Woman's place:
the absent family of film noir

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The world view generated within the film noir entitles this group of films to be considered as a distinct and separate entity within the history of American film.[1] What this world view reflects is a series of profound changes which, though they are not yet grasped or understood, are shaking the foundations of the established and therefore normal perceptions of the social order. Like an echo chamber, film noir captures and magnifies the rumbles that preceded one of those earthquakes in human history that shift the hidden foundations of a society, and that begin the displacement of its characteristic and dominant systems of values and beliefs. Like the world of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, in which the ingratitude of children towards their parents is at once the cause and effect of an immense disorder within the human universe, film noir offers us again and again examples of abnormal or monstrous behaviour, which defy the patterns established for human social interaction, and which hint at a series of radical and irresolvable contradictions buried deep within the total system of economic and social interactions that constitute the known world.

Despite the presence of most of the conventions of the dominant methods of film-making and story-telling: the impetus towards the resolution of the plot, the diffusion of tension, the circularity of a narrative that resolves all of the problems it encounters, the successful completion of the individual's quest, these methods do not, in the end, create the most significant contours of the cultural map of film noir. The defining contours of this group of films are the product of that which is abnormal and dissonant. And the dissonances, the sense of disorientation and unease, while frequently present at the level of plot and thematic development are, more importantly perhaps, always a function of the visual style of this group of films. Disequilibrium is the product of a style characterised by unbalanced and disturbing frame compositions, strong contrasts of light and dark, the prevalence of shadows and areas of darkness within the frame, the visual tension created by curious camera

angles and so forth. Moreover, in film noir these strained compositions and angles are not merely embellishments or rhetorical flourishes, but form the semantic substance of the film. The visual dissonances that are characteristic of these films are the mark of those ideological contradictions that form the historical context out of which the films are produced.

This principled claim that seeks to establish the importance of style and *mise en scène* as, materially, that which produces meaning in these movies, is not to be adequately followed up in this article.[2] The piece attempts an approach to the problem of defining the contours of this group of films from a different angle.[3] The article, that is, tries to understand the process whereby the depiction of women in these films, by a complex and circuitous network of mediation, reflects such social changes as the increasing entry of women into the labour market.

It is the representation of the institution of the family, which in so many films serves as the mechanism whereby desire is fulfilled, or at least ideo-logical equilibrium established, that in film noir serves as the vehicle for the expression of frustration. On the thematic level, one of the defining characteristics of film noir is to be found in its treatment of the family and family relations. However, there is another level of analysis beyond that of theme where things are not what they seem at the surface level of narrative and plot. One of the fundamental operations at this concealed level has to do with the non-fulfilment of desire. The way in which this underlying frustration or non-fulfilment is translated into, or expressed at, the thematic level in film noir is through the representation of romantic love relations, the family and family relations.

The repressed presence of intolerable contradictions, and the sense of uncertainty and confusion about the smooth functioning of the social environment, present at the level of style in film noir, can be seen also in the treatment of social institutions at the thematic level, and most notably in the treatment of the family. Moreover the kinds of tension characteristic of the portrayal of the family in these films suggest the beginnings of an attack on the dominant social values normally expressed through the representation of the family.

In so many of the major, and so-called 'non-political' American films, it is the family which has served a crucial function in inserting within the film narrative the established values of competitive, repressive and hierarchical relationships. The presence of the family has served to legitimate and natural-ise these values: that is, to present them as the normal, natural and unthought premises for conducting one's life. Moreover, the representation of women has always been linked to this value-generating nexus of the family. The value of women on the market of social exchange has been to a large extent deter-mined by the position of women within the structure of the family. Woman's place in the home determines her position in society, but also serves as a reflection of oppressive social relationships generally. As Engels suggested, within the family 'she is the proletarian, he the bourgeois.'

All movies express social values, or the erosion of these values, through the ways in which they depict both institutions and relations between people. Certain institutions are more revealing of social values and beliefs than others, and the family is perhaps one of the most significant of these institutions. For it is through the particular representations of the family in various movies that we are able to study the processes whereby existing social relations are rendered acceptable and valid.

Through its manifestation of a whole series of customs and beliefs, the family functions as one of the ideological cornerstones of Western industrial society. It embodies a range of traditional values: love of family, love of father (father/ruler), love of country, are intertwined concepts, and we may see the family as a microcosm containing within itself all of the patterns of dominance and submission that are characteristic of the larger society.

We might summarise here some of the most important concepts that are dealt with through and in the representation of the family. First, the concepts of reproduction and socialisation: the family is the arena that is sanctified by society for the reproduction and preliminary education of the human race, for the bringing up of children. In the free labour that it requires the mother to perform in raising the child, the family serves to legitimate a whole series of practices that oppress women. Moreover, in its hierarchical structure, with the father as the head, the mother as subservient, and the children as totally dependent, it offers us a legitimating model or metaphor for a hierarchical and authoritarian society. The internal, oppressive, often violent relations within the family present a mirror image of oppressive and violent relations between classes in the larger society.

Second, the family is sanctified as the acceptable location of a sexuality defined in extremely limited terms. Western industrial society has regarded marriage, and hence the family, as the only legitimate arena for the fulfilment of sexual needs, though this legitimacy has been somewhat modified to allow for the double standard, that is, for the separate codes of sexual practice to be adhered to by male and female. What is most interesting is that in general in the movies, as in society, the family at the same time legitimates and *conceals* sexuality. Although marriage is the only place where sexual activity is to be sanctioned, oddly enough (or perhaps it is not so odd) mothers and fathers are seldom represented as sexual partners, especially in those movies of the forties and fifties when censorship demanded that only bedrooms with separate beds were to be shown on the screen. So that, although married couples – that is, mothers and fathers – are the only ones allowed to engage in erotic activity, these parents or potential parents are normally presented in a totally de-eroticised way.

A final concept dealt with through the representation of the family is that of romantic love. Though so many movies go to extreme lengths to keep the two apart (a function of ideology working overtime to conceal its contradictions), romantic love and the institution of the family are logically and inevitably linked. The logical conclusion to that romantic love which seeks always the passionate and enduring love of a lifetime is the family, which must serve as the point of termination and fulfilment of romance. And if successful romantic love leads inevitably in the direction of the stable institution of marriage, the point about film noir, by contrast, is that it is structured around the destruction or absence of romantic love and the family.

Moreover, since we are engaged in analysing the ideological systems of movies, and not those of novels or newspapers, it is important to note that in film noir it is not only at the level of plot and narrative resolution that lovers are not permitted to live happily ever after,[4] but it is at the additional and perhaps more important level of *mise en scène* or visual style that the physical environment of the lovers (whether created by landscape/set, or by camera angle, framing and lighting) is presented as threatening, disturbing, fragmented.

The ideological significance of lovers living happily ever after lies in the unspoken, and usually invisible, metamorphosis that is implied to take place at the end of every happy ending. By means of this metamorphosis lovers are transformed into fathers and mothers, into families. This magic circle of transformation is broken in film noir which, in presenting family relations as broken, perverted, peripheral or impossible founds itself upon the absence of the family.[5]

In certain ways, the representation of women in this group of films reflects the 'normal' status of women within contemporary social relations. The two most common types of women in film noir are the exciting, childless whores, or the boring, potentially childbearing sweethearts. However, in other respects, the normal representation of women as the founders of families undergoes an interesting displacement. For it is the strange and compelling absence of 'normal' family relations in these films that hints at important shifts in the position of women in American society. Among these changes must be listed the temporary but widespread introduction of women into the American labour force during World War II, and the changing economic and ideological function of the family that parallels the changing structures and goals of an increasingly monopolistic economy. These economic changes forced certain changes in the traditional organisation of the family; and the underlying sense of horror and uncertainty in film noir may be seen, in part, as an indirect response to this forcible assault on traditional family structures and the traditional and conservative values which they embodied. The astounding Mildred Pierce (*Mildred Pierce*, 1945), woman of the world, woman of business, and only secondarily a mother, is a good example of this disruption and displacement of the values of family life. The image of Mildred, in a masculine style of dress, holding her account books and looking *away* from her lover, typifies this kind of displacement (see p26).

The appearance of the early film noir coincides with the rise and fall of nationalistic ideologies generated by the period of total war. It may be argued that the ideology of national unity which was characteristic of the war period, and which tended to gloss over and conceal class divisions, began to falter and decay, to lose its credibility, once the war was over. The encounter with a depressed peace-time economy, with its threat of high prices and rising unemployment, began a process of general disillusionment for many of those return-

Mildred Pierce

ing home after the war, in search of those values which they had fought to defend. It is this breakdown, also, this erosion of expectations, that finds its way into the film noir by a series of complex transmutations. The hard facts of economic life are transmuted, in these movies, into corresponding moods and feelings. Thus the feelings of loss and alienation expressed by the characters in film noir can be seen as the product both of post-war depression and of the reorganisation of the American economy.

With the increasing size of corporations, the growth of monopolies and the accelerated elimination of small businesses it became increasingly hard for even the petit bourgeoisie to continue to believe in certain dominant myths. Foremost among these was the dream of equality of opportunity in business, and of the God-given right of every man to be his own boss. Increasingly the petit bourgeoisie were forced into selling their labour and working for the big companies, instead of running their own businesses and working 'for themselves'. It is this factor of being forced to work according to the goals and purposes formulated *by someone else*, that accounts in large measure for the feelings of alienation and helplessness in film noir.

It is no accident that Walter Neff in *Double Indemnity* (1944) seeks an escape from the dull routine of the insurance company that he works for, in an affair with the deadly and exotic Phyllis Dietrichson. The possession of Phyllis Dietrichson, as of any of the other film noir women who function as sexual commodities, is, in the magic world of the movies, held up as a tempt-

ing means of escape from the boredom and frustration of a routinised and alienated existence. Nor is it accidental that Neff, on his way up to his office to make his final confession, encounters the elevator man who tells him that he never could buy medical insurance from the company that he has worked for all of his life, because he has a bad heart. It is this feeling of being lost in a world of corporate values (represented in different films by big business, the police, the mob etc.) that are not sensitive to the needs and desires of the individual, that permeates film noir.

In the world of symbolic searches, exchanges and satisfactions created by these movies, women are accorded the function of an ideological safety valve, but this function is ambivalent. Presented as prizes, desirable objects, they seem to offer a temporary satisfaction to the men of film noir. In the (false) satisfactions that they represent, they might be seen to prevent the mood of despondency and loss, characteristic of these films, from being translated into an understanding and analysis of the conditions that *produce* the sense of alienation and loss. However, the ideological safety valve device that operates in the offering of women as sexual commodities, breaks down in probably most of these films, because the women are not, finally, possessed. Walter Neff (*Double Indemnity*) summarises the position of many of the film noir men when he concludes: 'I didn't get the woman and I didn't get the money'. The same statement would be true for the men of *Scarlet Street* (1945), *They Live By Night* (1949), *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), *Lady From Shanghai* (1949) and *Gun Crazy* (1949).

One of the recurrent themes of film noir is concerned with the loss of those satisfactions normally obtained through the possession of a wife and the presence of a family, though this theme is manifested in different ways. At the simple level of the organisation of the plot, *Woman in the Window* (1944) is one of the most obvious examples of the multifarious evils that befall a man who is left alone without his family. At the beginning of the film, the wife and children of the professor, who is the central character of the film, depart for a summer vacation, leaving him alone with only the company of his male friends. Left to his own devices he gets involved with a woman whose portrait, displayed in the window of a gallery, has mesmerised him. The woman turns out to be the mistress of another man, and because of his relationship with her, the professor is involved in a murder.

As he sits at home, terrified that the police are closing in on him, he is surrounded by the photographs of his family, which seem to reproach him for the life that he is leading while they are absent.

At the end of the movie we discover that these lurid events have been enacted only in the professor's dream. But it is none the less significant that this masochistic dream is triggered by the departure of the protagonist's wife and children. Moreover in the images of this departure (see p28) — the family farewells at the station — we are given certain visual clues about the operation of the marriage. The children in the foreground of the scene, engrossed in their comic books, ignore both their mother and father. The father fumbles awkwardly with his hat, the wife, with an extremely restrained gesture,

Woman in the Window

Scarlet Street

touches him with one hand; both clutch at objects (the hat, the pile of glossy magazines) which prevent them from embracing each other. There is no warmth in the farewell, no hint of the erotic. Even the polished marble floor adds an element of coldness to the scene.

In the world of film noir both men and women seek sexual satisfaction *outside* of marriage. This is true, for example, for the characters of *Woman in the Window*, *Double Indemnity* and *Lady From Shanghai*. However, a fundamental ideological contradiction rises to the surface in these movies, for the noir lovers are not permitted the socially acceptable practice of quiet 'adultery' (an ideological operation which, like that of prostitution, reconfirms the primacy of monogamy), rather they are required to carry out the violent destruction of the marriage bonds. Paradoxically (and it is through this paradox that the dominant ideology attempts to reassert itself), the destruction of the sanctity of marriage, most notable in *Double Indemnity*, results in placing the relationship of the lovers under such strain, so beyond the boundaries of conventional moral law, that the relationship becomes an impossibility, and transforms itself into the locus of mutual destruction.

In *Double Indemnity* the act of killing the husband serves as the supreme act of violence against family life, and has, in some sense, to be atoned for through the mutual destruction of the lovers in the macabre shoot-out, at the family house, which ends the film. It is perhaps most clear in this movie that the expression of sexuality and the institution of marriage are at odds with one another, and that both pleasure and death lie outside the safe circle of family relations.

Moreover there is clearly an impetus in film noir to transgress the boundaries of this circle; for the presence of husbands on crutches or in wheelchairs (*Double Indemnity*, *Lady From Shanghai*) suggests that impotence is somehow a normal component of the married state. Other imagery in these films suggests that a routinised boredom and a sense of stifling entrapment are characteristic of marriage. A large birdcage looms in the foreground of the family home in *Scarlet Street*, separating husband and wife (see p28), and the husband hovers uncertainly at the edge of the frame, holding in one hand the paint brushes which signify for him his escape into the fantasy world of his paintings. The family home in *Double Indemnity* is the place where three people who hate each other spend endlessly boring evenings together. The husband does not merely not notice his wife, he ignores her sexually; so that it is only under Neff's gaze that her long legs become the focal point of both the room as Neff sees it and the composition of the frame (see p30). While Neff looks at her, the husband looks at the insurance papers which function as his own death warrant, in the sense that they are the device through which the lovers plan to benefit from the large insurance payments on his death. Neff is subsequently caught up in the inescapable cycle of desire, death and retribution.

By contrast, the man in *Lady From Shanghai*, Michael, does not kill, and does not die, but neither is he satisfied. He watches as husband and wife kill each other (see p30), realising at last that she has betrayed him as well as her
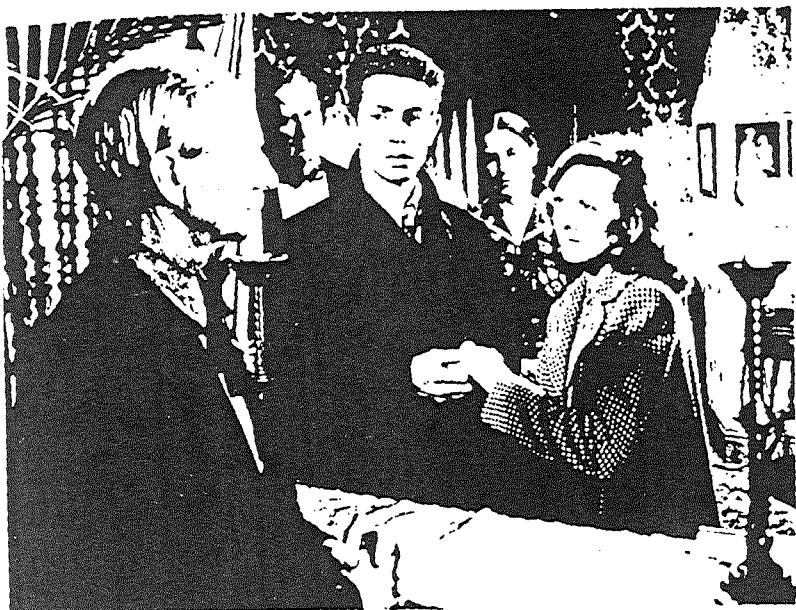
Double Indemnity


Lady From Shanghai

husband. It is at the end of the movie a condition of the lonely and frustrating freedom of Michael (as well as for the crusading private eye in *The Maltese Falcon*, 1941) that he is not married, that marriage is an impossible state for him. The men of film noir tend to be the chief protagonists, the chief movers of the plot, the locus from which the point of view of the film proceeds, and the central narrative consciousness which retells the events of the past, and controls the unfolding of the tale. However, this dominance is not total. For the 'black widow' women, for example in *Double Indemnity* and *Lady From Shanghai*, are actively involved in the violent assault on the conventional values of family life.

If many of the films noirs depict a boredom and sterility associated with the married state, others present married couples who create a kind of anti-family. Most obviously, lovers on the run are unable to conform to the normal stereotypes of family or married behaviour. The lovers on the run of *Gun Crazy* and *They Live By Night* (1949) are, technically, married; they go through the marriage ceremony. However, their position outside the law does not permit them to function as normal couples acceptable to the dominant ideology. Their marriages function as the nexus of destruction, not as the showcase of desire fulfilled. Even the marriage ceremony has a slightly threatening quality to it in *They Live By Night*. The left foreground of the frame is taken up by the looming figure of the man performing the ceremony (see p32); the lovers face the camera in the centre and behind them, seeming to encircle and dominate them, hover the two stern-faced witnesses. Moreover the man who performs the ceremony appears again later in the film as the one who can most clearly foresee the rapid approach of the tragic end. In refusing with an unexpected honesty to take the money that he is offered to help the young couple across the border into Mexico, he is the one who makes clear to them, at last, the impossibility of their situation and the inevitability of a violent climax.

In *Gun Crazy* the isolation of the couple as well as their nonconformity to certain social norms is emphasised by the way in which they are presented as outsiders to the family and family life. Taking refuge with Bart's family at the end of the film, they so clearly do not belong; they constitute a violent eruption into the ordered patterns of family life. Moreover, as in *They Live By Night*, it is through the organisation of the *mise en scène* that their final doom is foretold. The scene in the deserted railway shack where they plan their final heist is characterised by a series of unsettling frame compositions: by such things as the obsessive presence in the composition of a large lamp, that dwarfs the human subjects; or by the blacking out of portions of the screen, caused by the intervention of objects in the foreground. As in *Double Indemnity* and *Lady From Shanghai*, the relationship of the lovers turns to mutual destructiveness. At the end of *Gun Crazy*, in the terrible dawn scene in the marshes, with the mist rising and the police encircling the couple, Bart shoots his wife in order to stop her from shooting his male friends – the cop and the newspaper man. Destructive passion characterises the central male/female relationship, while the more protective gestures of loving are exchanged, as in

Sunset Boulevard
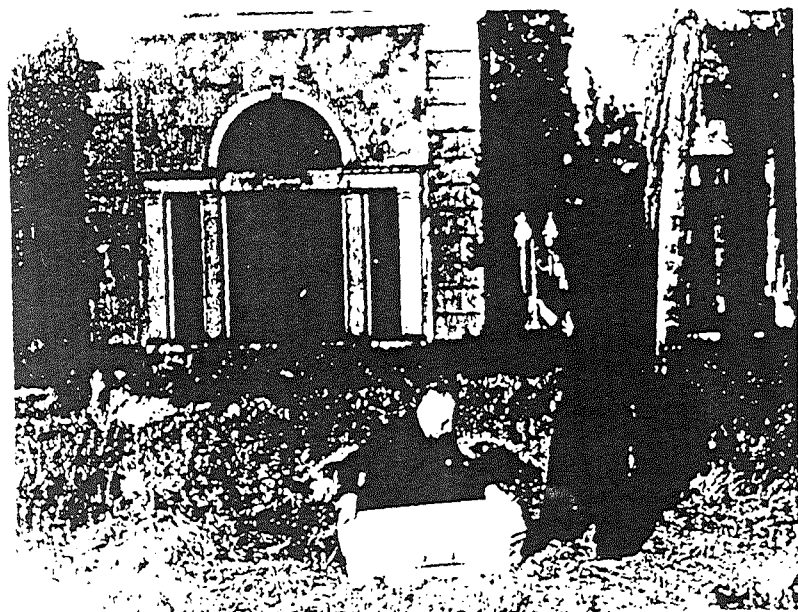
Double Indemnity, between men.

The sterility, in conventional family terms, of the central male/female relationships in film noir (and often these relationships are unfavourably contrasted with male/male relationships) is further emphasised by the childlessness of the couples. *Sunset Boulevard* offers an interesting example of this emphasis. The absence of the family and the failure of romantic love are central thematic elements. Joe Gillis, by becoming involved in the unsanctified relationship of gigolo (the paid and kept lover) to Norma Desmond, loses whatever chances he might have had of finding a successful romantic relationship. His failure is matched by hers, and the presence of the butler (von Stroheim), her ex-husband, now her servant, ministering to her relationships with men like Joe, is a permanent reminder of the failure of romance and marriage in her life. The macabre incident in which the butler and Norma officiate at the nocturnal, candle-lit burial of the chimpanzee which is Norma's substitute for a child (see p32), seems to summarise the sterile state of a world which floats adrift from the normalcy of a society normally governed by the institution of marriage, and the relations of family life.

The family, within a capitalist economy, has functioned both objectively and subjectively as the locus of women's particular oppression. Its internal relations have *produced* those ideological entities: daughters, wives and mothers, that are so familiar a part of our world. It is the absence of normal family relations (of the network of relationships between mother-father-wife-husband-daughter-son) that forms one of the distinctive parameters of film noir. If we can say that familial *entities* are the ideological fictions called into being by family relations, then the absence of these *relations*, which are by definition normal in capitalist society, creates a vacuum that ideology abhors. This terrible absence of family relations allows for the production of the *seeds of counter-ideologies*. The absence or disfigurement of the family both calls attention to its own lack and to its own deformity, and may be seen to encourage the consideration of alternative institutions for the reproduction of social life. Despite the ritual punishment of acts of transgression, the vitality with which these acts are endowed produces an excess of meaning which cannot finally be contained. Narrative resolutions cannot recuperate their subversive significance.

Notes

1 The film noir period can be taken to coincide approximately with the appearance of *The Maltese Falcon* in 1941 and of *Touch of Evil* in 1958.
2. The polemic for this position, and for the primacy of this method, is developed in Bill Nichols' article: 'Style, Grammar and the Movies', *Film Quarterly*, Vol. XXVIII, No. 3, Spring 1975, pp33-49.
3. The methodological inadequacy of this article lies in its failure to conceptualise the relationship between its own (only partly articulated) method, and the primary hypothesis already postulated, namely that of the primacy of visual style. Moreover, the attempt at analysing ways in which certain structures within the movies reflect certain (changing) structures within the society that is contemporary with the movies is insufficiently theorised.