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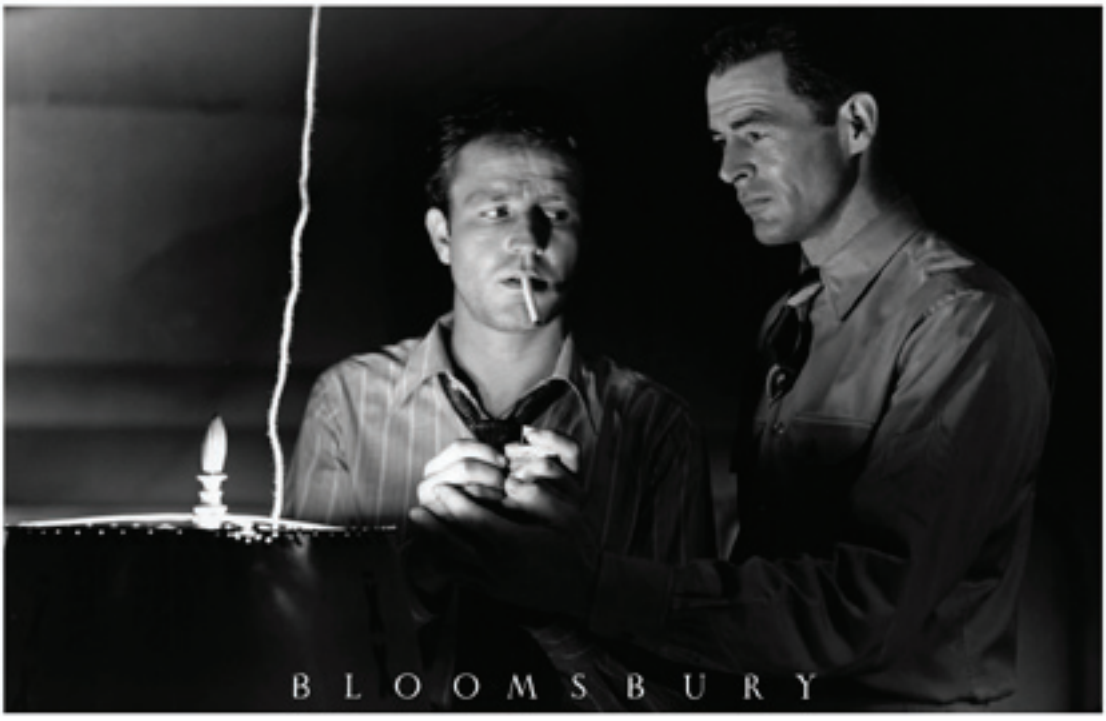
FILM NOIR

A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

IAN BROOKES



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Film Noir

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Film Noir

A critical introduction

IAN BROOKES

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Fallen Angel (Otto Preminger, 1945).

As it has come down to us through the decades, it is an object of beauty, one of the last remaining to us in this domain, situated as it is between neorealism and the New Wave, after which rounded objects like these will no longer be made. It is an object of beauty because Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall are to be found there, because it is neatly contained in a perfect decade (1945–55), because it is simultaneously defined by its matter (black and white) and by its content (the crime story), because it is strange (see its relation to German expressionism and to psychoanalysis), because one cannot but love it (in contrast to its companion-objects, it is the only one that makes a place for affect and that functions as both a rallying cry and a point of exclusion), because it assures the triumph of European artists even as it presents American actors, because it is a severe critique of faceless capitalism, because it prolongs the reading of detective novels while feeding comparatism, because there is always an unknown film to be added to the list, because the stories it tells are both shocking and sentimental, because it is a great example of cooperation—the Americans made it and then the French invented it—and because a book can be made of all these reasons, in which one would finally have the feeling of having it all. On the whole, film noir is like a Harley-Davidson: you know right away what it is, the object being only the synecdoche of a continent, a history, and a civilization, or more precisely of their representation for nonnatives.

Marc Vernet, "*Film Noir* on the Edge of Doom," trans. J. Swenson, in Joan Copjec, ed., *Shades of Noir* (London: Verso, 1993), 1.

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Introduction

This book is designed to provide an introduction to one of the most fascinating, complex, and problematic categories of film. Film noir has generated an enormous amount of academic work over the past few decades, and to the student, it can all look rather daunting: a large and increasingly amorphous field of study.

There are several initial questions we might want to ask about the term. Does "film noir" refer to a specific period of film production? Is its use restricted to films from, say, the 1940s, or can it be used to categorize films made today? Does it apply only to American films? What type of film does it designate? Is it a genre? Why is it a French term rather than an English one (why not just "black film")? Some of these questions may not be that easy to answer. To begin with, there is the problem of how to define the term and there are several impediments to establishing a working definition. "It has always been easier to recognize a film noir than to define the term," says film noir scholar James Naremore, and he has a point.[1] The term was first applied to a group of American films by French critics immediately after the end of the Second World War. One issue arising here is that when these films were originally produced, they weren't known as film noir, a term that was only retrospectively applied.

Another question crops up when we ask what exactly the object of study is supposed to be. The answer may seem obvious. Surely it is the films themselves. But because the term was retroactively projected onto these films, we need to ask another question. Do we study the films called noir *as* noir? That is, do we study them according to the critical apparatus hoisted onto them retrospectively? Or do we study them in terms of their production and consumption at that time, prior to their noir labeling? Even the object of study, then, isn't necessarily clear. I discuss these problems in due course, but for the moment I want to flag up a few of the issues I think would be useful to consider at the outset.

One key issue concerns the parameters of noir. One of my students recounted having a conversation with a housemate about film noir in which they seemed to be talking at crossed purposes. "What do you actually mean by 'film noir,' then?" asked my student. "Well, you know," his housemate replied. "Old films. In black and white." What are we to make of this response? Some

might think that the housemate was laboring under a misconception with an answer unlikely to be of much use as a critical definition. But, compared with many definitions of film noir in current circulation, this at least has the merit of indicating a degree of historical specificity ("old"), as well as highlighting a formal feature ("black and white"). For many critics today, "film noir" has come to denote an exceptionally wide category, one that doesn't necessarily specify "old" films at all, nor even ones in black and white (a defining feature for the early French critics). The term has become an increasingly elastic category that now often encompasses a very broad period indeed, from the 1940s, and sometimes earlier, up to the present day. Many studies now routinely incorporate this later period through the concept of "neo-noir," often discussing noir in terms of nostalgia and pastiche. Moreover, noir has also come to be seen in a much wider geographical field as the term has been stretched to incorporate films produced around the world. Film noir, in this sense, has been reproduced as a global phenomenon.

Unlike in other books on film noir, here I make no attempt to extend its geographical boundaries with the addition of more titles, nor do I seek to extend the chronological period in which noir can be said to operate by claiming earlier or later dates, nor do I propose the addition of extra film titles to the ever-expanding noir catalogs and encyclopedias. As I argue below, one of the major problems in film noir studies is the overextended use of the term itself, which now attaches to any and every crime film produced anywhere in the world, rendering it virtually meaningless as a functioning critical tool. It can sometimes seem as if the term has settled over the entire landscape of film studies like a great amorphous black cloud. "Just about everything seems to be labelled film noir these days," says Adam Frost in an entertaining BFI infographic on the subject. "If it's got a detective and a voiceover, it's noir. If we're in a city at night, it's noir, especially if it's raining."[2]

This book is not so much an account of what film noir *is*, but rather what it is said to be. Here, I am using "film noir" with an awareness that it is always an applied term. Like Naremore, I treat the term as a "discursive construct."[3] When I refer to a film noir in this book, I justify my license to use the term on the basis that someone has already applied it previously. In other words, it is a film noir insofar as someone has said it is. My book is about the ways in which the term came to be applied to a particular group of American films of the 1940s and 1950s. In this sense, it treats the term as a historical object of study, as a mode of categorization referring to a specific historical phenomenon, situated in the social, cultural, and political contexts of America in the 1940s and 1950s. It also looks closely at the cultural moment of the inception of the term by the French critics who did much to shape the generic concept. I then go on to consider the factors—industrial, cultural, social, and political—that had a bearing on noir production *avant la lettre*.

We should also bear in mind here one of the fundamental principles of genre criticism. A genre can sometimes seem like the category into which certain films fall and to which they naturally belong. But we should note at the outset that this isn't the case and there is no natural process of categorization. "Genres," as Rick Altman tells us, "are not inert categories shared by all . . . but discursive claims made by real speakers for particular purposes in specific situations."[4] In other words, films don't naturally occupy generic categories, but have been put in them. How, then, did film noir become the generic category into which certain American films from the 1940s and 1950s were put?

Another question concerns the generic status of these films before they became known as noir. The attribution of "film noir" created a new generic grouping of films that were formerly lodged in categories, often as "crime melodrama," but in other categories too. One consequence of this reclassification has frequently involved lifting out the films from their historical contexts to treat them as a thing apart, a category with special status. Throughout the book, I examine noir in relation to other "adjacent" generic categories such as the female gothic, the gaslight film, and, during the war, the home-front melodrama. I also consider other wartime genres such as the conversion narrative and combat film, and take into account the development of the gangster film together with other subcategories of the crime film such as the police procedural, the caper movie, and the "wrong man" film, as well as horror and the social problem film.

Noir scholars are frequently drawn to a small selection of canonical texts in their studies, typically highlighting examples such as *Double Indemnity*, *The Big Sleep* (1946), and *Out of the Past* (1947). I, too, consider these important entries in the noir pantheon, but I also draw on several lesser-known films from the period to look beyond the well-known noir canon in order to problematize the traditional noir constituency. This canon of familiar titles often serves to reaffirm many of the traditional assumptions about film noir, so going beyond it enables us to question some of the habitual generalizations formed from that limited sample.

Film Noir: A Critical Introduction is organized into three parts, each with three chapters. Part One addresses an innocuous enough looking question, "What is film noir?" only to find in answer something of a complicated critical morass. Chapter 1 charts the critical evolution of the category and, where much noir criticism pays scant attention to the historical conditions of its invention, I undertake a more thoroughgoing excavation of the term to raise questions about the predisposing factors in French culture and society which gave rise to the term, and to the anomalous question of why a group of American films should come to be known by a French name. Another issue I examine is how noir criticism has worked to impose an order of classification on what were often quite disparate films.

The stylistic look and narrative themes of film noir have often been seen as its defining and unifying characteristics. Many critics have placed particular emphasis on visual style. Recognizable by its low-key lighting with chiaroscuro effects and unusual shadow patterns with distorted camera angles, noir's visual style is linked to an iconography featuring dark cityscapes and rain-soaked streets at night, characteristics suggesting the stylistic influence of German expressionism. Noir has also been associated with such narrative themes as a haunted past, malign fate, the dark city, and the "absent family." It is this confluence of visual style, iconography, and narrative themes that is often seen as the defining characteristic of noir, and Chapter 2 examines these claims. The chapter also assesses the widely held view that film noir uniquely provides narrative expressions of a "postwar malaise" in American society. This chapter provides detailed analysis of noir style, although it's worth bearing in mind that this isn't a component that can be seen in isolation, and I return often to the subject of visual style throughout the book.

For many, the appeal of noir derives from its treatment of gender. Two of its paradigmatic characterizations, the femme fatale and the private eye, are often seen as emblematic of noir. Feminist criticism has highlighted the significance of the femme fatale as a transgressive figure, challenging patriarchal structures of power and authority, while noir's representations of masculinity have often been linked to uncertainties about the socioeconomic conditions of life in postwar America. Chapter 3 examines the cultural background of these figures, taking into account some of the "hard-boiled" pulp fiction that provided the source for many films noir, raising questions about why gender is seen as such a key element in film noir.

Noir studies often fail to make much of a distinction between the historical periods in which it was produced, often lumping the films together as part of a general, generically determined category. Part Two provides a historical framework for noir comprising three periods: wartime (1939–45), postwar (1945–50), and a late period (1950–58). The chapters in Part Two examine these historical phases by drawing on a range of film-related sources including studio publicity materials and reviews in addition to the film texts themselves. This enables us to identify some illuminating disparities between the retroactive noir modes of categorization of the films and the ways in which they were seen on original release.

Chapter 4 charts the "prehistory" of film noir and examines the emergence and early development of film noir during the war years in the context of the "genre work" of Hollywood's wartime production cycles such as the combat film and the home-front melodrama. Although the postwar years are usually credited as the definitive period of noir filmmaking, it was wartime itself that gave rise to a group of films working as narrative refractions of wartime concerns mapped onto criminal narratives. This chapter considers

noir's place in the generic landscape of wartime America to ask how its "dark" narratives may have been at odds with the ideological imperatives evident in Hollywood's other genres. I also examine wartime factors affecting Hollywood film production such as the effects of government restrictions on studio expenditure and wartime censorship regulations, both of which had an impact on the development of noir stylistics.

In Chapter 5, I cover the postwar years, the period most strongly associated with the production of "classic" noir such as *The Big Sleep* and *Out of the Past*. In contrast to a self-consciously affirmative narrative like *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), films noir were seen to reflect a dark and disillusioned vision of postwar America. This chapter examines critical claims for the generic distinctiveness and coherence of postwar noir. I also discuss existentialism, one of the key philosophical ideas associated with film noir. In this connection, I also examine low-budget filmmaking practices, predominantly with reference to Edgar G. Ulmer's *Detour* (1945), widely seen as the ne plus ultra of low-budget noir. I also consider here the place of adjacent genres such as the manifestation of the "corporation" gangster in such films as *I Walk Alone* (1948) and *Force of Evil* (1948), and also the modern gothic in *Sorry, Wrong Number* (1948) together with two Max Ophuls films, *Caught* (1949) and *The Reckless Moment* (1949).

The noir titles in the late period became increasingly diverse in terms of both visual style and narrative themes. Films such as *Outrage* (1950), *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), and *Touch of Evil* (1958) were markedly different from each other. What united them, however, was that they were all productions of the Cold War, and Chapter 6 accounts for the ways in which late noir in its various subcategories can be seen in relation to fears and anxieties generated by the Cold War. The chapter examines how noir criticism worked to ensure the persistent application of a term that was struggling to categorize an increasingly fragmentary body of films, often separated widely in terms of style, theme, and—in the context of the Cold War—political stance as well. In this chapter I consider the relation between film noir in the 1950s and other generic categories such as the social problem film and the caper film. For many critics, the "classic" period of film noir draws to a close with *Touch of Evil*, and sometimes a little later with titles such as *The Crimson Kimono* (1959), *Odds Against Tomorrow* (1959), and *Cape Fear* (1962) (a film that I discuss in Chapter 8). Although this book is principally concerned with the specified historical period, I also discuss some of the ramifications of "post-noir" or the "post-classical" development of "neo-noir."

I have mentioned earlier how film noir is often seen to speak on behalf of a dark mood or "postwar malaise" in American society (I discuss "Zeitgeist noir" in Chapter 2). This view reflects one of the tendencies in noir criticism to make vague presumptions about what it takes to be the social conditions

instrumental in shaping the production of film noir. Many accounts of noir remain disconnected from their historical moment and lack historical grounding. Part 3 presents a historical case study of what was then known as "the veteran problem," and it is my contention that social concerns with the figure of the returning veteran permeated postwar noir. After the end of the war, the veteran became the focus of intense scrutiny and speculation. His "readjustment" became the subject of overarching social concern, and he was invariably seen as a social problem. A vast quantity of sociological and popular literature on "the veteran problem" began to appear before the end of the war, and this case study demonstrates how these concerns were refracted through noir narratives.

Chapter 7 examines the discourse of veteran "readjustment" by drawing together a wide range of contemporaneous writings on the veteran problem: from advice to wives on how to assist with their husband's emotional readjustment to accounts by psychiatrists and criminologists warning of veteran violence, criminality, and the dangers of his "stranger" status. Concerns with the veteran problem repeatedly surfaced in the postwar narratives of film noir. These concerns often appeared in what we might call the "readjustment narrative," often identifiable as a subset of postwar noir. In contrast to the kind of affirmative narrative of veteran homecoming in *The Best Years of Our Lives*, noir films such as *Cornered* (1945), *The Blue Dahlia* (1946), *Dead Reckoning* (1947), and *Ride the Pink Horse* (1947) would suggest a dismal future and, sometimes, no future at all. Largely passed over in most noir scholarship, the discourse of the returning veteran figures significantly in film noir, and this discourse constitutes the focus of Chapter 8. The chapter also includes an analysis of the star persona of Humphrey Bogart, a figure readily identifiable with films noir.

Finally, in Chapter 9, I address one of the main concerns in the discourse of readjustment: the perception that the experience of military service would have engendered a conformist disposition in the veteran. This notion of military conformity was linked to wider concerns with a condition of conformity inherent in American society. For many social commentators, large-scale forms of corporate organization were becoming a defining feature of postwar American life, and it seemed to them as if the veteran had left one type of "total institution" only to arrive at another, becoming, in William H. Whyte's telling phrase, an "organization man." At the same time there were concerns that America had become a failing democracy. As postwar narratives would often show, it was precisely here in the ordinary small-town community that democracy was seen as especially vulnerable to incursive totalitarian influence. In my discussion of *The Stranger* (1946), I highlight the political implications of a narrative in which active citizenship is set up as a

bulwark against the resurgence of postwar fascism as an internal threat to postwar America.

Notes

1 James Naremore, *More than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 9.

2 Adam Frost, "Infographic: What makes a Film Noir?" (BFI, July 22, 2015). http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/news-bfi/features/infographic-what-makes-film-noir (Accessed June 27, 2016).

3 Naremore, *More than Night*, 6.

4 Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: BFI, 1999), 101.

PART ONE

What is film noir?

1

Genre and the problem of film noir

> "When *I* use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."
>
> "The question is," said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things."
>
> "The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master—that's all."
>
> LEWIS CARROLL, *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* (1879)[1]

> Film noir! . . . I never heard that expression in those days.
>
> BILLY WILDER[2]

What does it mean to speak of film noir as a "problem" when it hardly looks very problematic? After all, doesn't film noir appear as one of the most obviously recognizable categories of film? Anyone with a basic knowledge of cinema would surely be capable of giving at least a rudimentary account of it. When teaching my own courses on film noir, I often ask students at the outset to jot down their preliminary ideas about what it is. Almost everyone can provide at least some kind of response. They typically talk about crime films from the 1940s, black and white cinematography, urban settings, and characterizations such as the femme fatale and the private eye. When asked for representative titles, they usually come up with a handful from the period, such as *Double Indemnity* (1944) or *The Big Sleep* (1946). Sometimes, they mention more contemporary titles as well, such as *Fight Club* (1999), *Brick* (2006) or Christopher Nolan's

Batman trilogy.[3] There is also a tendency for particular directors to feature prominently in their examples: David Lynch, for instance, with *Blue Velvet* (1986), *Lost Highway* (1997) and *Mulholland Drive* (2001); Quentin Tarantino, for *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), *Pulp Fiction* (1994), and *Jackie Brown* (1997); and Joel and Ethan Coen, for *Fargo* (1996), *The Big Lebowski* (1998) and *The Man Who Wasn't There* (2001).

What invariably emerges from these sessions is widespread disagreement. On the question of periodization, for example, some see noir in terms of a distinct historical period with a beginning and an end. This period is usually seen to run from the early 1940s (sometimes earlier) to the late 1950s (sometimes later). For others, the term describes an ongoing category of film running more or less continuously from the early 1940s to the present. Here, "film noir" operates in contemporary critical discourse to provide terms of reference drawn from the earlier decades to denote a category of films produced afterward, usually designated as "neo-noir." One of the first problems we have to contend with, then, is whether film noir is what James Naremore calls "an extinct genre," one that constitutes a discrete historical object of study, or whether it is a more contemporary form of classification with an ongoing existence.[4]

My students' responses demonstrate something of the contentious nature of noir criticism and, indeed, they often find it gratifying to discover that their own struggles to account for the term are reflected more widely in academic debates. The term denotes one of the most complicated categories of film as well as the most intellectually challenging and exciting. Even the term itself has a complex history and one of the most useful questions we can ask is why a group of American films should be known by a French name. I'll return to this question later when I discuss how the term came into being and why it achieved such widespread currency.

Another problem arises from the fact that when these films were originally produced they weren't known as film noir, a term that was only retrospectively applied by critics. Neither the film industry nor its audiences were aware of the term at the time. It may seem odd for us today to discover that when Billy Wilder was making *Double Indemnity* (1944)—often seen as *the* quintessential noir—he didn't know he was making a film noir and nor did audiences realize they were watching one. Film noir, as a generic category, is unique in the sense of being constituted as a post hoc critical invention. But what kind of category?

Given that this book appears in a series on film genres, we should at least be able to presume that film noir is a genre, but it isn't that simple. Although some critics have seen film noir as a genre, it has also been described as a cycle, a series, a movement, a visual style, a lighting technique, and a mood

or tone. Michael Walker has provided a useful summary of the disparate ways in which critics have defined noir:

> The cycle of 'forties and 'fifties Hollywood films that retrospectively became known as films noirs seems at first sight to be rather too diverse a group to be constituted with any precision as a generic category. Nevertheless, various critics have sought different unifying features: motif and tone (Durgnat, 1970), social background and artistic/cultural influences (Schrader, 1971), iconography, mood and characterisation (McArthur, 1972), visual style (Place & Peterson, 1974), the "hard-boiled" tradition (Gregory, 1976), narrative and iconography (Dyer, 1977), representation and ideology (Kaplan, 1978), a master plot paradigm (Damico, 1978), conditions of production (Kerr, 1979), paranoia (Buchsbaum, 1986 . . .) and patterns of narration (Telotte, 1989).[5]

To complicate the situation still further, Jon Tuska sees noir as "both a screen style . . . and a perspective on human existence and society."[6] How can we make sense of all these competing claims? Whatever noir is, it isn't a genre in the generally accepted sense of the term as, say, the western or the musical are.

As Walker's summary suggests, viewpoints about what constitutes the "unifying features" of noir are so widely disputed that the functioning capability of the term itself can be called into question. Walker also identifies another major problem when he says that the group of films held by critics to constitute film noir seems "too diverse" to be categorized together under the rubric of noir. Most of the surveys on noir literature show an extraordinarily heterogeneous grouping of films. If, for example, we look at some of the entries in one of the standard encyclopedic reference books on film noir, the generic range and diversity appear striking, often including titles that might be thought to require the very widest latitude of definition for inclusion.[7] For example, if film noir of the 1940s is assumed to have contemporary urban settings, a Hollywood cycle of period melodramas from the middle of the decade—including *Gaslight* (1944), *Hangover Square* (1945), and *The Spiral Staircase* (1945)—has Victorian or Edwardian settings and is more usually categorized in the female gothic or gaslight genres. At the other generic extreme, and also well represented in the *Encyclopedia*, is science fiction. Titles such as *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), *Invaders from Mars* (1953), *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), and *Them!* (1954) are usually categorized in the cycle of science fiction/horror films of the 1950s. In addition to science fiction, there are several entries for the western in the *Encyclopedia*, including *Duel in the Sun* (1946), *I Shot Jesse James* (1949), *Johnny Guitar* (1954), *The Naked Spur* (1953), and *Rancho Notorious* (1952). There is even an entry for *The Black Book* (1949), also known as *Reign of Terror*, a narrative treatment

of Maximilien Robespierre's Paris after the French Revolution.[8] How, then, can we account for a category that seems to incorporate all these other genres?

This leads to another complicating factor in the various noir subcategories. There is, for example, the noir western, including *Pursued* (1947), *Ramrod* (1947), *Blood on the Moon* (1948), *Yellow Sky* (1948), and *Devil's Doorway* (1950); and the noir musical, including *The Band Wagon* (1953) and *Carmen Jones* (1954). According to one critic, there is a category of "noir musical films," which includes *The Red Shoes* (1948), a British film with a ballet subject by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger; *Young at Heart* (1954), the Doris Day and Frank Sinatra musical; and Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story* (1961), an updated version of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* with its rival families transposed as warring teenage gangs in New York City.[9] There is also the category of comedy noir, including *Lady on a Train* (1945) and *My Favorite Brunette* (1947), together with several comedies by Preston Sturges such as *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* (1944), *Hail the Conquering Hero* (1944), and *Unfaithfully Yours* (1948). The British Ealing comedy *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (1949) used to be called a black comedy but is now often called *comédie noir*e.

Another of the noir fusion-phrases is "tech-noir." Tech-noir, a hybrid of noir and dystopian science fiction, is named after the nightclub in *The Terminator* (1984), "TechNoir," where Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton) attempts to evade the cyborg assassin programmed to kill her. Tech-noir includes such films as *Alien* (1979) and its sequels, and *Blade Runner* (1982), itself the subject of a study under the rubric of "Future Noir."[10] Emily E. Auger sees tech-noir as characterized by a futuristic technology that "has become an aggressively destructive force that threatens to transform the environment into a wasteland and forever alter the forms of human individuality, relationships, and ways of living."[11] Auger's book provides another extensive catalog of film titles including *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), *Westworld* (1973), *Videodrome* (1983), *Brazil* (1985), *RoboCop* (1987), *Total Recall* (1990), and *The Truman Show* (1998). Even this brief list of titles indicates the sheer range and disparate nature of films being categorized under subcategories of noir.

These encyclopedic entries are indicative of a tendency in noir criticism to attract "inventory" approaches, and since the 1970s there has been a plethora of encyclopedias, catalogs, dictionaries, guidebooks, and filmographies of the kind exemplified by Silver and Ward's pioneering *Film Noir*, first published in 1979. It was subsequently published in a third edition as *Film Noir: An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style* (1992) and is, at the time of writing, in its fourth, with additional editors James Ursini and Robert Porfirio, as *Film Noir: The Encyclopedia* (2010). Each successive edition represents a significant expansion of its predecessor in the number of film titles it contains. There are many examples of such encyclopedic approaches.[12] There is also a plethora of websites similarly preoccupied with inventories.[13]

FIGURE 1.1 Two contenders for the "first" film noir: left, *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, 1941), showing the interior of Sam Spade's apartment; and right, the nightmare sequence in *Stranger on the Third Floor* (Boris Ingster, 1940).

So voluminous is the quantity of work on film noir that it constitutes by far the largest body of work on any film category. Much of this work is based on a critical proclivity for cataloging and, indeed, list-making can be seen to constitute something of a methodology in noir studies. The ever-lengthening list of film titles constitutes what Shannon Clute and Richard Edwards have called the "seductive amplitude" of noir, an exercise incapable of ever being completed.[14] Certainly, the profusion of inventory studies illustrates the kinds of problems inherent in critical attempts to produce a coherent taxonomy for film noir. By probing those attempts to impose an order of categorization on these films, we can start to question the functioning nature of the term. One interesting place to begin would be to ask of the two films often held to bookend the classical noir period, *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and *Touch of Evil* (1958): What is it they have in common? We could ask the same question of *The Maltese Falcon* and *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940), the latter being a film that many critics now cite as having replaced *The Maltese Falcon* as the "first" film noir (see Figures 1.1 and 1.2). How have these films, each markedly different from the other, been linked under the rubric of noir?

FIGURE 1.2 The "last" film noir: Orson Welles as Captain Quinlan in *Touch of Evil* (Orson Welles, 1958).

The encyclopedias and catalogs that form such a characteristic feature of noir criticism have a great deal in common with the fictional encyclopedia of animals, "The Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge," which appears in an essay by Jorge Luis Borges. Fascinated by the "wonderment of this taxonomy," Michel Foucault draws our attention to Borges's passage at the outset of his book, *The Order of Things*:

> This passage quotes a "certain Chinese encyclopaedia" in which it is written that "animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) *et cetera*, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies."[15]

Foucault recalls how the passage kept him laughing and it's easy to see why. The bizarre entries and surreal juxtapositions of Borges's fantastical taxonomy read like a ready-made satire on some of the encyclopedic studies of film noir. It also serves to highlight the dubious authority of the encyclopedia as a scholarly text with its ludicrous and unsubstantiated claims.

And yet however fantastical Borges's passage appears, it may not seem quite as far fetched in comparison with some of the entries classified as noir. In Patrick Brion's *Le Film Noir*, for example, we find situated between the entries for Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) and Siodmak's *Phantom Lady* (1944) the title *Who Killed Who?* (1943), a Tex Avery animated short. Its inclusion in Brion's catalog raises questions about what constitutes a representative example of film noir from "*the Golden Age of American Crime Films*," the subtitle of his book. The film itself has no discernible traces of film noir at all but rather plays with the tropes of a traditional ghost story linked to an old-fashioned whodunit.[16] Its inclusion in a book about film noir is a mystery.

Andrew Spicer is surely right to describe the sheer volume of work on film noir as "evidence of a thriving minor industry that shows no signs of abating."[17] His own work has made a significant contribution to that industry through several books seeking to extend the parameters of film noir. His *European Film Noir*, for example, features accounts of French, British, German, Spanish, and Italian film noir and neo-noir, while his *Historical Dictionary of Film Noir* attempts to extend the geographical boundaries of film noir yet further, incorporating entries from countries such as Argentina, New Zealand, and South Korea, to name but a few. The global reach of film noir, according to this view, seems practically inexhaustible, although the *Dictionary* is by no means comprehensive.[18] There are several instances of this globalizing tendency.[19]

This globalizing "extension" in noir criticism has created other problems. Spicer is one of many critics who see film noir as "exploring the dark underside

of the American dream," but this becomes a more difficult concept to deal with in a transnational context. "Because that dream forms the core mythology of global capitalism," he says, "film noir, handled intelligently, is not merely a commodified style, but an important and continuously evolving cultural phenomenon that, even if it cannot be defined precisely, remains a crucial vehicle through which that mythology can be critiqued and challenged."[20] For "globalists" like Spicer, a great deal of critical ingenuity is deployed in attempts to transform noir into a global configuration, especially here, as an ideological critique. But the problem with this kind of statement is that it is impossible to pin down. It's unclear, for example, how the American Dream is supposed to export to global capitalism. What does it mean to say "film noir, handled intelligently"? Can the lack of a precise definition be brushed aside so lightly? Spicer's "revisionist impulse" that works to extend the geographical constituency of noir beyond its original American one looks difficult to sustain.

This notion of widening the parameters of film noir as an object of study can seem like an attractive one, especially when compared with what Spicer sees as the limited focus on the "national exclusivity" of American cinema which, he claims, is "a serious distortion of noir."[21] However, it is here, in these ever-widening geographical boundaries that the student is likely to encounter one of the major problems of definition. For example, Spicer criticizes Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton for their pioneering 1955 text, *Panorama du film noir américain 1941-1953*, on the grounds that its object of study is American when it would be difficult to see how it could be otherwise given the historical circumstances in which they were writing and when the object of their study was intentionally that of American film. I discuss these circumstances in more detail below, but for the moment let me say that this book takes what might be called a post-revisionist view, and certainly a more skeptical attitude toward what I will argue is the overextended use of the term itself. Part of that overextended use has seen the term become almost synonymous with the crime film. In fact, the term is in such wide circulation and so casually used by critics, fans, and scholars that it gets attached to virtually any crime film produced anywhere, often rendering the term effectively meaningless. This ever-expanding body of film noir together with the lack of any agreed definition has enabled critics to draw selectively from the catalog of titles in order to demonstrate the particular critical viewpoint they wish to argue. Film noir, in this broad sense, can mean anything a critic wishes it to mean when evidence for that view is provided by the selective use of a film text that "fits" the argument. This is one of the reasons why noir has proved such a critically attractive field of study.

Another problematic assumption in noir criticism is the notion held by Spicer and others of a "distortion" of noir. Critics often lay claim to what might be described as the *degree* of "noirness" to be found in a given film text, and this

is evident in much of their work, especially in the kind of encyclopedic studies I have mentioned earlier. Here, we will often find commentaries that criticize a film noir for a perceived deficiency or shortfall of some kind, preventing it from being a "true" noir and therefore ineligible for the attribution of full noir status. But this, of course, is to presuppose that there exists in the first place a pure undistorted noir text, although it is by no means clear what that text is supposed to be.[22]

Cultural noir

> Let Revlon take you back to the days of Film Noir with our Ultra HD Lipstick
>
> Revlon advertisement (2015).[23]

"Noir" is complicated further by its wider cultural appeal. Beyond a mere film category, the term has acquired a pervasive cultural spread, traversing perfume, makeup, tailoring, lingerie, chocolates, tobacco, hairdressing salons, bars, clubs, and video games (giving rise to another noir subcategory, "game noir").[24] Noir, as Naremore suggests, "has become one of the dominant intellectual categories of the late twentieth century, operating across the entire cultural arena of art, popular memory, and criticism."[25] Why should the term have this kind of cultural resonance beyond that of a film category? Certainly, it's suggestive of some kind of intrinsic cultural value deriving, perhaps, from the films it describes and the period in which they were made. As Ian Cameron puts it, "even at the most rudimentary level of recognition, *noir* almost invariably has positive connotations: as a descriptive (or evocative) term, *film noir* carries an undertone of almost automatic approbation that, say, [the] western or musical do not."[26]

Examples of "cultural noir" abound, and I have chosen as an illustrative example of noir's evocative cultural reach a work by a musician. In 1997 singer-songwriter Carly Simon released an album called *Film Noir*. Accompanied by a promotional film, *Songs in Shadow: The Making of Carly Simon's Film Noir*, the album tells us a great deal about the cultural legacy of film noir at the end of the twentieth century.[27] The album comprises a collection of standards rendered in Hollywood's characteristic orchestral idiom of the 1940s with a few drawn explicitly from film noir soundtracks, such as Johnny Mercer's "Laura" from Otto Preminger's *Laura* (1944) and Frank Loesser's "Spring Will Be A Little Late This Year" from Robert Siodmak's *Christmas Holiday* (1944), all with accompanying vocals by Simon and an orchestral ambience self-consciously designed to evoke classical Hollywood noir. *Songs in Shadow* works to recreate a period sense of recording a film soundtrack as we see Simon, producer Jimmy Webb, and the session musicians in rehearsal