IN A LONELY PLACE

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The way things are going, the beginning of *The Big Sleep* will one day be banned. In silhouette, Humphrey Bogart lights Lauren Bacall's cigarette then lights his. Smoke swirls round the black, white, and silvery screen. Credits appear, turn to wisps, and disappear. The camera pans to an ashtray. Bogie's hand places his cigarette on its rim, Bacall's hand does the same, and from both butts thin grayish trails rise until credits fade out.

One day, tobacco police may ban all film noir, a genre in which rarely a scene passes without the players lighting up. As a symbol, the cigarette says it all about noir: You need a flame to start it; it's a pleasure, but toxic; it looks (let's admit this) really cool (and what does that say about what "cool" really is?); its existence is brief; and, in the end, it gets crushed.

That cycle describes many noir characters and situations. Those rather rigid parameters make noir a genre, but my colleague Marjorie Baumgarten shocked me with the news that most scholars now claim it is not a genre but, rather, a "visual style." Well, little could be less like academic life than the tales of noir, so why would scholars get it right?

They even get its history wrong. A truism passing for scholarship is that noir's high-contrast visual style dates from German Expressionist cinema of the Twenties. But you see noir-ish lighting in Léonce Perret's 1913 *L'Enfant de Paris*, and it shows up full-blown in Cecil B. DeMille's 1915 film *The Cheat. The Cheat's* production values stunned European filmmakers. Wrote one French critic, "It seemed to make everything that preceded it quite meaningless." ("Everything" included D.W Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, released earlier that year.) Noir lighting came from Hollywood, was imitated and enlarged by Germans, then came back to Hollywood.

As for noir writing, a university publication authoritatively declared the first example to be Dashiell Hammett's 1929 novel *Red Harvest*, though everything noir – dialogue, situation, atmosphere – is fully realized in Ernest Hemingway's 1927 story "The Killers."

None of that may matter very much. What matters more is the notion that writers and filmmakers invented noir. They did not. They recorded and stylized attitudes common in early 20th century America.

Noir came out of how folks made their way in that America, an America unevenly and uneasily divided between a new middle class aspiring to respectability and a working class that spoke a wisecracking, irreverent English; smoked and drank a lot; and had a schizoid attitude toward respectability. They sought and mistrusted it: Sought it for its supposed security; mistrusted it because they mistrusted their bosses, who were supposedly respectable.

Theirs was an America in which much that is now against the law was daily practice and much that is now daily practice was against the law, an America ferociously defending itself against the new while just as ferociously inventing the newer, an America in which, for the first time in human history, masses of young women and men left families to work and live alone in cities where there were scant safeguards to protect workers, women or children. Their America was a classist, racist, sexist, capitalist free-

for-all, a roughhouse in which people played and worked harder than at any time since. Roughness was expected. Whining about that was not respected. A popular adage circa 1920 went, “Catch ‘em young, treat ‘em rough, tell ‘em nothing.”

When writers and filmmakers recorded the underside of that America, one result was noir. Noir was the American Dream turned upside down and shaken till its pockets emptied.

In the ethic of the American Dream, success by any means is respected and failure for any reason is rarely understood -- and even more rarely forgiven. Failure is the ultimate American taboo. But in noir, aside from the occasional fling with somebody worth flinging, nobody really wins. Noir is a cinema of failure. More than a particular visual style, noir has a particular range of character and content. That makes it a genre.

The only justice in noir is a poetic justice that rarely squares with bourgeois aspirations or morality.

In bourgeois melodramas, love is the answer. In noir, love is a disaster -- it screws up everything. You always love the worst person you can love, and it always destroys one or the other, or both.

In *Humoresque*, scripted by Clifford Odets, Joan Crawford accurately insults John Garfield. He smiles: “Evidently, you don’t think so much of me.” She answers: “I love you, so I don’t care what I think of you.”

(I watch that movie for that line and how she says it -- a statement of unconditional love that is actually unconditional. Her expression in the film’s last moments evokes what “unconditional” really means.)

In bourgeois crime dramas, bad people are punished, good people are rewarded, and justice is served. In noir, you needn’t be perp or victim to be destroyed; all it takes is proximity. *In a Lonely Place* is almost unwatchable for Humphrey Bogart’s deepening agony as, suspected of a murder he did not commit, he is driven to understand the sleeping murderer within himself. At the film’s end, the utter bleakness in his face is one of those rare things truly worse than death.

In bourgeois mysteries, all is revealed and mysteries are solved. A noir like *Vertigo* doesn’t solve a thing. Kim Novak and James Stewart are more mysterious at the end than at the beginning. We’ve learned all there is to learn, but nothing is revealed. *Chinatown* turns that formula on its head: Everything is revealed, but nothing is solved.

Here’s an unsolved mystery: What makes a noir hero tick?

Humphrey Bogart’s Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon*, his very different Philip Marlow in *The Big Sleep*, Jack Nicholson’s J.J. Gittes in *Chinatown*, Orson Welles’ Michael O’Hara in *The Lady from Shanghai* – they are men of exceptional range and ability, so why do they do what they do? They could rise from the gutter but choose not to. What is it about the gutter that captivates their motivations?

Welles’ O’Hara (scripted by Welles) provides a key:

“I’ve always found it very sanitary to be broke.”

The noir hero distrusts money, distrusts how people get it, and what it does to them. Money is the lead statuette people kill for in *The Maltese Falcon:* “The stuff that dreams are made of,” Bogart says. Money is dead stuff that deadens people. The noir hero can’t be bought and won’t be owned, not because he’s noble but because he doesn’t want to be deadened.

Another institution almost always absent in noir is family. Noir's heroes and femmes fatales live without families – as though their experience of family is a black hole they turned from long ago. When noir characters are depicted as family members, they are usually shown to be a murderous sister, corrupt brother, sinister father, or sociopathic wife. In most noir, family is deadly.

Money, respectability, family -- pillars of the American Dream. Noir is the genre, my dear scholars, that rejects all that and finds no solace in love.

So what gives noir its intensity and appeal? What makes it fun? The same thing that makes tragedy fun. In noir, we live in the presence of characters who, for better or worse, and with a certain panache, are playing for keeps, and who sometimes shine most brightly when they lose -- as though in loss there's a secret that does no earthly good but feeds the soul.

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