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Ideology and Neo-noir: politcal discourses and the cinematic mode of
production in Hollywood cinema

by

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Abstract

The following thesis deals with American cinema in the 1970s. The author will

analyze several films from the neo-noir genre and compare and contrast them to

film noir from the classical cycle in Hollywood cinema. There will be a discussion

of Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976) in terms of its ideological and political

discourses in relation to American society. There will be another discussion of

private detective films made in the seventies: Robert Altman's *The Long Goodbye*

(1973), Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974), and Arthur Penn's *Night Moves*

(1975). This discussion will focus on the ideological and political discourses in

the films and relate them to American society as well. There will also be a

discussion of private detective films from the classical period of Hollywood with

a comparison to private detective films made in the 1970s.

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Illustrations

Introduction: neo-noir, theoretical problematic, methodology, and thesis outline

Every film expresses, denotes, or calls into question the society of its production. As part of the ideological structures of any social formation, the cinema is an apparatus which, along with every other ideological apparatus in society, works to reproduce the relations of production. What I am interested in studying is how and in what ways do neo-noir films relate, reflect, criticize, undermine, and reinforce the political/social/historical conditions of their production. My approach will be to discuss *The Long Goodbye* (1973), *Chinatown* (1974), and *Night Moves* (1975) in one chapter, the film noir detective films from the classical period in another chapter, and then conclude with an in-depth discussion of *Taxi Driver* (1976).

Initially, I wanted to make a strong distinction between the noir of the seventies and the eighties, effectively echoing much of the scholarship I reviewed on neo-noir. But I realized that this distinction could not be made because it does not exist. This tendency in neo-noir criticism to differentiate between modernist neo-noirs and postmodern neo-noirs appears to be a symptom of film criticism that bemoans postmodern culture against what they thought was a Hollywood New Wave akin to the more politically radical cinema movements in France and Germany. My task is not to diagnose this symptom of theory but rather investigate the ideological discourses of neo-noir cinema in the seventies. That is, I am more interested in looking at how neo-noir films attempted criticized American ideology while at the same time reinforcing it. The ways that each film reinforced the capitalist ideology of America of course differs from film to film. Many of these films of have critical impulses, sometimes extremely overt within their

filmic discourses, and the seventies cinema in Hollywood stands out much like the fifties does for introducing social problems and impulses into their filmic discourses. This is the case for both periods that critics label modernist and postmodernist neo-noir once we critically compare both periods in terms of ideological discourses. Any distinction between the noirs from the seventies and eighties based on ideological terms is a false distinction based on incorrect criticism of the respective films.

The rest of what follows in this introductory chapter will consist of an outline of the fundamental underpinnings of the theoretical problematic that I am using in this project. I intend to work within the Althusserian Marxist problematic combined with Fredric Jameson's discussions of literature, film, and ideology. I will discuss the fine points of these respective theoretical problematics, highlighting their similarities and differences. I will then conclude with a discussion of the methodology I intend to use for studying these neo-noir films.

Althusserian Marxism refers to a particular Marxian theory which rejects both humanist and historicist interpretations of Marx. This broke with the Hegelian interpretations of Marx that preceded Althusser's theoretical intervention in the sixties and seventies. Althusser argued that Marx defined history as a process with a subject, class struggle is the motor of history and the superstructure is relatively autonomous, determined in the last instance by the economic mode of production. I intend to combine Althusser's theoretical problematic with Jameson's Marxian hermeneutic. The methodology for this thesis is adapted from Fredric Jameson's Marxist hermeneutic, the critical

methodology put forward by Fredric Jameson in his work *The Political Unconscious: narrative as a socially symbolic act* (1981). Jameson's methodology provides the basis for a properly dialectical criticism of film and literature, moving from the intrinsic (the level of the film-text) to the extrinsic (the political, social, and historical dimensions of their production and reproduction). For this project, Jameson's methodology requires considering how these films are allegories of the social, political, and economic problems of late-capitalism in America. I have concluded that Jameson's interpretive theory is better able to account for the ideological discourses of neo-noir and there intrinsic and extrinsic elements. Jameson's critical method requires the cultural critic to "trans-code" the text into three concentric circles: the political, the social, and finally the historical. The value of this approach is that it immediately goes beyond "formal" analysis of a narrative and situates it as a socially symbolic act: an imaginary resolution of real contradictions. To construe a text as a socially symbolic act immediately goes beyond simple *explication de texte* because we are identifying that the text in question is socially and materially determined and not simply the product of a creative artist.

Given the abundance of psychoanalytic and feminist criticism on neo-noir, I intend to contribute to neo-noir scholarship by providing a Marxist account of neo-noir. Given the interpretative framework of Jameson's Marxist hermeneutic we can effectively subsume both psychoanalytic and feminist interpretations of neo-noir and then go further and trans-code these films into the three

interpretative horizons: the political, the social, and the historical (this will be explained in detail below in the *Methodology* section).

Theoretical problematic

One of the fundamental concepts for Marxism, for a Marxist cultural or film studies, and for this present analysis of neo-noir is the concept of totality. Unlike previous Marxist theorists, Althusser argued that there is a fundamental discontinuity between Hegel and Marx's conception of the social totality. The fundamental difference is as follows: for Hegel the totality has a center that is its ground and fundamental essence which is expressed in all of the phenomena that comprise the totality. Various Marxists, notably Lukacs, retained this formula and reinterpreted Marx in Hegelian terms. Althusser argues explicitly against these interpretations and explicitly against Lukacs in many instances.[1] What is the Marxist totality according to Althusser? First, Marx did away with any relationship between a center which could be the truth that defines the phenomena of the totality. Instead, Althusser argued that the social totality is a de-centered structure in dominance. Instead of a determining essence, there is a totality without a center, composed of various structures (legal, political, cultural, religious, economic, etc.) that exist according to their own logic and principles of practice. Each instance affects and is affected by one another, and more importantly, affects the economic mode of production while being affected by it. Althusser argued that the de-centered structure in dominance defines the

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[1] See Louis Althusser's "Contradiction and overdetermination" and "Marxism and Humanism" in *For Marx* (2005).

relationship between the economic mode of production and the various instances of the superstructure as an asymmetric relation. The economic structure is determined by the superstructure and vice versa, but the economic is determinant in the last instance. Therefore, Marx's break with Hegel was that the totality was no longer conceived of as an "expressive totality" but one in which has no center. The various levels are conditions of existence for each other, existing in an asymmetric relation between the economic structures in the totality.[2] For Althusser, when we speak of structures in the social formations we also mean contradictions, a central concept to any theory of Marxism.

I will now move on to Althusser's interpretive methodology, called "symptomatics." Althusser's methodology follows from his epistemology which strictly rejects idealist-empiricist theories of knowledge. Althusser used to methodology to discuss theoretical texts and Pierre Macherey and other Marxists have extended this type of interpretation to include novels, films, and other forms of cultural production. What does it mean to read a text symptomatically? Althusser states that Marx's later work provides us with a perfect outline of symptomatics when he interrogated the theoretical problematic of classical political economy.[3] When Marx read the texts of Adam Smith and David Ricardo, he discovered that they were providing answers to questions that they did not pose explicitly in their texts.[4] Marx realized that the answers they were giving were answers to questions posed on another "theoretical terrain," one that Smith and Ricardo produced inadvertently. Therefore, the political economists produced an

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[2] See Louis Althusser's *Reading Capital* (2009), p. 17.
[3] *Ibid*, p. 18.
[4] *Ibid*, p. 22.

object of knowledge that corresponded to another theoretical terrain.[5] Not only

did Marx criticize the classical political economists for their theoretical absences

but went further and demonstrated how what they were not recognizing in their

theory was produced when they provided answers to questions that they did not

explicitly pose. To summarize, a symptomatic reading is defined as follows: to

read a text against another "text," one that exists in the lapses and contradictions

of the primary text.[6] To read a text symptomatically means that we must

reconstruct a second "text" that is not present except in the articulated lapses of

the primary text itself. To read a text symptomatically is to uncover the structural

conditions of possibility provided by the theoretical problematic that produced it.[7]

This involves demonstrating the contradictory moments and theoretical lapses by

measuring the primary text against the "reconstructed text." The critic reads the

text as much for what it says and for what it does not say.

Althusser defines this reading against what he occasionally calls an

"expressive" reading. This other form of interpretation is directly related to the

empiricist theory of knowledge (for Althusser empiricism includes rationalist and

idealist variations).[8] An expressive reading (read: dogmatic reading according to

Althusser) simply reads the text and judges it according to what it does and does

not say and then condemns the author for its deficiencies. What this reading (i.e.

humanist and empiricist) implies is that there is a textual object which the critic

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[5] *Ibid*, p. 25.
[6] *Ibid*, p. 27.
[7] Witness this quote for an example of symptomatics: "[e]ven if Smith and Ricardo did 'produce', in the 'fact' of rent and profit, the 'fact' of surplus-value, they remained in the dark, not realizing what they had 'produced', since they could not think it in its concept." See Althusser (2009), p. 200.
[8] *Ibid*, p. 37.

can discern from it an essence and this discernment is the proper way to arrive at knowledge. Althusser rejects this form of interpretation because it is part of the empiricist problematic. The empiricist reading abstracts from the textual object its essence which implies that this abstraction exists in that object. Expressive readings also can be defined as a form of subjectivism: the interpretive subject can retain what is needed to produce the truth.

Why does Althusser reject this theoretical problematic? The empiricist problematic presupposes a knowing subject that confronts an object and is able to discern the truth or essence of that object in and through some form of abstraction. Althusser calls this process a "scouring procedure;" witness the following quote: "[d]iscovery should be taken in its most literal sense: removing the covering, as the husk is removed from the nut, the peel from the fruit, the veil from the girl,..."[9] On this theoretical terrain, knowledge is defined as a process of separation, the separating of the inessential from the essential in the real object which provides the knowing subject of knowledge with the truth of the real object.[10] The apprehension of truth is not immediate, but instead the knowing subject must arrive at it through this process of separation/abstraction/extraction. Althusser argues that empiricism implies that the essence the knowing subject arrives at after this process of abstraction is a *real part* of the real object that it is studying.[11] Therefore, knowledge (what is the end result of this process of separation) turns out to already be present in the object that we are studying, waiting for some knowing subject to come and discover it.

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[9] *Ibid*, p. 39.
[10] *Ibid*, pp. 38-39.
[11] *Ibid*, p. 40.

Althusser rejects the epistemological paradigm of empiricism in favor of one that originates with Baruch Spinoza and later adopted by Marx.[12] This paradigm distinguishes between the object of knowledge and the real object.[13] Marx defended this distinction in his work when he stated that the real object (real-concrete) and the object of knowledge (a product of thought which produces itself) are distinct objects with distinct modes of production.[14] The real-concrete's production happens in the real and according to historical moments while the thought-concrete occurs in the realm of knowledge.[15] Therefore, the categories of thought do not occupy the same space as the real objects within a social formation.

How does Althusser define "thought?" It is not an idealism of consciousness or a psychologism but rather thought is defined as an "apparatus of thought."[16] An "apparatus of thought" is defined by a set of conditions that are its peculiar mode of production and which are ultimately determined by history.[17] Thought is then a real system established in the real world that develops and transforms within a given historical social formation while maintaining a determinate relationship with nature.[18] Furthermore, thought is a "combination" between its raw material (the object of theoretical practice) and its specific mode

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[12] *Ibid*, p. 43.
[13] *Ibid*, p. 43.
[14] *Ibid*, pp. 43-44.
[15] *Ibid*, p. 44. Althusser referred to different abstractions in the process of theoretical practice. The different abstractions were defined by Althusser as Generalities I (initial abstractions), and Generalities III (the products of knowledge production), and Generalities II (the theory of science at a particular moment, or the mode of production of knowledge), see Althusser (2009), p. 99, and p. 351.
[16] *Ibid*, p. 44.
[17] *Ibid*, p. 44.
[18] *Ibid*, p. 45.

of production along with its relations between other structures of the social formation.[19] This formulation of knowledge allows Althusser to completely break with the empiricist paradigm; knowledge is no longer defined terms of a knowing subject and a knowable object. Knowledge now takes place in a domain that is entirely its own which develops according to its own logic and practice.

What does Althusser mean by the "raw material" of theoretical practice? The raw material is what has already been theorized and elaborated in the complex structures which already constituted a given object as an object of theoretical practice.[20] Namely, Althusser argues that we never confront[21] the real object as the empiricist supposes we do but rather we always confront the object within the background of a theoretical system that has beforehand defined this object as an object of theoretical practice.[22] Before an object of knowledge can appear as such, a theoretical system must have created it. This knowledge system has a particular history and mode of production that determines what appears an as object of knowledge and what does not.

We will now discuss Althusser's theory of ideology and ideological state apparatuses. Althusser defined ideology in contradistinction to theories of "false consciousness." For Althusser, ideology should not be understood as a conscious process but as a system of thought and representation that work unconsciously as

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[19] *Ibid*, p. 45.
[20] *Ibid*, p. 46.
[21] Jameson makes a similar argument about how we encounter texts. See Jameson (1981), p. ix.
[22] In Part One of *Reading Capital* Althusser uses this distinction to show how the problem that many interpreters of Marx have with the discerning the relationship between the logic of the concepts and then the logic of history is a false or imaginary problem because Marx proposes a radical distinction between the order of knowledge and of historical reality, see Althusser (2009), p. 50.

structures.[23] This theory of ideology allows Althusser to define it not in instrumental terms but in terms of an unconscious horizon that symbolically structures reality for subjects, defining the way they imagine their relation to their real conditions of existence. Therefore, ideology is not something the bourgeoisie uses on the lower classes to control them but rather ideology is an essential part of any social formation (including socialist social formations).[24] In a capitalist social formation ideology reinforces and reproduces the relations of production while in a socialist social formation it is in and through ideology that subjects are socialized to work and live in a classless society, thereby reproducing the relations of collective production.[25]

Jameson adopts this theory of ideology along with Althusser's reinterpretation of Marx, while adding a new dimension to it. However, their projects and interests in this conceptualization are very different: Althusser, when theorizing about ideology and the ideological state apparatuses, is concerned with figuring out how the social relations of production reproduce themselves, his answer being that most of the work of reproduction occurs in the realm of ideology and through the ideological state apparatuses. Jameson is interested in the peculiar relationship between literature, and cultural production in general and ideology. However, what Jameson adds to Althusser's theory is the proposition that if any text is ideological it must be at the same time utopian, that is, it must offer some sort of utopian dream concerning the social collective working as a fantasy bribe to the public about to be manipulated. The flip side of this

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[23] See Althusser (2005), p. 233.
[24] *Ibid*, p. 235.
[25] *Ibid*, p. 235.

formulation is that even so called political art (i.e. Modernist literature for several Marxian theorists) is still entrenched within the ideology which produced them.[26]

Another modification to Althusser's theoretical problematic is Jameson's doctrine of the *political unconscious*. This concept complements Althusser's methodology, symptomatics. For Jameson, interpretation involves going beyond the level of the "text" (in fact the "text" encounters dialectical transformations in Jameson's hermeneutic so that we are no longer simply discussing the material text of a novel or film, but rather *ideologemes* and the *ideology of form*). The purpose of the political unconscious is to uncover and restore the ways in which history has been repressed in a given text. Whereas Althusser reads a text symptomatically, uncovering the ideological terrain that conditioned what the text could and could not say, Jameson symptomatically uncovers how a given text represses and/or displaces history and the class struggle. In this sense Jameson complements Althusser's methodology along with the latter's theory of ideology and ideological state apparatuses.

Fredric Jameson and Marxist cultural studies

Marxism and Form (1974) was Jameson's overview of twentieth century theories of dialectical criticism that covered a wide range of authors from Lukacs to Sartre, dealing with Adorno, Benjamin, Marcuse, and Bloch, in the process. This text deals entirely with what a Marxist literary criticism entails and we will discuss the

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[26] This is how Jameson interprets and puts to work Walter Benjamin's comment: "There has never been a document of culture which was not at one and the same time a document of barbarism" (7th thesis in "Theses on the Philosophy of History"). Which for Jameson means that even when the Utopian-critical dimension of a text is restored there still persists in and through the text the ideological will of the ruling class to dominate the working classes, see Jameson (1981), p. 290.

main precepts that Jameson outlines in order to complete our discussion of Althusser and Jameson. This discussion draws primarily from the concluding section of *Marxism and Form* where Jameson summarizes the main precepts and tasks of dialectical criticism.

The discussion of dialectical criticism according to Jameson begins with the diachronic construct. The diachronic construct is defined as follows: the basic narrative form of the dialectic is the dialectical reversal which turns the object of study into its opposite, which Jameson argues is a diachronic process.[27] In dialectical criticism we isolate a limited group of categories (in the literary realm) which are related to each other in such a way that a change in one involves a change in the proportions of the others.[28] What this type of criticism implies when we construe these categories in isolation is a diachronic framework; dialectical criticism enables us to perceive these categories as singular moments within a diachronic process rather than as static entities.[29] Jameson uses French Realist literature as an example: Flaubert is not Balzac, and not Zola, but we read Flaubert with these literary constructs in mind, situating his work in a diachronic construct that makes it intelligible.[30] Therefore, the first feature of dialectical criticism is as follows: the critic isolates a category (defines the object of study), and then articulates it in a sequence of alternative structural realizations which Jameson defines as a diachronic construct.[31] However, according to Jameson, this

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[27] See Fredric Jameson's *Marxism and Form* (1974), p. 309.
[28] *Ibid*, p. 311.
[29] *Ibid*, p. 312.
[30] *Ibid*, p. 315.
[31] *Ibid*, p. 319.

is the essential form of a Hegelian dialectical criticism; what we find in Marx is quite different and we will discuss in detail below.

Before we can discuss the essentially Marxist form of dialectical criticism, we should discuss what Jameson means by literary categories (sometimes referred to as the logic of content). What we were discussing above as the diachronic construct can also be expressed as a contradiction between form and content.[32] Dialectical thought is a reversal of Aristotle's theory of form and content which stipulated that form dominated over content as the final articulation of the deeper structure of whatever the content was itself.[33] What dialectical criticism proposes is to articulate the work of art in its own terms initially but then widen the scope of analysis by situating it within a larger schema of formal structures which allows us to call into question the formal properties of the work of art.[34] In another sense Jameson sees dialectical criticism as transcending the opposition between formal and sociological literary criticism: dialectical criticism explores the social and historical reality that corresponds to the formal realizations and defects in the work of art in question.[35] Therefore, to comprehend the relationship between the artistic object and the social/historical realm we must gradually expand the critical gaze. This argument was carried over by Jameson in *The Political Unconscious* when he wrote that the critic should dialectically move

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[32] *Ibid*, p. 327.
[33] *Ibid*, pp. 328-329.
[34] *Ibid*, p. 330.
[35] *Ibid*, p. 331.

beyond the political to the social and then to the historical, and situate the work

differently within each of the interpretive horizons.[36]

Jameson desires to go beyond simply formal analyses of literature because

he believes that to stay within the formal level of analysis is an ideological

strategy in itself. For example, New Criticism displaced any discussion of the

social and history by repressing it into language, that is, the concrete language of

a particular poet is the result of the his or her moral and religious attitudes.[37] New

Criticism disposes of history as the ultimate interpretive ground and instead

focuses exclusively on the language of the poet. The categories used are not those

derived from the particular work itself but instead New Criticism uses the same

categories on every work and commits a violence against the inner coherence and

uniqueness of each work of art.[38] Jameson rejects this interpretive methodology

because it does not adequately discuss the formal or intrinsically literary level of

the work.[39] Macherey made the same criticism in Part One of *A Theory of*

Literary Production (1978), in the discussion of the fallacies of humanist

criticism. The fallacy in question here is when the literary critic subsumes the

work of art into extrinsic categories that do not adequately understand the intrinsic

logic and structure of the work of art in question. Dialectical criticism does not

use pre-established categories of analysis but rather the work of art dictates the

specific terms for our interpretation of it.[40] Against New Criticism's methodology,

Jameson understands style in terms of the relation it has to history; style and

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[36] *Ibid*, p. 331.
[37] *Ibid*, p. pp. 332-333.
[38] *Ibid*, p. 333.
[39] *Ibid*, p. 333.
[40] *Ibid*, p. 333.

formal properties are inherently tied to the mode of production. The task of

dialectical criticism is to uncover the historical reality where a particular style

originated. Jameson finds the source of this particular strategy of dialectical

criticism in Marx's discussion of the concepts of Smith and Ricardo in *Capital.*

Following Marx, this is what Jameson argues makes dialectical criticism "doubly"

historical: not only do we historicize the object of analysis but we also "unfreeze"

the concepts and categories we use for analyzing the objects of analysis, and

interpret the theoretical concepts as historical phenomena in their own right.[41]

Therefore, dialectical criticism always comes with a commentary on their own

concepts and methodological instruments.[42]

Jameson has made a distinction between a Hegelian and a Marxist

dialectical criticism which will be important for our discussion given Althusser's

stance on Hegel. The first way Jameson articulates the difference is with the

notion of the "self-consciousness" of the dialectic. For Hegel, this self-

consciousness is logical, in that the theorist realizes that their theoretical

problematic necessarily imposes limits on what can and cannot be articulated and

theorized.[43] Marx of course recognizes this aspect of theoretical work but

Jameson argues that the self-consciousness of the Marxist dialectic situates the

theorist in society and history and foregrounds their theoretical limitations in the

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[41] I would like to make a comparison here with Althusser's discussion of dialectical materialism, the theory of scientific practices and a theory of the history of scientific practices. It seems that Althusser and Jameson recognized how Marx did not use the concepts of classical political economy statically but also provided on commentary on the concepts themselves. See Jameson (1974), p. 336.

[42] *Ibid*, p. 336.

[43] *Ibid*, p. 340.

ideological conflicts of the class struggle.[44] This is how Jameson can say that

dialectical thought is tautological: not a logical tautology but a tautology between

the subject and object terms of the idealist theoretical problematic.[45] It is a

tautology because dialectical thought does away with the dualism between

subjectivity and objectivity.[46] Jameson argues that all objectivity has its source in

subjectivity which initially imagines an objective world outside as something

separate.[47] Marx reinvents this abolition with the proposition that reality is

produced by human labor and the class struggle in such a totalizing way that even

the producer himself is the product of this history.[48] What this results in for

dialectical theory is that theory and our categories of thought have no fixed point

or objective reality but rather that reality itself imposes limits on what a given

theoretical problematic can apprehend, theorize, and claim.[49] Therefore, the

essential difference between Marx and Hegel is how the former situates thought in

the social and the historical while the latter remains at the level of thought itself.

Both abolish the dualism between subject and object according to Jameson, but

for Marx this results in situating thought and theory back into history and the class

struggle. Furthermore, along with Althusser, Jameson argues that thought is a

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[44] *Ibid*, p. 340.

[45] *Ibid*, p. 341-342.

[46] Witness Althusser's criticism of the empiricist problematic of the subject and object: "this frontier is impassable in principle because it cannot be a frontier, because there is no common homogenous space (spirit or real) between the abstract of the concept of a thing and the empirical concrete of this thing which could justify the use of the concept of a frontier" in Althusser (2009), p. 210.

[47] Here we have another interesting corollary between Jameson and Althusser. The latter argued that Spinoza was the theoretical ancestor to Marx when Spinoza argued for the radical separation between thought and matter, which Marx then continued to argue for when he wrote that thought develops in a sphere according to its own logic, and the work of thought happens completely in thought. However, what Althusser attributes to Marx, Jameson attributes to Hegel. See Jameson (1974), p. 342.

[48] *Ibid*, p. 342.

[49] *Ibid*, p. 343.

process and one that never reaches some final or ultimate truth but is instead conditioned by the social.[50]

What effect does this tautology have at the hermeneutical level of thinking in dialectical criticism? Jameson proposes that we situate the cultural artifact into the social context where it originated.[51] This allows the critic to construe contradictions in literary form as marks of contradictions in history. If we take the historical novel as an example we say that the "historical novel" was a symptom of the historicism of the novel form in general.[52] This is then what Jameson calls the "tautological movement": questions of form are transformed into questions of content which are then transposed outside of the work itself into the examination of the relationship between the content of the work and its historical context.[53] Dialectical criticism therefore is a mediation between literary criticism and sociology because we expand our critical gaze into the historical dimension and study the historical reality that corresponds to the particular work of art in question.[54] Dialectical criticism attempts to understand the work of art, its content and form, in relation to the historical context, investigating how the content and form of the work corresponds to historical reality.

The final moment of a Jamesonian Marxist criticism would be then to situate the work within the socio-economic sphere. We move from a moment of specialization (isolation of categories) to the concrete itself.[55] This movement is

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[50] *Ibid*, p. 370.
[51] *Ibid*, p. 348.
[52] *Ibid*, p. 349.
[53] *Ibid*, p. 352.
[54] *Ibid*, p. 354.
[55] *Ibid*, p. 377.

inherent to all Marxian criticism in that it explicates the relation between a system

of thought and a corresponding social class while also explicating the functional

and strategic role of this system of thought in the class struggle. Marxist cultural

analysis describes how cultural objects (art and mass culture) are ideological

objects that have determinate strategies in the concrete class struggle. Jameson

will expand this moment of Marxist criticism further in *The Political Unconscious*

with the three interpretive horizons and the corresponding textual objects: the text

construed as socially symbolic act, the ideologeme, and then as the ideology of

form.

The other addition that Jameson made to the Marxian theoretical

problematic is the dismantling of the distinction between high art and mass

culture. Like previous Marxists before Jameson, Althusser attempted to

distinguish between high art and mass culture in political and ideological terms.

In a letter to one of his readers, Althusser wrote that art is the only thing that can

go beyond or exist outside of ideology.[56] Art allows us to distance itself from the

ideology that produced it, according to the early Althusser. In contrast to

Althusser, Jameson rejects any distinction between art and mass culture in terms

of their ideological discourses.[57] We will turn to Jameson's essay that explicitly

deals with this topic.

In Jameson's essay "Reification and utopia in mass culture" (1979) he

begins with a discussion of the Frankfurt school's contribution to Marxist cultural

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[56] See Althusser in "A letter on art in reply to Andre Daspre (*April 1966*)" in *Lenin and philosophy and other essays* (1971), pp. 221-227.
[57] See Jameson's essay "Beyond the cave: demystifying the ideology of modernism" in *The ideologies of theory volume two: the syntax of history* (1988), pp. 115-132.

studies along with various theories that juxtapose and define high art and mass culture. According to Jameson, aesthetic theories of the popular culture and high art end up valorizing one term while denying the validity of the other. The Frankfurt school is known for championing high modernism against the popular culture of capitalism. However, rather than continuing to argue for the primacy of high art over mass culture Jameson deems this valorization a theoretical mistake. To argue that Modernist art is the only source of criticism is unsatisfactory because it is theoretically untenable to argue that the high art of modernism is some fixed point, existing eternally throughout history so that we can judge all other aesthetic production.[58] Instead what Jameson argues for is a "genuinely historical and dialectical approach" to cultural production which means that we must construe both high art and popular culture as interdependent areas of production under late capitalism.[59] Jameson states this argument once again in the preface to *The Political Unconscious* (1981) ("[a]lways historicize!") as the methodological mandate for dialectical and Marxist cultural studies.[60] What Jameson adds specifically to the theoretical tradition of Marxist aesthetics is the emphasis on the utopian dimension of all cultural production, defined by Jameson as the "ritual celebration of the renewal of the social order and its salvation."[61] Therefore, we cannot fully understand the ideological function of cultural production if we do not recognize their utopian potential. Jameson argues that

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[58] See Jameson (1979), p. 133.
[59] *Ibid*, pp. 133-134.
[60] Jameson argues in the following sentences that dialectical criticism inevitably follows two distinct paths: the first outlines the historical origins of cultural production (the path of the object) and the other looks at the interpretative codes that we use to understand these objects (the path of the subject); it is the second path that Jameson is looking in *The Political Unconscious* (1981), see Jameson (1981), p. ix.
[61] See Jameson (1979), p. 142.

ideology cannot interpellate unless there is some sort of utopian dream that bribes the public.[62] Highlighting the utopian dimension of cultural production echoes Macherey's thesis on how works of art aesthetically represent their ideology which can result in their unmasking and self-criticism or auto-critique.[63] Jameson's position on high art and popular culture has the theoretical advantage of not falling into the theoretical pitfalls of idealist criticism that argues for particular works of art as eternally superior to others.

To conclude our discussion of Jameson and Althusser we will look at how both theorists understand Marx's relationship to Hegel. Althusser completely distances Marx from Hegel, whereas Jameson's interpretation of Marx is heavily influenced by both Lukacs and Adorno, two Hegelian Marxists. Althusser has clearly demonstrated Marx's definite break with the Hegelian problematic.[64] What this means for Marxist theory is anti-humanist and anti-historicist. Anti-humanism means that the category of the human is no longer present in Marxist analysis; we now use social relations. Anti-historicism means that Althusser rejected Gramsci's interpretation of Marxism as an absolute historicism, but more generally a philosophy that rejects any notions of teleology; "history is process without subject" and "the class struggle is the motor of history" are the theoretical dictums of Marx's theory of history. Furthermore, these propositions determined

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[62] In this article Jameson discusses the ideological and utopian dimension of Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972). The utopian dimension is the "family" as a collective fantasy while the ideological function is to displace our frustrations with the economic system into the realm of ethics, that is, the accumulation of profit and the reproduction of the relations of production are not the cause of misery, but it is dishonesty and corrupt gangsters that are destroying society, see Jameson (1979), p. 144.

[63] *Ibid*, p. 147.

[64] See Althusser's "Marx's Relation to Hegel" in *Politics and History: Motesquieu, Rousseau, Marx* (2007), p. 185.

the way Althusser defined ideology. For Althusser, ideology is a system of representations, sign-systems, and subject positions inscribed in material practices within the social formation ("apparatuses") which I believe is how Jameson understands ideology as well (see the interview in *Diacritics* devoted to *The Political Unconscious* in 1982).[65] Ideology is no longer defined as false consciousness but defined in materialist terms, something that exists in concrete practices. Ideology defines individuals as subjects within a particular discourse. According to Althusser, ideology exists in every social formation and is not limited to the capitalist social formation.[66]

The primary work of ideology is to reproduce the relations of production within the capitalist social formation, and ideology does its work through *interpellation*. All ideology has the function of constituting concrete individuals as subjects.[67] The existence of subjects and interpellation (described by Althusser as a succession of hailing and recognition by a subject) are one and the same thing: "ideology has always-already interpellated individuals as subjects."[68] Jameson, along with other Marxist cultural critics, is interested in studying literature, films, art, or texts as products of bourgeois ideology. Althusser's theoretical problematic (aside from his one comment from his early work about art being outside ideology) encourages the critic to take up this project and

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[65] See Jameson's interview in *Diacritics* Vol.12 (3), pp. 72-91. Jameson admits that Althusser's concept of ideology is a "powerful" and "persuasive" theory of ideology on page 85 of this interview.

[66] Witness this quote from Althusser's early writings on ideology: "it is that *ideology (as a system of mass representations) is indispensable in any society if men are to be formed, transformed and equipped to respond to the demands of their conditions of existence*" (emphasis his), see "Marxism and Humanism" in *For Marx* (2009), p. 235.

[67] See Althusser (1971), p. 171.

[68] *Ibid*, p. 175.

examine cultural production as ideological production, taking part in the class struggle at the level of theory. The work of interepellation done in concrete practices within a social formation is an imaginary resolution, and this is how Jameson argues how we should understand literature, not as an autonomous piece of art but as socially symbolic act, an imaginary resolution of a real contradiction. This is the first relationship that Jameson identifies between art and ideology: art is an imaginary attempt to smooth over concrete contradictions, it works to interpellate spectators as subjects of a particular class discourse. Jameson argues that a text is a socially symbolic act, an imaginary resolution of a real contradiction.

Even though Jameson defines his methodological commitments in Althusserian terms, he does write at length about reification in capitalism, influenced heavily by Lukacs and his account of reification. In the final literary analysis of *The Political Unconscious* titled "Romance and Reification: plot construction and ideological closure in Joseph Conrad" Jameson writes at length about the effects of reification on philosophy and literature. He argues that both positivism as a philosophy and impressionism as an artistic movement are both responses to rationalization and reification in capitalist social formations.[69] Both of these concepts, according to Althusser, are not explicitly Marxist concepts but ones imported from other theoretical traditions (i.e. Max Weber).[70] Jameson defends his choice by arguing that they are the most useful for this study. Witness this quote from Jameson defending his use of these concepts:

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[69] See Jameson (1981), p. 213.
[70] See Eagleton's essay "Fredric Jameson: the politics of style" in *Diacritics* (1982), No.3, pp. 14-22.

> It has no doubt already become clear to the reader that the mediatory code I have found most useful here is that variously termed rationalization by Weber and reification by Lukacs. Yet the reader should also be reminded that Marxism knows a number of other such mediatory codes, the most obvious ones being social class, mode of production, the alienation of labor, commodification, the various ideologies of Otherness (sex or race), and political domination. The strategic selection of reification as a code for the reading and interpretation of Conrad's style does not constitute the choice of one kind of Marxism (let us say, a Lukascean one) over others, but is instead an option open to all intelligent Marxisms and part of the richness of the Marxian system itself[71]

Jameson distances his use of the term from Lukacs however by arguing that the latter used the term ahistorically, as a way to criticize Modernist literature and valorize Realist literature. Instead, Jameson connects the experience of reification in capitalism by its subjects with Modernist literature and the various stylistic and formal innovations of the Modernists. This is how Jameson connects experiences in two structurally distinct spheres of existence within a social formation. An Althusserian modification to this type of cultural criticism would be to exclude the concepts rationalization and reification from the discussion and include the concepts social class, modes of production, the various ideologies of otherness, and political domination. This would resituate Jameson's theory back onto a Marxian terrain as defined by Althusser.

The Marxian problematic is explicitly concerned with the overdeterminations of concrete historical practices. This involves looking at the class struggle, the balance between the forces of labor and capital within the mode of production. Studying cinema implies from a Marxian problematic remain that the critic remain within the concrete, material struggle and not the effects of reification or rationalization on consciousness. Marxian criticism should look at how cinema interpellate spectators as subjects of a discourse, how ideological

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[71] *Ibid*, pp. 214-215.

interpellations combine with the work of art to reproduce the relations of production in the capitalist formation. Jameson's Marxian hermeneutic outlined in *The Political Unconscious* allows us to do this insofar as the critic remains within the Marxian problematic, i.e. uses the concepts of the social classes, and the mode of production when interpreting the work in question.

To end this introduction, we will now discuss the methodology of Jameson's Marxian hermeneutic. The discussion that follows will summarize the theoretical propositions from Jameson's text *The Political Unconscious* to demonstrate how I intend to use this theory to interpret neo-noir films from 1970s America.

Methodology

In *The Political Unconscious* Jameson explicates the protocols of a Marxian approach for studying cultural production that not only argues against the prescriptions outlined by various post-structuralists (Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Paul DeMan), New Criticism, and the anti-interpretivists (Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guatarri) but also demonstrates how these competing theories can be effectively subsumed within the semantic horizon of Marxism.[72] Jameson argues that when the various competing theories attempt to provide a purely immanent criticism of the text, they perpetuate an illusion because a purely immanent criticism is not possible. All interpretation necessarily re-codes the raw materials of the text into an interpretive schema.[73] Therefore, one justification for

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[72] *Ibid*, p. 60.
[73] *Ibid*, p. 60.

using Marxism as general theoretical framework and Jameson's Marxist

hermeneutic for analyzing these films is simply that this perspective subsumes the

other interpretive methods while moving beyond the level of the film-text.

Furthermore, if the cultural critic is interested in studying ideological and the

class struggle then the Marxian problematic is better suited because of its focus on

these areas. I intend to focus on these areas in my study of neo-noir by using

Jameson's Marxian hermeneutic.

Jameson's theory locates the film-text in three horizons of interpretation:

the political, the social, and the historical.[74] Each interpretive horizon corresponds

to a separate object of study. That is, once we move beyond the political, we

move to the social and then the historical. The political horizon entails

interpreting the text as a socially symbolic act that resolves a material

contradiction. The social horizon corresponds to the ideologeme (the most

reduced form of the fundamental antagonistic discourse of social classes), and the

historical horizon corresponds to the ideology of form (the symbolic meanings

given to us by multiple systems of representation and expression which are either

"survivals" or anticipations of modes of production).[75] Therefore, we recognize

immediately that Jameson's approach offers much more explanatory power than

the competing approaches which merely stay at the level of the text and do not

attempt to expand their focus to the social context.

We will now briefly discuss the specific operations of the three

interpretive horizons. The political horizon construes its object of study as the *text*

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[74] *Ibid*, p. 61.
[75] *Ibid*, pp. 61-62.

which is defined as a socially symbolic act.[76] Jameson takes this model of

interpretation from Claude-Levi Strauss[77] who defined the narrative as an

imaginary resolution of real contradiction.[78] Furthermore, Jameson argues that the

production of a narrative is in itself an ideological act because it is an attempt to

provide an imaginary solution to a real problem in society.[79] In contrast to other

interpretive methods that merely highlight themes or motifs within a given text,

Jameson's approach requires the critic to demonstrate how the narrative in

question performs this ideological function.

The second interpretative horizon, the "social," implies that we organize

everything around the Marxist concept of *social class*.[80] This particular concept of

social class is distinguished from other sociological analyses that define social

classes as strata which can then be studied in isolation.[81] A Marxian analysis

rejects this position because it does not grasp the contradictions between social

classes and reality of force relations in a social formation. The new object of

study in this horizon is no longer the individual text but rather a dialogical

object.[82] That is, we attend to the antagonistic discourses of the class struggle by

analyzing how two classes discursively battle each other on the basis of a general

discourse or set of codes.[83] In particular we study how the opposing demands of

each collective discourse are irreconcilable with each other and the completeness

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[76] *Ibid*, p. 62.
[77] See Claude Levi-Strauss "The Structural Study of Myth" in *The Journal of American Folklore* (1955), Vol. 68, No. 270, pp. 428-444.
[78] *Ibid*, p. 62.
[79] *Ibid*, p. 63.
[80] *Ibid*, p. 69.
[81] *Ibid*, p. 69.
[82] *Ibid*, p. 69.
[83] *Ibid*, p. 70.

of analysis at this level is to explicate the contradiction that exists within the collective class discourse.[84] The trans-coding operation at this level of analysis, again drawing from Saussure, is to rewrite the individual text as a *parole* (an individual utterance) of larger system of class discourse (*langue*).[85] The text is still construed as a symbolic act but now we understand it as a "strategic move" within the ideological battlefield of class discourse.[86] To complete the analysis at this level requires us to describe the "units" of the larger discourse of class struggle, that is, we must organize the class discourses into ideologemes.[87] Ideologemes can be pseudo-ideas (belief systems, opinions, prejudices, etc.) or proto-narratives (a fantasy character that represents a particular class position in the class struggle).[88] Therefore, the analysis at this level must define, conceptually what the ideologemes are, and locate them within the narrative.

The last interpretive horizon is the historical conjuncture and the organizing principle is the Marxist concept of the mode of production.[89] The new object of study is now the broader production system of signs and codes which transcend the interpretive codes in the previous two levels.[90] The corresponding textual object of study at this level is called the ideology of form, defined by Jameson as "the determinate contradiction of the specific messages emitted by the varied sign systems which coexist in a given artistic process as well as in its

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[84] *Ibid*, p. 70.
[85] *Ibid*, p. 70.
[86] *Ibid*, p. 71.
[87] *Ibid*, p. 72.
[88] *Ibid*, p. 73.
[89] *Ibid*, p. 74.
[90] *Ibid*, p. 74.

general social formation."[91] At this level we are required to make a formal

analysis of the various and discontinuous formal processes at work within the text

(which implies their uneven development). Jameson argues that there is

dialectical reversal in that we can now study how these "forms" carry or transmit

ideological messages without referring to the content of the text.[92] A complete

analysis at this level of interpretation will demonstrate how the survival of given

"formal structures of alienation" that coexist with contemporary formal structures

corresponds to oppression that is contemporaneous with the production of the

text.[93] The obvious advantage of this type of interpretation over other purely

formalistic interpretative methods is it locates the formal properties within the

history of modes of production and it requires the critic to distinguish between

multiple and often contradictory formal structures or sign systems. Not only can

we specify and isolate the various traces of previous and future formal structures

but we can also demonstrate the ideological presuppositions of said sign systems.

This is the path I will take as well for my analysis of neo-noir in the

seventies. The three chapters that make up the body of the thesis will necessarily

interpret the films in terms of symbolic acts, ideologemes, and ideology of form

but not in a consecutive manner outlined in the methodology section. The two

chapters on the private detective in film noir and neo-noir should be read as a long

analysis of the form of private detective films and the changes that occurred

within that genre. The chapter on *Taxi Driver* is connected to the previous

chapters on the private detective films by defining the way this film redefined

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[91] *Ibid*, p. 84.
[92] *Ibid*, p. 84.
[93] *Ibid*, p. 85.

neo-noir films. *Taxi Driver* represents another aesthetic mode that was made available for neo-noir films in the seventies, made possible by combining elements from the western and horror genres. Each of the films will be analyzed in terms of their ideological discourses and their relationship to the classical period of Hollywood.

Thesis outline

This project is divided into four chapters and a conclusion. We will look at the relationship between neo-noir of the 1970s and American society, focusing on the ideological and utopian dimensions of this cinema. After we discuss the previous scholarship on neo-noir (with a particular focus on *Taxi Driver* and *Chinatown* and the 1970s cycle of this movement) we will explore the conjuncture of the 1970s and use Althusser's conceptualization of the social totality to analyze the particular relationship neo-noir had with commercial Hollywood cinema and the American social totality during this period. Then we will discuss *Taxi Driver* and private detective films from the classical and New Hollywood period according to the methodology stated above.

In the first chapter I will review the previous scholarship on neo-noir and how this project will contribute to this scholarship. Then there will be discussion of the history of Marxist aesthetic theories, how Jameson's work contributed to this tradition, and how *this* project will contribute to the tradition of Marxist aesthetics and cultural theory. In the second chapter I will discuss several private detective films from the forties and fifties. I will pay particular attention to the

interplay of ideolegemes within the films and the fate of these ideologemes with a

discussion of *Kiss Me Deadly*. In the third chapter I will discuss three private

detective films from the seventies. We will discuss *The Long Goodbye*,

Chinatown, and *Night Moves* in terms of ideological discourses and the way each

film revised the private detective genre. The final chapter is an in-depth analysis

of *Taxi Driver*. Some reference will be made to *The Searchers* and *Psycho* to

further explore the ideological discourses of *Taxi Driver*. In the conclusion I will

not introduce any new information but merely summarize the arguments made in

the thesis. I will also make a few statements about what future work can be done

from this project.

Chapter One: literature review of neo-noir scholarship

What is Neo-Noir?

If the question "what is *film noir*?" stumped critics for decades, then trying to

define neo-noir will most likely present even more problems for film theory given

the fact that critics have now added a prefix to a term they cannot coherently

define. Early scholarship on neo-noir defined the phenomenon first as *film apres*

noir before using the now accepted term neo-noir. When film theory discusses

neo-noir, they are usually referring to films noirs produced after *Touch of Evil*

(1958) (or *Odds Against Tomorrow* (1959)) that resemble the dark films from the

forties and fifties.

Following the critical debates of film noir, there appears to be no

agreement on what is a neo-noir film in the previous scholarship. In fact some

critics do not think it even exists as such. In Schrader's account of film noir he did

not make the connection between the early neo-noirs and film noir and referred to

films like *Easy Rider* (1969) and *Medium Cool* (1969) as "naive and romantic"

and argued against construing noir as a genre (following Raymond Durgnat's

argument in "Paint it Black: the family tree of noir" which construed film noir not

as a genre but in terms akin to Wittgenstein's family resemblance), stating that it

has ended in the fifties.[94] For Schrader then neo-noir is not a legitimate category

because noir is a thing of the past (a historical period like German

Expressionism), and he does not believe that it can be resurrected (a somewhat

ironic statement given that Schrader wrote the script for *Taxi Driver* and other

films considered to be neo-noir by many critics). Against this line of thinking,

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[94] See Schrader's essay "Notes on film noir" in *Perspectives on film noir* (1996), p. 99.

other critics have recognized a group of American and foreign films that entertain some sort of relationship with the classic film noir cycle. The relationship can take many forms: a revision, a remake, an homage, or a continuation of the noir tradition in cinema. Examples of remakes include *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1984), *Double Indemnity* (1974), and *D.O.A.* (1988). Films like *Chinatown* (1974), *The Long Goodbye* (1973), *Body Heat* (1981), and more recently *Brick* (2005) should be understood as homages, continuations (but also revisions), and, perhaps, in a loose sense "remakes" of films noirs. *Chinatown* and *Brick* were original scripts while *The Long Goodbye* and *Body Heat* were adapted from novels and other films. What *The Long Goodbye* and *Chinatown* revised was the visual style with the use of color and the private eye character archetype while *Brick* took the noir private investigator, or quest narrative made popular by films like *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Big Sleep*, and *Murder, My Sweet* and placed it into a setting not used ever in film noir, a California high school. *Body Heat* can be defined as a remake and a revision of film noir: it combined elements of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946) and *Double Indemnity* (1944) films while also drawing from their literary sources, providing us with an excellent example of repetition and pastiche in our postmodern culture. Each of these films (and there are many others) invoke or refer to film noir in some way, and it is this relationship that defines them as neo-noir. Therefore, we can say that the first fundamental difference we see between film noir and neo-noir is that neo-noir entertains a relationship to film noir, a relationship that either invokes specific films, character types, narrative structures, or the noir visual style (or the popular

or particular understanding of noir's visual style) whereas film noir does not entertain any relationship with itself (however, film noir uses many of the stylistic and narrative devices from both German Expressionism and French Poetic Realism).[95]

The debate on the ontological or categorical status of neo-noir did repeat the debates on film noir with one exception: no critic has attempted to define neo-noir as a cinematic phenomenon with a consistent visual aesthetic as critics have tried to do with film noir (most notably taken up by Place and Peterson in there essay on the visual style of film noir).[96] Place and Peterson defined the visual style of film noir in terms of "antitraditional" lighting and camera techniques which was merely another way of saying that the majority of scenes in films noirs used very little light.[97] Criticism on neo-noir acknowledges the existence of a noir visual style in neo-noir films but they implicitly mean the style that critics constructed from a handful of classical Hollywood noirs, not a consistent visual style for neo-noir. In fact, sometimes what makes neo-noirs "neo" is the fact that they go at great lengths to distance their own visual style from the classic films noirs. An excellent example of this is *Chinatown* which is considered by some to be the template for future neo-noirs and as a representative film for the resurgence of neo-noir. In *Chinatown*, the lighting techniques that were considered to be characteristic of film noir were not present, and its visual style was not especially dark either: there were numerous scenes which included of a sun-bathed Los

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[95] Paul Schrader notes these influences in his essay "Notes on Film Noir" in *Perspectives on film noir* (1996), pp. 99-109.
[96] See Place and Peterson's "Some visual motifs of film noir" in *Film Comment* (1974), pp. 65-77.
[97] *Ibid*, p. 66.

Angeles and desert patches of dried up rivers. There was no attempt to emulate the chiaroscuro lighting (*The Godfather* (1971) and Alan J. Pakula's films from the seventies do a better job than *Chinatown* at recreating a dark *mise-en-scene* that filmmakers and critics identify as noir) or imitate a black and white color palette with color film stock like what Jean-Pierre Melville did in *Le Samourai* (1967). This is why many film critics have not attempted to define neo-noir in terms of a consistent visual style. Furthermore, attempts at defining neo-noir in terms of mood or tone usually do not sustain themselves either without entering into discussions of genre.

The most complete discussion of neo-noir was taken up by Foster Hirsch in his text *Detours and Lost Highways: a map of neo-noir* (1999). In this text, Hirsch argues explicitly against Schrader's analysis which defines film noir as a particular cycle of films in the history of cinema and as a movement that is defined by a particular mood or tone. What Hirsch's disagrees with in Schrader's account is the belief that noirs can no longer be produced after Welles' *Touch of Evil* (while he disagrees with Schrader's essay Hirsch uses many of Schrader's insights on film noir to talk about neo-noir).[98] Hirsch argues that we have evidence of films with noir-like style and point of view which then proves that noirs can be made after *Touch of Evil*, and this is the case because film noir is a genre according to Hirsch.[99] Out of all the critics discussing film noir and neo-noir, Hirsch makes the strongest argument for defining film noir as a genre. If film noir is a genre then so is neo-noir according to Hirsch; to be a bit more

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[98] See Hirsch (1999), pp. 2-3.
[99] *Ibid*, p. 3.

specific the genre he is talking about is "noir" where film noir refers to the

classical cycle from 1941 to 1958 and neo-noir refers to the contemporary update

and noir itself extends before 1941 and continues to the present.[100] However, there

are some problems with this account. When Hirsch uses neo-noir as a genre he

defines it in several ways: at several points noir is defined or used as if it were a

reflection of the Zeitgeist, a visual style, a mood or tone, and a genre with a

specific set of narrative structures and character types.[101] It is almost as if the

debates in Francophone and Anglophone film theory repeated itself in Hirsch's

attempt to explain how neo-noir is a genre. Hirsch's definition of the neo-noir

genre is a criteria for deciding what films are neo-noir and which films are not:

neo-noirs are films that continue the look and themes of classical noirs (or films

that do not and move into new territories while somehow remaining noir), or films

that combine traditional and contemporary patterns.[102] Furthermore, like many

other critics, Hirsch notes that some neo-noirs take a combative (revisionist)

stance to classical noir and other do not (the ones that do not are labeled

postmodern pastiche and the ones that do are usually modernist films like

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[100] *Ibid*, pp. 3-6.

[101] Hirsch defining film noir in terms of a Zeitgeist (p. 7), as a visual style (p. 12), as a mood or tone (p. 12), and as a narrative style (p. 14). See Hirsch (1999), pp. 7-14.

[102] Here is the quote from his text: "If, at least for the sake of discussion, we can agree that noir has a decent claim to genre status, then the next problem is which films qualify: How much noir does a picture need in order to merit the neo-noir tag? As Paul Schrader noted at "The New Noir" panel, "It gets easy to use the term to describe a lot of films," and indeed fragments of noir are scattered across a wide spectrum of contemporary movies. But even in the era of postmodern hybrids, noir remains a quanitifiably distinct commodity. My approach is to focus on films that continue the themes and the look formulated in classic noir; branch off into fertile or misguided new terrain; or, most typically, combine traditional and nouveau patterns with varying success" quoted in Hirsch (1999), p. 13.

Godard's *A bout de souffle*).[103] Both are examples of how noir has persisted as a genre that survived the classical period.

Even though I disagree with Hirsch's overall discussion because it is at times confused and incoherent, I agree with his overall approach in defining neo-noir as a genre, (although maybe not in the same way that he does). Neo-noir does function and exist as a genre like the western or the musical but I do not believe (like Hirsch) that it has a consistent visual style. In fact it would much easier to make that argument about films noirs but that argument has been dismantled.[104] Whenever I used the term "noir visual style" I am referring to the popular conception of film noir as a set of visual codes including detectives wearing trench coats with fedoras, extreme chiaroscuro black and white cinematography, and an overuse of Dutch angles. The popular understanding of noir's visual style shared by critics, filmmakers, and audiences does not define all of the films included in the noir canon. If film noir has no coherent visual style then by extension there is not a distinctive neo-noir style and any attempts at trying to construct one inevitably leave out films defined as noir while sometimes including films that are not. But, I will also concede the neo-noir or noir style (as understood by filmmakers and audiences) can attach itself to other film genres like science fiction, westerns, political thrillers, superhero films, and horrors. In this sense a particular version of noir (usually a visual style like in *Blade Runner* or *The Terminator*, but also narrative structures we now associate with noir) is combined with another genre to create a subgenre (of either science fiction or

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[103] See Hirsch (1999), p. 13.
[104] See Frank Krutnik's *In a Lonely Street* (1991) for a critique of a definition of film noir in terms of visual style.

neo-noir).[105] However, I do not think our definition of neo-noir is ultimately stable, and the radically different ways that American and foreign filmmakers use and invoke noir is a testament to this.[106] The type of noir that Coen Brothers films, *Blood Simple* and *Miller's Crossing*, invokes is more literary (Hammett and Chandler) than the cinematic tradition underlying classic films noirs much more than the visual style. Whereas Paul Verhoeven invokes classic noir character types like the idiotic middle-class male protagonist who is lured into crime by a femme fatale to revise the narrative expectations provided by previous films noirs. However, before we get ahead of ourselves we should discuss what film theorists believe distinguishes neo-noir from film noir. We will now briefly summarize the history of an idea, the scholarship on neo-noir which is a discourse about films that do not fit in other genres but constitutes a genre of their own.

Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton published the first full-length text on film noir, titled *A Pananorama of American Film (1941-1953)* and first appeared in France in 1955. The first critics to have treated film noir also acknowledged the resurgence of noir in the New Hollywood era. However, not everything from film noir carried over to the seventies. Borde and Chaumeton have noted the primary differences between the classic cycle and that of neo-noir in their essay "Twenty years later: film noir in the 1970s" (1975). According to Borde and Chaumeton, the first difference they listed between these two cycles is

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[105] This topic has been explored by Paul Meehan in *Tech-noir: the fusion of science fiction and film noir* (2008).

[106] Witness the way foreign films like *Get Carter* (1971) and *The American Friend* (1977) construe the past cinematic tradition of film noir compared to American films. Wenders and Hodges are much more interested in ramping up the atmosphere and de-emphasizing narrative structure and details.

the diminished role of the private detective.[107] In the classic cycle the private detective was a stock character for most of the films noirs, and this is due in large to the American tradition of hard-boiled fiction where the private detective figured prominently. This character archetype represented a being that was on the outskirts of the social system. Neither cop nor criminal, the private detective moved in and out of different social institutions and situations. The private detective symbolized the impotence of the American police force while also becoming their scapegoat.[108] In the neo-noir cycle, the private detective is displaced by the "rogue cop" archetype in films like *Serpico* (1973) and *Magnum Force* (1973). However, when the private detective is used, filmmakers have inserted an ironic treatment of it and distance its original usage in the classic cycle effectively taking the *content* from the classic cycle, (the private detective) and emphasizing the *form* itself (in films like *The Long Goodbye* and *Chinatown*).

In Altman's film, *The Long Goodbye*, the private detective archetype is a revision of the classic private investigator. But, Altman's Marlowe (Rip Van Marlowe as Altman once said) is sleuthing around in 1970s sunny California with nude-yoga practitioners for neighbors and ultra-health conscious messages that do not let him forget how unhealthy it is to smoke. Altman has taken a character archetype and thrown him into a world where his "moral code" is incongruous with the contemporary social formation. Altman utilizes the content of film noir to bring attention to the social sphere rather than the existential torment of the private detective that was emphasized in the classic cycle. In general, film

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[107] See Borde and Chaumeton's essay "Twenty Years Later: film noir in the 1970s" in *Perspective on Film Noir* (1996), p. 79.
[108] *Ibid*, p. 79.

theorists have argued that neo-noir uses and emphasizes the content of the film noir in the classic cycle to formulate both an indictment of society, and a nostalgia or appreciation for the classic cycle.[109] This is essentially what Altman has done here with his version of Philip Marlowe, except for the fact that Altman appears to be making fun of his society and the private investigator myth simultaneously.

Not only have neo-noirs taken the private detective archetype as a nominal premise, but the noir of the 1970s takes the entire host of film noir narrative tropes as premises for constructing original narratives rather than novel adaptations.[110] During the classic cycle the most common themes of film noir including narrative material like a world of moral ambiguity, a corrupt and dysfunctional society, and vague understandings of what is legal/illegal. These films emphasized how the protagonist attempts to distance himself from criminality rather than the social system itself.[111]The moral ambiguity of film noir is self-consciously treated in neo-noir as something that no longer has any frame of reference: psychological themes found in film noir, like guilt, fear, anxiety, and dread no longer figure into the protagonists mind because there is no moral lesson to be learned from this society created by the film-text.[112] Furthermore, the social institutions of late-capitalism are presumed to be criminal; there is no need to blur the line between legal and illegal activities like the classic film noir cycle because in neo-noir this becomes a premise to work with, not a proposition that must be

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[109] See Larry Gross' essay "Film apres noir" in *Perspectives on film noir* (1996), p. 110.
[110] *Ibid*, p. 110.
[111] *Ibid*, p. 110.
[112] *Ibid*, p. 113.

demonstrated.[113] The category of the free and autonomous individual who can change the system is ironically dramatized and called into question. The neo-noir films of the 1970s depict capitalist society as criminal and individuals as powerless to change anything.

We discussed above that film noir was never aware of itself as a particular style or movement which is the primary way we can distinguish between film noir and neo-noir (except for *Touch of Evil* by Orson Welles and *Odds Against Tomorrow* by Robert Wise as Foster Hirsch has noted in *Detours and Lost Highways*). In the classical period, filmmakers and producers always identified their films as crime, gangster, private investigator or melodramas. Neo-noir in the 1970s took the narrative themes and styles of the classic cycle and turned them into *forms* which then allowed these filmmakers to move away from psychological to sociological analyses.[114] According to Gross, the most critically acclaimed and influential films of this cycle include *Alphaville* (1965), *Point Blank* (1967), *The Long Goodbye*, *Performance* (1969), *The Conversation* (1974), *Taxi Driver*, *Badlands* (1973), and *Chinatown*, are not restricted to America and in their own way refer back to the thematic content of film noir. By turning the thematic elements into premises, neo-noir requires an active spectator, informed of the history of cinema to comprehend what these filmmakers are doing. Neo-noir calls into question, and in some cases (i.e. Jean-Luc Godard's films), repudiates the narrative conventions of Hollywood. The films in the short list mentioned above were attempts made by American filmmakers to introduce the

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[113] *Ibid*, p. 113.
[114] *Ibid*, p. 110.

innovations from the French New-Wave to break out of the commercial cinema of Hollywood.[115] This understanding of neo-noir is generally not disputed among critics. What is under dispute is how we should understand the 1970s version of noir compared to the "postmodern" neo-noirs or 1980 to the present version of noir.

Beginning with Leighton Grist,[116] film critics have made a distinction between noir from the seventies and the eighties (and nineties) continuation along the lines of the concept of a cinematic modernism. What several critics have done is relate the re-emergence of noir in the seventies to the cinema of the French New Wave. In fact, this seems to be the other main source for seventies neo-noir, especially the work of Godard. It is an interesting parallel given that the French created the idea of film noir, and gave American filmmakers inspiration for redefining noir in the seventies. However, the connection with the French New Wave appears to only work for the seventies noir; eighties and nineties version of the genre do not make any attempts to emulate the French New Wave, but instead have returned to the cinematic sources of the classic cycle and in some cases, like the work of Lawrence Kasdan and the Coen brothers, returned to the literary source material of classic noir.

Andrew Spicer divides neo-noir into two cycles: modernist neo-noir and postmodern neo-noir. Modernist neo-noir is a product of a wider phenomenon known as the "New Hollywood" or the "Hollywood Renaissance" according to Spicer and is an American version of European New Waves (French and Italian)

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[115] *Ibid*, p. 111.
[116] For Leighton Grist's discussion see "Moving Targets and Black Widows: Film Noir in Modern Hollywood" in *The Book of Film Noir* (1993).

which became a neo-Modernist cinema. American neo-modernist noirs worked within the noir genre to explore themes of anomie, and alienation, using parody and allusion to explore social anxieties. A significant amount of neo-modernist neo-noirs according to Spicer deconstructed the private detective myth while others combined the investigative narrative formula with political paranoia thrillers.[117] With the release of *Body Heat* neo-noir became postmodern. Spicer, while alluding to Jameson's work on postmodern culture but arguing against what he thinks is a negative treatment of postmodern cultural, uses Jean-Francois Lyotard's definition of the postmodernist theory of knowledge which rejected the legitimacy of metanarratives and hierarchies and instead celebrated difference and the production of theoretical discourses rather than philosophy as the source of truth. Postmodern culture, according to Spicer, is the extension of this rejection of metanarratives and hierarchical normative categories in favor of an aesthetic that celebrates communication from the present and the past to the realm of culture.[118]

Postmodern noirs borrow and revise the themes of the classic noirs while also creating hybrid films that combine noir with other genres. *Body Heat* represents the first aspect of postmodern neo-noirs, borrowing heavily from classical films noirs, and *Blade Runner* represents the second aspect, combining noir with science fiction. Apparently against what Jameson has written on postmodern culture, Spicer argues that this complex form of cinematic borrowing and reference has the possibility for genuine creativity rather than what Jameson

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[117] See Andrew Spicer's *Film Noir* (2002), pp. 137-141.
[118]*Ibid*, p. 150.

describes as superficial and empty exercises in pastiche.[119] This creativity is referred to as stylistic and generic excess by Spicer: postmodern noirs pushed the generic conventions (Spicer means character types and narrative tropes) and stylistic devices to their extreme: femme fatales were hyper-fatal and the male protagonists were much more ineffectual and hopeful than what we saw in the classic cycle. Several films recreated the chiaroscuro lighting effect with color stock, creating blacks that were much more dense than we saw before, and used the flashback structure to absurd extremes (see *Memento* (2000) for an extreme depiction of the flash-back narrative structure and David Fincher's *Se7en* (1995) for an example of an excessive use of black in a color film).[120] Furthermore, postmodern neo-noir revised gender stereotypes used in the classic cycle to criticize the legitimacy of male dominance in society, something that neo-modernist noirs failed to do in the seventies.

Richard Martin's historical survey of film noir in America, *Mean Streets and Raging Bulls: the legacy of film noir in American cinema* (1997) provides another systematic account of film noir beyond the classic period which covers similar ideas already discussed by Hirsch and Spicer. Martin's survey coincides with some of the points made by Spicer and Hirsch but he also diverges from their discussion when his survey reaches neo-noir in the nineties. He periodizes noir by decades, and for each decade he identifies certain tendencies that best describe the general orientation of the noirs produced in that time. The seventies was a period of genre revision and social critique, a claim that most of the scholarship on neo-

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[119] *Ibid*, p. 150.
[120] *Ibid*, pp. 155-159.

noir does not dispute, more so because these critics lump the seventies noir with

the more general cycle of New Hollywood films being produced during this time.

The eighties was a period of postmodern pastiche, while the nineties noir were

"ironic," which I believe is Martin's way of characterizing postmodern films that

are not only filled with pastiches to cinematic history but also social criticism.

The nineties "ironic" noirs seem to reinvent the social criticism of the seventies

noirs that most critics argue when they try to distinguish between these three

decades. Films like *Blue Velvet* have been seen as both a late survival of the

seventies socially conscious noirs or as an anticipatory film for the nineties noir

cycle. What I think Martin means by "ironic" in this context is some combination

of "counter-intuitive" and "cynical." The nineties noirs, Coen Brothers, Tarantino,

Soderbergh, Lynch, Dahl, and Kathryn Bigalow's films, all presuppose past

knowledge of noir cinematic codes which they will use for their own narrative

purposes. Lynch, Tarantino, and the Coen Brothers' noirs (*Lost Highway* (1997)

by Lynch, *Fargo* (1996) by the Coen Brothers, and *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and

Jackie Brown (1997) by Tarantino) represent the most "ironic" of the nineties

cycle because of how much they use past cinema to then comment on and produce

counter-intuitive narratives. For example, *Fargo* is a complete reversal of the

gender roles of the classic noir heroes with Marge Gunderson being the strong,

and invulnerable detective who solves the murder mystery. *Pulp Fiction* is made

up of three simple stories that interweave with each other. *Lost Highway* is

probably the most complex of this selection, which could be classified as a surreal

neo-noir because of its absurdist plot and imagery and has much less ironic

moments than Lynch's *Wild at Heart* (1990). Looking at this small selection of the more prominent noirs from the nineties it might be better to describe them as counter-intuitive or re-imaginings of previous noir situations, narrative structures, and characters than to call them ironic. They are not far from the pastiche films of the eighties in this respect because they do not succeed in criticizing society (with the exception of maybe *Fargo* which comments on the sexism of previous private investigator noirs, but that is not the primary focus of the film).

Now looking back at Martin's distinction between the eighties and seventies noirs he merely makes explicit what many scholars thought when they compared the noir of the eighties and the seventies. They typically juxtapose *Body Heat* with *Chinatown*, which somehow demonstrates the hypothesis that eighties noirs could do nothing but reference other films while the seventies noirs were filled with Godard imitators that increasingly pushed the limit of Hollywood generic conventions only to expose them as ideological myths (Altman did this effectively, much more so than other "New Hollywood" filmmakers, along with Arthur Penn in *Little Big Man* (1970) and *Night Moves* (1975)).

This sort of typology cannot be defended. *Taxi Driver* and *Chinatown*, along with many other neo-noirs of the seventies frequently engaged in postmodernist pastiche, and the claim that they were socially conscious films is debatable. In many ways, as we will discuss below, the eighties noir engaged in just as much social criticism as the seventies. But, whereas the seventies films tapped into public anxieties about Nixonian corruption and surveillance, along with an increasingly disillusioned belief in American foreign policy. The eighties

noirs reintroduced the femme fatale in a much bigger way than we ever saw before, undermined male dominance and the institution of patriarchy, which as many politically minded scholars have recognized that there was something missing in the neo-noirs produced in the "New Hollywood" cinema of the seventies.[121] When film critics attempt to make this distinction, juxtaposing the seventies as modernist and the eighties as pastiche, they usually were incorrectly imposing a framework that does not properly account for the various political discourse in both periods.

The basis of this distinction is the belief that the "New Hollywood" cinema changed into a more commercialized production system which favored films that guaranteed high profits and where the director was relinquished of his *auteur* status. Genre specialist Steve Neale made this argument to explain how the filmmakers in the seventies used noir discourse to criticize the government and/or society while the eighties noirs were merely exercises in pastiche filmmaking (the most common example given is Kasdan's *Body Heat*).[122] This distinction does not work too well, as we have already mentioned, given that the seventies films were using pastiche along with parody (i.e. *Chinatown* and *The Long Goodbye*) and the eighties noirs criticized American politics, and Reagan's government. This is because many films in the neo-noir canon do both. Neale's distinction does not help us to explain the difference between the 1970s and 1980-1990s noirs.

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[121] *Ibid*, p. 148.
[122] See "Film Noir" in Steve Neale's *Genre and Hollywood* (2000).

Alain Silver tried to define neo-noir by defining it as a continuation of the mood and tone of the films noirs in the classic cycle.[123] Neo-noirs, according to Silver, are distinguishable from retro-noirs which are films made after the classic cycle but are set during the forties period of classical noir (*Mulholland Falls* (1996), *L.A. Confidential* (1997), and *The Man Who Wasn't There* (2001)) while neo-noirs are films made after the classic cycle but set in the present (*The Long Goodbye*, *Body Heat*, *Collateral* (2004), and *Brick*).[124] Furthermore, retro-noir is more cinematic than realistic which for Silver means that retro-noirs are concerned with commenting on other films through their set-designs, clothing, and other visual/narrative embellishments that recall America cinema in the forties. This distinction repeats what Martin tried to do when he periodized the seventies, eighties, and nineties neo-noirs. However, this description does not work if we consider the examples Silver uses. I would argue that each of these films has the same amount of "realism" in them. Silver also argues that neo-noirs are characterized by a "need to know" (this description works for films in both categories that Silver uses and films that have this ideologeme present (the will to knowledge)).[125] The final distinction Silver makes is that retro-noirs are reactionary tales while neo-noirs are progressive because in retro-noirs men are more masculine and less vulnerable.[126] Again, retro-noirs are not anymore reactionary than neo-noirs and vice versa. To use the examples Silver brought up the men in the retro-noirs are just as vulnerable as the men in neo-noirs*: L.A.*

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[123] See Silver's "Introduction: Neo-Noir" in *Film Noir: The Encyclopedia* (2010), p. 350.
[124] See Silver's "Neo-noir/ Retro-noir" in *Film Noir: The Encyclopedia* (2010), p. 365.
[125] *Ibid,* p. 365.
[126] *Ibid,* p. 365.

Confidential (1997), (the prototype for retro-noirs for Silver), focuses on three police officers whose masculinity has been shattered in some or another, and two out of the three end up defeated in the final events of the narrative. Furthermore, some of the male characters in the neo-noirs mentioned are more masculine and cunning than the characters referenced in the retro-noirs, thus demonstrating that Silver's definitions are meaningless at worst, or too simplistic at best. I would argue that we can group them together under the category neo-noir but recognizing that their only common feature is that they refer in some way to the classic cycle while also recognizing that some are period pieces while others are not.

All we can say at this point is that neo-noirs invoke some sort of nostalgia for a cinematic past or a past of human history. Whether they are reactionary or not depends on the utopian dimension that they articulate. *L.A. Confidential,* far from being a reactionary tale, is one that invokes nostalgia for the 1950s while depicting it as a world that was just as violent and corrupt as our world today, thereby undermining any nostalgic impulse for an idealized or romantic vision of the past. And *Body Heat* (characterized by Silver as a neo-noir and not a retro-noir) is much more reactionary than other retro-noirs; this film entertains no connection with real human History at all but rather with cinematic and literary history.[127] It appears to be much more interested in producing a complex interplay between Cain's novels and Wilder's *Double Indemnity* than, as Silver would have it, criticizing society. Therefore, I do not see any coherent or consistent way to distinguish retro- from neo-noir along the lines of political discourses. Some are

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[127] See Jameson's *Postmodernism* (1991), p. 20.

period pieces while others are not. The fact that these films are retro does not mean that they are reactionary, and vice versa.

At this point I would like to comment on the status of neo-noir, bringing the discussion back to notions of genre, mood, tone, style, and/or historical definitions of neo-noir. Most of the critics writing on neo-noir define as a genre and this began with Todd Erickson's argument.[128] Erickson argues that film noir was a movement (this idea is similar to what Schrader proposed) which means that film noir cuts across genres that were more or less established within Hollywood production.[129] This movement ended with either *Touch of Evil* or *Odds Against Tomorrow*, and then the a small number of noirs were made in the sixties and seventies. The production of noir in the eighties allowed audiences and critics to discern a distinct cycle which Erickson argues is the emergence of a new genre, distinct from the film noir movement in the forties and fifties.[130] The core of this new genre was criminal activity and the return of noir is the result of three factors: technical advancements with color film stock, a higher degree of public fascination with crime stories, and an understanding of a noir sensibility among filmmakers.[131] Advancements in color film stock gave filmmakers the ability to recreate the expressionist lighting effects that we saw in films noirs.[132] Chandler, Hammett, and Cain were more popular with American audiences, and contemporary hardboiled fiction writers like James Elroy admitted to being

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[128] See Todd Erickson's "Kill me again: movement becomes genre" in *Film Noir Reader* (1996), pp. 307-330.
[129] *Ibid*, p. 308.
[130] *Ibid*, p. 308.
[131] *Ibid*, p. 314.
[132] *Ibid*, p. 316.

influenced by forties and fifties noirs.[133] Finally, filmmakers working in the

eighties were aware of film noir and they were interested in recreating noir for

contemporary cinema.[134] This is how Erickson defines the key difference between

film noir and neo-noir: one cycle was not conscious of itself (there were genre

conventions to uphold) while the other, neo-noir, responded to its culture but with

a resurrected sensibility or lexicon of cinematic codes from the past.[135] However,

Erickson does not provide a definition of the genre, neo-noir, and at many points

treats film noir as if it were a genre in the same way that Hirsch did in his two

texts on the subject.

However, neo-noir films themselves appeared to have solved the previous

debate on the status of film noir. When a film invokes a narrative strategy

characteristic of noir (for example, a flashback with a voice-over narrative), or

photographs scenes with high contrast between the light and darks, or uses "noir"

stock-characters, film noir is necessarily treated as if it was a genre, one that can

be reworked and made contemporary again (even if a filmmaker tells a story set in

historical period before film noir, like *Chinatown*). Furthermore, just as many film

critics had *Double Indemnity*, *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Big Sleep*, and *Out of the

Past* in mind whenever they tried to formulate their definition of film noir, it is

these films that became the main cinematic pivot points for several remakes or re-

imaginings in the eighties (for example we do not see many neo-noirs cite the

visual style of *Impact* (1949), a B-noir of the forties, or *Kiss Me Deadly*). Neo-

noirs like film critics have specific ideas as to what constitutes a film noir and

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[133] *Ibid*, p. 317.
[134] *Ibid*, p. 321.
[135] *Ibid*, p. 323.

what does not. But, what is interesting here is that film noir, however one wants to define it, never existed as such.[136] Neale argues that the phenomenon of film noir probably never existed.[137] This explains why many attempts at creating a coherent generic definition of film noir never lead to any consensus. There was never a stable set of semantic building blocks (to use Rick Altman's terminology) or a stable syntax, that is, film noir was never a semantic or syntactic genre. To use the example of the B-noir *Impact* again, this film does not have expressionist lighting techniques and the storytelling devices characteristic of film noir are not present. It has some elements of films noirs but it would not conform to the typical generic definitions of film noir put forth by critics. If this is the case, and I would argue with Neale that film noir is a critical category, then it may seem paradoxical to argue that neo-noir is a genre.

After, the fifties, and even with films like *Kiss Me Deadly*, *Touch of Evil*, and *Odds Against Tomorrow*, there was a recognizable awareness/understanding of film noir within the American filmmaking community. These included films from the French New Wave but also American films like *Harper* (1966) and *Point Blank*, which were followed with more neo-noirs in the seventies. The neo-noirs of the sixties and seventies drew on different elements of this fantasy construct than the neo-noirs of the eighties. We have already reviewed those differences so we will not repeat them here but instead think about neo-noir as a genre and one that works by simultaneously calling up the fantasy construct of film noir while also revising it. Neo-noir is a cultural relay in that it posits a

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[136] See Neale (2000), p. 154.
[137] *Ibid*, p. 156.

cinematic phenomenon that never existed while at the same time creating it by referring to it. It is a genre that revises and continues an empty space in cinematic history. Neo-noir is a genre but one that is inherently nostalgic (or postmodern),[138] one that relies on the existence of a constructed set of cinematic codes, tropes, and narrative patterns (which also relies on a semi-stable consistent set of semantic materials for the audience to recall) to explain its own unique forms of visual style, and transformations of narrative patterns. Neo-noir is therefore an excellent manifestation of what Jameson characterizes as cultural production that reflects the lack of historicity that characterizes the postmodern culture of late-capitalism.

Psychoanalytic and feminist criticism on neo-noir

Moving on from our review of the different ways film studies has characterized neo-noir to more politically oriented criticism we will now look at one of the main branches of criticism in film theory and also a popular critical lens for neo-noir scholarship which will be broadly defined as psychoanalytic-feminist theory. Many critics outside of feminist scholarship use psychoanalysis (Hirsch uses many of Freud's ideas when providing an overview of the plot for neo-noirs in *Detours and Lost Highways*) but the feminist critics predominantly use the psychoanalytic theory presented by Jacques Lacan along with Althusser's theoretical contribution to the theory of ideology for different ends than the critics

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[138] Along with highlighting pastiche as the primary characteristic of postmodern culture Jameson also acknowledged that American cinema was nostalgic, and one example he used was *Chinatown*. He argued that *Chinatown,* and also *Il Conformista,* represent an impulse for films to recoup the past which destroys our sense of the present, the immediate past, or to a more distant past, like the 1930s depression era in America and Italy, see Jameson's *Postmodernism* (1991), p. 19.

we have looked at thus far. We will now review some of the main ideas and trends developed by feminist critics writing on neo-noir.

Psychoanalytic criticism on neo-noir overlaps with feminist criticism and for the most part, these critics are interested in the depiction of women in neo-noir. Several feminist theorists analyze the revision of the femme fatale character in neo-noirs by comparing her depictions in films noirs. However, prior to this critical fascination with the femme fatale, feminist film theorists worked with the ideas that Laura Mulvey presented in her article "Visual pleasure and narrative cinema." Even though her article does not deal exclusively with noir, she makes a strong argument for using psychoanalysis as a critical tool for political activism in cultural criticism and her arguments have influenced most of the feminist criticism on neo-noir to come after. Mulvey's is apparent in any criticism that studies how the narrative apparatus structures the way women are "looked" at in films. She argues that traditional Hollywood cinema displaces the "threat" of castration that the female image evokes by fetishizing her body with a cinematic gaze that takes the form of a controlling male gaze.[139] This mode of looking is built into the cinematic language of traditional Hollywood filmmaking thereby buttressing the threat of the female image and preventing an alienation effect that would occur if the female image was not fetishized by the camera, and by extension the viewer.[140] To work against this tendency in American cinema, Mulvey advises avant-garde filmmakers to break with traditional editing and narrative techniques and free the image into the materiality of time and space,

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[139] See Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (1989)*, p. 25.
[140] *Ibid*, p. 26.

which would theoretically allow the spectator to view the female image without fetishizing her but with passionate detachment.[141] Feminist-psychoanalytic criticism extended Mulvey's political intervention by studying how the female voice is silenced by Hollywood cinema, and how it can also disrupt the dominant discourse of patriarchy.

Feminist critics, for example, Claire Johnston and Christine Gledhil, followed Mulvey, and used psychoanalysis as a critical tool to discuss how the female voice was evoked and subjugated in films noirs. Whereas a majority of critics were trying to answer the question "What does the text mean?" Johnston and Gledhil studied how film-texts create meaning, and particularly how films comment on women and their place in contemporary society. They demonstrated how supposed revisionary or progressive films from the 1970s evoked the female voice while also silencing it within the same film-text.[142] What Gledhil took from Mulvey was not her argument on how traditional Hollywood's *mise-en-scene* structures the female image so that spectators inevitably fetishize it, but Gledhil studied how male dominance is created within a film-text. This politically oriented criticism was directly inspired by Mulvey's intervention to reexamine the depiction of women in narrative cinema. Eventually, psychoanlytic-feminist criticism became more interested in the femme fatale of neo-noir that re-emerged in the 1980s and 1990s.[143]

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[141] *Ibid*, p. 26.

[142] See Christine Gledhil's "Klute 2: Feminism and Klute" in *Women in Film Noir* (1980), pp. 113-128.

[143] See Helen Hanson "Professional Investigations and Femme Fatales in Neo-noir" in *Hollywood Heroines: women in film noir and the female gothic film* (2007), pp.133-173. And Julie Grossman "Looking forward: deconstructing the femme fatale" in *Rethinking the femme fatale in film noir* (2009), pp.132-153.

With the publication of bell hook's text, *Reel to real: race, class, and sex at the movies* (2009), some feminist critics relied less on psychoanalysis to supply the critical tools for restoring the critical impulse in cultural texts and instead focused on the intersections of race, class, and sex films. hooks attempted to study films that were considered progressive statements on race, class, and sex to uncover whether they were actually progressive, or if they reaffirmed the status-quo.[144] hooks covered a wide range of contemporary filmmakers working today while giving an extended commentary on the work of Spike Lee, a filmmaker she considers to be the most recognizable Afro-American filmmaker. In this text hooks' goal was strictly pedagogical: she wanted to teach academic and non-academic spectators to consume films critically and resist accepting the ideological depictions of race and gender. She takes seriously the arguments made by various feminist theorists on representation and the role films play in legitimizing racial and gender norms in society.

In the realm of neo-noir criticism, Jans B. Wager, continued hooks' project with an analysis of female characters in noir cinema. The latter half of his text deals with neo-noir and so we will restrict our discussion to his neo-noir criticism. Wager repeats the arguments made before for distinguishing between retro-noir and neo-noir, stating that the former is more reactionary (not in the Marxist sense but as a coherent political theory for radical identity politics) in relation to the plight of women and racial others in the United States. Retro-noir, according to Wager, gives spectators a chance to return to the cinematic past of 1940s and 1950s film noir without any of the consequences: the femme fatales in

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[144] See hook (2009), p. 3.

retro-noirs do not threaten male dominance but instead submit to men without any trouble.[145] Neo-noirs on the other hand often revise the visual style of film noir while celebrating women with dangerous femme fatales that put men in their place. However, neo-noirs can at times be revisionary towards gender politics and at the same time be reactionary toward the racial other (and I would argue in terms of the class struggle as well).[146] I do not agree entirely with Wager's splitting of retro-noir and neo-noir according to how they comment on the role of women in society because as I have argued above I think there are progressive/reactionary potentials in both subsets of the genre and there is not enough evidence to distinguish between the two subgenres as he argues for in his text. However, his argument is persuasive because women certainly drive the narrative in the eighties and nineties neo-noirs compared to retro-noirs (for example, *Body Heat*, *The Last Seduction*, *Romeo is Bleeding, Fargo*, *Blood Simple*). In neo-noirs the femme fatale became the primary source of narrative disequilibrium by disrupting the schemes of men, using and abusing them to get what she desired. This disruption can be read as an allegory for freedom from the patriarchal ideology and practices for women. However, in retro-noirs (films like *L.A. Confidential*, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, and *Mulholland Falls*) there is a noticeable absence of strong and independent women (a similar sort of absence to what we saw in noir of the seventies). The absence of a femme fatale does not necessarily mean that retro-noirs are reactionary, as I have argued above, given that several retro-noirs revise the depiction of women in films noirs but in

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[145] See Jans B. Wager's *Dames in the driver's seat: rereading film noir* (2005), p. 157.
[146] *Ibid*, p. 114.

different ways than what we see in neo-noirs. That being said, Wager's text is the most sophisticated feminist criticism on neo-noir and his work presents possibilities for further discussions on how race, class, and sex on treated in neo-noirs.

Marxist criticism

We will now complete this literature review by moving away from work done on neo-noir and to a discussion of Marxist film theory. The purpose of what follows will be to explain the theoretical antecedents to the present work and explain how it relates to the previous scholarship done on neo-noir.

Compared to the amount of Marxist criticism on literature, there has been a relatively small amount done on cinema. This is not surprising given that discussions of literature are concerned with medium that has been in existence much longer than film. As a medium Marxian theorists did not take film seriously, especially in terms of creating possibilities for political praxis. Adorno in his stereotypically negative style did not have a high regard for the cinema, calling it "regression manufactured on an industrial scale."[147] Adorno's criticism of film is formulated by comparing it to literature. According to Adorno, literature is aesthetically autonomous whereas film attempts to be realistic. Witness this quote from Adorno:

> The reactionary nature of any realist aesthetic today is inseparable from this commodity character. Tending to reinforce, affirmatively, the phenomenal surface of society, realism dismisses any attempt to penetrate that surface as a romantic endeavour...[f]ilm is faced

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[147] See Adorno's essay "Transparencies on film" in *The Culture Industry* (2007), p. 178.

with the dilemma of finding a procedure which neither lapses into arts-and-crafts nor slips into a mere documentary mode[148]

There is one way out of this dilemma, to avoid mere "arts and crafts" or documentary filmmaking, which is montage. Why montage? Because it disperses images in the film into a constellation which mimics writing.[149] However, montage has its problems as well because a montage of images in a film lacks intention, or rather it renounces all meaning. According to Adorno, montage in film conveys nothing. There is nothing that film has within itself, staying pure to a language that is exclusively cinematic, that can be revolutionary. Instead filmmakers must combine film with other media in order to attempt to be political (like music for example).[150] In the end, Adorno has little hope for cinema to become an autonomous art.

Now in spite of Adorno's reproach of film I intend to study American cinema with ideas of political criticism in mind. In fact I want to continue the politically oriented style of criticism done by the psychoanalytic-feminist critics but instead focus on class struggle, how films subvert and/or reaffirm ideology, and situate the films within the broader schema of the mode of production in American cinema. This is generally what the *Methodology* section above explains, taking Jameson's theory from *The Political Unconscious,* transposing it to studying popular films. This way of doing film criticism will break away from previous Marxists film theorists, Colin MacCabe, Sergei Eisenstein, and Jean-Luc Godard who tried to discover the proper form and cinematic techniques for

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[148] *Ibid,* p. 182.
[149] *Ibid*, p. 182.
[150] *Ibid*, p. 183.

criticizing capitalism while mobilizing the political consciousness of the working class. Jameson's essays on film do not engage with the discussion of the of what is the best type of aesthetic for political praxis but with how certain films express the difficulties that postmodern culture has with apprehending the totality of late-capitalism. It is not that their work is not of interest, but I am more inclined to study how ideology works within neo-noir and more generally how films relate to their social context.

However, I do not dismiss MacCabe's work entirely because he has written substantially on film from a Marxist (and Althusserian Marxist) problematic and much of his insights will be incorporated into how I define the nature of the cinema and the way ideology interpellates subjects through the cinematic apparatus. It would therefore be useful to comment on MacCabe's work here and summarize the ideas I find useful for this thesis.

In MacCabe's essay "Theory and Film: principles of realism and pleasure" (1976) he uses Lacan's concept of the imaginary and the symbolic to explain how films resolve real contradictions in society. The way films resolve contradictions in the diegesis is by hiding the mechanisms that allow spectators to identify with characters in the film; when films hide this identification mechanism the spectator is removed from the realm of contradiction.[151] This imaginary resolution is a characteristic of "realist" cinema, the dominant aesthetic paradigm in Hollywood filmmaking. The realist paradigm was not always dominant but was the result of ideological strategies after the advent of sound and has been the dominant form

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[151] See MacCabe (1976), p. 21.

since the Second World War.[152] Realist cinema wants to hide the work of the

camera because to call attention to it is to threaten the imaginary resolution

created by a film's discourses. In particular, the Hollywood cinema tries to bring

two subjects into one: the spectator as viewer and the spectators as he/she is

brought into the diegesis of the film.[153] This distinction between the subject as

viewer and subject as identifying with the diegesis mirrors the distinction between

narrative and discourse.[154] Narrative begins with a multiplicity which must be

overcome but also prolonged; it begins with incoherence but promises to resolve

that incoherence.[155] However, to show the "seams" of this construction from

incoherence to resolution, the narrative must deny that it is a discourse, an

articulation, in order to pass itself off as a simple identity that has complete

knowledge of the reality that it has created.[156] To produce narratives means to

hide the existence of multiple discourses working within a film. According to

MacCabe, when realist films deny multiple discourses this means that realist

cinema resolve real contradictions in the imaginary.

MacCabe's theory of realism and pleasures anticipates Jameson's

comments on narrative and how each narrative is a socially symbolic act.

Furthermore, MacCabe's film criticism demonstrates how we can use Lacan's

theory of the symbolic and the imaginary along with structuralism to explain how

contradictions are "smoothed" over (MacCabe's term), resolved within a film

text. However, to merely stop at uncovering the work of ideological resolution

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[152] *Ibid*, p. 8.
[153] *Ibid*, p. 17.
[154] *Ibid*, p. 17.
[155] *Ibid*, p. 17.
[156] *Ibid*, p. 17.

within a film is not enough. MacCabe states that to make this the political goal is an "ultra-left" fantasy of surrealism.[157] We must bring the analysis of the film back to the spectator, back to the realm of the social to study what contradictions in society the film is "smoothing" over. The critic should criticize the film's relation to its audience, the way it produces an imaginary resolution by hiding this relation and the construction of this resolution within the film's diegesis. Subversive films break this identification, and expose the workings of ideology, and engage with History, the Real of the film. MacCabe does not go this far; he does not define the Real of the text as History, in the way that Jameson does with literature. MacCabe states that subversive films bring attention to the social relations of the characters in the diegesis and also to create a "strangeness" that breaks identification with characters in the diegesis. This estrangement makes it apparent that the spectator is watching a film. This process that MacCabe is writing about can only be History as the Real that MacCabe is claiming appears when the films fails to resolve in the imaginary the real contradictions of social existence. History, which is nothing other than what is propelled by the class struggle, works to disrupt the process of identification with characters in the diegesis.

In MacCabe' earlier essay "Realism and the Cinema: notes on some Brechtian theses" (1974), he puts forward a productive theory for thinking about films as texts made up of a set of discourses. He uses this theory to undermine Bazin's valorization of realist cinema. Rehearsing a similar debate in Marxist aesthetics MacCabe exposes the ideological *mise-en-scene* of Hollywood realist

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[157] *Ibid*, p. 21.

cinema by showing how discourses within the text are repressed. Realist cinema obscures the reality of contradiction in society by creating within the diegesis a reality that is simple, an expressive causality where the appearance is determined by its essence. Realist cinema cannot deal with contradiction and dismisses it by either containing opposing utterances from a subordinated discourse, evoking them in the film only to resolve contradictory discourses in the imaginary of the film or dismiss them entirely. However, given what we discussed above, MacCabe's thesis in this article states that the realist film is ideological because it hides a portion of reality from its text.[158] It implies a reality outside of the film which merely represents it. MacCabe makes a point of rectifying this in his later essay on realism by stating that his earlier work relied too much on structuralism which separated the viewer from the film, whereas we cannot separate these two figures because the viewer is interpellated in a process of identification within the film.[159] Even though he repudiated much of what he said in this essay later, we can still use his theory of filmic discourses in our analysis because it provides us with a cinematic counterpart to Jameson's use of Voloshinov's theory of ideologemes, strategic class discourses that exist within a film text which is a necessary and important element of Marxist criticism.

Therefore, the contribution to the scholarship of neo-noir that this thesis will make is to apply the ideas used by Althusserian influenced critics from *Screen* and Jameson's analysis of narrative that he introduced in *The Political*

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[158] See MacCabe (1974), p. 18.
[159] *Ibid*, p. 25.

Unconscious. This project aims to make a contribution to our knowledge of postmodernism in 1970s American cinema.

Chapter Two. The private detective in *film noir*: From *The Maltese Falcon* to *Kiss Me Deadly*

Introduction

In what follows we will discuss the private detective noirs from the classical Hollywood period.[160] We will begin with *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), then move to two Chandler adaptations, *My, My Sweet* (1944) and *The Big Sleep* (1946), the Jacques Tourneur film, *Out of the Past* (1946), and then we will end with Robert Aldrich's *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955). We will begin by discussing the movement from detective fiction to detective films to demonstrate the literary influence on films noirs. The private detective films of the forties drew heavily from Hammett and Chandler novels and therefore it is necessary to discuss the influence of the literary source material. We will then move on to discuss the ideological interpellations (ideologemes) at work within the private detective films noirs. This involves tracing the displacement of the private detective character by the rogue-cop character in films noirs which will demonstrate the persistence of the ideologeme of "good versus evil" in these films. Finally, we will end with a discussion of *Kiss Me Deadly*, a film that anticipates the characterization of the private detective in neo-noir before neo-noir came into existence.

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[160] I will be using David Bordwell's work as a reference point for a definition of classical Hollywood. See Bordwell's *The classical Hollywood cinema: film style and mode of production to 1960* (1988).

From detective literature to the private detective film

In 1941 the French critics thought a new genre emerged in American cinema (or rather a continuation of the French literary genre, serie noire).[161] *The Maltese Falcon* was the first of this group of films that the French identified as film noir along with other films like *Murder, My Sweet*, *Laura*, and *Double Indemnity*. *The Maltese Falcon* was adapted by John Huston without any substantial or minor changes from Dashiell Hammett's novel of the same name. According to French critics, Nino Frank and Jean-Paul Chartier, Huston's film kickstarted a new genre, and with that came a revision of the private investigator myth as he was depicted in detective fiction. This revision already happened in literature with Dashiell Hammett's novel in 1930. It took eleven years to register this change in the cinema, an example of the uneven levels of development within the social structures of a totality.[162] In Hammett's novel, Sam Spade, described as a blond devil, came to the screen for the third time, in Huston's first film played by Humphrey Bogart who until that point had only played supporting roles as villains in gangster films. Hammett's Sam Spade became the prototype for the hardboiled detective characterization. Spade talks and thinks fast, and knows how to play people against each other to his own ends.

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[161] Serie noire refers to a type of crime fiction written in France during the thirties and forties, and then eventually became a publishing imprint in France created by Marcel Duhamel. James Naremore makes a strong argument for believing that the French we predisposed to such a definition because their film culture viewed films as art rather than product and their tradition of serie noire allowed them to deploy a term or genre to classify the dark films made in America, see Naremore's *More than Night* (1998), p. 13.

[162] Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* was the third adaption of the novel produced in Hollywood. Not so much a remake of the first two versions, *The Maltese Falcon* (1931) and *Satan Met a Lady* (1936), as a more faithful adaption of the novel. In fact, Huston just lifted the dialogue from the novel and handed that in as his screenplay See the screenplay written by John Huston for a comparison between the script and film, "The Maltese Falcon" screenplay by John Huston.

The Golden-Age of detective fiction made popular during the twenties and thirties was based primarily on a "whodunit" narrative. Influenced by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes and G.K. Chesteron's Father Brown, detective narratives dealt with the protagonist using his skill to solve a mystery. Todorov observed that the Golden Age detective stories always contained two stories: the story of the crime and the story of the investigation.[163] Detective fiction coincidentally employs a theoretical distinction made by the Russian Formalists between the "story" (*fabula*) and "plot" (*sjuzhet*) (fable and subject) which allowed literary theorists to distinguish between the chronological sequence of events (the story, *fabula*, or fable) and the way these events are told and ordered (the plot, the *sjuzhet*, or subject).[164] Todorov demonstrates how the detective story takes these two components of a narrative by emphasizing one and suppressing another. The first "story" (the *story* in the Russian Formalist sense) is a story of an absence: we never get to read it but only some interpretation of it because it is a reconstruction of the events by the characters in the narrative.[165] The second "story" (the *plot* in the Russian formalist sense) is necessarily excessive because it has no importance in itself and functions as a bridge between the reader and the story of the crime.[166]

Because detective fiction tells two stories at once, the style of writing has to be as direct and simple as possible so that the first story can be delivered without any disruption. To inject style into the narrative would be to add excess to

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[163] See Tzvetan Torodov's *The Poetics of Prose* (1977), p.44.
[164] *Ibid*, p.45.
[165] *Ibid*, p.46
[166] *Ibid*, p.46

an already excessive story that should only serve as a bridge to the first story (there are also excessive attempts that go in the other direction: the example Todorov uses is reading a police dossier of a crime).[167] The first story determines the literary devices the author must use: temporal inversions and individual points of view, never writing in third-person omniscience.[168] The second story is where these devices are justified: the devices are naturalized because the author of the book speaks to the reader; he is usually a partner of the detective who is recording the events for us to read.[169]

During the Golden Age there was a discontinuous break with this style: the serie noire of France and the hardboiled literature of America fused the two stories by suppressing the first and giving the second one life.[170] Todorov's discussion of detective fiction allows us to see why the French critics identified *The Maltese Falcon*, *Laura*, *Murder My Sweet*, and *Double Indemnity* as a break with previous detective narratives in film. Like Naremore argued, the French critics produced the concept of film noir because it was already a concept that existed in their literature. At the level of narrative, series noires functioned the same way that American hard-boiled crime fiction told their stories. They were primed to identify films noirs within their own tradition of crime literature.

The series noires and hard-boiled detective fiction breaks considerably with the Golden Age detectives by suppressing curiosity and foregrounding suspense. Series noires and American detective fiction modified the

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[167] *Ibid*, p.46
[168] *Ibid*, p.46
[169] *Ibid*, pp.46-47, much like how Dr. Watson retells the mysteries that Sherlock Holmes solves.
[170] *Ibid*, p.47

characterization of their private detectives as well. Their detectives were made to seem more real, they were no longer immune as they were in Sherlock Holmes or Father Brown mysteries. The detective of series noires could feel pain and possibly die.[171] Genres do not necessarily follow logical developments because they are a contract (or literary institutions)[172] between the writer and the reader, followed unconsciously by producers and consumers, and become more visible once they are broken. Generic structures can either be thought of in terms of syntactic or semantic definitions or as a combination of both.[173] Either the semantic content or the structural elements of a particular story carry expectations for both the reception and creation of narratives. Discussions of genre theory for literature directly influenced film genre theorists like Stephen Neale and Rick Altman in their discussions of film genres in Hollywood productions.[174] Early film noirs in the classical cycle imported the characterization and narrative changes made in literature to film to produce another discontinuous break with past crime and detective films.[175]

Hammett and Chandler broke with Golden Age fiction significantly by making the mystery secondary to the story of the detective dealing with the consequences of the first story. Todorov observed that Hammett and Chandler do

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[171] *Ibid*, p.47

[172] This is how Jameson defines literary genres. See Jameson (1981), p. 92.

[173] See Rick Altman's essay "A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Genre" (1984).

[174] See Stephen Neale's *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood* (2002) and *Genre and Hollywood* (2000) for discussions of popular genres in Hollywood. See also Rick Altman's *Film/Genre* (1999) for a more theoretical discussion of film genres, critiquing theories that range from Aristotle to Wittgenstein. An interesting companion piece to Neale's work because Altman delves films that are ignored by Neale's discussions.

[175] There were many crimes films made in the thirties that noticeably different from the films noirs in the forties. However, several of these crime films from the thirties, *You Only Live Once* (1937) by Fritz Lang for example is considered to be a proto-film noir.

not completely do away with the whodunit story but that they subordinated it to the story of the detective's experience in the social milieu.[176] The way both authors suppressed the "first story" is different: Hammett depicted the story in an extremely limited third-person style that has more in common with the style of Hemingway from *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and *In Our Time* (1925) than any other style available, and Chandler wrote in first-person style from the point of view of his protagonist Phillip Marlowe. Hammett worked within the direct and economic style (using parataxis but not as much polysyndeton) of Hemingway which allowed him to foreground the action of the story. Chandler was the dialectical opposite of Hammett: Marlowe's view of the world was the world in Chandler's stories. The readers have no other viewpoint but Marlowe's viewpoint, and this style of narration was emulated in several noirs, using a combination of voice-over narration and subjective camera setups.[177] The subjective, or first-person style effaces the *fabula*, and emphasizes the detective's singular experience over an omniscient third-person. The subjective narration style of private detective fiction became a way for critics to group the various crime thrillers (private detective films and other types) together into some sort of a genre.

As one might expect, the transposition from literature to film did not change the characterization of the private detective. Much like the novels, Hammett's and Chandler's stories were always more about the search, the quest

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[176] See Todorov (1977), p. 48.

[177] An interesting comparison to this narrative strategy for film would be Hitchcock who in several of his films let the audience know more than the characters, creating suspense, foregrounding the plot rather than the character's consciousness like in *Dial M for Murder* (1954), and *Psycho* (1960).

and the character of the detective - his personal story - rather than the unraveling of a mystery. The emphasis on the experience of searching for something, the way the detective handles himself in modern, urban society was much more important than following the various plot twists and surprises that the Golden-Age detective would experience. The film adaptations closely followed the emphasis and narrative style of American hard-boiled literature. We will now discuss the way private detective films noirs used the private detective character in American cinema.

The first film noir: The Maltese Falcon

It was not the literary source material that completely determined the *noirness* of noirs for the early French critics. As mentioned above, there were two adaptations of *The Maltese Falcon* before Huston made his directorial debut. Neither of these adaptations captured the darkness of whatever the French thought existed in their crime fiction or whatever they saw in the American noirs produced in the forties. The reason is obvious though once we compare the adaptations: *Satan Met a Lady* was a comedy and *The Maltese Falcon* (1931) was a pre-code film[178] that

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[178] The production code refers to the code of standards written by Martin Quigley and Daniel A. Lord. Several studios met with Lord and Quigley and agreed to the stipulations. The MPPDA agreed that they would follow the code in 1930. The production was concerned with moral principles (banning miscegenation, homosexuality, and sexual relations outside of marriage from films). The underlining theme of the stipulations in the code was that the audience was supposed to know that evil was wrong and good is right. Those who were obligated to enforce the code were ineffective: Jason Joy (the head of the committee) had to review 500 films a year with a small staff and little power. As a result many studios and film makers simply ignored the code and because of the Great Depression, studios were more interested in making money than following the code. Films that dealt with sexuality and violence resulted in high ticket sales so the code became a joke, then a memory. The term "pre-code film" refers to films made during 1930 and 1934 that overtly ignored the code and dealt with material that was forcibly banned after 1934 when an amendment established the Production Code Administration which required that all films released after July 1, 1934 to obtain an approval certificate before being released.

changed several aspects of the novel, in particular playing up the romance

between Sam and Brigid. The 1931 version has explicit sexual scenes involving

Spade and other women and it also included a homosexual relationship between

Wilmer and Gutman. Huston's adaptation ramped up the tension significantly,

downplayed the sexuality that the first adaptation injected, and adapted

Hammett's writing style to film.[179] The consciousness of Sam Spade is never

open to the audience and does not frame the *mise-en-scene* as Marlowe's would

frame it in the Chandler adaptation *Murder, My Sweet*.

Figure 1. *The Maltese Falcon* (1931), *Satan Met a Lady* (1936), and *The Maltese Falcon* (1941)

        According to Frank and Chartier, *The Maltese Falcon* created an

extremely bleak depiction of America, something that must have stood out from

conventional films produced in the Hollywood system (notable exceptions might

include *Citizen Kane* and Erich Von Stroheim's *Greed*). American society was

depicted as cruel, cold, and dangerous. Critics considered it bleak because Spade

was introduced as an adulterer (we discover early on that he was having an affair

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[179] Witness the scene when we follow Archer on the job, and see him get killed. The camera begins at the ground, Archer walks into the frame, camera moves up to his face to frame him in a medium shot. Archer smiles and we see a gun appear. The camera setup is from the POV from the killer. This detachment from Spade's perspective resembles the limited third person perspective Hammett used for the novel. We don't find out until the end who killed Archer when Spade pins the murder on Brigid. And even then Spade admits that he's worried about Brigid turning on him. We don't have enough information as viewers to know whether Spade is just pinning a crime on her because he knows she did it or because he wants to avoid a criminal charge. Everything he says in the final scene begins with a "maybe." Maybe he loves her, maybe he doesn't. Maybe he's mad about his dead partner, maybe he isn't. We never have any confirmation about his inner psychic drama but only see his actions.

with his business partner's wife), it is heavily implied that he sleeps with Brigid, and then at the end of the film he gives her up to the police for killing his partner even though they fell in love. The other criminals were equally self-serving. The "Fat Man" gives up his young body guard so that Spade can find someone to pin the murders on lest he take the fall himself. Huston's aggressive depiction of greedy, capitalism gone wrong was major anchoring point for the French critics when connecting *The Maltese Falcon* to their own tradition of serie noire.

The private detective as we knew him from pre-noir films and literature was not carried over but juxtaposed intertextually to the new hardboiled detective. Like Sherlock Holmes and Father Brown, the private detective is unconstrained from the rituals and requirements of working for the police force, a component of the repressive state apparatus, demonstrating at once the freedom and efficiency of the private sector. This characterization was transported over from Victorian literature to a new setting without significant modification. The detective was always more autonomous, efficient, and effective when compared to the police force. He was able to put himself in spaces that a man working for the police could never reach. However, films noirs made numerous references to "fictional" private detectives as a way to give their private detective more authenticity. The references to paperback detective stories were mentioned in numerous films noirs, connecting the hard-boiled detectives to his literary origins while at the same time distancing him from them. The significant modification made to the detective characterization would be the way the hard-boiled detective is reconstituted as a man of action rather than rational thought. Witness the dialog exchange from a

scene in Edward Dmytrk's *Murder, My Sweet* as an illustration of this difference.

In this scene Phillip Marlowe (played by Dick Powell) is interrogating Dr.

Amthor, a suspicious psychologist, about the death of Marriott and the dealings of

the Grayle family:

> Dr. Amthor: You mean there are some things you do not understand? I've always credited the private detective with a high degree of omniscience. Or is that only true in rental fiction?
>
> Moose: Okay, I want you to ask him now.
>
> Dr. Amthor: Don't be impatient.
>
> Marlowe: Ask me what? What's the matter with you doing your own asking?
>
> (Moose leaves the room so that Dr. Amthor and Marlowe can discuss the Grayle family)
>
> Dr. Amthor: I believe you wanted me to discuss my relationship with the police--
>
> Marlowe: Look I usually come in through the front door, big as life.
>
> Dr. Amthor: I merely wanted to take you on the wing so to speak. An old psychological trick, helps us to get closer to the real man--
>
> Marlowe: Where did you pick up Malloy?
>
> Dr. Amthor: My dear Mr. Marlowe, I notice you have an unpleasant tendency toward abrupt transitions, a characteristic of your generation, but in this case I must ask you to follow some sort of logical progression. Now, about the police?
>
> Marlowe: Either they got something on you or they're trying to get it, I didn't expect you to tell me which is why I was just baiting you, an old psychological trick grandpa. What's your racket?
>
> Dr. Amthor: I'm in a very sensitive profession, Mr. Marlowe, I am a quack, which is to say I am ahead of my time in the field of psychic treatment. Naturally there are certain elements that would like to show me in a bad light, it is entirely possible that they've discussed me with the police, that's it. Sorry if I have upset your theories about me which I imagine are much more elaborate but--
>
> Marlowe (talking over Amthor): My theory's pretty simple, goes like this: Marriott was a blackmailer of women, he was good, women liked him around, his interest in clothes and jewelry came easy (Marlowe leans forward) but he wasn't the whole works, somebody told him which women to cultivate, so he could load them up with ice, take them out dancing, then slip to phone and tell the boys where to operate.

Dr. Amthor: And that is your picture of Marriott and me? (Amthor stands up) I am slightly disgusted and very disappointed.

Marlowe: Don't look now but Gussy the gun collector is back.

Dr. Amthor: I am very disappointed in you. Your thinking is untidy like most so-called thinking today. You depress me. Suppose your theory were correct, I would have Mrs. Grayle's jade now wouldn't I?

Marlowe: Unless something went wrong and you haven't got it--

Dr. Amthor: What would have gone wrong? (talking over Marlowe)

Marlowe: Well Marriott could've lost his nerve and rung in a private dick. Take a private dick who'd risk his neck for 100 bucks. You might get ambitious, you might figure that an expensive necklace would be a nice thing to have in the bank.

Dr. Amthor: This hypothetical detective of yours, he might be willing to part with the necklace for a consideration.

Marlowe: Could be if he had it.

Dr. Amthor: It would be difficult to discuss that until he produced the necklace. He might be bluffing. Hoping to gain information

Marlowe: In which case a great thinker might get the bright idea of trying to shake something out of him.

Dr. Amthor: You wouldn't suggest that?

Marlowe: Only if you wanted to wear your face backwards for a while?

Dr. Amthor: No need for us to be at each other's throats Mr. Marlowe, there's really no need for subterfuge. I want that jade. I'm prepared to buy it from you if you have it, or if you can get it.

Marlowe: Supposed that I haven't got it? or supposed that I don't want to sell?

Marlowe and Dr. Amthor glare at eachother until Moose barges in and subdues Marlowe. Dr. Amthor tells Moose to back off so he can talk again.

Dr. Amthor: I could teach you but to what purpose? Dirty, stupid man in a dirty stupid world. One spot of brightness on you and you'd still be that isn't that so--

Marlowe punches Dr. Amthor and Moose catches him. Amthor knocks Marlowe out with the butt of a pistol.

In this scene, Marlowe is supposedly brought in to question a man on the behalf

of Moose Malloy. Marlowe meets Amthor for the second time and they question

each other. Amthor comments on the differences between Marlowe and fictional detectives. He admonishes Marlowe for interrupting and being illogical, unlike those detectives from English literature. The characterization of the lone individual hero has changed from the implausible and unrealistic (read: fictional) Sherlock Holmes to the street smart, fast talking private investigator of America who cuts through intellectual prattle with sarcasm and force.

Rather than using rational arguments, Marlowe uses his strength, his wit, and his code of ethics to punish evil and uphold justice. The early film noir detective films coded the private detective as superior to everyone, much like the private detective was coded in English literature, but in this case it has to do with his street-smarts and code of ethics and less to do with his intellect. Here the hard-boiled detective's modification from a man of rational thought to a man of actions represents pure ideology in Althusser's formulation: ideology is spontaneous and practical, an unconscious rather than a conscious phenomenon. The practical is emphasized over the rational, effacing epistemological judgments and valorizing action, duty, and courage.

The detective's code of ethics was a way for the character to transcend his situation (defeat the criminals and be more efficient than the police) and distract himself from the fact that he was doing the bidding of the rich. In the Chandler adaptations, Marlowe was always working for the bourgeoisie, acting as their mediator that went out into the underworld and fixed the problems that they could not fix themselves. For example, in *Murder, My Sweet* Marlowe is hired to find a jade necklace that has gone missing from the Grayle household. The jade in this

film is typical "MacGuffin," as Hitchcock would have it, in this case symbolizing wealth and greed. In *The Maltese Falcon* the MacGuffin was the titular object which at the end of the film turned out to be a fake falcon statue.

In films noirs, the MacGuffin can be interpreted to symbolize profit or capital accumulation. The MacGuffin is the object that drives the plot and motivates the characters to do what they do (in Lacanian terms this could stand-in as the object petit-a, the cause of the subject's desire). At the end of the film we discover that Mrs. Grayle has had the jade necklace the entire time. Amthor was blackmailing her so that he could acquire the necklace. She told Amthor she gave the necklace to Marriott who was killed. Amthor now was trying to retrieve what he thought was his property. Mr. Grayle was under the impression it was stolen so he hired Marlowe to find it. Marlowe tracks down Amthor, gets knocked out and injected with psychotropic drugs that give him Daliesque dreams. While all this was happening, Marlowe became distracted from the film's initial MacGuffin, the whereabouts of Moose Malloy's wife, Velma Velento. At the end of the film Helen Grayle is revealed to be Velma. The two MacGuffins re-emerge as Velma in the end.

The Chandler adaptations following *The Maltese Falcon* (*Murder My Sweet*, *The Big Sleep*, and *The Lady in the Lake*) amended the bleak universe that Huston created for his private detective by giving us Phillip Marlowe, the "white knight"[180] who lived and died by a moral code. Huston's Spade hinted at this

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[180] This demonstrates the romantic tendencies of Chandler's work compared to Hammett. It demonstrates the inheritance a much older characterization (ideologeme) that was taken and then modified for an urban-capitalist social formation. Chandler's narrative represent a society that no longer knows how to reward the white knight for bringing the collective back into equilibrium.

ideologeme in the end of the film, telling Brigid that maybe he is still mad that his partner was killed, and maybe he is in love with her, but it does not matter because he will not be anyone's sucker. Spade's rebuke of Brigid at the end demonstrated the tension that Huston's film has with the ideologeme of good versus evil. The only explanation he can give to Brigid is that he is giving her up to the police because she killed his partner. Spade's amoral behavior throughout the film contradicts any sort of appeal to morality. It is as a much a surprise to Brigid as it is to the audience in fact. Why have an affair with your partner's wife and then start caring about him? In another sense though Spade demonstrates the Freudian argument that individuals are their contradictions. Another modification of the Victorian private detective in that the hard-boiled detective is not coherent or rational but rather imperfect and flawed. The good versus evil ideologeme is a generic survival that conflicts with the cynicism of Hammett's character and reality he created. Within the cynical universe constructed by Hammett/Huston emerged a hero who triumphed because he is good and not evil. We will now discuss how this ideologeme worked itself out in the Chandler adaptations.

Chandler Adaptions: Murder, My Sweet and The Big Sleep

The next two private detective films we will now discuss were adapted from the Chandler novels *Farewell, My Lovely* and *The Big Sleep*. Both films were more or less faithful to the source material, except for the title change for *Farewell, My*

Lovely which became *Murder, My Sweet.*[181] Both films were set in Los Angeles
and both involved extremely intricate plots involving the upper and lower classes.
In *Murder, My Sweet* and *The Big Sleep* Marlowe was hired by a white, male
member of the bourgeoisie to fix a problem that the police could not. This is the
first major difference between Marlowe and Spade: Spade was hired by rich
criminals to find a mysterious artifact for them and Marlowe was hired to clean up
the bourgeoisie's messes. Both Spade and Marlowe were men who worked on
their own. They were more effective and cunning than the police, and more
powerful than the rich men that hired them. Like the source material, the films
coded the private detective as intelligent, strong, and above all else, moral.

The bourgeoisie and the police force were always coded with pejorative
semic content so that these films could work as middle-class male daydreams or
fantasies. These film noirs demonstrated the liberal/populist appeal that was at
once anti-government, anti-elite, anti-bourgeoisie and potentially anti-
establishment. They posited a heroic figure that did the work of the rich and the
police simultaneously. The private detective was called in when society was put
into disequilibrium. He was the only one capable of defeating evil and he did so
by appealing to his code of ethics. The private detective symbolizes the
messiah/Christ figure, the one who will deliver humanity from evil. The messiah
is typically characterized as an outsider, the real or true embodiment of justice
juxtaposed to institutions (in the New Testament Jesus was juxtaposed to the
Pharisees). This is the ideological terrain that the private detective films used to

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[181] The producers for the film decided to change the title after casting actor Dick Powell. The actor
had previously worked in musicals before *Murder, My Sweet* and the producers thought that the
title *Farewell, My Lovely* sounded too much like a musical and not a detective story.

interpellate individuals as subjects of moralizing (and individualizing) middle-class discourses.

The private detective noirs interpellated individuals (spectators) as subject of a middle-class discourse. Spectators identified with the private detective, who was neither rich nor poor, he was courageous, clever, and strong compared with the lazy cops and the hedonistic upper-classes. The main way this interpellation worked was through the ideologeme of good versus evil (ethics, morality, or a moral code). Spade, and Marlowe succeeded because they had a moral code. What does this ideologeme tell us? What ideological message does it emit? What this shows is that for spectators to be interpellated as middle-class subjects, investing this character with heroic and positive semic content is compensation for essentially telling the middle-classes to stay in their place: do not sink into the working class, or the lumpen and do not aspire to move up into the upper-classes. The private detective films coded the services done by the middle-class with heroism and honor. However, it is not a strategic move played for the working class but rather against them, an ideological narrative directed toward the growing middle-class in America during the forties. The middle-classes are interpellated spontaneously as moral, just, and good, mythologizing American middle-class white males.

Ideolegemes can only come from one class position, and an Althusserian (structural-Marxist) position argues that there are essentially only two class positions in society: the workers and those who own the means of the

production.[182] The Althusserian problematic permits us to think about the middle-class as a shifting zone between these two classes, one that is significant in its own right because of its unique position: the middle-class exists between the structuring-destructuring antagonism between the workers and the bourgeois.[183] What is interesting about Woodiwiss' analysis of social class is the argument that any increase in the middle-class (the "contradictorily positionings" in Woodiwiss' terms) represents a negative blow to capital.[184] To make sure the middle-class does the job they must be paid more than the value of their labor power: the amount of profit that can be reinvested is instantly reduced once the middle-class increases in size. However, the size of the middle-class depends on market forces, the nature of the capital investment involved, and the balances between the classes.[185] Therefore, the middle-class is a crucial zone in the social structure not only because it facilitates capital accumulation but because it is a space where capital must appropriate and control to secure its continued domination.

Figure 2. Dick Powell in *Murder, My Sweet* (1944)

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[182] See Anthony Woodiwiss' *Postmodernity U.S.A.* (1993), p. 10.

[183] *Ibid*, p.11.

[184] *Ibid*, p.11.

[185] The Woodiwissian conceptualization of class is an extension of Marx's discussion of wages and class struggle. Witness the quote from Marx: "the more productive capital grows, the more it extends the division of labour and the application of machinery; the more the division of labour and the application of machinery extend, the more does competition extend among the workers, the more do their wages shrink together" in *Wage-labour and Capital* (1933), p. 47.

Unlike the pre-Marxist theoretical position of Habermas and the post-Marxist counterpart, Laclau/Mouffe, the Althusserian position is able to account for the economic and ideological determination of various social instances, their tensions, and their overdetermination.[186] This tension is identified as the effect of social totality, creating the illusion of a coherent social whole that can be interrogated and understood from one subject position. The Althusserian position justifies the critique of all forms of subjectivisms that imply a centered-subject position as the source of knowledge and morality. The social totality is a de-centered totality, structured in dominance, hence why to write of structures is to write of contradictions. In the private detective films the middle-class avatar can work through the complicated schemes and mysteries of the urban underworld and rich families to uncover the essential mystery that is plaguing the social world in their respective narratives. This would be the ideological discourse that the private detective film ultimately rests on against other interpellations that were potentially available during the time of their production. This argument is in line with what MacCabe has written concerning filmic discourses and his critique of Bazinian realism.[187] Films do not depict reality through a "looking glass-like" transparency but produce a particular reality with a particular combination of discourses. Certain narrative genres and storytelling devices have within them ideological baggage that structured the filmic reality in a particular way. These discourses

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[186] This conceptualization of the social totality is from Althusser's theoretical problematic. See "Contradiction and Overdetermination" in *For Marx*. Also see Ronjon Paul Datta's work on aleatory materialism for contemporary work done within this theoretical problematic: "From Foucault's Genealogy to Aleatory Materialism: Realism, Nominalism, and Politics" in *Critical Realism and the Social Sciences: heterodox elaborations* (2007), pp. 273-295 and R.P. Datta and L. Macdonald's "Time for Zombies: sacrifice and the structural phenomenology of capitalist futures" in *Race, Oppression and the Zombie* (2011), pp. 77-92.

[187] See Colin MacCabe's "Theory and Film: principles of realism and pleasure" in *Screen* (1976).

strive to situate the spectator within a particular position. Interpellation into a particular class position requires that the spectator identify with a particular discourse about reality provided by the film, whether it is through characterization or narrative resolution.

Ideology in the diegesis of Murder, My Sweet and The Big Sleep

Let's now look at how these ideological discourses work themselves out in the diegesis of *Murder, My Sweet* and *The Big Sleep*. To begin with *Murder, My Sweet*, we witness the attempt at a subjective narrative style: the film begins on a light-bulb and then dissolves to a police interrogation room with a blindfolded Marlowe. The police want Marlowe to explain a violent incident involving the Grayle family and Moose Malloy. Marlowe begins to recount the events and the film transitions to the past, connecting Marlowe's voice to images of the past. The diegesis we are watching is immediately framed as the memory of the detective, the most extreme version of subjectivity. Marlowe's voice interjects throughout, emphasizing certain events that we see and explaining other happenings. The narration never diverges from what we see on screen but instead emphasizes what we are seeing on screen.[188] The film is structured like a dream-text (an always distorted account of something) that recounts the memory of a dream by an analysand. The reality depicted by the film is a construction of Marlowe's point of view depicted expertly by Dmytryk's subjective camera techniques. The subjective camera style continues throughout: whenever Marlowe is knocked

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[188] Film noir voice-over narration is pre-Godardian in the sense that the words always refer to what is on screen and never anything else. They never contradict or confound the information presented to the audience.

unconscious Dmytryk uses a special effect to make it appear like a black hole is opening itself up over the unconscious Marlowe. When Marlowe wakes up from his psychotropic dream Dmytryk imposes grey streaks resembling cobwebs to convey Marlowe's disorientation, and the audience is introduced to characters in a scene at the same time Marlowe detects their presence. For example, in the beginning scene when Marlowe is looking out of the window and discovers through the reflection on the glass that Moose Malloy is standing behind him. The subjective camera techniques force the audience to identify with Marlowe's perspective.

These examples demonstrate that the *mise-en-scene* was used to construct a particular reality around the singular perspective and deeply subjective recounting of the experiences of the private detective. The private detective's perspective is what explains the seemingly inexplicable acts of violence that the police are investigating. We begin seeing Marlowe with a blindfold and we do not discover until the end of the film why Marlowe is wearing it. In fact, part of the story, the part that they police are most concerned with, Marlowe cannot retell because his eyes were burned from a gunshot. There is another perspective that is more or less silent throughout the film but nevertheless persists along with Marlowe's: the character Ann Grayle. The daughter of the rich Mr. Grayle consistently returns to help Marlowe throughout the film. We first see her when Marlowe woke up after being knocked unconscious. He then meets her disguised as a reporter, and then he is properly introduced to her when Mr. Grayle calls on him for a new job. Ann and Marlowe argue throughout the film while she

repeatedly warning Marlowe about her step-mother Helen. Ann exists as a

counterpoint to the femme fatale, Helen. Ann is the subservient, good woman, and

Helen is devious and independent. Ann is completely devoted to her father and

does nothing to take advantage of him whereas Helen uses him for his money.[189]

However, the woman's perspective, that of either Helen or Ann is fragmented.

The audience always remains locked into Marlowe's perspective as far as the

mise-en-scene is concerned. It is only until Marlowe is blinded that we get another

perspective. As Marlowe dictates the end of the story to the police, we see Ann

sitting nearby. She confirms to the police everything that Marlowe confesses and

it is her confirmation that allows him to go free. Throughout the film it was the

woman's voice that interrupted and challenged the private. She helped him,

leading him closer to what he needed, but her voice never took over. She never

became the private detectives equal but rather another pawn for him to use in his

quest which parallels (homology?) the gender-class relations of capitalist

exploitation. This is the place where the woman is allowed to exist in films noirs.

In *Murder, My Sweet*, Ann is given a perspective only when the private detective

lost his site.

The partnership between the private detective and the Ann Grayle

character tapped into the temporary acceptance of a more economically

independent woman of the early forties. Coming off of the worst economic period

in American history, women were paid substantially higher wages in the early

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[189] The film has a bit more nuance than most noirs. Ann and Helen Grayle are both independent and strong women. Neither one is passive. The only difference is that Helen uses her sexuality to manipulate men whereas Ann does not. Helen cares for her husband: when Amthor threatened to tell him about her affairs, she gave in to his threats because she was worried that he husband would have a heart attack.

forties.[190] As we know, this lasted until there was peacetime and the temporary

independence was closed off to women until a later period in America.[191] This

temporary independence did not create any sort of counter-cinema[192] that would

replace the interpellations in favor of capital, but like MacCabe argued in his

various essays on film, the "reality" effect in film is the production of a

combination of filmic discourses. In *Murder, My Sweet* the female-proletariat

discourse combined with the capitalist discourse of private detective films.

Reading the film as a combination of ideological discourses (interpellations) that

have specific ideologemes allows us to register the historical nature of the film,

the existence of a class struggle (one that exists along gender and racial

dimensions as well). *Murder, My Sweet* anticipated the feminist interpellations in

Kiss Me Deadly, albeit to a lesser degree. In the end, Ann Grayle exists only as a

helper to Marlowe, never as a self-autonomous subject in her own right. The

private detective myth was left intact. The woman who lost her father gained a

male lover with Marlowe.

　　We will now move onto our discussion of *The Big Sleep* directed by

Howard Hawkes, with a script by William Faulkner, Leigh Brackett, and Jules

Furthman. The film opens with Marlowe approaching the Sternwood mansion.

Marlowe has a long discussion with General Sternwood about the disappearance

of man who worked for the General, and the latest blackmail attempt against the

Sternwood family by Arthur Gwynn Geiger. The General believes that it is

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[190] See Mary M. Schweitzer's article "World War II and Female Labor Force Participation Rates" (1980), p. 89.
[191] *Ibid*, p. 90.
[192] A counter-cinema in the sense that Jacques Rivette (with *Celine and Julie Go Boating* (1974)) and Chantal Akerman would create in the sixties and seventies.

because his daughter Carmen has gambling debts. Marlowe investigates a series of occurrences that finally ends with a gangster Eddie Mars. Marlowe discovers that Carmen has some sort of mental problem (in the film it is implied that she is a drug addict) which resulted in her killing Sean Regan. Vivian, the older sister, convinces Marlowe that Carmen will receive psychiatric help which convinces him to let her go. At the end of the film every criminal has either died and or has been charged with a crime. What began as an errand for the bourgeois expanded itself to protecting society and bringing criminals to justice.

The Hawks adaptation significantly reduces the amount of potency and strength of women that Dmytryk's film provided them. Furthermore, Marlowe is no longer getting pushed around by everyone who has more control and power than him.[193] The police investigator works together with Marlowe, they share information, and there are no threats from either side. In *Murder, My Sweet*, the police investigator repeatedly visits Marlowe to remind him that Marriott's murder will be pinned on him if he cannot find the culprit. Marriott's murder and the threat of a murder charge motivated Marlowe to discover what is going on with the Grayle family and Amthor. In *The Big Sleep*, Marlowe is motivated by his guilt over letting Harry Jones die, and even when Vivian pays him to stop investigating, Marlowe continues to help them. The Powell-Marlowe is paid off in a similar way in *Murder, My Sweet* but handles it with more petulance than the Bogart-Marlowe. Witness this line from *Murder, My Sweet* which aptly summaries the place of the private detective in society:

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[193] The changes Hawks made to the Marlowe character has an analogous response that Hawks made with *Rio Bravo* (1959) to *High Noon* (1952).

> Marlowe: Ahh, this is beginning to make sense in screwy sorta way. I get dragged in. Get money shoved at me, I get pushed out and get money shoved at me, everybody pushes me in, everybody pushes me out, nobody wants me to do anything. (Marlowe looks at Ann, sighs). Okay put a check in the mail. I cost a lot not to do anything. I get restless. Go on a trip to Mexico.

Both films put the private detective through similar narrative events, juxtaposing Marlowe to both his rich clients and the police.

The Big Sleep has none of the disgust that *Murder, My Sweet* has about the private detective narrative. The Bogart-Marlowe is a white-knight who brings good to society because he is devoted to his personal code of ethics. This code brings him rewards rather than the ridicule it brought Powell-Marlowe who until the end of the film was punished for his morality. However, both films operate as middle-class fantasies, interpellating individuals as subjects of a middle-class discourse. *The Big Sleep* emphasizes an individualist ideology of ethics and personal responsibility that ultimately works to position subjects in the service of capital rather than some other political activity that would disrupt capital accumulation and reproduction. *The Big Sleep* like many other films produced by Hollywood in the forties appeared to oscillate between interpellations that coincided with laissez-faire liberalism or a moderate form of social democracy; however, none of the interpellations would ever disrupt the commitment to, and valorization of the pursuit of the accumulation of capital. Whether it was a film like *Murder, My Sweet* that attempted to auto-critique its own mythical-ideological raw material by making the private detective into a poor, wise-cracking goof, or *The Big Sleep* which glorified an individualist ethic of self-reliance and personal responsibility, the private detective noirs thus far subjected

individuals to an ideological terrain that would allow for the reproduction of the relations of production rather than the disruption of those relations.

Combining the Woodiwissian-Althusserian theory of social classes with Jameson's[194] theory of ideologemes we can now understand the importance of cinematic texts that interpellate spectators as subjects of a middle-class discourse. If the success of capital's ability to accumulate profit depends on this intermediate zone between the two classes, the ideological state apparatuses will work to interpellate individuals in such a way that middle-class subjects help reproduce the relations of production and not the opposite. Individuals then accept their place as a good one; their practical activity is construed as doing the right thing. This inevitably involves refusing other types of interpellations and discourses available for a cinematic text (compare the ideological narratives of the private detective films to Jacque Tourneur's *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943) that interpellates spectators as critics of racial subjection and domination). Private detective films noirs simultaneously subjugated spectators to a middle-class subject position within the cultural discourse. The films noirs compensated individuals for this subjection with private detective stories that ridicule the upper and lower classes, while making the private detective into a hero that stands up for justice and truth and is superior to everyone else. As a point of comparison, witness the middle-class male characters of the noir melodramas made later on in the cycle. In those films (*Double Indemnity*, *The Woman in the Window*, and *Scarlett Street* for instance) the middle-class males are ignorant, weak, and stupid,

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[194] Jameson cites M. Bahktin's work on linguistics, carnival, and ideology for the origin of the term *ideologeme* in *The Political Unconscious* (1981) p.70.

lacking the potency and strength that Marlowe and Spade possessed. They emit a

similar ideological message without the compensation offered by private detective

noirs. The middle-class male is punished (symbolically castrated) along with the

independent female character (the femme fatale) for "not staying in their place."

The melodramas demonstrated the disciplinary impulse of the ideological

narratives which punished white males for straying from their particular subject

positions. Both the private detective and the bourgeois melodrama operate on an

ideological terrain that interpellates spectators as subjects of a middle-class

discourse.

Out of the Past: Jacque Tourneur's private detective object-lesson

To continue our survey of the forties private detective films we will now discuss a

Tourneur film, *Out of the Past* (1947). Tourneur's previous films (*Cat People*

(1942) and *I Walked with a Zombie*) are known as now being somewhat

subversive compared to mainstream films produced during this time. *Out of the*

*Pas*t does not however attempt any sort of overt social critique that *Cat People*

and *I Walked with a Zombie* performed but instead works as a sort of cautionary

tale to middle-class males, continuing the narrative and ideological strategies of

the previous private detective films.

Adapted from the novel, *Build My Gallows High,* by Daniel Mainwaring,

Tourneur's film noir appeared to be much more aware of the stylistic tendencies

the French critics observed in the selection of noirs made from 1941 to 1944.[195]

The title of the film which was changed for the American release is about as

conscious as a film noir could get, highlighting the recurrent theme of the return

of the repressed. At the level of narrative, this film does not follow the structure

of the previous Spade and Marlowe detective stories. Furthermore, it is much

more invested with ideologemes of doom, fatalism, dread, and an almost tangible

feeling of predestination that the other films lack entirely. The film is nearly a

perfect match for what James Damico argued as the essential structure for all

films noirs. Witness his generic definition:

> Either because he is fated to do so by chance, or because he has been hired for a job specifically associated with her, a man whose experience of life has left him sanguine and often bitter meets a non-innocent woman of similar outlook to whom he is sexually and fatally attracted. Through this attraction, either because the woman induces him to it or because it is the natural result of their relationship, the man comes to cheat, attempt to murder, or actually murder a second a man to whom the woman is unhappily or unwillingly attached (generally he is her husband or lover), an act which often leads to the woman's betrayal of the protagonist, but which in any event brings about the sometimes metaphoric, but usually literal destruction of the woman, the man to whom she is attached, and frequently the protagonist himself[196]

Not the most expansive of generic definitions but definitely suitable for

explaining the heterogenous set of films like *The Woman in the Window*, *Scarlett*

Street, Double Indemnity, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and countless others

(while excluding many other films identified as film noir). What Damico was

trying to define was what Raymond Durgnat thought was simply a sub-genre of

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[195] See Nino Frank's "The Crime Adventure Story: a new kind of detective film" and Jean-Pierre Chartier's "The Americans are Making Dark Films Too." Both of these articles can be found in *Perspectives on Film Noir* edited by R. Barton Palmer (1996).
[196] See James Damico's "Film Noir: a modest proposal" in *Perspectives on film noir* (1996), p. 137.

film noir, the "middle-class murder" narratives.[197] Damico and Durgnat represent

the major critical disagreements among film critics writing on film noir. There has

never been a consensus on how to define the genre and which films should be

excluded. I will not attempt to solve the dilemma here but I will put forward the

argument that Neale and Naremore have in some form or another and argue that

film noir is a critical and historical category that critics have used to define a

group of heterogeneous films.

     Out of the Past represents a sort of combination of private detective

narrative with the middle-class murder subgenre as defined by Durgnat and

Damico. It has aspects of the film adaptations of Cain's work (*Double Indemnity*

and *The Postman Alway Rings Twice*) and along with the visual/narrative devices

of Dmytryk's *Murder, My Sweet.* The film's first act is told in flashback which

eventually catches up to itself in the latter half of the film. The flashback emulates

the way the Powell-Marlowe character narrates the events in *Murder, My Sweet*

but in *Out of the Past*, the memory and perspective of the detective is never

undermined by any other voices. In the beginning of *Out of the Past*, Jeff Bailey

has to meet a gangster named Whit Sterling and on the way he tells his girlfriend

who he really is and why he changed his name from Markham to Bailey. Jeff

previously worked as a private investigator in New York City with his a partner

Jack Fisher. Jeff was hired by Whit Sterling to find his girlfriend, Kathie Moffatt,

and bring her back along with the money she stole from Sterling. Markham finds

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[197] See Raymond Durgnat's "Paint it Black: the family tree of film noir" in *Perspectives on film noir (*1996), p. 83.

her in Mexico, and instead of taking her in, they begin an affair. He forgets his profession as a detective and escapes with Kathie to San Francisco.

What is important for our discussion is how the film demonstrates the uneasiness it has with the private detective myth and the respective ideological baggage that comes with that myth. The morality that Spade and Marlowe adhered to is cast aside by Jeff: in *Out of the Past* the private detective myth is disposed of without any second thought. Like things made of matter, things in the realm of culture decay and rot according to conjunctural changes which include a variety of cultural/ideological transformations along with political and economic transformations. There are no necessary ideological discourses that coincide with capitalist accumulation; anything and everything can exist insofar that the reproduction of the relations of production continues. Thus ideological discourses have a high degree of autonomy with respect to changes in the economic base: ideological discourses do not reflect changes in the base but are overdetermined and/or underdetermined.[198] Ideological interpellations are therefore reactive and active. They produce and reproduce new and old interpellations and changes in generic structures, semantic and syntactic. As critics we can register or map out changes in ideological discourses (in art and culture more generally) as being overdetermined/undetermined by other changes in the social formations structures.[199]

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[198] Balibar reminds that for Althusser the concept of overdetermination always implied underdetermination at the same time. See Balibar's essay "Structural Causality, Overdetermination, and Antagonism" in *Postmodern Materialism and the Future of Marxism* (1996), p. 115.

[199] This enterprise is part of what Jameson is interested in when discussing literature and film. For example, Jameson tracks the historical changes of capitalism along with the modifications of a

With Tourneur's *Out of the Past* the private detective narrative Jeff Bailey morphed into the middle-class nightmare plot that Durgnat thought was more subversive than the private detective films. In ideological terms, this position turns out to be a misreading of the films. Films can have ideological and utopian impulses (read: subversive) given that they are made up of multiple discourses. They can also be replete of subversive qualities entirely, and merely reproduce past ideological messages. *Out of the Past* represents the negative or cautionary tale of the private detective narratives, operating on the same ideological terrain of those films. A middle-class nightmare that is ultimately not subversive but reactionary.

The private detective is something that is out of the past, but the effects of his decay are still felt by films that adapt its myth for different purposes. Jeff Bailey cannot escape his transgression, his decision to give up his duty to his employer, and the consequences return to his present, much like the ideological baggage of the private detective myth that informs the narrative of this film. This film emits the same ideological message that the ideologemes in the previous films used but without the compensation of the private detective's triumph. Jeff shirked his responsibility: his job was to go to Mexico (the place in all film noirs where people go to escape their problems) and bring back the femme fatale. Jeff disobeyed his boss, broke the private detective's code of ethics, and moved to San Francisco with the femme fatale.

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high-realism in European literature and various changes in film/literature genres in postmodernity. See Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* (1981) and *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* (1991).

This film combines two negative sanctions or two ideological moves in the class discourse: the first exists on the same ideological terrain as the private detective films (but without the compensation), instructing the middle-class to stay in their place, the permeable zone between the proletariat and the capitalist that exists to benefit the accumulation of profit. The second ideological move is constructed around gender and class categories, and is directed toward the independent woman coded as a femme fatale representing women in America. The dangerous women depicted in films noirs (Brigid O'Shaughnessy from *The Maltese Falcon* is most likely the first femme fatale) act out against their husbands or whoever is subjugating them. They use their body and sexuality as a weapon against their enemies. The negative sanction against the woman in films noirs taps into the growing male anxiety over independent women.

The family, the sphere of biological reproduction is the place designated for women in patriarchal societies whether the economic mode is capitalist or feudalist.[200] In capitalism the place of the women is doubly important because patriarchy demands that the women take care of the house while the husband sells his labour-power, and she is allowed to sell her labour-power as well. The woman has either one job, taking care of the household and children, or two, her household work and working for a wage. According to the work done by Juliet Mitchell, patriarchy makes what is a product of history appear to be natural, and eternal.[201] This rejoins to Althusser's arguments on ideology referring to it as a

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[200] See Juliet Mitchell's *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1975), p. 405.
[201] See Juliet Mitchell's *Women, the longest revolution* (1984), pp. 19-21.

process that functions by creating a non-historical reality.[202] The condition of

women is the product of several structures at work that define her particular place

within a social formation. The unity of their condition is the product of

production, reproduction, sex, and the socialization of children.[203] Mitchell

argues (taking this line of argumentation from Marx and Engels) that a

precondition of women's liberation might come from bourgeois sexual/marital

relations.[204]

Throughout history women have been used as sexual objects, as

producers, reproducers, and objects of satisfaction for men.[205] In what Mitchell

calls the Christian era, monogamy had a specific form in Western societies: it was

coupled with an unprecedented degree of sexual repression against women.[206]

This sexual repression worked sometimes outside the boundaries of monogamy in

feudalism; for example, the upper classes delved into polygamy.[207] England in the

sixteenth century saw the rise of militant puritanism and an increase of market

relations in the economic mode of production.[208] Capitalism and the emergent

bourgeoisie provided women with a new status as wife and mother; women had

improved rights and her social position was now up for debate amongst the

rulers.[209] However, the juridical equality of capitalist society (which applied to

marital and labour contracts) masks real exploitation and inequality between the

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[202] *Ibid,* p. 161.
[203] *Ibid*, p. 26.
[204] *Ibid*, p. 39.
[205] *Ibid*, p. 34.
[206] *Ibid*, p. 36.
[207] *Ibid*, p. 36.
[208] *Ibid*, p. 36.
[209] *Ibid*, p. 36-37.

sexes.[210] The maternal role of the mother has decreased while her socializing role

has increased.[211] What this means for women is her socialization role is used as a

mystique, used to oppress women because there is no inherent necessity for the

biological and social mother to be one and the same.[212] The discourse of

patriarchy makes an arbitrary connection appear natural, and in capitalism the

maintenance of the nuclear family has practical consequences for capital

accumulation.

The nuclear family, or bourgeois household, is an institution that supports

the accumulation of capital. Maintaining lower wages for the male workers

(keeping women at home because of sexist ideology), and socializing children

into respectable members of the future work force. When this institution changes,

ideological strategic discourses react accordingly to these changes. In Hollywood

cinema in the forties, women who diverge from their household role are depicted

as evil and hedonistic individuals who do not support their family but are greedy

and selfish and worst of all, sexual. Witness the depiction of women in the horror

B-film produced for RKO studios *Cat People* directed by Jacques Tourneur. In

Tourneur's horror film the main character is a Serbian woman who believes that if

she becomes intimate with her male partner that she will turn into a large cat and

possibly eat him. Before *Double Indemnity* was filmed *Cat People* tapped into

and reflected American male anxiety over female independence. A Lacanian

critique however might argue that this is a form of displacement/censorship of

sexuality and desire for recognition from their sexual partners. In *Cat People*, the

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[210] *Ibid*, p. 37.
[211] *Ibid*, p. 42.
[212] *Ibid*, pp. 42-43.

female's desire for recognition from her male partner ends in death, providing an absurd object-lesson for independent women who defy their doctors and husbands. Both *The Maltese Falcon* and *Murder, My Sweet* had treacherous (read: independent) women which along with *Double Indemnity* used sexist ideologemes that attempted to reinstate male bourgeois superiority.

The codification of female sexuality with negative semes was hardly a new ideological strategy. F.W. Murnau's *Sunrise: a song of two humans* (1927) expressed the dialectic of pure/impure ideological codes, initiating a sexist cinema discourse that would persist for some time.[213] *Sunrise* is the story of a farmer who gets seduced by city woman. The woman tries to convince the farmer to drown his wife. He agrees to do it but then realizes he cannot. His wife discovers this and the husband must convince her that he still loves her. The wife character is coded as passive and compassionate and the city woman is coded as sexual and independent. According to Robin Wood this coding schema persisted in Hollywood production for Hollywood production in the twentieth century.[214] The juxtaposition of the city woman and wife implies another binary opposite between city and country. The city is dangerous and sinful whereas the country is pure and safe. The women from the city are sexual and dangerous whereas the women from the country or the household are submissive and de-sexualized. The binary opposite between country and city informed the narrative setting for noirs of the forties. Rather than presenting both sides of the binary in their narratives focused on the streets of urban metropolises like New York City, Los Angeles, and San

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[213] See Robin Wood's excellent essay on this topic "Sunrise: a false dawn" in his book *Sexual Politics and Narrative Film: Hollywood and Beyond* (1998), pp. 31-44.
[214] Wood (1998), p. 31.

Francisco. The country in films noirs existed solely as a place for characters to either hide (Mrs. Mars in *The Big Sleep*) or die (Dix Handley in *The Asphalt Jungle*). Furthermore, this binary opposition taps into the middle-class anxiety that requires national values in an urban setting where the conditions for traditional morals are lacking.

The increasingly devilish depiction of the independent woman changed drastically from the Spade-Marlowe detective films to the melodrama-noirs made popular by Billy Wilder and Fritz Lang. Spade, Powell-Marlowe, and Bogart-Marlowe worked together with a woman to solve the great "whatzit." Spade turned her in at the end to save himself, but the Powell and Bogart Marlowe's were able to work together with the woman character. In the Chandler adaptations, the women characters eventually bowed to the will of the private detective. In these private detective noirs, the taming of the independent woman was a condition for such an ideological resolution. This resolution was dramatized as resolution of interests and motives between the two characters in *Murder, My Sweet* and *The Big Sleep*. Both Marlowe characters succeeded in replacing the father figure (becoming the woman's lover) and solving the case, providing a happy ending in both of the Chandler adaptations.

Out of the Past then marks a divergence from this outcome. Instead of a pleasant day-dream for middle-class males, *Out of the Past* is a middle-class nightmare or object-lesson for men who decide to shirk their responsibilities to the upper-classes, their clients, and bosses (represented by Whit Sterling). The negative sanction against the middle-class avatar and the independent woman

coded as the femme fatale taps into the overwhelming anxiety over the growing independence of women. Coded in films noirs as a crisis in masculinity, reading these films in terms of Marxist concepts allows us to recode the crisis in masculinity as a temporary crisis in capital along with a buttressing of a sexist discourse.

Marxist social theorists have shown that capitalism gains nothing from excluding subjects from the system of production. The tendency to include rather than exclude the other explains the persistence of racist and sexist discourses which maintain lower wages for a particular segment of the workforce while including rather than excluding this population.[215] Furthermore, capital will move where it can seek profit, and this movement is determined according to the particular conjuncture and is not always the same, labor to sectors which will maximize profit accumulation.[216] Wallerstein argues that in capitalist social formations wages are kept lower in order to maximize the amount of surplus value that is exploited from the worker. This process is dependent upon the condition that there is some sort of household structure where the total household is made up of the labor-power inputted by the housewife along with the income made in the market by the male worker.[217] The labor input of the housewife is non-wage work which compensates for the lower wage-income and is in fact a subsidy to the employers of these wage-laborers.[218] So, to include women in the workforce would offset this subsidy that helps maintain lower wages for male

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[215] See Wallerstein and Balibar's *Race, Nation, Class* (1991), pp. 34-35.
[216] *Ibid*, p. 108.
[217] *Ibid*, p. 34.
[218] *Ibid*, p. 34.

workers. The consequences of this sort of influx of labor in the workforce would obviously be that wages would decrease dramatically because the supply of labor power has increased substantially. But, in WWII the women merely filled spots and were interpellated as subjects of a nation, serving their country for freedom and defense against the Nazi and Japanese threat. For our purposes here we should note that the disruption of the household economic structure had ideological changes that dialectically responded (in this instance) to the growing independence of the woman in America and the threat that this independence posed for capital.[219]

Labor forces that are variable, determined in part by the ideological structures of the conjuncture, are of course more favored than the opposite. During WWII, a large amount of women moved away from one sector of the labor force (the household) to industrial production. When America ended the war in Europe, men returned, and women either left their jobs and went back to the household or remained and continued to become more materially independent from men. This of course resulted in male-working class anxiety over the growing independence of women which was dramatized perfectly by the film noir *The Blue Dahlia* (1946) written by Raymond Chandler and directed by George Marshall. *The Blue Dahlia* was about a man who returns from the war with severe inner-ear problems that caused him to experience audio-visual hallucinations. His wife has become "fast and loose" and spends her time with tough guys instead of her husband. The wife is cheating on her husband and has no interest in staying

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[219] Evidence for this political-social interpretation of the femme fatale by Jennifer Fay and Justus Nieland (2010), Richard Dyer (1995), and Molly Haskell (1987).

married. *The Blue Dahlia*'s dramatization of male anxiety over the changes in the ideological-economic structures that took place while America was at war anticipates the narrative raw material used by *Out of the Past* to provide an object-lesson for both middle-class females and males for forgetting their proper place in American society.

We now return to *Out of the Past* to discuss the narrative strategies and ideologemes of the film. As we mentioned above, the flashback is intercut with Jeff's voice-over emphasizing certain parts of his story Ann and us the audience. What Jeff emphasizes with his voice is that what he is telling Ann is not good and that she won't like it. He revisits his complete loss of control whenever he is in the presence of Kathie Moffat. When Jeff first met Kathie in Mexico, he knew immediately that he was going to give up his job and do whatever he could to be with her. She resists at first but agrees. Jeff asks her about the money she stole from her gangster-boyfriend, she says she never stole anything, that Whit is lying to Jeff. He turns to her, calls her baby, and says I don't care and then they kiss on the beach.

In the first act of *Out of the Past*, Tourneur essentially over turns all of the conventional expectations we would attach to a private detective. Jeff is romantic and immoral and he is no Spade or Marlowe. Jeff has more in common with the middle-class dupes that are manipulated by the femme fatales in the Wilder and Lang films. The main dividing line here has to do precisely with the character's choice to live by a code or live according to his desire. *Out of the Past* reverses the characterization of the private detective created in *The Maltese Falcon*,

Murder My Sweet, and *The Big Sleep*. These four films are structured according to the ideologeme of bourgeois morality, of good versus evil.[220] Spade and the Marlowe incarnations are not punished because they know how to act and their actions are rewarded and the audience is compensated for their interpellation into this particular discourse. *Out of the Past* provides no such compensation. Instead, the film presents what happens to the private detective when he disobeys the bourgeoisie and forgets to stay in his place.

The detective character *and* narrative structure was something *out of the past* by the time Tourneur directed his private detective story. The pastness of the character was foregrounded in both the title of the film and the flashback structure. What was in the flashback was the character's life as a detective. The detective story in the flashback was then immediately tossed aside once desire trumped duty. Another type of middle-class fantasy took over in the narrative, what we have been calling it up until now an object-lesson for middle-class subjects. What we can learn from discussing this film is how the ideological terrain - bourgeois and sexist terrain - produced these detective stories during this time. Against what most if not all critics have said about film noir, these films were not counter-Hollywood pictures.[221] For all of their cynicism and "realism" they were profoundly ideological. They functioned as ideological tools for capital accumulation. Film noir private detective films interpellated individuals as

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[220] Claude Chabrol made a similar observation in his article "Evolution of the Thriller" where he argued that *Out of the Past* was a film that completely submitted to a the film noir genre conventions, see Chabrol (1985)[1955]in *Cahiers du Cinema, the 1950s: neo-realism, Hollywood, New Wave* (1985), p. 160.

[221] According to James Naremore, many French critics tried to discuss film noir as surrealist texts that subverted bourgeois morality. See Naremore's More than night (2008), pp. 17-22.

subjects in a discourse whose goal was to reproduce the relations of production rather than short circuit these relations.

 Excursus: the private detective's coma and the emergence of the rogue cop

Once the private investigator myth crumbled in *Out of the Past,* American audiences did not get another private investigator in the film noir cycle until Aldrich's *Kiss Me Deadly* in 1955. But, before we go into that B-film classic, we should make a couple of comments about what replaced the private investigator in Hollywood cinema. Here we enter the period of film noir identified as semi-documentary noir style epitomized by Anthony Mann and Robert Wise that emphasized sociological rather psychological dimensions in their stories. Robert Wise's *The Set-Up* is an excellent example of the shift in storytelling techniques in noir. Wise diverges from a subjective or first person narrative to a limited omniscient third person or semi-documentary style. Wise's story is told from multiple perspectives, depicting the experience of watching a boxing match from several subject-positions in the capitalist class system. In Mann's films, the semi-documentary style complemented the particular stories he was trying to tell. The characters in his films were organized around classes, distilled as professions or certain careers, in contrast to the private detective films that organized the narrative around an individual against an evil society. The disappearance of the private detective from noirs left a hole in the ideological/cinematic sphere.

For three or four years, Hollywood used middle-class characters to interpellate spectators as subjects of a middle-class discourse but without the

compensation of the private detective films. Abraham Polonsky's *Force of Evil* (1948) which is about a lawyer played by John Garfield, who works for a gangster trying to take control of a gambling ring. John Huston directed another *Key Largo* (1948) with Bogart in the lead opposite Edward G. Robinson as the villain. Bogart is a war-veteran who is locked up with a gangster and his crew during a storm. Huston's film is an excellent example of what critics thought was a theme germane to noir, a normal man caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. This is a trope we saw in the private detective films, but now taken as the primary narrative device for *Key Largo*. Bogart's character recalled the private detective character somewhat in this film because he used his intelligence and power to defeat a gangster. However, neither of these characterizations were able to replace and continue the ideological trend developed by private detective noirs.

Larry Gross in his essay on neo-noir wrote that the private detective of the forties was replaced by the rogue cop in seventies neo-noirs. In particular he was citing films like *Dirty Harry* and *Serpico* as evidence, two characters that represented individualism in the face of an impotent and corrupt bureaucracy which represented public institutions too incompetent to solve society's problems. In one sense this is correct, this is one version of the ways noir was revised in the seventies. But, it is more accurate to register it as less of a revision and more of a continuation of the rogue-cop films of the late forties and early fifties in Hollywood. The private detective was, in semantic terms, more or less dead in the cinema but syntactically, the way this type of character functioned in a crime or thriller narrative was reinserted as the rogue cop hero in films like *The Big Heat*

(1953) by Fritz Lang, *The Undercover Man* (1949) by Joseph H. Lewis, and *The Naked City* (1948) by Jules Dassin.

What first filled the gap of the private detective narrative in the cinema was the police procedural noirs like *The Naked City*, *He Walked by Night*, and *The Undercover Man* which provided a suitable replacement for the private detective noirs. It was not until Fritz Lang directed *The Big Heat*, Roy Rowland's aptly titled *Rogue Cop* (1954), and Joseph H. Lewis' *The Big Combo* (1955) that the private detective was properly resurrected at the syntactic level of film form. Not only is this the period where subjective camera work and storytelling were abandoned for a semi-documentary style but it was only known for characters with a more pronounced death drive.[222] The rogue cops were fixated on evil much more obsessively than the private detectives and were much less amoral as well. The ideologemes of redemption, revenge, and violence which were all based on the ideology of the bourgeois morality and the centered subject came back in these films. The brief period of sociological films of Wise and Mann were replaced by revenge thrillers. These films reused the ideological interpellations of the private detective films to combat other interpellations that threatened capital accumulations. These interpellations were combined with patriotic interpellations that tapped into the growing anxiety over the communist threat against American society.

Lang's *The Big Heat*, a paradigmatic film of the rogue-cop cycle, continues the narrative style of private detective noirs but with one important difference: the cop who turns rogue has a wonderful home, characteristic of

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[222] See Schrader's essay "Notes on film noir" in *Perspectives on film noir* (1996), pp. 99-109.

Eisenhower America, a precious household that becomes shattered by some sort of evil force, usually because of gangsters and criminals. The private detective's home was the job, sleeping during the day and working at night. In *Murder, My Sweet* we see Powell at his home dressed down before Helen Grayle walks in and hires him. His apartment is cramped and bare, and Powell-Marlowe cannot even afford a belt, he has a piece of white rope tied together to keep his pants up. In contrast, Dave Bannion from *The Big Heat* lives in a stereotypical fifties household in the suburbs. His home life is perfect until his wife is murdered by the mob. Bannion vows to avenge her and he eventually takes down the gangsters who killed his wife. Lang's film takes great pains to demonstrate the morality of the rogue cop which is a precursor to countless action, vigilante, and revenge films. Bannion is superior to the criminals because he is good, righteous, and does not get swayed by temptation of either women or money from the criminals. In actantial terms, Bannion and the other rogue cops in the later additions to the noir cycle performed the same function as the private detective. Rather than finding something or someone, the rogue cop's function was to destroy something, the evil gangster or criminal. Again, the police force are coded as ineffective and impotent but now compared with the rogue cop, they are also evil. The criminals are powerful and they possess political, economic, and social capital and they are evil. Lang's film and the others revert what police procedural noirs did but emptying out the police force of all its power and energy and reapplying the same codes as the detective films did. The criminals are essentially coded as they were

in private detective and police procedural films, except that they had more power

because of their political and economic connections.

The rogue-cop essentially polarized the morality ideologeme to absurd

limits. The bureaucrats in the police force and the gangsters were grouped into the

same evil threat that the rogue-cop had to fight against to preserve justice. The

rogue-cop noirs represents the fascist tendencies of films noirs from the classical

cycle, anticipating the fascist[223] narratives of seventies.

The end of film noir: Kiss Me Deadly

For many film critics[224] the noir cycle was put to death with Robert Aldrich's B-

movie classic *Kiss Me Deadly*. This film was an adaptation of Mickey Spilane's

novel of the same name with a script written by A.I. Bezzerides. The only thing

Bezzerides and Aldrich kept from the novel was the title. They changed

everything else because they despised the book. In terms of class and gender

politics, Aldrich and Bezzerides made a film that is the dialectical opposite of

Spillane's book. The Bezzerides/Aldrich version of Hammer embellishes the

hyper-masculine qualities of Spillane's character to an absurd limit. Instead of

making the detective the "hero" they made him the patsy (anticipating Robert

Altman's characterization of Phillip Marlowe). Bezzerides altered the

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[223] Fascist narratives refer to stories that position the white male character as superior to the rest of society. Women, non-whites, and those working in bureaucratic institutions are ineffective and impotent compared to the white male character. Society is then endangered by social deviants and needs the white male to bring it back into harmony and equilibrium. This narrative structure informed the Hollywood westerns and various crime thrillers and has become a dominant narrative strategy for Hollywood cinema. Godard defined fascist films as films that refuse the reality of social relations and the depiction of a mythic existence outside social relations. See MacCabe (1980), p. 41.

[224] More recent studies of film noir identify Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil* or Robert Wise's *Odds Against Tomorrow* as the final film in the classical cycle.

characterizations of the females in the novel. In Spillane's novel the female

characters functioned as sexual objects for Hammer. Bezzerides and Aldrich

turned every woman character into a feminist critique of Hammer's behavior.[225]

Hammer was effectively transplanted from a fascist ideological terrain to one that

demonstrated the ideological discourses at work in the private detective

characterization and narrative.

The *Cahiers du Cinema* claimed that *Kiss Me Deadly* was the "thriller of

tomorrow." According to Claude Chabrol this was the case because, unlike *Out of

the Past,* the *Kiss Me Deadly* seemingly discards the private detective genre while

preserving it.[226] The conventions it discarded were the visual style of noir (low-

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[225] Aldrich's film wasn't seen this way by American film critics who were appalled by the amount of violence and sex (?) in the film. See the article *Sex and Violence "Justified"* in *America* March 5, 1955 pp. 583-584 for an example of this. Writers from the *Cahiers du Cinema* had a different interpretation of *Kiss Me Deadly*. For example, Jacques Rivette in his article " Notes on Revolution" (1985) wrote: "[i]n opposition to the traditional morality of action, exemplified in Ray, Brooks, and Mann, Aldrich offers a negative morality, not contradicting it but proving it by the absurd. The real subject of the *The Big Knife*, as of *Kiss Me Deadly*, is precisely the destruction of morality, and its consequences" see Rivette (1985), p. 96. Claude Chabrol in his article "Evolution of the Thriller" wrote: "[i]n Kiss Me Deadly the usual theme of the detective series of old is handled off-screen, and only taken up again in a whisper for the sake of the foolish: what it's really about is something more serious: images of Death, Fear, Love and Terror pass by in succession. Yet nothing is left out: the tough detective whose name we know so well, the diminutive and the worthless gangsters, the cops, the pretty girls in bathing suits, the platinum blonde murderess. Who would recognize them, and without embarrassment, these sinister friends of former times, now unmasked and cut down to size?" see Chabrol (1985), p. 163

[226] Chabrol seems to be a little inconsistent here with his discussion of *Kiss Me Deadly* and also his overall discussion of the evolution of the thriller genre. He assumes some sort of theory of the filmmaker as an *auteur* and then as the history of a genre as some sort of continuum that evolves. Chabrol's argument about film noir as genre does not contradict how we have defined film noir here as an imaginary construct created by critics because Chabrol was one of those critics who used this imaginary (ideological) construct but he also implicitly means the thriller genre in this essay. He uses film noir and thriller interchangeably throughout. Back to *Kiss Me Deadly*, Chabrol champions it for being the thriller of tomorrow because it leaves behind all of the thriller conventions and because it makes a good film out of the worst source material possible (Mickey Spilane's novel of the same name). Spilane's novels were trash but they confirmed to all of the thriller conventions so Chabrol is confusing his argument here. That being said, his evolutionary narrative seems to follow a more punctuated rather than gradual, linear version of evolution which implies a more aleatory vision of cultural history and production.

key lighting),[227] the characterization of the private detective as a cunning and strong hero, ruthless gangsters, and women who cannot be trusted. *Kiss Me Deadly* moved beyond the private detective conventions without leaving them behind, utilizing parody, irony and humor to weld these opposing impulses into a unified narrative.

Figure 3. The opening credits, and the final scene to *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955)

The film ends with nuclear material being released from a suitcase and the two main characters, Mike and Velda, escape a nuclear explosion inside a lake house. The original ending of the film was excised from the theatrical release and audiences for many years assumed Hammer and Velda died in the house.[228] The ending was campy, and surprisingly not inconsistent with the tone of what came before. What I believe Chabrol was trying to express about *Kiss Me Deadly* as the thriller of tomorrow was that it anticipated the critique of Hollywood cinema and America that neo-noirs tried to do in the cinema in the seventies. *Kiss Me Deadly*

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[227] I believe the low-key lighting in *Kiss Me Deadly* was more functional than stylistic. Aldrich had to use a mise-en-scene to cut together shots that were done on sound stages and shots done on location. It's much harder to see any discrepancy when the shots are lit with barely any light. Before Aldrich this was a trademark style for the B-noirs made during the forties.

[228] Tarantino included a mysterious briefcase in his homage to B-films *Pulp Fiction* (1994). Vincent Vega opens a briefcase after inputting 666 to unlock it. We see his face light up, he looks down the contents, smokes a cigarette, and closes the case. Aldrich directed a similar scene in *Kiss Me Deadly* where Hammer opens the box in the gym and we see a blinding light inside accompanied by a high-pitched hissing sound. Hammer closes it immediately after burning his wrist.

is not an example of what Jameson calls pastiche defined as parody with a blank

mask, apolitical parody, but rather a modernist parody of Mickey Spillane's

writing and his character Mike Hammer. It is an anti-bourgeois, feminist film noir

that consumes its past generic traditions, taking the character types and pushing

them to their limit, creating a mockery of them.

Upon the release of *Kiss Me Deadly* many critics complained about the

amoral nature of the film. The complete lack of morality of the characters in this

film was transcoded for the *Cahiers du Cinema* as an effect of alienation and

reification in capitalist societies.[229] The right and left wing critics were in

agreement on *Kiss Me Deadly* in this respect. The *Cahiers du Cinema* group

thought this depiction of an amoral Mike Hammer was a critique of society

whereas the right-wing critics saw it as a symptom of an amoral society.[230] The

amoral nature of *Kiss Me Deadly* is not the result of reification but a change in

ideological terrain from previous private detective films. *Kiss Me Deadly* went

beyond ethics and toward a political terrain, one that attempted to think the

impossible in terms of the private detective narrative. In what follows we will

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[229] Jean Domarchi in "Knife in the Wound" wrote that in Aldrich's *The Big Knife* and *Kiss Me Deadly* the character's disrespect for life is the result of accumulated reification and alienation, see Domarchi (1985)[1956], p. 245.

[230] This divided reception between condemning/praising satire appears to be a built-in response to satirical cultural production. Part of the problem might be that satire and irony imply two audiences, one that is in on it, and one that is not. I always thought this schema was something imaginary, something that was hypothetically implied with every satiric or ironic act, but there does exist two audiences. The right-wing critics, this is gross generalization but I think it is accurate nonetheless, have a hard time detecting irony, satire, or anything beyond the surface of arts, high and low. Furthermore, films that attack or mock marriage, courage, achievement, or responsibility are *de facto* criticized by the right which is why they typically love movies based off of super-heroes. The not so recent transformation of the right in America to neo-conservatism or neo-liberalism invites Orwellian inspired films like Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* (1985) as examples of pro-conservative cinema. An interesting example of how ridiculous right-wing film critics can be is to compare their reception of *Blast from the Past* with *Revolutionary Road*. Both of course are bad films, but the right-wing agree with the depiction of the fifties in the former as a piece of history and the latter as a piece of ideology.

discuss the narrative of the film in order to explain the ideological and critical

dimensions in relation to previous private detective films.

The first major difference between the novel and film can be registered if

we attend to the dialogue between the female characters and Hammer. In

Spillane's fiction it was very common for Hammer to dominate the female

characters. Aldrich and Bezzerides changed the way women and Hammer

interacted so that every woman in the film became a feminist critique of the

character. Witness the scene when Hammer picks up Christina on the road and

she criticizes Hammer for being materialistic and selfish:

> Christina: Bet you do push-ups every morning just to keep your belly hard.
>
> Hammer: You against good health or something?
>
> Christina: I can tolerate flabby muscles in a man if it makes him more friendly. You're the kind of a person who never gives in a relationship. Who only takes. Woman, the incomplete sex. What does she need to complete her? Why man of course. Wonderful man.
>
> Hammer: Ahh, alright, alright. Let it go.

Christina continues the conversation and asks Hammer if he reads poetry and if he

has read Christina Rosetti. Of course Hammer has not read Rosetti. He has no

interest to poetry or other fine art. Aldrich created a complete caricature of a

right-wing tough guy who has superficial taste and detests the high-culture of the

rich. Hammer is very similar to the Bannion character in Lang's *The Big Heat;*

both Hammer and Bannion detest high-art.[231] They are anti-intellectual and

believe they are the better for it.

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[231] However, the similarities between Hammer and Bannion are few and far between. Bannion is completely fixated on justice while Hammer is not at all, at least not until his best friend, Nick the mechanic, is killed. Hammer shares with Bannion his ignorance of high-culture associated with

Christina and Hammer eventually encounter some villains. Christina is murdered by an unseen group of enemies. The villains try to kill Hammer as well but somehow Hammer survives and the next scene he wakes up in a hospital. A friend of Hammer's from the police arrives and questions Hammer about the incident. Hammer is taken to the police station and questioned there again. The interrogation scene has less to do with the murder and more to do with Hammer's character. The police lack focus or precision and repeatedly ask Hammer about his business, his ethics, and his personal life. We find out that Hammer specializes in divorce cases and blackmail; he does not help people with blackmail, he blackmails them by sending his girlfriend after the men and then seducing the women and then subsequently hiring both parties as clients.[232] The police reprimanded him for having no morals. Hammer's divorce and blackmail work are again from Aldrich and Bezzerides. In the Spillane's novels, Hammer never did this type of work. He was usually uncovering drug and prostitution rings, and helping the police solve murder cases.

The police investigation has now become a staple for private detective noirs. Examples from the films we discussed above are as follows. After Archer is murdered Spade is questioned by police and suspected as the murderer. After Marriott is murdered Powell-Marlowe is questioned by Lt. Randall and suspected as the murderer. When the Sternwood's chauffeur is murdered Bogart-Marlowe is

the upper-classes. However, Bannion appears to be content to be where he is in the class system, a police officer, while Hammer is climbing the social ladder so to speak, doing whatever he can to get wealthy.

[232]The most obvious discrepancy between Aldrich's Hammer and Spillane's version is that in the novels Hammer was overtly obsessed with justice and police intervention (i.e. state involvement in private affairs) was always depicted as an obstacle to justice. The novels version of Hammer prefigure the characterization of Harry Callaghan while the films prefigure J.J. Gittes.

questioned by Chief Inspector Bernie Ohls but not suspected as the murderer. *Out of the Past* does not have an interrogation scene because the police are never involved with Whit, Jeff, and Kathie. The underworld in *Out of the Past* appears to be almost separate from the police and everyday life. *Kiss Me Deadly* uses the interrogation scene but the police officers sitting a round table, berate Hammer with questions about his business and his personal life. They can hardly focus on Christine's murder. Like the previous private detective films, the interrogation scene functions as a way for the audience to get to know the main character and repeat important narrative information. The police interrogation tells us that Hammer manipulates the upper-class clients into paying him double. He co-opts their sexual desire, uses his female employee/partner to seduce the husbands, he seduces the wives, he works for both parties and makes twice as much money as he normally would. Hammer is more conniving and dishonest than the Galahad Marlowe. To connect to our earlier discussion of the private detective as the middle-class avatar who serves the upper-classes, Hammer represents a middle-class character who is duping the upper-classes into paying him for nothing: Hammer creates a problem (sending his female partner to have sex with rich husbands) and then charges to fix it. He produces capital from nothing, a perfect allegory of finance capitalism. Hammer puts desire to work and makes it productive. He refuses to be subservient to the upper-classes and uses them to make money for himself.

Hammer's desire for glittering objects, fast cars, and money anticipates the characterization of J.J. Gittes in *Chinatown*. Both characters aspire to join the

upper-classes. Hammer's character is an ideological reversal of the previous private detective characters. Instead of depicting a character that is good, smart, and heroic, Aldrich presents a materialistic goon who serves only himself, an individualist pure and simple. Hammer embodies the bourgeois ideology of the centered subject much more so than Marlowe or Spade. All that is missing is the aesthetic compensation for identifying with this character. By removing the compensation or fantasy bribes we saw in the previous private detective films, Aldrich and Bezzerides reversed the ideological terrain at work in private detective films. This is done by recoding the private detective as a selfish middle-class male trying to join the upper-classes, a mockery of the private detective character embodied previously by Spade and Marlowe. Hammer is a morally bankrupt version of Spade and Marlowe. Aldrich is not a subtle filmmaker and he has several characters repeatedly comment on Hammer's lack of morals and goodness to emphasize the main character's difference from previous private detective characterizations. *Kiss Me Deadly* then, is a caricature of the private detective noirs that came before it. This parody of the private detective criticizes bourgeois ideological narratives depicted in private detective films.

Not only is the film a critique of bourgeois ideology but it also taps into the reactionary anxiety caused by the Communist threat. The film makes several references to an unseen enemy that is behind all of the trouble in the story. Near the end of the film Hammer yells at Pat Chambers, the police officer who repeatedly returns to Hammer to get information. Hammer asks Pat why he let so many people die, why the police did nothing to stop this threat, a threat that no

one can identify. Hammer expresses the irrational middle-class fear of

communism that was so present in fifties America. Hammer is furious with the

police for failing to protect American citizens. In the private detective film one of

the ideologemes is to code the repressive state apparatuses (the police/the state/the

juridical) as corrupt, and useless which contrasts to the potent and energetic

individualist private detective. This juxtaposition remains intact in Aldrich's film

except that in this film Hammer is no longer stronger and more intelligent than the

police force. Hammer fails to protect anyone even though he followed the

strategies of the previous private detectives. He used his cunning and potency to

deduce the mystery, find the great whatzit, and identify the villains. However, this

does not lead to bringing society back into equilibrium but to nuclear disaster.

Kiss Me Deadly demonstrates that neither the state apparatus nor the heroic

individual can protect America from their impending doom at the hands of the

evil communists. The critique relays itself through the history of the private

detective on film. When the nuclear material is unleashed from the box Hammer

and Velda retreat to the ocean where they watch the house explode with a

blinding white light.

  Kiss Me Deadly anticipates the depiction of the anti-communist paranoia

in Don Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956).[233] Previous films like *The

Iron Curtain* (1948), *The Red Menace* (1949), *I Married a Communist* (1949), and

Conspirator (1949) depicted this threat in a more overt manner and they all did

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[233] The *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* is not a communist film but a critique of all kinds of
conformity, communist and anti-communist alike. However, most critics highlight how the film
taps into Cold War paranoia about the apparent communist threat to the American way of life.

poorly at the box-office.[234] Compared to *Invasion of the Body Snatchers, Kiss Me Deadly* was not as overt. In Siegel's film aliens (i.e. communists) were pitted against middle-class Americans to dramatize the conflict of anti-communist America with communism. Aldrich dramatized the Cold-War paranoia by never showing the unnamed villains who were behind Christina's murder and others that died in the story.

After Hammer returns from the police investigation he decides to investigate the death of a man named Kowolsky who was mysteriously killed before the events of the film. This leads the detective to Lilly Carver (also known as Gabrielle), Christina's roommate. In his investigation Hammer is never able to find out the identity of the killers. Hammer discovers that Lilly encounters the same unknown villains as well, always referring to them "they," she is never able to identify who the enemies are. The audience does get glimpses of the unknown threat. When the villains appear on screen, Aldrich photographs their shoes and legs, never showing who is behind the murders. Hammer discovers that a man named Dr. Soberin is behind the various murders in the story. The doctor is after a mysterious box containing nuclear material. By using the nuclear material as the great whatzit in the film Aldrich dramatized another public fear during the fifties: the possible threat of nuclear attack.

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[234] See Larry Ceplair's article on anti-radicalism and the American film industry "The Film Industry's Battle Against Left-wing Influences, from the Russian Revolution to the Blacklist" in *Film History*, pp. 399-411.

Figure 4. Hammer opens the suitcase containing nuclear material, and Lilly on fire after opening the suitcase in the final scene.

Hammer's motivations for investigating into the death of Christina have to do with his belief that there is something big behind it and he was wants a piece of it. Unlike previous the depiction of private detectives, Hammer's quest was not motivated by justice but instead a desire for money. We discover at the end of the film that Hammer's quest to get a piece of "something big" is completely misguided and he ends up inadvertently releasing the material from its container. Aldrich connects the detective's quest to solve investigation with nuclear disaster. In *Kiss Me Deadly,* it is not the communists who bring nuclear destruction to America but those who embody the capitalist ethic, the individualist detective trying to solve the mystery.

Figure 5. Christina and Hammer riding in car, and Christina getting tortured in *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955)

Aldrich manipulated the private detective narrative to criticize bourgeois morality and ideology. He also deployed a feminist critique of the bourgeois ideology of sexism and masculinity. We discussed how the private detective's quest for knowledge ended up in nuclear disaster. Previous private detective narratives connected the detective's quest to his masculinity. The detective's quest to solve the mystery was also a quest to prove that he was a man, to demonstrate his superiority and intelligence.[235] Hammer somehow passes this test but the consequences are much different. When Hammer solves the mystery, proves his masculinity to the world, he destroys the world (metaphorically at least in the film) by unleashing the great whatzit. Aldrich connects Hammer's quest to be masculine, and an individualist ideology with destruction.

In *Kiss Me Deadly,* the private detective's quest now failed to bring society back to equilibrium. Hammer's actions exacerbated the problems in society, directing society towards a normative crisis. Spade and Marlowe and to an extant Jeff Bailey/Markham made society better in their respective stories: Spade found Archer's killer, Powell-Marlowe helped the police find out who killed who in the final shoot out, Bogart-Marlowe destroyed Eddie Mars and made sure Vivian was rehabilitated, and Jeff Bailey/Markham inadvertently got rid of the criminals. Hammer tried to save Lily Carver but is used by her to find the radioactive material and which then leads it to being unleashed. *Kiss Me Deadly* effectively utilized all of the codes and ideologemes of the private

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[235] Frank Krutnik discussed this interpretation of the private detective in his book on the depiction of masculinity in film noir, *In a Lonely Street: film noir, genre, masculinity* (1991). Chapter Seven, *the 'tough' investigative thriller*, covers the private detective's quest to solve the mystery as a test that he must go through to prove he is masculine.

detective noirs to subvert the ideological strategies put forward in the previous films we discussed. If the private detective was a middle-class avatar who performed the dirty work of the upper-classes that brought society back to equilibrium, then *Kiss Me Deadly*'s version of the mythical hero punished the private detective for doing the same task. Aldrich mocked the bourgeois morality that valorized individualism and misogyny by turning the private detective narrative against its own ideological coordinates.

Conclusion

So far we have traced the various private detective films in the forties and fifties cycle of films beginning with *The Maltese Falcon* and ending with *Kiss Me Deadly*. The bookends of this rather brief cycle demonstrated the critical and ideological dimensions of the sub-genre. The first four films in the cycle express anxieties of the class struggle and material conflicts during the forties. They dramatized the white-middle-class male as the hero/savior of society while the women were either coded as passive or evil. After the release of *Out of the Past*, it appeared that the private detective myth was exhausted. Tourneur combined the private detective narrative with a middle-class melodrama narrative. The private detective narrative lay dormant for a brief period but its individualist ideologemes resurfaced in the rogue cop films. Both characterizations were recycled and reused in the seventies. *Kiss Me Deadly* resurrected the private detective only to criticize its ideological terrain.

Chapter three. Neo-noir in the Seventies: *The Long Goodbye, Chinatown,* **and** *Night Moves*

Introduction

One problem that many critics have had to deal with was how to define film noir.

This critical problem was carried over to discussions of neo-noir. Critics who

defined noir as a genre were then able to identify new films that resembled the

classical cycle within a noir canon.[236] Others like Paul Schrader argued that film

noir is best understood in historical terms and not as an artistic category, similar

to the way critics define cycles like German Expressionism. Other critics like

Rick Altman argued that film noir had a relatively high degree of an anti-

communitarian stance for a genre which is why there is no stable canon for film

noir while Steve Neale argued that film noir was not a genre at. Witness this quote

from Neale:

> As a single phenomenon, noir, in my view, never existed. That is why no one
> has been able to define it, and why the contours of the larger noir canon in
> particular are so imprecise. Many of the features associated with noir- the use of
> voice-over and flashback, the use of high contrast lighting and other
> 'expressionist' devices, the focus on mentally, emotionally and physically
> vulnerable characters, the interest in psychology, the culture of distrust marking
> relations between male and female characters, and the downbeat emphasis on
> violence, anxiety, death, crime and compromised morality--were certainly real
> ones, but they were separable features belonging to separable tendencies and
> trends which traversed a wide variety of genres and cycles in the 1940s and
> early 1950s[237]

Other critics avoided the question of genre altogether and instead define the group

of films as a phenomenon in ideological terms.[238] To my mind, Neale is the most

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[236] Both Foster Hirsch and Andrew Spicer define film noir in this way and separate the history of the canon into distinct periods: the forties and fifties original cycle, the neo-modernist cycle, and postmodern cycle. See Hirsch's *Detours and Lost Highways* (1999) and Spicer's *Film Noir* (2002).
[237] See Stephen Neale's *Genre and Hollywood* (2000), p. 164.
[238] See Brian Neve's *Film and Politics in America* (1992).

consistent and precise in his definition of film noir. Like Naremore, Neale

believes that the term film noir was used by the French critics group together a set

of heterogenous films within a unified style. However, once we begin to discuss

neo-noir, generic definitions surprisingly become a little easier to defend. I agree

completely with Neale's argument that unlike film noir, neo-noir is in fact a

genre.[239] Neo-noir, as a genre, is at its core nostalgic. Each film posits the

existence of an earlier period in cinema and refers to it through its own *mise-en-*

scene, characterizations, and narrative. However, like the film critics who

wrangled over how to define noir, neo-noir films decided what aspects of the

unstable canon they were going to pick from and revise. The neo-noirs in the

seventies were much more interested in continuing with the private detective

narratives than the "middle-class murder" narratives (to use Durgnat's term). The

following discussion will look at three private detective neo-noirs: *The Long*

Goodbye (1973), *Chinatown* (1974), and *Night Moves* (1975). We will look at

how each film revised the private detective narrative and expanded upon it so that

we can register the ideological changes in the cinema between these two periods.

Contextualizing the private detective in the seventies

 Arthur Penn, Robert Altman, and Roman Polanski experienced some critical and

commercial success before making their neo-noirs in the seventies. None of the

three directors were part of the younger generation of Hollywood directors[240] that

went to film school in Los Angeles or New York but either started in television or

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[239] See Neale's *Genre and Hollywood* (2000), p. 165.

[240] The younger generation I am referring to here are directors like Martin Scorsese, George Lucas,
Francis Ford Coppola, Brian de Palma, and John Milius.

abroad in different film industries. Each of these directors in question would

diverge from the classical conventions in various ways. To a degree, the influence

of Hitchcock was evident with how each of them desired to insert their own

personality as a director in the productions (Polanski was the only director to

feature himself in a cameo). In their neo-noirs, each director worked with the

private detective character, and to varying degrees, dismantled the myth in the

service of an ideological critique. Each film and director were also part of a more

widespread shift in Hollywood filmmaking that began in the sixties and ended in

the mid-seventies, called the "New Hollywood" or the "Hollywood

Renaissance."[241]

Figure 6. *The Graduate* (1967), *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), and *Easy Rider* (1969)

The Hollywood Renaissance refers to a brief period in Hollywood history

where several film historians have recognized a decisive shift towards more

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[241] Several texts cover this shift in Hollywood. See James Bernardoni's *The New Hollywood: what the movies did with the new freedoms of the seventies* (1991), Peter Kramer's *The New Hollywood: from Bonnie and Clyde to Star Wars* (2005), and *The Last Great American Picture Show: new Hollywood cinema in the 1970s* (2004) edited by Thomas Elsaesser, Alexander Horwath, and Noel King.

cynical and artistic films. This growing cynicism reflected a lack of belief in any

utopian projects more so in contrast to the utopian projects of sixties America.

The early films[242] that many film scholars regard as having started the shift were

notably less fatalistic and cynical than the neo-noirs discussed here. For example,

Bonnie and Clyde,[243] one of the three films that motivated Hollywood to employ

younger directors and writers, was considered bleak and cynical when it came out

because main characters died at the end.[244] Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* tapped into

the sixties radical student movements by valorizing a young criminal gang who

were opposing social conventions. Later films in the New Hollywood period

would become less radical and more fatalistic. To connect this shift in between

the two tendencies at work in the New Hollywood we could frame the change in

Woodiwiss' terms as the starting point of the forgetting of social modernism. The

promises of a liberal welfare state would be removed from the cultural memory in

favor of an ideology of self-reliance.[245] Hollywood films tapped into this

ideological shift by trading in radical ideologies for cynicism.

The way that *Bonnie and Clyde* tapped into the utopian culture of the

sixties and the spectator's anxiety over such projects was through the way Penn's

film coded the criminals and the public. Throughout most of the film, the public's

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[242] *The Graduate* and *Easy Rider* are among the first three that have been noted by critics for creating a shift in Hollywood production. An international film influenced studios as well. Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966) had some more adult-themed content than what was popular for commercial films in the seventies.

[243] Another rejoinder to our discussion of noir as a genre and the subsequent problems critics have with it. Bonnie and Clyde is somewhat of a retread of Joseph H. Lewis' *Gun Crazy* (1950). The Lewis film was identified as another key film noir, a story of a couple on the run from the law. After *Bonnie and Clyde*, Terence Malick's *Badlands* (1973) was another addition the couple-on-the-run narrative that detached itself from discussions of neo-noir almost entirely and *Natural Born Killers* (1994) helped distinguish this type of narrative even further from neo-noir.

[244] Joseph H. Lewis' *Gun Crazy* (1950) had a similar ending except with more emphasis put on the instability of the female character.

[245] See Woodiwiss' *Postmodernity USA* (1993), pp. 106-107.

reactions to the criminals are comically over the top and at times ridiculous. The various bankers and police appear to have some sort of personal grudge against the criminals and repeatedly behave like spastic children whenever they see the titular characters. For example, there is one scene where the gang robs a bank and drives away. One of the bankers runs after their car and jumps onto the side. What does he think he is going to accomplish here? He has no gun and no experience with capturing criminals and yet he risks his life for money that would be covered by insurance. The criminals shoot him in the head and he falls off the car. There are numerous scenes in the film like this where the public overreacts to the criminals who are doing nothing to hurt them. The film codes the public as brutal and borderline psychotic while the criminals are coded as free, strong, and good. Penn used this coding scheme to depict American society as hostile to the poor and to those who do not want to conform to conventional values.

The final scene of the film demonstrates the exaggerated negativity the American public has towards the criminals. Near the end of the film Bonnie, Clyde, and C.W. are hiding at C.W.'s father's house. The father discovers C.W.'s tattoo and thinks that Bonnie and Clyde have corrupted his son. He makes a deal with the police to give away the couple so his son can get a reduced sentence. The police set a trap for Bonnie and Clyde and annihilate them with a hail of bullets. The police fire machine guns for twenty seconds of screen time at Bonnie and Clyde, riddling their bodies with bullets. The death of the criminal as punishment for hurting innocent people was an old convention from the classical period. In Penn's film, the criminals did not kill innocent people but stole money from

banks, money that would be replaced by insurance companies. The criminals were neither evil nor good but simply trying to survive in the Great Depression.[246] Penn reversed the conventions used in *Gun Crazy* (1950) to tap into the radical movements marching against hypocrisy in American. Penn's film demonstrated the hostility American society had towards anti-conformists, to those who disrupted the flow of capital and the accumulation of profit.

Figure 7. Peggy Cummins and John Dall in *Gun Crazy* (1950), and Faye Dunaway and Warren Beaty in *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967)

Night Moves has a different ideological message than *Bonnie and Clyde*. We begin with a private detective Harry Moseby who is very similar to Hackman's character Harry Caul in the equally fatalistic film in Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation.* In Coppola's film Harry Caul distrusts everyone he knows and can barely sustain any friendship with anyone. He breaks up with his girlfriend because she asks about his past, irritated with her questions. Every gesture, pleasant or otherwise, is scrutinized beyond the necessary limits. In the end, Caul's character arc ends where it began, alone in his apartment. *The Conversation* was one of the key films of the seventies cycle in Hollywood that

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[246] In one scene, Clyde asks a farmer during a bank robbery if the money he is holding is his or the banks. The farmers admits the money is his so Clyde lets him keep while he gathers the bank's money.

pitted an insecure male character against a faceless and inexplicably powerful evil that could not be defeated. Penn's *Night Moves* belongs to this group of conspiracy-paranoia thrillers just as much as it belongs to neo-noir. Both of these films present an insecure male pitted against corporations and institutions representing a rejection of the legitimacy of American institutions. Penn's film combines the private detective narrative conventions with the tropes of the conspiracy thriller to reinvent the private detective for the seventies.

Night Moves: the detective's fractured point of view

The main character in *Night Moves*, Harry Moseby, is introduced as a private detective; "a real, live detective" according to his answering machine message. The voice on the machine is Nick, a fellow detective from an agency, a friend who sends Harry clients. Before leaving his office, the detective puts on a tie and drives to see his wife who works at an antique shop. When he gets there she is on the phone, and Harry begins to fondle her breasts from behind her. His wife, Ellen, smiles and asks Harry if he will join Nick's agency. "It's an information factory" according to Harry, "I'd go bananas there in a week." In the first five minutes, Penn characterizes the contemporary detective as an anachronism and a lonely figure who avoids corporations and community. Ellen invites Harry to a film with her and her boss that night. They are going to see Eric Rohmer's *My Night at Maud's* (1969). "I saw Rohmer film once. It was kind of like watching paint dry," Harry responds. Harry, like Hammer, either detests high-art or he was

trying to make fun of his wife's homosexual boss. Eventually, Harry leaves her at work to go meet Mrs. Grastner, his new client.

Night Moves strongly foregrounds the detective story as a crisis in masculinity in a similar way to classical period noirs. Harry's quest to solve the mystery is tied more directly to the character's own quest for meaning and desperate attempts to be a man of action. For example, Harry teases Ellen's boss, Charles, a homosexual art dealer. After throwing an antique at her boss, Harry says "nice hands" and Charles responds with "you seem to get some sort of weird satisfaction out of that sort of thing, don't you?" This teasing and the idiotic remark about the Rohmer film we mentioned above are attempts for Harry to assert himself as a man. The homosexual Charles is of no threat to Harry and yet he feels compelled to assert his masculinity when in his presence, representing the homophobic tendencies within American film noir. Later on that night, Harry stakes out his wife and Charles at the movie theatre. He sees Ellen, Charles, and another man that he cannot identify. Ellen and the unknown man say goodbye to Charles and leave together. Ellen kisses the unknown man. Harry doesn't interrupt but instead writes down his license plate with the intention of following him.

The opening sequence here introduces all we need and will ever know about Harry. The director uses an unconventional editing style to depict the inner-state of the main character. Penn-Allen cut their scenes on the action of the characters. From the Ellen introduction scene to the Mrs. Grastner introduction scene, Penn transitions in the middle of sentences. When introducing a new scene,

Penn does not provide the audience with any establishing shots, but instead decides to convey information through the character's dialogue. For example, we cut from Harry laughing at his joke to Charles, to him laughing with Mrs. Grastner. When Harry is about to say how much his service costs, Penn cuts to the next scene where Harry is listening to an audio tape describing his client. Each scene completes the last one by using audio information. Penn's editing style expresses the character thematics of Harry, a man who cannot express himself to those close to him but can only act through his private detective occupation.

Dede Allen was Penn's editor for *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Alice's Restaurant* (1969), *Little Big Man*, and then *Missouri Breaks* (1976). The cutting style of *Bonnie and Clyde* was well-regarded because of the affinities with Godard's *A bout de souffle*. However, the Allen-Penn cutting style is a bit more than just a simple emulation of Godard's montage in *A bout de souffle.*[247] Allen-Penn used jump cuts to either create the sense of speed and chaos during the action scenes or sexual frustration like in the two aborted love scenes in *Bonnie and Clyde*. Penn uses jump cuts in both films to visually depict impotence. Instead of depicting Clyde according to the biographical Clyde Barrow, Penn made the character impotent (the biographical Clyde Barrow was bi-sexual) something he makes up for by being a man of action, and an adventurer. In an early conversation Clyde tells his lover that he is like no other man that she knows, he is not so good at

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[247]Godard's excessive use of jump cuts in *A bout de souffle* was somewhat of an afterthought, applied to the film after it was shot and edited into a much longer cut. At the behest of producers who wanted the film to be commercially viable, they asked Godard to cut 30 minutes. Jean-Pierre Melville suggested that Godard take out everything that was inessential to the film. Godard cut whatever you thought was not necessary to the story and the radical jump cuts became an important part of the film. Godard cut the middle and ends or beginnings out of scenes so the conversations between Michel and Patricia were disjointed and jarring. See Richard Raskin's "Five explanations for the jump cuts in Godard's *Breathless*" in *P.O.V.* (1998), pp. 141-153.

making love but he is good at robbing banks. She is excited by the second statement but repeatedly forgets the first.

In *Night Moves,* Harry is not physically but emotionally impotent. There is something amiss with him and the narrative repeatedly leads us down a path that hints at some explanation without ever giving one. For example, in an early scene, Harry is at home watching a football game. He asks his wife about the movie, not about the man she was kissing. Ellen says "It was arty." She asks Harry which team is winning. Harry responds "Nobody. One side's just losing slower than the other." Harry is unable to confront his wife. He merely pokes and prods with questions, like a private detective. She goes downstairs and asks Harry to join. He sulks in his chair, and continues to watch football with a blank expression on his face.

Instead of lingering on this image or pulling the camera back to close of the scene, Allen-Penn abruptly cuts to the next scene that begins with Harry punting a ball. Penn never lingers too long on these quiet moments early on in the film but rather juxtaposes scenes of Harry's inactivity and impotence with his desperate attempts to act. In this scene Harry questions a friend of the girl, Delly Grastner that he is supposed to find. The friend's name is Quinton (actor James Wood); Harry discovers that Quinton is Delly's ex-boyfriend. Harry asks about the bruises on Quinton's face. "I won second prize in a fight" Quinton responds. He tells Harry that he saw a man hitting on Delly in New Mexico and challenged him to a fight. This scene contrasts the young, masculine Quinton to the tired and impotent Harry. Cut to the next scene, Harry is staking out a house and playing

chess by himself in his car. He is not working on the Grastner case but parked

outside Marty Heller's house, the man who is sleeping with Ellen. Harry walks

into the house and Marty immediately knows that it is Ellen's husband. They

speak about the affair. Marty begins to talk about Harry and his past. Ellen told

Marty about Harry's childhood and absent father. Harry does not like what he is

hearing and moves as if he is going to punch Marty. "Come on take a swing at

me, the way Sam Spade would" Marty yells at Harry. Penn winks at the audience

here. Harry is no man of action like Sam Spade. Penn reversed the convention of

film noir by using an intertextual reference to make the male protagonist appear

weak and impotent. In the previous chapter we discovered that films noirs used

intertextual references (i.e. referring to detective's from the Golden Age of

detective fiction) to depict the private detective as strong and cunning, a man of

action. Penn reverses the convention to again emphasize Harry's inability to act.

Figure 8. Marty and Harry in *Night Moves* (1975), and Joel Cairo and Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon* (1941)

The crisis of masculinity is the content of the form of this film. The visual

and editing style has ideological content in its own right, which expresses a

critique of masculinity. *Night Moves* takes the private detective narrative and

completely empties out the character of his semic content dictated by the genre.

All of the compensation we normally receive as spectators for identifying with the

character is removed from this film. We do not get any aesthetic gratification for watching this character and there is nothing to learn and discover about Harry Moseby. For example, later in the film Moseby tells Ellen about the time he tracked down his father, a man who abandoned Moseby when he was a young boy. Moseby spent a lot of time to find his father and when he eventually found him, he found an old man reading newspaper comics on a park bench. Moseby watched his father read for a few minutes and then left. Earlier in the film when Moseby confronts Ellen's lover in a beach house they argue for awhile, and the man tells Harry that Ellen told him about his father abandoning him and why she thinks that might explain his stunted emotions and his inability to relate to her. We discover that what Ellen thinks is the key to their problems is a red herring because nothing will explain the disunity and disarray of Harry's ego. It is futile to try to discover the truth of Harry; like the film itself, there is no center behind the mystery, but merely fragments of a de-centered subject.

Figure 9. Harry sulking in front of the television, and Harry leaving for Florida.
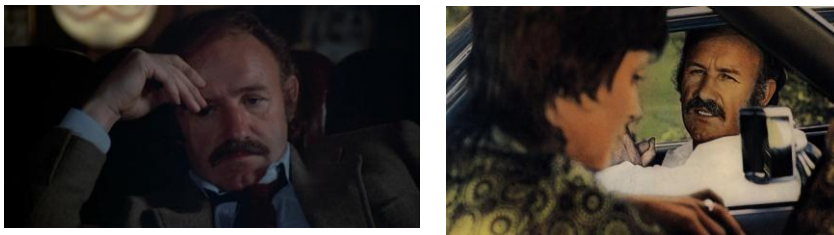
Night Moves implies early on that there is some truth to discover about Harry and the mystery he is investigating. Penn uses the generic conventions of detective fiction to create expectations for a mystery to be solved. Like previous private detectives, Harry needs a mystery to prove his masculinity and champion

individualist ideology. However, Penn uses these conventions only to display the emptiness behind the detective myth. The ending of the film demonstrates this reversal; Penn the private detective is now impotent and ineffective in the face of corruption. Penn co-opted the coding mechanisms used by conspiracy-thrillers to criticize the private detective myth.

We discussed above the generic conventions for coding the world in private detective films: society (represented by the upper-classes and the police) was coded as weak and the male protagonist was coded as strong, intelligent, and masculine. To compare this with conspiracy-thrillers, this coding was reversed and the male protagonist is overtaken by some faceless evil.[248] Jameson notes that conspiracy films reduplicate the detective narratives in their own way by joining the individual victims with society, so that society is now the victim.[249] However, I would argue that this condensation was done by the western before the conspiracy film, and the detective narratives as well. In *Night Moves*, the nuclear family is again the victim, but not of some malevolent evil or criminal, but of coincidence, some kind of blind fatalism. Both Harry's marriage and the Grastner household are in shambles. We find out later that Delly is living with her mother's ex-husband Tom and his girlfriend Paula. Delly, Paula, and Tom have managed to make this arrangement work but we soon discover that this household is in trouble as well.

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[248] Jameson covered this extensively in his text mentioned in the above footnote. The most extreme reversal of the classical Hollywood coding is *The Parallax View* whereas *All the President's Men* is the dialectical response to the former, showing America the hope of individuals who dare to ask questions. Both films are ideological in their own way according to Jameson's analysis. See *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* (1991), pp. 9-84.
[249] See Jameson's *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* (1991), pp. 33-34.

The destruction of the nuclear family as an institution is coupled with the destruction of bourgeois centered ego, represented in this film by Harry. We discover early on that Harry is not as deft or clever as the private detectives in the past. His vision is flawed, he fails to understand the real truth behind events because he continually misinterprets objects, events, and people. Compared to the classical period, the detective was coded as intelligent and capable of discerning the truth behind the mystery. From Sherlock Holmes to Philip Marlowe, the detective used his intellect to solve the mystery. Harry Moseby is not so cunning and intelligent and not that strong either. In *Night Moves,* Harry fails to put all of the pieces of the mystery together until it is too late.

Harry finds Delly in Florida and brings her home to Mrs. Grastner. He completed his job but the story continues. He discovers shortly after his return that Delly was killed in a car accident while shooting a car chase scene in a movie. Harry decides to investigate because he believes someone wanted her dead. We learn that Delly found a dead body off the Florida coast and this motivated her to return with Harry to Los Angeles. We discover later that the dead body was an ex-lover of both Delly and Arlene, and a stunt pilot working with the film crew that Delly used to work with. Harry recalls Quinton worked on the set as a mechanic and suspects him as the one who murdered Delly. Joey Ziegler, a stunt driver and minor character in the film up to this point, shows Harry a 16mm print of the car crash that killed Delly. Harry decides to return to Florida once he discovered that Tom and Paula did not report the dead body Delly

found to the police. He believes Quinton is there and hopes to bring him to justice.

Harry arrives in Florida and finds Quinton dead in Tom's dolphin pit. Harry confronts Tom and they fight, which is more comical than exciting because both men are slow and old. They trade blows until Tom accidentally runs head first into a wooden post and knocks himself out. With Tom out of the way Harry makes Paula explain everything. She tells Harry that she slept with him the night that Delly found the body because Tom flew out and moved the stolen goods so the coast guard would not find them. Up until this point in the film, Penn did not hint that there was a smuggling plot in the film. The emphasis was on the broken families and Harry's inability to communicate his feelings. What lies behind the broken households is a smuggling plot that has driven the narrative events since Harry arrived in Florida. The deaths in the film were the result of individuals searching for profit.

Along with themes of the broken household and criminal capitalism Penn also introduces epistemological criticism in this film, aiming directly the private detective myth. Penn effectively used an epistemological ideologeme implying an empiricist theory of knowledge. The private detective, representing the epistemological pole of the subject in the subject/object dynamic is no longer a reliable source for knowledge. His epistemological judgements cannot be trusted. He no longer brings society back into equilibrium with his knowledge but make it worse.

Figure 10. Joey fires at Harry, and Harry watching Joey drown.

Night Moves replaced the ideologeme of the centered ego (i.e. the master subject, the hero who can discover something about the world and appeal to some universal ground of reason, rationality, or Law) with a fractured one. Harry's limited perspective is depicted explicitly at the end of the film. When Harry and Paula drive out on Tom's boat, called the "Point of View," they encounter a low flying plane. Joey Ziegler is in the cockpit and he opens fire on Harry while Paula is diving to retrieve the stolen goods. Joey shoots Harry's leg. Harry, unable to do anything, watches the plane land on the water. Joey continues to shoot at Harry until his gun jams. While the plane lands, Paula emerges from the ocean with the stolen goods. Harry yells at her to move but she cannot hear him. The plane flies into the stolen goods which dislodges the left floater, causing the plane to crash into the water, killing Paula instantly. Harry goes to the underwater viewing window and looks at the pilot. He discovers it is Joey Ziegler. He is yelling at Harry through water and two panes of glass, recalling earlier scenes where characters speak between panes of dirty glass. Harry tries to drive the boat back to land but cannot stand up because of his leg. He pushes the throttle, and the boat,

aptly titled "Point of View," moves in a circle as Penn ends the film on this

image.

Figure 11. The "Point of View," and the planet Solaris. The final shots of *Night Moves* (1975) and *Solaris* (1972)

The last shot of the film is composed in a similar way to Tarkovsky's

Solaris (1972). In Tarkovsky's film, the main character Dr. Kelvin is back at his

home, the lake is frozen but there is no snow on the ground. Tarkovsky does not

let the know audience know if Kelvin is back on earth or if Solaris did in fact

consume him. Kelvin walks to his house and sees water is pouring in from the

roof inside, but it is not raining outside. His father walks out and Kelvin drops to

his knees and embraces him. The camera slowly zooms out and we see that

Kelvin's home is an island in Solaris' yellow ocean. We discover that Kelvin has

become a part of the planet and the film ends. In *Night Moves*, the camera pans

out slowly just like in *Solaris* but reveals nothing to the audience, simply showing

us the "Point of View" continuously spinning in a circle. With this ending Penn

demonstrated that the detective myth turns out to be a snake eating its own tale.

Night Moves provides a nihilistic conclusion to the detective's quest: there is a

shift from a normative nihilism to an epistemic nihilism, signifying the lack of

desire for knowledge and belief that epistemic judgments are no longer useful in

late-capitalism.

As discussed in the previous chapter, detective narratives are as much about action as they are about the detective thinking through problems, examining objects, judging situations, and reading people. Filmmakers working within the detective genre using a first-person narrative register that limits the audience's perspective to that of the detective's field of vision. This was usually done by never including a scene without the detective and only showing scenes when the detective is conscious. Out of the five detective films we discussed only *Murder, My Sweet* and *Out of the Past* used a voice-over and they only used it because they were told in flashback. The detective noirs in the seventies followed this tendency by excluding the voice-over while remaining within the first-person narrative register. The detective films essentially leave the consciousness of the detective and the world, the society, intact once they reach their climax and the detective brings the criminals to justice. That is, once the narrative progresses so that the world is in disequilibrium, the detective uses his intelligence to figure out the mystery and to bring the film back into disequilibrium. Again, this can be demonstrated by returning to *The Big Sleep* as evidence of this tendency. Once Bogart-Marlowe orchestrates Eddie Mars' death, he asks Vivian to make sure Carmen gets psychiatric help. Vivian agrees and Marlowe then pins the unsolved murders on Mars. The ability for the detective to solve the mystery demonstrates that society can be fixed and also that the hero can use knowledge to work through the intricate totality of events and figure out a solution to the problem. This generic convention was not preserved for the seventies private detective noirs.

In *Night Moves* Harry and Ellen talk before he leaves again to Florida. She asks him to let the police handle the problem. He is no longer on the case, so to speak, and he has no professional obligation to finding out what is happening with Tom and Paula in Florida. He merely repeats the narrative actions dictated by the detective genre. There is no police investigator who is forcing him to keep working, questioning him at every turn like in *Murder, My Sweet* or *Kiss Me Deadly*. Harry wants to solve the mystery himself, motivated now by either his guilt for allowing Delly to die or by his desire to escape his life at home. We do not know why he returns to Florida. The film never tells us and his wife doesn't know what to think either. However, returning to the classical noir tradition again, we know that the detective's acts are primarily motivated by his desire to bring justice to society. For example, Spade delivers Brigid to the police because she killed his partner; Powell-Marlowe investigated the Grayle household because Marriott died while he was supposed to be protecting him. Bogart-Marlowe continues to investigate Vivian because he believes she is being blackmailed and because he feels guilty over the death of Harry Jones, and Mike Hammer wanted to avenge his dead friend Nick the mechanic. In *Night Moves*, Harry returns without any explanation of his motivation; he appears to return because it is dictated by the genre and nothing else.

Harry Moseby in *Night Moves* believed that Quinton was responsible for Delly's murder. This motivates him to disregard his wife's plea for him to stay in Los Angeles. But, unlike the private detectives from the classic period, Harry fails to find the murderer, and like the circling boat at the end, "Point of View," the

detective's moral code and intelligence lead to a dead end. Penn ends *Night Moves* with a complete subversion of the ideological terms of the classical noir tradition. Penn demonstrates not only the futility of epistemological judgments but also ethics itself. In *Night Moves* Harry fails precisely because he followed the ethical and epistemological strategies of the private detective.

This change in the detective narrative demonstrates a change in the way American ideological state apparatuses created new types of postmodern subjectivities for late-capitalism. The name that many have given this new sort of mind sight or ideological framework is "cynicism."[250] The only ideologeme that was available was the cynical philosophy of characteristic of postmodernism. Part of the reason for the success of this ideologeme has to do with the ideological/cinematic discourses that structured Hollywood cinema. Certain types of cinema, like the Brechtian cinema of Godard (particularly the films he made after *Pierrot le fou* (1965)[251]) were, and are, closed to directors working in Hollywood. Certain film makers like Chantal Akerman, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, John Cassavetes, and of course, Godard, along with some less known films like *Killer of Sheep* (1979) or *Mandingo* (1975), are examples of narrative directors that are counter to the ideological-cinematic discourses of Hollywood cinema. The New Hollywood period was in many ways just as restricted in ideological terms as the classical period. *Night Moves* represents the ideological

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[250] William Chaloupka discussed the history of cynical thought in American culture in his book *Everybody Knows: cynicism in America* (1999).
[251] Robin Wood discussed on the political dimensions of the Hollywood cinema in the seventies. Highlighting the political nature of Aldrich's and Fuller's filmography. See Robin Wood *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (1986), p. 32.

coordinates that bourgeois discourses permitted without moving outside of the ideological terrain that the film was attempting to criticize.

Figure 12. Counter-cinema: *Shadows* (1959), *Pierrot le Fou* (1965), *Killer of Sheep* (1979), and *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975).

Night Moves tapped into the growing cynicism inspired by the poor performance of the American economy, the failures of the revolutionary sixties, and the corruption of the American government with the Watergate scandal.[252] Woodiwiss identifies this shift as the beginning of the forgetting of social modernism. This forgetting produced a cynical culture, a lack of belief in politicians, institutions, American society, and values. What makes cynicism profoundly ideological is that it passes itself off as critique when it is essentially harmless and compatible with late-capitalist ideology. Cynicism appears in films as a sort of resigned wisdom that mocks characters who believe in morality and

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[252] See Jeffrey C. Alexander's "Three Models of Culture and Society Relations: toward an analysis of watergate" (1984) for a discussion of the ideological and normative shifts that took place because of the Watergate Scandal. In particular Alexander addresses the way Watergate was first brushed over and then turned into a serious offense that was televised and screened like a drama for the American public to watch.

goodness. *Night Moves* tapped into the cynical cultural turn while at the same time ignoring the resurgence of populism and a reinvention of Protestant Evangelical Christian culture in America. Interpellations that would have appealed to the populist dimension were left out of the film entirely. *Night Moves*, rather than criticizing American society helped produce a new form of ideological interpellation, constituting cynical, postmodern subjects, individuals who are interpellated into a cultural framework that openly admits to the failures and shortcomings of capitalism but continues to live within it. This phenomenon could also be conceived of in Frank Pearce's terms, taken from Durkheim's work, as an example of forced solidarity (a combination of force and mechanisms of ideological manipulation); cynicism turns into fatalism which itself masks anomie produced by conditions of forced solidarity.[253] Harry Moseby's circling consciousness at the end of *Night Moves* taps into the frustration over the inability for American films to break free of the social modernist paradigm, criticize American capitalism from a different ideological/cinematic terrain. Penn's genre-bending noir merely represents a new form of ideological narrative cinema that is perfectly compatible with the cultural logic of late-capitalism.

The Long Goodbye: the castrated Marlowe

Altman and Penn are different filmmakers and the way they treat the genre's tradition clearly demonstrates their differences.[254] Like Atlman's previous film, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971), *The Long Goodbye* was an experiment in genre

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[253] See Frank Pearce's *The Radical Durkheim* (2001), p. 129.
[254] Both Penn and Altman made revisionist westerns (*Little Big Man* and *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*) before making neo-noirs.

revision. Comparing the two films, it is much easier to understand what Altman was attempting to do with *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* than with *The Long Goodbye*. Altman's neo-noir confused both studio executives and audiences upon its release. *The Long Goodbye* received two releases because the studio was unable to market it successfully the first time and ended up creating two different marketing campaigns for the film.[255] As a filmmaker, Altman worked with established genres in the film industry. Westerns were much more popular and widespread than films noirs which up until this point was only emerging as a film studies construct or something that astute cinephiles would be aware of. *The Long Goodbye* attempted to deconstruct the private detective film by taking the Marlowe character and transplanting him into the seventies. Many critics have cited Altman's remarks about making Marlowe the ultimate patsy, and naming him Rip Van Marlowe as a way into interpreting the film.[256] The Gould version of Marlowe is nowhere close to this description, in fact a better example of the forties private detective anachronously existing in the seventies would be Harry Moseby in *Night Moves*.[257] The Gould-Marlowe characterization is less an anachronism and more of a reversal of everything audiences and film makers associated with the private detective.

The Gould-Marlowe characterization distanced itself the Bogart-Marlowe and Bogart-Spade performances by acting like Dick Powell's characterization of Marlowe in *Murder, My Sweet*. The story and tone in *The Long Goodbye* in many

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[255] See Paul Gardner's article "*Long Goodbye* proves Big Sleeper here" in *The New York Times* (November, 1973).
[256] See David Thompson's *Altman on Altman* (2006), p. 76.
[257] Recall the line directed towards Harry Moseby by Ellen's boyfriend "Come on take a swing at me, the way Sam Spade would."

ways is much more indebted to *Murder, My Sweet* than *The Big Sleep*. In

Dmytryk's film, the Marlowe character is more interested in making sarcastic

comments than acting tough. Bogart and Hawkes collectively created the more

iconic and ultimately more memorable version of Phillip Marlowe. Altman's

films do not escape this type of collective authorship either[258]: Altman's intention

for *The Long Goodbye* was to destroy the private detective myth by either going

against expectations and deconstructing the form of the genre itself. Altman took

advantage of the then popular fascination with quirky and off-beat actors like

Gould to distance *The Long Goodbye* from previous detective noirs. The

cinematic precursor to the use of quirky or anti-heroic heroes is Jean-Paul

Belmondo's Michel in *A bout de souffle*. In fact, Woody Allen's script, *Play it*

Again, Sam (1972) works in a similar way where the main character fetishizes

Bogart and old Hollywood, and channels the spirit of Bogart to win over the love

interest. In contrast, Michel channels Bogart's heroic-tough guy persona to a fatal

end in *A bout de souffle*. The Gould-Marlowe taps into the popularity of quirky

actors and also the parody stylistics of early Godard. Altman uses Gould to revise

and essentially mock the old-Hollywood conventions used for private detective

characters whilst updating Marlowe for the seventies.[259]

Altman lets the audience know early on that the he intends to parody the

private detective myth. For example, consider this dialogue excerpt from the

interrogation scene in the first act. The beginning montage of the film showed us

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[258] See Jeremy Kaye's excellent essay on the Elliot Gould persona in the seventies, "Hardboiled
Nebbish: the Jewish Humphrey Bogart in Robert Altman's The Long Goodbye and Woody
Allen's Play it Again, Same" in *Robert Altman Critical Essays* (2001), edited by Rick Armstrong.
[259] Along with Altman's film, there were two remakes of Chandler adaptations: *Farewell, My
Lovely* (1975) and *The Big Sleep* (1978), with Robert Mitchum as Marlowe in both films.

that Marlowe drove his friend Terry Lennox to Mexico late in the night. In the

morning, two cops are waiting for Marlowe at his home when he returns to Los

Angeles. They question him about his whereabouts the night before:

> Sergeant Green: Where did you go last night Marlowe?
>
> Marlowe: Oh, is this where I'm supposed to say "what's all this about?" and he says "shut up, I ask the questions"
>
> Green: Yeah, yeah, that's right Marlowe so just answer the questions.

Here Altman is quoting directly from Chandler's novel of the same name. Just

like *Murder, My Sweet*, Gould-Marlowe is questioned immediately after his first

quest with Lennox, following precisely the narrative structure of previous private

detective films. In *Murder, My Sweet*, Powell-Marlowe is taken in by the police

and they question him until they realize he does not know anything, in *The Long*

Goodbye, Gould-Marlowe is questioned first in his apartment and then brought to

police station.

Figure 13. Marlowe in black face while being interrogated in *The Long Goodbye* (1973)

Later on in the second interrogation scene, a black uniformed cop talks

with his white superior officer who chides him for not speaking properly (the

black cop mistakenly calls Marlowe a cutie-pie when he meant to say smart ass).

Later on, Marlowe is with a white man in jail for possession of marijuana, who is

complaining about being housed with "real" criminals when he all he wants to do

is get high.

> Cellmate: They got people that smoke marijuana. Possession. Possession is what you get in here for now, possession of noses, of gonads, possession of life, it's a weird world. Listen, someday, someday all the pigs are gonna be in here and all the people are gonna be out there.

> Marlowe: You can bet on that. Listen, babe, you're not in here, it's just your body. See you when you get out.

Marlowe mocks the counter-cultural character as he slouches out of the cell when

the police tell him they no longer need him. Terry Lennox was found dead in

Mexico with a signed confession stating that he killed his wife. Marlowe is

dumbfounded by the news and thus begins his quest to prove his friend's

innocence.

Like every private detective film, the Gould-Marlowe character is more

ethical than political. This ideolegeme is precisely what Altman was after in *The

Long Goodbye*; it was also what essentially motivates the plot of the film. Eileen

Wade contacts Marlowe because of his loyalty to his friend, the police question

him for the same reason, and later in the film Marty Augustine holds him

responsible for the money Terry stole. The police question Marlowe about his

relationship to Terry, they accuse Marlowe of being a homosexual because his

last name is spelled with an "e" at the end. The police lieutenant calls Terry

Lennox a murderer. Marlowe does not give in and stands by his friend, even

though all the evidence suggests that Lennox killed his wife.[260] This is the first

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[260] The first montage of the film has Marlowe going to the store to buy cat food and Terry Lennox driving to a gated community. We discover later that the gated community is the one where Eileen Wade lives. Terry speaks to the security guard who is known for doing impressions of Hollywood actors and actress from the classical period. When Lennox pulls up he impersonates Barbara Stanwyck from *Double Indemnity* "I don't understand. I don't understand it at all. I've never

many instances in the film where Marlowe blindly, and to his own detriment, defends Terry Lennox. At first the film implies that Marlowe's code of ethics serves him well: Eileen tells him that his loyalty to his friend made her want to hire him. She hired Marlowe to find her husband after he recently disappeared. Marlowe finds the husband immediately after being hired instead of later on the film, again going against audience expectations. The husband is returned home to his wife. This does not bring happiness but more trouble for the Wade family. From then the film is divided between meetings with Eileen and Marty Augustine, without any clear center and narrative trajectory. The narrative is aimless,[261] and continues to circle back to Terry Lennox, who for most of the film is an absent-cause of all the narrative action.

The film takes the male friendship and moral commitment trope of the early detective noirs as the primary source the conflict in the film. Altman exposes the futility of the good versus evil ideologeme by showing how the private detective's code of ethics is worthless to both Marlowe and society. The de-centered or quasi-schizophrenic spatial scheme that replaces the subjective camera style of the detective noirs, matches the aimless narrative structure as well. Both of these revisions to the genre subvert the primacy of a singular

understood it, Walter. I just don't understand why I don't understand it all. I don't..." Lennox responds with "Okay, just remember that and you'll be alright." We discover the meaning to this exchange at the end of the film. Lennox delivered the money he stole from Augustine to Eileen to keep while he escaped to Mexico after murdering his wife. Altman breaks with the singular perspective of the private detective to demonstrate from the beginning Marlowe's fractured perspective and failure to recognize his friend as a criminal.

[261] Kolker argues that Altman's narrative is a directly connect to the way the director organizes space in his films, see Kolker (2000), p. 346.

perspective[262] (a perspective that is moral, strong, smart, white, and male, or a singular perspective could be construed as a leverage point of critique which testifies to another level of ambiguity in the film), for a groundless perspective that focuses on the surfaces rather than the psychological states of the characters.

The endless tracking shots and slow zooms used in the film decenter the space of each scene so we never know exactly which character or what object we are supposed to focus on. The aimless visual style duplicates the aimless subject positions that Marlowe is given throughout the film. In the police interrogation scene, he is accused of being a homosexual while simultaneously co-opted by the black characters as their ally. When Marlowe meets the gangster Marty Augustine, Marlowe's apartment, lifestyle, and class position is challenged by the gangster.[263] For example, in the first confrontation Marty lifts up his shirt and orders Marlowe to punch him in the stomach to demonstrate how firm his abs are. Marty brags about how he takes tennis lessons three times a week and his perfect physical condition. This dialogue exchange is a comedic take on the Fassbinder

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[262] We mentioned above that the singular perspective of the Marlowe character is accompanied by the sequences showing Terry Lennox driving to the Wade house in the beginning. This other perspective is Altman's interjecting into the story, telling us immediately that he is superior to the characters of the film. Colin MacCabe notes a similar perspectivalism in *Nashville* in "The discursive and the ideological in film: notes on the conditions of political intervention" in *Screen* (1978), p. 37. This is only same point that Robin Wood made when distinguishing Altman and Penn as film makers. Penn does not assume superiority to his characters whereas Altman does, see Wood (1986), p. 41.

[263] Marty's socio-economic status comparison between Marlowe and him evoke the dialog exchanges between the gangster, Mr. Brown, and the police office, Lieutenant Diamond, in *The Big Combo*. Witness the line from Mr. Brown "Diamond, the only trouble with you is, you'd like to be me. You'd like to have my organization, my influence, my fix. You can't. It's impossible. You think it's money, it's not. It's personality. You haven't got it, Lieutenant, you're a cop. Slow, steady, intelligent, with a bad temper, and a gun under your arm. And with a big yen for a girl you can't have. First is first, and second is nobody." And this remark "Joe, the man has reason to hate me. His salary is $96.50 a week. The busboys in my hotel make better money than that. Don't you see, Joe? He's a righteous man."

theme of class conflict being inscribed on the body.[264] Marlowe is poor and

unhealthy whereas Marty is rich and in great shape. He then tells Marlowe about

his home and compares his mansion to Marlowe's apartment, Marlowe responds

with "Well home is where the heart is, right?" and Marty retorts with "Your heart

is in the garbage." In the classical cycle, the detective is usually compared to the

police, the lower classes (i.e. criminals), wealthy gangsters, or the bourgeoisie and

is depicted as a superior individual. In *The Long Goodbye*, Marlowe is constantly

ridiculed by the police and the gangsters. The private detective is no longer the

individual that can fix society. For example, Marty Augstine's business depends

upon the circulation of money which has been disrupted by Lennox. Marlowe's

friend is the enemy of civil society for murdering his wife and the enemy of

capitalism for disrupting the flow of money.[265] Marlowe makes this worse by

defending rather than delivering this criminal.

In *The Long Goodbye*, Altman positioned Marlowe at the bottom of the

class hierarchy, not needed by the police or the bourgeoisie and needed only by

the gangsters because of his friendship with Terry. In Altman's narrative universe,

Marlowe does not have to be a mediator between the upper classes and the lower

classes like the previous private detective films. In this film he is merely a stand-

in for the criminal Terry Lennox. Instead, Marlowe has become the mediator

between husband and wife. He returns to the Wade home on several occasions,

acting as a buffer between Eileen and her husband. Here Marlowe replaces

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[264] Fassbinder's *Ali: fear eats the soul* (1974) is the most overt depiction of this theme I have seen
from this period in world cinema.
[265] Marty Augustine to Marlowe: "Let me tell you something. It's a minor crime, to kill your wife.
The major crime is that he stole my money. Your friend stole my money, and the penalty for that
is capital punishment."

Lennox again but this time as Eileen's lover, becoming a literal a place holder because he never has sex with Eileen. He is an empty space within the chain of desire, a castrated detective. The Gould-Marlowe is the extreme version of the noir detective who distrusts the femme fatale. Marlowe is beyond temptation because a sexual relationship never even figures into his perspective: the only person he knows how to care for and love is his absent friend. Altman recalls the homo-social relationship between Nick and Mike Hammer in *Kiss Me Deadly*, the only character Hammer truly cares about in Aldrich's film. Marlowe's sexual impotence represents his inability to be a man of action. He repeatedly fails to act in the face of confrontation from Augustine and the police, and fails to sleep with Eileen.

Figure 14. Roger drinking with Marlowe in *The Long Goodbye* (1973)

The theme of impotence is perhaps the strongest theme that runs through Altman's film. The theme of impotence is not only embodied by Marlowe but Eileen's husband, Roger Wade, the alcoholic writer, also suffers from a form of impotence: writer's block. Witness the conversation between Roger and Eileen:

Roger: You know, if I could just get you to understand that when a writer can't write, it's just like being   impotent.

Eileen: I understand what that's like, too.

Roger: Oh, you do, do you? BALLS, BABY, BALLS!

Roger is angry because the artistic process for externalizing his desire has been lost. He is impotent as a writer and the film implies, in the bedroom as well (Eileen is sleeping with Terry but is still in love with her husband). In contrast, Marlowe is perfectly fine with his impotence. He repeats "It's O.K. with me" to all of the absurd questions, and remarks that come from his interlocuters throughout the film. The private detective's method of coping with his impotence as a character, and the changing postmodern society of America, is to let it roll off his shoulders. He is not angry because he has become truly cynical and indifferent: "everything is going fine" as Spalding Grey would say. Gould-Marlowe exemplifies the privatism of the postmodern liberal subject who is only concerned with his individual matters and not the dealings of the collective. He has become impotent and he's fine with it.

Figure 15. The gangsters strip down in *The Long Goodbye* (1973)

Marlowe's impotence is again brought up later in the film. Witness the scene when Marlowe visits Augustine in his penthouse. Augustine enters into a monologue, explaining how his favorite mistress became disfigured. He concludes that it is Marlowe's fault for the accident; he is to blame for the

violence that Augustine committed because he has failed to pay Augustine his money. Augustine then decides that Marlowe must pay his debt with his penis and orders one of his thugs to castrate the detective while the rest of them get naked. However, Augustine's threat is empty and ironic (and weird) because as we all know by now Marlowe is impotent in every respect. The threat against the body of the private detective is futile because Altman has already castrated Marlowe: he is a detective without privates.

Terry Eagleton argued that like the family, the body (the signifying body) is an ambivalent and undecidable category between the base and the superstructure.[266] The signifying body is where the class struggle inscribes itself and it is here where Altman explicitly redefines the private detective. Altman reverses the ideological codes from private detective films to create an impotent figure representing middle-class contradictory positions that mediate between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Altman tapped into the impotent, cynical, and post-utopian feelings of postmodern culture by redefining the middle-class ideologeme as an impotent white-male.

In Wood's essay on Altman "Smart-ass and cutie-pie: notes toward the evaluation of Altman," he compared Altman's film to the work of Michelango Antonioni. According to Wood, both directors provide a diagnosis of modernity (Wood cites Antonioni's *L'avventura* (1960) and *The Red Desert* (1964) for his argument) but fail to provide an answer as to how we should react to modernity[267] (or postmodernity). Any progressive (or political) moments in both Altman and

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[266] See Eagleton's *Walter Benjamin, or towards a revolutionary criticism* (2009), p. 154.
[267] See Wood (1986), pp. 36-38.

Antonioni's films are disguises for despair about not having an answer to political problems. For Antonioni, this description is more or less accurate but for Altman it is a bit more complicated. Altman does have an answer and it is to retreat in cynicism. Rather than moving beyond ethics toward politics, Altman disposes of ethics and closes off the possibility for politics, for utopian visions of a future collectivity, signifying the fear to "think the impossible."[268] This marks the fundamental difference between the New Hollywood directors like Altman and the late-modernist directors like Antonioni, and Godard. The two possibilities Altman proposes for the individual (white male) in *The Long Goodbye* are suicide or cynicism. Roger Wade represents the first former position and Marlowe the latter. Wade's despair over his impotence is too much for him bear. He sought psychological help, and alcohol. Nothing cured him. When speaking with Marlowe he asked the detective about his thoughts on suicide:

> Roger: Do you ever think about suicide, Marlboro?
>
> Marlowe: Me, I don't believe in it.

Marlowe's solution is cynicism, depicted by his "It's O.K. with me" line again and again throughout the film. According to Altman, cynicism is the only subject position left available in late-capitalism, the postmodern, the post-industrial society that has seemingly exported class conflict to the south. Altman's Los Angeles is bright and full of yuppies and hippies who are more interested in practicing nude yoga[269] than radically criticizing their social formation.

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[268] See Althusser's work on aleatory materialism in *Machiavelli and Us* (2000), p. 80.
[269] When Marlowe leaves his home, Harry the hood is supposed to tail Marlowe. Harry is waiting in his car outside and Marlowe stops to talk to him before he leaves. Harry asks Marlowe about his

In the previous chapter we discovered that in detective noirs Mexico was the place where individuals went to escape their problems. For example, in *The Big Sleep* Sean Regan and Mrs. Mars escaped to Mexico to avoid suspicion, and Jeff Bailey/Markham chased Whit Sterling's girlfriend to Mexico only to remain there and forget his responsibility to his employer. In *The Long Goodbye*, Marlowe goes to Mexico three times: at the beginning when he drops off Terry Lennox, the second time he goes to see if Lennox is dead after receiving a letter with five-grand from his friend, and the third time Marlowe goes to find his friend Terry alive and relaxing in the sun. As mentioned above the narrative always circles around the absent Terry Lennox and the two interested parties, Marty Augustine and the Wade family. The way that Altman depicts the class conflict is by juxtaposing Mexico to America. Altman uses Mexico to contrast their poverty with the culture of excess and consumption of America. Mexico is again used as a Utopia, the space where individuals go to escape their troubles in America, to start a new life, whereas California is depicted as wealthy but shallow, and materialistic. But, the ending of the film shows us that Mexico is merely a temporary Utopian space; it is unveiled as a fake once the detective uncovers the living Terry Lennox.

Mexico is also the place where Lennox hides to escape punishment for killing his wife. The police have closed the case because they believe Lennox is dead while Marlowe continues to investigate. Altman-Gould effectively dismantled the private detective myth by reversing the conventional filmic codes

neighbors. Marlowe tells him that they work as candle dippers. Harry responds "I remember when people just had jobs."

of the character type. But, the ideological baggage of the private detective myth

hangs over his film, haunting its attempts at criticism and deconstruction.[270]

Marlowe follows the conventions of the genre blindly to the end of film. When he

finally confronts Terry in Mexico, the Gould-Marlowe finally acts: he kills Terry

for killing his wife. The only motivation for the ending is the private detective

narrative conventions of the forties. Nothing in the diegesis motivated Marlowe's

actions; Marlowe's motivations are intertextual, the generic conventions of film

noir dictate the outcome of the film, not the character's motivations.

*The Long Goodby*e does not function as middle-class fantasy or daydream

like the classic detective noirs did, but rather as a repudiation, a critique of the

middle-class daydream narrative. However, the critique never enters into any sort

of political or utopian subjectivity, but rather opts out for a schizophrenic, "throw

everything at the wall see what sticks" attack that effectively interpellates

individuals as subjects of a postmodern discourse, one that champions resigned

wisdom (read: cynicism) instead of any sort of political perspective that

implicates the collective. Not only are the upper-classes made to be dupes and

impotent pleasure-bots but the middle-class hero has become a patsy, whose only

action in the film is to say "It's O.K. with me" and kill his friend at the end. After

all Marlowe did for Lennox, he ends up punishing the individual who broke the

reproduction of the relations of production, the flow of capital that disrupted

Augustine's financial enterprise, that could possibly disrupt his tennis lessons and

his wife's attempts to skinny-up at Los Angeles fat-farms. Altman does criticize

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[270] In *American Skeptic: Robert Altman's genre-commentary films* (1982) Norman Kagan suggests that for *The Long Goodbye*, Altman reaffirms as much as he criticizes the detective genre. See Kagan (1982) p. 96.

capitalism, and Hollywood, the American myth machine, but to no end. Altman's film represents the purest form of postmodern cinema, the post-ideological discourse that has discarded the desire for any sort of utopia or communist hypothesis.[271]

Jameson wrote that postmodern cinema is essentially nostalgic. However, Altman's film is not nostalgic in the sense that Jameson used the term. Jameson cites other examples of postmodern cinema like *Chinatown*, *Il Conformista* (1970), *American Graffiti* (1973), ad *Rumble Fish* (1983) to demonstrate the meaning of nostalgic cinema. Altman castrates the private detective myth by first rewriting the narrative so that the detective is made to be the patsy (very similar to *Kiss Me Deadly*) and by using a visual style that de-stabilizes any sort of easy identification with the central action of each scene. For example, witness the way the camera style rearranges the way the viewer's attention to the scene when Marlowe goes to Mexico for the second time. The camera tracks horizontally while zooming in (creating the appearance of a diagonal track) and focusing not on Marlowe leaving the bus but on two dogs copulating, which is where the camera almost completes the zoom toward before cutting to Marlowe walking out and about in Mexico. Instead of staying with Marlowe, Altman's camera rooms around, finds actions and objects that are more interesting or maybe for the director more deserving of our attention than Marlowe, the supposed main

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[271] Jameson has an excellent article on the persistence of utopia in postmodernism. He gives special attention to the work of Hans Haacke who is postmodern and political, something which was not foreseen by theoretical discussions of postmodern culture. See Jameson's *Postmodernism* (1991), pp. 159-161.

character of the narrative. Altman has absolutely no nostalgia[272] for old-

Hollywood or the past but rather celebrates the decay of this ideological myth.

Let's return to the ending of the film again. As we mentioned above

Marlowe goes to Mexico for a third time after being relieved of his duties to the

gangster. He finds Terry relaxing in the sun. Marlowe hears his friend explain

why he killed his wife. According to Terry, Roger told her about the affair with

Eileen, his wife then became hysterical, she threatened to call the police on Terry.

He was holding Augustine's money, he was scared so he beat her to death. Here's

where Altman demonstrates the emptiness of the Hollywood myth, and the

character Terry Lennox is Altman's mouthpiece in the final confrontation.[273]

Lennox tells Marlowe that nobody cares what happened: the police have their

murderer, Augustine has his money, and Eileen and Terry have each other.

Marlowe is the only one that cares about what Terry did. He responds by shooting

Terry point blank.

Figure 16. "Hooray for Hollywood."

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[272] A conflicting vision with the film's cinematographer Vilmos Zsigmond who thought the pastel-like aesthetic evoked the memory of the fifties but not "the fifties." See David Thompson's *Altman on Altman* (2005), p. 77.

[273] I should mention that for the main characters of the film Altman used two actors and the rest were non-actors. Also Sterling Hayden, who was an excellent character actor from several films noirs, was intoxicated for the entire duration of the film so most if not all of his lines were improvised because he never learned what he was supposed to say. Even the character of Augustine was played by a non-actor, the documentary filmmaker Mark Rydell. Stunt casting worked well for this film because Altman was interested in engaging the audience in the normal sense of the term but rather demonstrating the character types and noir conventions.

This absurd conclusion is the final deconstruction of the private detective genre. Altman demonstrates the unnecessary allegiance to justice that Marlowe has as a private detective. This is a deconstruction of the good versus evil ideologeme because the detective has been rendered impotent and obsolete by society, but whose only action is to murder an already "dead" man. Just like in *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Big Sleep,* the detective works where the police cannot go, and flushes out the criminals. In *The Long Goodbye*, the criminal is in Mexico, beyond the jurisdiction of the law. As Marlowe walks away from Terry's dead body, the song "Hooray for Hollywood" plays on the soundtrack (the first song that is not a rendition of the song "The Long Goodbye" in the film). Altman does not let us forget that we are watching a film, a piece of fiction, and not reality.

Ideology and morality in The Long Goodbye

The film in some ways repeats Hegel's critique of morality. Hegel concluded that Kantian ethics is an empty formalism, a system that cannot give us any concrete list of duties because it brackets any discussion of the social context and institutions.[274] Rationality and morality will always be the product of the social formation, and even though there is always relative autonomy of the superstructure, bourgeois morality, part of the ideological state apparatuses, works to reproduce the relations of production. The critique of capitalism can take several avenues, one of which is parodying cultural myths from the past. As we have seen from our discussion in chapter two, the ideologeme of good versus evil

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[274] See Steven B. Smith's "Hegel's Critique of Liberalism" (1986).

was a prominent strategic discourse in the private detective genre. To repeat

Hegel's critique of Kantian ethics or of liberalism is the first step, but we then

must move onto a properly political terrain that goes beyond individualist ethics.

Altman's film does not move outside of the social modernist discourse but merely

deconstructs with his own brand of humor and irony. There is an excellent

connection between Altman's deconstruction of the private detective myth and

Benjamin's comments on the spoils of the class struggle:

> The class struggle, which is always present to a historian influenced by Marx, is a fight for the crude and material things without which no refined and spiritual things could exist. Nevertheless, it is not in the form of the spoils which fall to the victor that the latter make their presence felt in the class struggle. They manifest themselves in this struggle as courage, humour, cunning, and fortitude[275]

Altman foregrounds the cunning and courageous American hero by demonstrating

the futility of his actions at the end of the film. Marlowe essentially executes his

friend after everyone has been appeased. Why? Because the private detective is

supposed to bring criminals to justice. Altman demonstrates how following duty

for duty's sake accomplishes nothing, and morality or code of ethics of Marlowe

is an outmoded and dangerous ideologeme.

In fact, the deconstruction of the private detective myth in this film is

similar to what Bakhtin referred to as carnival: the liberation of an image into

multiple significations, uprooting all transcendental signifiers, interpreting images

and signs backwards, radically using surfaces to foreground impotence of the

private detective.[276] The signifiers remain dominant because of the carnivalesque;

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[275] This insight is from the collection *Illuminations*, pp. 256-7, edited by Hannah Arendt.
[276] Kolker's chapter on Altman is titled "Radical Surfaces", and an excellent example of what Kolker is referring to in Altman's play surfaces is the scene where Roger and Eileen are fighting, and the reflection of Gould-Marlowe is placed in between the two figures. Marlowe is standing

the inversion of signifiers does nothing to replace those signifiers, they remain

intact and are therefore hegemonic.[277] This is the best way to understand Altman's

deconstruction because it is at once calculated and spastic. Altman's

deconstruction takes the cinematic ideologemes of social modernism and throws

them off a cliff. In this film, ideologemes are pushed to their logical limits,

exposed as myths and absurd fictions.

However, unlike the utopian potentials of Brecht's theatre or Fassbinder's

films, Altman's critique is solely negative[278] and lacks any sort of utopian thrust

that would reposition the film and the audience onto a political terrain. Said

differently, Altman is engaged in *criticism* rather than serious ideology critique.

Criticism involves using a set of unreflective judgments dependent on pre-set

criteria that belong to the problematic of the situation being criticized, a simple

form of immanent criticism that produces no positive content.[279] The other way

we can interpret Altman's negativity is to think of it as an example of Benjamin's

negative utopia, an anti-historicist theory of utopia which removes any sort of

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outside watching the couple argue inside the house. Altman places Marlowe's reflection between
the two showing us the futility and ineffectiveness of this character.

[277] I am grateful to Dr. R.P. Datta for this insight.

[278] I am using the definition of deconstruction given by Terry Eagleton in his text *Walter
Benjamin, or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (2009)[1981], pp. 131-142. Eagleton
demonstrated that deconstruction is akin to both left reformism and ultra-leftist. Furthermore, it is
neither a theory or a system and disowns any sort of programmatic description. Instead,
deconstruction attempts to nullify everything, purely negative criticism, that is ultimately
reactionary. Witness the quote by Eagleton: "[m]any of the vauntedly novel themes of
deconstructionism do little more than reproduce some of the most commonplace topics of
bourgeois liberalism. The modest disownment of theory, method and system; the revulsion from
the dominative, totalizing and unequivocally denotative; the privileging of plurality and
heterogeneity, the recurrent gestures of hesitation and indeterminacy; the devotion to gliding and
process, slippage and movement; the distaste for the definitive--it is not difficult to see why such
an idiom should become so quickly absorbed within the Anglo-Saxon academies" in Eagleton
(1981) pp. 137-138.

[279] I am again grateful to Dr. R.P. Datta for clarifying the difference between *criticism* and
critique.

positive dialectic between past and present.[280] Altman's film merely

recontextualizes the social formation's myths and ideologeme: every threat and

violent gesture is emptied out at once.   For example, the scene when Augustine

orders one of his thugs to castrate the detective while the rest of them get naked.

The threat against the body of the private detective is futile because Altman has

already castrated Marlowe. Like the family, the body (the signifying body) is an

ambivalent and an undecided category between the base and the superstructure.[281]

The signifying body is where the class struggle inscribes itself and it is here where

Altman explicitly redefines the private detective as an impotent figure

representing the middle-class contradictory positions who mediate between the

bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Altman's film is an impotent critique as well.

The ridicule of the bourgeois-centered ego and the supremacy of ethics

does not move dialectically to a political standpoint but rather ends up with what

several postmodern theorists believe is evidence for the end of ideology: the

cynical postmodern subject.[282] In epistemological terms, cynicism means a sort of

self-conscious or enlightened false consciousness and in political terms it means

the real subsumption of politics by capitalism, the replacement of a political

community with consumer society. Freedom is transcoded as consumer freedom,

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[280] Here I am referring to Eagleton's reading of Benjamin from his text *Walter Benjamin, or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (2009)[1981], p146.

[281] *Ibid*. p. 154.

[282] The first "end of ideology" thesis was from Daniel Bell's work which argued that class conflict had disappeared in America which had become a liberal consensus society, in *The End of Ideology* (1960). Another "end of ideology" thesis came from post-modern and post-structuralist theory which argued that epistemological foundations for any theory of ideology are unfounded and incorrect. Foucault's work is the most effective critique of any theory of ideology. See Paul Veyne's "Foucault revolutionizes history" in *Foucault and his Interlocutors* (1997).

having choice in the market place.[283] In fact, the empty utopian impulse of
Altman and Penn's neo-noirs represent the tail end of the social modernist
discourse that transitioned to its own forgetting and self-effacement after social
modernism could not fulfill its promises. This ideological state apparatus
excluded a genuinely political solution to the failures of social democracy. Penn's
Night Moves demonstrated the emptiness and futility of the private detective myth
as a courageous and cunning hero in a less satirical style than Altman but to the
same end. The anti-political ideologeme of morality should be dismantled and the
only option left is the cynical consciousness, one that is superior because of its
resigned wisdom and sarcastic attitude, political quietism recoded as hip. Altman
repeated this political commentary with *Nashville*, a film that critiques American
society along with any form of political engagement.[284]

Chinatown: neo-noir's new private dectective

The neo-noir private detective films discussed thus far present the revisions made
by seventies film makers to the cinematic and ideological conventions of the
genre. We will now turn to *Chinatown*, a film that has in many respects become a
blue-print for neo-noirs made after. It was both a critical and commercial success
upon its release and has become the most recognizable and revered of private

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[283] Jonathan Rosenbaum has criticized the AFI for essentially promoting films that have been seen
by everyone and represent the self-congratulatory liberal production of essential cinema for
American audiences. Rosenbaum repeatedly promotes cinema that is more or less blocked from
being viewed by American audiences. An excellent example of this is AFI's 100 best list choice of
To Kill a Mockingbird and Rosenbaum's replacement *The Phenix City Story*. He covers this type
of censorship in his book *Movie Wars: how Hollywood and the media limit what movies you see*
(1995).
[284] See Colin MacCabe's discussion of *Nashville* in his article "The discursive and the ideological
in film: notes on the conditions of political intervention" (1978), p.38.

detective noirs in American cinema. We will conclude our survey of the seventies private detective films with Polanski's masterpiece. Much more popular than both the Altman and Penn films, and certainly more influential, *Chinatown* represents one of the high points of seventies American cinema. In what follows we discuss the ideological dimensions of the film in relation to what we discussed in this chapter and chapter two. We will then end with a discussion of *Kiss Me Deadly* and how it relates to seventies private detective noirs.

Many critics have noted how *Chinatown* diverges from the conventions of the private detective genre. This has much to do with Robert Towne's fascinating script that sets the story during the Great Depression in the thirties. Furthermore, there is also a strong visual resemblance between *Chinatown* and Bertolucci's political drama *Il Conformista* which is set during the thirties in Italy and France. To connect the discussion back to the previous seventies noirs we should note that compared to *The Long Goodbye* and *Night Moves* Polanski's film resembles the closed, claustrophobic, and absurd universe of Lang's films noirs[285] rather than the Hawks, Huston, or Wilder films noirs. Furthermore, we should also note that another unacknowledged influence on Polanski's *Chinatown* is Joseph H. Lewis' *The Big Combo*, in particular the way Lewis' film registers class conflict.

Figure 17. *The Big Combo* (1955) and *The Big Heat* (1953).

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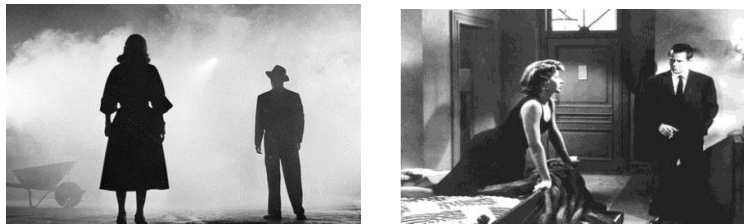
[285] Fritz Lang's noirs include *Ministry of Fear*, *The Woman in the Window*, *Scarlett Street*, *The Blue Gardenia*, *The Big Heat*, and *Human Desire*.

The Big Combo is similar to Lang's *The Big Heat* in that we have a rivalry between a gangster and rogue cop. In *The Big Heat*, Dave Bannion is seemingly invincible and unstoppable whereas in *The Big Combo* Lieutenant Lenoard Diamond is a worn out man with more flaws than any other protagonist in a private detective or police procedural noir. Diamond and the villain of the film, Mr. Brown, have several notable conversations throughout the narrative. Diamond calls Brown a sadistic killer and Brown refers to Diamond by his weekly wage, $96.50. Lewis repeatedly brings our attention to the class divide between these characters: Diamond is obsessed with sending Brown to jail; he hates him because he is rich and powerful and has the woman Diamond loves. Lewis equates money and power with evil. In *Chinatown,* this class consciousness is carried over, investing the private detective with a longing to be in the upper-classes, a desire to distance himself from his public service compatriots in the police force (Lieutenant Escobar and his police) and security consultant enemies (Mulvihill and the "little man" played by Polanski).

Jake refers to his employees, photographers and detectives, as his associates, and attempts to create an aura of professionalism and prestige in his office and around his position/occupation. Many critics have remarked on how Jake Gittes is a revision of the Bogart-Marlowe style detective[286] and that might

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[286] See John G. Cawelti's "Chinatown and Generic Transformation in Recent American Films" in *Film Genre Reader 3* (1979), pp. 243-261, Virginia Wright Wexman's "The Generic Synthesis: Chinatown" in *Roman Polanski* (1985), pp. 91-106, James Morrison's "Polanski in the New Hollywood" in *Roman Polanski* (2007), pp. 55-81, Jeanne Schuler and Patrick Murray's ""Anything is possible here": capitalism, neo-noir, and *Chinatown*" in *The Philosophy of Neo-noir* (2007), pp. 167-181, Richard Gilmore's "The Dark Sublimity of *Chinatown"* in *The Philosophy of Neo-noir* (2007), pp. 119-136, Kelly Olivier and Benigno Trigo's "Jokes in Chinatown: a question of place*"* in *Noir Anxiety* (2003), pp. 137-161, and James Maxfield's "The injustice of it all:

be the case but he is not the first, in fact, Gittes is very similar to Mike Hammer

from *Kiss Me Deadly* and the many insecure male protagonists of Lang's noirs.

Not that these critics are wrong to look at the connection between Jake Gittes as a

detective compared to the Bogart-Marlowe version but a closer inspection reveals

that Jake Gittes is less a revision of the noir tradition and more of a continuation

from the Lang noir universe and Mike Hammer.

Figure 18. Opening titles to *Il Conformista* (1970) and *Chinatown* (1974)

The film, *Il Conformista*, is very aware of its nostalgia for classical

Hollywood. *Chinatown* begins with the old Paramount logo and then fades to

black with stylized credits that resemble the same font used by Bertolucci,

copying the nostalgic themes and style of the film. *Chinatown* and *Il Conformista*

are very different in terms of their story and visual style, they do represent what

Jameson identified as an example of postmodern culture, nostalgia films represent

symptoms of our own lack of historicity or historical consciousness. I do not

know if that is the best way to understand these films or nostalgia films in general.

The very fact that these films distinguish between a past and a present,

constructing them in such a way that the audience is aware that the collective

authorship and the film itself is aware of this difference, does not imply a lack of

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Polanski's revision of the private eye in *Chinatown*" in *The Detective in American Fiction, Film, and Television* (1998), pp. 93-102.

historicity but rather an awareness of historicity, and a historical consciousness that can distinguish between past, presents, and possible futures. But, in any case, these films represent a new shift in cinema wherein films make a point of emphasizing their period-piece status with more self-consciousness than we have seen before.

Figure 19. The two Paramount logos in *Chinatown* (1974)

Chinatown opens with the old Paramount logo and it ends with the contemporary logo. The film's first shot is a close-up of black and white photographs of two people making love in a field of grass. An unidentified person flips to the next photo, and repeats until the camera cuts to a medium shot showing us where we are and who we are watching. We are in Jake's office and he is showing his client, Curly, the evidence of her infidelity. Curly walks over to the window, looks outside and then begins to chew on the venetian blinds, weeping to himself. Jake tells him to stop chewing on the blinds because he just had them installed. This scene establishes the world of Jake Gittes, showing us what kind of detective he is. Jake is successful, and self-assured, and compared to the private detectives of the forties, he has no problem taking marital problem or divorce cases just like Mike Hammer. The other function of this scene is to foreshadow the conclusion of the film: Jake's search for knowledge and his actions end up hurting women. Jake meets up with Curly near the end of the film, his wife has a black eye from

her husband, and Jake's desire to know the truth and help Evelyn lead to her

death, a bullet through the back of her head, exiting through her left eye.[287]

Figure 20. Violence to the woman's face: Curly's wife, Faye Dunaway getting her make-up done for the final scene of *Chinatown* (1974), and Gloria Grahame as Debby Marsh in *The Big Heat* (1953).

Chinatown presents three instances of violence done to the woman's face

which are a direct result of the detective's quest for knowledge. The

narratological poles are reversed in *Chinatown*, the quest for knowledge does not

bring society back into equilibrium from the initial disruption in the narrative but

instead intensifies the conflict. The film essentially reverses the ideological-

political meaning of *All the President's Men*, the optimistic conclusion to

Pakula's conspiracy thriller film trilogy from the seventies.[288] Again, nothing

original here; Fritz Lang introduced the punishment to the woman's face in *The*

Big Heat (Altman had similar scene in *The Long Goodbye* with Marty and his

mistress and Coke bottle). The main character in Lang's film is seen with the

Debby character. Her lover, Stone, then accuses her of revealing his secrets to

Bannion and throws boiling hot coffee in her face. Before Debby was burned,

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[287] Polanski harms the detective's face as well in *Chinatown* in a Hitchcockian cameo. The director's plays a little man with a knife and slicing the detective's nostril.
[288] Polan connects *Chinatown* to the seventies conspiracy films in his essay "Chinatown: politics as perspective, perspective as politics" in *The Cinema of Roman Polanski: dark spaces of the world* (2006), p.113.

Bannion's wife was murdered because he investigated Mike Lagana and Vince

Stone.

Figure 21. Christopher Cross played by Edward G. Robinson in *Scarlet Street* (1945) and Gloria Grahame as Debby Marsh with a coffee pot in *The Big Heat* (1953).

In the Lang noir universe, characters are always punished for following

their desires, and in our example of detective Bannion, his desire was justice. In

Scarlett Street Chris is punished for first falling in love with Kitty and then for

killing her (a production code ending but nonetheless Lang made it work with the

film) and in *The Big Heat*, Bannion was initially punished for doing the right

thing, for following his moral code. In the end of the film however Bannion

triumphs and destroys the evil gangsters, thus redeeming himself and avenging

the death of his wife. Debby burns Stone's face with hot coffee before she is

killed. The criminals are brought to justice but the woman's wounds remain. The

film in the very least demonstrates the nominal nature of justice in noir. Justice

means everyone is still damaged and scarred and dead if they are lucky and

society remains the same. Polanski's *Chinatown* slipped into Lang's absurdist

universe with the first scene when Curly started to chew on the venetian blinds in

Jake's office. The absurdity of the universe is apparent to the audience but not to

Jake and his quest for knowledge. This quest is eventually revealed to be a quest

for an empty truth that explains nothing and leaves the world in disequilibrium.[289]

Not only does Polanski borrow from the Lang noirs (*The Woman in the

Window*, *Scarlet Street*, and *The Big Heat* among others) to create his noir

universe but he also used the established private detective conventions. Polanski

not only used these conventions, but dialectically reversed them for the

characterization of Jake. If we recall the Spade and Bogart characterization the

detective is economically poor while being strong, cunning, moral, and superior to

society. Jake is rich, successful, immoral, cunning but not superior to the police or

society.

Chinatown is set during the Great Depression like *Bonnie and Clyde*.

Along with the film's art direction Polanski uses character dialog to let us know

we are in the thirties. For example, witness the argument Jake has with a banker

in the barber shop. Shortly after Jake photographed Hollis and Katherine

Mulwray, the photographs were leaked to a newspaper turning Jake into a minor-

celebrity in Los Angeles. While getting a shave he was boasting about his work to

his barber. A patron sitting next to him in the barber shop snipes at Jake. The

detective stands up from his chair and asks what the man does for a living. We

find out he is a banker. "How many houses did you foreclose this month?" asks

Jake. When Jake's morality is called into question, he becomes aggressive and

challenges the banker to fight outside. The barber calms Jake down with an

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[289] The philosophical underpinning of *Chinatown* is that evil cannot be destroyed, events are uncontrollable, and life can be demolished in an instant. The general philosophical underpinnings of Chinatown were discussed at length in James Maxfield's article "The injustice of it all: Polanski's revision of the private in Chinatown" (1988).

oriental racist joke. Polanski cuts to the next scene before we hear the punch line.

Jake defends his personal and professional honor in the barber shop only to

become the butt of the joke once he retells the joke to his associates while Evelyn

Mulwray is waiting for him in the background of his office.[290] The scene

encapsulates the generic revision that Polanski did with the J.J. Gittes character:

he is not a cunning hero but the brunt of his own jokes. Polanski/Towne's creation

is almost a carbon copy of the Mike Hammer character, and Aldrich's *Kiss Me

Deadly* anticipates many of the revisions that Polanski/Towne did to the private

detective myth.

Figure 22. Ida Sessions played by Diane Ladd posing as Evelyn Mulwray in *Chinatown* (1974).

The plot of *Chinatown* falls in line with previous private detective films.

Like previous films in the genre the detective was given an early quest in the story

which motivates further action and conflict. Jake is hired by Evelyn Mullwray

(a.k.a. Ida Sessions) to investigate her husband's extra-marital activities. Jake

photographs the husband with a young woman and then his photos got leaked to

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[290] In Oliver's article "Jokes in Chinatown: a question of place" (2003) she demonstrates how this short montage of the barber and office scene works like displacement. Evelyn turns the oriental joke into a bad joke and turns Jake into the butt of the joke.

the press. The film spends some time showing us the actual sleuthing involved in this sort of work. The cinematography used here is very impressive in this sequence. Polanski uses special effects and composite shots to bring us into the perspective of Jake, the voyeur, peeping on the taboo relationship between father and daughter. Polanski references the previous voyeuristic themed films, *Peeping Tom* (1960) directed by Michael Powell and *Rear Window* (1954), an early example of how neo-noirs were interested not only in revising noir conventions but also paying homage through cinematic references and allusion. Polanski connects the voyeur with the savior and the villain, a fact that eludes Jake until the end of the film. Jake's voyeurism does not endanger him but defames a politician who is trying to protect the city from another disaster with a water dam, and oppose the capitalists who would rather privatize the water supply for profit. The film goes to great lengths to show these connections and we will explore them below.

Figure 23. Jake Gittes photographing Hollis and Katherine in *Chinatown* (1974), Mark Lewis filming a woman in *Peeping Tom* (1960), and Jeffries in *Rear Window* (1954).

When Jake is investigating Hollis at a municipal town hall meeting, Hollis explains why he will not build a dam even though it would help the irrigation problems that are plaguing the farmers. Hollis believes that it will result in death and disaster (based off of a similar project from past experience). The farmers in the audience revolt and let goats loose in the courtroom. They yell at the politicians: "tell me where to take them. You don't have an answer for that so quick do ya'! You steal water from the valley, ruin the grazing, the livestock, who's paying you to do that Mr. Mulwray! That's what I want to know!" Meanwhile Jake is laughing at the protest until we cut abruptly on the action to the next scene in the desert.

Figure 24. Hollis speaking at a town hall meeting, and staring at the ocean in *Chinatown* (1974).

The camera pans horizontally which demonstrates to the audience that we are back in Jake's point of view. There is no establishing shot which would guide us as to where to look in the shot. Polanski connects everything in these early investigative/voyeuristic scenes with images. Jake is spying on Hollis in the desert. Hollis is looking at construction plans until a young Mexican boy approaches him on horseback. They speak but Jake is too far away to hear what they are saying. Cut to the next scene, and Jake has followed Hollis to the ocean. Hollis looks out at the water and sees a starfish washed up on the shore. He throws it back in the water. Jake is watching from the top of the hill. The scene begins, again, with no establishing shot but rather a subjective-shot from Jake's

perspective looking at Hollis from inside a car. Jake follows Hollis to the beach

front. Then the camera switches to Hollis' perspective on the beach. When Hollis

moves his head to look behind him because he heard a noise the camera whips

with him. For a moment, the audience is positioned as the "Other" to the

detective, we are meant to identify with Hollis instead of Jake.

The scene lasts until night and Jake has stayed to watch Mulwray look at

the ocean. We then hear sounds of water. Jake is standing by a drainage pipe that

begins to shoot out water into the ocean. The detective has to dive out of the way

to avoid getting soaked. Hollis looks up from the beach at the water without any

expression: he must know this happens every night. Jake has had enough and

walks away to his car. Before he leaves he grabs a flyer from his windshield that

reads "Los Angeles is Dying of Thirst." Jake crumples the flyer up. He then walks

over to Hollis' car and places a stop watch in the trajectory of Hollis' car wheel to

see how long Hollis will stay at the ocean. Morning comes and Jake has a meeting

with his associates. Hollis was at the ocean front all night staring at the ocean and

watching the water drain from the pipe. Another associate reports that Hollis

visited three of the city's water reservoirs as well. "The guy's got water on the

brain" says an associate. Hollis is depicted to be obsessed with water, with his

past failures. *Chinatown* is certainly about water but uses it in a much different

way than films noirs from the classical period.

Unlike previous films noirs, *Chinatown* does not have rain drenched

streets in every scene shot outside. In fact, the dry desert of Los Angeles is the

most obvious revision that Towne made to the genre. According to Schrader,

there is almost a Freudian attachment to water given how many films noirs used rainy urban streets in their *mise-en-scene.*[291] Schrader wrote that "rainfall tends to increase in direct proportion to the drama. Docks and piers are second only to alleyways as the most popular rendezvous points."[292] A Freudian attachment to water definitely describes Hollis' psyche because he cannot forget his mistake with the dam he built in the past, a mistake he refuses to make again no matter how many farmers armed with goats protest at City Hall. The lack of water in the streets and fields of Los Angeles, if we take the dramatic symbolism that Schrader introduced, suggests that the drama in the film has left the streets and the diegesis itself. The film has no water and yet is entirely about water; it is what Hollis Mulwray obsesses over until his death. The lack of water in *Chinatown* does not signify a lack of drama but rather suggests that this drama has become internalized into the character's perspectives. The drama is psychological and material: the Los Angeles draught disproportionately affects the lower classes more so than the upper classes. The drought and all of the political and social pressures that come with it for Hollis recalls a mistake he made in the past, whereas drought means low revenues and potentially starvation for the farmers. Towne's revision allows us to register the expansion of this noir plot from the psychological to the social. The water in *Chinatown* symbolizes capital and more generally, access to the mode of production, to nature and resources, something that should belong to everyone but is concentrated into the hands of a few capitalists.

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[291] See Schrader's "Notes on film noir" in *Perspectives on film noir* (1996), p. 104.
[292] *Ibid*, p. 104.

In the same meeting with his associates Jake is shown a picture of Hollis

and Noah Cross, arguing downtown in front of a pub. The associate tells Jake he

heard them say "apple core." Jake dismisses the photograph immediately because

it does not implicate Hollis in any extra-marital activity. Jake is on a divorce case

and everything else is of no importance to him. Another photographer reports that

Hollis was seen at Echo Park with his mistress. Jake and his associates

immediately rush out of his office to photograph the couple. Jake catches Hollis

with his mistress and the pictures make the paper with the headline "Department

of Water and Power Blows Fuse."

Figure 25. Evelyn Mulwray visiting Jake Gittes.

Another Evelyn Mullwray (the real one this time) comes to visit Jake. She

wants to sue him for photographing her husband. Jake wants to clear his name and

professional reputation so he goes to city hall to investigate the matter. When he

arrives, Hollis is out of his office. Jake is eventually asked to leave but not before

he encounters Claude Mulvihill, an ex-police officer like himself, and they

exchange a few words. The city has hired Mulvihill as security because of threats

from farmers about stealing water from their reservoir. Jake says "they're in luck,

when Mulvihill was the sheriff of some small town he allowed tons of booze to

come in without anyone losing a drop" (another moralizing claim against an

enemy). Jake distinguishes himself from Mulvihill by appealing his code of
ethics. Jake believes he is superior because he is good and Mulvihill is evil
because he allowed gangsters to distribute alcohol.

Jake leaves City Hall and goes to the Mulwray mansion to speak with
Evelyn. He wanders throughout the backyard and speaks to the oriental gardener
who tells Jake that the salt water is "bad for the glass." Jake knows he meant
grass. He looks into the pond and sees a shiny object. It is a glass lens.

Figure 26. Piece of glass in the pond, and the dead Hollis Mulwray.

Jake goes to fish it out, but Evelyn interrupts him and they speak about her
husband. She tells Jake that Hollis is out looking at water reservoirs today and
should be back by 6: 30 PM. Jake informs her that he believes Hollis is in trouble
and he thinks he was set up by the fake Evelyn Mulwray to slander Hollis. Jake
wants to investigate further to clear his name but then Evelyn quickly decides to
drop the lawsuit. Jake is puzzled but still wants to look into the matter. Jake
leaves for one of the water reservoirs and when he arrives it is surrounded with
police cars. He breaks in and finds an old friend, Lou Escobar, a lieutenant for the
police force; he tells Jake he no longer works in Chinatown. Jake asks to see

Hollis and Escobar tells him to wait a moment. His men have Hollis at the end of rope: Hollis drowned himself in the reservoir.[293]

Jake further investigates the murder and learns that Hollis had saltwater in his lungs even though the reservoir was filled with fresh water. Jake does not buy this as a suicide. He continues to investigate. Why? The same reason that Spade, Marlowe, and Hammer continued to investigate in their films, because either their professional and/or personal image was defamed (i.e. their masculinity was offended) and they needed to redeem themselves by solving the mystery. Towne and Polanski are merely following generic conventions of the private detective films.

As discussed above, Polanski commits to the private detective genre conventions only to revise them. Jake's quest for knowledge, his quest to redeem his professional reputation as a detective, and his quest to assert his masculinity does not bring society back into equilibrium. Jake's quest follows two trajectories. The first deals with the water scandal that eventually leads to Evelyn's father, Noah Cross, and the other narrative trajectory goes back to the girl Jake saw with Hollis. We discover that the girl is Katherine Cross/Mulwray, the daughter *and* sister of Evelyn Mulwray. When Jake discovers that Evelyn has been hiding Katherine from him, he threatens to give Evelyn over to the police for the murder of her husband. Jake slaps her around (another private detective convention) until Evelyn breaks down and admits to having a sex with her father. Jake asks if Noah

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[293] Polanski created a terrific visual reference with the juxtaposition of the glass in the pond, and Hollis being fished out of the water. We do not discover until later the connection once Jake learns that Noah drowned Hollis in the pond.

raped her; she shakes her head no. Jake eventually discovers that Noah Cross is behind an intricate water scandal.

Figure 27. Noah eats with Jake Gittes.

The film demonstrates first and foremost the futility of the private detective to sort out clues and information. In the first act of the film one of Jake's associate overheard a conversation between Hollis and Noah before the murder, and heard the phrase "apple core." Jake found a piece of glass in the salt water pond at the Mulwray mansion and shortly after he discovered that Hollis had salt water in his lungs even though he supposedly drowned himself in a fresh water reservoir. Jake is unable to properly interpret the information and objects he encounters. Hired indirectly by a mysterious villain, most likely Noah Cross, Jake is unable to diagnose the real problem because he is unknowingly fulfilling his role as the mediator for the upper-classes. The middle-class hero embodied by the private detective is again serving the bourgeoisie literally in this film to sustain the accumulation of capital and reproduction of the relations of production.

The private detective film typically attempted to subjectivize narration, breaking certain realist principles in the service of a particular style, one which emphasizes the *syuzhet* over the *fabula*. In fact, the private detective films of the forties were noteworthy for subverting the Hollywood norm of reserving stylistic techniques for the coherent transmission of *fabula* information through the

syuzhet. The transmission of *fabula* information was suppressed by the hard-boiled literature and this suppression was carried over to film noir forcing the audiences to attend to the quest for knowledge, the narrative of the experience of the detective discovering the mystery rather than finding out the mystery itself. This stylistic tendency of private detective films was carried over by Polanski and Towne to the extent that *Chinatown* emphasizes the epistemological fallacies of the detective over uncovering the mystery behind the death of Hollis and the water scandal. Polanski uses the space behind Jake Gittes in scenes to demonstrate to the audience that the detective's perspective is limited. He misses clues and dismisses the social problems telegraphed to both the audience and other characters in the film. For example, when Jake is getting a shave in the barbershop scene discussed above, a car in the background is over-heating and a character remarks how this dry heat and drought is killing the city. When Jake is in the court house listening to Hollis present on why he will not build a new dam, Jake is yawning and completely uninterested with the proceedings. *Chinatown* broadens the scope of the crime to go beyond the murder of a man and Jake/the perceived audience of the detective noir are oblivious to this particular epistemological perspective until the very end of the film.

The epistemological strategies of *Chinatown* transgresses the conventional realist strategies of objectivity and characterization. The audience identifies with the flawed private detective and his flawed perspective. Jake's characterization duplicates the Gould-Marlowe and Hackman-Moseby detectives we discussed above. However, unlike Altman's detective film, Polanski is not interested in

showing his own superiority to his characters but is much more interested in showing Jake's involvement with the political and social manipulation at work in *Chinatown.*[294] The story of Jake relearning his lesson from working in Chinatown is not meant to belittle the character but to demonstrate to the audience the limitations of a singular perspective, represented by the private detective. Like both *The Long Goodbye* and *Night Moves*, Polanski's film employs cynical ideologemes insofar as epistemological judgments are concerned. *Chinatown* for all of its supposed critical impulses undercuts its own attempt to criticize American society. The quest for knowledge uncovers the truth but it does not matter to society whether it knows its own truth or not. "Forget it Jake, it's Chinatown." The conclusion uses an ideologeme of resignation which just accepts the status-quo. Polanski criticizes the detective's singular perspective, delegitimizing the bourgeois ideologeme only to destroy the importance of epistemological judgments at the same time. Unlike Althusser's critique of empiricism and idealism, Polanski's criticism of bourgeois ideology removes the ground from which to criticize capitalism. Chinatown imagines no utopia but instead positions itself firmly on a postmodern ideological terrain, the space where utopian dreams are no longer possible or desired by the collective.

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[294] See Robin Wood's chapter on Robert Altman "Smart-ass and Cutie-pie: notes toward an evaluation of Altman (1975)" (1986) and Colin MacCabe's comments on the self-defeating style of Altman in "The discursive and the ideological in film: notes on the conditions of political intervention" (1978).

Figure 28. Jake visiting the farms affected by the draught, and Noah and Jake at the Mulwray mansion.

When Jake asks Noah Cross at the end of the film why he constructed the elaborate water scandal, Cross answers with "The future Mr. Gits. The future." Cross gives Jake an elementary lesson in capitalist accumulation. However, Cross is more interested in finding the girl, Katherine, heavily implying that he will use her to fulfill his perverse desires. The economy of capital and incest are intermixed in *Chinatown* to the extent that capital and the capitalist are invested with a taboo status. This is the film at its most critical: capitalism and the bourgeoisie are coded as evil and taboo. When Jake confronts Lieutenant Escobar with what he uncovered it makes no difference. Nothing Jake does can make anything better. The private detective watches as the woman he loves gets a bullet through the head and the evil entrepreneur escape unscathed, buying the future and getting the girl at the end.

Figure 29. "Forget it Jake, it's Chinatown."

The film's apparent non-resolution of the violence done to the characters masking itself as a political and modernist text in Hollywood cinema in fact is an early example of the postmodernist cultural logic that would emerge and become the dominant cultural logic of late capitalism. The film projects a negative utopia as its utopian impulse. The content of its form is an attempt to revise the private detective genre in a way that dismantles the ideological determinations of the early films but without any positive content. The film projects a vision of a social formation where no utopian dream is possible, making it a paradigmatic postmodern film. *Chinatown* criticizes an American genre only to spin itself into nothingness until, like Woodiwiss argues, there was the eventual forgetting of the social modernist discourse. "Forget it Jake, it's Chinatown" is the cinematic equivalent of this forgetting.

Return to Kiss Me Deadly: film noir after the apocalypse

We will now return to *Kiss Me Deadly* to complete our discussion of the neo-noir private detective film. *Kiss Me Deadly* is a silent specter that haunts the seventies private detective films. Comparing the films we discussed in this chapter with Aldrich's masterpiece allows us to measure the different ways that the seventies noirs tried to get outside their ideological discourses to criticize American society. *Kiss Me Deadly,* as discussed above, anticipated the critical-political impulses of all three private detective films we are discussing that appeared in Hollywood. The film was able to register a critique of an American ideologeme or an ideological myth that invested so many films and narrative, that worked to

interpellate spectators as subjects of the capitalist relations, without undercutting its own subversive attempts. At the end of *Kiss Me Deadly,* Hammer and Velma look back at the burning lake house. They did not turn into salt like Lot's wife in *The Book of Genesis*, but are able to see the horror for what it is. In *Night Moves*, the detective uncovers a smuggling plot that no one cares about, the world he inhabits has no interest in his dealings and yet he is compelled to bring those culpable to justice. In *The Long Goodbye* Gould-Marlowe discovers that his code of ethics causes harm not good. The ideologeme of good versus evil is exposed as a symbolic resolution that is exposed as such. Marlowe kills Terry Lennox but society is not changed and no one is made aware that the killer was brought to justice. In *Chinatown,* Jake exposes a scandal involving money and a perverse sexual affair between father and daughter. Noah Cross' power reaches beyond his own means to the state. Jake and the audience discovers that the police, the judges, everyone, are all in his pocket. Jake learns this truth that everyone else already knew at this point. These three seventies films are the dialectical opposite of the private detective films of the forties in terms of narrative and characterization conventions of the genre. But, they are firmly entrenched within the social modernist discourse that the critical components of the films are packaged, sold and consumed without interpellating any radical threats to the reproduction of the relations of production. *Chinatown*, *Night Moves*, and *The Long Goodbye* provide new perspectival and ideological coordinates for the postmodern subjects in late-capitalism. *Kiss Me Deadly* did not do this, but

repositions itself upon a political ideological terrain that is still able to criticize

capitalism without undercutting itself in the process.

Aldrich reverses the semic investments of the previous private detectives

in a much more efficient manner than either of the seventies had tried to do. When

Hammer is captured and knocked unconscious the screen goes black and he

wakes up tied to the bed face down with his legs tied apart. In the fifties this

overtly homoerotic treatment would have registered as strange and bizarre for a

middle-class population that was sufficiently repressed from acknowledging the

existence of homosexuals.[295] Hammer is strapped to the bed with his ass up for

grabs.[296] Aldrich reversed the supposed superiority of the private detective with

this one scene which exposed the homoeroticism of the male bonds inherent to the

private detective films made previously. Revisiting *Kiss Me Deadly* from the

point of view of the twenty-first century, the film is an unequivocally feminist

film whose subversive elements were obscured by the violence of the film when it

first came out.[297] It is unique to the genre in that the only voice-over we hear in

the film is from Hammer's secretary Velda, also with how the female characters

treat the male protagonist in the film. In one of the final scenes Hammer confronts

William Mist at an art gallery only to find the man fast asleep after taking a fatal

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[295] See Harris Mirkin's "The Pattern of Sexual Politics: feminism, homosexuality and pedophilia" (1999), p. 11. Mirkin discusses the surveillance activities that the police and FBI were engaged in during the fifties. For, example, the FBI instituted widespread surveillance of gay meeting places, and the post office placed tracers on the letters of gay men, and gave evidence of homosexual activity to employers. See also John D'Emilio's "Capitalism and Gay Identity" (1983), for a short history of treatment of homosexuals in America from the fifties to the eighties.

[296] Aldrich and Bezzerides were most likely satirizing the novelists penchant for not only having Mike Hammer hunt down communists but writing these communists as flamboyant homosexuals.

[297] Aldrich was attacked by several conservative film critics for the violence in the film. Aldrich responded to the critics which to realism and the Bible. If humankind is violent and the Bible has violence in it, why can't mainstream films be violent?

amount of sleeping pills. Hammer looks at the pill bottle and reads Dr. Soberin.

Hammer recalls Velda speaking to him about Dr. Soberin "Does that name do

anything for ya'?" Velda asks. The female voice overpowers this film to the

extent that Hammer's own discoveries are due to him following the voice of the

female. No other private detective give so much narrative importance the female

voice and so little to the male perspective.

The film does not remain at the level of sexual politics but is the first

detective film to implicate the whole of society on a literal narrative level within

the detective's quest to solve the mystery. *Kiss Me Deadly* is the first private

detective film to invest the private detective with capitalist-entrepreneurial semic

content. Hammer wants to discover the great whatzit because he believes it will

lead to a "big score." In the other films, the private detective is motivated by his

moral code. Hammer has no moral code but merely mourns for his friend Nick the

mechanic after a car was dropped on his head. The private detective quest for

knowledge, his will to know, motivated initially by a desire for profit (i.e. "the big

score"), then cloaked in the good versus evil ideologeme, is the supreme critical

impulse of Aldrich's film. In fact, Aldrich not only produces a more effective and

coherent critique of this ideologeme and its respective functioning within the

private detective story but he explicitly breaks with the social modernist

ideological discourse: the private detective's quest for knowledge motivated by

the accumulation of profit will destroy the world. Crude and simplistic? Without a

doubt, but this B-film repositions the spectator on a different terrain than the

ideological-postmodern terrain in *Night Moves*, *Chinatown*, and *The Long Goodbye*.

 Kiss Me Deadly is a cautionary tale, exposing the fallacies of male bourgeois dominance symbolized by the private detective. The three seventies noir films show us that instead, the private detective's actions are now irrelevant and unable to fix society. In fact, in all three films the private detective is treated as an outmoded characterization. All three films deploy cynical ideologemes, producing apolitical narratives that fit perfectly with the late capitalist discourse of the forgetting social modernism.

Chapter Four. *Taxi Driver*: the noir hero as avenging angel

Introduction

The following chapter will explain several characteristics concerning the narrative

of Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*. Part of the discussion will deal with the

relationship between Scorsese's film to other films. We will also discuss the

critical and ideological discourses in *Taxi Driver*, the moments where the film

attempts to distance itself from the ideological myths that have been produced by

classical Hollywood and the New Hollywood cinema that *Taxi Driver* was a part

of. Before we go too far with this argument I should recognize that *Taxi Driver*

and the other neo-noirs of this period are not political or avant-garde films (i.e

examples of Brechtian cinema similar to Godard's political cycle roughly between

1968 and 1972). Rather these films are mainstream Hollywood productions that

are part of the American ideological apparatus, the cultural or cinematic apparatus

that contributed to the reproduction of the relations of production. However, the

following analysis will also demonstrate the relative autonomy of the

superstructure by explaining how the resurrection of neo-noir in the seventies

criticized American society.

The narrative of Taxi Driver

The narrative of Taxi Driver is essentially an existential drama about a man trying

to find a coherent subject position for himself in late-capitalism America. It is a

quest of a man trying to find a quest, trying to find something that will define his

life. In Lacanian terms, he is a subject directing himself to desire; or in

Althusserian terms, a subject looking to be interpellated, finding his God/subject to him interpellate him. In the beginning of the film we learn that he has been lonely all his life. We see him working lots and in his free time he goes to porno-theaters in New York or walks around the streets in the daytime with a brown bag. He finds Betsy, falls in love, thinks she is an angel who floats above the garbage in the city ("They cannot touch her" Travis says). Betsy becomes the object of his quest, the object of his desire. Betsy is coded here as a sacred woman, clothed in white, a virgin-angel in contrast to the prostitutes walking the streets. For some reason she becomes intrigued with Travis (He's a walking "contradiction," "part truth, part fiction" according to Betsy), recounting a lyric from a Kris Kristofferson song. Travis does not get the reference. In fact he does not get any references that Betsy uses as she makes chit-chat with him. Travis has no interest in pop culture; instead he wants to talk about serious things: like despair, loneliness, love, companionship, etc. Something you would talk about after you got to know someone but not on a first date.

As a psychopathic character, he is very different from the postmodern version of this character Patrick Bateman (in the film and novel *American Psycho*) who can only talk about pop culture.[298] Here is the beginning of Travis'

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[298] Witness this line of dialogue from the film version of *American Psycho*. In this scene Patrick is about to murder the sedated Paul Allen in his apartment:

> Allen: Why are there copies of the style section all over the place, d-do you have a dog? A little chow or something?
>
> Patrick: No, Allen.
>
> Allen: Is that a rain coat?
>
> Patrick: Yes it is! In '87, Huey released this, *Fore*, their most accomplished album. I think their undisputed masterpiece, "Hip to be Square," a song so catchy, most people don't listen to the lyrics.

quest: he must find someone with whom he can make a serious connection. He fails with Betsy, not before failing with the lady at the convenient stand in the porn theater, and then succeeds somewhat with Iris. His object of desire changes from finding love to redemption of himself along with the redemption of who he believes to be innocent. *Taxi Driver* is not only a quest narrative but that it also unintentionally draws from the latter portion of the film noir cycle that Paul Schrader called the cycle of the psychotic killer with a suicidal impulse.

Character system

The system of characters in *Taxi Driver* has a complicated structure, with each character's relevant importance shifting as we move along in the diegesis of the film. The two adversaries or blockages to Travis's objects of desire are Senator Palantine and the pimp Sport is holding Iris hostage as a prostitute. As we are introduced to Iris, Betsy takes the back seat, and Palantine and Travis' mission come into the foreground of the narrative. Travis' mission to save Iris becomes mixed in with his mission to kill Palantine, and in the finale it is difficult to discern whether he planned to kill Palantine, then die and leave Iris all of his money, or kill Palantine then kill Sport and whoever else works in the whore house and then give Iris the money. Palantine is a figure of "God the father" who has rejected his "Son"--Travis is a negative version of Christ, trying to fulfill the Father's wish/demand for justice, but Travis, unlike Christ, follows his own will,

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But they should because it's not just about the pleasures of conformity, and the importance of trends, it's also a personal statement on the band itself!

not that of the Subject/Palantine.[299] In both scenarios it appears like Travis was

expecting to die in an act of self-sacrifice, but it is unclear whether he planned to

kill Sport all along or whether that was an afterthought when he failed to

assassinate Palantine.

Figure 30. Ethan Edwards played by John Wayne in *The Searchers* (1956), and Travis Bickle
played by Robert DeNiro in *Taxi Driver* (1976).

From the second act of the movie on to the end the system of characters

adopts another character system, one introduced many years before, not in a film

noir but in a western, John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956).[300] In Ford's film,[301] we

have Ethan Edwards, Debbie Edwards, and Scar which then correspond to Travis,

Iris, and Sport in *Taxi Driver*. In *The Searchers*, the protagonist is Ethan Edwards,

a soldier returning home from the American Civil War three years after it ended.

Debbie is Ethan's niece who, when all of the men were out trying to hunt down a

Comanche band, was captured by this band and taken by their chief Scar to

become one of his wives. Both Debbie and Iris are women who seemingly do not

want to be saved: Debbie resists the attempts of Martin and Ethan to save and Iris,

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[299]See the Gospel of Luke Chapter 22:42: "saying, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup
from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done." *New American Standard Bible*.

[300] This comparison was made by Lesley Stern in chapter three of his text, *The Scorsese
Connection* (1995). Stern argues that *Taxi Driver* is complex remake of Ford's film in an urban
setting.

[301] An early entry into the revisionist-western cycle, predating the work of Peckinpah, Penn, and
Altman by almost nearly two decades.

while not resisting as much, is not opposed to being a prostitute but does not want to go home either, she would rather move to a commune in Vermont. Both films depict the fate of women at the hands of men who use them as a way to achieve redemption.

Another similarity between the Ford and Scorsese films is the depiction of Travis' hatred for the underclass (mostly black people) and Ethan's hatred for the Comanche. Both Ethan and Travis are anti-Christ figures; saviors that hate the dirty poor. Ethan's hatred drives him to define the Comanche as non-humans, as things that contaminate and destroy the earth and people as well: his quest to save his niece Debbie later in the film becomes his quest to kill her because she has become corrupted by Scar. This change in the Ethan's quest was not recycled in *Taxi Driver.* Travis intends to die himself while saving Iris from Sport and this hatred for a contaminated woman is displaced toward Betsy. Betsy rejected him, the woman who was once an angel floating above the dirty scum of the city, which convinces Travis that she is "just like all the others." Travis' hatred then gets displace toward Palantine, the man who Betsy serves and believes in. In some ways, Betsy is an updated version of Martha from Ford's film. Early on in the film when Ethan returns home to his brother and relatives there are several scenes that imply that Martha and Ethan have either once been in love or are still in love. There is a scene where Ethan lingers a little too long holding Martha and then lets her go after he kisses her on the forehead. There is another scene when Martha, who thinks she is alone but is in fact being watched by the preacher, is holding some of Ethan's clothes and coins, staring at them. Nothing happens

beyond these two scenes because she is eventually killed by Scar and his fellow Comanches. This short-lived love affair between Ethan and Martha is replayed somewhat in *Taxi Driver* with Travis' fling with Betsy until she rejects him for being a pervert. For Travis she becomes contaminated, no longer worth saving from her lonely life and therefore must be rejected. Betsy occupies an interesting position because at certain points she functions as the Martha character did and then functions later on in the film as the Debbie figure. The paradoxical impulses behind Ethan's obsessive quest in *The Searchers* have become now split and are redirected towards two characters in *Taxi Driver*.

Figure 31. Betsy in *Taxi Driver* (1976), and Martha in *The Searchers* (1956).
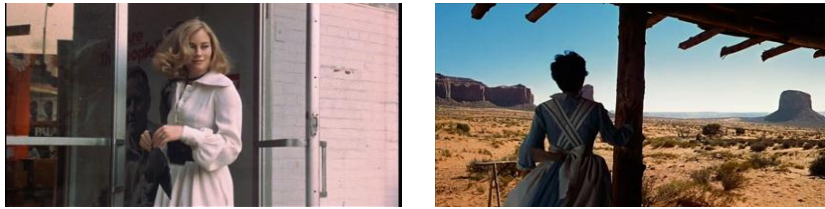
Another character that does not figure in this juxtaposition of character systems is the character of Martin Pawley, a man who was raised by Ethan's brother Aaron and his brothers' wife Martha. During Ethan's five year quest to save Debbie, Martin accompanies him because he knows he cannot be trusted to bring Debbie back alive. We first see Ethan's racism spike when Martin comes in before the dinner begins in the first act of the film. He admits to Ethan that he is "one-eighth" Cherokee, which is too much Cherokee as far as Ethan is concerned. Ethan repeatedly embellishes his Cherokee status (calling him a 'half-breed' when they meet for the first time in the time and then one-quarter after being corrected by Martin). Throughout the five-year search we discover that Martin is much

more humane, understanding, and reasonable than Ethan (in one scene, upon encountering a herd of buffalo Ethan pulls out his rifle and tries to shoot as many as possible so that they will not be able to feed any Comanche while Martin looks on in bewilderment). He accompanies Ethan because he is Ethan's conscience: Martin's quest is to save Debbie from Ethan.

The Martin character is not regurgitated in *Taxi Driver* but is invoked in one scene between Travis and Palantine. Travis is asked what he would like changed about society and first dismisses the question because he admits he knows nothing about politics, but then answers with a request to flush all of the scum in New York City down the toilet.[302] Palantine and his political aids look nervous and then Palantine explains that he understands where Travis is coming from and says that he can make society better but it will take hard work and diligence. Here Palantine tries to correct Travis by showing him a different way to improve society. But, Travis has no interest in this solution because he is not a "political person." His trouble exists in the realm of the psychological, and he denies an approach that implies the existence of a collective that changes society together: he wants to get rid of the filth and later on he becomes the own solution to his problem or "purpose," the absence of morality and the impotence of politicians to clean up the filth in society.

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[302] Travis is without a doubt, a Fascist male subject. His fascination with dirt and scum raises issues about abjection and political culture. See *Male Fantasies* (1987).

Figure 32. Martin Pawley in *The Searchers* (1956), and the Wizard in *Taxi Driver* (1976).

The character of Martin Pawley as the moral rudder for the avenging angel

is evoked by the film again when the Wizard tries to give Travis advice. Travis

rejects it in the same way that Ethan Edwards rejects Pawley's attempts to

humanize him. The advice that Wizard gives makes absolutely no sense and the

entire scene in fact comes off as a parody of various "advice scenes" in American

films where one character imparts some wisdom to the protagonist which helps

him get over his problem.[303] When Wizard tries to advise Travis he comes off as

inarticulate and his advice is a useless string of pop-psychology ideas that Travis

immediately calls "bullshit." The scene embodies a Hindu-Hegelian mandate to

the individual "do you duty" to civil society and you will find your purpose for

your life.

> Wizard: Look at it this way. A man takes a job, you know? And that job - I mean, like that- that becomes what he is. You know, like - you do a thing and that's what you are. Like I've been a cabbie for thirteen years. Ten years at night. I still don't own my own cab. You know why? Because I don't want to. That must be what I want.To be on the night shift drivin' somebody else's cab. You understand? I mean, you become - You get a job, you become the job. One guy lives in Brooklyn. One guy lives in Sutton Place. You got a lawyer. Another guy's a doctor. Another guy dies. Another guy gets well. People are born, y'know? I envy you, your youth. Go on, get laid, get drunk. Do anything. You got no choice, anyway. I mean, we're all fucked. More or less, ya know.

> Travis: I don't know. That's about the dumbest thing I ever heard.

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[303] Paul Schrader noted in his commentary for *Taxi Driver* that this was his intention for this scene.

> Wizard: It's not Bertrand Russell. But what do you want? I'm a cabbie. What do I know? I don't even know   what the fuck you're talking about.

> Travis: Maybe I don't know either.

Every time someone advises Travis there is a lack of understanding between Travis and his interlocutor. The specter of Martin Pawley, the conscience for Ethan, tries to penetrate into Travis' world but without any success. Travis, unlike Ethan does not have anyone to keep him in line but only his own "clean conscience."

The Vietnam Subtext

The cinema of the seventies appears as an anomaly in Hollywood production for many critics because they believe that films were more socially conscious and subversive than they are today. Several films commented on political corruption and the American war in Vietnam. Films that used Vietnam as their subtext were part of a larger cycle that tapped into the defiant energy of '68 anti-establishment generation that helped reinvigorate Hollywood when profits were down. The war in Vietnam was a war between the American working class[304] against the poor from the Third World. It was an event that many filmmakers from the New Hollywood group used as a narrative subtext to express their angst and frustration.[305] The subtext of Vietnam is not an excuse for Scorsese to express his angst or as a way for Scorsese to somehow legitimate this so-called vigilante film. Here the angst most certainly reflects the crisis of the normative and legitimating

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[304] See C.G. Appy's book *Working-class war: American combat soldiers and Vietnam* (1993).
[305] See Paul Kerr's article 'The Vietnam Subtext' 1980 from *Screen* 21(2).

strategies employed to differentiate America from the communist threat. The

seventies decade has an inordinate amount of films that question the normative

order of American culture.[306] For example, in films like *The Last Detail* (1973),

Nashville, *American Graffiti*, and *Big Wednesday* (1978), Vietnam became a

pretext for New Hollywood directors (or the "movie brats" as Paul Kerr calls

them) to express angst and dissatisfaction with America. According to Kerr these

directors imply that vigilantism, heroism, insanity, and injury came from

America's experience in Vietnam, the place where good American boys go.[307]

This pretext functions as a plot device, something that explains without explaining

anything of the troubles or problems that arise in the narrative of the film.[308]

Vietnam as a subtext works like ideology, suturing over the disparate elements of

realist texts, resolving contradictions with imaginary explanations that explain

nothing. *Taxi Driver* is not a film about Vietnam like *Apocalypse Now*, *The Deer*

Hunter, or even *Little Big Man.* Each of those films try to display the horror of

Vietnam as their setting for a particular narrative. The horror of Vietnam is

symbolized by the random and incoherent violence of Russian roulette in *The*

Deer Hunter,[309] the depiction of America's Vietnam adventure in *Apocalypse*

Now, and the inclusion of oriental actors getting killed in *Little Big Man.*[310] *Taxi*

Driver does not use the pretext of Vietnam to tell a vigilante film either. It is as

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[306] Jurgen Habermas discusses theories of such crises in his text *Legitimation Crisis* (1975).
[307] *Ibid*, p. 72.
[308] *Ibid*, p. 72.
[309] See Roger Ebert's comments in his review of *The Deer Hunter* in March 9, 1979 of the *Chicago Sun-Times*. Ebert sees the Russian roulette as the organizing symbol of the film which somehow neutralizes any ideological argument about Vietnam. I disagree. The film is clearly anti-war and the Russian roulette motif and can be seen as putting itself in the Vietnam war debate, arguing that the Vietnam war is insane and that we should not forget what happened.
[310] See *Conversations with Pauline Kael* (1996), page 45.

much a vigilante film as much as *New York, New York* is a musical. To group *Taxi Driver* in with these other films as Kerr does is to have seriously misread the film and to have a complete lack of sensitivity for irony, satire, and parody. Kerr's ungenerous reading of *Taxi Driver* relegates it to films that are nothing more than expressions of angst from a generation of filmmakers angry at America but unsure of how to properly express a political or social critique.

Even though Scorsese does not use Vietnam as a subtext for his narrative, he does use it to distinguish Travis from the rest of the New Yorkers we encounter in the film. Travis, with the exception of the scenes with Betsy, is always wearing his marines' fatigues with the King Kong Company patch signifying to everyone where he came from. If Vietnam were a subtext for this film then what we would have is the return of a soldier from a war that his side lost (much like the return of Ethan at the beginning of *The Searchers*), to a society that does not appreciate his service and sacrifice. Given this initial rejection he then reacts with the skills her learned in Vietnam which then disrupts the equilibrium of the society he returned to and in the end the anti-hero should either be killed or somehow be reconciled with society and after he is pacified he becomes a productive and socially acceptable member. This is of course not the plot line for *Taxi Driver* but rather the plot outline for *First Blood*, (1982). If the Scorsese and Schrader were using a social phenomenon as their subtext it would be more accurate to say that it is the feelings of dislocation and atomism that characterizes the existential experience of living in an a major metropolitan environment like New York City. This subtext and Travis' feelings of alienation

and loneliness are demonstrated early on in the film with a series of scenes which show us his lonely existence. There is one in particular that is very short but demonstrates succinctly Travis' inner state. We see him walking during the day time drinking from a brown bag, and instead of holding the shot, letting him walk into the foreground of the frame we see a dissolve that cuts the middle out of the scene and places Travis into the foreground. A technique that is typically used to express the passage of time, here it is used to show the audience that Travis is merely a being that moves from one experience to the next trying to "become a normal person just like everyone else." The slow dissolve shows us the passing of a body a space not time. This transition technique is used against convention to depict the sorrowful existence of Travis.

The account of the loneliness Travis feels is somewhat complex and contradictory due to the Travis' voice-over and its juxtaposition with what we see in the narrative. In his diary he writes that he has been lonely his entire life. The Vietnam is only mentioned once in the film when Travis applying for the job at the beginning of the film. It also one of the only times when he makes some sort of friendly connection with another person. Vietnam continues to resurface throughout the film: be it the fatigues that Travis wear or his fascination with weapons, guns and knives, and familiarity with hand-to-hand combat (for example, the scene when Albert Brooks' character tries to forcibly push him out of the campaign office and Travis deflects his grabbing hands and poises himself into an attack position). One explanation of the connection between these accounts of Travis' alienation that turns into violence would be to say in Vietnam

he was allowed to channel his anger towards the Vietnamese whereas back in civil society he has no outlet for his aggression; he can no longer kill the poor and evil people he believes are scum but must live among them.[311] Vietnam taught him one way to deal with his rage but that method for catharsis is no longer appropriate for American society.

Taxi Driver appeared in the wake of several important anti-establishment films that characterize the cinematic context of this period, the most paradigmatic film of this type was Hopper's *Easy Rider*, a film that Paul Schrader criticized for being nothing other than a collection cliches and stereotypes. *Taxi Driver* entertains a somewhat complicated relationship with this cycle: Travis is a stereotypical anti-establishment character like the bikers in *Easy Rider* or Clyde Barrow. However, unlike the sixties films, *Taxi Driver* parodies left-wing populism while at the same time it is a parody of right-wing extremism and vigilantism.

In the aftermath of several political assassinations, the American public was psychologically primed for this material. Public anxiety and discomfort with seeing their leaders killed, and their assassins killed, provided the raw material for conspiracy thrillers during the seventies, *The Parallax View* and *The Conversation*, and provides, along with the political and social circumstances surrounding the Vietnam War, the subtext for politics in *Taxi Driver*. The former two films allegorize the Nixon administration and the public anxiety over the Nixonian power apparatus, along with political and private assassinations. In fact,

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[311] Travis is similar to the Freikorps studied by Klaus Theweleit in *Male Fantasies Volume 1: women floods bodies history* (1987). The Friekorps targeted unhealthy or corrupted elements of the social body and disposed of them.

public assassination becomes linked with the Nixon administration strongly in *The Parallax View* and then more subtly in *The Conversation*. Pakula's other film during this period, *Klute*, uses these themes in a somewhat different way to provide a retelling of the private detective story along that taps into the social anxiety over privacy invasion and the mistreatment of women.

Travis recodes his desire to kill Palantine in terms of a fascination with the repressive state apparatus, the government, and the secret service. The film presents the origins of political assassination as deeply personal and existential rather than the result of corporate conspiracy plots. Travis decides to kill Palantine, who stands in as the father figure for Betsy. This man is also the one who wants to stand in as the representative for the people, he is their savior, and he includes himself within his political campaign slogan "We Are the People." We know from earlier in the film that Travis has no interest in reforming society and here Palantine, the populist Democrat, becomes conflated with the urban poor in Travis' perspective. The senator is using classical populist rhetoric according to Ernesto Laclau's work done on the subject.[312] Populist rhetoric tries to present an alternative to the dominant power bloc in a given social formation by not appealing to particular classes but to an empty concept, "the people"[313] Palantine appeals to this empty concept, includes himself in it, so that he can appeal to everyone and no one a simultaneously. In *Taxi Driver*, Palantine is nothing but a caricature and a focus point for Travis' vigilante rage.

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[312] See Ernesto Laclau's *Politics and Ideology of Marxist Theory* (1977).
[313] *Ibid*. pp. 165-173.

Figure 33. Senator Charles Palantine in *Taxi Driver* (1976).

Here we observe a narrative form problem, a contradiction in the text. The violent deliverance as an act of salvation becomes the answer for Travis. He first targets Palantine and then moves onto Sport even though in the latter half of the film, Travis is more concerned with Iris' fate than Betsy's. How does the film explain this? - Travis is crazy. His desire to be a man of action and to kill the father figure of Betsy provides the motivation for planning to kill Palantine. The assassination thematic taps into the social anxiety concerned with political assassinations in America. Scorsese-Schrader-DeNiro created a preparation sequence that demonstrates Travis' devotion to his new mission (Schrader had the filmography of Robert Bresson in mind and also the diary of Arthur Brenner). This section uses one long scene beginning with Travis laying his arsenal and then taking apart a glide from a desk-drawer which he then uses to make his gun-glide (this scene that was written as one scene in the script but then was cut up into a montage). This arsenal scene was then intercut with another one where Travis is attending a Palantine rally, inquiring about getting a job in the secret service. At the political rally his hair is cut shorter, cropped and cleaned up compared to how we saw him before with a shaggy mop. Then Scorsese cuts back to an earlier scene following him playing around with his guns and now he is

speaking to a faceless enemy in the mirror, challenging and taunting them. The two scenes (written as two separate scenes in the screenplay) imply that Travis' training and his preparation is meant for a political assassination.

The narrative form problem, or break in narrative totality, comes with this juxtaposition of two sequences along with the film's understated depiction of Travis' racism and hatred for the underclass. Why train to kill Palantine? A large part of Travis' psychosis involves his hatred for the "filth" of the city ("This city is like an open sewer") and he wants a real rain to come wash it away. Travis desire for a redemptive action is similar to the flood narrative in Genesis where God desired to cleanse the earth of the wickedness of man by water. Travis' belief in redemption and punishment is continually juxtaposed to Palantine's populist doctrine "We ARE the People." In fact, Palantine, as many critics have observed, is a caricature of Democratic leaders in American politics. The last one in office before Nixon, Lindon B. Johnson, tried to wage war against urban poverty and socio-economic disparity but is better known for his mishandling of the Vietnam War. Given that a large part of Travis' perspective involves an intermingling of good versus evil combined with clean versus dirty, it is somewhat incoherent at the level of narrative to stage a training montage scene intercut with hints at political assassination when the real enemy according to Travis is the filth in the streets, "the whores, skunk pussies, buggers, queens, fairies, dopers, junkies..." This break in narrative totality is the result of the film trying to tap into a social contradiction that underlies the narrative: namely that the American dream is plainly false, the two alternative strategies to fixing the country, reform/regress or

neglect are both bankrupt. What the film leaves us with is not an answer to this binary opposition but rather a cynical indictment on our media society: we glorify Travis because we are all as crazy as he is. The film appears to provide closure but it is in fact an empty gesture, just like the closure at the end of *The Searchers,* is nothing what Ethan had planned to do before. In the end he neither killed Scar nor Debbie, but instead scalped Scar and brought Debbie home. In *Taxi Driver*, Travis does succeed, he kills Sport and brings Iris home thus healing the disequilibrium in the narrative. In this film, the disequilibrium was created because Travis needed someone to save and he made it his mission to save Iris even though she did not want to go back to her family. However, the narrative denies closure for audience and implies that Travis may have survived but he is definitely not cured. In some ways, *Taxi Driver* repeats the ending of *The Searchers* because both characters return the lost girl to her family. Travis returns to his job as a taxi driver and Ethan walks out of the Jorgensen home as the door closes on his figure and the film ends. *Taxi Driver* shows us what the closure at the end of *The Searchers* displaced. Both Ethan and Travis, the lone gun-man vigilante mythical hero of American culture, will kill again.

The city as urban nightmare and the country as home

The state of the city compared to rural or suburban communities in *Taxi Driver* is a juxtaposition made late in the movie and it is introduced when Iris becomes involved with Travis. Before Travis meets Iris all we are given is Travis' disgust with the city without any juxtaposition to the country. Travis' fellow cab drivers

express their disgust for other types of individuals that "are not really part of the real America." For example, his friends mention homosexual couples being given alimony in California. This disgust for the Other reflects the Nixonian attitude toward California and New York City which, since Nixon, are not considered part of the real America.[314] When Travis takes Iris out for a mid-day lunch she tells him that she came from the American mid-west, and about her desire to move to a commune in Vermont. Travis wants to bring her back home, to rebuild the American nuclear family which has become broken apart by some unnamed event. In the film it is implied that her parents did something to drive her away but it is never explored further than this conversation. It is here where we are first introduced to this juxtaposition between Home and Away (or urban and suburban/rural). The city is associated with violence, corruption, dirt, and sin. Various scenes visually reinforce Travis's perspective. For example, there is one scene where a group of young African-Americans vandalize Travis' cab as he is driving, a prostitute and her John have sex in the back of Travis' cab, and another scene where Travis is looking at people walking on the street and an African-American is tripping uncontrollably, yelling incoherently and shaking. However, this has as much to do with the characterization of Travis Bickle and also how this character was depicted through the subjective narrative register in the film.

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[314] I owe Dr. Datta for this insight.

Figure 34. New York City in *Taxi Driver* (1976).

A device that was inherited from German Expressionism, the films noirs used the subjective narrative register to create a visually compatible mode of first-person narrative register made popular by hardboiled literature.[315] The classic noirs used this device to depict the quest of the private detective. Scorsese co-opted it to produce two effects in his film. First, to show us a world through the perception of a psychopath, breaking with cinematic realism by signaling to the spectators that the images we are seeing are distortions of reality. Second, to provide us with no other perspective except Travis' which leaves us with no other characters to identify with. This device puts us back somewhat into classical cinematic realism because it does not give us a multiplicity of discourses that intersect like what we would find in Godard's later films but a closed universe that is distorted while at the same time unified by Travis' perspective. It calls attention to the fact that the image we are seeing is a projection of a subjective experience and not "reality" as such, but the reality as constructed from a singular point of view. In the early films noirs like *Murder, My Sweet*, *Lady in the Lake*, *Possessed* (1947), and *Dark Passage* (1947)[316] the subjective camera style

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[315] See Telotte's *Voices in the Dark* (1989), p. 18.
[316] *Ibid*, p. 19.

brought the audience into the psychological state of the main character. Here in *Taxi Driver* the narrative register attempts to match the psychosis of the protagonist in a similar way that Boorman depicted Walker's revenge quest in *Point Blank*. Scorsese uses the subjective narration register to demonstrate the way reality becomes distorted by the bourgeois ego. It is both a critique of Hollywood conventions and liberal-empiricist ideology which grounds knowledge of reality in the centered subject.

The best example of subjective camera technique in Scorsese's film is the scene where Travis is about to talk with The Wiz on the street and an African-American man walks past them. He glares at Travis and Travis glares back at him. Nothing happens in the scene except for the depiction of Travis' racism. The camera presents the stranger and cuts immediately to Travis' hateful gaze and then back on to the stranger. The camera positions us in the place of the stranger, the object of racial subjection which allows us to observe the workings of this particular type of narrative register. This scene, among others, provides us with a depiction of the first in the binary relation, city and country, or home and away. But, this depiction and semantic investment of the binary opposition "Away" versus "Home" is at once a significant component in the way that *Taxi Driver* rewrites *The Searchers.* As a result of the subjective narrative register which uses the narrative raw material of *The Searchers*, Scorsese creates Travis' perception of vigilante justice by initially setting up a binary opposition between "Good" versus "Evil" which then provides us with the opposition "Home" and "Away." The second opposition is invested with the semantic components of the first

opposition. Home is invested with happiness, community, and love, whereas

Away signifies corruption, evil, and loneliness. However, in the film Travis

associates the codes Good and Evil with "Clean" and "Dirty."[317] Travis' entire

existence is surrounded in filth: his apartment is messy and unorganized, his cab

is full of semen and blood that he cleans off every night, and he voluntarily works

in neighborhoods that are notorious for housing drug addicts, dealers, pimps, and

prostitutes. The combination of the Good and Evil binary and its transcoding in

Travis' psyche as Clean and Dirty generates another opposition that appears late

in the narrative which juxtaposes "Home" and "Away" thus introducing the

vigilante theme from the narrative raw material of *The Searchers*.

     During the scene where Travis and Iris are having lunch he tells her that

New York City is "no place for a young girl like herself," and that "you should be

at home with her family and going on dates with boys" instead of working as a

prostitute. The mid-west America is where Iris eventually returns, this space is

associated with wholeness and the good life. A utopian dream of a unified

community existing separate from the horrors of the inner city poor and the

violence in Vietnam; a romantic-conversative antimodernism. This is also another

point of continuity between *Taxi Driver* and the older film noir tradition. The

noirs from the classical cycle depicted the American nuclear family as

fundamentally broken. The introduction of the femme fatale in these films was a

way for this brokenness to appear on screen while at the same for noirs to

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[317] See Mary Douglas *Purity and Danger* (2005), Dominique Laporte *History of Shit* (2000), and Alain Corbin *The Foul and the Fragrant* (1986).

dramatize male anxiety over female independence.[318] The petty bourgeois

protagonists desire the femme fatale (the independent city woman) because she

gives them something they are not getting at home. An example of this noir trope

is found in Lang's *Scarlet Street* a retelling of the story that inspired Jean Renoir's

La Chienne (1931). Lang's narrative has a femme fatale that works as a grifter

and a middle-class protagonist who lives in a household where he is emasculated

on a regular basis. He wears an extremely effeminate apron with a flower pattern

and lace frills and has to look up at a portrait of his wife's dead husband who

insists that the painting stay up above their fireplace so as to honor his memory.

The fundamental conflict of the broken middle-class home runs deep in this film

and leads to a particularly violent end for 1945 (with the protagonist murdering

his mistress with an ice pick, and him going insane with guilt as punishment for

his transgression). In *Taxi Driver* the destruction of the nuclear family figures into

the narrative as as a wound that serves to explain to us the cause of Iris becoming

a prostitute and joining with Sport. It is not male desire that has destroyed the

nuclear family in this case but some unknown problem that motivated Iris to

move away from her family and into an urban nightmare.

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[318] See Boozer (1999), p. 21, Nieland and Fay (2010), p. 149.

Figure 35. Christopher Cross in *Scarlet Street* (1945) and Iris in *Taxi Driver* (1976).

Three terms present themselves in the narrative following this conversation with Iris: Home (which is invested with the semantic content of goodness, cleanliness, community, and the feeling of being a normal person), Away (exemplified by Travis' perception of New York City which is filthy, corrupt, full of terrible people, and is essentially Hell) and the third becomes Not-home (this third term is the contradictory of the first term) and the fourth term is then Not-away.[319] We can map out these terms to see the finite permutations available in the narrative.

Figure 36. Greimas Semiotic Square of the complex term (=Home+Away) and the neutral term (=not-away+not-home)

Home   <--------------------> Away

Not-away <--------------------> Not-home

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[319] See Greimas and Rastier's "The Interaction of Semiotic Constraints" in *Yale French Studies* (1968), p. 89.

In Greimas' theory the two first terms can join together and form the "complex" term and the third and fourth join to form the "neutral" term.[320] We can now map out the various combinations which represent different spaces in American society. The combination Home+Away becomes the commune in Vermont that Iris wants to go to instead of going back to her parents. She invites Travis to come but he declines because he does not think he would "get along" with those people. He is right because according to how we saw Travis' mind work up until now in the film, the minute he saw a mother permit her daughter to snort some cocaine and then have sex with someone in the next room, Travis would be shooting up the entire commune instead of the whorehouse in New York City.[321] In fact, those whom Travis wishes to destroy share the same inherited hippie morality as their middle-class counterparts living in communes during this time. Moving on, the complex term in Greimas' theory has been identified by Jameson to be the imaginary resolution of a conceptual opposition.[322] The methodological utility of Greimas' work presents us with an advancement beyond what Levis-Strauss did with the structural analysis of myth because Greimas' work allows to perceive other combinations possible in a narrative, not just the imaginary resolution but also the neutral term which turns out to be a utopian narrative.[323] The neutral term which combines the two contradictories, in our case Not-Away and Not-Home, is produced by a utopian

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[320] *Ibid*, p. 90.

[321] See Bennet M. Berger's article "American Pastoralism, Surburbia, and the Commune Movement" in *Society* (1979), pp. 64-69.

[322] See Jameson's article "Of Islands and Trenches: neutralization and the production of utopian discourse" in *The Ideologies of Theory Vol. II: the syntax of history*, pp. 78-79.

[323] *Ibid*, pp. 78-79.

narrative as Jameson would call it because it neutralizes the imaginary resolution.

The other combinations are the positive deixis, the combination of the first term

and the fourth which in our case is Home and Not-away, and the negative deixis,

the combination of the second and the third term, combining Away and Not-

Home.[324] The negative deixis is New York City which combines Away and Not-

Home and the positive deixis is the reconciled home of the Steensma family.

The utopian narrative which produces the neutral term is supposed to

neutralize the imaginary resolution which in this film would be the Vermont

Commune, a transcendence of the terms Home and Away for Iris. The neutral

term that figures into our conceptual of the ideology of the film is a term that

combines Not-away and Not-home and suggests itself as the Apocalypse, the

violent removal of good and evil, home and away, a purifying force that washes

away all the scum. The Apocalypse term was first introduced in the narrative

when Travis evoked the redemptive flood in Genesis near the beginning of the

film in his voice-over.

It is here where another connection to the classical cycle of film noir

appears as *Taxi Driver* reaches way back into the history of cinema to 1955 to

grab ahold of Robert Aldrich's *Kiss Me Deadly*. Even though both protagonists in

these films are either explicitly or implicitly homophobic[325] and paranoid, we

should recognize that this connection is not an explicit one made by a reference in

the film itself but rather it repeats a similar gesture that *Kiss Me Deadly*

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[324] See Greimas and Rastier (1968), p. 90.

[325] Robert Lang provides an excellent commentary on the implicit homophobia of Aldrich's version of Mike Hammer in the article "Looking for the "Great Whatzit": *Kiss Me Deadly* and Film Noir" in *Perspectives on Film Noir* (1996) edited by R. Barton. Palmer.

performed in its narrative resolution. The shared gesture here is how both films take a cultural myth, the detective or private investigator and the vigilante, and push the internal logic of this myth to an absurd limit. *Taxi Driver* and *Kiss Me Deadly* take this American cultural hero and dramatize his quest to bring society back into equilibrium, to find the great whatzit in *Kiss Me Deadly* and save Iris from her life as a prostitute, as quest that does violence to society. *Kiss Me Deadly* dramatizes it as nuclear holocaust, the lake house explodes with white light shooting out of it which functions as a metonymy for nuclear annihilation, and *Taxi Driver* ends with violent insurrection against members of the lumpenproletariat. It is here where *Taxi Driver* criticizes the cinematic ideology that it inherited from Ford's film. The end of *Taxi Driver* repeats the ending of *The Searchers*: Iris is returned home in the same way that Debbie is returned to her "home" and Travis survives and continues on as a taxi driver and John Wayne leaves the Jorgensen home.

    The Searchers ends with the closure that is typical of Hollywood films during the classical period. The resolution of the narrative compels us to forget about the racist avenger that Ethan Edwards is, while *Taxi Driver* takes this particular form of narrative and reworks it to show that the work of narrative closure or ideological containment is an imaginary construction. The end of the film presents to us an epilogue where we now see that Travis is alive and well, chatting with his fellow taxi drivers. He does not appear to be experiencing the same social anxiety that he was before and maybe he has finally become a normal person and given up his obsessive lifestyle. As he is chatting he notices he has a

fare so he goes back to his cab to find Betsy in the back seat. He gives her a cool

nod and starts driving. She tells him that she read about him in the papers and that

she thinks he is very brave. He does not think much of it and drives her to where

she wants to go, does not charge her and then drives away. Before the movie ends

Travis looks into the rear-view mirror and we see his eyes go wild for a second

reminding us that what we just saw was not really closure but rather a wish-

fulfilling fantasy of a crazy person. Thus providing us with an example of how a

film might use parody to try and criticize the cultural myths and narrative forms

of bourgeois culture.[326]

Figure 37. Scar in *The Searchers* (1956), and Sport with Travis in *Taxi Driver* (1976).
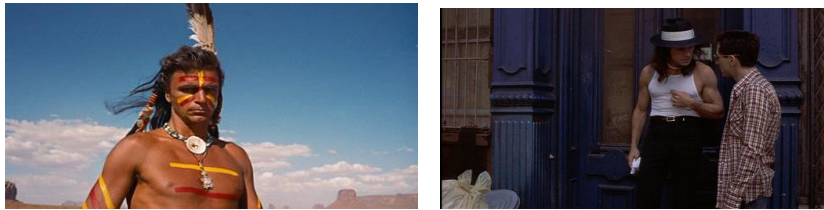
However, we should return to our conceptual map of the film's ideology

before we complete our discussion of how the film rewrites John Ford's *The*

Searchers. Travis is a parody of a familiar bourgeois myth created and used again

and again in Hollywood cinema, but the narrative of the film, and logical

permutations outlined above demonstrate to us that we do not have a utopian

narrative nor rather one that opts out for the imaginary resolution of a

contradiction, but rather the combination that we are left with is the positive

deixis, the return of Iris to her parents, and the reconcilement with middle-class

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[326] See Althusser's essay 'The Piccolo Teatro: Bertolazzi and Brecht' in *For Marx*, pp.138-141.

suburbia. If we were to have an imaginary resolution as our ending, then we would have had Travis stealing Iris away from the whorehouse, shooting all of the pimps, johns, and whoever else was involved in Sport's business, and then bringing her to the hippie commune in Vermont where she would take part in exactly the same activities that she was doing in New York City with Sport. Here we begin to see a fundamental contradiction in the form of the film: namely how can the political unconscious of this film reject both the anti-establishment ethos of the sixties and remain a socially conscious anti-Hollywood film at the same? It does this by parodying the narrative closure of Hollywood films while rejecting the anti-establishment institutions and in this case, narrative solutions which prescribe the removal of oneself from society rather than destroying it.

Irony and ideological strategies of containment: displacing politics with morality
What is evil for Travis drives at the morality that underpins his actions throughout the film. The city is evil, and the country is good, filth is evil and cleanliness is good, and the underclass (along with populist politicians) are evil and the absent Steensmas family are good. Travis' ethical code is what Jameson would call an ideologeme, a pseudoidea or a protonarrative, which can understood in conceptual terms or in terms of the narrative.[327] The ideologeme of good versus evil displaces politics in this film by replacing the organizing concept of social classes from Marxian theory with an ideological concept, the "people." However, at the same time, the film parodies this distorted conception of society. Travis resents the lower classes, which are understood by him as hobos, prostitutes, pimps, drug

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[327] See Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* (1981), p. 73.

dealers, gangsters, homosexuals, and black people. He resents them because he believes they are evil. Travis hates the poor but he also needs them to give his existence purpose. He creates a fictional world where the repressive state apparatuses interpellate him as the harbinger of justice thus justifying his own hatred of the poor. Yet he desires to be near them. For example, early on in the film Travis tells the manager in his job interview that he is willing drive anytime, and anywhere in New York, which is again re-emphasized by the voice-over of Travis reading from his diary. He spends most of his free time in porno theaters which the film implies are filled with the people he despises as well.

If we transcode the text into what Jameson calls the social interpretative horizon, we can say that Travis' psychotic morality is a distinctive utterance within a class discourse between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. What this means is that we should think of the film as a collection of discourses, that are not harmonious but antagonistic to each other, i.e. overdetermined. According to this thesis, a film text will then embody strategic utterances from the two classes in capitalist social formations: proletariat and bourgeois strategic utterances. Furthermore, not only do films embody particular strategic utterances, they also produce an address when they make statements, they subject viewers to a particular viewing position.[328] Not only does this address subject a viewer to a particular position, it also instructs the viewer how to view and understand the film. Here is where the concept of parody as critique comes in. *Taxi Driver* requires us to be at once literate in a number of other films, other film genres, and

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[328] See Colin MacCabe's article "The discursive and the ideological in film: notes on the condition of political intervention" in *Screen* (1978), pp. 29-44.

believe that this film is in a relation of superiority to those films because it parodies them. The ideologeme of good and evil that underscores the revenge heroes of westerns is parodied in Scorsese's film.

In *Taxi Driver* Travis here embodies the petty bourgeois class figure so common to films noirs who was typically dramatized by the private detectives; the figure that trekked through the dirty underbelly of society at the behest of upper-classes. According to Robert Kolker, Travis is the last noir man living in the last noir world. The noir world is a world of paranoia, perversion, and destruction. The film produces this noir universe utilizing an expressionistic *mise-en-scene* borrowed from German expressionism and its recycled use in American films noirs. For example, there is an early scene in the film where Travis is sitting with three of his co-workers in the Belmore Café and we experience his racist perspective first-hand.

Figure 38. The Belmore Cafe in *Taxi Driver* (1976), and Emmi's family in *Ali:fear eats the soul* (1974).

This scene has a duplicate in Fassbinder's *Ali: fear eats the soul* (1974) when Ali and Emmi make their relationship public to Emmi's family. The family members are sitting down while the camera tracks their faces as they glare at their mother with her Moroccan husband. Scorsese uses a similar camera movement and blocking composition to convey a sense of threat and danger from the gaze of

strangers in the Belmore Cafe. Travis looks noticeably bothered and the camera

zooms in on his face and then cuts to what he is looking at: the cafe is full of

African-Americans. The scene is strange because the camera pans across this

selection of pimps in the cafe who are all sitting and looking in exactly the same

way, creating a more surreal rather than realistic composition. The film cuts to

Travis' stare after we here the Wizard calling New York "fucking Mau-Mau land"

which then primes us for what we are about to see next, Travis' fearful and

paranoid look at the African-Americans in the Belmore Cafe. The disposition and

dress of the pimps, because of the subjective register that film is working in, can

be interpreted as a distortion of reality created by Travis. Therefore, we could

argue that what we see is not social reality but rather a look into Travis' psyche:

the surroundings are a direct expression of Travis' inner emotional state, the

phenomenology of a reactionary working-class man. As we look at what is

bothering Travis so much, we hear one of his co-workers saying his name off

camera, trying to get his attention. The glare is broken and the camera cuts back

to the table with Travis and the other three taxi drivers, showing us who is saying,

"Travis, Travis"; the camera keeps moving until finally resting on Travis who is

glaring at the two pimps in the cafe, looking threatened and threatening all at

once. We cut to behind Travis' shoulder while the cabbies banter still going on

off-screen and Travis opens an Alka-Seltzer package, drops the tablet into the

water. Here we have Scorsese's nod to Godard's *2 ou 3 choses que je sais de'elle*

(1967), the camera zooms in on the glass of water, watching the bubbles rising in

the glass, resembling Godard's zoom into the coffee cup.

Figure 39. Coffee cup in *2 ou 3 choses que je sais de'elle* (1967), and the Alka-Seltzer in *Taxi Driver* (1976).

This scene and several others show us that we are following a character that is not only paranoid and frightened but also completely detached from reality, and this detachment is doubled in the visual form of the film.

The expressionistic *mise-en-scene* is the evidence that Kolker uses for saying that Travis is the last noir man in the last noir world. The visual style of the film is certainly one of the main reasons why we now consider this film a neo-noir, however, the content of the film is something uncommon to this genre and it would fall into what Schrader called the period of anti-social pyschotic killers classical film noir.[329] Therefore, we should qualify Kolker's observation before we move forward. Many early film theorists highlighted how the noir anti-heroes, typically private detectives, were morally ambiguous figures that rejected the simplistic morality of typical Hollywood heroes. In contrast, Travis has a very clear moral code inherited from the American cultural myth of the lone crusader exemplified by John Wayne. The ideologeme at work in the film is that of good versus evil: the moralizing consciousness puts the blame on the individual (or on "the people" or the herd). It brushes over the contradictions of a class society by

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[329] See Schrader's "Notes on film noir" in *Perspectives on Film Noir*, p. 87.

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inserting morality and the concept of the centered subject into the cultural

discourse. Therefore, Travis' condemnation of the underclass as filthy and evil is

a strategic move to dispense with contradiction as a critical category and replace it

with a moralistic view of the "people." As we saw above this moralistic viewpoint

is effectively congealed into the visual style of the film. Travis' paranoid morality

dictates what we see in the film. There are several scenes where we see Travis

observing some sort of violence or aggression: the old men fighting on the street,

the passenger who wants to kill his wife, the store owner who beats the dead body

in his shop, and several others. All of these seemingly random events show

compound Travis' awareness and condemnation of a sick society.

However, even though the film puts us in an uncomfortable position,

sympathizing with a crazy person, it also distances itself by parodying what it is

depicting. What the character of Travis and his righteous indignation is parodying

is a sort of bourgeois myth that was to become reinstated as a persuasive critique

of socialism we know now as neo-liberalism. This ideologeme, good versus evil,

unconsciously brings forward the humanist philosophy of bourgeois idealism, is

an utterance that seeks to ignore a basic truth of historical materialism that

Althusser argued for:

> History really is a "process without a Subject or Goal(s)," where the given circumstances
> in which "men" act as subjects under the determination of social relations are the product
> of the class struggle. History therefore does not have a Subject, in the philosophical sense
> of the term, but a motor: that very class struggle[330]

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[330] Althusser makes this point several places but this quote is one that presents his idea in the
clearest way and is taken from *Essays in Self-Criticism* (1976) p.99.

This quote is not directed at a neoliberal but rather at a humanist (Sartrean) Marxist, John Lewis, criticizing Althusser's interpretation of Marx. This materialist truth however is one that the American myth effectively discredited with their cinematic production of westerns. The western tradition significantly revised by directors Sam Peckinpah, Arthur Penn, and Robert Altman during the seventies with films like *The Wild Bunch*, *Little Big Man*, and *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, and with Scorsese' neo-noir. The other films mentioned critiqued this myth much more overtly than *Taxi Driver* which in many ways.

The film's critique of this bourgeois myth is produced in the way the film turns this myth inside-out in the form of modernist irony. Travis is an anti-hero but not of the type we see in *The Searchers* or in the classic film noirs but rather a psychotic anti-hero. Trained in Vietnam to fight, and trained by the television and the porno theaters on the nature of sexual and human relationships, Travis is the other side of this American crusader archetype, one that not only terrorizes the underclass in Scorsese's film but also made headlines with the several assassinations of American civil servants preceding the production of this film. He represents the extreme possibilities that exist within the vigilante archetype.

Scorsese's film presents the demented irony of this American mythical figure by creating a character that lives at the boundary between reason and unreason, patriotism and treason, life and death. The way the film does this is by combining two films previously made in Hollywood: *Pyscho*, by Hitchcock, and of course *The Searchers* by John Ford. Lesley Stern discussed how *Taxi Driver* remakes *The Searchers* but did not address its relationship to *Psycho* whereas

Kolker makes a very strong argument for comparing *Psycho* to *Taxi Driver*.[331] In

fact on Kolker's commentary for *Taxi Driver* he argues that the film begins by re-

enacting *Psycho* but then eventually becomes *The Searchers* almost half way

through the running time. Kolker is obviously referring to the latter half of

Psycho. For the first forty five minutes of *Psycho* we follow around Janet Leigh's

character, Marion Crane, as she steals a briefcase full of money and then tries to

escape to be with her lover. She eventually meets Norman Bates and is killed. For

the rest of the film we are left with Norman, and without Marion, the character we

have been identifying with from the beginning. Most likely a joke played by

Hitchcock on the audience, we are left in an uncomfortable position: identifying

with the psycho Norman. The narrative in *Psycho* attempts to release the viewer

from this uncomfortable position by focusing on Sam and Lila, Marion's sister

and their attempt to find Marion. The film then becomes split between the Sam

and Lila quest to find Marion and Norman's attempts to flee the police. We are

lead to believe, until the very end of the film, that the sweet, soft-spoken Norman

is covering up for a murderous mother, but we eventually discover that Norman is

the killer. The scene of the mother, shot from straight above so we could not see

his face, was Norman in drag as his mother. The audience is eventually left off the

hook; they no longer have to identify with Norman on the screen because he has

in the end become the villain.

There is no analogous revelation in *Taxi Driver*. The spectator has no way

out from Travis' perspective and the reality created in the film is a direct

expression of his state of mind. Travis is crazy from beginning to end in this film

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[331] See Kolker (2000), pp. 237-240, and Stern (1995), pp. 32-46.

but there is still a progression and the beginning sets us up to identify with Travis

early on in his quest for happiness. However there are several moments that signal

to us that something is bubbling beneath Travis' façade. We are encouraged to

latch onto Travis and his point of view which is creatively reinforced by the

expressionist *mise-en-scene* created by Scorsese. Similar to *Psycho* there is a

disruption in the quest (Travis' quest for companionship and happiness and

Marion's quest to financial freedom and marriage to Sam) Betsy rejects Travis

and he unravels into a psychopath. We started with a socially awkward anti-hero

who tried to get the girl and we are left with a psychotic killer who believes he

will redeem society by killing a Democratic politician. In this sense *Taxi Driver*

combines *Psycho* and *The Searchers*, by forcing us to identify with a relatively

harmless and unproblematic character at the beginning until the equilibrium is

disrupted and we are now left to identify with a madman.

Figure 40. Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver* (1976), Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers* (1956), and Norman Bates in *Psycho* (1960).

But, the entry of the madman is also the entry of Ford/John Wayne narrative. Kolker argues that this marriage of Norman Bates and John Wayne has created Travis and then the characters of action films with Bruce Willis and Sylvester Stalone that followed him.[332] I disagree with this analysis because I see those action heroes embodying John Wayne characters and not a marriage between Norman Bates and John Wayne like Travis Bickle. The more recent incarnations of the hero myth are not lonely outcasts and if they are, it is because are understood as individuals who will not conform (Eastwood's Harry Callahan from the *Dirty Harry* series is probably a better antecedent to the recent action heroes than Travis Bickle. In fact, Joel Schumacher's *Falling Down* (1993) is a more appropriate continuation of the downtrodden vigilante gone crazy than the action films of the eighties and early nineties).

Travis Bickle stands out from the future incarnations of the lonely hero in American cinema because his characterization and the finale to his quest chastise the ideologeme of good versus evil that propels the quests of violent action heroes. One could say that Travis' journey represents the quests that the villain undergoes before he becomes who he is. Most films do not spend time explaining the road to psychosis. But, instead of having the good guy kill the bad guy like in *Dirty Harry*, the good guy in *Taxi Driver* becomes Travis. Both characters are opposed to the political left but for different reasons: Harry despises the rules and regulations that get in the way of doing his job as a police detective and Travis hates anything that resembles community and fellowship. Palantine's slogan "We

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[332] See Kolker (2000), p. 239.

ARE the People" repulses Travis. The people for him are hookers, pimps, drug

dealers, drug addicts, and non-white delinquents. He sees the lumpenproletariat

and the political figures in the same way. When he confronts Betsy in her

campaign office, this time in his military jacket instead of his blazer and tie, he

cannot even formulate sentences properly. He tells her "you're in the hell. And

you're gonna die there. Just like the rest of them." The political message that is

emitted from Travis' conflation of the political campaign workers and the

lumpenproletariat is this: you both live and subsist off one another, and you both

need to be flushed down the toilet. Travis dismisses any sort of organized politics

or collective life. He despises the populist rhetoric that appeals to the dirty, poor,

and weak people, and casts them out of the heaven that he is going to prepare with

the violence against Palantine/the lumpen. Travis as the marriage of Norman

Bates and Ethan Edwards embodies the middle-class disgust for the under-class of

major urban centers and also the social democratic policies that tried to help

them.[333]

The Democratic political campaigns with their respective economic

policies (defined by Woodiwiss as the modern state intervening in the economy

for the betterment of all) proved to be a false promise. The political anxiety that

Taxi Driver taps into is the respective middle-class anger at American politicians

and policymakers who were forgetting the silent majority, the American middle-

class. Travis embodies all of this aggression and this aggression codes the way the

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[333] Woodiwiss outlines these changes in the class discourses during this time, devoting attention to
the increase in surplus population that became concentrated in minority-dominated ghettos of the
inner cities. Self-reliance was not an option so the War on Poverty was instituted. But, Lindon B.
Johnson's policies had little effect on the unemployed because they favored the under-employed,
see Woodiwiss (1993), p. 103.

film and Travis understand the social world. The visual style of the film employed

by Scorsese cues the audience into the distortion of reality at work in Travis'

psyche.

The expressionistic *mise-en-scene* corresponds to the ethical drive of

Travis. The ethical rather than more collective imperative, the political, implies a

closure, a sort of distorted view of the social totality. Unlike the great Italian neo-

realists, Rossellini, Visconti, and De Sica, expressionist *mise-en-scene* does not

depict reality as a set of social contradictions but rather the *mise-en-scene* is an

extension of an individual consciousness, usually the protagonist. So in *The*

Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1920), one of the most recognizable and paradigmatic of

the German Expressionist cycle, has black and white sets that are distorted and

misshapen, along with gaudy make-up for the actors which combined with the

facial expressions of the actors provided a way into their psychology.

Figure 41. *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), and *The Bicycle Thief* (1948).
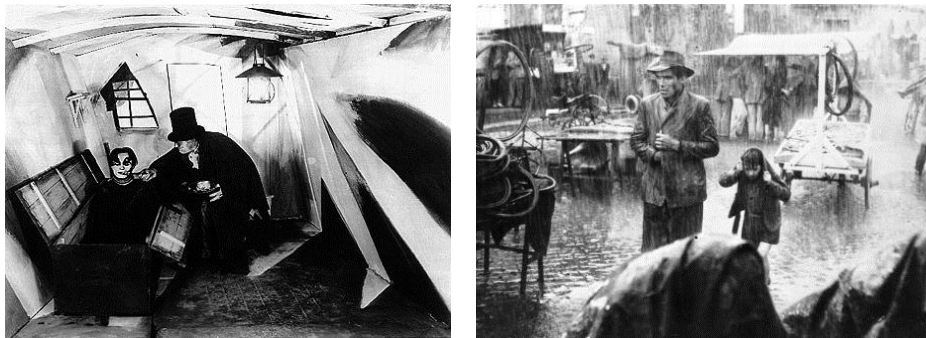
 Taxi Driver, like the earlier films noirs from the classic cycle, does not go to the

extremes of the German Expressionists to depict the psychological states of the

characters. In *Taxi Driver* we identify with Travis through the use of the

subjective narrative register. The voice-over compounds this effect while at the

same time contradicting what see on screen.[334] The disconnection between sound

and image is a device used to further convey Travis' contradictory subject

positions. The voice-over, which usually gives us a way into the character,

working like an ongoing stream of consciousness is not used to that effect here.

There are several scenes where the voice-over overtly tells us something different

than what we know or have already learned about the character. This has the

effect of depicting the delusional state of Travis, and disrupting passive

spectatorship, a typical Godardian device. He takes on the hero persona when

writing a letter to his parents telling them he is now working for the secret service,

a persona he moves into again when he has lunch with Iris telling her he is doing

some special work for the government.

The *mise-en-scene* and cinematography also changes with Travis' mood.

When we first encounter Betsy we do not hear the melodramatic saxophone theme

or the stirring piano lines from before but the gentle strumming of chords which

are accompanied with fast tracking shots of New York during the day, people

almost hitting the camera, a documentary style that is not used in rest of the film.

There are several slow motion sequences as well that bring the audience into the

emotional state of the protagonist (think back to the *Vertigo* homage at the

beginning when we see Travis' eyes shifting back and forth, lit with red light).

The cuts are fast, showing us several busy streets of New York during the day, a

rare shot in this film. Right before Travis is reading from his diary telling us that

he believes someone should not devote himself to something in morbid self-

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[334] Godard often used this technique to break up the unity of the film. By juxtaposing image and sound produced an alienation effect that Godard believed disrupted passive spectatorship in the cinema.

obsession, they should instead become a normal person like everyone else. We then meet Betsy after this quick montage. She is walking in slow motion, wearing a white dress, and we hear again from the diary, she is alone, they cannot touch her. Even the establishing shots of the campaign office (the first scene where Scorsese breaks with the subjective narrative register) are fast and vibrant. The camera fixates above the front doors, showing us posters of Charles Palantine and his ridiculous slogan and then the camera quickly swoops down to the front doors. So here the *mise-en-scene* reproduces and compounds Travis psychological state, creating a highly subjectivized narrative register that is broken only twice in the film.

The first break was mentioned above, in the campaign office with little to no effect except to show us Betsy and Albert Brooks' character, Tom. She notices Travis staring at her from his cab and then Tom goes outside and tells Travis to drive away. The second scene where the subjective register is broken is when Sport and Iris are shown dancing together in an apartment room. Iris tells Sport that she doesn't like what she is doing and she wants to quit. Sport reassures her that he loves her and distracts her from her concern. It is a strange and tender moment in the film. It shows us how Sport manipulates Iris into doing what she does; he's not forceful or aggressive, he doesn't threaten her. Instead he tells her that he loves her. Sport's characterization in this moment is a stark contrast to Travis who is so awkward that he cannot relate to anyone without alarming them. The second break in the subjective narrative register is used to show us how Iris is treated by Sport behind closed doors. The break in form is explained in formal

terms by an establishing shot of Travis sitting outside in his cab looking up at the Sport's apartment window. We then dissolve to the famous "Scar" scene of the film. The scene that Scorsese and Schrader argue through this film should have been in *The Searchers* because it would have shown Debbie getting along in Comanche civilization.[335] In *Taxi Driver* the Scar scene somewhat offsets what Travis saw during the early half of the film when Iris tries to escape and Sport drags her out of the cab, throwing Travis a crumpled up twenty for his trouble. It suggests that Iris is loved while being exploited, and if she left her own home on her own accord then she must be getting more in life as a prostitute in New York than what she was getting in Pittsburgh.

Much like Ethan Edwards, Travis does function in structural terms as the hero. In fact Travis, in structural terms, is more of a hero than Ethan because in *The Searchers* it is Martin Pawley who succeeds in killing Scar, and saving Debbie, not Ethan. It is not until the final confrontation between Ethan and Debbie that Ethan takes on the hero role again and asks her to come home. Except in this scene, Ethan is battling himself. This is the most problematic aspect of *Taxi Driver*: Travis functions as the hero and yet he is insane. At the level of narrative Travis is a hero, at the end of the film he is rewarded by society, but he is no different from Norman Bates. Scorsese duplicates this narrative with *The King of Comedy* (1983), the protagonist again played by DeNiro. Rupert Pupkin is certainly not mentally deranged, but desperate to become a celebrity and goes to great lengths to achieve celebrity status. After he showcases his routine on the Jerry Langford Show he goes to jail and after which he becomes a famous

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[335] See Wood (1986), p. 52.

comedian. Scorsese constructed two films where the audience appears to have more insight than the society constructed in the films: Travis is not a hero and Rupert is not funny but they are both rewarded. The endings are purposively cynical.

Therefore, *Taxi Driver* is a self-conscious noir, one that knows its cinematic heritage very well. Travis is the last noir man in the sense that he is a parody of what came before him in American cinema. He is a parody of the crusader mythical hero that organizes reality around moral grounds rather than political; replacing the category of class and contradiction with the category of the "individual" or the "people" and good versus evil. While not offering a utopian discourse that provides a new vision of the social collective, *Taxi Driver* represents American seventies cinema at its most critical and subversive.

Chapter five. Conclusion: neo-noir in the seventies

The preceding chapters on *Taxi Driver*, the private detective noirs in the forties, and their later manifestation in the seventies discussed these films in terms of ideological discourses. Each of these films re-invented a genre that existed solely in the discourses of film critics and cinephiles. Film noir in the forties and the fifties was not a genre. Film noir became a genre once the seventies films introduced the film critics category as an artistic concept to work with. The seventies films used the film noir genre as raw material and by virtue of this referral created a genre out of the past that never existed as such. This complicated relay/referral to a past narrative raw material is the reason why critics have difficulty defining film noir and neo-noir. Each film discussed in the above chapters demonstrated how the ideological discourses were reused and revised in the seventies. I will now summarize the main arguments from the preceding chapters.

The private detective in the forties

We began the discussion of the private detective characterization by looking at detective fiction. The hard-boiled writers revised the detective genre by emphasizing the experience of the detective in an urban setting. Hammett and Chandler provided the literary source material to the early private detective films in the forties. We discussed the ideological dimensions of *The Maltese Falcon*, *Murder, My Sweet*, and *The Big Sleep*. We uncovered the bourgeois ideologeme, good versus evil, which guided the various discourses within each of these film

texts. The private detective was uncovered as a narrative ideologeme that interpellated spectators as subjects of a middle-class discourse. According to Althusserian theory, the middle-class is an important and crucial zone between the relations of labor and capital. In America, the middle-class became a silent majority that dictated the political and social concerns of the country. Hollywood cinema tapped into middle-class social anxieties and used them for ideological narratives like private detective films. The first three in the cycle we discussed used the private detective character as a way to interpellate spectators as subjects of a petty-bourgeois discourse. The private detective films were ideological because they valorized individualist ideology by using the good versus evil ideologeme.

We then moved on to discuss Tourneur's film *Out of the Past* starring Robert Mitchum and Kirk Douglas. Tourneur's film remained on the same ideological terrain created by the private detective films. The only difference was that *Out of the Past* lacked all of the compensatory strategies of the previous private detective films and instead created an object-lesson for middle-class subjects. The ideological message became even clearer once we compared *Out of the Past* with previous detective films: stay in your place. Serve the interests of the upper-classes, remain as the mediator between the capitalists and the wage-laborers. Resignation about their place in the social system was transcoded in these films as adherence to morality. When the detective fails to do his duty, he is punished. *Out of the Past* demonstrates the negative sanctions that are inherent to

the private detective ideology. Jeff Markham failed to follow orders and he was punished by death.

We also discussed the intersections between misogynist and bourgeois ideology in the private detective films. By using a materialist account of sexism provided by the work of Wallerstein, Balibar, and Mitchell, we discovered the class conflict at work within misogynistic discourses. The female characters were either coded as passive, subservient helpers or devilish, independent sex objects. The female's voice never over took the film's narrative. In the first three private detective films we covered the independent villainous women were punished for their attempt to become autonomous from men. This narrative strategy tapped into the male anxiety brought on by the temporary independence given to women during World War Two. Misogynistic discourses in private detective films interpellated female spectators as passive subject in the films, combining happy endings with women who knew their place as one that is dependent upon white males. We learned from both Wallerstein and Mitchell's account of sexism that in capitalist formations sexism is used to ensure that the women stays at home so that capitalists can extract surplus value from her "non-work." In liberal-democratic societies, sexist ideologies should theoretically disappear if we believe the liberal problematic. But, Wallerstein demonstrated the materialist causes as to why sexism persists in liberal-capitalist social formations. Private detective film noirs represent one of the various ideological apparatuses that maintained sexism during the forties.

After discussing the exhaustion of the private detective character in *Out of the Past* we then moved toward the re-emergence of the private detective's ideological terrain in rogue-cop films. We briefly discussed the work of Fritz Lang and Joseph H. Lewis and their respective rogue-cop films that defined this sub-genre. In this discussion we merely discovered a radicalization of the ideologeme, good versus evil. The rogue-cop become more extreme with his allegiance to morality while the police were coded as evil along with the gangsters. The rogue-cop films presented the bourgeois individualist ideology in a more distilled form, and with the historical distance we have from these we can see just how absurd their preconceptions are.

Finally, we finished with Aldrich's masterpiece *Kiss Me Deadly*. An adaptation of a fascist novel by Mickey Spillane, Aldrich's *Kiss Me Deadly* brought back the private detective only to ridicule this ideological characterization and turn the hero into a patsy. Aldrich used the narrative conventions of the previous private detective films to simultaneously criticize bourgeois individualism and the bourgeois cult of masculinity. Hammer's quest to solve the mystery did not end in bringing society back into equilibrium but instead nuclear disaster.

The private detective in the seventies

In chapter three we moved to the seventies to discuss the revised incarnation of this Hollywood myth. We looked at three films: *Night Moves*, *The Long Goodbye*, and *Chinatown*. Each film revised the conventions of the private detective,

focusing specifically on the individualist, bourgeois ideologemes that informed the filmic discourses of the detective films of the forties. Altman decided to use modernist-style irony, turning the private detective into a joke, making him an ineffective and incompetent character. Penn emphasized the displacement of the bourgeois centered ego by fracturing the perspective of the detective. Harry Moseby and the film itself were empty voids masquerading as mysteries. *Night Moves* revised the private detective conventions to criticize the ideologeme of the centered subject as the epistemological ground for making epistemological judgments. And more than the other two films, Penn demonstrated the postmodern ideologeme of cynicism as the utopian impulse against bourgeois ideology. *Chinatown* took a more nostalgic approach to the detective myth by setting its narrative in the 1930s depression era in Los Angeles. This film mixed an incest plot and a political corruption plot to project another postmodern conclusion in a similar fashion exhibited by *Night Moves* and *The Long Goodbye*.

The detective Harry Moseby was intertextually created with references to Sam Spade and other private detective characters. Harry exemplified the crisis of masculinity ideologeme that underscored the classical private detective films. He was never able to communicate to his wife or others, always keeping himself at a distance until we discover that there was nothing to reveal. The mystery behind Harry's crisis in masculinity was hiding nothing but a void. This revision at the level of characterization was duplicated at the level of narrative. The apparent mystery behind the various deaths and trouble in the film turned out to be an insignificant smuggling operation. Harry figured it out but it changed nothing.

Penn made sure to deliver this message directly with the last shot of the film, the "Point of View" circling nothing in the ocean as the camera panned out.

The detective's inability to act, his impotence was taken to another extreme with Altman's *The Long Goodbye*. The Gould-Marlowe characterization reversed nearly every convention of the private detective character as embodied by Bogart in his roles as Spade and Marlowe. The Gould-Marlowe's inability to act and create any sort of positive change in society was taken to an absurd limit in this film. At one point the detective is threatened with castration from Marty Augustine. But, there is nothing to castrate. The detective's potency, sexuality, and strength have been taken away from him in this film that the threat to castrate becomes as empty one. Like the detective in *Night Moves*, the Gould-Marlowe detective has become a placeholder, a body taking up space in the narrative. Altman reversed the ideological discourses of previous detectives by reducing his detective to the placeholder of a criminal. The Gould-Marlowe is a stand-in for the murderer and thief Terry Lennox. His only moment of action asserts himself as the final replacement of the villain. The Gould-Marlowe shot Lennox point blank fulfilling the genre conventions to no end other than to follow them.

In Polanski's *Chinatown*, the detective character Jake Gittes was a continuation of the Mike Hammer characterization from *Kiss Me Deadly*. The detective is now successful, and rich, and no longer a mediator between the upper and lower classes but he was slowly rising into the upper classes. However, like the private detectives from *Night Moves* and *The Long Goodbye*, Jake Gittes is no longer superior to society, but a flawed subject. His perspective and ability to sort

out the clues is suspect. Rather than resolving the conflicts he encounters, he exacerbates them. The detective learns in the end at it is better for everyone if he did nothing at all.

What each of these private detective films from the seventies have in common is the way they manipulate the ideological discourses of the classical private detective films. Each film revises the ideologemes that informed the classical period to criticize the bourgeois ideological terrain that produced them. Bourgeois individualism and morality is taken to task and reduced to nothing at the end of these narratives. But, the films are unable to reposition their own ideological discourses that would effectively radicalize their positions, moving beyond ethics to politics. They remain within capitalist discourses essentially by producing postmodern ideology that fits perfectly with late-capitalism. As much as these film makers wanted to emulate the radical films of Godard, Fassbinder, or Antonioni. Penn, Altman, and Polanski instead introduced a new constellation of ideological discourses that reproduce the relations of production rather than short-circuiting them. For all of their aesthetic creativity and experimentation, they fall short by failing to offer a radical counter-cinema. The private detective neo-noirs interpellate individuals as postmodern cynical subjects, imagining a collectively beyond utopian sketches for a future collective that has moved beyond the capitalist social formation.

God's lonely man: the last hero of noir

The final chapter deals with Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*. A late entry into the seventies cycle of neo-noir, *Taxi Driver* in many ways is a radical departure from film noir and the neo-noir films we discussed in chapters Two and Three. Scorsese pulled from the western and horror traditions rather than film noir to create narrative that uses and revises conventional noir themes and problematics. Travis Bickle represents an extreme version of the noir man, experiencing a crisis in masculinity, whose only way to relate to people is through violence.

The narrative structure of the film uses the binary opposition "Home" and "Away" used by various westerns and films noirs from the forties, a binary that goes as far back as Murnau's *Sunrise*. As we discussed in chapter Four, Travis believes he must free Iris from her life of prostitution. Like Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers*, Travis is trying to free a girl that does not want his help. Scorsese uses the conventional coding for Home and Away by depicting urban New York City as corrupt and filthy and the Home (the American mid-west) as clean and good. But, the coding scheme used by Scorsese is problematized by the narrative strategies in the film which depict reality from the perspective of Travis Bickle. We are again in familiar noir territory, and Scorsese creatively mixes German expressionist and neo-realist techniques to confuse and distort the subjective narration throughout the film. The classical coding schemes for Home and Away and Good and Evil are projections of Travis' perspective, and these coding schemes produce the particular reality he perceives in *Taxi Driver*.

The ending of *Taxi Driver* is certainly the most problematic aspect of the film. After the slaughter at Sport's brothel, Travis has become a hero. We hear the voice of Iris's father over images of newspaper articles praising Travis' courage. Scorsese has shown that not only is the lone-individual psychotic, but society is just as crazy. The avenging angel, Travis, is parody of the western protagonists who were superior to society and called upon to fix it. Scorsese brings the narrative back to equilibrium. Travis has become a hero, Iris is home with her parents, and Sport and the other criminals are dead. In the final scene, Travis drives Betsy in his taxi. She is now not disgusted but attracted to Travis. The narrative ends with everything back in place until a final image and spike in the soundtrack destabilizes all of this assurance. Travis glares into the mirror with a crazed look in his eyes and the camera pans to the streets as the credits roll. Scorsese dismantled the ideological myths that juxtapose the individual to a weak collective while demonstrating the fallacies of such myths as absurd ideological discourses.

Directions for future research

This thesis continued the work done by both Fredric Jameson in literature and the *Screen* group in film studies. Studying films in terms of ideological discourses and the various mediatory codes available to Marxian theory allow cultural theorists to cut across several themes and ways of approaching texts. The above study demonstrated the applicability and productiveness of applying Jameson's literary theory to studying cinema. Jameson of course already did this to an extant

in his text *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* (1991) but to different ends. Jameson is more interesting in studying the effects of reification and the way this phenomenon affects narrative in films. I decided to reposition Jameson methodology, which is certainly the richest Marxian theory of studying culture, onto the Althusserian terrain which discards any attention to reification and idealist concerns.

I would argue that future work done in this area would benefit from applying Jameson's hermeneutic to texts. His re appropriation of Voloshinov's theory of ideologemes is especially rich for studying films. Transcoding films as a multiplicity of ideological strategic moves proved an excellent way into identifying the ideological tensions in the neo-noir films under discussions and also a viable method for studying the montage of the films themselves. Jameson's approach to texts allows us to uncover the ideological messages emitted by the form of a text and not merely its content. Althusser's little work done on art hinted at this sort of method but never fleshed it out to the extent of Jameson. Future work in this should look at how ideological tensions inform the visual and narrative style of films which would provide a richer interpretive account of the films in question.

Finally, future work done in neo-noir scholarship can use the methods and theoretical problematic of this project to re-evaluate the ideological tensions and political nature of neo-noir films. Looking at more recent periods like the nineties with the work of both Tarantino and the Coen Brothers would be an excellent extension of this study. Using a Marxian theory allows for researchers to properly

evaluate the ideological and utopian discourses of a film and discover whether or not the film criticizes the social formation or is complicit with it.

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