films were being drawn, by drawing a hierarchy amongst criminal activities and how becoming an informer of bigger criminals can compensate for previous wrongdoings. William R. Weaver noted this in his review in the *Motion Picture Herald* when saying that “The picture is

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most widely read journal of opinion.” See: <http://www.amazon.com/The-Nation/dp/B000CNEFRE> [accessed 11-09-14]

<sup>33</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_. ‘Kiss of Death’ Hair-Raiser; ‘Body, Soul’ Packs Wallop: Production Skill Heightens Realism’, *The Hollywood Reporter*, Wednesday, August 13, 1947, p.3.

grim, hard, adult, suspenseful, and is the first to champion the view that a criminal can compensate for own misdeeds by turning informer. As handled, the point is not belaboured, but firmly established.”<sup>34</sup> This observation is particularly interesting because in contemporaneous Hollywood films, the criminals often paid the price for their sins with their life, but in *Kiss of Death*, Bianco is established as sympathetic by the love for his children and the difficult life he has had and is therefore spared such a fate.

Shirley O'Hara in the *New Republic* gave *Kiss of Death* a less positive review stating that it has “received notices above its merits,”<sup>35</sup> and going on to add: “‘The Kiss of Death’ is good in the it’s-so-much-better-than-most kind of criticism by desperation.” In reference to the Tommy Udo character in particular, she concludes that “Sadism, incidentally, has taken over the position in the movies once occupied by True Love-it will be a happy day when the trend exhausts itself.”<sup>36</sup> O'Hara appeared to be in agreement with Kracauer's criticism in relation to the emerging trend of portraying sadism in Hollywood films. Noticing a change in the portrayal of ruthless violence in films Kracauer stated that “it originates from compulsive sadistic urges, it is less animal – one might say that it is less spontaneous.”<sup>37</sup> Kracauer's argument was that sadism had its place in films during the war period in order to show the world the horrors of fascism and was now being exploited, in films like *Kiss of Death*, to terrorise the audience. He remarks that no solutions are offered arguing that “The feeling of uneasiness stirred up in the audience at the spectacle of an everyday world full of totalitarian horrors is left unrelieved.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Weaver, William R., ‘The Kiss of Death: 20<sup>th</sup>-Fox Criminological Melodrama’, *Motion Picture Herald*, August 23, 1947. p.3794.

<sup>35</sup> O'Hara, Shirley, ‘Movies: Oh, To Be in England’, *New Republic*, September 22, 1947, p.38.

<sup>36</sup> O'Hara, ‘Movies: Oh, To Be in England’, *Ibid*, p.39.

<sup>37</sup> Kracauer, Siegfried, ‘Hollywood Terror Films: Do They Reflect an American State of Mind’, (First printed in *Commentary* 2 (1946): 132-36), reprinted in *New German Critique*, No.89, Film and Exile, (Spring – Summer, 2003), p.106.

<sup>38</sup> Kracauer, *Ibid*, p.108.

### **Call Northside 777 (1948)**

*Call Northside 777* is based on a true story with locales associated to the story portrayed in the film. The film is set in 1932 and in the opening scene a policeman is shot dead in a speakeasy run by Wanda (Betty Garde). Frank Wiecek (Richard Conte) is accused of the murder due to previous minor convictions. Wiecek makes minor mistakes regarding his alibi and it is enough to get him and his friend Tomek (George Tyne) sentenced to 99 years. The case is forgotten about until 1944 when an advert appears in a newspaper offering a \$5000 reward for more information on the case. P.J. McNeal (James Stewart), a reporter from the Chicago Times goes to speak to Tillie (Kasia Orzazewski), Wiecek's mother, who placed the advert. McNeal writes a popular story about her and follows up with interviews with Wiecek and his, now ex-wife. Wiecek had asked his wife Helen (Joanne De Bergh) for a divorce for his son's sake and then becomes angry that his family is being exploited to sell papers instead of McNeal showing compassion for his case. After Wiecek passes a lie detector test concerning his innocence McNeal decides to take the case further. McNeal looks at police records and finds that the police officials are more concerned with their reputation than the truth. McNeal finds a press photo of Wanda visiting the police station at the same time Wiecek had, proving that she had seen him before the court case and that she had lied in court when she testified that she had not seen Frank after the shooting until the trial. Wiecek is released and McNeal reminds him that it is a big thing that he has been allowed to go free because "there are not many governments in the world that would do it."

Red Kann writing in the *Motion Picture Herald* gives a very factual account of the film, emphasising the realism through the use of real locales and adding that "The outcome is a sharp degree of realism and the prime example of how resorting to the

actual can enhance the make-believe.”<sup>39</sup> Kann also comments that Henry Hathaway, “a leading exponent of the technique of combining the documentary flavour with the dramatic [...] maintains his reputation.” Bosley Crowther in the *New York Times* equally commends the film in his review, stating that “It combines a suspenseful mystery story with a vivid, realistic pictorial style, and it has some intriguing arcana in it on the gentlemen of the press.”<sup>40</sup> Crowther is positive about the film, but his writing style has a cynical edge – as if criticising the way that the filmmakers depicted working in the press. He adds that “If some of its newspaper techniques are not entirely in line and if its climactic evidence is flimsy, blame that on the scriptwriters’ awe. The Hollywood people are usually overwhelmed by the mightiness of the press.” As with the *Motion Picture Herald* the review is uncharacteristically light on comments about the subject matter of a gross miscarriage of justice. Crowther, at this time, had been particularly outspoken about minorities when writing about *Crossfire* (Edward Dmytryk, 1947) and *Gentleman’s Agreement* (Elia Kazan, 1947), as indicated in Chapter Three, so it is noteworthy that the underlying themes of racism and injustice in *Call Northside 777* go unmentioned, highlighting how this film was perceived differently. Herm. in his review of the film in *Variety* had no such trouble in determining a stance from the outset stating that it makes only a “mild impact” and that “this pic has a faltering pace, an uneven realistic focus and only a thin dramatic point.”<sup>41</sup> The critic continues by stating that: “Henry Hathaway’s direction marks a retreat from the documentary form. Instead of consistent realism, he lapses into a hybrid technique with plenty of hokey melodramatic tones.” And finally concludes on a cynical note: “For some unexplainable reason, the fate of the other innocent man is left in the dark. Maybe he never had a mother.” The final sentence indicates that by 1948 the semi documentary genre had evolved so much

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<sup>39</sup> Kann, Red, ‘Call Northside 777: 20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox – Semi-Documentary Drama’, *Motion Picture Herald*, January 24, 1948, p.4029.

<sup>40</sup> Crowther, Bosley, ‘\_\_\_\_’, *New York Times*, February 19, 1948, p.29.

<sup>41</sup> Herm., ‘Film Reviews: Call Northside 777’, *Variety*, Wednesday, January 21, 1948, p.8.

that what was once a believable format was now incorporating too much fiction and the truth was now emerging in a dressed up format. The fictionalization of the story was, in fact, Darryl F. Zanuck's idea, who had criticised the original script for being too episodic and lacking drama. In a memo to the producer Otto Lang and original writers Quentin Reynolds and Leonard Hoffman he wrote that the script was "Almost like a cold, stenographic report, we tell the facts which we want the audience to know in each separate episode, but we fail to take advantage of the opportunities to dramatize these facts."<sup>42</sup> In 1950, when referring to the semi-documentaries, Zanuck also mentioned *Call Northside 777* and he wrote that the stories told in film "need not be true in every case, it must be presented in such a way that the audience *thinks* the whole story is true."<sup>43</sup> The memos from Zanuck actually reveal that whilst he was a keen promoter of the semi-documentary, he had less regard for films that were truthful representations of the facts, and more regard for films that successfully employed this style, appearing to be truthful representations of facts, even if they were not. Indeed the whole term 'semi-documentary' is somewhat misleading in that at the time the personnel involved did not see any obligation to present a factual account in the story they were telling and used the term primarily to refer to the filmmaking style. This can, in some way, explain their "uncertain status and limited interest" that Will Straw mentions.<sup>44</sup>

In the *New Republic* Robert Hatch considers the rise of the documentary style with regard to crime films using *Call Northside 777* and *The Naked City* (1948, Jules Dassin) as case studies. He believed that the crime film was a safe choice for this

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<sup>42</sup> Memo from Darryl F. Zanuck to Otto Lang, Quentin Reynolds and Leonard Hoffman, dated March 5, 1947, reproduced in :Behlmer, Rudy (Ed.), *Memo from Darryl F. Zanuck: The Golden Years at Twentieth Century-Fox*, Grove Press: New York, 1993. p.122.

<sup>43</sup> Conference with Darryl F. Zanuck, Otto Lang [producer], Michael Wilson [writer] and Molly Mandaville, concerning "Operation Cicero" [later to become *5 Fingers* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1952). Report reproduced in Behlmer, (Ed.), *Memo from Darryl F. Zanuck: The Golden Years at Twentieth Century-Fox*, Ibid, p.194.

<sup>44</sup> Straw, Ibid, p.132.

style because of crime being an unusual aspect of life for most people, enabling the semi-documentary style to convince greatly. He says:

Film documentation, which developed from the propaganda needs of the recent war is a camera technique that strives for verisimilitude rather than reality. What it conveys may be completely false, and when you believe it you do so, not through any intellectual persuasion, but from the ancient fallacy that you cannot deny the evidence of your own eyes. [...] It is relatively safe and relatively easy, thus, to illuminate it [the crime film] with complete factuality.<sup>45</sup>

Hatch goes on to add that “Both films are fun to see, and they carry the new technique about as far as it can be taken” but he adds that “they cannot stand any closer analysis.” He explains this by saying that “If any real use is to be made of the new style, the scripts will have to grow up to the cameras.” Hatch’s comment suggests that he likes the semi-documentary style, but it had now reached the point where it needs to be used in films other than crime films. By 1948 crime themes had been portrayed in film for almost 50 years<sup>46</sup> and had relied on the basic principles of good versus bad. Hatch was clearly keen for the techniques and style to be used in more mature, perhaps less formulaic, films. This point is also suggested by Bosley Crowther in an article in the *New York Times* where he writes: “this straight, shock-absorbing reviewer has wondered wistfully why this same use of detailed realism is not more frequently applied to non-crime films,”<sup>47</sup> going on to suggest genres such as love stories and comedies could benefit from its usage. As with Hatch, Crowther desired to see less of the fake studio sets and a more realistic mature style of

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<sup>45</sup> Hatch, Robert, ‘Movies: The New Realism’, *New Republic*, March 8, 1948, pp.27-28.

<sup>46</sup> See: Neale, Steve, *Genre and Hollywood*, Routledge: London, 2000, p.71.

<sup>47</sup> Crowther, Bosley, ‘Imitations Unwanted: A Plea for Extension of ‘Documentary Style’’, *New York Times*, February 22, 1948, p. XI.



filmmaking and wished it to not be restricted to the telling of crime stories. Crowther also wrote a further article in 1948 which expands upon what he was hoping for the future of film. Acknowledging “that pictures with any vital substance are likely to be out for the next few years”,<sup>48</sup> which is clearly in reference to the HUAC investigations, he goes on to steep high praise on director Alfred Hitchcock and his recent film, *The Paradine Case* (1947), in terms of his style and camera technique. Crowther adds that:

there are many of us who have long wished that Mr. H. could put his rare style in expression to a drama of genuine consequence – something above the reproductions of sensational journalism that he prefers; something, for instance, like a drama on the fight for civil rights in these grave times.

The quoted sentence highlights many of Crowther’s concerns at this time. He wanted films to fight for civil rights, films to have genuine consequence and furthermore, he saw directors like Hitchcock as having the skills and popularity to reach a wider audience than perhaps the crime thrillers were.

In spite of the criticisms relating to the fictional elements, Henry Hathaway was aware that he was pushing the boundaries with regard to the issues tackled in *Call Northside 777*. In interviews for the Directors Guild publication, Hathaway recounts how Darryl Zanuck was angry about the script. He states: “We had a meeting with Zanuck about the new script. Well, he just goes off his rocker about one point in there and tells us that this is un-American and he’s never going to attack the city or the personnel of the district attorney.” He then goes on to add that “Zanuck was not a flagwaving American, but he was 100 percent American and very strict and hated

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<sup>48</sup> Crowther, Bosley, ‘Matter of Style: Now You See It and Now You Don’t’, *New York Times*, January 18, 1948, p.X1.

stuff in his movies that had to deal with corruption.”<sup>49</sup> This highlights an interesting point in that Zanuck was aware of the HUAC proceedings, but also that Hathaway knowingly pushed the boundaries by moving from propaganda war films, and applying the same techniques to provide a less positive image of American society and the corruption within. As pointed out in the previous chapter, Polonsky and Rossen had focused their films on how power and wealth corrupted the individual and their internal reaction to this. Hathaway was now looking at how a corrupt society affects the individual as well as the individuals’ struggles to maintain faith and hope.

## Conclusion

As demonstrated in the critical reception of Henry Hathaway’s three thrillers, reviewers noted the growing use of psychoanalysis being applied to films. As detailed, Richard Maltby believed that “the liberal critics took the movies as being symptomatic of a social condition they themselves were desperately in need of discovering”<sup>50</sup>; and expresses his surprise at “The fact that they paid any attention at all to such low-rent material as *The Killers* and *Dark Corner*”<sup>51</sup> Maltby, appears to be reiterating James Agee’s sentiment, however both overlook the fact that liberal critics had been advocates for the use of realism since before the war; and after the war they had seen an opportunity for documentary style to be utilised in film. From their writings it becomes apparent that there were two main reasons for this: firstly their preference to move away from the fake glamour of Hollywood films and secondly, they valued the chance to encourage educational, meaningful and factual films with a

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<sup>49</sup> Henry Hathaway quoted in Behlmer, (Ed.), *Henry Hathaway: A Director’s Guild of America Oral History*, Ibid, pp.217-219.

<sup>50</sup> Maltby, Ibid, p.68-69.

<sup>51</sup> Maltby, Ibid. p.68.

message to convey. Liberal critics had clearly seen the potential of such films and *The Dark Corner*, but allocated it so much article space because they saw it as something they could help improve to be more like the films they wished for. Indeed Bosley Crowther himself had made this quite clear in an article from the same year *The Dark Corner* was released, in which he stated “This is a pretty tall order to be repeating on a hot summer day, but the more it is mentioned the better. Something must be done to forward factual films [...] – such films, that is, as give the public graphic insight into problems of the day.”<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, Kracauer, in particular, was more concerned with horror without meaning, in other words, sadism with no attempt to contextualise the behaviour of the character. Kracauer’s use of *The Killers* and *The Dark Corner* was part of a study looking at various films,<sup>53</sup> some of which are not generally categorised as *film noir*, certainly by many of today’s understandings of the term. However, James Agee had noted the incidences of applying psychoanalysis to film in 1948 and was disturbed by the fact, likening it to the pressure groups trying to set morality standards in films and it was, therefore, something he strongly opposed.

A common element referred to by many critics regarding the Hathaway thriller films considered in this chapter was his use of documentary realism. Darryl F. Zanuck noted that the films merely needed to appear true to life rather than be based on true life. However, after becoming familiar with this style of filmmaking, the critics were beginning to notice the artistic liberties taken with the factual stories and began suggesting directions of how this technique could evolve. Both Robert Hatch and Bosley Crowther had been advocates of the earlier crime films that were filmed using this technique, but now wanted to see the same techniques of using real locales

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<sup>52</sup> Crowther, Bosley, ‘In Favor of Factual Films’, *New York Times*, Sunday, July 7, 1946, p.X.

<sup>53</sup> Kracauer mentions terror being used in, among others: *The Lost Weekend* (Billy Wilder, 1945), *Gaslight* (George Cukor, 1944), *Shadow of a Doubt* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1943), *The Spiral Staircase* (Robert Siodmak, 1946), and *Suspicion* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1941).

applied to all films in a move away from crime melodramas. Hatch specifically emphasised the point that mature dramas would benefit from this filmmaking style.

A common theme throughout these three Hathaway films is that of the sympathetic criminal. In *The Dark Corner* we have the detective who had previously been set up and spent time in prison for a crime he did not commit; in *Kiss of Death* we have the criminal who learned from his mistakes, and as the story unfolds it becomes apparent that he committed crimes for the 'right' reasons; and in *Call Northside 777* two men are sent to prison for a crime they did not commit. Moreover, in all three films corruption is shown in people of power, be it police, lawyers or the rich. Peter Roffman and Jim Purdy claim that early "Hollywood movie was a chief glorifier of the big criminal"<sup>54</sup> and that "Sensationalism, not social criticism was the motivation behind the gangster films." However, Hathaway's films of the late 1940s did contain social criticism and this was noted by some of the critics who referred to the difficulties of the ex-criminal.

Finally, the language used by some of the critics positions Hathaway's films as terror films, or horror, films in that the use of sadism and violence was commonplace. Interestingly, as the critics were becoming more dismissive of the stories told using documentary realism, their mention of the morality of the actions of the characters became less pronounced, and the technique itself was allocated more column space. In other words, as the films failed to live up to their expectations of those featuring this style, there was less concern over how the characters were perceived in terms of being 'human'. The films may have been getting darker, but the social messages were getting lighter. However, there was a further film where the social message was bold and it was filmed in the favoured documentary style technique, but liberal

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<sup>54</sup> Roffman, Peter, and, Purdy, Jim, *The Hollywood Social Problem Film: Madness, Despair, and Politics From the Depression to the Fifties*, Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1981, p.147.

critics were vehemently opposed to it: *The Iron Curtain* (William A. Wellman, 1948); which will be discussed in the following chapter.

## Chapter Six

### Poisonous Propaganda: The Iron Curtain (1948)

*"If we tried to make pictures within the narrow limits of the  
"responsibility" set by our critics; if we deliberately made propaganda  
pictures, our industry would not only go bust, but we would be doing the  
worst possible service for America."*<sup>1</sup> Eric Johnston, 1948.

#### Introduction

Henry Hathaway's thrillers *The Dark Corner* (1946), *Kiss of Death* (1947) and *Call Northside 777* (1948) had portrayed a spectrum of 'criminals', from the wrongly accused Bradford Galt in *The Dark Corner*, through the 'criminal out of necessity' Nick Bianco (nicely contrasted with the thoroughly rotten career-criminal Tommy Udo) in *Kiss of Death*; to the wrongly incarcerated petty criminal Frank Wiecek in *Call Northside 777*. It can clearly be observed that the real criminals in *Call Northside 777* are the bureaucratic police whose apathy led to the wrong man being convicted. This blurring of good and bad could cloud the viewer's judgement of the characters and indeed highlights a potential criticism of America and its society. Key aspects of the films seem to have the intent of asking the audience to re-evaluate their judgements on real life characters like those portrayed. Hathaway's political indictments, unlike those portrayed in the films by Robert Rossen and Abraham Polonsky, were subtle insofar as they seemed to be criticising attitudes that were detrimental to the liberal way of life. *The Iron Curtain* (William A. Wellman, 1948), released the same year as both *Call Northside 777* and *Force of Evil* (1948), was

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<sup>1</sup> Johnston, Eric, 'Report From Europe', *The Screen Writer*, Vol. 4, No. 4, October 1948, p.5.

less subtle and certainly more political. In a very black and white tone the theme and message was anti-Communist.

Richard Maltby has stated that “From Hollywood, in 1948, they got their first of a wave of anti-Communist movies, the majority of which employed the mannerisms of *film noir*, fixing a positive political charge to a style whose previous ideological meaning had only been defined by negatives.”<sup>2</sup> Whilst this statement relies on selective inclusion of films into the *noir* canon and neglects some of the semi-documentaries, certainly in the case of *The Iron Curtain*, producers and critics alike saw this as a continuation of the “authentic” style of filmmaking which is nowadays associated with the term *film noir*. And, as Maltby stated, 1948 did see the emergence of what was to become a cycle in its own right, that of the anti-communist film. Daniel J. Leab has highlighted that this was because the “American film industry took its lead from the politics of the day.”<sup>3</sup> Leab goes on to summarise many of them and shows how this cycle started with *The Iron Curtain* and continued well into the 1950s.<sup>4</sup> The traits that were to be found in the melodramas and thrillers of the post-war 1940s, often attributed to *film noir*, provided the ideal template for the anti-Communist films; in that with all political films, or for want of a better expression, propaganda, the effectiveness lies partly in authenticity, in the audience believing what they see to be a truthful representation of how it can affect them.

In April 1947 Darryl F. Zanuck sent a confidential memo to producer Sol Siegel and writer Martin Berkley outlining his plan to make a film about Communism. He stated “The Iron Curtain is a story to be written in the technique of *The House on 92<sup>nd</sup> Street*, dealing with the activities of secret foreign agents in the United States and

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<sup>2</sup> Maltby, Richard, ‘*Film Noir: The Politics of the Maladjusted Text*’, *Journal of American Studies*, Volume 18, No.1, 1984, p.71.

<sup>3</sup> Leab, Daniel J., ‘How Red Was My Valley: Hollywood, the Cold War Film and I Married A Communist’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 19, No.1, Historians and the Movies: The State of the Art: Part 2, Jan. 1984, p.59.

<sup>4</sup> Leab, ‘How Red Was My Valley: Hollywood, the Cold War Film and I Married A Communist’, *Ibid*, p.65.

Canada and the subversive activities of the Communist”.<sup>5</sup> He goes on to state that like *The House on 92<sup>nd</sup> Street* (Henry Hathaway, 1945) the film was to be made from an amalgamation of several cases dealing with the issues they hoped to raise. The memo implies that initially, at least, the idea was to make an anti-Communist movie and fit the factual cases in around the issues they were raising. Zanuck concluded the memo by saying that they would need to get details from Washington or the FBI on cases, adding that “From this we can design one major case from which the body of our story will evolve.” In his comparisons with the semi-documentary films that Fox had made, he highlights that “It must be remembered that in 92<sup>nd</sup> Street the entire last three reels of the picture were completely fictional.” The points Zanuck outlines are interesting because it shows how the semi-documentary format was being exploited as a means of conveying messages and providing entertainment, rather than informing the public of actual events. Eventually *The Iron Curtain* was based on just one account, but with elements added for entertainment purposes. It seems, however, that had the case not arisen, then the film would have gone ahead anyway based on another case that equally portrayed the perceived threat of Communism.

As Leonard Mosley has written in his biography of Darryl F. Zanuck, Zanuck wished to make films with big themes “torn from the headlines in the newspapers, from controversial novels everyone was talking about, and not from footnotes in the history books.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, many of his films in the post-war years that are considered in previous chapters had fallen into these categories (particularly *House on 92<sup>nd</sup> Street*; *Gentleman’s Agreement* (Elia Kazan, 1947); *Boomerang* (Elia Kazan, 1947) and *Call Northside 777*); however, these had covered ‘liberal’ themes, or anti-fascist themes

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<sup>5</sup> Memo dated April 9, 1947, reproduced in: Behlmer, Rudy, *Memo from Darryl F. Zanuck: The Golden Years at Twentieth Century-Fox*, Grove Press: New York, 1993, p.128.

<sup>6</sup> Mosley, Leonard, *Zanuck: The Rise and Fall of Hollywood’s Last Tycoon*, Panther Books: London, 1985, p.311.



at the very least. It could be argued that audiences who had made these films popular would have been susceptible to the liberal themes and therefore it should not have been a surprise that *The Iron Curtain* turned out to be a divisive film. Zanuck however, according to George F. Custen, was surprised at the backlash, and the latter states that “Zanuck was amazed at the whole episode. Baffled by the notion that anyone could support what he saw as an authoritarian regime”.<sup>7</sup> Zanuck appears to have not understood the messages that could be taken from the films he produced in that criticism of his film did not necessarily mean the critic was sympathetic to all aspects of Communism. Suggesting that the political inclination of *The Iron Curtain* was very much in line with his own beliefs, Zanuck even wrote a letter to the *Chicago Tribune* in 1952 in which he objected to a statement in the newspaper that he had been “long friendly to internationalist and Leftist causes”. And to emphasise his point Zanuck proudly highlighted the attacks that followed *The Iron Curtain*, and stated: “I produced the first anti-Communist picture made in Hollywood, namely *The Iron Curtain*.”<sup>8</sup>

Zanuck had believed that *The Iron Curtain* had been a public service rather than a political statement, and director William A. Wellman was to reiterate this. Expressing his political stance in an interview he claimed that “Hell, I don’t make political films [...] I’m a Republican, but I loathe politicians.”<sup>9</sup> However, Bertrand Tavernier has reported that “*The Iron Curtain* was not a studio imposed job; on the contrary, it faithfully reflected Wellman’s principles.”<sup>10</sup> These assertions can only confirm that Wellman; a veteran of the golden age of Hollywood, would have been perfectly cast

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<sup>7</sup> Custen, George F., *Twentieth Century’s Fox: Darryl F. Zanuck and the Culture of Hollywood*, BasicBooks: New York, 1997, p.307.

<sup>8</sup> Letter addressed to Mr. D. Maxwell, dated July 9, 1952, reproduced in: Behlmer, Ibid, p.209.

<sup>9</sup> Thompson, Frank T., *William A. Wellman*, Scarecrow Press Inc.: Metuchen N.J., 1983, p.221.

<sup>10</sup> Tavernier, Bertrand, ‘Pioneer Spirit’, *Film Comment*, Jan/Feb 2004; 40, 1; p.35.

in his role of director of *The Iron Curtain*; a film Daniel J. Leab, in his detailed account of the film's production, calls "Hollywood's first Cold War movie".<sup>11</sup>

After the film was made, in March 1948, a further document was sent from Zanuck to director William A. Wellman and writer Milton Krims regarding the script being leaked to Russian magazine *Pravda*, who had, in turn, attacked the film. Zanuck understood this as confirmation that "it certainly shows that they are petrified and frightened to death of the film and the fact that it will expose them to the world."<sup>12</sup> This also indicates that Zanuck, before the film was released was aware of the potential backlash that the film could cause. Whatever the true political nature and intentions of the personnel involved, this "message" picture, which so angered the Soviets and provided a very bold statement, was to divide the critics. The following study of the critical reception of the film aims to consider what reaction *The Iron Curtain* received from the critics and what particular aspects they found noteworthy. Many of the publications and critics considered in the previous chapters had expressed sympathy with the social and political messages portrayed in films. However, the films considered thus far had expressed views and stances in a subtle manner under the guise of genre films. Many were labelled as melodramas or thrillers and the threat in the film had been instigated by a breakdown in morals or bad individuals. *The Iron Curtain* portrayed the threat as universal and there was nothing subtle about the political message in that it was overtly anti-communist and sold as such.

Looking at the critics' reception will show the rifts that had formed with regard to not only differing ideology, but also the thoughts regarding the direction that films should be taking. There had been a great deal of column space dedicated to praise and

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<sup>11</sup> Leab, Daniel J., "The Iron Curtain' (1948): Hollywood's first Cold War movie, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 8:2, p.153.

<sup>12</sup> Memo addressed to Sol Siegel, copied to William Wellman [director] and Milton Krims [writer], dated March 20, 1948, reproduced in: Behlmer, Ibid, p.129.

criticism outside of the standard reviews, and liberal commentators such as John Houseman and Siegfried Kracauer had also expressed an interest in many of these films. Therefore a film as blatant as *The Iron Curtain* will provide a suitable concluding chapter to highlight the differences in opinion.

### **The Iron Curtain (1948)**

In a similar vein to the semi documentaries, *The Iron Curtain* opens with the following introduction:

This is a story based on the report of the Royal Commission June 27 1946 and evidence presented in Canadian Courts that resulted in the conviction of ten secret agents of the Soviet Government. The messages and other documents quoted in this film are exactly as those presented as exhibits in the trials of the accused agents. All were authenticated by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. All exterior scenes were photographed in the original locales.

In 1943 Igor Gouzenko (Dana Andrews) arrives in Canada from the Soviet Union to work in Ottawa as a spy at the Soviet Embassy. He is informed on how important Canada will be to the Soviet Union when they have won the war and their organisation, The Associated Friends of Soviet Russia (a front for recruiting agents), is making contact with key personnel in Canada. Soon after Igor's wife, Anna (Gene Tierney), arrives she falls pregnant and has a baby boy and Igor informs her not to fraternise with Canadians for fear of being exposed. Igor's main contact, known as Paul (Berry Kroeger), meets with a scientist, Doctor Norman (Nicholas Joy), from England, whom he believes is in need of "politically re-educating". Doctor Norman

passes on the samples of uranium and detailed plans of the production of atomic bombs. A short time later the first atomic bomb is dropped on Japan. After a Communist group meeting, Anna tells Igor that she has doubts about the Communist leader's preaching. This coincides with the breakdown of a colleague of Igor's who cannot handle the killing anymore for the sake of Communism. Igor decides he cannot return to Russia and begins to take some of the confidential documents home from work. Once he has gathered the information Igor goes to the Justice Building – convinced that his information must go to the highest level of government. Unfortunately he cannot speak to anyone in control and when Igor fails to turn up to work in the morning his colleagues grow suspicious and notice that documents are missing. He goes to the press who find his story unbelievable. Sending his wife and child to his neighbour's house with the documents Igor sees his colleagues arrive outside his house. Anna calls the police, who after seeing the documents place Igor and his family under protective custody. The Canadian MP who is a member of the Communist party is told to try and get people on side after the story hits the press. The party tells him that if he goes to prison he will be a martyr and a hero – the Party comes first. The spies involved stand trial and some are sent to prison and Igor remains in Canada as a British subject under protection. The voiceover at the end concludes that "They know that ultimate security for themselves and their children lies in the survival of the democratic way of life."

*The Hollywood Reporter* was impressed with the film but note that it has "incontrovertible provocativeness" Their review opens with:

Once again 20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox comes through with a hard hitting documentary timed to fit the temper of these times and done with the same technique that has made the Darryl Zanuck organization the

leader in this type of film dramatization. A more gripping, tense and suspenseful narrative could hardly have been put on the screen.<sup>13</sup>

The critic goes on to state that “According to the studio many dramatic episodes were deleted from the script because they were believed to be too fantastic and incredulous.” This is an interesting point to make because of the very nature of semi-documentaries and the connotations that one would expect the audience to associate with them; after all the reviewer calls the film a “documentary” yet says that parts of the plot were too far fetched to be left in. In a noteworthy difference between the films discussed in the previous chapter, where it was noted that Henry Hathaway was adding subplots into a factual story to make them more dramatic, the makers of *The Iron Curtain* were removing parts of the plot for being too “fantastic”. This observation indicates that the producers could have realised the limitations of what the audience had come to expect from this type of filmmaking and that the more fantastic elements would have been unbelievable and assumed to be made up. Whatever their reasoning, using the word documentary to apply to these films, at this stage, was becoming a misnomer.

James Agee took a broader view of *The Iron Curtain* and appeared not entirely convinced by the theme as film-worthy and was under-whelmed by the message. In his summary in *The Nation* he says: “If it could be proved that there is any nation on the earth that does *not* employ spies, that would be news. This is just the same old toothless dog biting the same old legless man.”<sup>14</sup> Robert Hatch, in the *New Republic*, takes Agee’s indifferent attitude towards the film a stage further by outlining his sympathy for Russia. In his review he states that the film gives the impression that

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<sup>13</sup> \_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_, ‘“Iron Curtain” Explosive Documentary Revelation: Cast, Direction Score Graphic Hit’, *The Hollywood Reporter*, Friday, May 7, 1948, p.4.

<sup>14</sup> Agee, James, ‘Films’, *The Nation*, June 19, 1948, p.698.

“Twentieth Century-Fox considers us at war with the USSR.”<sup>15</sup> He goes on to imply that the Russians were justified in sending spies to Canada because after hearing rumours about atomic energy and wanting to know more, he states “but we – that is the Americans, the British and the Canadians – were not giving away that kind of information to our comrades-in-arms. They had to spy for it.” Hatch has the opinion that all countries have spies and was not pleased that the film had resorted to stereotyped villains and formulaic devices to portray their one sided message. He concludes that “According to the tenets of freedom of expression, Twentieth Century-Fox has the right to make this film; according to the same tenets I have the right to call it mischievous.”<sup>16</sup> Throughout his review Hatch takes an objective view of the film, apparently unconvinced that this particular semi-documentary was intended for anything else other than propagandistic purposes. Another noteworthy point is that although Hatch highlights that it is based on the 1946 Canadian spy trials, he mentions that the film had used standard plot devices and that he has doubts as to whether the fanatical speeches were in the official records of the trial. Clearly he thought that too many liberties had been taken with the story and instead of being an interesting semi-documentary, it had become too much of a conventional propaganda film and, in terms of international relations, a dangerous one at that.

Red Kann in the *Motion Picture Herald* gave *The Iron Curtain* a “Good” overall rating, highlighting the authenticity and realism of the film. His tone remains sceptical pointing out “How much has been introduced under dramatic license, of course, is impossible to know”.<sup>17</sup> This seemed to be a growing trend with the reviews of the films produced in the vein of the semi-documentaries. All of the reviews considered so far highlight that part of the story had been omitted, or that a particular side has

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<sup>15</sup> Hatch, Robert, ‘Movies: Fait Accompli’, *New Republic*, May 24 1948, p.30.

<sup>16</sup> Hatch, *ibid*, p.31.

<sup>17</sup> Kann, Red, ‘The Iron Curtain: 20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox – A Timely Topic’, *Motion Picture Herald*, May 15, 1948, p.4163.

been taken, thus providing a biased, or at least selective, view of the story. Kann does emphasise the connection to previous films by 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, when he adds “Produced in the semi-documentary style reminiscent of 20<sup>th</sup>-Fox’s predecessor attractions in the same mould”. Interestingly, Kann had referred to *Call Northside 777* a “semi-documentary drama”<sup>18</sup>, whereas now he refers to it as a “style”. However, Brog. in *Variety*, took a more one sided view of the film allowing political judgements to be made in the review. Opening their review with “The documentary screen technique reaches the heights of timeliness in “The Iron Curtain.” Telling a true story with implications important to every American”.<sup>19</sup> The reviewer goes on to call it a “corking melodrama” and states that “Footage is crammed with eye-opening details of Soviet treachery”; going on to patriotically state how a devoted Communist learns “what it means to live without fear” by living in Canada. Adding comments about how realistic the film is and politically opining that “Gene Tierney is fine as the wife, who first becomes aware of the deadend that Communism leads to.” Finally, as if to address Bosley Crowther and Robert Hatch’s concerns outlined in the previous chapter regarding a way forward for the semi-documentary film, Brog. writes that “William A. Wellman’s direction carries out documentary technique, pointing up factual material and the dramatic values [...] and the absence of obvious meller tricks goes a long way in adding to realistic air with which the film is imbued.”

Bosley Crowther, in the *New York Times*, had a much different view of the film. Whilst *Variety* thought that *The Iron Curtain* told the true story “with implications important to every American”, Crowther expressed concern that the film was trouble-making to say the least. In his review he stated that “It still seems excessively sensational and dangerous to the dis-ease of our times to dramatize the myrmidons of Russia as so many sinister fiends. It still seems extremely irresponsible to go all

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<sup>18</sup> Kann, Red, ‘Call Northside 777: 20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox – Semi-Documentary Drama’, *Motion Picture Herald*, January 24, 1948, p.4029.

<sup>19</sup> Brog., ‘Film Reviews: The Iron Curtain’, *Variety*, Wednesday, May 12, 1948, p.8.

out with a wave of “hate the Red.””<sup>20</sup> He concludes that “There is no question about it: it is a highly inflammatory film.”<sup>21</sup> Throughout his review Crowther explains his reasoning, and he highlights the fact that the actors playing the Russians, except Dana Andrews playing Igor Gouzenko, speak with heavy accents and that they are “the familiar granite-faced, super-gangster types”. With reference to the realism, so promoted in these films, he adds that “in spite of the honoring of the record and some exterior shots in Ottawa, this story and film have a patent detachment from authenticity.” It is interesting that just three days later Crowther took the step of also writing a further article against the film in the *New York Times*. In the aforementioned article Crowther expresses that:

it’s doubtful if this sort of picture, distorted and “hammed” as it is, will have much effect upon the thinking of the alert and objective audience. But it surely will aggravate anger and anxiety, suspicion, hate and fear, not through any sober clarification but through the old-fashioned villain stereotypes.<sup>22</sup>

Crowther highlighted his concern that the medium was being used unwisely when he said “But we know, in the first place, that movies have tremendously pervasive effects upon the patterns of thinking and action of millions of people over periods of time [...] it must be acknowledged that “The Iron Curtain” is no average film; it’s an out-and-out anti-Soviet picture in which “entertainment” seems a secondary aim.” On the surface, it appears that attacking social problems and injustices in America were suitable issues for films, but when another country, or political parties as a whole

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<sup>20</sup> Crowther, Bosley, ‘THE SCREEN: ‘The Iron Curtain,’ Anti-Communist Film Has Premiere Here at the Roxy Theatre, *New York Times*, May 13 1948, p.31.

<sup>21</sup> Crowther, ‘THE SCREEN: ‘The Iron Curtain,’ Anti-Communist Film Has Premiere Here at the Roxy Theatre’, *Ibid.* p.31.

<sup>22</sup> Crowther, Bosley, “The Iron Curtain’: New Roxy Film Poses a Question: Is It Being Raised or Lowered?’, *New York Times*, May 16, 1948, p.11.



were attacked it was a step too far in the eyes of Crowther. However, Crowther highlights possibly his main concern in his concluding paragraph. He states that:

it can't be that sane and sober people want our screen to start a wave of "hate the Red." Nor can they seriously want our movies to cast equal suspicion and contempt upon all native organizations which thump for "rights" and "freedom" in these desperate times, which is precisely what this movie, by strong implication, does.

It is interesting that Crowther chooses to place "rights" and "freedom" in quotation marks to stress their relevance; it could be likely that he was noting that for the sake of liberty and democracy any type of political ideology cannot be suppressed. Bosley Crowther had been consistent in his regard for overt politics in film. Indeed, in 1943, with the release of *Mission to Moscow* (Michael Curtiz, 1943) which was considered to be pro-Russia, he had highlighted that there are "responsibilities [i]ncumbent upon those who have an influence upon large numbers, as the producers of motion pictures do."<sup>23</sup> This stance was also reiterated by Ruth A. Inglis in her study of freedom of the movies in 1946. She had issued a recommendation that "A politically free screen is one which varying ideas – minority as well as majority – find expression. If films as a whole overwhelmingly take one side of an issue on which public opinion is divided, they should properly be called into accounting."<sup>24</sup> Inglis and Crowther's comments show that there was a concern with any film that was considered political and such film would automatically be considered daring and face opposition.

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<sup>23</sup> Crowther, Bosley, 'Missionary Zeal: The Ecstasies in 'Mission to Moscow' Raise Doubt on Political Films', *New York Times*, May 9, 1943, p.X3.

<sup>24</sup> Inglis, Ruth A., *Freedom of the Movies: A Report on Self-Regulation from The Commission on Freedom of the Press*, The University of Chicago Press: London, 1947, p.19.

Returning to *The Iron Curtain*, Crowther was not alone in his vocal contempt for the film. *The Hollywood Reporter* collected an array of reviews from many publications, which showed how split the critics were over the film. The snippets of the reviews varied from “remarkable melodrama” (New York Sun) and a “thrilling picture that every loyal American should see” (*New York Journal*) to “mostly a ludicrous, leaden bore”<sup>25</sup> (*PM*). A common thread, however, throughout the majority of reviews, was the mention of politics and propaganda. The reviews that *The Hollywood Reporter* collected showed a clear division of critics either loving the film or hating it, none were ambivalent.

Providing further evidence of the division that certain films were producing at this time and in response to Crowther’s review and article criticising *The Iron Curtain*, Darryl F. Zanuck wrote to the Screen Editor of the *New York Times* and had his letter published. He had taken umbrage at Crowther’s remarks and wanted to put his side of the story across. Whilst showing respect for the “academic” Crowther, Zanuck argued the stance and portrayals in his film had not stirred any more hatred to Russia than the *New York Times* reporting of the case in question as headline news. He highlighted that “The Communists and their ideological companions in this country did not picket the newspapers which printed the accounts of the trials [...] or the publishing house which printed Gouzenko’s book [...] they were more afraid of the printed picture than the printed word. They fear the power of the motion picture as they would fear an avenging fate.”<sup>26</sup> Zanuck concluded his letter with emphasising the very aspect that Crowther highlighted: freedom. He stated “As long as the American press remains free, Twentieth Century-Fox will continue to share in this same freedom and will produce in pictorial form newsworthy items from the printed page without fear of intimidation or censorship.” Zanuck had exposed a weakness in

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<sup>25</sup> Hoffman, Irving, ‘Iron Curtain’ Applauded, Lambasted By N.Y. Critics, *The Hollywood Reporter*, Monday 17<sup>th</sup> May 1948, p.22 and continued on p.45.

<sup>26</sup> Zanuck, Darryl F., ‘Zanuck Defends ‘The Iron Curtain’, *New York Times*, May 30, 1948, p.X5.

Crowther's argument, that of a particular hypocrisy that was now beginning to become apparent. The films that Crowther had favoured, like for example the anti-Capitalist films of Abraham Polonsky, were allowed to portray messages which might irk many people, yet when films were not in agreement with his personal politics, they were hate mongering. However, politics was not the only issue Crowther had with the film and whatever politics those involved in the film subscribed to, *The Iron Curtain's* negative portrayals of Russians was a worthwhile criticism. A further point of note is that Zanuck mentioned freedom, in that he believed Crowther's article had encroached upon the right of films to portray divisive issues. Zanuck also mentions some of his other films that were made in this style, and he writes that it is inflammatory in the same sense that "'Gentleman's Agreement' was inflammatory against racial prejudice. 'Boomerang' and 'Call Northside 777' were inflammatory against legal injustice". What Zanuck fails to mention is that he was specifically intending to make an anti-Communist film.<sup>27</sup> However, Zanuck's argument did not address the fact that Dana Andrews was cast in the leading role and did not imitate a Russian accent, as the bad guys did. Furthermore, it is interesting, yet somewhat contradictory, that Zanuck, in the midst of the protests and picketing that he mentions in his article, takes the time to respond to one particular negative review; especially since he mentions the "commendatory editorials in the newspapers of the various cities where it has played" and that "In New York and many other places these editorials are unanimous in urging everyone to see and heed the warning in the picture." However, this does highlight that Crowther's opinion was held in high esteem by the industry, a viewpoint that Ruth A. Inglis shares in her study when she states that "The exceptional reviewers of Bosley Crowther's type are extremely rare."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Memo addressed to 'Messrs. Sol Siegel [producer], Martin Berkeley [writer]' dated April 9, 1947, reproduced in: Behlmer, (Ed.), Ibid. p.128.

<sup>28</sup> Inglis, Ibid, p.200.

Further to Zanuck's article defending *The Iron Curtain*, writer Milton Krims also wrote an article for *The Screen Writer* later that year. Whilst staying away from any political affiliation he states that his primary concern before taking the assignment as a writer was "is the story true?"<sup>29</sup> After a lengthy introduction outlining that "An honest man does not sell his conscience for money" he goes on to detail the events leading up to and during writing the script. In his conclusion he says that he is pleased that he wrote *The Iron Curtain* and that it is not "every picture that brings mass picketing and riots to otherwise peaceful American streets" and "everybody has a chance to say his own piece the way he sees it. And if it makes for confusion – it also makes for free men."<sup>30</sup> Freedom for filmmakers was a particular issue that *The Screen Writer* was discussing at length during this period<sup>31</sup>, and as detailed in the Introduction and Chapter One, it was something that they were promoting. Obviously, as shown with their inclusion of the article by Krims, it meant freedom from anywhere within the political spectrum.

The picketing and riots Krims mentioned referred to the picketing of the Roxy Theatre in New York on the opening night of *The Iron Curtain*. *The Hollywood Reporter* reported on the evening and claimed that "over 5000 Wallace supporters marched past the house chanting "keep away from the Fascist film""<sup>32</sup> The 'Wallace supporters' that *The Hollywood Reporter* mentions were supporters of Henry A. Wallace who was running for the presidential elections as the Progressive candidate who was backed by the Communist Party. *The Hollywood Reporter* mentions that during the Wallace campaign in Madison Square Gardens leaflets were given out urging the Roxy to be picketed, which led to "Approximately 200 members of the Catholic War Veterans [...] start a counter picket line". The day before, *The*

<sup>29</sup> Krims, Milton, 'Iron Curtain Diary', *The Screen Writer*, Vol. 4, No.3., September 1948, p.14.

<sup>30</sup> Krims, Ibid. p.32.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, the special section 'The Freedom of the Screen', *The Screen Writer*, Vol. 3, No. 2, July 1947.

<sup>32</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, "'Curtain' Picketed By 5000 NY Lefties Prior to Opening', *The Hollywood Reporter*, Wednesday, May 12, 1948, p.1.

*Hollywood Reporter*, whilst detailing that due to the number of groups applying for picketing rights there could be up to six hours of picketing per day, also reported that there were other newsworthy problems besetting the exhibition of the film, that of “threatened legal action over the use of music by three Russian composers and possible libel suits by three Canadians”.<sup>33</sup> It was also reported that Norman Canright in the Communist publication *The People’s World* had called for a public boycott of the film, labelling it as “poisonous propaganda”.<sup>34</sup>

The controversy and protests surrounding the film did not stop a successful opening night<sup>35</sup> and it was reported in *The Hollywood Reporter*, just two days after the opening of the film, that the boycotts and demonstrations had been called off by the Communist Party chiefs; reportedly to “concentrate all efforts on the Mundt-Nixon Bill<sup>36</sup>, [an] anti-Communist measure now being debated in Congress.”<sup>37</sup> It would seem that the Communist Party did need to be concerned about the Mundt-Nixon Bill, but more concerning for them was the fact that their protests were attracting the attention of the FBI. Indeed, *The Iron Curtain* is featured in several FBI files, including a section on “protests against *The Iron Curtain*”.<sup>38</sup> Even with the furore surrounding *The Iron Curtain*, Daniel J. Leab has highlighted that “Despite a supposed clamor for anti-Communist films these did not attract audiences.”<sup>39</sup> It

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<sup>33</sup> ‘\_\_\_\_’, ‘N.Y. Police Grant Reds ‘Iron Curtain’ Limited Picketing’, *The Hollywood Reporter*, Tuesday, May 11, 1948, p.1.

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in ‘\_\_\_\_’, ‘Curtain’ Defies Red Threats: Capacity Audience Here And S.F. Despite Commie Appeal For Mass Protest’, *The Hollywood Reporter*, Thursday, May 13, 1948, p.1, continued on p.9.

<sup>35</sup> ‘\_\_\_\_’, ‘Curtain’ Defies Red Threats: Capacity Audience Here And S.F. Despite Commie Appeal For Mass Protest’ Ibid, p.9. *The Hollywood Reporter* noted that 20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox reported new highs in box office takings for the mid week opening in San Francisco and the Roxy in New York had figures that were “one of the best marks in recent months”.

<sup>36</sup> The Mundt-Nixon Bill was a proposed law which outlined that all members of the Communist Party were to register their affiliation with the Attorney General.

<sup>37</sup> ‘\_\_\_\_’, ‘Reds Shelve Plan To Smear ‘Curtain’, *The Hollywood Reporter*, Friday, May 14, 1948, p.1.

<sup>38</sup> Leab, Daniel J. (Ed.), *A Guide to the Microfilm Edition of Federal Bureau of Investigation Confidential Files, Communist Activity in the Entertainment Industry: FBI Surveillance Files on Hollywood 1942-1958*, University Publications of America: Bethesda, 1991, p.8.

<sup>39</sup> Leab, *A Guide to the Microfilm Edition of Federal Bureau of Investigation Confidential Files, Communist Activity in the Entertainment Industry: FBI Surveillance Files on Hollywood 1942-1958*, Ibid. p.viii.

appears that the off-screen drama surrounding the films was providing more than enough entertainment by itself. .

Zanuck clearly had high hopes for anti-Communist films. In the aforementioned memo to Sol Siegel and Martin Berkley he mentions comparisons to *The House on 92<sup>nd</sup> Street*<sup>40</sup> and how it was to be a template for *The Iron Curtain*, making it likely that, as with the immediate post war period where there was a series of anti-Fascist/Nazi films, Zanuck had hoped to begin a phase of timely anti-Communist films exposing the new “enemy”. Possibly Zanuck misjudged the audience for such films and as Leab has pointed out “The film did not prove to have the expected impact at the box office [...] The film made a modest profit but the overall returns proved lackluster.”<sup>41</sup> Leab goes on to point out that the film did not get shown in parts of Europe because of political situations, thus decreasing revenue for 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox. Looking at a selection of Zanuck’s post war films, which are now considered to be *film noir*, the Nazis as the villains, as portrayed in *The House on 92<sup>nd</sup> Street* and *13 Rue Madeleine* (Henry Hathaway, 1947), had a very visible track record of atrocities that the audiences would have been all too familiar with. Most audiences would have seen from the wartime newsreels the real threat that they posed as the enemy. With social problem films, such as *Gentleman’s Agreement*, subtle changes in people’s attitudes were sought. However, with anti-Communist films, the message was a lot broader and tackled a more fluid issue of politics; and Communists and their left wing sympathisers, which formed a large part of the American voting public, could regard the films as an attack on their ideals, and, like Bosley Crowther, an attack on their freedom.

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<sup>40</sup> Behlmer, *Ibid.* p.128.

<sup>41</sup> Leab, “The Iron Curtain’ (1948): Hollywood’s first Cold War movie’, *Ibid.* p.175.

The consideration of *The Iron Curtain* continued into the following year where the dangers of the misjudgement of the film were outlined by Siegfried Kracauer, who considered *The Iron Curtain* amongst other films, and the Hollywood portrayals of foreign characters. Believing Hollywood to be a leader as well as a follower of public opinion, he was concerned that what Hollywood took to be the public's opinions of the times were being reinforced by onscreen portrayals. In his article he considers mainly British and Russian characters in films and how they are portrayed. Kracauer noted that when Russia joined the allies in World War II, "Hollywood permitted no one to outdo it in glowing accounts of Russian heroism. *Mission to Moscow*, *Miss V. from Moscow*, *The North Star*, *Three Russian Girls*, *Song of Russia* – a veritable springtide of pro-Russian films - flooded the movie houses in 1943 and 1944."<sup>42</sup> He goes on to suggest that Russia then disappeared from the movies while Hollywood took stock of the changing opinions in America. When they did reappear, Russian heroism was not their theme and to Kracauer, the Russians now appeared as the new Nazis. For this point he references *The Iron Curtain* and how its Russian characters:

spread an atmosphere of oppression [...] they appear as ruthless totalitarians obeyed by devout slaves. And the only "good" Russian is a man who so firmly believes in the superior value of Western civilization that he deserts Communism and betrays his country.<sup>43</sup>

This is an interesting point that Kracauer raises. At a time when so many "Un-American" activities were being highlighted, it seems ironic that a non-"Un-American" activity was to indulge in "Un-Russian" activity. In a less convoluted description, being a good American meant being against Russia. Kracauer's sentiments that *The*

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<sup>42</sup> Kracauer, Siegfried, 'National Types as Hollywood Presents Them', *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol.13, No.1 (Spring 1949), p.58.

<sup>43</sup> Kracauer, *Ibid.* pp.68-69.

*Iron Curtain's* Russian characters were stereotypes and projections rather than portrayals was a clear indicator of how far the 'genre' had evolved from the initial post-war semi-documentaries when a unified Hollywood and its personnel had a clear and certain enemy. Since then the polarisation of their personal politics had carried the genre to the extremes. Many of the films made during this period are often grouped together today under the banner of *film noir*, yet the differences between these films are quite apparent and the differences were fully intended at the time.

## **Conclusion**

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, both Bosley Crowther and Robert Hatch had been advocates of the semi-documentary style; even going so far as to recommend ways forward for it to be taken. However, *The Iron Curtain* with its clear anti-Communist message was not as Crowther and Hatch had envisaged. They saw the themes and issues raised in *The Iron Curtain* as sensationalist and propagandistic and considered their use as irresponsible in that it had the power to cause tensions. This does indeed highlight the importance that certain critics were placing on these sorts of films and that instead of being a sidestep away from the glamour and fakery that they had disliked in Hollywood and instead of providing valuable lessons in morality for the cinema-going public, they had become politically charged films, and in their eyes, dangerous ones at that.

Indeed, some groups in the public, too, had seen the inflammatory nature of *The Iron Curtain* and had taken part in demonstrations urging people not to support the film. The demonstrations had subsequently led to counter demonstrations and the producer of the film, Darryl Zanuck, writing an article in the *New York Times*



defending the film. Zanuck, throughout his article, made the misjudgement of assuming that being anti-Communist meant that he was defending freedom. Further to this, he mentions the other semi-documentaries that he made and overlooks the fact that no one could argue against the morality of the cases depicted in his earlier films and their messages were subtle. Indeed, it is claimed by Henry Hathaway (See Chapter Five) that Zanuck hated depicting American corruption in his films, yet for *The Iron Curtain*, safer, perhaps, that it was set in Canada, had little or no qualms about depicting Communism as corrupt.

Zanuck and Crowther's comments do highlight a difficult situation in that the debates mentioned throughout the Introduction and Chapter One of this thesis show that there was concern about what might have been considered to be suitable for film content. It seemed that the majority of the Hollywood Left personnel would have liked more mature films and with that the freedom to show more on film, but, of course, having the freedom to portray ideologies on film would allow for ideologies of more right-wing personnel to be represented too. *The Iron Curtain* took the social message film to the extreme by utilising not just the semi-documentary and realist format to convey its message, but also making particular casting choices, script decisions and technical methods, so that the viewer would be left in no doubt as to the message the film contained – that of Communism being bad. It seems that the likes of Crowther saw the film as a misuse of technique and style that they considered should have been put to much better use.

Some of the reviews considered were positive and either relished the political views in the film matching their own, or saw it merely as a continuation of the current phase of semi-documentary films. These particular critics made no mention of the possibly detrimental effect that this film could have on foreign relations, or that the film could upset a percentage of the American population. Siegfried Kracauer summarised the

situation very well when he noted the glowing portrayals of Russia during the wartime films and how that changed significantly in the post-war years. Nazism was defeated and, as is usual in any good story, a new antagonist was required. This role was now filled by Communists, and Soviet Communists at that. As the unity between America and Russia had fallen apart post-war, it seemed that the unified Hollywood political groups, so vital for the war effort, had now fallen apart also.

## Conclusion

### The Real Problem for the Left

*“Those organizing the right-wing movement in the guild suspected anyone who was reported to have left the Party but continued to make the same kind of movies and had never, as evidence of patriotic good faith, spoken up against communism in their work. These men believed that the films I’d made and the plays I’d directed after I’d quit the Party in 1935 were “Communistic,” if not in literal content, by reason of their influence. Among these films were *Pinky* and *Gentleman’s Agreement*”*<sup>1</sup> Elia Kazan 1988

In post-war America, many critics had fascinating points to make and wrote much to influence and guide filmmakers toward what they saw as the best direction for film. Citing Bosley Crowther as an exceptional reviewer of this period, Ruth A. Inglis goes on to state that “criticism should be encouraged as a service to the industry and to the development of the art of movies.”<sup>2</sup> In Inglis’ view critics, therefore, like the films they wrote about, had a significant amount of social responsibility towards the public and the industry itself. This responsibility can be seen in many of the reviews during this period, where it is apparent that they took the art of film and its ability to influence very seriously.

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<sup>1</sup> Kazan, Elia, *Elia Kazan*, Andre Deutsch Limited: London, 1988, p.387.

<sup>2</sup> Inglis, Ruth A., *Freedom of the Movies: A Report on Self-Regulation from The Commission on Freedom of the Press*, The University of Chicago Press: London, 1947, p.200.

The period of film history that this thesis covered was of particular interest because of the lasting impact that World War II had on the film industry and the levelling that the war had created led to differing preferences for the direction of film. While Hollywood was preparing itself for a new audience this was the time for interested parties to express their ideas. In the mid to late 1940s there was a myriad of debates, writings, studies and articles that offered commentary and suggestions. By the time HUAC was investigating Hollywood in the late 1940s priorities needed to change along with the types of films being made, providing an equally interesting, but considerably different era to study.

It can be surmised that there were recurring issues that were concerning the Hollywood Left in the post-war period and these were all manifest in their reviews and writings about those films now known as *film noir*. These relate to realism, the portrayal of violence, morality and political/social messages. Whilst all publications were enthusiastic about the new style of filmmaking that the semi-documentaries brought to the fore, those who were the greatest advocates were the likes of Noel Meadow, Bosley Crowther and Robert Hatch. Meadow was repeatedly pushing for the documentary format to be used more and Crowther and Hatch were keen to see the semi-documentary format being used with greater potential in mind. Their ideology was reflected in wider circles during the post-war period and can be interlinked with the desire for more freedom for filmmakers to portray a wider range of topics at this time.

The immediate post-war period in Hollywood was a particularly turbulent time that brought about many changes in both the industry and in the types of films that the audiences were seeing. Considering these films retrospectively gives us the enormous privilege of hindsight. Not only are we able to view these films in a different context but also we are able to draw on the numerous invaluable texts that

have been written since, each adding fresh and different perspectives allowing us to view cultural texts differently. However, with a topic like *film noir*, a great deal has been written and then added to, meaning objectivity becomes more difficult. As such, a novice to film noir could find that, for example, James Naremore claims that “Few would deny that *Double Indemnity* is a definitive film noir”<sup>3</sup>; William Luhr has written that “Since its release in 1947, *Out of the Past* (aka *Build My Gallows High* in the UK) has grown in popularity to become for many the definitive film noir.”<sup>4</sup>; Sheri Chinen Biesen cites that “America’s entry into World War II interrupted the development of film noir that had begun with the definitive *The Maltese Falcon* (1941)”<sup>5</sup>; Barry Langford writes about Humphrey Bogart that “his two roles as private detectives in adaptations of classic ‘hard-boiled’ thrillers are canonical, even definitive *noir*: *The Big Sleep* makes most lists of classic *noir*, while *The Maltese Falcon* is sometimes cited as the progenitor of the entire cycle.”<sup>6</sup>; for Andrew Dickos “*Night and the City* [is] a film that displays the definitive fusion of all the noir visual stylistics.”<sup>7</sup>; and Jack Shadoian considers *Criss Cross* (Robert Siodmak, 1949) to be a “film of such relaxed intelligence that it feels more amiable and serene than it really is; the definitive *film noir*”<sup>8</sup>. Of course, there is no definitive *film noir*, because there is no definitive definition of *film noir*. The closest would be to refer to the man who coined the phrase in the first instance, Nino Frank, and maintain *noir* must have “psychological plots” and display the “truth of the characters” and that they have a “stamp of verisimilitude”<sup>9</sup>. These few subjective key traits belie the wealth of studies

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<sup>3</sup> Naremore, James, *More Than Night: Film Noir in its Original Contexts*, University of California Press: London, 2008, p.81.

<sup>4</sup> Luhr, William, *Film Noir*, John Wiley & Sons Ltd.: West Sussex, 2012, p.100.

<sup>5</sup> Biesen, Sheri Chinen, *Blackout: World War II and the Origins of Film Noir*, The Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, 2005, p.9.

<sup>6</sup> Langford, Barry, *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond*, Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, 2005, p.215.

<sup>7</sup> Dickos, Andrew, *Street With No Name: A History of the Classic American Film Noir*, The University Press of Kentucky: Kentucky, 2002, p.76.

<sup>8</sup> Shadoian, Jack, *Dreams and Dead Ends: The American Gangster Film*, Second Edition, Oxford University Press, Inc.: New York, 2003, p.323.

<sup>9</sup> Frank, Nino, ‘A New Kind of Police Drama: The Criminal Adventure’, (Translated from French by Alain Silver) in Silver, Alain & Ursini, James, (Eds.), *Film Noir Reader 2*, Limelight Editions: New York, 1999, p.18.

that have since been undertaken related to the subject and highlight the difficulties with making assumptions about the films that are now generally considered *film noir*. Such an example is Richard Maltby's article '*Film Noir: The Politics of the Maladjusted Text*', in an otherwise comprehensive study, it is fair to say that Maltby, was generalising when he said that disillusioned liberals had a problem with *film noir*.<sup>10</sup> Citing key figures as John Houseman, Abraham Polonsky and Siegfried Kracauer, Maltby takes their criticisms of certain films to be representative of their overall opinion of *noir*. As shown throughout this thesis, their writings were not aimed at this retrospectively named trend of combined cycles united by overlapping discourses.

It has been demonstrated that the Left had grown tired of the fake glamour Hollywood was often associated with, and the war-time documentaries had proved to be a refreshing change by serving the purpose of educating as well as entertaining the public. This was something that was favoured almost universally by the critics. Likewise, realism was something to be promoted and many films during the 1940s were experimenting with realist aesthetics and techniques, favouring actual locations along with stories of everyday people. Whilst not always positive about the overall end product of the film, many commentators were praising this move forward into more adult films with messages. The actual concerns, like Houseman's, surfaced when the messages were not being represented on the screen in a way that they considered was doing them justice. For example, Houseman's attacks on *The Big Sleep* (Howard Hawks, 1946) and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Tay Garnett, 1946) were more concerning the way violence was portrayed as well as the motivations and morals of the lead characters rather than the films themselves. Indeed, at this time he produced *The Blue Dahlia* (George Marshall, 1946), which

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<sup>10</sup> Maltby, Richard, '*Film Noir: The Politics of the Maladjusted Text*', *Journal of American Studies*, Vol 18, 1984, p.66.

had plenty of scenes of violence, but clearly, to him, that violence was justified as it showed the difficulties of the returning war veterans. This type of “acceptable” violence in *The Blue Dahlia* was either attacking people who were morally wrong, or it was justified by the fact that the character had sustained a brain injury whilst fighting for his country in a war. Houseman clearly thought that characters like Marlowe in *The Big Sleep* showed no redeeming features and his behaviour was not explained or justified in the background of the character. Likewise, to Houseman, the leads in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* came across as just amoral characters. Yet, for Houseman the violence in *Body and Soul* (Robert Rossen, 1947) was purer, justified by being a sports drama, and the message was clearer. Further evidence of Maltby’s generalising claim can be found in Houseman’s article on violence in 1947<sup>11</sup>. He used three films as case studies and all three films have since been labelled *film noir*, however Houseman highlighted key differences between the films in his article. Examining *Variety*’s miniature reviews, it would be difficult to see any particular link between the three films. *Variety* labels *Brute Force* a “Prison meller.”<sup>12</sup>; *Body and Soul* a “b.o. winner about boxing and the rackets.”<sup>13</sup>; and *Crossfire* a “Provocative whodunit set against anti-Semitism framework”<sup>14</sup>. These examples show how, even though Houseman had considered a connection at the time solely based on the way violence was used in film, they were still seen differently in many other aspects. Indeed Houseman was just using the films as case studies and went on to praise *Body and Soul* and *Crossfire*.

Renowned cultural critic, Siegfried Kracauer, also highlighted his concerns throughout a series of articles reflecting on movies. He published observations on

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<sup>11</sup> Houseman, John, ‘Violence, 1947: Three Specimens’, *Hollywood Quarterly*, Vol. 3, No.1. (Autumn 1947), pp.63-65.

<sup>12</sup> Abel., ‘Film Reviews: Brute Force’, *Variety*, June 18, 1947, p.8.

<sup>13</sup> Kahn., ‘Film Reviews: Body and Soul’, *Variety*, Wednesday August 13, 1947, p.15.

<sup>14</sup> Abel., ‘Film Reviews: Crossfire’, *Variety*, Wednesday, June 25, 1947, p.8.

themes such as, films which contained a social or moral message; terror films as a representation of America's psychology; and national types portrayed in films. Kracauer, whilst not explicitly stating it, was calling for more real characters. For example, when writing about the terror in films, he commented "the failure of the movies to offer or suggest solutions has become particularly striking",<sup>15</sup> in other words, the motivations of the character doing the terrorising were not explained, and instead the films encouraged the audience to just accept that that it was a feature of the individual. Kracauer was also critical of the ways in which liberal message movies portrayed their message, arguing that the liberal spokesperson in such films was ineffective.<sup>16</sup> Throughout his articles it becomes apparent that Kracauer was not against such films, but his criticism was more that they lacked the depth required of the statements they were trying to make.

Perhaps most prominent out of all the critics considered throughout the thesis was Bosley Crowther. Whilst his reviews enabled him to highlight what he considered to be issues relating to the film industry, he also wrote many additional articles for the *New York Times* commenting on, criticising and promoting what he saw to be key films relating to his preferred direction for films to progress. Whilst this thesis just considers in detail films from 1945 to 1948, Crowther's writings extend beyond those years and highlight his informed stance on topics such as factual films, political films and censorship, whilst continually expressing a dislike for the fakery of Hollywood glamour in films and promoting the documentary style technique.

Robert Hatch was also a frequent commentator on film content and styles and promoted the use of the documentary style beyond the crime films of the post-war

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<sup>15</sup> Kracauer, Siegfried, 'Hollywood Terror Films: Do They Reflect an American State of Mind', reprinted in *New German Critique*, No.89, Film and Exile, (Spring – Summer, 2003), p.107. First printed in *Commentary* 2 (1946): pp.132-36.

<sup>16</sup> Kracauer, Siegfried, 'Those Movies With a Message', *Harper's Magazine*, June 1, 1948, p.571.



period. In 1948 he called for semi-documentary films to be taken a stage further<sup>17</sup>, however, as pointed out in Chapter Six, when the style was applied in the anti-Communist film, *The Iron Curtain* (William A. Wellman, 1948), Hatch considered this to be an abuse of the technique, disliking its use for propaganda purposes.

What is apparent through the writings of those considered is that the Hollywood Left certainly did not dislike those films now considered *film noir*. In fact any criticisms that they had of these films were more directed at the themes and issues that they brought up. Generally the Left were in favour of the new realism and they disliked the misuse of violence, in that violence for exploitation purposes was inappropriate, but violence as part of a realistic social problem scenario was acceptable. Morality, for the Left, was a key component in films and again linked to the social message that the character was conveying – they saw a distinct difference between the bad characters and the bad characters where an insight into the reasons for their wretchedness was given; in other words, bad characters that were humanised. Finally another aspect uniting the leftist commentators was a dislike or mistrust of politics, or propaganda in films, which was demonstrated in the study of their response to *The Iron Curtain* in Chapter Six. It is likely that stronger responses were generated by this film because just five years earlier there had been a surge of pro-Russian features, the most noteworthy being *Mission to Moscow* (Michael Curtiz, 1943), which had tried very hard to portray Russia as just like America and as worthy allies in the war. As a result, this change to demonising Russia would have been all the more obvious and many critics highlighted it as a misuse of film. The propaganda during the war served a purpose to unify all sides for a common cause, whereas by 1948 it served to influence the public for an altogether more subjective cause, that of anti-Communism, albeit one with a lot of governmental support.

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<sup>17</sup> Hatch, Robert, 'Movies: The New Realism', *New Republic*, March 8, 1948, pp.27-28.

What can be drawn from the responses to these films is that there is a strong running theme that the Left felt that they had the public's interests at heart and that they strongly believed that films were a way of making America a better society through the education of the public. In short, they were arguing for significant films that would contribute something to the audience, as opposed to generic films that entertained but lacked substance. This is evident in a 1946 article by Bosley Crowther in which he says "The last thing that any movie-goer in a reasonable state of mind would neglect to require of a movie is that it fascinate and absorb. What's the point in looking at a picture which fails to stimulate?"<sup>18</sup> This highlights that Crowther's view was that a harmonious balance of education and entertainment was required in film in order to gain the optimum result. Crowther's viewpoints seemed to provide a voice to the many Hollywood liberals and he was frequently called upon for opinions in articles and forums. His regular views at this time could be summarised by his stance at the round-table discussion entitled 'Have the Movies Failed Us?', which was reported in the *New York Times*. The writer states that Crowther "called for more realism in pictures. [And] He criticized the artificiality and dream-world quality of the boy-meets-girl type of picture."<sup>19</sup> The overall sentiment of the forum was that movies should educate and the audiences must learn to appreciate better films. By this stage in the many debates, it seemed that the onus was being placed on the audience and that, through their patronage or not, they have to accept responsibility for the quality of movies that are made.

With reference to Maltby's generalisation that the liberals were alarmed by *film noir*, the research has shown that the left-leaning commentators on the subject tried to

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<sup>18</sup> Crowther, Bosley, 'That Old Question: Mr Dietz's Thoughts on Film 'Significance' Are Put to a Practical Test.', *New York Times*, Section 2, Sunday, February 3, 1946, p.X.

<sup>19</sup> '\_\_\_\_', 'Public is Blamed for Poor Movies: Panel at Times Forum Agrees Primary Purpose of Films Should Be Educational', *New York Times*, November 17, 1946, p.23.

position themselves as arbiters of film quality and progress. They were then frustrated that the types of films being produced were not as they had hoped, and many of the post-war films, now considered *noir*, bore the brunt of their criticisms. That is not to say that they would have not criticised them in a different period, but, at this crucial time any deviation from their post-war aspirations was felt more strongly. Far from disliking *noir*, they were disappointed in the route some of the films now considered *noir* took. However, from the differing opinions on many of the films examined in this thesis, there was a noticeable lack of unity within the Left which highlighted a significant problem at this time. For example, whilst citing a list of problems with the Production Code, Ruth A. Inglis asks the question “Why must script-writers invent “compensating moral values” in films, when often they are lacking in real life?”<sup>20</sup> Inglis’ question does contradict Houseman’s main criticism of *The Big Sleep*’s Marlowe that he had an “absolute lack of moral energy”. She also recommended that the Left would benefit from a united pressure group like, but intended to counteract, the Legion of Decency. She outlined that there had been an attempt in the past, writing that “During the late 1930s a group called variously Associated Film Audiences, Films for Democracy, and, later, Film Audiences for Democracy organized for this purpose. It failed because of internal dissension of a political nature, but the idea was sound.”<sup>21</sup> Much like the Screen Writers Guild previously, the factions struggled to be united in what they specifically wanted. Most of the Chapters in this study do show this persistent lack of unity with regard to the messages to be taken from the films.

Chapter One highlighted the reaction to the impact that imported films like *Rome Open City* (Roberto Rossellini, 1945) had on the filmmakers and how this, alongside

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<sup>20</sup> Inglis, *Ibid*, p.186.

<sup>21</sup> Inglis, *Ibid*, p.190.

the promotion of the documentaries discussed in the Introduction resulted in the semi-documentaries. Whilst it could be argued that the American semi-documentaries were not as bold as the Italian Neo-Realist films, many similarities could be drawn. It was unlikely that any American studio would have made an equivalent of *Rome Open City* because of a number of factors, namely Hollywood's reliance on stars and the key need and desire for box office returns. Whilst the semi-documentaries employed non-professional actors, leading roles were always given to an established star. However, as the beginnings of a movement away from standard fare, the initial semi-documentaries provided a timely, effective and successful niche that many hoped would expand. The auspicious beginnings to the cycle and format later, for example by the time of *Boomerang* in 1947, began to prompt concerns regarding their political commentary and introduction of Hollywood formulas.

The tough movies considered in Chapter Two revealed differing opinions with regards to the directions in the way that violence was being depicted. And the realist technique that was noted by the critics in some of the tough movies was something to be promoted and to be criticised. Whilst it was noted that the semi-documentary style was being utilised in these detective or crime films, concerns were expressed regarding them almost being too real in that they could be seen by overseas audiences of being a documentary of what America is like. Throughout the debates that had been taking place concurrently while these films were being made there were two schools of thought regarding films; one is that films are a response to public opinion in that they reflect the society; and the other is that they have the ability to influence the public rather than react to it. Probably both are correct to a certain extent and this presented a problem for the Hollywood Left with the tough movies in regard to how the hero was portrayed. The typical boundaries of clear-cut good and bad characters were somewhat blurred and this was particularly shown in *The Big*

*Sleep*, which received the harshest criticisms of the films considered in this chapter. If movies were to reflect real life, then the hero of *The Big Sleep* was not someone who encouraged aspiration and the high murder count painted a particularly bleak view of life in America after the war. Likewise, if films were to influence the public, the actions carried out by characters in films such as *The Big Sleep* were not something they wanted to encourage either. Chapter Two does highlight a tough movie that was more acceptable in these terms: *The Blue Dahlia*; in that the characters and any violence they commit, in the eyes of the critics, was justified by the characters' back story. Nowadays the tough films typify what we understand as *film noir* and the violence used by Johnny in *The Blue Dahlia* and Swede in *The Killers* (Robert Siodmak, 1946), for example, appear similar. However, at the time the subtle difference of Swede being passive, and it could be said, suicidal, and Johnny desperate to clear his name, made a large impact on the morality of the story and thus on whether the violent acts they committed were acceptable or not. The realism was praised, but generally the characters' morality was widely criticised.

Having produced a spate of 'women's films' during the years of World War II, the returning soldiers represented a new market for filmmakers to capitalise on. This was shown by a number of prestige male melodramas produced immediately after the war and these were covered in Chapter Three. These films, in catering for the new market, generally featured soldiers and the setting was very clearly post-war America. It could be said that these films were actually part of the social message film cycle in that they contained an educational message or individual, yet relevant, problem, which Peter Roffman and Jim Purdy refer to as "pockets of distress in an otherwise sound society."<sup>22</sup> These social message male melodramas received considerable attention from the Hollywood Left in terms of promotion since they

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<sup>22</sup> Roffman, Peter, and, Purdy, Jim, *The Hollywood Social Problem Film: Madness, Despair, and Politics From the Depression to the Fifties*, Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1981, p.228.

believed the films to be particularly relevant and realistic in their portrayal of humanity. In fact, considering the writings of the leftist commentators at the time, these films generally appeared to be everything the Hollywood Left had hoped for in that they were realistic, of great human interest and they contained valuable social messages. However, some of the films did draw criticism and it is through studying these critiques that it is possible to understand more what the Hollywood Left were trying to achieve in the post-war period. Whilst Bosley Crowther had applauded the social messages that can be taken from *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, other critics had criticised its lack of realism. Far from having the classic status that it has gained today, its portrayals of people with a complete lack of morals caused huge concern among critics at the time. It is likely that this concern was exasperated by the time of its release in that when considered alongside the more well-meaning efforts of the time, such as *The Best Years of Our Lives* (William Wyler, 1946), it would seem to be a step backwards in what the Left had hoped to achieve. A particularly significant development was the criticism that some gave to the blatant messages within the films. To some commentators they were heavy handed and came across as preachy rather than taking a more subtle approach in tackling issues. Furthermore it was noted that some of the films did not appeal to the target audiences and this led to criticisms of the films being made by the middle classes for the middle classes. Interestingly the case studies in Chapter Three really highlight the factions in the Left in that there was no one film which all sources agree portrays the message well. In spite of receiving praise from some, the messages in each film was attacked by others: *The Best Years of Our Lives* received significant criticism from James Agee<sup>23</sup> and Abraham Polonsky<sup>24</sup>; *Crossfire* was criticised by Siegfried Kracauer<sup>25</sup>; *Gentleman's Agreement* was considered ineffective by Robert Hatch<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Agee, James, 'Films: What Hollywood Can Do', *The Nation*, December 7, 1946, p.673.

<sup>24</sup> Polonsky, Abraham, "The Best Years of Our Lives": A Review', *Hollywood Quarterly*, Vol. 2. No. 3, (Apr. 1947), pp.257-260.

<sup>25</sup> Kracauer, Siegfried, 'Those Movies With a Message', *Harper's Magazine*, June 1, 1948, p.570

and Siegfried Kracauer<sup>27</sup>; and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* was heavily criticised by John Houseman<sup>28</sup>.

Chapter Four considered Abraham Polonsky and Robert Rossen, both of whom had had links with the Communist party, and made a number of films that could be seen as anti-Capitalist. Their four films of this period did not stick to one particular genre, insofar as many studies now cite them as being part of *film noir*, but individually they were considered as part of four different genres at the time of their release. Polonsky had been openly critical of films not showing the working classes realistically and the films he was involved in during this period did attempt to highlight social problems that affected the working classes. Rossen too had been vocal, although in his instance it was about the freedom of the movies for the sake of the industry as a whole and he had expressed his dislike at pressure groups dictating what should not be shown in films. Their films drew praise for their integrity and realism but not when they became overtly political, a move that encouraged the critics to feel that the films had become too preachy and many of them opined that the genre they were positioned in was not the place for philosophical debates. There was a common theme in Polonsky and Rossen's films of the corrupt society making individuals react the way that they do, which added a human and psychological element to the already existing realism. However, this evidently required a side step into politics meaning that there was a very thin line between being a thoughtful drama and being considered propaganda. As had been noted by Bosley Crowther in 1943, there was a strong argument for films not to contain politics,<sup>29</sup> and this argument came to the fore with *The Iron Curtain*, which was discussed in Chapter Six.

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<sup>26</sup> R.L.H, 'Movies: Gentleman's Agreement', *New Republic*, 17 November, 1947, p.38

<sup>27</sup> Kracauer, *Ibid*, pp.569-570,

<sup>28</sup> Houseman, John, 'What Makes American Movies Tough?', *Vogue*, January 15, 1947, p.125.

<sup>29</sup> Crowther, Bosley, 'Missionary Zeal: The Ecstasies in 'Mission to Moscow' Raise Doubts on Political Films', *New York Times*, May 9, 1943, p.X3.

Chapter Five focused on films by Henry Hathaway, who continued with the semi-documentary style he had used with *The House on 92<sup>nd</sup> Street* (1945) throughout the rest of the 1940s. The films considered in this chapter were his thrillers as opposed to the other two war-related semi-documentaries that were examined in Chapter One of this thesis. In many respects they can be considered part of the social problem cycle in that they dealt with criminals, be it wrongly convicted or reforming. However, this fact was not universally agreed to be the main point of discussion by the commentators. Mainly the concerns revolved around the resorting to conventional genre tactics in the films. It was noted that with *Dark Corner* (1946) and *Kiss of Death* (1947) the violence depicted was purposely included to fill the audience with terror and that there was an increase in the portrayal of sadism. By 1948, when *Call Northside 777* (1948) was reviewed, leftist writers were commenting that the format had gone as far as it could with the crime film and that the semi-documentary technique should now be applied to other genres. One of the main reasons for this turnaround was that *Call Northside 777* was considered to be too fictional. It was also noted that Darryl F. Zanuck, who had helped to pioneer this refreshing new format, seemed less concerned with the format and more concerned with telling formulaic stories.

Finally, Chapter Six highlighted an end to the era. Whilst a number of filmmaking techniques had been established, which were to be carried on long after 1948, it became all too apparent that the direction that the Left had desired these films to take had veered off track. Whilst there had been criticisms of Polonsky and Rossen's films for containing politics and then Hathaway's films for containing too much fiction, *The Iron Curtain* seemed to contain too much of everything. Richard Maltby argued that what disillusioned liberals "seemed to see in film noir in particular was their own



worst nightmare enacted on the screen”.<sup>30</sup> However, it is much more likely that *The Iron Curtain* provided their worst nightmare since they saw the film as trouble making and causing divisions in the American population, inciting hatred for Russia, containing too much politics and, above all, using a film format that they had nurtured and encouraged since its inception. *The Iron Curtain* caused protests and was heavily criticised for using the old Hollywood formula of stereotypes to try and push the anti-Communist message.

### Further Study

Due to space and time limitations that apply when writing a thesis that does justice to the selected topic, it was necessary to narrow down the focus of this study and thus exclude certain aspects, which could add to this field. As has been well documented by many, often *Touch of Evil* (Orson Welles, 1958) is considered to be the last classic *film noir*,<sup>31</sup> meaning that the trend continued for ten further years after the last film considered in detail in this thesis. Whilst it has also been noted that the films now considered *film noir* were becoming less frequent in the latter stages of the lifecycle,<sup>32</sup> it does mean that there is a large period requiring further investigation. As highlighted, the commentators on the Left had suggested that the semi-documentary format was not taking the direction they had desired by 1948 and had begun to criticise its misuse more often. However, it would be interesting to consider the films of Anthony Mann and their critical reception. Mann made many films that are considered to be part of the *noir* canon, such as *T-Men* (1947), *Railroaded* (1947),

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<sup>30</sup> Maltby, *Ibid*, p.66.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example: Munby, Jonathan, *Public Enemies, Public Heroes: Screening the Gangster from Little Caesar to Touch of Evil*, London: University of Chicago Press, 1999, p.10-11; and, Schrader, Paul, “Notes on *Film Noir*” (1972), in Silver, Alain, & Ursini, James, (Eds.) *Film Noir Reader*, Limelight Editions: New Jersey, 2006, p.54.

<sup>32</sup> Andrew Spicer has shown the number of films considered film noir produced each year using three different studies. All studies show a decline from the year 1954 onwards. See Table 2.1 in: Spicer, Andrew, *Film Noir*, Pearson Education Limited: Harlow, 2002, p.28.

*Raw Deal* (1948), *Border Incident* (1949) and *Side Street* (1950). Thomas Schatz has suggested Mann was one of the directors who “brought with them a progressive political agenda and a strong interest in film realism”.<sup>33</sup> Also his films in the period tackled a variety of issues such as immigration (*Border Incident*) and criminal psychology (*Raw Deal*, *Side Street* and *Railroaded*); as well utilising the fact based semi-documentary in the style that Henry Hathaway had used (*T-Men*). A reception study of Mann’s work would interestingly show how the films were perceived as *film noir* matured.

Also of significant interest would be a study of the films of Elia Kazan in this period. Unlike the other filmmakers considered, Kazan made films that are relevant to each of the first three chapters of this thesis, so his canon of work considered to be *film noir* would be useful in terms of a full journey so to speak. In addition to this Kazan’s work gives an insight into Hollywood’s political environment, in that he was a former Communist who testified before the House Committee of Un-American Activities in 1952. Kazan’s work contains an imprint of what had happened in Hollywood in the post-war years in that he went from making the semi-documentaries *Boomerang* (1947) and *Panic in the Streets* (1950); the social problem films of *Gentleman’s Agreement* (1947) and *Pinky* (1949); through to the considerably anti-Communist *Man on a Tightrope* (1953) and the seemingly apologetic explanation of his role with HUAC in *On the Waterfront* (1954). Studying the critical reception of Elia Kazan and Anthony Mann’s films would encompass the HUAC era where many films were examined closely for subversive material and this was reported regularly in the trade press.

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<sup>33</sup> Schatz, Thomas, *History of the American Cinema, Volume 6, Boom and Bust: American Cinema in the 1940s*, University of California Press, Ltd.: London, 1999, p.382.

## Summary

The variety of attempted definitions of *film noir* coupled with the numerous writings showed it to be a rich area for research in terms of the films themselves, the political environment in which they were produced and the reaction to these films. The case studies cover a wide range of films and the critical reception of these particular films allows the modern reader to understand the complications and nuances that are encountered within a genre that has been rather too neatly summed up by the term *film noir*. This thesis has investigated those films now considered to be *film noir* in their original contexts and using groupings more relevant than the standard *film noir* blanket description; and looking at the crucial immediate post-war period which is generally considered to be the glory days of *film noir*. Taking a closer look at the critical reception of these films has shown that whilst there are identifiable trends, there were films that do not feature frequently in contemporary studies of *film noir*, which were actually viewed in similar terms by the critics and commentators at the time. Amid a very complex period within film history where large changes were taking place, many leftist filmmakers and commentators were pushing for more documentary style films to be made as a way of dispensing with the fakery in Hollywood films and making films more current, significant and educational. Aside from this the Left saw it as a way of gaining more freedom within films, something which many other interested parties were seeking to inhibit. The way this thesis has been structured is such that it gives clear examples in each of the chapters of the types of films that were being made within the cycles now considered *film noir* and each of the chapters highlights the facets that were being encouraged as well as the aspects that the critics saw disappointing. From this, a picture emerged of the hopes and desires that the Left had for the Hollywood films to go forward in those unpredictable times. It also shows that towards the end of the period the Left had

differing ideas of what the next stage should be. In the lead up to and with the release of *The Iron Curtain* there seemed to be a realisation that the vision they had encouraged was not going to happen. With the Production Code still maintaining a strong influence, the HUAC force being felt on Hollywood and the National Legion of Decency still ready to act, it would be sometime before the freedom they hoped for would be within reach.

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## Filmography

### *13 Rue Madeleine.*

Director: Henry Hathaway; Producer(s): Louis De Rochement; Writer(s): John Monks Jr, Sy Bartlett; Studio: 20th Century Fox; Country: USA; Year: 1947.

### *5 Fingers.*

Director: Joseph L. Mankiewicz; Producer(s): Otto Lang; Writer(s): Michael Wilson (Based on the book by L.C. Moyzisch); Studio: 20th Century Fox; Country: USA; Year: 1952.

### *All the King's Men.*

Director: Robert Rossen; Producer(s): Robert Rossen; Writer(s): Robert Rossen (Based on the novel by Robert Penn Warren); Studio: Columbia Pictures; Country: USA; Year: 1949.

### *Backfire.*

Director: Vincent Sherman; Producer(s): Anthony Veiller; Writer(s): Ivan Goff, Larry Marcus, Ben Roberts; Studio: Warner Bros.; Country: USA; Year: 1950.

### *Beginning or the End, The.*

Director: Norman Taurog; Producer(s): Samuel Marx; Writer(s): Frank Wead (Story by Robert Considine); Studio: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer; Country: USA; Year: 1947.

### *Best Years of Our Lives, The.*

Director: William Wyler; Producer(s): Samuel Godwyn; Writer(s): Robert E. Sherwood (Based on the novella by MacKinlay Kantor); Studio: RKO Pictures; Country: USA; Year: 1946.

### *Bicycle Thieves.*

Director: Vittorio De Sica; Producer(s): PDS (Produzioni De Sica); Writer(s): Vittorio De Sica, Cesare Zavattini, Suso Cecchi d'Amico, Gerardo Guerrieri, Oreste Biancoli, Adolfo Franci (Story by Luigi Bartolini); Studio: Ente Nazionale Industrie Cinematografiche; Country: Italy; Year: 1948.

### *Big Sleep, The.*

Director: Howard Hawks; Producer(s): Howard Hawks; Writer(s): William Faulkner, Leigh Brackett, Jules Furthman (Based on the novel by Raymond Chandler); Studio: Warner Bros.; Country: USA; Year: 1946.

### *Blue Dahlia, The.*

Director: George Marshall; Producer(s): John Houseman; Writer(s): Raymond Chandler; Studio: Paramount Pictures; Country: USA; Year: 1946.

### *Body and Soul.*

Director: Robert Rossen; Producer(s): Bob Roberts; Writer(s): Abraham Polonsky; Studio: United Artists; Country: USA; Year: 1947.

### *Boomerang.*

Director: Elia Kazan; Producer(s): Louis De Rochement; Writer(s): Richard Murphy (Story by Fulton Oursler); Studio: 20th Century Fox; Country: USA; Year: 1947.

*Border Incident.*

Director: Anthony Mann; Producer(s): Nicholas Nayfack; Writer(s): John C. Higgins (Story by George Zuckerman); Studio: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer; Country: USA; Year: 1949.

*Brute Force.*

Director: Jules Dassin; Producer(s): Mark Hellinger; Writer(s): Richard Brooks (Story by Robert Patterson); Studio: Universal Pictures; Country: USA; Year: 1947.

*Call Northside 777.*

Director: Henry Hathaway; Producer(s): Otto Lang; Writer(s): Jerome Cady, Jay Dratler, Leonard Hoffman, Quentin Reynolds (Based on articles by James P. McGuire); Studio: 20th Century Fox; Country: USA; Year: 1948.

*Casablanca.*

Director: Michael Curtiz; Producer(s): Hal B. Wallis; Writer(s): Julius J. Epstein, Philip G. Epstein, Howard Koch (Based on the novel by Murray Burnett, Joan Alison); Studio: Warner Bros.; Country: USA; Year: 1942.

*Chase, The.*

Director: Arthur Ripley; Producer(s): Seymour Nebenzal; Writer(s): Philip Yordan (Based on the novel by Cornell Woolrich); Studio: United Artists; Country: USA; Year: 1946.

*Citizen Kane.*

Director: Orson Welles; Producer(s): Orson Welles; Writer(s): Herman J. Mankiewicz, Orson Welles; Studio: RKO Pictures; Country: USA; Year: 1941.

*Come Back, Little Sheba.*

Director: Daniel Mann; Producer(s): Hal B. Wallis; Writer(s): Ketti Frings (Based on the play by William Inge); Studio: Paramount Pictures; Country: USA; Year: 1952.

*Cornered.*

Director: Edward Dmytryk; Producer(s): Adrian Scott; Writer(s): John Paxton, Ben Hecht, John Wexley; Studio: RKO Pictures; Country: USA; Year: 1945.

*Criss Cross.*

Director: Robert Siodmak; Producer(s): Michael Kraike; Writer(s): Daniel Fuchs (Based on the novel by Don Tracy); Studio: Universal Studios; Country: USA; Year: 1949.

*Crossfire.*

Director: Edward Dmytryk; Producer(s): Adrian Scott; Writer(s): John Paxton (Based on the novel by Richard Brooks); Studio: RKO Pictures; Country: USA; Year: 1947.

*Cry Danger.*

Director: Robert Parrish; Producer(s): W.R. Frank, Sam Wiesenhal; Writer(s): William Bowers, Jerome Cady; Studio: RKO Pictures; Country: USA; Year: 1951.

*Dark Corner, The.*

Director: Henry Hathaway; Producer(s): Fred Kohlmar; Writer(s): Bernard C. Schoenfeld, Jay Dratler (Based on a story by Leo Rosten); Studio: 20th Century Fox; Country: USA; Year: 1946.

*Detective Story.*

Director: William Wyler; Producer(s): William Wyler; Writer(s): Robert Wyler, Philip Yordan (Based on the play by Sidney Kingsley); Studio: Paramount Pictures; Country: USA; Year: 1951.

*Detour.*

Director: Edgar G. Ulmer; Producer(s): Leon Fromkess; Writer(s): Martin Goldsmith; Studio: Producers Releasing Corporation; Country: USA; Year: 1945.

*Double Indemnity.*

Director: Billy Wilder; Producer(s): Buddy DeSylva, Joseph Sistrom; Writer(s): Billy Wilder, Raymond Chandler (Based on the novel by James M. Cain); Studio: Paramount Pictures; Country: USA; Year: 1944.

*Enforcer, The.*

Director: Bretaigne Windust; Producer(s): Milton Sperling; Writer(s): Martin Rackin; Studio: Warner Bros.; Country: USA; Year: 1951.

*Force of Evil.*

Director: Abraham Polonsky; Producer(s): Bob Roberts; Writer(s): Abraham Polonsky (Based on the novel by Ira Wolfert); Studio: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer; Country: USA; Year: 1948.

*G.I. Joe.*

Director: William A. Wellman; Producer(s): Lester Cowan, David Hall; Writer(s): Leopold Atlas, Guy Endore, Philip Stevenson; Studio: United Artists; Country: USA; Year: 1945.

*Gaslight.*

Director: George Cukor; Producer(s): Arthur Hornblow Jr.; Writer(s): John Van Druten, Walter Reisch, John L. Balderston (Based on the play by Patrick Hamilton); Studio: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer; Country: USA; Year: 1944.

*Gentleman's Agreement.*

Director: Elia Kazan; Producer(s): Darryl F. Zanuck; Writer(s): Moss Hart (Based on the novel by Laura Z. Hobson); Studio: 20th Century Fox; Country: USA; Year: 1947.

*Gilda.*

Director: Charles Vidor; Producer(s): Virginia Van Upp; Writer(s): Jo Eisinger, Marion Parsonnet (Story by E.A. Ellington); Studio: Columbia Pictures; Country: USA; Year: 1946.

*Glass Key, The.*

Director: Stuart Heisler; Producer(s): Fred Kohlmar; Writer(s): Jonathan Latimer (Based on the novel by Dashiell Hammett); Studio: Paramount Pictures; Country: USA; Year: 1942.

*Glass Key, The.*

Director: Frank Tuttle; Producer(s): E. Lloyd Sheldon; Writer(s): Kathryn Scola, Kubec Glasmon, Harry Ruskin (Based on the novel by Dashiell Hammett); Studio: Paramount Pictures; Country: USA; Year: 1935.



*Grapes of Wrath, The.*

Director: John Ford; Producer(s): Darryl F. Zanuck, Nunnally Johnson; Writer(s): Nunnally Johnson (Based on the novel by John Steinbeck); Studio: 20th Century Fox; Country: USA; Year: 1940.

*He Ran All the Way.*

Director: John Berry; Producer(s): Bob Roberts; Writer(s): Hugo Butler, Dalton Trumbo (Based on the novel by Dalton Trumbo writing as Sam Ross); Studio: United Artists; Country: USA; Year: 1951.

*House on 92nd Street, The.*

Director: Henry Hathaway; Producer(s): Louis De Rochement; Writer(s): Barre Lydon, Jack Moffitt, John Monks Jr (Story by Charles G. Booth); Studio: 20th Century Fox; Country: USA; Year: 1945.

*How Green Was My Valley.*

Director: John Ford; Producer(s): Darryl F. Zanuck; Writer(s): Philip Dunne (Based on the novel by Richard Llewellyn); Studio: 20th Century Fox; Country: USA; Year: 1941.

*Incident, The.*

Director: Larry Peerce; Producer(s): Edgar J. Scherick; Writer(s): Nicholas A. Baehr; Studio: 20th Century Fox; Country: USA; Year: 1967.

*Iron Curtain, The.*

Director: William A. Wellman; Producer(s): Sol C. Siegel; Writer(s): Igor Gouzenko, Milton Krims; Studio: 20th Century Fox; Country: USA; Year: 1948.

*Johnny O'Clock.*

Director: Robert Rossen; Producer(s): Edward G. Nealis, Jerry Giesler; Writer(s): Robert Rossen (Story by Milton Holmes); Studio: Columbia Pictures; Country: USA; Year: 1947.

*Ju Dou.*

Director: Zhang Yimou; Producer(s): Hu Jian, Yasuyoshi Tokuma, Zhang Wenzhe; Writer(s): Liu Heng; Studio: Miramax Films; Country: China; Year: 1990.

*Killers, The.*

Director: Robert Siodmak; Producer(s): Mark Hellinger; Writer(s): Richard Brooks, Anthony Veiller, John Huston (Based on the short story by Ernest Hemingway); Studio: Universal Pictures; Country: USA; Year: 1946.

*Kiss of Death.*

Director: Henry Hathaway; Producer(s): Fred Kohlmar; Writer(s): Ben Hecht, Charles Lederer (Story by Eleazar Lipsky); Studio: 20th Century Fox; Country: USA; Year: 1947.

*Laura.*

Director: Otto Preminger; Producer(s): Otto Preminger; Writer(s): Jay Dratler, Samuel Hoffenstein, Betty Reinhardt (Based on the novel by Vera Caspary); Studio: 20th Century Fox; Country: USA; Year: 1944.

*Letter, The.*

Director: William Wyler; Producer(s): Hal B. Wallis; Writer(s): Howard E. Koch (Based on the novel by W. Somerset Maugham); Studio: Warner Bros.; Country: USA; Year: 1940.

*Little Foxes, The.*

Director: William Wyler; Producer(s): Samuel Goldwyn ; Writer(s): Lillian Hellman;  
Studio: RKO Pictures; Country: USA; Year: 1941.

*Lost Weekend, The.*

Director: Billy Wilder; Producer(s): Charles Brackett; Writer(s): Charles Brackett, Billy Wilder (Based on the novel by Charles R. Jackson); Studio: Paramount Pictures;  
Country: USA; Year: 1945.

*Love on the Dole.*

Director: John Baxter; Producer(s): John Baxter; Writer(s): Walter Greenwood, Ronald Gow, Barbara K. Emary, Rollo Gamble; Studio: Anglo-American Film Corporation;  
Country: UK; Year: 1941.

*Maltese Falcon, The.*

Director: John Huston; Producer(s): Hal B. Wallis; Writer(s): John Huston (Based on the novel by Dashiell Hammett); Studio: Warner Bros.; Country: USA; Year: 1941.

*Maltese Falcon, The .*

Director: Roy Del Ruth; Producer(s): " \_\_\_\_ "; Writer(s): Maude Fulton, Brown Holmes (Based on the novel by Dashiell Hammett); Studio: Warner Bros.; Country: USA; Year: 1931.

*Man on a Tightrope.*

Director: Elia Kazan; Producer(s): Robert L. Jacks; Writer(s): Robert E. Sherwood (Based on the novel by Neil Paterson); Studio: 20th Century Fox; Country: USA; Year: 1953.

*Mildred Pierce.*

Director: Michael Curtiz; Producer(s): Jerry Wald; Writer(s): Ranald MacDougall (Based on the novel by James M. Cain); Studio: Warner Bros.; Country: USA; Year: 1945.

*Miss V. From Moscow.*

Director: Albert Herman; Producer(s): George M. Merrick; Writer(s): Arthur St. Claire, Sherman L. Lowe; Studio: Producers Releasing Corporation; Country: USA; Year: 1942.

*Mission to Moscow.*

Director: Michael Curtiz; Producer(s): Robert Buckner; Writer(s): Howard E. Koch (Based on the novel by Joseph E. Davies); Studio: Warner Bros.; Country: USA; Year: 1943.

*Murder Is My Beat.*

Director: Edgar G. Ulmer; Producer(s): Aubrey Wisberg; Writer(s): Aubrey Wisberg, Martin Field; Studio: Allied Artists; Country: USA; Year: 1955.

*Murder, My Sweet.*

Director: Edward Dmytryk; Producer(s): Adrian Scott; Writer(s): John Paxton (Based on the novel by Raymond Chandler); Studio: RKO Pictures; Country: USA; Year: 1944.

*Naked City, The.*

Director: Jules Dassin; Producer(s): Mark Hellinger; Writer(s): Albert Maltz, Malvin Wald; Studio: Universal Studios; Country: USA; Year: 1948.

*Night and the City.*

Director: Jules Dassin; Producer(s): Samuel G. Engel; Writer(s): Jo Eisinger (Based on the novel by Gerald Kersh); Studio: 20th Century Fox; Country: USA; Year: 1950.

*Nightmare Alley.*

Director: Edmund Goulding; Producer(s): George Jessel; Writer(s): Jules Furthman (Based on the novel by William Lindsay Gresham); Studio: 20th Century Fox; Country: USA; Year: 1947.

*Nobody Lives Forever.*

Director: Jean Negulesco; Producer(s): Robert Buckner; Writer(s): W.R. Burnett; Studio: Warner Bros.; Country: USA; Year: 1946.

*Nora Prentiss.*

Director: Vincent Sherman; Producer(s): William Jacobs; Writer(s): N. Richard Nash (Story by Paul Webster and Jack Sobell); Studio: Warner Bros.; Country: USA; Year: 1947.

*North Star, The.*

Director: Lewis Milestone; Producer(s): Samuel Goldwyn, William Cameron Menzies; Writer(s): Lillian Hellman; Studio: RKO Pictures; Country: USA; Year: 1943.

*Notorious.*

Director: Alfred Hitchcock; Producer(s): Alfred Hitchcock; Writer(s): Ben Hecht ; Studio: RKO Pictures; Country: USA; Year: 1946.

*Now, Voyager.*

Director: Irving Rapper; Producer(s): Hal B. Wallis; Writer(s): Casey Robinson (Based on the novel by Olive Higgins Prouty); Studio: Warner Bros.; Country: USA; Year: 1942.

*On Dangerous Ground.*

Director: Nicholas Ray; Producer(s): John Houseman; Writer(s): A.I. Bezzerides, Nicholas Ray (Based on the novel by Gerald Butler); Studio: RKO Pictures; Country: USA; Year: 1951.

*On the Waterfront.*

Director: Elia Kazan; Producer(s): Sam Spiegel; Writer(s): Budd Schulberg; Studio: Columbia Pictures; Country: USA; Year: 1954.

*Out of the Past.*

Director: Jacques Tourner; Producer(s): Warren Duff; Writer(s): Daniel Mainwaring (Based on his novel); Studio: RKO Pictures; Country: USA; Year: 1947.

*Paisan.*

Director: Roberto Rossellini; Producer(s): Rod E. Geiger, Roberto Rossellini, Mario Conti; Writer(s): Sergio Amidei, Klaus Mann, Federico Fellini, Macello Pagliero, Alfred Hayes, Vasco Pratolini; Studio: Organizzazione Film Internazionali (OFI); Country: Italy; Year: 1946.

*Panic in the Streets.*

Director: Elia Kazan; Producer(s): Sol C. Siegel; Writer(s): Richard Murphy, Daniel Fuchs (Story by Edna Anhalt, Edward Anhalt); Studio: 20th Century Fox; Country: USA; Year: 1950.

*Paradine Case, The.*

Director: Alfred Hitchcock; Producer(s): David O. Selznick; Writer(s): Alma Reville, James Bridie, David O. Selznick, Ben Hecht (Story by Robert S. Hichens); Studio: Vanguard Films; Country: USA; Year: 1947.

*Pinky.*

Director: Elia Kazan; Producer(s): Darryl F. Zanuck; Writer(s): Philip Dunne, Dudley Nichols (Based on the novel by Cid Ricketts Sumner); Studio: 20th Century Fox; Country: USA; Year: 1949.

*Port of New York.*

Director: László Benedek; Producer(s): Aubrey Schenck; Writer(s): Eugene Ling (Story by Arthur A. Ross, Bert Murray); Studio: Eagle Lion Films; Country: USA; Year: 1949.

*Postman Always Rings Twice, The.*

Director: Tay Garnett; Producer(s): Carey Wilson ; Writer(s): Harry Ruskin, Niven Busch (Based on the novel by James M. Cain); Studio: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer; Country: USA; Year: 1946.

*Pride of the Marines.*

Director: Delmer Daves; Producer(s): Jerry Wald; Writer(s): Albert Maltz, Marvin Borowsky (Based on the book by Roger Butterfield); Studio: Warner Bros.; Country: USA; Year: 1945.

*Railroaded.*

Director: Anthony Mann; Producer(s): Charles Reisner; Writer(s): John C. Higgins (Story by Gertrude Walker); Studio: Producers Releasing Corporation; Country: USA; Year: 1947.

*Raw Deal.*

Director: Anthony Mann; Producer(s): Edward Small; Writer(s): Leopold Atlas, John C. Higgins (Story by Arnold B. Armstrong, Audrey Ashley); Studio: Reliance Pictures; Country: USA; Year: 1948.

*Razor's Edge, The.*

Director: Edmund Goulding; Producer(s): Darryl F. Zanuck; Writer(s): Lamar Trotti (Based on the novel by W. Somerset Maugham); Studio: 20th Century Fox; Country: USA; Year: 1946.

*Rebecca.*

Director: Alfred Hitchcock; Producer(s): David O. Selznick; Writer(s): Philip MacDonald, Michael Hogan, Joan Harrison, Robert E. Sherwood (Based on the novel by Daphne du Maurier); Studio: United Artists; Country: USA; Year: 1940.

*Red Light.*

Director: Roy Del Ruth; Producer(s): Roy Del Ruth; Writer(s): George Callahan, Charles Grayson (Story by Don Barry); Studio: United Artists; Country: USA; Year: 1949.

*Rome Open City.*

Director: Roberto Rossellini; Producer(s): Giuseppe Amato, Ferruccio DeMartino, Roberto Rossellini, Rod E. Geiger; Writer(s): Sergio Amidei, Federico Fellini, Alberto Consiglio; Studio: Minerva Film SPA; Country: Italy; Year: 1945.

*Ruthless.*

Director: Edgar G. Ulmer; Producer(s): Arthur S. Lyons; Writer(s): Alvah Bessie, S.K. Lauren, Gordon Kahn (Based on the novel by Dayton Stoddart); Studio: Producers Releasing Corporation; Country: USA; Year: 1948.

*Scarlet Street.*

Director: Fritz Lang; Producer(s): Walter Wagner, Fritz Lang; Writer(s): Dudley Nichols (Based in the novel by Georges de La Fouchardière and the play by André Mouézy-Éon); Studio: Universal Pictures; Country: USA; Year: 1945.

*Shadow of a Doubt.*

Director: Alfred Hitchcock; Producer(s): Jack H. Skirball; Writer(s): Thornton Wilder, Sally Benson, Alma Reville (Story by Gordon McDonell); Studio: Universal Pictures; Country: USA; Year: 1943.

*Side Street.*

Director: Anthony Mann; Producer(s): Sam Zimbalist; Writer(s): Sydney Boehm; Studio: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer; Country: USA; Year: 1950.

*Snake Pit, The.*

Director: Anatole Litvak; Producer(s): Robert Bassler, Anatole Litvak, Darryl F. Zanuck; Writer(s): Millen Brand, Arthur Laurents (Based on the novel by Mary Jane Ward); Studio: 20th Century Fox; Country: USA; Year: 1948.

*Somewhere In The Night.*

Director: Joseph L. Mankiewicz; Producer(s): Anderson Lawler; Writer(s): Howard Dimsdale, Joseph L. Mankiewicz (Story by Marvin Borowsky); Studio: 20th Century Fox; Country: USA; Year: 1946.

*Song of Russia.*

Director: Gregory Ratoff; Producer(s): Joe Pasternak, Pandro S. Berman; Writer(s): Leo Mittler, Victor Trivas, Guy Endore, Paul Jarrico, Richard Collins; Studio: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer; Country: USA; Year: 1944.

*Southerner, The.*

Director: Jean Renoir; Producer(s): Robert Hakim, David L. Loew; Writer(s): Hugo Butler, William Faulkner, Nunnally Johnson (Story by George Sessions Perry); Studio: United Artists; Country: USA; Year: 1945.

*Spellbound.*

Director: Alfred Hitchcock; Producer(s): David O. Selznick; Writer(s): Angus MacPhail, Ben Hecht (Story by Hilary Saint George Saunders, Francis Beeding); Studio: United Artists; Country: USA; Year: 1945.

*Spiral Staircase, The.*

Director: Robert Siodmak; Producer(s): Dore Schary; Writer(s): Mel Dinelli (Based on the novel by Ethel Lina White); Studio: RKO Pictures; Country: USA; Year: 1946.

*State Fair.*

Director: Walter Lang; Producer(s): William Perlberg; Writer(s): Paul Green, Oscar Hammerstein II, Sonya Levien, Philip Stong; Studio: 20th Century Fox; Country: USA; Year: 1945.

*Strange Loves of Martha Ivers, The.*

Director: Lewis Milestone; Producer(s): Hal B. Wallis; Writer(s): Robert Rossen (Based on the novel by John Patrick); Studio: Paramount Pictures; Country: USA; Year: 1946.

*Stranger, The.*

Director: Orson Welles; Producer(s): S.P. Eagle; Writer(s): Anthony Veiller, Decla Dunning (Story by Victor Trivas); Studio: RKO Pictures; Country: USA; Year: 1946.

*Street With No Name, The.*

Director: William Keighley; Producer(s): Samuel G. Engel; Writer(s): Samuel G. Engel, Harry Kleiner; Studio: 20th Century Fox; Country: USA; Year: 1948.

*Sullivan's Travels.*

Director: Preston Sturges; Producer(s): Paul Jones; Writer(s): Preston Sturges; Studio: Paramount Pictures; Country: USA; Year: 1942.

*Suspicion.*

Director: Alfred Hitchcock; Producer(s): Harry E. Edington; Writer(s): Samson Raphaelson, Joan Harrison, Alma Reville (Based on the novel by Francis Iles); Studio: RKO Pictures; Country: USA; Year: 1941.

*Three Russian Girls.*

Director: Henry S. Kesler, Fedor Ozep; Producer(s): Gregor Rabinovitch; Writer(s): Maurice Clark, Dan James; Studio: United Artists; Country: USA; Year: 1943.

*Till The End of Time.*

Director: Edward Dmytryk; Producer(s): Dore Schary; Writer(s): Allen Rivken (Based on the novel by Niven Busch); Studio: RKO Pictures; Country: USA; Year: 1946.

*T-Men.*

Director: Anthony Mann; Producer(s): Aubrey Schenck; Writer(s): John C. Higgins (Story by Virginia Kellogg); Studio: Edward Small Productions; Country: USA; Year: 1947.

*To Each His Own.*

Director: Mitchell Leisen; Producer(s): Charles Brackett; Writer(s): Charles Brackett, Jacques Thery; Studio: Paramount Pictures; Country: USA; Year: 1946.

*To Have and Have Not.*

Director: Howard Hawks; Producer(s): Howard Hawks, Jack Warner; Writer(s): Jules Furthman, William Faulkner (Based on the novel by Ernest Hemingway); Studio: Warner Bros.; Country: USA; Year: 1944.

*Touch of Evil.*

Director: Orson Welles; Producer(s): Albert Zugsmith; Writer(s): Orson Welles (Based on the novel by Whit Masterson); Studio: Universal Pictures; Country: USA; Year: 1958.

*Unseen, The.*

Director: Lewis Allen; Producer(s): John Houseman; Writer(s): Hagar Wilde, Ken Englund, Raymond Chandler (Based on the novel by Ethel Lina White); Studio: Paramount Pictures; Country: USA; Year: 1945.

*Where the Sidewalk Ends.*

Director: Otto Preminger; Producer(s): Otto Preminger; Writer(s): Victor Trivas, Frank P. Rosenberg, Robert E. Kent (Based on the novel by William L. Stuart); Studio: 20th Century Fox; Country: USA; Year: 1950.

*White Heat.*

Director: Raoul Walsh; Producer(s): Louis F. Edelman; Writer(s): Ivan Goff, Ben Roberts (Story by Virginia Kellogg); Studio: Warner Bros.; Country: USA; Year: 1949.