



(The version of this handout on the website has color images and hot urls.)

**Directed by** Robert Montgomery  
**Written by** Steve Fisher (screenplay) based on the novel by Raymond Chandler  
**Produced by** George Haight  
**Music by** David Snell and Maurice Goldman (uncredited)  
**Cinematography by** Paul Vogel  
**Film Editing by** Gene Ruggiero  
**Art Direction by** E. Preston Ames and Cedric Gibbons  
**Special Effects by** A. Arnold Gillespie

Robert Montgomery ... Phillip Marlowe  
Audrey Totter ... Adrienne Fromsett  
Lloyd Nolan ... Lt. DeGarmot  
Tom Tully ... Capt. Kane  
Leon Ames ... Derace Kingsby  
Jayne Meadows ... Mildred Havelend  
Dick Simmons ... Chris Lavery  
Morris Ankrum ... Eugene Grayson  
Lila Leeds ... Receptionist  
William Roberts ... Artist  
Kathleen Lockhart ... Mrs. Grayson  
Ellay Mort ... Chrystal Kingsby  
Eddie Acuff ... Ed, the Coroner (uncredited)

**Robert Montgomery (director, actor)** (b. May 21, 1904 in Fishkill Landing, New York—d. September 27, 1981, age 77, in Washington Heights, New York) was nominated for two Academy Awards, once in 1942 for Best Actor in a Leading Role for *Here Comes Mr. Jordan* (1941) and in 1938 for Best Actor in a Leading Role for *Night Must Fall* (1937). He directed 6 films including, 1960 *The Gallant Hours*, 1950 *Eye Witness*, 1949 *Once More, My Darling*, 1947 *Ride the Pink Horse*, 1947 *Lady in the Lake*, 1945 *They Were Expendable* (uncredited; directed a few scenes when John Ford fell ill). He also produced one additional film and two TV series: 1960 *The Gallant Hours*, 1950-1957 *Robert Montgomery Presents* (TV Series, 321 episodes), 1953 *Eye Witness* (TV Series, 13 episodes). Montgomery acted in over 64 films and television shows, among them, 1960 *The Gallant Hours*, 1950 *Eye Witness*, 1949 *Once More, My Darling*, 1947 *Ride the*



*Pink Horse*, 1947 *Lady in the Lake*, 1945 *They Were Expendable*, 1941 *Here Comes Mr. Jordan*, 1939 *Fast and Loose*, 1938 *Three Loves Has Nancy*, 1937 *Ever Since Eve*, 1937 *Night Must Fall*, 1936 *Petticoat Fever*, 1935 *Biography of a Bachelor Girl*, 1934 *Riptide*, 1933 *Night Flight*, 1932 *Faithless*, 1931 *The Man in Possession*, 1931 *Shipmates*, 1930 *War Nurse*, 1930 *Our Blushing Brides*, 1930 *The Big House*, 1929 *Their Own Desire*, 1929 *Three Live Ghosts*, 1929 *The Single Standard*.

**Steve Fisher (writer, screenplay)** (b. August 29, 1912 in Marine City, Michigan—d. March 27, age 67, in Canoga Park, California) wrote for 98 various stories for film and television including *Fantasy Island* (TV Series, 11 episodes from 1978 - 1981), 1978 *Switch* (TV Series, 1 episode), 1977 *The Great Gundown*, 1976 *Woman in the Rain*, 1975 *The Last Day* (TV Movie, screenplay & story), 1975 *Kolchak: The Night Stalker* (TV Series, 1 episode's teleplay), 1973 *The Evil Touch* (TV Series, 1 episode), 1973 *Cannon* (TV Series, 1 episode), 1967 *Hostile Guns* (screenplay), 1966 *Waco* (screenplay), 1966 *Johnny Reno* (screenplay & story), 1965 *Combat!* (TV Series, 1 episode), 1961 *The Dick Powell Theatre* (TV Series, 1 episode), 1959 *General Electric Theater* (TV Series, 1 episode), 1959 *77 Sunset Strip* (TV Series, 1 episode's teleplay), 1957-1959 *Have Gun - Will Travel* (TV Series, 2

episodes), 1955-1956 *Schlitz Playhouse* (TV Series, 4 episodes' teleplay), 1955 *Night Freight*, 1953 *Sea of Lost Ships* (screenplay), 1953 *Woman They Almost Lynched* (screenplay), 1953 *San Antone* (screenplay), 1952 *Battle Zone*, 1952 *The Big Frame*, 1947 *Song of the Thin Man* (screenplay), 1947 *That's My Man*, 1947 *Lady in the Lake* (screenplay), 1947 *Dead Reckoning* (screenplay), 1945 *Johnny Angel* (screenplay), 1943 *Destination Tokyo* (original story), 1942 *Berlin Correspondent* (original screenplay), 1942 *To the Shores of Tripoli* (original story), 1938 *The Nurse from Brooklyn* (story).

### **Raymond Chandler**

**(novelist)** (b. July 23, 1888 in Chicago, Illinois—d. March 26, 1959, age 70, in La Jolla, California) was nominated for two Academy Awards, one in 1947 for Best Writing, Original Screenplay *The Blue Dahlia* (1946) and one in 1945 for Best Writing, Screenplay *Double Indemnity* (1944), which he shared with: Billy Wilder. Chandler wrote for over 37 films and TV shows including, 2014 *The Long Goodbye* (TV Mini-Series, 5 episodes based on Chandler's

novel), 2007 *Marlowe* (TV Movie) (characters), 1993-1995 *Fallen Angels* (TV Series, 2 episodes taken from his story), *Philip Marlowe*, *Private Eye* (TV Series, 10 episodes, 1983 – 1986 from his novels), 1978 *The Big Sleep* (based on his novel), 1975 *Farewell, My Lovely* (based on his novel), 1973 *Double Indemnity* (TV Movie based on his 1944 screenplay), 1973 *The Long Goodbye* (novel "The Long Goodbye"), 1969 *Marlowe* (novel "The Little Sister"), *Philip Marlowe* (TV Series, 2 episodes, 1959 – 1960 as well as title character based on his novels), 1958 *77 Sunset Strip* (TV Series, 1 episode's screenplay), 1951 *Strangers on a Train* (screenplay), 1950 *Robert Montgomery Presents* (TV Series, 1 episode based on his novel *The Big Sleep*), 1947 *Lady in the Lake* (novel), 1946 *The Big Sleep* (original novel), 1946 *The Blue Dahlia* (written by), 1945 *The Unseen*, 1944 *Murder, My Sweet* (novel), 1944 *And Now Tomorrow* (screen play), 1944 *Double Indemnity* (screenplay), 1942 *Time to Kill* (novel "The High Window"), 1942 *The Falcon Takes Over* (novel "Farewell, My Lovely").

**Paul Vogel (cinematography)** (b. August 22, 1899 in New York City, New York—d. November 24, 1975, age 76, in Los Angeles, California) won the 1950 Academy Award for Best Cinematography, Black-and-White, *Battleground* (1949) and was nominated in 1963 for Best Cinematography, Color *The Wonderful World of the Brothers Grimm* (1962). Vogel was a cinematographer on 114 films and television series, among them, *My Three Sons* (TV Series) (99 episodes, 1966 - 1970), 1967 *Riot on Sunset Strip*, 1966 *Return of the Seven*, 1965 *The Money Trap*, 1964-1965 *12 O'Clock High* (TV Series) 1965 *The Rounders*, 1964 *Mail Order Bride*, 1962 *The Wonderful World of the Brothers Grimm*, 1959 *The Gazebo*, 1959 *Tarzan, the Ape Man*, 1957 *The Wings of Eagles*, 1956 *The Rack*, 1956 *High Society*, 1955 *It's a Dog's Life*, 1955 *The Tender Trap*, 1954 *Green Fire*, 1954 *The Student Prince*, 1951 *Go for Broke!*, 1951 *Three Guys Named*

*Mike*, 1950 *Dial 1119*, 1950 *Black Hand*, 1949 *Battleground*, 1949 *Scene of the Crime*, 1947 *High Wall*, 1947 *Lady in the Lake*, 1944 *The Negro Soldier* (Documentary short), 1942 *Pacific Rendezvous*, 1941 *Down in San Diego*, 1939 *Drunk Driving* (Short), 1939 *While America Sleeps* (Short), 1939 *The Story of Alfred Nobel* (Short), 1938 *Nostradamus* (Short), 1938 *Wide Open Faces*, 1927 *I Running Wild*, and 1927 *The Potters*.

### **Cedric Gibbons (art director)**

(b. March 23 1892 in Dublin, Ireland—d. July 26, 1960, age 67, in Hollywood, California) has over 1050 Art Director credits and received 28 Academy Award nominations and won 11 times. Some of his wins include, 1957 Best Art Direction-Set Decoration, Black-and-White, *Somebody Up There Likes Me* (1956), which he shared with Malcolm Brown, Edwin B. Willis and F. Keogh Gleason; 1956 Best Art Direction-Set Decoration, Black-and-White, *I'll Cry Tomorrow* (1955), shared with Malcolm Brown, Edwin B. Willis and Hugh Hunt. 1955 Best Art Direction-Set Decoration, Black-and-White, *Executive Suite* (1954) shared with Edward C.

Carfagno, Edwin B. Willis and Emile Kuri and Best Art Direction-Set Decoration, Color, *Brigadoon* (1954) shared with E. Preston Ames, Edwin B. Willis and F. Keogh Gleason. 1954 Best Art Direction-Set Decoration, Black-and-White, *Julius Caesar* (1953) shared with Edward C. Carfagno, Edwin B. Willis and Hugh Hunt as well as Best Art Direction-Set Decoration, Color, *The Story of Three Loves* (1953) shared with E. Preston Ames, Edward C. Carfagno, Gabriel Scognamiglio, Edwin B. Willis, F. Keogh Gleason, Arthur Krams and Jack D. Moore. In 1953 Best Art Direction-Set Decoration, Black-and-White, *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1952) shared with: Edward C. Carfagno, Edwin B. Willis and F. Keogh Gleason. In 1952 for Best Art Direction-Set Decoration, Color, *An American in Paris* (1951) shared with E. Preston Ames, Edwin B. Willis, F. Keogh Gleason. In 1950 for Best Art Direction-Set Decoration, Color, *Little Women* (1949) shared with Paul Groesse, Edwin B. Willis and Jack D. Moore. In 1947 Best Art Direction-Interior Decoration, Color for *The Yearling* (1946) shared with: Paul Groesse and Edwin B. Willis. In 1946 for Best Art Direction-Interior Decoration, Color for *National Velvet* (1944) shared with Urie McCleary, Edwin B. Willis, and Mildred Griffiths. In 1945 Best Art Direction-Interior Decoration, Black-and-White for *Gaslight* (1944) shared with William Ferrari, Edwin B. Willis and Paul Huldsky. In 1942 for Best Art Direction-Interior Decoration, Color, *Blossoms in the Dust* (1941) shared with Urie McCleary and Edwin B. Willis. In 1941 for Best Art Direction, Black-and-White for *Pride and Prejudice* (1940) shared with: Paul Groesse. In 1935 Best Art Direction for *The Merry Widow* (1934) shared with Fredric Hope and in 1930 Best Art Direction for *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1929).

**Audrey Totter ... Adrienne Fromsett** (b. December 20, 1917 in Joliet, Illinois—d. December 12, 2013, age 95, in Los Angeles, California) acted in over 91 films and television shows including,



1987 *Murder, She Wrote* (TV Series), 1984 *City Killer* (TV Movie), 1980 *The Great Cash Giveaway Getaway* (TV Movie), 1979 *The Apple Dumpling Gang Rides Again*, 1975 *Police Story* (TV Series), 1975 *Harry O* (TV Series), 1973 *Hawaii Five-O* (TV Series), 1967-1969 *The Virginian* (TV Series), 1966 *Bonanza* (TV Series), 1964 *Perry Mason* (TV Series), 1964 *The Carpetbaggers*, 1964 *Kraft Suspense Theatre* (TV Series), 1962-1963 *Our Man Higgins* (TV Series), 1962 *Rawhide* (TV Series), 1962 *Route 66* (TV Series), 1960-1961 *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (TV Series), 1954-1961 *General Electric Theater* (TV Series), 1960 *The Loretta Young Show* (TV Series), 1958 *Lux Playhouse* (TV Series), 1958 *Wagon Train* (TV Series), 1958 *Jet Attack*, 1957 *The Joseph Cotten Show: On Trial* (TV Series), 1956 *Zane Grey Theater* (TV Series), 1955 *A Bullet for Joey*, 1955 *Women's Prison*, 1953 *Champ for a Day*, 1953 *Mission Over Korea*, 1953 *Woman They Almost Lynched*, 1952 *Assignment: Paris*, 1951 *FBI Girl*, 1949 *Tension*, 1949 *Any Number Can Play*, 1948 *The Saxon Charm*, 1947 *Lady in the Lake*, 1946 *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, 1945 *The Sailor Takes a Wife*, 1945 *Ziegfeld Follies*, 1945 *Bewitched*, 1945 *Dangerous Partners*, 1945 *Main Street After Dark*.



**Lloyd Nolan ... Lt. DeGarmot** (b. August 11, 1902 in San Francisco, California—d. September 27, 1985, age 83, in Los Angeles, California) won a Primetime Emmy in 1956 for Best Actor- Single Performance, for *Ford Star Jubilee* (1955) for his role as "Capt. Queeg" in "The Caine Mutiny Court-Martial" episode. He was also nominated for a 1969 Primetime Emmy for Outstanding Continued Performance by an Actor in a Leading Role in a Comedy Series for *Julia* (1968). Nolan acted in 160 films and television shows including, 1986 *Hannah and Her Sisters*, 1985 *Prince Jack*, 1983 *Adams House* (TV Movie), 1981 *Archie Bunker's Place* (TV Series), 1978 *The Hardy Boys/Nancy Drew Mysteries* (TV Series), 1978 *Quincy M.E.* (TV Series), 1978 *The Waltons* (TV Series), 1977 *The Private Files of J. Edgar Hoover*, 1975 *Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Color* (TV Series), 1973 *The F.B.I.* (TV Series), 1970 *Airport*, 1968 *Ice Station Zebra*, 1967 *The Double Man*, 1965 *Never Too Late*, 1964 *Circus World*, 1963 *77 Sunset Strip* (TV Series), 1959-1962 *Laramie* (TV Series), 1961 *Susan Slade*, 1960 *Girl of the Night*, 1960 *Bonanza* (TV Series), 1959 *The Untouchables* (TV Series), 1957 *Peyton Place*, 1957 *A Hatful of Rain*, 1956 *The Last Hunt*, 1953 *Island in the Sky*, 1951 *The Lemon Drop Kid*, 1949 *The Sun Comes Up*, 1948 *The Street with No Name*, 1947 *Wild Harvest*, 1947 *Lady in the Lake*, 1946

*Two Smart People*, 1945 *The House on 92nd Street*, 1945 *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, 1943 *Guadalcanal Diary*, 1943 *Bataan*, 1942 *Apache Trail*, 1942 *It Happened in Flatbush*, 1941 *Blues in the Night*, 1941 *Mr. Dynamite*, 1940 *Michael Shayne: Private Detective*, 1940 *Gangs of Chicago*, 1940 *Johnny Apollo*, 1940 *The House Across the Bay*, 1939 *St. Louis Blues*, 1938 *King of Alcatraz*, 1938 *Prison Farm*, 1937 *Wells Fargo*, 1936 *The Texas Rangers*, 1936 *Lady of Secrets*, 1935 *She Couldn't Take It*, 1935 *Atlantic Adventure*, 1935 *Stolen Harmony*, 1935 'G' Men.

**Tom Tully ... Capt. Kane** (b. August 21, 1908 in Durango, Colorado—d. April 27, 1982, age 73, in Newport Beach, California) was nominated for one Oscar in 1955 for Best Actor in a Supporting Role for *The Caine Mutiny* (1954). Tully acted in 87 films and television, some of which include: 1973 *The New Temperatures Rising Show* (TV Series), 1972-1973 *The Rookies* (TV Series), 1973 *Charley Varrick*, 1972 *Mission: Impossible* (TV Series), 1969 *Mod Squad* (TV Series), 1968 *Coogan's Bluff*, 1965-1967 *Bonanza* (TV Series), 1965 *The Farmer's Daughter* (TV Series), 1961-1965 *Rawhide* (TV Series), 1964 *The Virginian* (TV Series), 1964 *Perry Mason* (TV Series), 1964 *The Carpetbaggers*, 1963 *The Untouchables* (TV Series), 1958 *Ten North Frederick*, 1954 *The Caine Mutiny*, 1954 *Arrow in the Dust*, 1952 *The Jazz Singer*, 1952 *Ruby Gentry*, 1952 *Return of the Texan*, 1951 *Texas Carnival*, 1951 *The Lady and the Bandit*, 1951 *Tomahawk*, 1950 *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, 1948 *Rachel and the Stranger*, 1947 *Intrigue*, 1947 *Killer McCoy*, 1947 *Lady in the Lake*, 1946 *Till the End of Time*, 1946 *The Virginian*, 1944 *I'll Be Seeing You*, 1943 *Destination Tokyo*, 1943 *Mission to Moscow*, 1932 *The Sign of the Cross*.

**Leon Ames ... Derace Kingsby** (b. Leon Waycoff on January 20, 1902 in Portland, Indiana—d. October 12, 1993, age 91, in Laguna Beach, California) won the Screen Actors Guild's Life Achievement Award in 1981. Ames acted in 157 films and television series including 1986 *Peggy Sue Got Married*, 1983 *Testament*, 1977 *Claws*, 1975 *The Jeffersons* (TV Series), 1970 *Tora! Tora! Tora!*, 1970 *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever*, 1966 *Please Don't Eat the Daisies* (TV Series), 1965 *The Monkey's Uncle*, 1961 *The Absent-Minded Professor*, 1960 *From the Terrace*, 1957 *Peyton Place*, 1953 *Sabre Jet*, 1953 *Let's Do It Again*, 1950 *Dial 1119*, 1950 *Ambush*, 1949 *Battleground*, 1949 *Little Women*, 1947 *Song of the Thin Man*, 1947 *Undercover Maisie*, 1947 *Lady in the Lake*, 1946 *The Great Morgan*, 1946 *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, 1945 *The Thin Man Goes Home*, 1945 *They Were Expendable*, 1945 *Anchors Aweigh*, 1945 *Son of Lassie*, 1945 *Between Two Women*, 1944 *Meet Me in St. Louis*, 1944 *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo*, 1943 *Crime Doctor*, 1939 *Legion of Lost Flyers*, 1939 *Calling All Marines*, 1939 *I Was a Convict*, 1938 *Secrets of a Nurse*, 1938 *Suez*, 1938 *Mysterious Mr. Moto*, 1938 *Come On, Leathernecks!*, 1938 *Bluebeard's Eighth Wife*, 1937 *Murder in Greenwich Village*, 1937 *Charlie Chan on Broadway*, 1934 *The Count of Monte Cristo*, 1933 *Ship of Wanted Men*, 1933 *Parachute Jumper*, 1932 *State's Attorney*, 1932 *Murders in the Rue Morgue*, 1932 *Cannonball Express*, 1931 *Quick Millions*.

**Jayne Meadows ... Mildred Haveland** (b. September 27, 1919 in Wuchang, Wuhan, Hubei, China—d. April 26, 2015, age 95 in Encino, California) was nominated for 3 Primetime Emmy's including 1996 for Outstanding Supporting Actress in a Comedy Series for *High Society* (1995) for playing "Alice Morgan-DuPont-



Sutton-Cushing-Ferruke"; in 1987 for Outstanding Guest Performer in a Drama Series for *St. Elsewhere* (1982) for playing "Holga Oseransky" in the episode "Visiting Daze"; and in 1978 for Outstanding Lead Actress for a Single Appearance in a Drama or Comedy Series for *Meeting of Minds* (1977) for playing: "Florence Nightingale" in the episode: "Luther, Voltaire, Plato, Nightingale". Meadows acted in 83 films and television series, some of which



include, 1999 *The Story of Us*, 1998 *Homicide: Life on the Street* (TV Series), 1995-1996 *High Society* (TV Series), 1995 *Casino*, 1991 *City Slickers*, 1990 *Murder by Numbers*, 1987-1988 *St. Elsewhere* (TV Series), 1986 *Crazy Like a Fox* (TV Series), 1978-1986 *The Love Boat* (TV Series), 1986 *Murder, She Wrote* (TV Series), 1985 *Da Capo*, 1979-1983 *Fantasy Island* (TV Series), 1983 *Matt Houston* (TV Series), 1977-1981 *Meeting of Minds* (TV Series), 1980 *Tenspeed and Brown Shoe* (TV Series), 1979 *Hawaii Five-O* (TV Series), 1979 *The Paper Chase* (TV Series), 1976 *James Dean* (TV Movie), 1970 *Love, American Style* (TV Series), 1957-1963 *The Red Skelton Hour* (TV Series), 1960 *College Confidential*, 1953 *Suspense* (TV Series), 1952 *Robert Montgomery Presents* (TV Series), 1951 *David and Bathsheba*, 1951 *The Fat Man*, 1948 *Enchantment*, 1948 *The Luck of the Irish*, 1947 *Song of the Thin Man*, 1947 *Dark Delusion*, 1947 *Lady in the Lake*, 1946 *Undercurrent*.

#### **New York Times review, 24 January 1947, by T.M.P."**

Having seen "Lady in the Lake" yesterday at the Capitol, this corner now can confirm what the advertisements have been saying all along. The picture is definitely different and affords one a fresh and interesting perspective on a murder mystery. YOU do get into the story and see things pretty much the way the protagonist, Phillip Marlowe, does, but YOU don't have to suffer the bruises he does. Of course, YOU don't get a chance to put your arms around Audrey Totter either. After all, the movie makers, for all their ingenuity, can go just so far in the quest for realism.

As the star and director, Robert Montgomery permits the camera to do most of his "acting," the result being that his image is only observed when it can naturally be reflected through a mirror. And, since the story is a first person affair, the camera on occasion observes the detective seated at a desk relating his tortuous and exciting adventures in locating the missing Mrs. Chrystal Kingsby.

In making the camera an active participant, rather than an off-side reporter, Mr. Montgomery has, however, failed to exploit the full possibilities suggested by this unusual technique. For after a few minutes of seeing a hand reaching toward a door knob, or lighting a cigarette or lifting a glass, or a door moving toward you as though it might come right out of the screen the novelty begins to wear thin. Still, Mr. Montgomery has hit upon a manner for using the camera which most likely will lead to more arresting pictorial effects in the future.

Since Raymond Chandler provided the story and Steve Fisher wrote the screen play, one can rest assured that the plot isn't lacking in complications, romantic and otherwise. Marlowe, naturally, has a weakness for a pretty client and runs into plenty of trouble with the police and assorted strangers the deeper his investigation goes. Clues sprout and evaporate, or end up as blind leads, until the spectator is nicely but firmly confused. This bewilderment doesn't extend so much to the identity of the lady found in the lake as it does to how Marlowe will go about solving the mystery.

Mr. Montgomery has the least acting to do, but his scenes are played with ease and conviction. His Phillip Marlowe is somewhat more cynical and sneering—a characterization which is developed more by the tone of his voice than anything else—than the previous conceptions of the detective we got from Dick Powell in "Murder, My Sweet" and Humphrey Bogart in "The Big Sleep." You can take your choice of the three and still be happy. Audrey Totter, who is blonde and fetching, gets her first really important role in this picture and handles herself most credibly. Lloyd Nolan, Jayne Meadows and Leon Ames do very well by supporting roles, which permit them to develop sizable characterizations.

#### **From "Film Noir of the Week":**

To really enjoy the 1947 MGM film noir *Lady in the Lake*, it's crucial to accept the subjective camera angle [Robert Montgomery](#) uses, and fully give yourself to seeing things via this artificial first person lens. Allow some room for deviation, too, from the expected portrayal of [Raymond Chandler's](#) Phillip Marlowe character. It's worth leaving such preconceptions behind as the film pulls off the rare trick of being nasty and cynical while still maintaining its studio gloss as first rate entertainment wrapped in a decidedly noir package, Christmas bow and all.

In his first directing gig (aside from some uncredited work on the set of *They Were Expendable* when John Ford was sidelined), Montgomery let the camera act as the audience's eyes. The advertising promised an interactive experience of solving the case alongside Montgomery, who also played Marlowe. It was perhaps questionable to use both this odd perspective and to adapt a Chandler story using a different sort of interpretation of Marlowe than what's on the page or the way he'd been played earlier by Dick Powell and Humphrey Bogart. Nonetheless, there's little reason to be particularly beholden to the rigid limitations of what a character can be. Montgomery increased the sarcasm and distrust while muting most any of Marlowe's half-buried good qualities. But, importantly, his Marlowe exists only within the confines of the film *Lady in the Lake*. Those who prefer their Marlowe as a hard-bitten but ultimately still safe creature can watch Dick Powell and those who enjoy Bogart's smart, cynical and movie star glistening turn will always have [The Big Sleep](#). This isn't a competition.

As director, Montgomery skews ironic from the start. Using a Christmas carol medley across the opening title cards, images of snowy evergreens and bells and reindeer tease a warm holiday story until the final reveal of a handgun. There's also a completely made-up actress listed in the credits, a nice touch probably unrealized until at least the second viewing of the picture. Director/actor then greets the viewer in an odd introduction that again plays with expectations since we're really being addressed by the character of Marlowe, and after the events about to be seen have already taken place. Similar scenes pop up a couple of times throughout the film to add bits of information which might have been said in a voiceover had that device been used. Despite this being a 1947 release, the interruptions now play sort of like a television program returning from a commercial break. They take us out of the first person perspective, if not quite the film as a whole, but it's difficult to quibble with Montgomery's use of these brief interludes. Each time he's seen is like a small refresh, a reminder that we're seeing things through the eyes of a movie star. It's reasonable to wonder what MGM must have thought about Montgomery, ideally the main draw of the picture, not showing his face for the vast majority of the running time. A similar, perhaps even more daring trick considering the discrepancy in stardom was adopted for Humphrey Bogart in the Delmer Daves film [Dark Passage](#), also from 1947, though the subjective angles are ditched about halfway through that picture. There's a mirror here and there plus those direct resets, but Montgomery remains committed to showing the action through Marlowe's eyes during the entirety of *Lady in the Lake*. When Marlowe gets slapped around, the camera jerks, and when [Audrey Totter](#)'s character Adrienne Fromsett leans in to kiss him, we vicariously experience that too, at least visually. The main complaint some have with this effect seems to be that it's a "gimmick" unneeded by the narrative, but that reaction seems a bit hasty. If used with any frequency (and it really hasn't been outside of video games) the first person point of view angle would indeed become a chore to watch. In *Lady in the Lake*, though, it increases the suspense and paranoia and disorientation - all of which are hallmarks of film noir. The device also makes every scene an interrogation. The viewer looks directly at who's speaking while that actor is typically alone on camera. Something accusatory arises in most all of Marlowe's conversations.

Several of these feature Totter. Her performance is very much in the femme fatale mold, albeit straddling the line nicely as a love interest so that we can't be sure until the very end which side she's actually on. Marlowe first encounters her after submitting a detective story to a magazine which she more or less runs for publisher Derace Kingsby ([Leon Ames](#)). Having Marlowe wearily and, in Montgomery's shoes, bitterly resort to writing about his past cases rather than pursuing new ones gives the entire proceeding a self-reflexive, even post-modernist spin. So, again, *Lady in the Lake* seems to buck tradition in favor of a knowing, though no less serious wink. Montgomery's Marlowe comes across as trapped in a cycle of getting his feet dirty despite realizing the limitations of the profession. He can't help himself because these

things keep falling in his lap, even, apparently, when he's looking into other options. The calamity this time, for what it's worth, involves Kingsby's wife in some capacity. Details emerge piece by piece, with Chandler's usual complexity.

Those who frequent the world of noir rarely do so for the plots. After all, there can only be so much interest in missing persons, dead bodies, and the wrongly accused. Sure we all enjoy those things but they simply aren't the exclusive draw. *Lady in the Lake* seems to get this idea while still offering up a rather twisty narrative that never becomes unnecessarily convoluted. Marlowe's client initially is Fromsett but transitions into being Kingsby. He gets beaten up over and over again, left for dead once by the cop ([Lloyd Nolan](#)) who's also his chief tormentor. One woman isn't

who she first claims to be while another's mostly on the level but difficult to trust and a third is little more than a ghost. Montgomery has to juggle the story enough to keep interest without completely giving way to it. That's not an easy task and it's worth praising the film for successfully balancing the plot against the dual characterizations of Marlowe and Fromsett, all the while still letting the noir elements flourish in a cynical but nonetheless playful way.

For all of the causticity shown by Marlowe, his scenes with

Fromsett gradually reveal the desire to be vulnerable and start anew, with her, in a loving relationship. Again, maybe this isn't the Marlowe we're accustomed to elsewhere but Montgomery plays him as weary and stubborn and not terribly bright yet always, almost painfully, guarded. His actions indicate that he wants to believe Fromsett's not involved with any of the unsavory parts of this case but he can't give himself to her until everything's been settled. Their many encounters really strengthen the film as we see the gears of romance turn much slower and more deliberately than is the norm in Hollywood. The sequence where Marlowe seems to come around involves a very domestic situation, at Fromsett's apartment. She's given him an uncharacteristically flashy robe as a Christmas gift, but Marlowe finds a card in the pocket addressed to Kingsby, indicating the robe was bought for her boss. But before Marlowe even has a chance to mention the card, Fromsett casually admits the whole thing and tells him she left it there on purpose, that she wants a fresh start where they're honest with each other.

Part of the frustration with Montgomery's performance is that he's unable to react to most anything. We obviously can't see his face, but even Marlowe's voice and dialogue rarely allows for any change in mood. This isn't necessarily a deficiency in Montgomery's acting. It just makes the viewer approach things from a different angle, one where the lead character neglects his usual duties as a guide of the film's emotion. Totter's performance, then, has to subtly shift along the way to greet the hardened Marlowe. Where Montgomery can rely on Marlowe's actions to fill in the blanks of his behavioral arc, Totter must, with the added difficulty of looking at the camera while acting, express the growing trust Fromsett feels for such a closed man without it seeming too ridiculous. That Totter pulls this off so well as to make the entire film emotionally hinge more on the dynamic between these two rather than the central mystery is a real triumph of noir acting. There's a complexity that exists within this romance



that might not be immediately recognizable, but it ends up as one of the most adult and fully developed pairings in all of film noir.

And, still, *Lady in the Lake* remains mostly unloved by devotees of Chandler and Marlowe and film noir. That's probably to be expected considering the liberties Montgomery takes with both the story and the portrayal of its protagonist, but it simply shouldn't be an accepted truth that *Lady in the Lake* is minor anything. The film is noteworthy in its adherence to noir stylistic and narrative conventions without ever really emphasizing any sense of danger or overwhelming darkness. It's an oddity full of misconceptions, assured enough to gently torture the viewer through an elaborate mystery filmed in the first person for absolutely no reason yet still so accommodating as to periodically provide entry level updates on the plot and offer up the promise of a happy ending. Those looking for a strict noir fix are better off watching Montgomery's next effort [Ride the Pink Horse](#) (which isn't easy to find), as it's far more prototypical and probably the superior film overall. *Lady in the Lake*, though, seems to get dismissed too quickly and partly because of the things that make it special.



#### **Paul Schrader: Notes on Film Noir**

In 1946 French critics, seeing the American films they had missed during the war, noticed the new mood of cynicism, pessimism and darkness which had crept into the American cinema. The darkening stain was most evident in routine crime thrillers, but was also apparent in prestigious melodramas.

The French cineastes soon realized they had seen only the tip of the iceberg: As the years went by, Hollywood lighting grew darker, characters more corrupt, themes more fatalistic and the tone more hopeless. By 1949 American movies were in the throes of their deepest and most creative funk. Never before had films dared to take such a harsh uncomplimentary look at American life, and they would not dare to do so again for twenty years.

Hollywood's film noir has recently become the subject of renewed interest among moviegoers and critics. The fascination film noir holds for today's young filmgoers and film students reflects recent trends in American cinema: American movies are again taking a look at the underside of the American character, but compared to such relentlessly cynical film noir as *Kiss Me Deadly* or *Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye*, the new self-hate cinema of *Easy Rider* and *Medium Cool* seems naive and romantic. As the current political mood hardens, filmgoers and filmmakers will find the film noir of the late Forties increasingly attractive. The Forties may be to the Seventies what the Thirties were to the Sixties.

Film noir is equally interesting to critics. It offers writers a cache of excellent, little-known films (film noir is oddly both one of Hollywood's best periods and least known), and gives auteur-weary critics an opportunity to apply themselves to the newer

questions of classification and transdirectorial style. After all, what is film noir?

Film noir is not a genre (as Raymond Durnat has helpfully pointed out over the objections of Higham and Greenberg's Hollywood in the Forties). It is not defined, as are the western and gangster genres, by conventions of setting and conflict, but rather by the more subtle qualities of tone and mood. It is a film "noir", as opposed to the possible variants of film grey or film off-white.

Film noir is also a specific period of film history, like German Expressionism or the French New Wave. In general, film noir refers to those Hollywood films of the Forties and early Fifties which portrayed the world of dark, slick city streets, crime and corruption.

Film noir is an extremely unwieldy period. It harks back to many previous periods: Warner's Thirties gangster films, the French "poetic realism" of *Carne* and *Duvivier*, Von Sternbergian melodrama, and, farthest back, German Expressionist crime films (Lang's *Mabuse* cycle). Film noir can stretch at its outer limits from *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) to *Touch of Evil* (1958), and most every dramatic Hollywood film from 1941 to 1953 contains some noir elements. There are also foreign offshoots of film noir, such as *The Third Man*, *Breathless* and *Le Doulos*.

Almost every critic has his own definition of film noir, and a personal list of film titles and dates to back it up. Personal and descriptive definitions, however, can get a bit sticky. A film of urban night life is not necessarily a film noir, and a film noir need not necessarily concern crime and corruption. Since film noir is defined by tone rather than genre, it is almost impossible to argue one critic's descriptive definition against another's. How many noir elements does it take to make a film noir noir?

Rather than haggle definitions, I would rather attempt to reduce film noir to its primary colors (all shades of black), those cultural and stylistic elements to which any definition must return.

At the risk of sounding like Arthur Knight, I would suggest that there were four conditions in Hollywood in the Forties which brought about the film noir. (The danger of Knight's Livliest Art method is that it makes film history less a matter of structural analysis, and more a case of artistic and social forces magically interacting and coalescing.) Each of the following four catalytic elements, however, can define the film noir; the distinctly noir tonality draws from each of these elements.

**WAR AND POST-WAR DISILLUSIONMENTS.** The acute downer which hit the U. S. after the Second World War was, in fact, a delayed reaction to the Thirties. All through the Depression movies were needed to keep people's spirits up, and, for the most part, they did. The crime films of this period were Horatio Algerish and socially conscious. Toward the end of the Thirties a darker crime film began to appear (*You Only Live Once*, *The Roaring Twenties*) and were it not for the War film noir would have been at full steam by the early Forties.

The need to produce Allied propaganda abroad and promote patriotism at home blunted the fledgling moves toward a dark cinema, and the film noir thrashed about in the studio system, not quite able to come into full prominence. During the War the first uniquely film noir appeared: *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Glass Key*, *This Gun for Hire*, *Laura*, but these films lacked the distinctly noir bite the end of the War would bring.

As soon as the War was over, however, American films became markedly more sardonic—and there was a boom in the crime film. For fifteen years the pressures against America's amelioristic cinema had been building up, and, given the freedom, audiences



and artists were now eager to take a less optimistic view of things. 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.

This immediate post-war disillusionments was directly demonstrated in films like *Cornered*, *The Blue Dahlia*, *Dead Reckoning*, and *Ride a Pink Horse*, in which a serviceman returns from the war to find his sweetheart unfaithful or dead, or his business partner cheating him, or the whole society something less than worth fighting for. The war continues, but now the antagonism turns with a new viciousness toward the American society itself.

**POST-WAR REALISM.** Shortly after the war every film-producing country had a resurgence of realism. In America it first took the form of films by such producers as Louis de Rochemont (*House on 92nd Street*, *Call Northside 777*) and Mark Hellinger (*The Killers*, *Brute Force*), and directors like Henry Hathaway and Jules Dassin. "Every scene was filmed on the actual location depicted," the 1947 de Rochemont-Hathaway *Kiss of Death* proudly proclaimed. Even after de Rochemont's particular "March of Time" authenticity fell from vogue, realistic exteriors remained a permanent fixture of film noir.

The realistic movement also suited America's post-war mood; the public's desire for a more honest and harsh view of America would not be satisfied by the same studio streets they had been watching for a dozen years. The post-war realistic trend succeeded in breaking film noir away from the domain of the high-class melodrama, placing it where it more properly belonged, in the streets with everyday people. In retrospect, the pre-de Rochemont film noir looks definitely tamer than the post-war realistic films. The studio look of films like *The Big Sleep* and *The Mask of Dimitrios* blunts their sting, making them seem more polite and conventional in contrast to their later, more realistic counterparts.

**THE GERMAN INFLUENCE.** Hollywood played host to an influx of German expatriates in the Twenties and Thirties, and these filmmakers and technicians had, for the most part, integrated themselves into the American film establishment. Hollywood never experienced the "Germanization" some civic-minded natives feared, and there is a danger of over-emphasizing the German influence in Hollywood.

But when, in the late Forties, Hollywood decided to paint it black, there were no greater masters of chiaroscuro than the Germans. The influence of expressionist lighting has always been just beneath the surface of Hollywood films, and it is not surprising, in film noir, to find it bursting out full bloom. Neither is it surprising to find a large number of Germans and East Europeans working in film noir: Fritz Lang, Robert Siodmak, Billy Wilder, Franz Waxman, Otto Preminger, John Brahm, Anatole Litvak, Karl Freund, Max Ophüls, John Alton, Douglas Sirk, Fred Zinnemann, William Dieterle, Max Steiner, Edgar G. Ulmer, Curtis Bernhardt, Rudolph Mate.

On the surface the German expressionist influence, with its reliance on artificial studio lighting, seems incompatible with post-war realism, with its harsh unadorned exteriors; but it is the

unique quality of film noir that it was able to weld seemingly contradictory elements into a uniform style. The best noir technicians simply made all the world a sound stage, directing unnatural and expressionistic lighting onto realistic settings. In films like *Union Station*, *They Live By Night*, *The Killers* there is an uneasy, exhilarating combination of realism and expressionism.

Perhaps the greatest master of noir was Hungarian-born John Alton, an expressionist cinematographer who could relight Times Square at noon if necessary. No cinematographer better adapted the old expressionist techniques to the new desire for realism, and his black-and-white photography in such gritty film noir as *T-Men*, *Raw Deal*, *I'm the Jury*, *The Big Combo* equals that

of such German expressionist masters as Fritz Wagner and Karl Freund.

### THE HARD-BOILED TRADITION.

Another stylistic influence waiting in the wings was the "hard-boiled" school of writers. In the Thirties authors such as Ernest Hemingway, Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain, Horace McCoy and John O'Hara created the "tough", cynical way of acting and thinking which separated one from the world of everyday emotions—romanticism with a protective shell. The hard-boiled writers had their roots in pulp fiction or journalism, and their protagonists lived out a narcissistic, defeatist code. The hard-boiled hero was, in reality, a soft egg compared to his existential counterpart (Camus is said to have based *The Stranger* on McCoy), but he was a good deal tougher than anything American fiction had seen.

When the movies of the Forties turned to the American "tough" moral understrata, the hard-boiled school was waiting with preset conventions of heroes, minor characters, plots, dialogue and themes. Like the German expatriates, the hard-boiled writers had a style made to order for film noir; and, in turn, they influenced noir screenwriting as much as the German influenced noir cinematography.

The most hard-boiled of Hollywood's writers was Raymond Chandler himself, whose script of *Double Indemnity* (from a James M. Cain story) was the best written and most characteristically noir of the period. *Double Indemnity* was the first film which played film noir for what it essentially was: small-time, unredeemed, unheroic; it made a break from the romantic noir cinema of (the later) *Mildred Pierce* and *The Big Sleep*.

(In its final stages, however, film noir adapted then bypassed the hard-boiled school. Manic, neurotic post-1948 films such as *Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye*, *D. O. A.*, *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, *White Heat*, and *The Big Heat* are all post-hard-boiled: the air in these regions was even too thin for old-time cynics like Chandler.)

**STYLISTICS.** There is not yet a study of the stylistics of film noir, and the task is certainly too large to be attempted here. Like all film movements film noir drew upon a reservoir of film techniques, and given the time one could correlate its techniques, themes and causal elements into a stylistic schema. For the present, however, I'd like to point out some of film noir's recurring techniques.

—The majority of scenes are lit for night. Gangsters sit in the offices at midday with the shades pulled and the lights off. Ceiling lights are hung low and floor lamps are seldom more than five feet high. One always has the suspicion that if the lights were



all suddenly flipped on the characters would shriek and shrink from the scene like Count Dracula at noontime.

—As in German expressionism, oblique and vertical lines are preferred to horizontal. Obliquity adheres to the choreography of the city, and is in direct opposition to the horizontal American tradition of Griffith and Ford. Oblique lines tend to splinter a screen, making it restless and unstable. Light enters the dingy rooms of film noir in such odd shapes—jagged trapezoids, obtuse triangles, vertical slits—that one suspects the windows were cut out with a pen knife. No character can speak authoritatively from a space which is being continually cut into ribbons of light. The Anthony Mann/John Alton *T-Men* is the most dramatic but far from the only example of oblique noir choreography.

—The actors and setting are often given equal lighting emphasis. An actor is often hidden in the realistic tableau of the city at night, and, more obviously, his face is often blacked out by shadow as he speaks. These shadow effects are unlike the famous Warner Brothers lighting of the Thirties in which the central character was accentuated by a heavy shadow; in film noir, the central character is likely to be standing in the shadow. When the environment is given an equal or greater weight than the actor, it, of course, creates a fatalistic, hopeless mood. There is nothing the protagonist can do; the city will outlast and negate even his best efforts.

—Compositional tension is preferred to physical action. A typical film noir would rather move the scene cinematographically around the actor than have the actor control the scene by physical action. The beating of Robert Ryan in *The Set-Up*, the gunning down of Farley Granger in *They Live By Night*, the execution of the taxi driver in *The Enforcer* and of Brian Donlevy in *The Big Combo* are all marked by measured pacing, restrained anger and oppressive compositions, and seem much closer to the film noir spirit than the rat-tat-tat and screeching tires of *Scarface* twenty years before or the violent, expression actions of *Underworld U. S. A.* ten years later.

—There seems to be an almost Freudian attachment to water. The empty noir streets are almost always glistening with fresh evening rain (even in Los Angeles), and the rainfall tends to increase in direct proportion to the drama. Docks and piers are second only to alleyways as the most popular rendezvous points.

—There is a love of romantic narration. In such films as *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, *Laura*, *Double Indemnity*, *The Lady from Shanghai*, *Out of the Past* and *Sunset Boulevard* the narration creates a mood of *temps perdu*: an irretrievable past, a predetermined fate and an all-enveloping hopelessness. In *Out of the Past* Robert Mitchum relates his history with such pathetic relish that it is obvious there is no hope for any future: one can only take pleasure in reliving a doomed past.

—A complex chronological order is frequently used to reinforce the feelings of hopelessness and lost time. Such films as *The Enforcer*, *The Killers*, *Mildred Pierce*, *The Dark Past*, *Chicago Deadline*, *Out of the Past* and *The Killing* use a convoluted time sequence to immerse the viewer in a time-disoriented but highly stylized world. The manipulation of time, whether slight or

complex, is often used to reinforce a noir principle: the how is always more important than the what.

**THEMES.** Raymond Durnat has delineated the themes of film noir in an excellent article in *British Cinema* magazine (“*The Family Tree of Film Noir*,” August, 1970), and it would be foolish for me to attempt to redo his thorough work in this short space. Durnat divides film noir into eleven thematic categories, and although one might criticize some of his specific groupings, he does cover the whole gamut of noir production (thematically categorizing over 300 films).

In each of Durnat’s noir themes (whether *Black Widow*, *killers-on-the-run*, *doppelgängers*) one finds that the upwardly mobile forces of the Thirties have halted; frontierism has turned to paranoia and claustrophobia. The small-time gangster has now

made it big and sits in the mayor’s chair, the private eye has quit the police force in disgust, and the young heroine, sick of going along for the ride, is taking others for a ride.

Durnat, however, does not touch upon what is perhaps the most over-riding noir theme: a passion for the past and present, but a fear of the future. The noir hero dreads to look ahead, but instead tries to survive by the day, and if unsuccessful at that, he retreats to the past. Thus film noir’s techniques emphasize loss, nostalgia, lack of clear priorities, insecurity; then submerge these self-

doubts in mannerism and style. In such a world style becomes paramount; it is all that separates one from meaninglessness. Chandler described this fundamental noir theme when he described his own fictional world: “It is not a very fragrant world, but it is the world you live in, and certain writers with tough minds and a cool spirit of detachment can make very interesting patterns out of it.”

Film noir can be subdivided into three broad phases. The first, the wartime period, 1941-46 approximately, was the phase of the private eye and the lone wolf, of Chandler, Hammett and Greene, of Bogart and Bacall, Ladd and Lake, classy directors like Curtiz and Garnett, studio sets, and, in general, more talk than action. The studio look of this period was reflected in such pictures as *The Maltese Falcon*, *Casablanca*, *Gaslight*, *This Gun for Hire*, *The Lodger*, *The Woman in the Window*, *Mildred Pierce*, *Spellbound*, *The Big Sleep*, *Laura*, *The Lost Weekend*, *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers*, *To Have and Have Not*, *Fallen Angel*, *Gilda*, *Murder My Sweet*, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, *Dark Waters*, *Scarlet Street*, *So Dark the Night*, *The Glass Key*, *The Mask of Dimitrios*, and *The Dark Mirror*.

The Wilder/Chandler *Double Indemnity* provided a bridge to the post-war phase of film noir. The unflinching noir vision of *Double Indemnity* came as a shock in 1944, and the film was almost blocked by the combined efforts of Paramount, the Hays Office and star Fred McMurray. Three years later, however, *Double Indemnity*s were dropping off the studio assembly line.

The second phase was the post-war realistic period from 1945-49 (the dates overlap and so do the films; these are all approximate phases for which there are many exceptions). These films tended more toward the problems of crime in the streets, political corruption and police routine. Less romantic heroes like Richard Conte, Burt Lancaster and Charles McGraw were more suited to this period, as were proletarian directors like Hathaway,





Dassin and Kazan. The realistic urban look of this phase is seen in such films as *The House on 92nd Street*, *The Killers*, *Raw Deal*, *Act of Violence*, *Union Station*, *Kiss of Death*, *Johnny O'Clock*, *Force of Evil*, *Dead Reckoning*, *Ride the Pink Horse*, *Dark Passage*, *Cry of the City*, *The Set-Up*, *T-Men*, *Call Northside 777*, *Brute Force*, *The Big Clock*, *Thieves' Highway*, *Ruthless*, *Pitfall*, *Boomerang!*, and *The Naked City*.

The third and final phase of film noir, from 1949-53, was the period of psychotic action and suicidal impulse. The noir hero, seemingly under the weight of ten years of despair, started to get bananas. The psychotic killer, who had in the first period been a subject worthy of study (Olivia de Havilland in *The Dark Mirror*), in the second a fringe threat (Richard Widmark in *Kiss of Death*), now became the active protagonist (James Cagney in *Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye*). There were no excuses given for the psychopathy in *Gun Crazy*—it was just “crazy”. James Cagney made a neurotic comeback and his instability was matched by that of younger actors like Robert Ryan and Lee Marvin. This was the phase of the “B” noir film, and of psychoanalytically-inclined directors like Ray and Walsh. The forces of personal disintegration are reflected in such films as *White Heat*, *Gun Crazy*, *D. O. A.*, *Caught, They Live By Night*, *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, *Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye*, *Detective Story*, *In a Lonely Place*, *I' the Jury*, *Ace in the Hole*, *Panic in the Streets*, *The Big Heat*, *On Dangerous Ground*, *Sunset Boulevard*.

The third phase is the cream of the film noir period. Some critics may prefer the early “gray” melodramas, others the post-war “street” films, but film noir’s final phase was the most aesthetically and sociologically piercing, the later noir films finally got down to the root causes of the period: the loss of public honor, heroic conventions, personal integrity, and, finally, psychic stability. The third-phase films were painfully self-aware; they seemed to know they stood at the end of a long tradition based on despair and disintegration and did not shy away from that fact. The best and most characteristically noir films—*Gun Crazy*, *White Heat*, *Out of the Past*, *Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye*, *D. O. A.*, *They Live By Night*, and *The Big Heat*—stand at the end of the period and are the results of self-awareness. The third phase is in rife with end-of-the-line noir heroes: *The Big Heat* and *Where the Sidewalk Ends* are the last stops for the urban cop, *Ace in the Hole* for the newspaper man, the Victor Saville-produced *Spillane* series (*I' the Jury*, *The Long Wait*, *Kiss Me Deadly*) for the private eye, *Sunset Boulevard* for the Black Widow, *White Heat* and *Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye* for the gangster, *D. O. A.* for the John Doe American.

By the middle Fifties film noir had ground to a halt. There were a few notable stragglers, *Kiss Me Deadly*, the Lewis/Alton *The Big Combo*, and film noir’s epitaph, *Touch of Evil*, but for the most part a new style of crime film had become popular.

As the rise of McCarthy and Eisenhower demonstrated, Americans were eager to see a more bourgeois view of themselves.

Crime had to move to the suburbs. The criminal put on a gray flannel suit and the footsore cop was replaced by the “mobile unit” careening down the expressway. Any attempt at social criticism had to be cloaked in ludicrous affirmations of the American way of life. Technically, television, with its demand for full lighting and close-ups, gradually undercut the German influence, and color cinematography was, of course, the final blow to the “noir” look. New directors like Seigel, Fleischer, Karlson and Fuller, and TV shows like *Dragnet*, *M-Squad*, *Lineup* and *Highway Patrol* stepped in to create the new crime drama.

Film noir was an immensely creative period—probably the most creative in Hollywood’s history—at least, if this creativity is measured not by its peaks but by its median level of artistry. Picked at random, a film noir is likely to be a better made film than a randomly selected silent comedy, musical, western and so on. (A



Joseph H. Lewis “B” film noir is better than a Lewis “B” western, for example.) Taken as a whole period, film noir achieved an unusually high level of artistry.

Film noir seemed to bring out the best in everyone: directors, cameramen, screenwriters, actors. Again and again, a film noir will make the high point on an artist’s career graph. Some directors, for example, did their best work in film noir (Stuart Heisler, Robert Siodmak, Gordon Douglas, Edward Dmytryk, John Brahm, John Cromwell, Raoul Walsh, Henry Hathaway); other directors began in film noir, and it seems to me, never regained their original heights (Otto Preminger, Rudolph Mate, Nicholas Ray, Robert Wise, Jules Dassin, Richard Fleischer, John Huston, Andre de Toth, and Robert Aldrich); and other directors who made great films in other molds also made great film noir (Orson Welles, Max Ophuls, Fritz Lang, Elia Kazan, Howard Hawks, Robert Rossen, Anthony Mann, Joseph Losey, Alfred Hitchcock, and Stanley Kubrick). Whether or not one agrees with this particular schema, its message is irrefutable: film noir was good for practically every director’s career. (Two interesting exceptions to prove the case are King Vidor and Jean Renoir.)

Film noir seems to have been a creative release for everyone involved. It gave artists a chance to work with previously forbidden themes, yet had conventions strong enough to protect the mediocre. Cinematographers were allowed to become highly mannered, and actors were sheltered by the cinematographers to distinguish between great directors and great noir directors.

Film noir’s remarkable creativity makes its longtime neglect the more baffling. The French, of course, have been students of the period for some time (Borde and Chaumeton’s *Panorama du Film Noir* was published in 1955), but American critics until recently have preferred the western, the musical or the gangster film to the film noir.

Some of the reasons for this neglect are superficial; others strike to the heart of the noir style. For a long time film noir, with its emphasis on corruption and despair, was considered an aberration of the American character. The western, with its moral primitivism, and the gangster film, with its Horatio Alger values, were considered more American than the film noir.

This prejudice was reinforced by the fact that film noir was ideally suited to the low budget “B” film, and many of the best noir films were “B” films. This odd sort of economic snobbery still lingers on in some critical circles: high-budget trash is considered more worthy of attention than low-budget trash, and to praise a “B” film is somehow to slight (often intentionally) an “A” film.

There has been a critical revival in the U. S. over the last ten years, but film noir lost out on that too. The revival as auteur (director) oriented, and film noir wasn’t. Auteur criticism is interested in how directors are different; film noir criticism is concerned with what they have in common.

The fundamental reason for film noir’s neglect, however, is the fact that it depends more on choreography than sociology, and American critics have always been slow on the uptake when it comes to visual style. Like its protagonists, film noir is more interested in style than theme; whereas American critics have been traditionally more interested in theme than style.

American film critics have always been sociologists first and scientists second: film is important as it relates to large masses, and if a film goes awry it is often because the theme has been somehow “violated” by the style. Film noir operates on opposite principles: the theme is hidden in the style, and bogus themes are often haunted (“middle class values are best”) which contradict the style. Although, I believe, style determines the theme in every film, it was easier for sociological critics to discuss the themes of the western and gangster film apart from stylistic analysis than it was to do for film noir.

Not surprisingly it was the gangster film, not the film noir, which was canonized in *The Partisan Review* in 1948 by Robert Warshow’s famous essay, “The Gangster as Tragic Hero.”

Although Warshow could be an aesthetic as well as a sociological critic, he was interested in the western and gangster film as “popular” art rather than as style. This sociological orientation blinded Warshow, as it has many subsequent critics, to an aesthetically more important development in the gangster film—film noir.

The irony of this neglect is that in retrospect the gangster films Warshow wrote about are inferior to film noir. The Thirties gangster was primarily a reflection of what was happening in the country, and Warshow analyzed this. The film noir, although it was also a sociological reflection, went further than the gangster film. Toward the end film noir was engaged in a life-and-death struggle with the materials it reflected; it tried to make America accept a moral vision of life based on style. That very contradiction—promoting style in a culture which valued themes—forced film noir into artistically invigorating twists and turns. Film noir attacked and interpreted its sociological conditions, and, by the close of the noir period, created a new artistic world which went beyond a simple sociological reflection, a nightmarish world of American mannerism which was by far more a creation than a reflection.

Because film noir was first of all a style, because it worked out its conflicts visually rather than thematically, because it was aware of its own identity, it was able to create artistic solutions to sociological problems. And for these reasons films like *Kiss Me Deadly*, *Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye* and *Gun Crazy* can be works of art in a way that gangster films like *Scarface*, *Public Enemy* and *Little Caesar* can never be.

## COMING UP IN BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS 31

Sept 29 Claude Chabrol, *Le Beau Serge*, 1958  
 Oct 6 Andrei Tarkovsky, *Ivan’s Childhood*, 1962  
 Oct 13 Lawrence Kasdan, *Body Heat*, 1981  
 Oct 20 Costa-Gavras, *Missing*, 1982  
 Oct 27 Roland Joffé, *The Mission*, 1986  
 Nov 3 Mira Nair, *Mississippi Masala*, 1991  
 Nov 10 Hayao Miyazaki, *Princess Mononoke*, 1997  
 Nov 17 Elia Suleiman, *The Time That Remains*, 2009  
 Nov 24 Terry Gilliam, *The Imaginarium of Dr. Parnassus*, 2009  
 Dec 1 Béla Tarr, *The Turin Horse*, 2011  
 Dec 8 Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, *A Matter of Life and Death/Stairway to Heaven*, 1946

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The Buffalo Film Seminars are presented by the State University of New York at Buffalo and the Dipson Amherst Theatre, with support from the Robert and Patricia Colby Foundation and the Buffalo News.

