

THE STUFF THAT AMERICAN DREAMS ARE MADE OF:  
WHY THE FILM NOIR GENRE EMERGED  
IN THE MIDST OF RELIGIOUS FERVOR IN POSTWAR AMERICA

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Religion 240H: American Christianities  
December 16, 2015

Dark allies. Shadows. City lights refracting off rain-drenched streets. Fedoras, fancy cars, and low-cut dresses shot in low light with unusual camera angles. Murder, betrayal, and overt sexuality. A detective who follows his own rules and a dame who breaks the rules. These are the classic images of *film noir*, recognizable by most Americans whether they know the term *film noir* or not. Noir titles like *The Maltese Falcon*, *Double Indemnity*, and *The Big Sleep* are considered some of the most classic films of all time, and the American film noir movement of the 1940s-1950s continues to influence cinema to this day. However, the 1940's and 50's were also a time of religious enthusiasm in America. Why, then, did the noir movement develop during an era that brings images to mind of happy middle-class, Protestant families in cookie cutter homes? Although the film noir genre seems morally ambiguous and at times even nihilist, there are connections between post-World War II religious enthusiasm and the noir style that make the correlation of their respective rises not so strange. The film noir movement arose during this period because audiences could relate for a variety of reasons, including post-war fear, the desire for a morality in a changed world, and the quest for redemption from sins.

First, what is film noir? The film noir period is typically designated as the years between 1941-1958, bookended by the films *The Maltese Falcon* and *Touch of Evil*.<sup>1</sup> Although scholars have no official definition or canon, Thomas Hibbs eloquently summarizes the genre of noir:

If film critics have found it impossible to come up with a unifying definition of noir as a genre, the films grouped under the noir label still exhibit what philosophers call family resemblances, including recurring themes (criminality, infidelity, get rich quick schemes, and seemingly doomed quests), dominant moods (anxiety, dread, and oppressive entrapment), typical settings (cities at night and in the rain), and peculiar styles of filming (sharp contrasts between light and dark and tight, off-center camera angles).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mark T. Conard, Introduction to *The Philosophy of Film Noir*, ed. Mark T. Conard (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas S. Hibbs, *Arts of Darkness: American Noir and the Quest for Redemption* (Dallas: Spence Publishing Company, 2008), xv.

Mark T. Conard delves deeper into the themes present in typical noir films: “But besides these technical cinematic characteristics, there are a number of themes that characterize film noir, such as the inversion of traditional values and the corresponding moral ambivalence [...]; the feeling of alienation, paranoia, and cynicism; the presence of crime and violence; and the disorientation of the viewer [...].”<sup>3</sup> Philip Hanson seems to agree with these themes: “In true noir two core elements must be present: moral certainty must be somehow obscure (a pillar of society turns out to be a criminal, a detective is nearly as much a part of the underworld as he is a part of enforcing the law, and so on), and certainty itself must be thrown into question (voice-over narrators speak with confidence only to wind up telling us a story of how wrong they were all along [...]).”<sup>4</sup> Noir is often a story told from inside the criminal world rather than the outside looking in.<sup>5</sup> Lastly, the film noir hero is a unique aspect of the genre. “As for the ambiguous protagonist, he is often more mature, almost old, and not too handsome. [...] He is often enough masochistic, even self-immolating, one who makes his own trouble, who may throw himself into peril neither for the sake of justice nor from avarice but simply out of morbid curiosity.”<sup>6</sup> The protagonist is often found in “the grey area between legal and criminal behavior”<sup>7</sup> because he is bound by no one set of morals. These men are often detectives, either by trade or by choice, on their quest for truth, and are often distracted or tricked by a *femme fatale* woman. The noir genre, then, can be characterized by the fusion of strange lighting, criminal activities and violence, and a noir hero, focused around the idea of a reversed societal roles and a flexible moral code.

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<sup>3</sup> Conard, Introduction, 1-2.

<sup>4</sup> Philip Hanson, “The Arc of National Confidence and the Birth of Film Noir, 1929-1941,” *Journal of American Studies* 42, no. 3 (2008): 395.

<sup>5</sup> Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton, “Towards a Definition of *Film Noir*” In *Film Noir Reader*, ed. Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight Editions, 1996), 20.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

The film noir movement emerged during a time of political and social turmoil in the United States. Many scholars credit hard-boiled fiction, the crime dramas and gangster films of the 1930s, and German immigration with planting the seeds for the film noir genre.<sup>8,9</sup> However, the social and political spheres in the early 1940s were a blank canvas for artistic movements like film noir to arise. First, the Great Depression era influenced the noir genre extensively. The stock market crash created a roller coaster ride out of American self-confidence as well as confidence in the capitalist system. As business leaders proved to be fraudulent, societal morals and pillars appeared to have been fabricated.<sup>10</sup> Americans turned on the wealthy and the powerful in anger for the lies and what was being done about the crash. “And this contributed to a new cynical view of national leadership and a scouring of history all the way back to World War I for villains. This paranoiac element, as a sourness set into the national bloodstream late in the decade, would materialize in a new and dark form in popular film.”<sup>11</sup> This cynicism explains the negative portrayal of cops and authorities in noir films. Paul Schrader agrees the Depression was influential, blaming World War II for the tardy development of noir:

All through the Depression, movies were needed to keep people’s spirits up, and, for the most part, they did. [...] 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.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> James Naremore, *More Than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 9.

<sup>9</sup> Hanson, “The Arc of National Confidence and the Birth of Film Noir”, 395.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 392.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 390.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Schrader, “Notes on *Film Noir*” In *Film Noir Reader*, ed. Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight Editions, 1996), 54.

Indeed, the end of the war did bring it. In the words of Mark Osteen, “The war and its aftermath were by far the most significant cultural influence on noir.”<sup>13</sup> The anxiety and suspense developed in 1930s crime dramas and early noir films flourished in the post-war world of uncertainty: “a world which could no longer be depended upon.”<sup>14</sup> The post-war era gave Hollywood the freedom to produce more pessimistic films, ones audiences could relate to: “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.”<sup>15</sup> Film noir offered a realism that had been missing from Hollywood for years: a shift away from the propaganda-like happy-go-lucky films of the war era and away from standard cinematography to more critical view of America, what the people were looking for.<sup>16</sup> Thusly the pessimism from the Depression era combined with the post-war American disillusionment and the newfound freedom of expression, and film noir was finally let out of its cage to work its magic.

However, the domestic religious developments of the postwar 1940s and ‘50s contrast with the political and social anxiety and instability at the time. The baby boom and America’s shift to middle class suburbia also contained an important religious factor: “In the immediate aftermath of World War II, American society grabbed onto religion with both hands. Levels of adherence reached record highs. New church construction boomed as new suburban neighborhoods were built. Television brought religion into the living rooms of American families. Catholicism and Judaism had shed their ‘foreign’ identities and were accepted as

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<sup>13</sup> Mark Osteen, *Nightmare Alley: Film Noir and the American Dream* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 11.

<sup>14</sup> Hanson, “The Arc of National Confidence and the Birth of Film Noir”, 414.

<sup>15</sup> Schrader, “Notes on *Film Noir*,” 54.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

legitimate alternatives to Protestantism”<sup>17</sup> In fact, “The overwhelming majority of Americans in 1945 were Protestants, Catholics, or Jews.”<sup>18</sup> Churches had to take up building programs to keep pace with the rapid return to religion.<sup>19</sup> While some turned to traditional Protestant and Catholic Christian services, other movements also arose during this period, including the evangelical Reverend Billy Graham’s church and radio show and Norman Vincent Peale’s religion of positive thinking.<sup>20, 21</sup> People were finding their faith, going to church with their families, feeling the evangelical spirit, and settling into church communities. If this was the face of America in the postwar period, why did a pessimistic genre like film noir flourish?

The first part of the answer is found by taking a deeper look into the religiosity of the postwar period. Fear arising from the Depression, the atrocities of the Second World War, and an immanent Cold War with the USSR was a dominant mood at the same time the flourishing postwar economy, regained faith in capitalism, and the baby boom were pushing people toward religion. “Secular and religious writers alike agreed that Americans, while victorious and materially well endowed, remained anxious, adrift, unsure of their identity and purpose.”<sup>22</sup> Elaine Taylor May argues the fear of the Cold War era and the domestic religious revival are “two sides of the same coin,” as Americans after the war had an “intense need to feel liberated

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<sup>17</sup> Etan Diamond, *Souls of the City: Religion and the Search for Community in Postwar America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 5.

<sup>18</sup> Patrick Allitt, *Religion in America: Since 1945: A History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 5.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>20</sup> R. Barton Palmer, “Moral Man in the Dark City: Film Noir, the Postwar Religious Revival, and *The Accused*” in *The Philosophy of Film Noir*, ed. Mark T. Conard (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 190.

<sup>21</sup> Shmoop Editorial Team. "Society in The 1950s." *Shmoop University, Inc.* Last modified November 11, 2008. Accessed December 14, 2015. <http://www.shmoop.com/1950s/society.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Palmer, “Moral Man in the Dark City,” 192.

from the past and secure in the future.”<sup>23</sup> The emotional dichotomy of the postwar era between fear and quiet domesticity is explained by the desire for a sense of security, both domestic and foreign.

To many scholars, the noir genre reflected the pessimism and anxieties marinating in the United States in the ‘40s and ‘50s. As mentioned before, the postwar era was not all comfortable suburbia: “[...]the postwar economic boom was accompanied by massive layoffs, renewed labor unrest, and heightened concerns about the stability of money and the plight of the worker,”<sup>24</sup> While some Americans were optimistic in victory and the solidification of America as a great power, many others felt the world “had never been worse,”<sup>25</sup> especially with the advent of nuclear power. The idea that noir portrayed the anxieties of the time is called the “dark mirror theory.” “According to this view, the sudden emergence and flourishing of film noir reflects the supposedly bleak and fearful national mood that unexpectedly descended on the nation in the wake of the war’s end, despite (or because of) the overwhelming victory achieved by American arms in both the European and the Pacific theatres.”<sup>26</sup> To some, noir represented a new philosophy, portraying the pursuit of happiness, self-reinvention, upward mobility, control over one’s life as impossible and hopeless,<sup>27</sup> reflections of Depression-era anxieties in a new period of anxiousness. Under the dark mirror theory, noir’s pessimism and fear arose because society was pessimistic and in fear, and films were finally portraying reality. Contrary to what it may be

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<sup>23</sup> Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, rev. and updated ed. (New York: Basic, 1999), xxi, quoted in R. Barton Palmer, “Moral Man in the Dark City: Film Noir, the Postwar Religious Revival, and *The Accused*” in *The Philosophy of Film Noir*, ed. Mark T. Conard (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 192.

<sup>24</sup> Osteen, *Nightmare Alley*, 12.

<sup>25</sup> Allitt, *Religion in America*, 4.

<sup>26</sup> Palmer, “Moral Man in the Dark City,” 187.

<sup>27</sup> Osteen, *Nightmare Alley*, 3-4.

thought, religion was not exempt from anxiety as the Cold War crept upon the United States. Many Christians swept up in the religious surge of the 1940s and '50s brought their fears with them to church in a search for answers to calm the worries they had about the future. "No one voiced the fear that the world was coming to a crisis more convincingly than evangelical and fundamentalist preachers."<sup>28</sup> It is not hard to see why the threat of nuclear war with Soviet Russia and the worldwide fight between communism and capitalism appeared to many to be signs of the Second Coming, manifesting in a rise in fundamentalism and preaching of the second coming of Jesus.<sup>29</sup> In fact, the rise of religiosity and the rise of film noir at the same time are not necessarily strange if one recognizes that fear of the future motivated both movements.

Other scholars explain the rise of film noir during a period of religious fervor and domesticity to the idea that films noir are actually not morally ambiguous. Certainly the typical protagonist of crime and drama films have shifted in noir films: the police are often corrupt and are no longer protagonists, law breakers tend to be the good guys, and the classic private detective character is used because he can walk the line of lawfulness and criminality.<sup>30</sup> In "Moral Clarity and Practical Reason in Film Noir," Aeon J. Skoble argues the genre of film noir is not as morally ambiguous as it is typically believed to be, and that ethics lie beneath the surface of a seemingly murky morality.<sup>31</sup> He argues, "[...] when there is a 'right thing to do' but the alternatives are attractive (for whatever reason), the seeming moral ambiguity is in fact an exercise in ethical decision making."<sup>32</sup> Because the audience sees the characters deliberating

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<sup>28</sup> Allitt, *Religion in America*, 12.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-13.

<sup>30</sup> Borde and Chaumeton, "Towards a Definition of *Film Noir*," 21.

<sup>31</sup> Skoble, Aeon J. "Moral Clarity and Practical Reason in Film Noir" in *The Philosophy of Film Noir*, ed. Mark T. Conard (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 41.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 41-42.



over their choices, narrating and rationalizing their reasoning behind them, and the ethical outcome of those choices, ethical decision making is portrayed in film noir no matter if the “right” decision is made in the end or not.<sup>33</sup> Skoble even excuses moments in noir films when the sympathetic “good” protagonist makes the choice to lie or deceive someone, comparing this choice to an underground railroad worker lying about hiding fugitives: they break the rules for the greater goal of pursuing justice.<sup>34</sup> “When the noir protagonist is breaking rules in pursuit of unjust goals, of course, such as plotting the murder of a lover’s spouse, this is shown to be wrong regardless of which rules are in place.”<sup>35</sup> In essence, the morally ambiguous characters either make the good choice in the end, make the bad choice but show why it was bad, or lie for a greater justice.

Skoble uses two classic film noir examples to prove his point: *The Maltese Falcon* and *Double Indemnity*. *The Maltese Falcon*’s protagonist Sam Spade (Humphry Bogart) makes the “right” decision in the end of the film to overlook his attraction to a possible romantic partner Brigid, outing her for murdering his partner after a long explanation of his motives. “Even if Spade has fashioned a *reputation* for being amoral, he nevertheless does demonstrate a sense of objective right and wrong. He notes that, ‘when a man’s partner is killed, he’s supposed to do something about it,’ and that to do otherwise is dangerous (‘bad for every detective everywhere’), suggesting some sort of moral code to which he subscribes, one that he will not violate simply out of physical attraction.”<sup>36</sup> Such noir characters who choose the right path in the end, no matter the journey, are protagonists that religious and moral audiences could rally

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 42-43.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 44.

around, because they follow a morality they understand rather than a reversal of values. In contrasting fashion, star of *Double Indemnity* Walter Neff (Fred Mac Murray) deceives himself that murdering a fellow man would bring him happiness, and chooses the “wrong” path: committing murder for a *femme fatale*.<sup>37</sup> Spade lives on at the end of *The Maltese Falcon* to solve crime another day, while Neff suffers pain and is ultimately killed by the woman he did the deed for. The importance in these portrayals is this: “[...] *actually* amoral noir characters [...] also do not represent an inversion of values since their decisions and actions are presented to the audience as wrong. Their schemes do not produce the desired results and are thus *poor* examples of practical reasoning.”<sup>38</sup> The portrayal of morality in noir is therefore not ambiguous: the “bad” suffer what was coming to them and are portrayed as morally flawed, even if they are the protagonists of the film. “Typically, killers are killed, cheaters are busted, and thieves go to prison.”<sup>39</sup> These two types of noir films would have been attractive to audiences familiar with Christian morality because the character with seemingly ambiguous morals is really not ambiguous: he either ends up choosing the good path or his life becomes a cautionary tale for those who do not. Therefore, it is not odd that film noir arose in a religious period.

Lastly, film noir has been recognized by some scholars for its stories of redemption. In *Arts of Darkness: American Noir and the Quest for Redemption*, Thomas S. Hibbs claims there is an often ignored theme of redemption present in many noir films. Hibbs uses Walter Neff of *Double Indemnity* to prove the presence of redemption in a common noir element: the voiceover confession. Neff’s dying confession to his boss “[...] mimics the religious confession that recounts past events and acts, especially sins, in the present, in the hope of forgiveness and

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 47.

reconciliation.”<sup>40</sup> These confessional voiceovers are typical in noir films when the protagonist makes the wrong choice, using the voiceover to explain his thought process that led to his demise. R. Barton Palmer also wrote on redemption in noir in reference to the film *The Accused*: young professor Wilma Tuttle is forced to kill to save herself, and in fear covers it up. Palmer explains her redemption story, because not only is she acquitted of the crime but she is delivered into a happy love life including a makeover and a new domesticity.<sup>41</sup> Although the confessions and redemptions in noir usually are given to and by a friend or by the law, the faithful of America could admire these confessions and be heartbroken when they come too late, as in Neff’s case, or rejoice when the innocent get a chance in this cruel world, like Wilma. These redemption stories would resonate well with Protestant American audiences due to the theme of confession and redemption for sins, showing again why noir and Christianity do not show conflicting ideals after all.

The peculiar timing of the rise of religiosity in America at the same time as the rise of a dark crime film genre in the post-WWII era is somewhat perplexing on the surface. However, it makes sense for a few reasons. For some, film noir’s darkness and depressing undertones mirrored the dark and fearful spirit of America in the coming of the Cold War, much like religious fundamentalism flourished at the same time in a fear of the coming end. For others, the world was frighteningly immoral, as seen in the numerous genocides, bloody total war, and the invention of atomic warfare. Film noir portrayed a changed moral world, with ambiguity and bent morality, but showed audiences morality was still alive even in such confusing atmospheres. And for others, noir stories were about redemption, a classic Protestant and American story of

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>41</sup> Palmer, “Moral Man in the Dark City,” 197.

reinvention. These simultaneous events, a rise in religious conviction and the rise of noir films, seem to be unrelated. However, when one recognizes the national mood in the postwar era and the search for morality and redemption in an impending world of darkness, it becomes understandable why the popularity of noir and religion went hand in hand.

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