Rerunning Film Noir

As Americans embraced the future after World War II, they entertained themselves with cinematic visions of mean streets and sordid pasts. The tale of film noir's rise and fall has a few twists of its own.

BY RICHARD SCHICKEL

Sometime right after the end of World War II, they staged a parade in Milwaukee, where I was uneasily entering adolescence. The theme of the event was "Don't Buy Another Depression." Ads for it featured a shiny apple, a reminder of the fruit some people had desperately sold for a nickel on street corners in the previous decade.

I was too young to understand the anti-inflation message. Two other attractions drew me to the parade. One was its grand marshal, Jim Thorpe, the great Native American athlete who had been stripped of his Olympic medals because he had taken a few dollars for playing semipro baseball, a punishment my father (and everyone else I knew) thought was mean-spirited and hypocritical. The other was that the parade was to feature large inflatables (get it—inflation: inflatables?) of the kind that were the heart of the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade in New York.

The event proved to be a disappointment. The day was cold and windy, and the march down Wisconsin Avenue was rather paltry: two or three high school bands, about the same number of big balloons. Jim Thorpe was indeed on view—waving genially to the sparse crowd—but in retrospect, of course, the occasion seems even more pointless. We didn't buy another depression; we bought (and bought) the longest period of prosperity America has ever known, one that extends to this day and has encompassed virtually my entire senescent lifetime.

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It might seem odd to evoke this silly parade to introduce a piece about film noir, but hear me out. Noir, at that same historical moment, was establishing itself as *the* American movie genre, the predominant style, both visual and narrative, of almost all our seriously intended films, whether or not their subject was crime, in the first postwar decade. There's some dispute about what the first noir film was, but in my opinion the first truly great one was 1944's *Double Indemnity,* which displayed most of the genre's stylistic tics and narrative tricks. Among the classics that followed, we'd have to name *Out of the Past, The Big Sleep, The Big Heat,* and literally hundreds of others—with their seductive women and seducible men, their betrayal-upon-betrayal plots, and their wee-hour lighting.

Noir, despite its Frenchified name, is a truly American form, as Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward observe in *Film Noir: An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style* (1979). Yes, many of its leading directors (Fritz Lang, Billy Wilder, Jacques Tourneur, André de Toth) were born in Europe and well versed in expressionism. But their source—often directly, always at least indirectly—was the American crime fiction of Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain, W. R. Burnett, and others. Almost all noir actors and many of the directors' significant collaborators (cameramen, editors, etc.) were American born and certainly American trained.

How, then, to square the dark visual and psychological designs of this thoroughly American genre with the general mood of the country in the immediate postwar years?

A new girl and an honest job can't rescue Jeff Bailey, played by Robert Mitchum, from his former life in the 1947 noir classic *Out of the Past*.

Screenwriter and director Paul Schrader thought that was easy. In his seminal 1972 article "Notes on *Film Noir*," he wrote, "The disillusionment many soldiers, small businessmen and housewife/factory employees felt in returning to a peacetime economy was directly mirrored in the sordidness of the urban crime film. . . . The war continues, but now the antagonism turns with a new viciousness toward the American society itself." I've never seen this rather casual bit of sociology disputed, mostly because the many commentators on noir tend to focus on specific films, with little interest in the society that produced them.

Granted, there were a number of movies, especially in the mid-1940s, about servicemen returning to civilian life to find that their wives or girlfriends had betrayed them, or that they had been cheated out of their pre-war jobs or prospects by scheming former associates. Sometimes, lingering issues from their military years had to be resolved in civilian life. And tainting the nation's overall mood were the Bomb, McCarthyism, and, on the Korean peninsula, our first muscular confrontation with communism. All of these matters were touched upon in the movies, though not often in pictures we can clearly identify as film noirs.

But despite these clouds, the good times were starting to roll, particularly for the middle class. A number of books, television shows, and films nostalgically recall this period as the last "American High" (to quote the title of one popular history)—an era when we bustled heedlessly forward, spending freely, optimistically, on everything from the new lake cottage, complete with powerboat, to European vacations, to better educations for our children, and forget those darned Russkies.

Let me return to that 1946 parade. What it was addressing was not our promising future but our dark and anxious past. It was simplistically suggesting that the inflationary 1920s had so overheated our economy and our expectations that we had stupidly "bought" the inevitable retribution of the Depression. In other words, the parade, like film noir, was directing our attention backward, not forward. After the war, we were not so much disillusioned by our prospects as giddily illusioned by them, and the message of film noir was curiously at odds with the national mood.

Noir films, with their greatly intensified visual style and their stress on perverse psychology, weren't reflecting our misery in a peacetime economy, as Schrader suggests. Instead, their aims were quite different (don't forget, they were meant to entertain). For one, they were trying to give the traditional crime film a new lease on life—particularly in the way it represented the city's place in the postwar world. Somewhat more originally, they were placing a new stress on the power of the past—something most of us thought we had buried—to reach out and twist our fates when we least expected that to happen.

Noir is a rich genre, and I don't want to imply that these were the only themes it took up. They are, however, the two I find the most interesting. Let me begin with the metropolis. In the early 1930s, it had been portrayed in grimly realistic terms—in gangster pictures and in a surprising number of movies about the working poor, struggling to survive. But by the late '30s, the city had by and large become a much happier and more promising place—penthouses, white telephones, dressing for dinner—a setting for romantic comedies and Fred Astaire–Ginger Rogers musicals. It was a place where young provincials came to escape the narrowing constraints of their small-town pasts.

After the war, however, the city's glamour became much darker and more menacing. Noir quickly noted the gathering flight to the suburbs and the countryside. Or, at least, the desire of many people to join that flight. The genre began to offer this dichotomy: the suburbs as a clean, spare, safe, if not very interesting place to love a plain little woman and to raise healthy, normal children, versus the city, whose glamour was at once more menacing and more tempting than it had ever been. This new noir mise en scène (rain-wet streets, blinking neon signs, fog-enshrouded alleys) often gave the metropolis the aspect of a wounded beast. It was either attempting to entangle people who thought they had made their escape from it, or it was obliging these refugees to return to its mean streets in order to free themselves of some past terror or transgression that now haunted their dreams of happiness.

Two crucial noir sequences illustrate this point: One occurs in Fritz Lang's *The Big Heat* (1953), in which we find Glenn Ford, giving one of his typical mumbling, stumbling, imitation-Method performances, as a cop investigating the local criminal syndicate. Off duty, he lives with his wife (Jocelyn Brando) and child in suburban primness. This is quite novel—until then, most movie cops were duty obsessed and not permitted "normal" lives. But one morning, Ford's wife borrows his automobile and is blown up by

a car bomb intended for him, permanently shattering the illusion of peaceful anonymity the couple had embraced. More colorfully, in a more self-consciously "artistic" way, the noir city was sometimes seen as something like the hellmouth in medieval mystery plays, yawning, fiery, ever ready to swallow sinner or innocent. In King Vidor's *Beyond the Forest* (1949), Bette Davis's character, murderous and sexually voracious, is shown wandering Chicago's streets, clawed at or, worse, treated with indifference by its heedless denizens in a brilliantly orchestrated portrayal of urban cruelty.

Such expressionistic sequences were slightly feverish attempts to imbue the city with a power it no longer had. In the real postwar America, the city was increasingly viewed as a place we were putting behind us, a locale of disorganized rather than organized crime—of small-scale muggings and large-scale slum clearances. Daddy was now, in popular culture, the Organization Man or the Man in the Gray Flannel Suit. He might still visit the metropolis in order to earn a living, and we were encouraged to worry about its sapping effect on his soul. But at five o'clock, he beat a hasty retreat to his safe suburban haven.

Noirs doubtless overstressed the city's menace and perverse seductiveness. And they perhaps underestimated the bucolic attractions of the hinterlands. Moviemakers are, at heart, melodramatists. In a curious way, their defense of the city's power was a defense of the turf they had always loved better than they did, say, the backyard barbecue, and sex in the city is much more exciting to them—and perhaps to us—than suburban adultery.

Two noir films particularly underscore the residual yet still-potent malevolence of the postwar city. One is John Huston's *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950), the title of which accurately and colorfully suggests the director's vision of the sordid and labyrinthine city, clutching at his antiheroic protagonist (that hardest of movie hard guys, Sterling Hayden) as he tries for one big, final score that will buy his way back to the sylvan horse country of his idealized boyhood—a goal he realizes only in an ironic-tragic way.

The other is Jacques Tourneur's masterly *Out of the Past* (1947), which, as it opens, shows its protagonist, Jeff Bailey, played by Robert Mitchum at the peak of his doomy-romantic powers, as an urban escapee running a gas station at a spare desert crossroads, his mysteriously wounded self apparently on the mend and romantically involved with a plain but sensible local woman. In noir, however, you can run but you can never hide, and his former criminal associates find him. Jeff is forced to recall his past in the long flashback that forms the film's central passage, which takes place in a hellishly realized San Francisco, where our protagonist's every encounter is with a liar or a betrayer.

In both of these films, the leading figures are old enough to know better than to succumb to their dark side. But another fairly standard noir conceit was to place less worldly victims at the center of a corrupt urban environment—young folks struggling to find a better life, but being dragged back into the urban nightmare. A good example is Anthony Mann's 1947 poverty row film *Railroaded,* made before he moved up the Hollywood ranks to produce more-polished noirs such as the beautifully styled *Side Street* (1950), which, incidentally, also takes up the theme of innocents desperate to escape the clutching city.

SEX IN THE CITY is much more exciting to moviemakers—and perhaps to us—than suburban adultery.

In *Railroaded,* a nice young man named Steve Ryan has his car stolen, and it is then used in the commission of a murderous crime. Falsely accused of the deed—the lad lives with his mother and sister and was puttering peacefully in his garage when the crime occurred—Steve is jailed, and it is up to his sister and a good cop who was once romantically interested in her (and soon will be again) to clear him. The Ryan family lives on a modest, shady street in a trim little house, well away from the corrupt center of the city.

But that suburban idyll won't be sustained if Duke Martin, played by John Ireland, the only actor in the film who may have some dim claim on your memory, has anything to do with it. He's the crime's mastermind, and he represents a new kind of movie villain. His habit is to perfume his bullets and lovingly polish his revolver before dispatching his

Suburban boredom drives *Pitfall*'s Dick Powell into the arms of Lizabeth Scott, but a menacing Raymond Burr is more excitement than he bargained for.

victims. (He incidentally wants Steve's sister, and in one delicious sequence, in which she tries to entrap him into admitting his crime, she dresses up like a noir tart and pretends to seduce him in a nightclub.)

In the past, crime movie miscreants had mostly been dull brutes, with the genially demonic James Cagney the notable exception. There had been no psychosexual component to their criminal calculations. Now these creeps were everywhere. In 1947, the same year *Railroaded* was released, Richard Widmark famously pushed the old lady in the wheelchair down the stairs in *Kiss of Death*, and Raymond Burr was a sadistic nightclub owner in Mann's very good *Desperate*—his work with a hot chafing dish prefiguring Lee Marvin's more famous disfiguring of Gloria Grahame with a hot coffeepot in *The Big Heat*.

These characters are personifications of the evil city, suggesting that its dark nights hold deeper menaces than a few guys planning some dimwit heist or other. They also represent the movies' postwar discovery that psychopathy could reach out and maim ordinary lives. Oh, these people were bad—so much badder (and more bent) than movie villains had ever been. At the time, we enjoyed their new styles of transgressiveness, but on the whole they did not present a realistic threat to our well-being.

I agree with Paul Schrader that you can detect an obvious American unease in classic noir, but it is very symbolically represented. Despite the fact that the cars and clothes and furniture are up to date, the world of noir is most often portrayed as a kind of alternative universe—sort of like America, but not quite so. For example, much noir ends, as we've seen, in tragedy. Indeed, I know of no major American genre that so often ends with the people we've been encouraged to sympathize with quite simply—oh, all right, quite complicatedly—dead. But they end up that way not because noir was reflecting what Schrader calls "the acute downer" that hit the United States after the war, but because in these films the past still sometimes exerts a force on their destinies, just as it catches up with Mitchum's character in the aptly named *Out of the Past*.

The past had not been much of a presence in pre-war

movies, in part because the movies had not yet discovered Freudian psychology. Whatever personalities we encountered had been shaped—by the slums, by the orphanage, by mysterious fate—before the movie began. There were few flashbacks, and almost no references to earlier incidents that might condition a character's actions in the present. But once Alfred Hitchcock made the noirish *Spellbound* in 1945, that would no longer do. Explanations were required, and the noir style was ideal for dark dream and memory sequences. Middle-class America might be engaging in mass amnesia, but noir, bless its twisted little heart, could not forget anything.

In my opinion, the best noir to take up the malign influence of the past on the present is Fred Zinnemann's *Act of Violence* (1948). When we meet Frank Enley (the always earnest and generally trustworthy Van Heflin), the small California town where he and his family have taken up residence is celebrating his achievements as a builder of GI housing and nascent civic leader. However, he is being stalked by the dark and limping Joe Parkson (Robert Ryan, without whose brooding presence one sometimes doubts there would have been a film noir genre). Joe intends to kill this paragon, and he terrorizes Frank's wife (a subdued but persuasively scared Janet Leigh, appearing in one of her first films).

At first, we think Joe is just another psycho on the loose, but it turns out that during the war he was assigned to a bomber Frank piloted. When they were shot down and imprisoned in a Nazi camp, most of the crew was killed in an escape attempt that Frank betrayed. Only Joe and Frank survived. Frank's story is that he thought he was saving lives: He had considered the plan doomed and believed the Germans' promise that they would not kill the recaptured escapees. The movie, however, leaves little doubt that he gave up his comrades for more generous rations and better treatment.

Frank is a fully flawed hero, and we quickly realize that we aren't going to discover some redemptive behavior in his past. He will have to redeem himself in the here and now. He attends a builder's convention in Los Angeles, and Joe follows him there. But the convention is a hellish shambles, and it's clear that there's no safety for Frank in its drunken numbers. He stumbles out into the night city, where he meets a hard-used prostitute (a brilliant cameo by Mary Astor) who introduces him to a man who, for a price, will kill Joe. Frank, Joe, and the hired gun meet in a darkened train yard, and Frank, at last, achieves his only available redemptive destiny by taking the bullet meant for Joe.

The film's greatness derives from the several balances it achieves: between the haunted, desperately denying Enley and the half-mad Parkson; between the placidity of the small town and the nightmare energy of the decadent city; between the hope of creating a postwar morality as promising and innocent as a spanking new housing development and the power of dark memory to insist on original sin's remorseless power.

MIDDLE-CLASS AMERICA had amnesia, but noir, bless its twisted little heart, couldn't forget anything.

There is one great (and infuriatingly unavailable, therefore neglected) film that, I think, fits Schrader's theory of the 1940s and early '50s as an American bummer. That is André de Toth's *Pitfall* (1948). The picture begins in, and keeps circling back to, a suburban tract house. The street where the Forbes family—John, Sue, and son Tommy—lives reeks of compromise and conformity; this is the best they can obtain of the American dream. John (Dick Powell) reeks of dissatisfaction, too. He had an unheroic war and now has an unheroic job as an insurance claims adjuster. He and his wife (Jane Wyatt) play in a weekly bridge game, and that's about it for excitement. John talks wistfully about the boat they once dreamed of building and sailing around the world, but that's a lost fantasy. From their curb, the Forbeses can see the city looming in the distance, a vague menace to Sue's fragile happiness and to John's weary compromises.

One day, a private detective named MacDonald, played by the epicene Raymond Burr, appears in John's office. His evidence has put an embezzler in jail, and now he has

traced goods purchased with the money to the embezzler's girlfriend, Mona Stevens (Lizabeth Scott). MacDonald suggests that John go retrieve them. John does so, and finds a hurt, vulnerable woman. Included in her loot is a sassy little motorboat. She gives John a ride in it—it's as close as he's ever going to get to his dreamboat—and that sun-splashed sequence brings him back to life. They begin an affair.

Which is shadowed by a jealous MacDonald. Burr is strangely confident, even domineering, in his scenes with Mona. But of course, MacDonald must terrorize John Forbes, too. He stalks John to his suburban castle, and mercilessly beats him up in his driveway. Later MacDonald returns, murder on his mind, but it's John who kills him. Eventually, John confesses to the whole tangled web of his relationship with MacDonald, and is conditionally forgiven by the police and his employers. The picture ends in cleansing early-morning light, with Sue proposing a fresh start on their marriage. But we leave *Pitfall* without any confidence that the Forbeses' life will regain even its former grousing stability, or that this sequence, despite its implicit ambiguities, is more than a conventional Hollywood ending—its optimistic text runs counter to its much gloomier subtext.

THE SPIRIT OF NOIR has never died. The greatest noir of all, *Chinatown*, did not appear until 1974.

This taut little movie reflects more than any noir film the worminess of the postwar American apple, indicating that the split-level is no anodyne for sexual restlessness or for the anomie of dead-end jobs. The other noirs we have considered are sometimes marked by presumptive postwar optimism; there is often a faint ray of hope in their morning light. But the Forbeses have no meaningful future. They are trapped in the encircling present.

If the Forbeses prefigure anything, it is not the future of noir. Rather, they suggest the kind of restless, unhappy figures in the suburban angst movies of the later 1950s—*No Down Payment, Rebel Without a Cause, All That Heaven Allows, Imitation of Life*. These movies, full of bourgeois misery, much more clearly support Schrader's thesis about the gathering unhappiness over the choices middle-class America made than the noir films of the classic era (roughly 1945–55) do. It took us something like a decade to come to grips with the downside of our suburban exodus.

Half a lifetime ago, after the genuine disillusionment of the 1960s and '70s had set in, I knew several families who were rather like the Forbeses—people who had left the city so their kids could enjoy fresh air and decent schools. The husbands endured their commutes stoically. The wives were culturally restless, perhaps restless in other ways, too. We would visit these refugees on a Sunday, perhaps watch a golf tournament on TV, have a barbecue, and leave at a reasonable hour for the journey home. It is just barely possible to imagine some scarring event in these couples' pasts—an infidelity, perhaps, but one with less than deadly consequences—but even that's a reach. The true tragedy of postwar American life was how ahistorical it was, how quickly those who lived it forgot the war and the Depression, how easily they settled for comfort, routine, and passivity.

This possibly accounts for the fairly abrupt ending of the noir cycle in the mid-1950s. The cities were in a decline more pathetic than menacing, crime was represented in popular culture by the parodistic corporatism of "The Syndicate" (never, in those days, the Mafia), and great, late noirs like *The Sweet Smell of Success* (1957) were first-run failures. It became impossible to imagine deadly melodrama emerging "out of the past" to intrude on our contentment, though we were still several decades from gentrification and its implicit optimism about city living.

The spirit of noir has never fully died. Indeed, the greatest noir of all, *Chinatown*, did not appear until 1974. Then there are the *Godfather* films and HBO's recently concluded series *The Sopranos*. But the former relocated the criminals to the suburbs, and they commuted to work in the city as if they were so many accountants. And the oft-noted genius of *The Sopranos* lies in its normalization of the criminal life. Tony Soprano lives in a New Jersey McMansion, goes to a psychiatrist, and has problems with his children and his wife just like any other suburban pop.

But it has taken well over a half-century for this rep-

When TV crime boss Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini) isn't fighting with his wife (Edie Falco), he's kvetching about his panic attacks to a therapist.

resentative American figure to achieve that condition, as we're reminded when we glimpse the old crime movies and film noirs that often play on the televisions in Tony's home. Ah, those were the days—when screen crime had a certain dark glamour and emerged from a carefully constructed aesthetic context that granted it a power not found at the Bada Bing Club.

A few wistful suburban gangsters aside, film noir is now largely a cult interest for cinephiles and cineastes. But still we must wonder: Was noir simply a way of reanimating the tired conventions of the prewar crime film? Or did we need melodramatic illusions potent enough to overcome whatever disillusions strayed briefly into our minds as we surrendered to the mighty engines of prosperity? Or was it one of those cycles—like biopics, westerns, sci-fi, etc.—that Hollywood mysteriously embraces and then just as mysteriously abandons? Very likely all of these factors account for noir's brief dominance. But today, it is noir's remarkable style that we most revere. What the genre said or did not say about American reality in the late 1940s and early '50s remains much more ambiguous than Paul Schrader and other critics suggest.

In the end, tailfins and picture windows, the NBC peacock and the Boeing 707, became the irresistible forces of the postwar era as it played out—precisely because they didn't seem to be forces at all. They were merely the brave new reality the Organization Man had to deal with. Yes, by the 1960s the war in Vietnam and the struggle for racial equality were roiling the nation, but before that, the discontents of American civilization were modest and local: juvenile delinquency, the dead-end job, the rising divorce rate, the prefeminist restlessness of the American housewife.

These were matters beyond the purview of noir. But still . . . it is possible for us to imagine *Pitfall*'s John and Sue Forbes, older, but not necessarily wiser, in the 1970s, divorced and living in different states, drinking a little too much, perhaps considering the adulterous possibilities in the new couple down the block—and watching nice Raymond Burr on television as Perry Mason and Detective Ironside. Surely that was never him beating John to a pulp out there in the driveway. He must have been the figment of someone's overheated imagination. As indeed he was. ■