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Attractions and Negotiations of Film Noir in American Cinema and Culture

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
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ABSTRACT

America's embrace of film noir came swift and furiously, the popularity of noir exists even in contemporary cinema. I would like to explore the implications as to why film noir has become one of the truest forms of American Cinema, perhaps even exceeding the western, as well as the reasoning as to why the American people have exalted a type of genre which is known primarily for its ties with human vice and depravity. In this investigation of the populations intrigue with noir I will address instances in select noir films that illustrate specific moments of the philosophical frame works of Michel Foucault. Through the application of these frameworks of thought I believe evidence can be found linking Film noir to primal human urges and desires that were initially discussed within the writings of these two philosophers.

Throughout the evolution of cinema over the last 70 years, America has seen an abundance of reconditioned plots and outlines of classically structured stories. Film noir does not escape this refurbishment. With the collapse of the original Hollywood studio system as well as the infamous black list era, the ideology of Film making in America shifted enormously. This shift allowed cinema to reach into the postmodernist conditioning that had already been applied to literature and stage craft. The shift into postmodernism allowed for extraordinarily interesting developments in the

genre of Film noir. Perhaps the most noted of these developments was that noir was no longer just a genre; it had become an actual ideology for telling a cinematic story. This is exemplified with the emergence of noir sensibilities throughout multiple contrasting film genres. This is illustrated throughout the arrival of such categories as the Science Fiction Noir, and most recently the genre of Neo-Noir. Neo-Noir is also home to the films that have attempted to satirize or parody the initial sensibilities of the original classic noir genre. The exploration of these new evolutions of noir constructed genres is of vast importance of understanding America's embrace of Film noir as a whole.

Chapter One

An Introduction of Noir in Hollywood

There are few moments in the history of American cinema that make as a deep an impression on cinematic culture and innovation as that of Film noir. As a genre that is widely considered to have started the nineteen-forties and fifties, Film noir was the basis for a cinematic experience that would come to instigate a mode of tortured psyches, depraved desires, and brutal characterizations upon Hollywood's silver screen. For much of America's movie going audience, this category of film would mark a deep departure from the wholesome silent comedic films of Charles Chaplin, or the innovative musicals of Alan Crosland. Film noir would bring a darkness to the mainstream studios of Hollywood's golden age. Films would now engage the audience to endure sinister plots of crime and depravity. The heroes of the classical western and war film would become shadowed by the introduction of the grizzled anti-hero, often an individual saturated in physical vice and bottomless moral ambiguity. The virginal image of the virtuous female would become twisted by the vampish *femme fatale*; feminine purity would become largely portrayed as something that was broken or antiquated within the realm of noir cinema. Throughout the presentation of countless crime driven noir dramas American audiences would be swept away. The rough tongued gumshoe and the booze soaked lounge singer would become guides for the American everyman, allowing them to pay witness to a dark urban landscape that was otherwise unknown to a middle class blue

collar society.

The emergence of Film noir in Hollywood began as one of very limited production value and relatively unknown stars. The reason for this low budget production schematic and B-movie licensing was to maintain the film production quality far enough under the studio systems radar as to ensure that production codes would not be as stringent as they were on higher budgeted films of the era. During the classic era of the Hollywood studio system, the production codes were very limiting to what could be presented in terms of characterization and of plot development. For example, if production codes were maintained a film could not show two characters in bed together if they were not each other's spouse. Nor could a film allow a primary character to commit a murder in the course of the story without going unpunished. These elements of plot control were far to confining for the vice driven noir films, thus the embrace of a B-movie listing would ensure that the budget was low enough to warrant any major studio interference.

There have been hundreds of films created in the noir canon to date. While most maintain similar sensibilities to one another, there are a select few that have stood out in contrast. This contrast within specific noir films rests within a multitude of variables. By and large the films of noir that have been held at a higher standard; that have been remembered throughout the history of Hollywood filmmaking all shared a commonality in that they introduced a particular precedent in either film making or social commentary.

American noir is considered to be set in precedence by the 1940 RKO release *Stranger on the Third Floor*, director by Boris Ingster. While the film was panned critically at the time of its release it marked an important American introduction for the

actor Peter Lorre. Lorre was present through several international noir films such as Fritz Lang's *M*, and Alfred Hitchcock's *The Man Who Knew Too Much*. Lorre would also go on to appear in one of the most pivotal films of the noir genre, John Huston's 1941 directorial debut, *The Maltese Falcon*, starring Humphrey Bogart and Mary Astor.

The Maltese Falcon is considered to be a keystone classic of Hollywood Film noir. It was received with general favorability and was nominated by the academy for three awards including best picture. This film would be John Huston's first directing experience and would solidify the professional acting careers of both Humphrey Bogart and his female counter part Mary Astor. Bogart portrays the character Sam Spade, a private investigator that would set a standard for the rough neck anti hero which would be invoked in countless noir films follow its release.

Another of the most memorable cinematic noir stories is that of Billy Wilder's 1944 adaptation of James M. Cain's novel *Double Indemnity*. The film stars Fred MacMurray and Barbara Stanwyck. This film was able to further establish the noir sensibility of a character driven deception within the story line. Stanwyck's portrayal of Phyllis Dietrichson was a defining moment in America's popular reception of noir based characters in that it brought the vice and scandal of the *femme fatale* into a setting of a domestic home life. Now film goers were able to witness characters that were engaged in the darkness of noir that were not private investigators or urbane cocktail waitresses. These characters were more immediate to the American Family.

Commentary on social class ideology is also made through instances of the noir genre, illustrated in Howard Hawks' 1946 adaptation of Raymond Chandler's classic *The Big Sleep*. Humphrey Bogart stars as Philip Marlowe, a street wise private investigator

that would echo his previous role of Sam Spade. Lauren Bacall is seen as Vivian Sternwood Rutledge, the daughter of an aristocrat that is trying to salvage her reckless younger sister's indiscretions. What *The Big Sleep* brought to audiences was a sense of corruption in an elite family. An interesting aspect of this story line was the commentary on a wealthy family's downfall coming internally, from its own members, as opposed to outside agency.

In his acclaimed 1950 piece *Sunset Boulevard*, Billy Wilder once more brought innovation to the noir cannon by introducing the film's main character Joe Gillis, post humorously. The opening sequence of William Holden floating face down in a swimming pool, while remarking on his own death through narration, is a directorial decision that is discussed in academia still nearly six decades after it release. Gloria Swanson's Norma Desmond can be considered a queen amongst *femme fatales*; locked in the immortal memories of golden cinema in her final stairs sequence: descending the grand foyer of her mansion awaiting her close up from Mr. De Mille, unaware that her future holds little more then iron bars and padded cells.

The legendary Alfred Hitchcock, after making his move from British to American film making, added his adaptation of Patricia Highsmith's *Stranger's on a Train* in 1951 to the noir cannon. Interesting in its deviation from a standard noir sensibility of the investigator and *femme fatale* characterization, this film was able to portray its lead characters, Guy Haines and Bruno Anthony, as doubles. Hitchcock was able to efficiently portray characters that each sought similar instances of crime, yet maintained completely alternative histories of social stature and class, though by the films finale an introspective viewer may notice the instances of doubling within the two men. Each man

becomes the other's dark side, blurring lines of virtue and corruption.

With these few instances of classic noir cinema and the interesting observation of noir being a genre of film, with an enormous popular following, that functions primarily on vice and human degradation, several questions arise: How has noir maintained itself, not only as a genre of films that critics and scholars return to constantly, but as a sensibility among other genres of films as well? While one can argue that it is impossible to create a true noir Film in contemporary Hollywood, it is difficult to ignore the possibility that the genre of Film noir has transcended beyond the limitations of one single genre, and now touches the sensibilities and styles of all genres of film making.

Film noir will always have an audience. The reason it will always have an audience is because in human nature, there will always be a drive; a thirst even, for exposure to the darkness of humanity. People desire to witness accounts of crime and depravity. They want to live along side of the tortured *femme fatale*, to know of her broken past and her exploitations. The audience wants to walk along side of the noir anti-hero, no matter who or what he is, and watch him spiral madly into the depths of crime and alienation. Perhaps the reason that audiences seek out these cinematic instances is that the screen provides a frame of safety; no matter how bad things get for a noir character, the viewer is content providing they are not directly present for the murder, or the heist, or the beating. Does film noir present the audience with a form of catharsis? Does the viewer take release in the pain of the noir character?

With an exploration of several texts by Michel Foucault, primarily *Discipline and Punish*, an investigation of why audiences are attracted to noir will be addressed. Instances within *Discipline and Punish* will be applied to attempt an organization of what

the audience might experience as they witness the actions of noir characters. Foucault's texts *The History of Sexuality, Madness and Civilization* as well as various short essays will be applied to isolate instances within noir films that allow a broader contextualization of the noir audience's connection to the conflict and struggle of morality within the noir film. Within a specific analysis of the contemporary films *Miller's Crossing, Brick,* and *Blade Runner* an exploration will be conducted to facilitate the understanding that film noir is no longer an active genre of determined cinematic sensibilities, but has in fact evolved into a type of sensibility that is implemented throughout many genres of contemporary films.

Chapter Two

Connections within *Discipline and Punish*

In an effort to better understand what it is about film noir that attracts such a large following several issues found within the 1977 text *Discipline and Punish* by Michel Foucault can be addressed. In his meditation on the corporeal spaces of reformation, Foucault posits that there is a moment of release in the spectacle of the public execution. Part of the reason that royalty would hold open execution as public shows would be to ensure that the common citizens of the land would bare a direct witness to what could potentially happen to them should they invest in certain forms of lawlessness.

Foucault recognizes that part of the reason that the crowd would attend these public executions was to witness a raw form of humanity that takes place within the condemned: "If the crowd gathered round the scaffold, it was not simply to witness the sufferings of the condemned man or to excite the anger of the executioner: it was to also to hear an individual who had nothing more to lose curse the judges, the laws, the government and religion." What this passage suggests is that the spectator becomes part of the licit action that the condemned indulges in during their final moments. Even though the law abiding citizen cannot utter the curse that the criminal speaks, they can still take part in them through a vicarious exposure to the words of the condemned. It appears as if an attraction to film noir can work on a similar level. This point can be illustrated in Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity*. During the scene in which Phyllis

Dietrichson and Walter Neff have decided to murder Phyllis' husband by throwing him off the back of a moving train to collect on his life insurance money, it is very important to both characters that they body of Mr. Dietrichson be discovered on the train tracks. This discovery of the body on the tracks is important so that the double indemnity clause of his life insurance policy can be invoked. However, on a more philosophical level, the spectacle of the body being displayed on the tracks is just as important to the audience watching the film. The reason that it maintains this importance to the audience is that, even though the actions that Phyllis and Walter are taking part in are wrong, the viewer is still in an alliance with them. The audience wants these two illegitimate lovers to pull the crime off, because once they are able to commit this crime it is possible that the audience can experience their own deep rooted desires to commit similar crimes of perversity without having to manifest these actions in reality. The crime on the screen provides a safe catharsis for the audiences own lust for vice.

An instance of observation for Foucault is that within the judicial system, when a criminal is charged with a crime and a sentence is handed out, it is more often than not a interpreted socially as a reflection of the criminals worth as a human being: "…the judges have gradually, by means of a process that goes back very far indeed, taken to judging something other than crimes, namely, the 'soul' of the criminal." Fritz Lang's 1931 release *M* illustrates an instance of this idea. Peter Lorre plays the child killer Hans Beckert. The police force is unable to track down Beckert to end his predatory crimes. After many children are killed, the leaders of the criminal underground decide that they must take mattes into their own hands of bringing justice to the murderer. What happens with this turn of events is very interesting on a social level. Once the crime bosses catch

Beckert, they put him through their own brand of mock trial to determine how he will be punished. So the audience must contend with criminals judging a criminal in order to reach a sense of justice. While the some of the men that judge Beckert are common murders themselves, the viewer can often sympathize with their brand of rough justice that they subject Beckert to largely for the fact that Beckert preys on children. The jury of criminals does more than just sentence Beckert for his crimes; they judge his soul for the nature of the crimes that he commits. During the final sequences of the film, while Beckert is on trail judged, quite literally by his peers, the audience finds themselves siding with criminal characters. It becomes an issue, for most viewers, of trying to find a connection with the lesser of two evils.

Within *M* the viewer is witness to another notion of Foucault's disciplinary discourse. Foucault infers that the idea of capital punishment has undergone an evolution throughout its existence. In terms of the corporeal body of the criminal, there has been a shift over the idea of what agency may claim ownership over the condemned: "In the old system, the body of the condemned man became the king's property, on which the sovereign left his mark and brought down the effects of his power. Now he will be rather the property of society, the object of a collective and useful appropriation." The aforementioned sequence within *M* may be applied to this idea as well. Once Beckert has been captured by the leaders of the criminal underworld, his body becomes condemned but does not belong to the governing ruler of Berlin, but instead to the society of Beckert's criminal colleagues.

Foucault suggests that there should be a parallel that is directly correlated to the nature of punishment and crime. A punishment should fit the crime that was committed

and the duration of the punishment should only be maintained for as long as it takes to recognize the effect of regret within the criminal: "But the delicate mechanism of the passions must not be constrained in the same way or with the same insistence when they begin to improve; the punishment should diminish as it produces its effects." An instance that illustrates this notion can be found in Tay Garnett's 1946 noir *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. At the film's close Frank Chambers is tried and sentenced to die for the death of his lover Cora Smith. While Frank was not the cause of Cora's death, he was the murderer of Car's husband Nick. Through the turn of events within the film, Frank is never caught for the murder of Nick. Frank may be innocent of Cora's specific murder, but he is guilty of murdering Nick. The punishment that awaits Frank is specifically designed to reprimand murder. Since Frank is sentenced to die, there is only one degree of his punishment's effect. Frank's punishment will diminish completely once it has achieved the effect of his death.

There is an interesting testament to the space of punishment in *Discipline and Punish*. Foucault posits that there is a geography to the possibility of discipline: "Discipline sometimes requires enclosure, the specification of a place heterogeneous to all others and closed in upon itself. It is the protected place of disciplinary monotony." This circumstance is illustrated in *Sunset Boulevard*, directed by Billy Wilder in 1950. In this film Joe Gillis finds himself on the run from repossession agents, and ends up turning at random into the estate of Norma Desmond. What occurs after his arrival at Desmond's home is a bizarre sequence of obsession, rejection, and hopelessness. Norma quickly grows infatuated with Joe and demands that he live at the estate with her. Joe struggles internally with Norma's attraction to him. Joe appreciates the material wealth the Norma

is able to provide him, but eventually grows weary of her company. In Joe's eventual attempt to leave the estate, Norma becomes overtaken with jealousy and a fear of abandonment, and murders Joe before he can depart. This film connects with Foucault's idea of the geography of punishment in that Norma's estate acts as Joe's own private hell. The location provides Joe with all the material gain that he could want, but what he cannot find at Norma's home is any semblance of love or hope. For Joe his punishment is bound to the location of Norma's estate. He cannot leave to pursue any happiness that might await him in the outside world. He is forced to live and eventually die in a location that he feels is poisonous to his spirit.

Chapter Three

Connections within other works of Foucault

In Foucault's 1978 release *The History of Sexuality*, he makes an interesting observation regarding the nature of the individual's drive to discover truth: "We have at least invented a different kind of pleasure: pleasure in the truth of pleasure, the pleasure of knowing the truth, of discovering and exposing it, the fascination of seeing it and telling it, or captivating and capturing others by it, of confiding it in secret, of luring it out in the open…" What this statement suggests is that human beings have a strong impulse to understand the nature of truth, that a mystery might equal conflict in the heart of man. This point is exemplified in Howard Hawks' *The Big Sleep*. The way that this film validates an individual's quest for truth is through the presentation of main protagonist, Philip Marlowe. Marlowe is s a private investigator; it is the basis of his entire livelihood to produce the truth for his clients no matter what their question or concern might be. Since the main protagonist has this position in the framing of the film, the audience is immediately drawn into his conflicts and interests. The viewer must relate to Marlowe's character in order to establish a direction within the plot of the film. Because Marlowe wants to uncover the truth behind the mystery that he is hired to investigate, an alignment with his character by the viewer satisfies two desires: the first being that the audience has a strong and virtuous vessel to navigate the dangers of the story within. Marlowe acts as guide negotiating the rough urban terrain and seedy dealings with criminal society, the

audience has an undaunted trust for Marlowe though, and they will follow him without fear of deception or of being misconstrued. The second desire is what Foucault speaks of: the unending desire to discover the truth that is found in the soul of the individual. As long as Marlowe is in pursuit of the truth, the viewer will transpose their won identity with his. They will live symbiotically within the eyes and ears of Marlowe's character as he maneuvers toward the conclusion of the mystery that he is solving, and ultimately a form of truth.

Foucault also mentions in *The History of Sexuality* that the nature of sexuality is repressed in common society and that through this socially placed repression sexuality becomes secretive: "But this often-stated theme, that sex is outside of discourse and that only the removing of an obstacle, the breaking of a secret, can clear the way leading to it, is precisely what needs to be examined." *The Big Sleep* contains plot elements that echo this sentiment as well. The investigation that Marlowe is initially hired to complete revolves around the wealthy, but sickly General Sternwood. He is a man of deep wealth and allows his daughters to run freely throughout town. His youngest daughter, Carmen Sternwood has had indiscrete photos taken of her and her father wishes Marlowe to find the negatives so that their family name is not sullied. The sexuality of the youngest is what is displayed within these photographs and is also what must remain a secret for the Sternwood family to maintain a respectable social status. The plot of the film revolves around Marlowe trying to unveil the secret of the location Carmen Sternwood's photos, which have to be maintained as a secret publicly on account of the sexuality that they depict. Here the film portrays an instance of sexual discourse that is only a secret because of the efforts that have been taken to ensure that it is repressed.

There is evidence in Foucault's 1961 text *Madness and Civilization*, chronicling the manner in which morality may be shifted from an inherit spiritual virtue to that of commercial commodity: "The law of nations will no longer countenance the disorder of harts… Morality permitted itself to be administered like trade of economy." The character of Marlowe illustrates the licensing of morality as a commodity of economics. Marlowe's character, in the nature of most anti-heroes, has a strong since of virtue and loyalty to those he is close to. However, he requires a payment to bring justice to the characters that exist outside of his circle of associates. When General Sternwood requests that Marlowe find the lewd pictures of Sternwood's youngest daughter, Marlowe accepts the job. Marlowe agrees to find the pictures, not for the sake of engaging any form of moral high ground, but for the pay out once the pictures are discovered. Here Marlowe is a character of strong virtue, but for him to take action morally regarding the needs of the Sternwood family requires financial motivation.

Continuing the idea of an economic system within the genre of noir, Foucault suggests another aspect of the manner in which labor functions within the discourse of madness and paranoia: "But outside of the periods of crisis, confinement acquired another meaning. Its repressive function was combined with a new use. It was no longer merely a question of confining those out of work, but of giving work to those who had been confined and thus making them contribute to prosperity of all." This idea reflects the instances within noir films in which the anti hero protagonist might pay lower echelon street criminals for information that would bring them closer to the higher profile criminal antagonists. This issue is exemplified in the Joel Coen's 1991 crime drama *Miller's Crossing*. Throughout the course of the film, the protagonist Tom Reagan

manipulates the street level degenerates of the prohibition era city in which he lives. With the city acting as a space for criminals that live off of bootlegging and gambling, Tom in turn switches the unemployed miscreants to employed informants. Through a combination of subtle manipulation and physical force, Tom turns the criminal minds that he encounters from serving selfish desires to aiding Tom in his journey toward a greater good of protecting his best friend and the woman he loves.

In *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*, Foucault examines the progression of the history of knowledge. He addresses that genealogy is not a linear system, that there are many pockets of space throughout a time line that require investigation. What this essay suggests is that time does not exist as a single unit or a straight line, but that it exists as many units spread across a plane. Foucault acknowledges that there is a certain form of danger that takes place when one researches: "It discovers the violence of a position that sides against those who are happy in their ignorance, against the effective illusions by which humanity protects itself, a position that encourages the dangers of research and delights in disturbing discoveries." This idea is embraced in Rain Johnson's 2006 release *Brick*, a contemporary film that invokes the sensibilities of noir and achieves the categorization of being a Neo-Noir film. The manner in which the film exemplifies Foucault's thoughts of knowledge is that the film's protagonist, Brandon, is a high school student that takes the role of an unofficial private investigator to unravel the mystery of his ex-girlfriend's murderer. The deeper that Brandon moves throughout the underbelly of criminal activities at his school, the closer that he gets to finding out who committed the murder the more danger he is placed it. As Brandon gains knowledge, he becomes less safe. There is a direct correlation that exhibits the more that he researches about the

crime the more disturbing the information has the appearance of becoming. The audience experiences a sense of danger alongside of Brandon. While the viewer's goal is the same as Brandon's throughout the film, the danger that he becomes exposed to remains completely objective to the audience. The viewer only invests emotion, which engages and removes the audience from the specific conflict of the scene. The characters are the ones that risk physical danger by the knowledge that they seek.

Chapter Four

A Circumstance of Noir Pastiche as seen in *Miller's Crossing*

In his essay *Postmodernism and Consumer Society,* Fredric Jameson offers a juxtaposition of the terms parody and pastiche. He suggests that while both ideas incorporate the use of a simulacra or mimicry of an already established style, they vary greatly in their individual execution and presentation. Parody, Jameson posits, is the imitation of a form of artistic style that is used to bring humor or satire to the original concept. Once the presence of the satiric impulse is removed then parody shifts into a mode of pastiche. Pastiche, like parody, makes a focused effort on imitation. However, what pastiche lacks from parody is the tongue in cheek humor that is meant to satirize the original concept. Pastiche is a direct imitation of a form of style that takes itself seriously. To address and identify the idea of a Noir Pastiche in film, several cinematic concepts must be identified. Does the film of Noir Pastiche maintain similar sensibilities to the original genre of noir? How are the visual cues that imply a connection to the noir sensibility represented? Does the film portray these visual cues in such a way that they should be taken seriously or as parody?

While there are many contemporary films in that might address these questions, the Coen Brother's 1990 release, *Miller's Crossing* addresses each with a pointed grace and verbal finesse that is scarce in most films, classical or contemporary. What the Coen's have created with this film is a subtle blend of gangster film and noir. Perhaps

the most striking agent of *Miller's Crossing* that suggests its classification as a noir pastiche is the harmony of the *mise en scene* that is imbued throughout the entire structure of the film.

The film takes several noir sensibilities as plot devices. Tom Reagan, played by Gabriel Byrne, is the film's protagonist. He is at once the traditional anti-hero of the classical noir genre. He is the right hand of the Irish kingpin Leo O'Bannon. As the lieutenant of a prohibition era mob boss, Tom is involved with many criminal activities that run the gamut from bootlegging to racketeering. But as the tradition of the anti-hero dictates, while he is engaged with many aspects of lawlessness, he is not without connection to virtue. Tom's particular standard of morality is that he will not take another man's life. Tom maintains the physical characteristics of the classic noir protagonist as well. He is often adorned in the traditional dark trench coat and fedora, and is more than an arm's reach away from a bottle of whiskey.

Also in keeping with the noir tradition *Miller's Crossing* contains the presence of a beautiful *femme fatale*. Vern Bernbaum, played by Marcia Gay Harding, is the woman who is trying to protect her brother Bernie. Bernie has fallen into bad grace with the local mob scene through a consistency of degenerate gambling debts and the sale of privileged information. In an effort to keep Bernie alive, Verna enters into a romantic affair with both Leo and Tom, in the hopes that their feelings for her will result in protection for her brother.

The film's primary antagonist also echoes the classical noir villain in that he is unabashedly evil. Eddie Dane, played by J. E. Freeman, is a henchman for the Italian gang leader Johnny Caspar. Caspar is Leo's rival for political and territorial control over

their city. Eddie Dane is a character that contains no sympathy or mercy. He kills in cold blood and will listen to no word of reason beyond the command of his employer. The Dane is a character of complete darkness, without a shred of redemption.

The aesthetic of *Miller's Crossing* which enables the film to be regarded as a noir pastiche, includes the incorporation of a stylized dialogue that is direct, sharp and riddled in wit. The Coen Brother's explained in interviews that in writing the screenplay for the film they took a strong inspiration from the 1931 novel by Dashiell Hammett, *The Glass Key*. With the roots of the film's influence being found in the work of one of America's most notorious noir fictionists, it is no far cry to suggest that this connection alone would be enough to earn the film the label of noir. However, since *Miller's Crossing* was produced four decades beyond the timeline that encapsulates the life of the noir genre, the film can only be recognized for its imitation of the noir style.

There are other moments in the aesthetic presentation of the film that support the label of Noir Pastiche. The use of shadows and lighting to frame characters is a very important aspect of the film's imitation of the noir genre. One of the strongest instances of the use of shadowing in the film takes place toward the conclusion of the story. Tom, through a myriad arrangement of double crossings and false information, manipulates a situation that allows Bernie to kill Johnny Caspar. Once Tom arrives at the scene and discovers Caspar's body he addresses Bernie and explains that he too will have to die. While Tom slowly moves toward Bernie, the shadows of the staircase that they are located on move across his face, masking the expression that he is wearing. The use of alternating light and shadow on the character of Tom suggests a physical manifestation of the inner struggle that Tom is engaging in during his decision to kill Bernie. Since Tom

is a character that has resolved never to kill anyone, this scene is a moment of great significance to his development as a true anti-hero. He has to defy his own code of conduct in order to restore harmony within the universe that the film occurs in. In the final moments of the film, Tom is left standing alone in a graveyard, the symbolic significance of which is that since he has defied his own standards he has become completely alienated by the associates and colleagues that he once considered his friends. The only company he keeps during the film's final frame is that of the man he killed. He has chosen a self-perpetuated exile over the indulgent life he once had as Leo's second in command. This decision to exile himself that Tom makes is indicative of the noir anti-hero. The common trait of the anti-heroes of the noir genre is that they end up alone, often in prison or dead, in retribution of the crimes that they have committed.

An important scene that speaks to the imitation of many great noir films also comes toward the film's close. The sequence occurs between Tom and Verna, and marks the moment of their final conflict in the plot. Tom has set in motion an elaborate plan to have both Caspar and Bernie kill one another. This plan was instigated through information that Verna provided Tom, unbeknownst to Verna that Tom was planning on devising the murder of her brother. Verna eventually realizes that Tom double crossed her and meets him on a city street in the pouring rain. She pulls a small hand gun on him and threatens to kill him for lying to her. Despite that pain she feels from the betrayal, Verna truly does feel something along the lines of love for Tom and cannot pull the trigger. She walks away from him sobbing through the rain. The use of lighting throughout this sequence is also of some import. Both characters are shrouded in darkness, so much so that the viewer can only make out the profile of each character.

The strength of this darkness exemplifies the point that this is the blackest moment, emotionally and psychologically for each of the characters' interactions with one another. There is a genuine affection between Tom and Verna, but it is eclipsed by deception and the self centricity of each of their individual motivations.

Perhaps one of the most significant reasons that *Miller's Crossing* occurs in cinema as a noir pastiche and not a parody of noir is that the film takes itself very seriously. The characters in the film do not hint at any moments of comic relief or of satire; the direct actions that each character engages in results in either their own destruction or abandonment. While the Coen Brother's are often cited for the use of comedy and parody within their work, *Miller's Crossing* is a crucial piece of cinema that does not use or exploit the sensibilities of classic noir cinema to indicate any moments of levity throughout the film.

Chapter Five

A Circumstance of Neo-Noir as Seen in *Brick*

Few contemporary films have been able to achieve the edgy conventions of classic noir sensibilities in such a deeply unique way as *Brick*, the 2005 feature film debut of director Rian Johnson. When Johnson initially wrote the screen play for what is now the motion picture *Brick* he was only 23 years old. It took him over six years to instigate funding for the project which was just over 450 thousand dollars. The result of Johnson's efforts was the blossoming of a film that no previous director had ever imagined in terms of style and effect. Johnson contends that the primary desire for the initial writing of *Brick* was found after having exposure to the literary contributions of detective genre fictionist Dashiell Hammett. One would not have to watch much of *Brick* to find such influential comparisons between Johnson and Hammett, specifically concerning morality and language.

The film moves along in the general structured fashion of many familiar noir tales, pulling obvious tones from Humphrey Bogart's Philip Marlowe, and the calculated manipulation of *femme fatales* such as Mary Astor and Lauren Bacall. The establishing shots of the film also bear a reminiscent echo to the unique openings of *Sunset Boulevard* and *Double Indemnity* in that one of the main characters of *Brick* is murdered almost immediately. Their story is later told through a series of flashbacks that enables the viewer to gain a deeper understanding to the complexity of the story.

Brick is primarily a murder mystery. The film begins with a young woman Emily, speaking frantically to her ex-boyfriend Brandon, on a pay phone. Brandon is the film's protagonist. He initially tries to calm Emily down but the line goes dead just as the screen cuts to a shot of a jet black Ford Mustang racing by. Brandon, after inquiring Emily's last known whereabouts from mutual friends, discovers that she has been murdered and left in a drainage tunnel. After hiding her body, Brandon begins his own investigation, knowing that once the city police are involved, the real truth behind her murder may never be found. The element of the local police being postured as inept in *Brick* is another tie that one could make to classic noir cinema. Popular noir films such as *M* and *His Kind of Girl* both portray residential law enforcement as being careless and clumsy in their investigations. Shortly after Brandon begins his own, informal mode of investigation he quickly tumbles into a subterranean society of drug peddlers and hired thugs. The primary antagonist of the story is a drug pusher known only as The Pin. Early in the film Brandon introduces himself to The Pin as a source of future business, in an effort to get close enough to the dealer to determine whether or not he was the source of Emily's murder.

The film's plot line weaves itself along as a standard and familiar detective story, Johnson's innovation with the film itself takes place in his decision to set the action entirely within the realm of a southern California high school. Brandon and Emily are both Seniors, The Pin is a twenty something drop out, and the hired muscle that The Pin employs are high school bullies and thugs. What Johnson manages to create through this revitalization of noir cinema is accomplished largely because the behavior of the

characters throughout the plot stay very honest to the reality that is imposed by the director. Johnson never places the characters in a position to be mocked or satirized, the actions and events in the film are presented in ways that do not come across as tongue in cheek or as a deconstruction of noir cinema in general. The film takes it self seriously and therefore requires an objective stance from the audience. Brandon is an 18 year old character, but his character should be taken as merely a vessel for the soul of a down and out investigator in the tradition of Philip Marlowe. Laura, the mysterious girl who moves romantically between The Pin and Brandon is also just a young woman in high school, but her actions and motivations throughout the film indicate the presence of a deep manipulation that was characteristic of the many cinematic *femme fatales* that came before her.

Having a noir film take place in a high school removes individual visual indications that tether the idea of noir sensibilities to one specific typecast. Now the viewer has a noir film that doesn't require the lead character to wear the traditional over coat and fedora. *Brick* allows its characters to be dirtied up in other ways than by saturating them with gin, rye, and divorce. What Johnson has also created in placing this film in high school is a claim to his audience that what makes a film engaging in the tradition of the noir genre, more than setting or time frame is the language. Johnson openly admits to borrowing terminology from the literary works of Hammett and Highsmith, and the pacing of the characters speech is a definite nod toward Joel Coen's 1991 release *Miller's Crossing*. What the viewer discovers after watching *Brick* is that any element of youth and naiveté from characters that should traditionally possess both

quickly vanish. Brandon's vernacular throughout the film is comprised of underground terminology that is edgy and street worn; a verbal joust of wit and rhetoric. Individuals in common society that are twice his age don't speak as he does, which suggests that Johnson was not interested in the age of his characters playing a factor in the relevance of what genre the film would eventually become a part of.

An important aspect of *Brick* that also ties it tightly to the sensibilities of noir is that the protagonist Brandon retains a sense of moral ambiguity throughout the entirety of the film. This circumstance is brought to its zenith toward the film's conclusion. Brandon has linked Emily's murder to The Pin's henchman Tugger. In an effort to topple The Pin's drug operation Brandon plays Tugger against The Pin through subtle manipulation. The scene takes place in The Pin's office. The Pin is standing on the far left side of the shot and Tugger is on the right. Brandon is standing between them acting as a mediator for the conflict that he has created. What makes this shot interesting is the color schematic of the characters' wardrobe. The Pin is clad from head to toe in black, while Tugger is wearing a pristine white shirt, Brandon; standing between the two adversaries is wearing a grey jacket. This symbolically illustrates that Brandon's character is not entirely a part of either side, but a neutral player in the game he has spun. Brandon is only seen once without his grey jacket on, which is during a flashback sequence. In this flashback he is wearing a crisp white undershirt. This exemplifies a moment from the character's past in which he was innocent of the actions that he takes during the course of film. Once Brandon begins to engage in sifting through the underworld of The Pin and his associates, he slips from innocence into a realm of questionable morality and is adorned in grey from that point forward.

A parallel also arises between Brandon and his nemesis suggesting a link to moral transformation as well. Both primary antagonists, The Pin and Tugger, suffer from varying physical deformations. The Pin has a club foot that forces him to walk with a limp and Tugger has a vicious scar running vertically down the side of his forehead. Johnson's effort to make the film's antagonists more monstrous than the other characters involved in the plot is not lost. An interesting development occurs with Brandon's increased interactions with The Pin through out the film, he too becomes more physically altered. Brandon's physical transformations are not permanent however. They are the result of constant beatings that he receives from Tugger in an effort to reach The Pin throughout the story. By the final confrontation Brandon's face is beaten to the point of being unrecognizable. It is his interactions with a morally devoid world that has caused him to be altered physically, connecting his deformities to that of the very individuals that he trying to fight against.

The film's resolution is also a reflection of many classical noir pieces. Once Brandon has overcome The Pin and Tugger, he realizes that they were being manipulated as well. The source of this manipulation was found in the beautiful female lead Laura. The element of a gorgeous and highly sexual *femme fatale* is an arguable necessity in telling a noir story, and *Brick* is no exception to this. The final scene of revelation takes place at dawn on the high school football field. The time of day symbolizes Brandon's rebirth or renewal as a character. The cuts on his face have already begun to heal slightly. He has victoriously overcome his dealings with The Pin, and the new day is ahead of him. Laura meets him on the field relieved that he is alive from the previous night's encounters. As she expresses her happiness Brandon finally determines the true

depth of Laura's involvement in Emily's murder. He pulls her closely to him and whispers the details in her ear. The events that he describes are interjected through rapidly edited shots of each action taking place, making the viewer an actual witness through the final moments of Laura's incrimination. When Brandon finishes putting the pieces together Laura walks away from him, damaged and guilty. The final shot of the film shows Brandon standing alone on the field, watching Laura move further and further away from him. This resolution is also indicative of many film noir plots in that the conflict within the actual story is resolved but the character's life doesn't really change in any aspect. Brandon is the same person at the close of the film as he was from the beginning. There is no spiritual growth, only a fall from innocence through the knowledge that is gained over the course of the story. One is left debating on whether or not Brandon is any better off for having discovered the facts surrounding Emily's death, or if he will end up being even more tortured on account of having fallen in love with another woman who was never completely what she claimed.

While *Brick* was only recently released in 2005 it nonetheless registers as a contemporary noir film by the sensibilities that govern the classic noir movement of the 1940 and 50s. *Brick* within its own unique style and characterization should be embraced as a film noir of post modernity much in the same light as Joel Coen's *The Man Who Wasn't There* or as Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*. Rian Johnson has not so much redefined a genre of film as he has refreshed contemporary ideology of noir.

Chapter Six

A Circumstance of Science Fiction Noir as seen in *Blade Runner*

There is a constant sense of foreboding in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*. The Science Fiction legend opens with an establishing shot suggesting the height of urban bleakness. The city of Los Angeles in 2019 illustrates the perfect dystopia. A twisted menagerie of concrete and steel, with not a trace of the natural world for as far as the eye can see. Great bursts of fire thrust into the black atmosphere, emitted from the tops of sky scrapers themselves. If the audience was not informed by the placard at the film's start that they were staring down onto the future of Los Angeles, one could easily think they were looking into the eternity of Hell.

It is this landscape that first suggests an innovative take on presentation of Science Fiction. What Ridley Scott has done with his adaptation of Philip K. Dick's *Do Android's Dream of Electric Sheep?* is crafted a new interior to the structure of the Science Fiction genre. This interior is adorned with the implementation of sensibilities from the classic genre of film noir. Throughout the film *Blade Runner* the audience will be presented with several archetypes of noir elements that indicate the very essence of noir is permeable even in the most unlikely of genres. *Blade Runner* illustrates that the spirit of noir is very much alive in contemporary filmmaking as well as in genres of storytelling, such as Science Fiction, that are not traditional to the classic noir style of presentation.

The immediate noir sensibility that occurs in the film is the atmosphere of the setting. It is traditional of the noir film to take place in a very gritty and urbane environment. Noir requires a city to thrive in on account of the idea that noir is something that is instigated and perpetuated by the evil of mankind. A noir story can never take place in the natural world as the crimes and vices that are vital to the basis of noir are only found in the slums of large industrial quarters or the whiskey soaked streets of the downtown arenas. With *Blade Runner* the cityscape is a nightmare; it s a chaos of technology that acts as a breeding ground for depravity and lawlessness.

The viewer's guide for this dystopian landscape is Rick Deckard portrayed by Harrison Ford. Deckard is himself a Blade Runner, the street term coined for the police investigators that are enlisted to track down replicants. Replicants function as the film's primary group of antagonists. They are engineered creations designed to replicate human beings in every way aside from emotions and life span. The film opens with replicants listed as an illegality and it is Deckard's assignment to track down four renegades and destroy them. The protagonist Deckard mirrors one of the strongest noir characteristics of the film which is the presence of the down and out, street wise anti-hero. Deckard is a character that has lived on the streets of LA for so long that the vice of the city as permeated his virtue. He is at once pure and corrupted by the city that he is an inhabitant of. He is able to negotiate the labyrinthine landscape as it is his home, yet he cannot speak the Pan-Asian dialect that has become the primary vernacular in order to perform the simplest function of ordering his own lunch. This circumstance echoes a familiar duality of the noir anti-hero: he is both an insider and an outsider of the setting in which

he must perform his task. Beyond this duality there are visual cues that indicate the influence and presence of noir sensibilities. Deckard is clad in the traditional dark colored over coat that muddles the visual of his physical prowess, adding a literal surface level mystery of who he is internally. His appearance is unkempt as if he has been negotiating the streets for nights on end.

Deckard first receives his assignment to hunt down the replicants from his agency headquarters in a scene that mimics many classic noir films portrayal of private investigators offices. Deckard speaks with his superior while discussing the case file. The coloration of the scene is shrouded in tints of stark blue, grey and black, imposing an icy feel to the spectator. Both Deckard and his boss are saturated in dark blue, which exemplifies that the coldness of their setting has penetrated into their physicality as well. They are framed within the shot by copious amounts of smoke, further obscuring the view that the audience has of what is transpiring. The use of smoke and shadows in a traditional noir was important as it would act as an agent of concealment. The symbolic mystery of the noir characters would be physically manifested when their face would be partially covered in smoke or shadow, obstructing a clear view of their facial expressions and their eyes. This technique is mirrored in the briefing sequence with Deckard and his superior.

The mystery and obscurity of Deckard's expressions, due to the obscuration caused by lighting and smoke suggests that Scott did not want his audience to make up their minds about the morality of what was entailed in Deckard's destruction of the replicants. Does the Tryell Corporation, the agency that created the replicants, have the moral right to destroy their creation?

This issue is one of the primary moral ambiguities that drives the movement of the plot line for the film. Once more connection is made between the presence of classical noir motivations in present contemporary genres, specifically the idea of blurring morality. Deckard's anti-heroism is also rooted in his sensitivity to moral ambiguity. He understands the orders from his headquarters, but throughout the film and his contact with individual replicants he begins to question whether or not the Tyrell Corporation has license to destroy their own creations. The largest aspect of Deckard's conflict occurs when he is introduced to Rachel.

Rachel who is portrayed by Sean Young, for all intensive purposes, is the *femme fatale* of *Blade Runner*. This, like the presence of an anti-hero protagonist, is a staple of classical noir structuring. The *femme fatale* that Rachel portrays deviates from the traditional model of the damaged beauty queen of the Hollywood noir era. While she does maintain a physical beauty that enthralls Deckard, she does not have a broken past that is littered with vice and degradation. Rachel's flaw that makes her the *femme fatale* is not that she has fallen to indiscretion in the past but that she is a replicant, one of the very subjects that Deckard is ordered to assassinate. The character element of Rachel that is added to the plot line brings a stronger level of conflict that forces Deckard into an even deeper meditation of moral ambiguity. Now he faces the decision of betraying the establishment that employs him in an effort to seek an emotional connection with a character that is genetically unable to experience emotions. The idea that the *femme fatale* is an agent that will always draw the noir anti-hero further away from the presence of a conventional establishment is a sensibility that was started cinematically in the noir

genre. It has become immortalized. This particular sensibility has survived throughout decades of Hollywood film making and has firmly solidified itself as a reoccurring standard in contemporary films that belong to genres and styles outside of noir specifically.

While Deckard is an authority figure he is not a common police officer. He is instead an elite detective that is given the mission of finding the replicants. He is given this mission specifically because the common line of police officers below him are too inept to carry it out. The notion that common law enforcement is too inept to solve the crimes committed is a condition of the noir genre as well. Most noir films require a sense of rough justice in order to maintain the natural order of the streets. This rough justice is not a power that common police officers possess. It is the anti-hero's responsibility to achieve the ability of maintaining this rough justice. The anti-hero must be willing to ignore the law in order to get closer to their individual goals, be it good or bad. A sense of law in a noir film can be read as being ignorant to the life that takes place on the underbelly of the street, the anti-hero will often be stronger and more savvy than the law at following clues and solving crimes.

Toward the close of the film, once Deckard has defeated the final replicant antagonist, a startling revelation is made clear to the audience. This revelation is that there is a strong possibility that Deckard himself may unknowingly been a replicant throughout the course of the film. This is the zenith of Deckard's struggle as the noir anti-hero. His realization that he is the very thing that he has been trying to destroy through the entire story catapults his stance as an anti-hero to a tragic anti-hero. His

greatest strength which was searching for replicants and dispatching them has led to his own downfall of humanity. The film closes with Deckard on the run from the inevitability of other Blade Runners, the ones that will undoubtedly come to destroy him as well.

That *Blade Runner* is classified as a science fiction noir film can be addressed by the visual apparatuses that occur in the film that indicate its presence in a setting of the future. The taxi cabs and police cars hover through virtual air-space highways miles above the ground and the United States has adopted trademarks suggesting that a strong Asian influence has occurred on the culture and inhabitants of a future Los Angeles. Genetic engineering has become so advanced that human beings and animals can be manufactured to look identical to the actual specimens that they are designed after. Science has grown advanced enough that it can manipulate the cognitive imagery that the human mind uses to manifest memory. Dreams and memories are created on computers and can be installed in the mind virtually. These moments and elements of a dystopian future allow the film to be classified as being part of Science Fiction, while the plot structure and character struggles allow it to simultaneously exist as noir film.

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