

Censoring and Selling Film Noir

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Analysed retrospectively, film noir is not a genre, but a style influencing many different genres¹. French critics Nino Frank and Jean-Pierre Chartier coined the term film noir (black film) in 1946, recognizing a series of American crime pictures notable for their censorable nature and violent eroticism. In the United States, by 1944 industry analysts observed the “red meat” crime cycle, not yet called film noir (Stanley, 1944: X1; Biesen, 2005: 1). Archive records indicate censors considered these films provocative, salacious and “sordid”. Hollywood studios walked a fine line between appearing to comply with Hays Office Production Code censorship while simultaneously pushing the envelope of its moral constraints, then hyping and sensationalizing censorable sex, violence and hard-hitting themes to sell noir films to the public². In fact, studios capitalized on the explicit

¹ Because historians and critics defined the ‘*film noir*’ category retrospectively, we are analysing the film context from a retrospective point of view, and in the 1940s noir films were not classified as a single genre (that is, Alfred Hitchcock thought of *Suspicion* as a psychological thriller, Warner Bros marketed *White Heat* as a gangster film, moviegoers attended *Double Indemnity* expecting a melodrama). French critics Nino Frank (1946), Jean-Pierre Chartier (1946), Raymonde Borde and Etienne Chaumeton (1955, 2002) were influential in coining the term *film noir* widely adopted in the 1970s by cineastes such as Paul Schrader in “Notes on Film Noir” (1972). Like Schrader and Alain Silver, I consider film noir a style rather than a single genre.

² Censorship mediated the production of film noir. Louis Althusser suggests the seamless, sutured, realist cinematic text (classical Hollywood style with seamless, invisible editing in narrative films without gaps, fis-

nature of noir pictures in publicity contradicting assurances of censorial compliance. Film noir responded to Production Code censorship and other regulatory factors, including Office of War Information (OWI), Bureau of Motion Pictures restrictions on Hollywood screen depictions of the domestic American home front (or overseas combat front), and Office of Censorship strictures such as a wartime ban on screen gangsters as 'un-American' for propaganda purposes in World War II-era noir films centering on criminals³. This regulatory climate catalyzed the development of film noir, a dark cycle of shadowy 1940s-50s crime films that boomed during World War II and evolved over the postwar era. I will investigate primary archival records – scripts, publicity, memos from writers, directors, producers and censors – to compare how film noir was censored and sold.

Hollywood's moral blueprint for industry censorship, the Production Code, written in 1930, discouraged sex, violence and illicit activities in crime pictures such as gangster yarns and film noir. Loosely followed in the early 1930s, the Production Code was enforced by 1934 when Hollywood's trade association, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) led by Will Hays, founded the Production Code Administration (PCA), known as the Hays Office headed by chief censor Joseph Breen.

Violence and political content shunned by the Production Code was allowed during the war to promote propaganda in *Casablanca*

suers, contradictions) as the most insidious form of ideological dominance (Althusser 1970, 1971). Post-structuralist film theory thus calls for a self-reflexive display of the process of film construction to highlight this mediation to distance, defamiliarize and encourage spectator disengagement from indoctrinating cultural production as ideologically inscribed subjects from texts through the dominant mode of representation.

³ These multiple censorship entities often collided. For more on OWI propaganda, see Clayton Koppes and Gregory Black (1987); for more on Office of Censorship banning gangsters, see Biesen (2005).

(1942), *This Gun For Hire* (1942) and *Ministry of Fear* (1945)⁴. By 1943-44 Washington's Office of Censorship allowed newsreels of atrocities to further propaganda aims, setting a precedent that paved the way for grislier, hard-hitting content in noir films. *Double Indemnity* (1944) was set before the war to avoid federal OWI censorship. As the war ended, Raymond Chandler's original idea for *The Blue Dahlia* (1946), where a brain-injured returning serviceman commits murder but experiences psychotic amnesia, was censored. Instead, the murderer was changed to a house detective who was a former cop, violating the Production Code's preference for respecting law authority figures.

Censorship/propaganda aims shaped Hollywood noir films and how they were sold to filmgoers⁵. What was shown on screen was usually not nearly as suggestive as the way noir motion pictures were promoted. Movie attendance boomed during the war and peaked in 1946, coinciding with the apex of film noir production. Film-going crowds did not magically appear: studios relentlessly promoted their films, using trailers, posters, print ads, lobby cards, press books, radio spots, promotional tie-ins, gossip, and planted stories about the stars and pictures. In the case of film noir, these promotions often ran counter to the spirit of the Production Code values supposedly embraced by the studios. The objective here was to sell the film through sex, violence – often sexualized violence – and exploit the fact that the industry's Advertisizing Code for publicity was far more lenient than the Production Code. The result was a series of salacious "red meat" publicity campaigns.

Ads for Paramount's 1942 Graham Greene noir adaptation *This Gun For Hire* pondered «Kiss Her or Kill Her... Wich will he do?», suggesting star Alan Ladd's assassin Raven might murder alluring blonde Veronica Lake rather than romance her. Publicity quoted Lake:

⁴ The promotion of propaganda in wartime classical Hollywood films seems to validate Althusser's theories regarding the censorial mediation of films (1970, 1971).

⁵ This censorship/propaganda mediation also suggests Althusser's analysis (1970, 1971).

«24 hours in an abandoned shack with a professional killer with a gun and without a conscience... A guy with ice where his heart should be».

This hard-boiled misogyny in *This Gun For Hire* invoked a more brutal combat mentality as men, including Ladd, went off to serve in World War II. In fact, Paramount promoted *This Gun For Hire* as a patriotic gangster film that featured cold violence and a criminal antihero who aids the Allied war effort. Moreover, early noir films like *This Gun For Hire*, *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941) and Alfred Hitchcock's *Suspicion* (1941) were produced when Breen temporarily left the PCA for a year from 1941-42 and shifted from censor to RKO studio executive publicizing *Suspicion*.

After directing his first Hollywood film, the female gothic thriller *Rebecca* (1940), Hitchcock adapted Frances Iles' novel *Before the Fact*, retitled *Suspicion*, about a young wife Lina who is murdered by her mysterious husband Johnnie with a poisoned glass of milk. The book's ending violated the Production Code and censor Breen's 'Compensating Moral Values' clause, requiring justice and retribution for cinematic crimes. That is, if screen characters engaged in crime, they had to be punished, die or go to prison, often awaiting their fate at the electric chair. This contributed to some gruesome noir and gangster crime picture resolutions, adding to the downbeat finales seen in film noir. In Hitchcock's early female gothic thrillers, as World War II ramped up, these crime films often set their story in an earlier period overseas (as in *Rebecca's* and *Suspicion's* English Cornwall coast) to avoid censorship depicting the American home front during war. Hitchcock casts comedy star Cary Grant as a dangerous antihero in *Suspicion*, opposite naïve ingénue Joan Fontaine, star of *Rebecca*. Hitchcock shot multiple endings for the picture to appease censors. In an alternate patriotic war-related finale, Johnnie joins the RAF rather than killing Lina.

Suspicion's topical propaganda ending was shot instead of the original novel's murder and then changed (to one unrelated to the war) just months before the United States officially entered the conflict abroad. Film viewers in June 1941 previews of *Suspicion* may have felt that the ending in which Cary Grant goes off to war to die was less

than satisfying. Instead, Hitchcock created ambiguity that suggested Lina's suspicions were paranoid machinations. Her subjective point of view is presented as the imaginings of an obsessed wife who suspects that her mysterious husband will murder her.

Breen worked as censor on the film's production in spring 1941, but became executive vice president at RKO making publicity decisions by the fall. RKO was concerned the film would not be successful at the box-office. Preview viewers were resistant to seeing Grant in a role that implied he was a scoundrel, killer or reprobate. *Suspicion* publicized Grant as "strange," "frightening" and "sinister," invoking "fear," "agony" and "terror" in Fontaine who suspects he is a "murderer."

Homicide and fatale attraction were the stuff noir was made of—and studio publicity departments reveled in. For instance, although the Production Code censored excessive violence, ads for *The Maltese Falcon* emphasized brutality and sexuality, featuring Humphrey Bogart's earlier *High Sierra* gangster persona rather than his fedora-clad detective Sam Spade. Unlike the private eye he portrays in the film, the poster image resembles a mean hoodlum as he holds a pair of guns beside a caption «He's a Killer when he Hates!». Dashiell Hammett's tough tale is described as «A story as Explosive as his Blazing automatics!». Like *This Gun For Hire*, it resonated with the violence of war. Noir femme fatale Mary Astor is clad in much more revealing gowns than she actually wears in the film.

The noir film cycle and its source material, such as James M. Cain's hard-boiled stories, caused controversy for their immoral violation of the Production Code and were not initially endorsed by the PCA. It took years for censorial resistance to subside and make it institutionally feasible and industrially lucrative to adapt these noir stories during World War II. Even when noir subjects were produced, they were provocative. Breen was so powerful during the mid-1930s that he was able to ban Cain's gritty novels such as his 1934 *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and 1936 *Double Indemnity* outright from being adapted onscreen. This situation changed as the war years progressed. By 1944 Cain's pulp fiction, prohibited earlier for explicit

sex and violence, was produced with promises from filmmakers and studios that the noir film versions would tastefully comply with the Code. Remarking on the censorable nature of Hollywood hard-boiled adaptations, Fred Stanley of the *New York Times* reported that studios were making “red meat” productions involving stories of «illicit romance and crime» for non-war-related projects, a filmmaking trend catalyzed by Wilder’s adaptation of *Double Indemnity*, at Paramount, promoted as «the chilling masterpiece from the pen of James M. Cain» (Stanley, 1944: X1; Biesen, 2005: 1).

Murder and adulterous affairs (for cash) were recurring themes in these noir films. Their sexual innuendo provided ample intimation of what was censored. Embedding its moral retribution into promotional ads, Paramount publicity for Wilder’s *Double Indemnity* warned, «You Can’t Kiss Away a Murder!». The trailer for *Double Indemnity* opened with a fierce tagline against the blackened nocturnal crime scene of the railroad tracks: “It’s MURDER!” Miklos Rozsa’s ominous score blares. A bloodied dying criminal, insurance agent Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray), confesses into his Dictaphone about committing the evil deed: «Yeah, I killed him. I killed him for money and for a woman». As Neff flashes back to remember his past sordid activities, his point of view subjectively envisions blonde married femme fatale Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwick) in a towel backlit at the top of the stairs looking down at him. Neff explains, in iconic hard-boiled noir style, «I was thinking about that dame upstairs and the way she looked at me». In an atmospheric comingling sex and violence that heightens censorable connotation, he grabs her in the smoky shadows and she kisses him as they lay on a couch, reflecting in voice-over, «How could I have known that murder could sometimes smell like honeysuckle». When they plot to knock off her husband and make off with the insurance loot, he tells the femme, «They’re not gonna hang you, baby... ’cuz you’re gonna do it and I’m gonna help you». A voice-over announcer provides commentary: «Yes! From the Moment they met it was Murder!». Edward G. Robinson as insurance investigator Barton Keyes simulates a private detective by trying to solve the crime. He pursues them with his “devilish” hunches, but the narrator alerted, «They get

away with Murder!». Phyllis grips Neff with a black glove. As Neff hides her behind a door, Keyes threatens the “Dietrichson dame”: «I’d have the cops after her so quick it’d make her head spin». Taglines shout: «Three Great Stars... Clash... Fred MacMurray. Barbara Stanwick. Edward G. Robinson... ‘*Double Indemnity!*’ *Paramount’s Shocking... Suspense-Filled Masterpiece Of Love... And Murder!*».

Billy Wilder’s collaboration with Raymond Chandler in adapting Cain’s *Double Indemnity* was a censorship milestone and a definitive example of film noir. Frank Krutnik describes how Cain’s novels were «secured by the studios because of their success», although they waited for a favorable «representational context» to adapt them (Krutnik 1991: 36). Leonard Leff and Jerold Simmons observed that studios «could never resist a potential blockbuster, much less one that smelled of scandal», so executive Louis B. Mayer «sensed the wind shifting in Hollywood» and MGM resubmitted Cain’s story *The Postman Always Rings Twice* to the PCA in October 1944 (Leff and Simmons, 1990: 130).

In 1944 Cain complained about Production Code censorship and called it “nonsensical” in «its effort to establish a list of rules on how to be decent», arguing that «a studio can obey every one and be salacious – violate them and be decent» (in Hanna, 1944: 11-13). Censorship and a transgressive violation of the Code were a key aspect of film noir’s immense popularity. In fact, the publicity campaigns for both films advertised that they derived from Cain’s fiction rather than, for example, in the case of *Double Indemnity*, referencing director-writer Wilder or co-writer Chandler.

When Warner Bros. submitted *Mildred Pierce* to the PCA for production consideration in February 1944, Breen insisted that there were «so many sordid and repellent elements» in James Cain’s 1941 story that it was «highly questionable» (Breen, 1944: 1). Michael Curtiz’s film managed to satisfy the Hays Office by toning down objectionable aspects in the story, emphasizing the struggle of its heroine, solving a murder mystery, and including a moral resolution that ensures the guilty killer is sent to jail.

For many noir films, publicity reprimanded characters and seemed to emulate the scorn of censors. This only added to their

appeal. Marketing insinuated that Mildred was more of a bad girl than her working redeemer in the film. For example, taglines for *Mildred Pierce* read «The kind of Woman most men want – *But Shouldn't Have!*» and «She knew there was trouble coming – trouble she made for herself – a love affair and a loaded gun... She had no right playing around with either!».

Moreover, even during the war, critics and industry watchers like Stanley recognized the “high mark” of Hollywood’s “red meat” trend in Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer’s intention to film Cain’s *The Postman Always Rings Twice* after shelving the project for ten years. Showcasing stars John Garfield and Lana Turner in a lustful crime yarn, the property was «kept in the studio’s archives until now because (to use a favored Hollywood expression)» of MGM’s «inability to clean it up». Stanley observed, moreover, that this hard-boiled noir trend was proliferating throughout the industry as studios challenged screen censorship (Stanley, 1944: X1).

Noir filmmakers defied and complied with Code censorship in a variety of ways. In adapting Cain’s *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, MGM struck a careful balance in its efforts to appease the demands of censors while testing the limits of Code regulation. Cain’s *The Postman Always Rings Twice* was considered scandalous in 1934 when syndicated columnist Herschel Brickell called it «strong men’s meat and not for those who mind blood and raw lust. It has vigor and economy of method... But its artistic merit won’t keep it from giving the sensitive nightmares» (Brickell 1934, 1982: 596). In the wake of *Double Indemnity* (1944), MGM finally decided to adapt *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946), although it was necessary to tidy the book’s content for censors.

Originally, censor Breen had been “shocked” when MGM purchased Cain’s *The Postman Always Rings Twice* in May 1934. Yet, a decade later as filmmakers adapted hard-boiled fiction in wartime, Breen actually assured religious groups it would “not be offensive”. The film’s femme fatale Lana Turner was clad in white to denote angelic purity. The sets were flooded with an abundance of brightness. MGM director Tay Garnett washed the screen with light to suggest a

more wholesome setting, unlike the chiaroscuro mise-en-scène Billy Wilder used to convey a dark atmosphere of censorable actions in *Double Indemnity*, which evoked a shady milieu with its pitch-black interiors and night shots. However, a married blonde femme fatale still uses sex to lure an antihero to kill her husband for money. Censors made sure they didn't get away with murder and would pay for their evil deeds. Nevertheless, the studio also endeavored to heighten and call attention to the censorable nature of its subject matter. This strategy contradicted its earlier pledges that Cain's story would be «watered down» into a tame cinematic adaptation (Leff and Simmons, 1990: 130-135).

Unlike the censor's mild description of the project to religious leaders, the film version of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* was shot to display abundant skin of femme Cora with tight hot pants, a plunge neckline, bare midriff, high heels and smoldering look in her eye. It was also promoted differently as "torrid" and "too hot to handle". Lana Turner wore a scanty two-piece bathing suit (resembling intimate apparel) and found "Love at Laguna Beach" with hunky, bare-chested John Garfield (in snug swim trunks) who insisted «You must be a she-devil», as he grabs her and she arches back above the crashing surf, a scenario that hinted at far more sex, flesh, and "savage boldness" than is shown in the film. What Breen would reproachfully call "sexually-suggestive" ads and photo spreads were splashed across *Life* magazine to promote MGM's production of *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. Publicity included lobby cards with color photo images of the adulterous near-naked couple in a heated embrace of *Life's* "Love at Laguna Beach" article with the cautionary warning: "Suitable Only For Adults". Posters featured Garfield strangling Turner as he caresses her alongside an insert of the cover of Cain's book and the bold caption: «*The Novel They Said Was Too Daring For Hollywood!*» ("Love at Laguna Beach", 1945).

While the film showed hamburgers scorching on the grill to allegorically convey the sexual chemistry between the stars, publicity could be more explicit about their toxic relationship with taglines «Their Love was a Flame That Destroyed!» describing James Cain's

«Sultry Novel of Love and Violence!». MGM's trailer for *The Postman Always Rings Twice* introduced Turner in hot pants and Garfield with the fiery caption: «He had to have her love... If he hung for it!». Turner's femme fatale Cora tries to convince Garfield's antihero to knock off her husband, declaring: «I'm not what you think I am! I made a big mistake in my life and I've got to be this way just once to fix it».

Such film noir advertising campaigns show how studios utilized the censorable material of these productions to amplify controversy and play up their sex and violent content to lure filmgoers. Leff and Simmons assert that, «The Seal on *The Postman* would close the parenthesis on an era of Code enforcement; it would tell Hollywood to purchase the most salacious books and anticipate Production Code certification» (Leff and Simmons, 1990: 134-135). Ads exploited their taboo concerns and hard-hitting topics to tantalize theatergoers in hopes of attracting a wider audience.

Noir films and their publicity revealed a distinction between major studio releases and lower-budget independent productions that had a different relation to the Production Code Administration and different publicity strategies. In stark contrast to noir releases at major studios, low-budget noir B films such as Poverty Row PRC's *Detour* (1945) did not have the lavish resources for a splashy publicity spread in *Life* magazine or the huge stars of MGM's more expensive production of *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. Noir films like *Detour* and *Scarlet Street* (1945) included an abundance of censorable content.

As gender roles changed from wartime to postwar, gender images shifted in noir films' depictions of violence against women, whether it was the sexually independent femme fatales in *Scarlet Street*, *Gilda* (1946), *Ace in the Hole* (1951) and *Affair in Trinidad* (1952), or the more passive 'redeemers' in gothic thrillers like *Suspicion* and *My Name is Julia Ross* (1945). 1949 noir *Act of Violence* channeled women from 'transgressive' femme fatales or gangster molls into nurturing domestic partners of tormented veterans while reimagining World War II-era crimes as an allegory for the Cold War.

Intent on suggesting illicit censorable content, horror conventions were invoked to promote noir films. *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940) featured 'demon lighting' on mysterious sociopath stranger Peter Lorre that hinted at censurably horrific murderous delights. Horror style ad campaigns were also used for gothic murder thrillers like *Suspicion*, *My Name is Julia Ross*, and masculine noir melodrama *Act of Violence*. *My Name is Julia Ross*, for instance, was called an eerie mystery with a haunted mansion and a «nightmare of terror».

However, there were limits regarding noir publicity: 1947's *Kiss of Death* shows a dead body on the poster, but it avoids the most notorious scene where Richard Widmark viciously murders an elderly woman in a wheelchair by pushing her down the stairs as she pleads for her life. While ads applied horror conventions to a stylized chiaroscuro-lit Victor Mature as the film's tortured detective, studio publicity doesn't highlight breakout star Widmark who steals the picture as the cackling psychopathic hoodlum. After the war, in the absence of Hollywood's wartime censorship of gangsters, noir pictures resurrected crime narratives where flawed antiheroes mingle with the mob.

Even social-realist noir productions showcased censorable brutality or sexual innuendo in selling the films with provocative promotions. Postwar message pictures included Edward Dmytryk's acclaimed 1947 film *Crossfire* in which the PCA censored homosexuality and a lethal homophobic hate crime. Accordingly, the story was changed to revolve around a brutal anti-Semitic murder committed by a bigoted veteran, which was especially topical in the context of the Nazi holocaust in the aftermath of World War II. While publicity images for *Crossfire* revealed gun-toting tough guys in fedoras and Gloria Grahame's cigarette-smoking dance-hall dame to connote hard-boiled noir, ads heralded: «Sensational?... No, It's Dynamite!». RKO gave hate crime violence a social-realist spin with the tagline: «Hate is like a loaded gun».

Similarly, posters for social-realist 1947 noir *Body and Soul* featured star boxer John Garfield and an array of beautiful women in sexually alluring poses with such taglines as «The story of a guy

women go for! *Body and Soul!*». With sexy dames and lawyer-turned-racketeer Garfield firing a gun, ads for 1948's *Force of Evil* promoted «MGM's Inside Story of Gambling on Numbers! John Garfield puts his Body and Soul into *Force of Evil!*». In Robert Wise's 1947 noir *Born to Kill*, murderous Lawrence Tierney, a smoldering cigarette hanging from his grim lips, and dangerous sexualized femme Claire Trevor are labeled, «Bullet-Man and Silken Savage...». Wise's masculine 1949 noir *The Set-Up* was called "Sensational" and "Muscular."

MGM's title for Fred Zinnemann's 1949 *Act of Violence* implies more censorable violence than in the film, which is more psychologically haunting with its social-realist message about World War II-era war crimes that provide an allegory about the Cold War Red Scare. The publicity also taps horror and suspense thriller conventions. Loew's Criterion ad for *Act of Violence* reads, «The Killer with the Limp Arrives Today!! Night and day he stalks his prey. Slowly, surely his shadow of doom darkens the life of his terrified victim». After betraying his men by informing in a Nazi POW camp, Van Heflin's conflicted veteran has become «The Hunted! What suddenly made him a fugitive?». Robert Ryan's menacing disabled veteran antagonist is «The Hunter! He came from nowhere to avenge!». Ads for *Act of Violence* targeted war veterans and their wives in the suburbs, as depicted in the film, with mysterious taglines: «One morning Frank kissed me goodbye... and everything was as it always had been. That evening, he came home with horror in his eyes... and told me things that changed my life forever».

As a World War II veteran stands in the night on the tracks before a blaring oncoming train and attempts suicide, a trailer roars: «'Act Of Violence'! Van Heflin Clashes With Robert Ryan...». Heflin punches a limping Ryan in a trench coat, «and *Three Women Cross Their Evil Path!*». Nonetheless, the noir film was a male melodrama where the female roles are sidelined as redeemers rather than sexually independent femme fatales. The noir setting has moved from the urban jungle to suburban main street USA.

Selling rough sex and weapons, lobby cards for Joseph Lewis' low-budget 1950 noir *Gun Crazy*, independently produced by the King

Bros., released through United Artists, and originally called *Deadly Is the Female*, lauded its “Bonnie and Clyde”-style fugitive noir fatale as: «She Believes in Two Things... *love and violence!*» and unlike her more scrappy androgynous garb in the film she wears a strapless split-skirt gown. Ads blazed: «Thrill Crazy! Kill Crazy! Gun Crazy!». Peggy Cummins’ blonde skin-tight sweater-clad femme fatale was more masculine, wearing a black beret with a cigarette dangling from her mouth and both hands holding loaded phallic pistols cocked and ready to fire. As its alternate title, *Deadly Is the Female*, alluded to, publicity was all about targeting men (such as an abundance of returned World War II veterans as the nation was on the precipice of the Korean conflict) with sex and violence and women with a strong independent, androgynous female. As in earlier censorable “red meat” wartime crime films, it promoted the film’s ruthless femme fatale as a blonde bombshell – «The Flaming Life and Loves of the Most Infamous of All Female Outlaws! From Her Crimson Lips... to the Blazing Tips of Her Gun... She’s *Boxoffice!* Blazing, Blasting Life Story of Laurie Starr the Lethal Blonde! Wanted In A Dozen States! Hunted by the FBI! *Gun Crazy*. Daring! Devastating! Men Were A Dime A Dozen to Laurie Starr!» – and noted the outlaw couple’s «tempestuous love affair» intertwined with crime in a fusion of sex with violence. Even low-budget 1950 B noir *Quicksand* promoted antihero Mickey Rooney as «A Guy who Yields to Temptation Just Once...And Finds It’s Once Too Often!».

Like the bold risk-taking in independently produced noir pictures, in the postwar era, amid an evolving Cold War culture industry and a series of ideological propaganda objectives, film noir protagonists increasingly shifted from the criminals of wartime 1940s noir to beleaguered postwar antiheroes and returning veterans, and eventually to infallible FBI crime fighters and government employees by the late 1940s and 1950s. In 1955, Raymonde Borde and Etienne Chaumeton regarded film noir’s defiant tendency to challenge the strictures of screen censorship. They contrasted the iconic subjective perspective in film noir – which was distinguished by a «different angle of vision» concerning corruption «from within, from the

criminals'» point of view centering on a «whole host of angelic killers, neurotic gangsters, megalomaniac gang bosses», and «disturbing or depraved stooges» – with later, more documentary-oriented crime films such as the police procedural which «considers the murder from without, from the official police viewpoint» (Borde and Chaumeton, 1955, 2002: 6-29, 135). Earlier wartime 1940s noir films, originally about criminals and focused on narratives told from an antiheroic point of view, were eventually superseded by Cold War films that revolved around crime-fighting cops enforcing the law and projected an all-powerful federal government. Lewis' *The Undercover Man* (1949) was promoted as an “inside story” not about a crime mind but about a “U.S. investigation” by G-man protagonist Glenn Ford (inspired by treasury agent Elliot Ness) and documenting his method of catching a gangster like Al Capone.

As noir morphed into Cold war crime films and police procedurals, films unveiled a myriad crime-fighting network of government agencies and laboratories to crack down on wrongdoers. In semi-documentary style, they showed the office buildings and federal headquarters in Washington or vast metropolises like New York City as in *The Naked City* (1948), *The Enforcer* (1951), *The Thief* (1952), or Los Angeles, as in the TV series *Dragnet* (1951-59), adapted as a film in 1954. The police “cop on the beat” is shown to be part of a vast crime-fighting, scientific organization.

In a changing studio system after the war, the film industry's trade organization, the MPPDA, was renamed the Motion Picture Association of America and longtime head Will Hays stepped down in 1945. Hays' successor Eric Johnston had no appetite for unsavory noir pictures by 1947. In fact, in the growing Cold War climate following the conflict, by 1950 studio executives such as Darryl Zanuck were less enthusiastic about downbeat crime films, warning that their box-office risk should be avoided.

As Dana Polan argues, *The Naked City*, produced by Mark Hellinger and directed by Jules Dassin, is «the flip side of film noir» (Polan 2007). Acclaimed for its realistic documentary-style locales of New York, *The Naked City*, shot on location in 1947 and released in

1948, was promoted by Universal not as a story in noir tagline fashion about lust, murder, or “red meat” criminals, but rather – in a comparatively tame manner – as a “truthful” and “exciting” story that depicts a safe, reassuring postwar world where the cops are the heroes (telling the story from their point of view) and authorities ultimately restore order by apprehending criminals – a pleasing resolution for censors.

By 1951, Bogart was no longer a 1930s gangster or hard-boiled 1940s noir loner, but rather a crime-fighting law man in *The Enforcer*, trying to get a hoodlum to testify and inform on ‘Murder Inc.’ Bogart was promoted in the United States Pictures production released by Warner Bros. as an everyman beating the bad guys: «The Hero of this story is the Fighting District Attorney of this City – and Every City!». Lobby cards proclaimed: «They called him The Enforcer... Here is the story of the man who matched himself against a nationwide network of ‘killers-for-hire’ ... the first story of the Double-Fisted D.A. who Tore Apart the Evil Dynasty that peddled Murder for a Price!». Mobilizing mob slang such as “contract,” “hit,” “troop,” and “finger” as “the most vicious words in crimedom”, one caption reads as Bogie holds his arm out and fires a gun: «If you’re smart you’ll come in – If you’re dumb you’ll be dead». Lobby card images included swaggering tough guy DA Bogart next to a cop, arresting mobsters, punching criminals, grabbing and collaring crooks, and protecting society streets while a girl witness looks down to evade the network of hoodlums. Unlike the censorship of the World War II years, gangsters and crime fighters were everywhere and noir style crime films were now flooded with light with sunny outdoor environs shot on location. Femme fatales had become more submissive redeemers on the edges of virile masculine melodramas involving lawbreaking.

Noir crime films had come a long way from Ladd’s assassin Raven in *This Gun For Hire*. As film censorship, the motion picture industry, and postwar audiences changed in the Cold War, by 1959 Wise’s noir style heist film *Odds Against Tomorrow* foreshadowed an apocalyptic future in the atomic era. Its trailer promoted the film as «This is More Than a Story... It’s an Explosion!» with images of a bomb

blowing up in what resembles a huge atomic blast and mushroom cloud that evoked nuclear trauma and a bleak Armageddon.

After *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), self-reflexively promoted as “A Hollywood Story” and “a most unusual picture” – “Sensational... Daring... Unforgettable!”, with celluloid stars Gloria Swanson and William Holden in a crazed embrace against a splash of scarlet red, Paramount was unable to promote the scathing social critique of *Ace in the Hole* (1951), Billy Wilder’s last film noir before moving into comedy, even after the studio vainly changed its title to *The Big Carnival* (without consulting Wilder, who produced the film). Both *Sunset Boulevard* and *Ace in the Hole* were considered very provocative, especially given their unvarnished portrayal of the Hollywood film industry and a sensationalized media, despite the fact that, on paper, they conformed to the constraints of the Production Code. In a changing postwar motion picture industry, Supreme Court rulings, such as the 1948 Paramount antitrust decision (a case that had been reopened in 1944, ultimately breaking up the classical studio system over the course of the 1950s) and 1952 *Miracle Decision*⁶ (granting motion pictures First Amendment free speech protection), would further weaken the Code and its enforcement as a *dis-integrated* Hollywood studio system unraveled.

In fact, PCA chief Breen left the Hays office in 1954 and the Code itself became more lenient in 1956, during the reign of Breen’s predecessor Geoffrey Shurlock, as film noir ebbed. Many films such as Joseph Lewis’ 1955 *The Big Combo* revealed greater latitude in screen content amid an increasingly lax era of Production Code enforcement. Released, after Breen’s departure, by Allied Artists (formerly low-budget “poverty row” Monogram), independently produced *The Big Combo* included a torture scene, allusions to oral sex, homosexuality, and sadistic gangsters – all of which were considered shocking

⁶ The *Miracle Decision* judgment passed into history spurred by Roberto Rossellini’s *The Miracle* (1948), a title outside the noir tradition. These censorial developments also recover Althusser’s analysis regarding the mediation of films (1970, 1971).

transgressions of the Code's moral strictures. Publicity called it: «The most startling story the screen has ever dared reveal!». Yet, ironically, as screen regulation eased regarding cinematic portrayals of formerly taboo subjects, the film actually implied more censorable deeds than the relatively subdued publicity. Ads featured gangster Richard Conte kissing his strapless-gowned mistress Jean Wallace on the neck rather than any tawdry sexual encounter (its star and producer was Wallace's husband, Cornel Wilde, who was also featured prominently in publicity).

In the absence of wartime censorship, postwar noir films revived the provocative underworld of gangsters and heightened illegal activity. Like Conte's mobster in *The Big Combo*, James Cagney's volatile cold-blooded psychotic hoodlum Cody Jarrett stirs up brutal mayhem until he goes down in a fiery blaze of glory in Warner Bros.' noir gangster picture *White Heat* (1949), directed by Raoul Walsh. Posters featured menacing *Public Enemy* fugitive Cagney looking fierce firing his guns. Independent United Artists release, Stanley Kubrick's *The Killing* (1956), was promoted «In All Its Fury and Violence... Like No Other Picture Since *Scarface* and *Little Caesar!*». *Kansas City Confidential* (1953) was called: «The picture that hits with *Bullet Force* and *Blackjack Fury!*». Lobby cards for *Nightfall* (1956) highlighted noir sex and violence as ads proclaimed, «On a night made for Lovers... and Killers... Between dusk and dawn... sheer terror – and rapture... in the story of an innocent fugitive... a pick-up girl... and killers stalking a black bag with \$350,000 in loot!».

Postwar noir films such as Fritz Lang's *The Big Heat* promoted cops, gangsters, and misogynistic violence toward their molls with returning vet detective Glenn Ford roughly grabbing Gloria Grahame: «Somebody's Going To Pay... because he forgot to kill me...» and «Vice... Dice... and Corruption!». Even in 1953 the violence depicted in the publicity does not include hoodlum Lee Marvin's scalding and scarring his mistress Grahame's face with boiling coffee or explosively blowing up Ford's wife as in the film. Other noir pictures sported sensational B-movie taglines as in the ads for 1953's *Cry of the Hunted* which screamed «Two Dangerous Men Lured Into the Mysterious

Bayou by an Exciting Swamp Girl!» in «MGM's drama of Love and Thrills in the dangerous waters of the Louisiana Bayous! This is the *Cry of the Hunted!*».

Like a low-budget B-grade teen exploitation flick, taglines were even wilder for Robert Aldrich's 1955 noir *Kiss Me Deadly*, released after Breen retired from the PCA, and considered by many to be one of the late great noir films as the cycle declined in the 1950s. With suggestive innuendo that would no doubt make the former-censor's head spin, ads raucously declared «I Don't Care What You Do To Me, Mike – Just Do It Fast!» and «Blood-Red Kisses! White-Hot Thrills! Mickey Spillane's Latest H-Bomb!». In this cocktail of sex and violence in the atomic era, Ralph Meeker grabs and kisses his partially bare, alluringly clad amore with a gun (and skin-tight leopard pants). While the film was sold with hard-boiled sexual appeal, it also included harsh violence.

In addition to the famous explosive atomic finale recognized by film critics as projecting nuclear fears in the Cold War era, the opening of *Kiss Me Deadly* is wonderfully experimental⁷. Credits scroll in reverse from the bottom of the screen toward a distant z-axis point at the top, shot with a fish-eye lens as Meeker's detective Mike Hammer zooms around in the pitch-black night in his convertible sports car that screeches to a stop and runs off the road when Cloris Leachman appears out of nowhere running fearfully from someone. Although Leachman is partially dressed, she is clad only in a trench coat with bare feet on the dirt road in the dark and it is clear she has nothing on underneath. Her heavy, breathless panting through the credits are much louder than the thin strains of Nat King Cole on the radio and convey sexual exertion rather than arduous running. When they stop at a gas station, the attendant knowingly implies that they have been having sex on the side of the road, when in fact it is revealed that she is fleeing an insane asylum pursued by frightening entities. In fine noir style, suggesting censorable violence, these mysterious lethal thugs

⁷ For more on *Kiss Me Deadly*, see Schrader (1972), and Silver (1996).

intercept Mike and Christina, knock him out and viciously beat her to death off-screen as she screams her lungs out kicking wildly while they torture her. Who are they? Gangsters? The government? Authorities from the asylum? A Cold War enemy? It is not clear, but it is a deeply disturbing sequence. Something is clearly wrong in this troubling Cold War noir universe which is lacking any of the compensating moral values Breen championed during his 20-year tenure as Production Code censor from 1934-54. *Kiss Me Deadly* is highly visceral, modernist in its provocative nature, challenging the audience while exploring stark lapses in PCA censorship in a new post-Breen Cold War era a decade after the war years.

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