HOLLYWOOD’S INWARD TURN: STYLISTIC SELF-REFLEXIVITY IN FILM NOIR

By

NATHANIEL ROBERT DEYO

A DISSERTATION PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2016
To my parents
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my dissertation chair, Robert B. Ray, for his invaluable guidance in seeing this project through to completion. It was in classes and conversations with him that many of this dissertation’s core ideas took shape. I would also like to thank the members of my dissertation committee—Barbara Mennel, Marsha Bryant, and Sylvie Blum-Reid—for their support and encouragement during the drafting phase. I must also acknowledge the role played by the late Scott Nygren in the development of this project, and of my thinking about the cinema more generally. Beyond my committee, I owe thanks to many other faculty members in the Department of English, who helped me as both teachers and colleagues, particularly Susan Hegeman, Brandy Kershner, Phil Wegner, Stephanie Smith, Raúl Sánchez and Kenneth Kidd. I must also thank the department’s administrative staff—particularly Kathy Williams and Carla Blount—for putting up with my tendency to miss deadlines.

I am also grateful for my family and for the numerous friends I have made in my six years in Gainesville, without whose company and moral support I would not have been able to finish this project.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 THE NARROW MARGIN: CONVENTION AND DECEPTION</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 MINISTRY OF FEAR: UNSUTURING THE SYSTEM OF THE SUTURE</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 THE BIG SLEEP: THE CONSTRUCTION OF HOLLYWOOD FANTASY</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 LAURA: THE RESISTANCE OF REALITY</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 CONCLUSION</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF REFERENCES</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-1</td>
<td>Objective and subjective framing of Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-1</td>
<td>A close-up of Ann Sinclair (Jacqueline White)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-2</td>
<td>A close-up of Mrs. Neall (Marie Windsor)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-3</td>
<td>Femme Fatale imagery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-4</td>
<td>Expressive framing and lighting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-5</td>
<td>Reflective surfaces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-1</td>
<td>Unconventional editing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-2</td>
<td>Distant framing of Stephen Neale (Ray Milland)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-1</td>
<td>Rhyming mise-en-scène</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-2</td>
<td>Artful composition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-3</td>
<td>An unbalanced medium-shot of the proprietress (Dorothy Malone) and Philip</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Marlowe (Humphrey Bogart)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-4</td>
<td>The proprietress’s perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-5</td>
<td>The proprietress’s disappointment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-1</td>
<td>Laura Hunt (Gene Tierney) making coffee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-2</td>
<td>Modern décor in Laura’s kitchen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-3</td>
<td>Matching clocks in the apartments of Laura and Waldo Lydecker (Clifton Webb)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-4</td>
<td>Waldo Lydecker performing domesticity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-5</td>
<td>Detective Mark McPherson admiring a painting of Laura</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-5</td>
<td>An overly posed image of Laura from Waldo’s flashback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-6</td>
<td>Laura’s return filmed in long shot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-7</td>
<td>Alternating long shots and close-ups of Laura</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-8</td>
<td>“Glamourous” lighting during Laura’s interrogation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“Hollywood’s Inward Turn: Stylistic Self-Reflexivity in Film Noir” argues that the film noir cycle of the 1940s and 1950s marks a distinctly modernist, self-reflexive turn within Classical Hollywood cinema. During this period, an increasing number of films began to use sophisticated stylistic procedures to call attention to, and comment upon, certain standard conventions of Hollywood filmmaking. Through close, detailed analyses of four films from the period—*The Narrow Margin* (Richard Fleischer, 1952), *Ministry of Fear* (Fritz Lang, 1944), *The Big Sleep* (Howard Hawks, 1946), and *Laura* (Otto Preminger, 1944)—the dissertation charts the workings of a number of these procedures and explores the formal possibilities of the Classical Hollywood style, revealing new aspects of films, and a style of filmmaking, that may appear critically exhausted.

Film noir represents a particularly rich object of study in this respect because it arrived at a crucial historical juncture in the development of cinematic language. Emerging in the mid-40s, just before widescreen formats, other industrial pressures, and the innovations of post-war European art cinema brought about a major reconfiguration in the way mainstream movies looked, noir films present the critic with
an artistic language that had reached full maturity, and whose dominance over its medium was soon to be on the wane. The critical interest of these films lies not only in their handling of deviant thematic material, or their tendency to reflect symptomatically the pent-up anxieties of post-war America, but also in their capacity to demonstrate the potential complexity of Classical Hollywood’s basic formal and stylistic figures, such as stock character types, the continuity editing system, and glamorous star close-ups.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Part way though Billy Wilder’s *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) there occurs one of the most astonishing moments in all of film noir. One evening in the dark of her decaying Hollywood mansion, the fading silent film star Norma Desmond (Gloria Swanson) and Joe Gillis (William Holden), the unsuccessful scriptwriter she has lured into a dependent situation, watch a film projected on Norma’s home theater, with the projector run by Max Von Mayerling (Erich von Stroheim), her servant (and, we eventually learn, former husband). The film, we are told, is from Norma’s glory years as an actress, and we watch as the aged Norma becomes enthralled by the image of her younger self. “We didn’t need dialogue. We had faces,” she tells Joe. “There just aren’t any faces like that anymore.” Eventually, her reminiscence turns to anger and she begins to decry “those idiot producers” who have “forgotten what a star looks like” before rising to theatrically declare “I'll show them! I'll be up there again, so help me!”

At one level, this scene would seem relatively straight-forward, its primary purpose being to underline Norma’s delusions, her pathetic narcissism, and her pathological inability to let go of the past. Things become more complicated, however, when we consider the film that she and Joe are watching. It is not a mock-up made for *Sunset Boulevard*, but rather a real silent film: 1929’s *Queen Kelly*, which starred Swanson and was directed by von Stroheim. The presence of this real Hollywood artifact within the film’s diegetic world disturbs any clear boundary between reality and fiction, calling attention to the real people inhabiting the Norma Desmond and Max Von Mayerling roles, and reminding us of their own histories in the film industry. Moreover, the scene emphasizes some of the more unsavory elements of the Hollywood system,
such as the way it treated stars, and female stars in particular, as commodities to be tossed aside when the spark of youth has left them, or the way studio politics and industrial economics often got in the way of genuine artistic expression (as in the case of von Stroheim’s directorial career, which was famously beset by clashes with producers like Irving Thalberg over his films’ purported commercial viability).

What we have here, then, is an instance of Hollywood turning inward, using one of its own films as an occasion to cast a critical eye on its own practices and tendencies. In this dissertation, I will argue that this instance is not a unique outlier, but rather an example of a growing tendency toward self-reflexivity in 40s and 50s Hollywood, a tendency most prevalent in the film noir cycle, and one locatable even in films that were not explicitly about the film industry. Through close, detailed analyses of four film noirs from the period – *The Narrow Margin* (Richard Fleischer, 1951), *Ministry of Fear* (Fritz Lang, 1946), *The Big Sleep* (Howard Hawks, 1946), and *Laura* (Otto Preminger, 1944) – I explore a variety of self-reflexive strategies, arguing in the process that noir may be seen as representing the emergence of a “modernist” aesthetic disposition within Hollywood’s classical style. Furthermore, in employing extended close readings of single films to develop this argument, the dissertation implicitly argues for the usefulness of this practice in addressing matters of both film theory and film history.

In the last two decades, film scholars have begun increasingly to explore the relationship between noir and modernism, and the general consensus seems now to be that the noir cycle represents a key element in what might be termed the culture of modernity. Three works that present this argument quite forcefully are James Naremore’s *More Than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts* (1998), Paula Rabinowitz’s *Black
and White and Noir: America’s Pulp Modernism (2002), and Edward Dimendberg’s Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity (2004). While all three represent impressive scholarly achievements, the focus in each tends to be on locating noir within the larger social and economic frameworks of modern society. As a result, individual films often seem to be reduced to mere data points, their interest deriving from their ability to reflect extra-cinematic phenomena. Dimendberg, for instance, clearly declares his intentions to journey beyond mere film analysis and into “the extra-cinematic precincts of geography, city planning, architectural theory, and urban and cultural history” (9) and a typical passage sees him asserting that one finds in noir

[a] tension between a residual American urbanism of the 1920s and the 1930s and its liquidation by the technological and social innovations accompanying World War II, as well as the simultaneous dissolution of this new social compact of the 1940s and 1950s by the society emerging in the 1960s, in which the simulacra and spectacles of contemporary post-modern culture are clearly visible in retrospect (2004: 3).

Rabinowitz, meanwhile, boldly avers that her’s is “a book about film that barely mentions them” (2002: 17), positioning it as “an interdisciplinary cultural history of twentieth-century America through episodic readings of films, photographs, and literature – a history of the myriad detritus floating beyond the borders of acceptable scholarship” (2002: 18). For her argument, the films themselves are considered solely in terms of their relationship to larger cultural formations and their tendency to register the ideological tensions present in twentieth-century American culture.

While the approach of scholars like Rabinowitz and Dimendberg can certainly bear considerable fruit, providing specific and detailed insight into the ways in which films reflect the world in which they were made and confirming Irving Thalberg’s prediction that ”in the future, the movies will be the best record of how we lived our
lives,” it can have an unfortunate flattening effect when it comes to the consideration of films themselves. To treat movies as merely indices of larger social processes is to risk losing sight of film’s unique capabilities as an aesthetic and signifying practice, not to mention the numerous differences between individual films themselves in terms of style, tone and texture (to say nothing of quality). It also risks missing how different films engage with history and ideology differently. Take, for instance, Rabinowitz’s catalogue of (in)famous femme fatales, which I quote at some length to give a sense of the flavor of her approach:

There comes a moment in many film noirs when the bad girl emerges snarling with anger as she ensnares the dimwitted doomed guy….Jane Greer, dressed like a nun, turns on Robert Mitchum in the final moment of *Out of the Past* after she kills her gangster lover Kirk Douglas, leaving Mitchum dead and framed for a number of murders. So too Barbara Stanwyck in *Double Indemnity* sneers at Fred McMurray when he starts getting cold feet about their plans to murder her husband….Gloria Grahame laughs at Jack Palance when he slaps her face in *Sudden Fear*….Lizabeth Scott in *Too Late For Tears* reveals her greedy murderous desire for the cash hurled mistakenly into the convertible she and her husband drive….These scenes repeat themselves again and again as if it is not enough that the women’s morbid sexuality already marks them as bad. They must also mutate into animals….The image of the woman turning into a wild beast is code for the impossible: to see the moment of female orgasm (2002: 25).

In this passage, Rabinowitz effectively reduces seven quite different films (she also mentions *Cat People* [Jacques Tourneur, 1942], *Phantom Lady* [Robert Siodmak, 1944]), *Detour* [Edgar G. Ulmer, 1945], and *The File on Thelma Jordan* [Siodmak, 1950]) into a single, repeated moment. The characters played by Greer, Stanwyck, Grahame, Ann Savage, Simone Simon, and Ella Raines become, in effect, simple variations on the same figure, and no attention is paid to the ways in which the different actresses embody and inflect the femme fatale differently, nor to the differing perspectives taken by the various films toward their female antagonists. *Too Late for*
*Tears* (Byron Haskin, 1949), for example, clearly finds Scott's Jane Palmer unredeemable, while *Detour* makes Ann Savage's Vera more ambiguous, suggesting that her venality may be a product of her circumstances. But such differences matter little for Rabinowitz’s argument, in which these performance and the films that contain them are notable only because they “index the changing position of women accelerated by women following the Second World War” (Rabinowitz 2002: 27). For the purposes of such an argument, *Detour* is the equivalent of *Double Indemnity*, which is the same as *Out of the Past*, and so on.

But these films are determinably not all the same, and their differences may be taken to reflect a dynamic and complex range of cultural responses to the changing role of women in post-war society. Ascertaining these differences, however, requires a type of thorough and detailed close analysis effectively precluded by Rabinowitz’s panoramic approach. Dimendberg, too, consistently frames his analysis of individual films in terms of the way in which they symptomatically refer to external social and political phenomena. Thus, a scene in *Kiss Me Deadly* (Robert Aldritch, 1955), in which Mike Hammer drives his convertible into the old Los Angeles neighborhood of Bunker Hill is interpreted as “a suggestive spatial metaphor for the encroachment of the Harbor Freeway on the neighborhood’s western edge” (Dimendberg 2004: 162) and *Double Indemnity* is said to “portend the growing sway of centrifugal space through the relative absence of the city, as well as the significance of the automobile as the modality through which the now-diffused metropolis is primarily encountered” (2004: 173).

Indeed, Dimendberg’s reading of *Double Indemnity*, in particular, betrays certain pitfalls in moving too hastily from film analysis to social history. He writes that “apart
from the principal sites of the action (the Pacific All-Risk Building, Neff’s apartment, the Dietrichson house, Jerry’s Market), Los Angeles itself is strangely absent from the film….Rarely do characters walk through its streets, and the film features few conspicuous urban landmarks. Taken as a whole, these relatively fleeting scenes reinforce the geography of the film as separate spatial monads” (Dimendberg 2004: 173). It could be argued, however, that what Dimendberg here takes to be a symptomatic expression of the genuinely historical disintegration of coherent urban space and the emergence of a society organized into “separate spatial monads” may, in fact, simply be a by-product of Hollywood filmmaking practices. Many – perhaps most – films set in large cities made between the dawning of the sound era and the post-war period confined their action to a handful of interiors, providing only a handful of glimpses at the larger urban environment. Such, unfortunately, was the cost of filming primarily on soundstages. One might argue, of course, that the film employs this steadfast convention of Hollywood filmmaking to suggest the isolation and alienation of its characters, but this interpretation would speak primarily to Billy Wilder and his collaborators’ abilities to wring expressive potential from the material restrictions of studio-bound production.

Do not misunderstand me -- I do not wish to disparage the scholarly accomplishments of either Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity or Black, White and Noir, as both provide invaluable insight the seismic cultural changes wrought by modernity and intriguing propositions regarding fiction filmmaking’s capacity to register real history. But in generally passing over specifics of style and form in their analysis of cinematic texts, they, perhaps unintentionally, reduce film noir (and, indeed, cinema
itself) to an archive of moments, images and fragments that might be marshaled to illustrate any given socio-historical trend. The films themselves become mere documents of processes external to themselves. Writing in 1976, Brian Henderson addressed this tendency in film studies more broadly, writing of an imbalance between “extensive” criticism (which sought to relate films to external phenomena) and “intensive” criticism (which sought to understand the complicated internal relations of individual films), and his remarks may be taken to apply still today. “The place to begin,” Henderson urges, “is always with the work itself. Only when the work is comprehended in its complex relations with itself, can relations with anything other be made. If one attempts extensive relations without plumbing the work itself, he is likely to get the second relation wrong (for works of art, like systems of courts, often reverse themselves at higher levels of organization)” (Henderson 1976: 399-400).

What’s more, in passing over the formal organization of individual films, neither Rabinowitz nor Dimendberg ends up accounting for aesthetic elements that might allow us to consider the films under discussion as themselves aesthetically modernist, rather than as mere registering devices for modernity at large. Naremore, on the other hand, demonstrates a slightly more pronounced interest in form, yet ultimately restricts his analysis of these elements to primarily narrative and thematic, rather than formal or stylistic concerns. Of noir’s modernism, he writes that “early examples of the so-called film noir tend to reproduce themes and formal devices associated with landmarks of early-twentieth century art. Like modernism, Hollywood thrillers of the 1940s are characterized by urban landscapes, subjective narration, hard-boiled poetry, and misogynistic eroticism” and suggests that, beginning in the 40s, “narratives and camera
angles were organized along more subjective lines; characters were depicted in shades of gray or in psychoanalytic terms; urban women became increasingly eroticized and dangerous; endings seemed less unproblematically happy; and violence appeared more pathological” (Naremore 1998: 45). The individual cases he chooses to represent these trends, however, are drawn large from film noir’s literary antecedents rather than the films themselves, with two of the “three case studies” in his chapter on “Modernism and Blood Melodrama” devoted to extended looks at the oeuvres of Dashiell Hammet and Graham Greene.

When Naremore does turn his attention to a film – *Double Indemnity*, again – his interpretation, like those found in Dimendberg and Rabinowitz, centers principally on the film’s “critique of American modernity” rather than on any modernist formal or aesthetic tendencies inherent in the work itself. Writing of the film’s “imagery of Fordist Amerika” and its “theme of industrialized dehumanization,” Naremore analyzes in detail both the preponderance of “grimly deterministic metaphors of modern industry” in the film’s dialogue (1998: 88) and elements of its mise-en-scène he finds suggestive of the soullessness of urban modernity. Examples of the latter include the “aisles filled with baby food, beans, macaroni, tomatoes and seemingly anything else that can be packaged and arranged in neat rows” in the store where Fred McMurray’s Walter Neff and Barbara Stanwyck’s Phyllis Dietrichson meet to discuss their plot to murder her husband, as well as Phyllis’s clothing, which he describes as “blatantly artificial,” writing that “her ankle bracelet, her lacquered lipstick, her sunglasses, and above all her chromium hair give her a cheaply manufactured, metallic look” (1998: 89). Though he
dwell more on specific cinematic details than Dimendberg or Rabinowitz do, his analysis still ultimately positions the film as allegory and social criticism.

For the three scholars discussed here, and for many others, film noir's interest lies in the way it reflects, either intentionally or symptomatically, the numerous tensions, contradictions, and upheavals of social life in postwar America. The films themselves are thus prized primarily for their ability to look outward. In this project, I examine what we might call the “other side” of noir’s modernism, or an inward turn toward self-conscious reflection on film as an artistic and narrative medium. In this, I draw on the conception of modernist aesthetics developed by Clement Greenberg in his analyses of modern painting. For Greenberg, the emergence of a modernist sensibility marked the moment at which an artistic medium or discipline became fully aware of itself as an artistic medium or discipline and began to reflect upon and interrogate its own essential methods and materials. As he saw it, “the essence of modernism” lay “in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence” ([1960] 1993: 85). This process, he argued, required each art to “determine, through its own operations and works, the effects exclusive to itself” ([1960] 1993: 86). Thus, painting, in its modernist phase, began to reject “realistic” perspectival representation and instead began to emphasize the flatness of the canvas’s surface and to call attention to the fact that its pictures were “made of paint that came from tubes and pots” ([1960] 1993: 87). The ultimate “subject” of modernist painting was, in part or in whole, the art of painting itself. I argue that a similar inward turn can be found in Hollywood films of the 1940s and 1950s, and in film noir in particular.
Before proceeding with this argument, however, it may be necessary to deal with two potential objections that might be raised in response to this conjunction of Clement Greenberg’s modernist aesthetics and Hollywood noir. The first is that Greenberg himself conceived of modernist and avant-garde art in direct opposition to the sort of lowbrow, mainstream cultural production represented by Hollywood moviemaking. In “Modernist Painting,” for instance, he argues that the modernist turn “rescued” art from becoming mere “entertainment” in the face of the Enlightenment’s rationalism.

We know what happened to an activity religion, which could not avail itself of Kantian, immanent criticism in order to justify itself. At first glance, the arts might seem to have been in a situation like religion’s. Having been denied by the Enlightenment all tasks they could take seriously, they looked as though they were going to be assimilated to entertainment pure and simple (Greenberg [1960] 1993: 85-6).

And, in “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” maybe his most famous essay, Greenberg poses the divide between high and low culture as practically a battle for the soul of western civilization. In response to this objection I offer only the hope that a half-century’s worth of revaluation has been sufficient to show that the Greenberg’s mandarin disdain for popular entertainment was misguided, and that even apparently ordinary Hollywood films were capable of genuine artistry. Indeed, one of the underlying goals of the analyses that follow is to demonstrate precisely this point.

A second, perhaps more urgent, objection to the proposition that certain noir films are modernist in Greenberg’s sense might be that, for him, truly modernist art was non-representational and non-narrative in a way that Hollywood movies, with their undying commitment to classical storytelling principles, could never be. A properly modernist cinema, according to this line of thinking, would be composed only of abstract movement, light, and sound – those “effects exclusive” to film as an artistic medium. Or,
in other words, Stan Brakhage and Michael Snow instead of Otto Preminger and Howard Hawks. I would like to argue, in response to this potential objection, that we might take the films under discussion here to be examples of a modernist tendency within the practice of classical Hollywood filmmaking.¹ The target of their self-reflection, then, would not be the ontological essence of film as a medium, but rather the foundational elements of the classical narrative cinema, what film theorists often refer to as Hollywood’s “codes of representation”—stock character types, “invisible” continuity editing, the glamorizing star close-up, and so on.

It may be time now, however, to clarify in some detail what this type of self-reflexivity entails. As the title of this project indicates, I am concerned primarily with stylistic self-reflexivity, or self-consciousness at the level of formal construction—at the level of mise-en-scène and découpage, of staging and scene construction. I am less interested, that is, in examining the garden-variety fourth-wall breaking on display in something like the Bob Hope and Bing Crosby “Road” films, as in the moment in The Road to Bali (Hal Walker, 1952) where Hope awakens after a shipwreck and asks Crosby, “What happened? Is the picture over?” The ironic, winking self-consciousness of such films works, Andrew Britton once argued, effectively to promote an “ideology of entertainment” as a means of effectively cutting off critical reflection. “The function of the

¹ For a differently inflected, and much wider-ranging, consideration of the relationship between studio-era Hollywood filmmaking and modernism, see Miriam Brtau Hansen’s path-breaking essay “The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism” (1999), which argues that Hollywood cinema, as a mass-produced, technologically-based medium, is both a product of, and a response to, the cultural upheavals of modernity. For my own purposes, I am using “modernism” less as a defined historical category and more as a simple short-hand for the aesthetic tendency described by Greenberg.
irony of entertainment,” Britton writes,

is to celebrate entertainment as a special practice with its own unique forms and keepings which we all know about and which have no significance whatever….The way it presents itself is the most perfect form of self-mystification ever developed by a popular art form. It tells us that it is not doing anything except what we already know it to be doing, and because we know, there is, of course, no need to find out. (Britton [1986] 2008: 105)

Britton’s essential point is to challenge the notion that any and all art or fiction that calls attention to itself as art or fiction is necessarily “subversive” or critical. Though thoroughly self-conscious, the Hope and Crosby films are clearly not Brechtian attempts to, in Britton’s somewhat mocking words, “foreground the capitalist structure of the Hollywood film industry” ([1986] 2008: 105).

In this, Britton’s argument dovetails with Dana Polan’s similarly oriented comments on self-reflexivity in Hollywood filmmaking in the essay “A Brechtian Cinema? Towards a Politics of the Self-Reflexive Film.” Like Britton, Polan is concerned with differentiating between films that employ self-reflexivity for genuinely political and critical purposes and those which merely use it as a gag, such as the Road to… movies or, his chosen examples, Bugs Bunny cartoons and television’s Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman. Moreover, he sets his essay up in opposition to film critics and theorists who would mistake purely formal self-reflexivity for genuinely political and critical artistic activity. His ultimate target, then, is the basically binary view—attributed here to theorists associated with the journal Screen, such as Colin MacCabe and Peter Wollen—that effectively divides films into a “dominant” and “counter” cinemas, with the former promoting unthinking identification with dominant ideology and the latter deconstructing standard codes of representation as a means of subverting that ideology.
and “destroying” the pleasures associated with it (to paraphrase Laura Mulvey). Followed to its logical conclusion, Polan argues, this theory would turn *Duck Amuck* (Chuck Jones, 1953) into an example of radical art while devaluing more apparently traditional or “realist” films that are, in their own ways, subtly but powerfully self-critical.

Polan concludes with a call for criticism that “pays more attention to degrees of identification and pleasure,” examining “differing uses and degrees of self-criticism” while simultaneously being “receptive to the possibility that such a critical mode may be operative in films of the so-called ‘dominant cinema’” (1985: 671). In his notion that in nearly all works of art we find the interplay of degrees of both identification and self-reflexive distanciation, Polan’s argument once again finds common cause with Britton, who argues that “the great mimetic fictions generate a continuous interplay between the deepest kind of emotional engagement and an analytical ‘out-sidedness’ to the dramatic world—an interplay in which each term is a component of the other and determines its specific character” ([1986] 2008: 104). That is to say, they elicit our involvement in their fictional worlds while simultaneously providing us with a vantage point from which we can regard them as fictions. Great, or “significant,” artworks, then, are those that mobilize this dialectic between involvement and self-awareness for deliberately critical purposes, and which do not treat self-reflexive elements as supplementary (as in Bob Hope occasionally turning to deliver a winking aside to the absent audience) but as part and parcel of their overarching formal organization.

Hollywood in the mid-40s, and the noir cycle in particular, I argue, bore witness to a particularly rich flourishing of such films. The particular historical, industrial and cultural reasons for this flourishing may require further research to determine, but some
potential hypotheses do seem to suggest themselves. Emerging in the mid-40s, just before widescreen formats, other industrial pressures, and the innovations of post-war European art cinema collectively brought about a major reconfiguration in the way mainstream movies looked, noir films present the critic with an artistic language that had reached full maturity, and whose total dominance over its medium was soon to be on the wane. It is not surprising, then, to find the films themselves turning inward to one degree or another.

In any case, the goal of this project is not to examine the historical determinants of this inward turn, but rather to examine in detail specific instances of it. While the chapters that follow provide lengthy and detailed analyses of such instances, it may be useful here in the introduction to supply two shorter, thumbnail analyses to give a more specific sense of the sort of self-reflexivity I am talking about. For these, I will look to two films already mentioned above which are often given as key examples of film noir’s tendency to comment upon or reflect the larger social climate—Robert Aldrich’s *Kiss Me Deadly* and Billy Wilder’s *Double Indemnity*. I hope to show that they may also be seen as commenting upon certain aspects of Hollywood filmmaking in general, and the noir cycle in particular.

*Kiss Me Deadly* is typically interpreted as a critical satire of atomic age Cold War paranoia. Scripted by avowed leftist A.I. Bezzerides, the film transforms Mickey Spillane’s sadistic, practically fascist 1952 bestseller about Private Investigator Mike Hammer taking on the Mafia into a labyrinthine comic thriller involving secret government plots, mad scientists, and a mysterious suitcase containing the “Great Whatzit,” which turns out to be an apocalyptic nuclear device. Alex Cox sums up the
standard reading of the film in his introduction to its 2011 Criterion DVD release, arguing that it “is actually an anti-nuclear parable” that’s been “disguised as a “tough-guy detective picture.” The film has also been read as a subversive parody of the right-wing, “might-makes-right” worldview expressed in Spillane’s novels and embodied in their portrayal of Hammer as a lone avenger using brutal violence to “clean up” the criminal underworld. Aldrich and Bezzerides’s have turned Hammer, played here by Ralph Meeker, into a character J. Hoberman (2011) aptly describes as “one of the sleaziest, stupidest, most brutal detectives in American movies,” a sadistic fool whose quick recourse to violence is, in large part, a cover for his almost total deficiency in cunning, wit, or rational thinking.

While these general interpretations of the film certainly highlight salient aspects of its intended purpose, they typically fail to account for the way in which the film’s satiric bent inflects its style at the levels of mise-en-scène and performance, both of which are stamped, at a practically molecular level, by a sense of deliberate artificiality. Take, for instance, the blocking of actors in two early scenes. The first shows Hammer being interrogated by representatives of the “Interstate Crime Commission” in relation to a recent incident involving the death of a woman—an escaped mental patient played by Cloris Leachman—and an automobile explosion that left Hammer himself near dead. Hammer sits at the head of a table, his back turned to the investigators flanking him. As the scene unfolds, Aldrich alternates among a series of shots showing the table and the figures arranged around it from slightly different angles. In each, the blocking is rigid, cramped, and awkward, with the actors remaining largely still as they flatly deliver their lines. To get a sense of its strangeness, we might compare it to the scene in The
Maltese Falcon (John Houston, 1941) in which police officer’s question Humphrey Bogart’s Sam Spade in connection to the recent murders of his partner, Miles Archer, and the man their detective agency had been hired to tail. Houston employs dynamic editing and character movement to invest the scene with a sense of liveliness and energy, while simultaneously conveying the shifting power dynamic between Spade and his interlocutors. Kiss Me Deadly’s interrogation scene, in comparison, is utterly devoid of dynamism and energy, instead feeling rigid and deliberately staged.

This rigid, artificial approach to mise-en-scène is even more blatant in a subsequent “love scene” between Hammer and his secretary, and ostensible love interest, Velda. After returning to his hypermodern apartment on Wilshire Boulevard, Hammer receives a call from Velda informing him that she will be “right over.” After putting the phone down, he walks over to a window and gazes out at the busy street below. Aldrich then dissolves from a shot of Hammer alone at the window to a shot of he and Velda embracing amorously. As in the interrogation scene, the staging here is again awkward, unnatural, and overly posed. Other elements further work to take us “out of” the scene and disturb our potential immersion in the dramatic action. For instance, in the second shot, Hammer is in shirtsleeves, indicating that at some point during the time elided by the dissolve he removed his jacket. This change suggests that there has been some movement or activity between the shots, making it all the more strange that the two of them are now standing in the exact same spot that he was standing in by himself in the first shot. These elements combine to create an odd, uncanny feeling that calls attention to the scene’s artifice.
Similarly uncanny is Meeker’s performance as Mike Hammer, specifically the way in which he delivers his lines. Compared to Bogart’s cool detachment in *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Big Sleep*, Dick Powell’s breeziness in *Murder, My Sweet*, or Robert Mitchum’s dispassionate drawling in *Out of the Past*, Meeker is all blunt inarticulate-ness, cramming words together in clipped bundles spoken at a volume that is nearly always just slightly louder than the situation calls for. There is a stiff, laboriously quality to his phrasing and diction, as if forcing the words out was taking an inordinate amount of effort. While by no means an exceptional performer, Meeker was at least capable of playing characters resembling real human beings in films like Anthony Mann’s *The Naked Spur* (1953). His Mike Hammer, however, seems less like a person and more like a living caricature of brutish masculinity. Rather than detracting from the film, however, the ugliness of Meeker’s performance contributes to the film’s ultimate goal of revealing the Mickey Spillane worldview to be the product of cheap, juvenile fantasy.

In *Double Indemnity* we find a similar, but subtler, critique of the sort of male fantasy that feminist critics have long identified as one of noir’s foundational elements. A key instance of this critique occurs during the scene in which insurance agent Walter Neff (Fred McMurray) first meets Barbara Stanwyck’s Phyllis Dietrichson, with whom he will eventually conspire to murder her husband in order to claim a life insurance windfall. The film, on the surface, seems to present the Platonic ideal of the “spider woman lures an unsuspecting man into a web of violence and deceit” narrative frequently found in noir, with Phyllis, as Forster Hirsch once put it, standing as “noir’s ultimate Gorgon” (1981: 152). And yet, several of the film’s stylistic and formal elements actually work to
challenge this easy reading of the film’s narrative. For one thing, the entire story is told from Walter’s perspective, as he narrates an admission of guilt into a Dictaphone recorder for his boss at the Pacific Life Insurance company, Barton Keyes (Edward G. Robinson). Since this narration is a diegetic event taking place within the film’s world, rather than the more ambiguous, non-corporeal voice overs found in many other noirs, we might safely assume that the version of events we receive has been filtered, to one degree or another, through Walter’s subjective impressions. The scene in which he meets Phyllis for the first time seems to confirm this inference.

As Walter is shown into the Dietrichson house (“one of those California Spanish houses everyone was nuts about 10 or 15 years ago,” in his words), the family’s housekeeper informs him that “Mrs. Dietrichson” is out sunbathing on the terrace. Phyllis herself soon appears at the top of the staircase, introducing herself from the second floor landing. As the two begin to talk briefly about insurance, Wilder presents their conversation in shot/reverse-shot with one crucial distinguishing element: he alternates the same medium, high-angle shot of Walter with three increasingly closer shots of Phyllis, the first a long shot taken from behind Walter, the second a medium shot, and the last a close-up. It is in this final shot that Phyllis’s facial expression and body language seems to turn vaguely erotic, and we might see it as the moment her fatal seduction of Walter begins. Writing of this moment in his recent book on Stanwyck, Andrew Klevan argues that it signals one of the central facts of the film, which is that the “Phyllis Dietrichson” given to us is merely “a character in [Walter’s] story” and that she is “conceived within his gaze” (2013: ).
Additionally, and more importantly, the shot progression allows the audience to compare what Walter realistically could have seen (the initial, long shot, in which Phyllis is far away and concealed behind the bannister, her expression difficult to read) and his own subjective experience of the moment (the close-up, in which her manner seems first to turn seductive). In showing us these two perspectives side by side, as it were, Wilder troubles the easy reading of the Walter/Phyllis relationship, with Phyllis as the seducing temptress and Walter as the hapless dupe caught in her web. By associating the initial moment of seduction with Walter’s subjective perspective, the film subtly suggests that the close-up’s pregnant sexual energy is at least as much a projection of Walter’s libido as it is an intentional act on Phyllis’s part. Paraphrasing Wordsworth, we might say that Phyllis’s seductive manner is half what Walter creates and half what he perceives. The moment invites us, from the start, to question Walter’s narrated version of events, and his interpretation of both Phyllis’s behavior and her relationship to him. Here, as in the scenes from Kiss Me Deadly analyzed above, we find an instance in which a film’s formal construction may be seen as not only shaping the unfolding narrative action, but also providing a wry commentary on certain norms and conventions of both Hollywood filmmaking generally and film noir more specifically—the star close-up, the alluring femme fatale—along with their attendant sexual politics.
These two brief interpretive sketches have been intended to serve two purposes. First, to give a sense of what stylistic self-reflexivity looks like in action, and second, to demonstrate the methods of close-reading and stylistic analysis that this dissertation will employ. This method, which concerns itself with fine-grained details of staging, performance, editing, and camerawork, is built on an understanding of film style derived from the tradition of “mise-en-scène” or style-based criticism, which has found its most forceful and lasting expression in the work of figures like V.F. Perkins, Douglas Pye, John Gibbs, Deborah Thomas, and Andrew Klevan. As Adrian Martin has put it, critics in this tradition view style not as a “mere coating (comprised of strategies as a certain color scheme, a moody score, fast editing and so forth) laid over the story,” but rather as a “moment-to-moment” process that “articulates, modulates, and develops” narrative and thematic structures, generating “multi-layered contrasts [and] comparisons” (2009: 35).

Detailed engagement with the particularities of a given film’s stylistic choices allows us to grasp, to take the measure of, the depth and significance of these contrasts and comparisons, of the moment-by-moment processes through which the film shapes
our engagement with our world. It is also valuable because it allows us to see the ways in which superficially similar films may, in fact, be working quite differently. Often, studies of Classic Hollywood work synoptically, reducing individual films to mere illustrations of broader formal or ideological trends, and framing them, in George Wilson’s words, as “basically trivial variants of one another” (1988: 61). While the mapping of large-scale tendencies and explication of norms and conventions is certainly a necessary task in the study of any cultural formation, film studies also requires tools to help us recognize significant works that employ conventions in novel and critical ways, and that encourage us, as Wilson puts it, “to rethink, sometimes in a fairly radical way, our ideas of what there might be to see in a film or, more specifically, to a film belonging to one or another apparently well-worn genre” (1988: 61). Style-based criticism supplies just such tools.

In this context of the current study, close reading allows us, for instance, to grasp not only the complex strategies of stylistic self-reflexivity employed in each of the individual films discussed, but also allows us to see the ways in which the different films are self-reflexive in different ways, and the varying ends to which they use Hollywood’s stylistic norms and film noir’s generic conventions. In Chapter 2, I examine The Narrow Margin’s deliberately misleading use of noir’s typical stylistic devices and character types and argue that the film works to reveal these devices and types as signifiers whose meaning is constructed rather than “natural.” In Chapters 3 and 4, I turn my attention to Hollywood’s conventional, “invisible” editing strategies, showing how both Lang and Hawks make these strategies visible. Ministry of Fear, I argue, does so by introducing hiccups and discordances into the smooth articulation of shots, while The
*Big Sleep* does so by being almost too harmonious, pushing classical construction into the realms of mannerism. In Chapter 5, I combine this focus on scene construction with Chapter 1’s interest in the manufacture and imposition of meaning, reading *Laura*’s systematic alternation of close-ups and long shots as reflective of a tension between the Hollywood style’s practice of imposing clear and definite meanings on images and Preminger’s desire to take advantage of film’s inherent capacity for ambiguity.
CHAPTER 2
THE NARROW MARGIN: CONVENTION AND DECEPTION

A mother, her son, and their nanny sit down for breakfast on a train bound for California. The boy excitedly tells his mother about a “robber” he has encountered on the train, while the nanny calmly explains that he is talking about a passenger who, apparently by accident, stumbled into their cabin the night before. Undeterred, the boy continues to spin an imaginative tale about the robber “sneaking all over the train.” His mother briefly humors him before shifting the conversation to the more practical matter of what he would like for breakfast. As a waiter takes their order, the mother catches a glimpse of a sinister looking mustachioed man glaring at her through a window in the dining car’s door, and a look of concerned alarm passes across her face.

Figure 2-1. A close-up of Ann Sinclair (Jacqueline White) [The Narrow Margin (Richard Fleischer, 1952)]

This moment occurs at around the halfway point of Richard Fleischer’s The Narrow Margin (1952). On a first viewing, here is what we would know so far: The movie has begun with Detectives Walter Brown (Charles McGraw) and Gus Forbes (Don Beddoes) of the LAPD arriving by train in Chicago. They are there to pick up the wife of a recently murdered mob boss, identified in the film only as “Mrs. Frankie Neall” (Marie
Windsor), and escort her back to the west coast, where she is set to testify before a grand jury about her husband’s activities and associates. Before they can even leave her apartment building, however, a hit man ambushes them and Forbes is mortally wounded. Brown, now working alone, succeeds in getting Mrs. Neall safely aboard the train. Worried that the hit man at the apartment building got a good look at him, he instructs Mrs. Neall to avoid being seen in his presence, as he fears that he has been tailed to the train station by other gangsters. His suspicions are confirmed when one of them, Joseph Kemp (David Clarke), the “sinister looking mustachioed man” mentioned above, enters his compartment and begins snooping around under the pretext of looking for a lost bag. Brown instructs Mrs. Neall to lock herself in her compartment and goes to look around the train. While doing so, he encounters Ann Sinclair (Jacqueline White), the mother from the scene described above, and a suspiciously avuncular fat man (Paul Maxey), who briefly blocks his pursuit of Forbes, and who Brown suspects is working with Kemp. Eventually finding himself trapped between the two in a tight hallway, he ducks into a darkened compartment, where he is mistaken for a robber by Ann’s son, Bobby (though at this point neither he nor we know the two are related, as the boy is sharing a compartment with his nanny and not his mother).

Upon a first viewing of the film, then, the scene showing the Sinclairs at breakfast would seem to be playing the role that scenes of ordinary, domestic life play in many film noirs. The family would appear to represent a group of regular, innocent citizens who, thanks to the vagaries of chance, have become inadvertently caught up in the threatening machinations of the criminal underworld. At the end of the scene, as Kemp and Ann exchange glances, we worry that, having seen her talking to Brown, he has
concluded that she is Frankie Neall’s widow. As is so often the case, the scene appears to figure the noir world as a threat to the ordinary and the domestic.

Soon, however, we realize that our initial assumptions about these matters have been completely wrong. Events will soon reveal that Ann Sinclair is, in fact, Frankie Neall’s widow, and that Marie Windsor’s character is merely a decoy, an undercover police officer sent to (1) distract the gangsters from the real target, and (2) keep an eye on Brown for Internal Affairs in case he is offered a bribe. Upon subsequent viewings, therefore, the scene at breakfast will begin to take on a slightly different cast, as we recognize that Ann is far from an innocent bystander. In particular, her glance toward Kemp at the scene’s conclusion, which Fleischer captures in a close-up, will read much differently. What we may initially see as an expression of distressed confusion—“Who is this strange man and why is he looking at me like that?”—becomes, upon later viewings, a clearly defined expression of worry and sensed danger. She knows that assassins may be on her tail, and that they may not know what she looks like, and so we can surmise from her look of concern that she (rightly) suspects Kemp to be one of them, and fears that he has found her out.

Nothing, of course, will have changed about the actual image of her expression from the first viewing to the second. What has changed is how we, in the audience, interpret the glance based upon the knowledge we have of the unfolding situation. As Roland Barthes observes in *S/Z*, “a second reading” of any text “places behind the transparency of suspense (placed on the text by the first avid and ignorant reader) the anticipated knowledge of what is to come in the story” (1975: 165). On a first viewing, we have no reason to think that Ann Sinclair is the real “Mrs. Neall,” and so nothing
would prompt us to read her expression as the sign of recognition of genuine danger. A similar moment occurs earlier in the film, when Kemp’s less thuggish associate, Vincent Yost (Peter Brocco), attempts to bribe Brown into giving up Mrs. Neall. As Yost makes his offer—“We want her, you have her. How much?”—the film cuts to Windsor alone in the darkened adjoining compartment. She stands up with frightened start, and moves toward the communicating door to hear the conversation more clearly. Fleicher’s camera tracks her movement, ultimately framing her in an extreme close-up as she leans her ear against the door. The camera briefly holds on her face as we hear Yost attempt to persuade Brown off screen. She initially stares straight forward, her eyes wide with apprehension, before subtly shifting her glance to the left, as if a new thought has suddenly crossed her mind. We then return to other compartment, where Brown continues to refuse Yost’s offer and Yost continues to press him, eventually removing his wallet and handing the policeman $5000 in cash as a “sample.” At this point, the camera cuts back to the close-up of Windsor, whose eyes continue to shift around nervously.

As with the shot of Ann looking at Kemp, the way we “read” Windsor’s facial expression changes depending upon our knowledge of her character. During a first viewing we are likely to take her as simply expressing fear at being discovered by the gangsters. Upon a second viewing, though, her look seems to convey a more complicated attitude. Recalling that she has been tasked by Internal Affairs with monitoring Brown’s behavior, we can see her expression wavering between trepidation (even though she is an imposter, being identified by the gangsters could prove fatal—and it eventually does, when they locate and shoot her later in the film) and a
“professional” interest in whether or not Brown will accept the bribe. Here, again, nothing about the image or the performer’s expression changes from one viewing to the next. Rather, what has changed is what we read into it, and what words we use to describe what we are seeing.

Figure 2-2. A close-up of Mrs. Neall (Marie Windsor) [The Narrow Margin (Richard Fleischer, 1952)]

We might view our shifting understanding of these images during repeated viewings of the film as a variation on the perceptual phenomenon that Ludwig Wittgenstein called the seeing of “aspects.” The most famous example Wittgenstein provides of this experience is the so-called “duck-rabbit,” a simple line drawing that can be seen as either a duck or a rabbit. Our impression of this image, the aspect that initially strikes us, is heavily influenced by the context in which we are first exposed to it, and by the words we may possess for talking about it. For instance, as Wittgenstein puts it, “I see two pictures, with the duck-rabbit surrounded by rabbits in one, by ducks in the other. I don’t notice that [the duck-rabbits] are the same. Does it follow from this that I see something different in the two cases?” ([1953] 2009: 205). Similarly, if someone were to show us the drawing and say “this is a duck” or “this is a rabbit,” we
would likely interpret the image according to the given statement. Finally, if we only possessed knowledge of one of the animals, our experience of the image would be significantly altered. Could we possibly “see” a duck in this drawing if we had never seen a duck before, or been taught of their existence? Such hypotheticals clearly suggest the deep, complex entwinement of visual experience and linguistic expression.

Theorists of film and photography have long been aware of this entwinement. Practically from the start, the essential ambiguity of any given photographic image, later noted by André Bazin, provoked anxiety in those committed to making film and photography mean something, and so they began to search for methods with which to “guide” audiences to see the “correct” aspects. For Walter Benjamin, committed to finding a properly “political” use for film and photography, written captions were to “become the most important part of the photograph” as only they could provide a bulwark against photography’s tendency to “remain no more than an approximation” ([1931] 2009: 192). Similarly committed to the production of a political cinema, Soviet Montage filmmakers discovered that two or more images, edited together, could function “as” a language, with various combinations producing clearly defined “statements.” These statements ranged from the relatively simple effects of Lev Kuleshov’s early experiments (shot of a man’s face + shot of a bowl of soup = “the man is hungry”) to the more complex, metaphorical articulations found in Sergei Eisenstein’s mid-1920s works. Finally, Boris Eikhenbaum argued that the film audience “reads” these cinematic statements by translating them into what he termed “inner speech,” an actively engaged thought process that “perform[s] the complex mental labour of coupling the frames” (quoted in Willemen 1994: 41).
Looked at it in this context, we might understand the two close-ups from *The Narrow Margin* as sending our “inner speech” down the wrong paths, or as intentionally supplying us with incorrect, or at least incomplete, captions. The way in which these moments work to mislead the audience points us in the direction of the film’s overriding narrative and stylistic structure, which is built upon strategies of misdirection. At the level of narrative, we find the series of mistaken identities and deliberate deceptions around which the story’s development continuously turns. In addition to the central Mrs. Neall/Ann Sinclair criss-cross, there are also the two instances in which an agent of the law is mistaken for a criminal. First, we have Tommy Sinclair and his over-active imagination mistaking Brown for a “train robber.” This mistaken assumption, which initially seems to function merely as a bit of comic relief, turns out to be a sort of prefiguration for Brown’s own mistaken assumptions regarding the character of Sam Jennings, the fat man played by Paul Maxey mentioned in the plot summary above. Initially suspected by Brown as working with the gangsters, Jennings later reveals himself to be a railroad security agent.

But if the film’s strategies of misdirection operated only at the level of narrative, this would hardly distinguish it from any other number of film noirs, as such revelations and reversals have functioned as a central element of the genre from *The Maltese Falcon* onward. *The Narrow Margin* is unique, however, in the way in which it also employs stylistic and formal features to purposefully and systematically lead viewers astray. Whereas a film like *The Maltese Falcon* merely withholds information from the audience by not showing us the face of Miles Archer’s killer, Fleischer’s film deliberately invokes a whole range of well-established generic codes in order to encourage the
audience to arrive at conclusions about its characters and narrative that ultimately prove false.

Take, for instance, the film’s handling of its two female leads, who seem, at first, to slot neatly into the “Spider Woman”/“Nurturing Woman” dichotomy that Janey Place long ago identified as a key structuring principle in nearly all of film noir ([1978] 1998: 47). Comparing each character’s first appearance will provide a good sense of this. The decoy Mrs. Neall is introduced first. Having taken a taxi from the train station, Brown and Forbes arrive in a part of town that is, as Brown puts it, “slightly out of the high-rent district.” As they enter the tenement building where “Mrs. Neall” resides, a high angle shot taken from the top of a flight of stairs gives us a sense of the place. It appears small and cramped (an effect of the framing), its walls dingy. The banisters surrounding its staircases cast shadows everywhere in a manner that calls to mind the climax of F.W. Murnau’s *Nosferatu*. The music of a distant jazz record fills the air. Already, the signifiers of “seediness” have begun to accumulate.

As they climb the stairs and approach Mrs. Neall’s apartment, we realize that the music is coming from inside. They knock, and a cut takes us to a low-angle shot of the other side of the door, where another officer answers. Brown and Forbes enter and the three men huddle together in the middle of a cramped, low-angle shot. They look off-screen toward the source of the music and, after a pause that seems to emphasize their fascination with what they see, an eye-line match supplies us with our first look at “Mrs. Neall.” She sits leaning over a record player, half her face concealed by a swoop of dark curls draping over her right eye. A cigarette dangles precariously from her lips. She is wearing somewhat garish jewelry and a patterned dress with a plunging neckline. As
she rises to meet her escorts, she tosses her hair back before confidently striding over to where they stand, the camera panning with her. Before she has even spoken a word, we know (or think we know) who this woman is. Every element of mise-en-scène in this short sequence works to instantly paint (what appears to be) a very clear picture of her character, in both senses of the word. Were you to open an illustrated dictionary of film terms to the entry for *femme fatale*, you may well find her picture there.

![Femme Fatale imagery](image)

Our first impression of Ann Sinclair could not be more different. First, unlike the introduction of Mrs. Neall, the film provides no build-up for her first appearance. While dialogue, mise-en-scène, and diegetic music worked together to build anticipation for the introduction of Windsor’s character, White’s is brought into the film in a sudden, incidental manner. We first encounter her in the train’s lounge car as Brown encounters Kemp for the second time, shortly after the gangster has made his presence known by snooping around in Brown’s compartment. She first appears, partly obscured and slightly out of focus, in the background of a shot showing Brown and Kemp crossing paths. A reverse-angle medium shot follows as Brown moves forward, takes a seat at a
seemingly random table, and turns his head toward the car’s window to watch Kemp’s actions in its reflection. As he does so, Fleicher reframes to follow his movements, revealing an as-yet unknown female passenger, who he seems not to have noticed, sitting across from him. After a brief POV shot of the window, Fleisher returns to this establishing shot. A waiter asks Brown if he would like a drink, and Brown, distractedly, points toward the woman and requests “the same as hers,” before returning his gaze to the window.

At this point, Fleischer provides us with our first real look at White, cutting to a medium close-up. Apparently taking Brown’s actions as a clumsy attempt at flirtation (another case of initial assumptions proving incorrect), she skeptically looks the detective up and down, before pointedly declaring that she’ll be finishing her drink at another table. She gets up to leave, and we return to the initial camera set-up, while Brown, still staring off-screen at Kemp’s reflection, pays her no attention. A sudden, coincidental jolt causes her to stumble and spill her drink on him, and after helping him clean himself off, he offers to buy her a new drink and she returns to the table. Brown again turns away to look at Kemp’s reflection and begins nervously to break apart his cocktail’s wooden stirrer. As he does so, Fleischer cuts to a reaction shot of Ann looking amused. After the waiter returns with a new drink, she offers a toast, “Here’s to better tracks and steadier nerves.” Brown finally turns his full attention to her, and a short, friendly conversation, handled in typical shot/reverse-shot fashion, follows, until Brown suddenly realizes that Kemp has left the car and quickly gets up to follow him, leaving behind money to pay for the drinks. Ann attempts to get him to wait, but to no avail, and the scene ends with her shrugging bemusedly to herself.
From the outset we can see a number of contrasts being established between White’s and Windsor’s characters. On the most superficial level, Windsor is brunette, vampish, and caustic, while White is blonde, modest, and kind. In terms of character and behavior, Windsor’s character is coded as sexually aggressive (during their cab ride together to train station, she grabs Brown’s hand as he holds a lit match and uses it to light her own cigarette, a prototypical *femme fatale* gesture), while White’s is presented as being reserved, even prudish (her first impulse when she thinks Brown is trying to pick her up is to immediately extricate herself from the situation). Overall, we are obviously meant to understand that Windsor’s character is a denizen of the criminal underworld, while White’s is a fine, upstanding member of ordinary, polite society.

The apparent one-dimensionality of these characters is productively exacerbated by the performers themselves. Though each makes for an interesting screen presence in their own ways, neither Windsor nor White would ever be mistaken for first-class film actors. What they lack, in particular, is the ability to imbue their relatively flat characters with a sense of depth and complexity. We might compare, for instance, Marie Windsor’s performance in this film with Barbara Stanwyck’s turn as the ur-*femme fatale*, Phyllis Dietrichson, in *Double Indemnity*. In terms of what the characters do or have done, Phyllis is clearly more despicable, and yet Stanwyck’s performance grants the character a level of psychological complexity that suggests a litany of potential motivations for her practically sociopathic behavior. At a certain level, her performance invites us to sympathize with the character. Windsor’s Mrs. Neall, on the other hand, comes across as simply mean-spirited and somehow less likeable than Stanwyck’s murderous housewife. Of course, eliciting sympathy for the Mrs. Neall character in the early going
would run counter to the film’s overall strategy. We thus find here an interesting corollary to David Thomson’s observation, made in reference to Fred Astaire, “that it is often preferable to have a movie actor who moves well than one who ‘understands’ the part.” (2004: 36). In a film like The Narrow Margin, it is preferable to have a less “talented” performer, one who excels at simply embodying a stock character type, than an actor capable of projecting a fully realized, “three dimensional” personality.

But it is not only elements of mise-en-scène and performance than contribute to our initial sense of Mrs. Neall and Ann Sinclair. The way in which Fleischer films scenes involving the two women also works to guide our responses to the characters. As noted above, the first conversation between Brown and Ann is handled with very traditional shot/reverse-shot editing, and the alternating medium shots that make up the sequence are steady and evenly composed. In contrast, the early conversations between the detective and Mrs. Neall frequently employ many of the “visual motifs” that Lowell Peterson and Janey Place identified as central to noir’s stylistic iconography, including harsher, low-key lighting, “bizarre, off-angle compositions,” and “claustrophobic framing” ([1974] 1996: 65). By the time of The Narrow Margin’s release in 1952, the noir cycle had been reliably humming along for nearly a decade, so such stylistic elements already carried with them strong connotations, further encouraging the film’s audience to view Windsor’s character as “simply” a femme fatale and nothing more.

We must, however, differentiate between the functioning of cinematographic elements such as these and the elements of mise-en-scène discussed above. While each works to guide the audience to certain (ultimately wrong) conclusions about the film’s characters and narrative, they belong to wholly different registers of signification.
Where aspects such as Windsor’s costuming and performance might be plausibly attributed to some diegetic motivation (i.e. the police higher-ups, not wanting Brown to suspect that she is an undercover officer, asked her to “play up” the vampish-ness), the canted camera angles and claustrophobic compositions of the Brown/Mrs. Neall scenes do not seem similarly assignable to a source within the film’s world. They are, instead, extra-diegetic. One could perhaps advance the argument that these devices are meant to convey a sense of Brown’s own perspective on the situation, that the “disturbed” framing of his scenes with Mrs. Neall corresponds with his discomfort around her, while the more placid compositions of the conversations with Ann Sinclair suggests a greater degree of comfort. In such a reading, the cinematography would be seen as producing what George Wilson has called “indirect or reflected subjectivity,” wherein “a certain central character [here Detective Brown] appears in segments throughout the film, and the action is only partially, if at all, seen from his or her physical point of view. Features of the projected image or the mise-en-scène are used to depict or symbolize or reflect aspects of the way in which the character perceives and responds to his or her immediate environment” (1988: 87). Taken this way, the film could be seen as, in effect, “translating” Brown’s subjective experience of events into stylistic elements such as framing and blocking.

In any case, these scenes’ chief interest lies not in their manipulation of narrative point of view, but rather in the questions they raise about film style’s ability to purposefully, and systematically, deceive or mislead an audience. Because we, as viewers, know what oblique angles and cramped framing “mean” as a result of both their inherent unbalanced aesthetic properties and their conventionalized usage in other
films, we may initially interpret their presence in these scenes straightforwardly, perhaps without even thinking about it. The operation here is quite different from what we find in other films built around misdirection and audience deception. Such films, typically, take one of two forms. On the one hand are movies like *The Maltese Falcon* or M. Night Shamylan’s *The Sixth Sense* (1999), which work, like the classical mystery story, by simply withholding some piece of key information (Brigid O’Shaugnessy killed Miles Archer; Bruce Willis’s character is a ghost) from the audience until the end, strewing false leads and red herrings along the way. More extreme, and more rare, are cases like Alfred Hitchcock’s *Stage Fright* (1950) or Bryan Singer’s *The Usual Suspects* (1995), which stage, often in the form of flashbacks narrated by ultimately “unreliable” characters, events that never “actually” occurred in the film’s world. What both of these modes of “deceptive” narrative share is that, in each, the deception occurs almost solely at the diegetic level. In the first case, the full extent of an event is left hidden from us, while, in the second, a “false” diegesis is constructed to mislead us into believing something that isn’t true. Thus, within the tradition of deceptive film narrative, *The Narrow Margin*’s use of functionally non-diegetic signifiers like suggestive framing to deceive its audience stands as somewhat unique.

At issue here is the way these films handle what Roland Barthes, in *S/Z*, identifies as a narrative’s “Hermeneutic Code” (1975: 19). As Barthes frames it, the Hermeneutic Code names the process by which a narrative, in any form, first poses and then eventually resolves a series of enigmas (some of *The Narrow Margin*’s enigmas would include: “Will Detective Brown and Mrs. Neall reach California safely?” “What will happen to Ann Sinclair?,” “Who is the fat man?,” and “Will Detective Brown take a
bribe?,” Some of these questions, of course, turn out to have surprising answers

Central to this process are the methods by which a text can delay the supplying of final, conclusive answers to these enigmas, as a text that immediately provided resolution to its enigmas would be a mere anecdote. Barthes provides us a taxonomy of typical delaying tactics. They include:

- The Snare: “A kind of deliberate evasion of the truth”
- The Equivocation: “A mixture of truth and snare which frequently, while focusing on the enigma, helps to thicken it”
- The Suspended Answer: “An aphastic stoppage of the disclosure”
- Jamming: “Acknowledgement of insoluability”
- And, finally, the Partial Answer, “which only exacerbates the expectation of truth” (1975: 75)

The question, then, is to which category might we assign The Narrow Margin’s use of film noir’s visual motifs to delay recognition of the story’s “truth”? The most obvious answer would be the “snare,” and we can again gain a sense of the film’s uniqueness in these matters if we compare this “snaring” to more typical examples.

Take Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories, which boast some of the cleverest “snares” in all of popular literature. Consider, for instance, “Silver Blaze.” A prize thoroughbred, the titular Silver Blaze, has gone missing on the eve of a big race, and its trainer has been found dead in a nearby ravine, his head caved in by some blunt object and his leg gashed by a small knife found near the body. These clues would seem, at first, to be the signs of a struggle between the trainer and whoever stole the

---

2 For an extensive discussion of deceptive filmmaking practices and their relationship to Barthes’s theory of narrative, see also Kristin Thompson’s essay on Stage Fright in Breaking the Glass Armor (1988).
horse. After weighing the evidence, however, Holmes arrives at a different conclusion. Far from an innocent casualty, it turns out that the now-deceased trainer was the guilty party. Having been paid off by the owners of a rival horse, he endeavored to make several small subcutaneous cuts on Silver Blaze’s legs so that the horse would come up lame before the race. The night of his death, he had taken the horse to the ravine, so that its struggles would not wake anyone else on the farm. There he lost control of the animal and received a fatal kick to the head, and the knife, which he himself had been holding, grazed his leg as he fell. What’s significant here is that all of the story’s “snares”—those details which seemed to suggest an apparently obvious solution to the mystery—are fully explained away at the story’s end. Everything adds up, no detail is left dangling without explanation. Once the “true” sequence of events is revealed, the truth of each “false” lead becomes clear.

The same cannot be said for *The Narrow Margin*’s deceptive camerawork. Because elements of cinematography exist effectively outside of the world of the film, because they are merely formal effects that guide our response to the images they frame, they contain no “truth” to be revealed once the plot has reached resolution. Upon subsequent viewings, when we know that “Mrs. Neall” is actually an undercover cop and that “Ann Sinclair” is the real mob wife, the stylistic devices that seemed initially to confirm otherwise become, in effect, empty signifiers. Their apparent significance vanishes, and they are rendered, as far as the clued-in audience is concerned, merely decorative.

To get a better sense of this process, whereby an apparently significant stylistic element turns out to be misleading, we might examine another instance in which the film
uses style to mislead viewers into making incorrect inferences about a character. Immediately after the scene between Ann and her son with which I began this essay, Fleischer cuts to the hallway outside the dining car, where Brown is cornered by both the train’s conductor and Sam Jennings, the mysterious fat man who we later learn is a railway police agent. Jennings, whom Brown has seen talking to Kemp, had earlier asked the detective about the supposedly empty compartment adjacent to his own. When Brown declined, suspecting that this question was another ruse to force him into giving up Mrs. Neall, Jennings stated that he would go to the conductor with the matter. The conductor, however, takes Brown’s side. The issue apparently resolved, Jennings disappointingly concedes and the conductor exits. Brown stays behind for a few moments, making small talk with Jennings and asking if he knows how long it will be until the next stop. Jennings answers and Brown, satisfied, exits the frame by moving toward the camera. Rather than cutting to follow him, Fleischer keeps his camera on Jennings, who turns to watch Brown leave with what seems to be a threatening look on his face. Framed in ¾ profile, he stands almost perfectly still, as the train suddenly and unexpectedly enters a tunnel. A loud whistle sounds, the echo of clattering wheels is heard, and bright lights flash ominously across his features.

Up until this point, the film has done a great deal to lead us to suspect that Jennings is working with the mob without explicitly telling us that he is. We have seen him talking to Kemp, and his proposition to Brown about the empty cabin certainly seems to hide an ulterior motive. Moreover, we can deduct from the laws of narrative economy that a character who has received as much screen time as Jennings will prove to be significant in some way. And, finally, we know that, in film noir, corpulence often
signifies criminality (i.e. Sydney Greenstreet in *The Maltese Falcon*, or Raymond Burr in Anthony Mann’s *Desperate* [1947] and *Raw Deal* [1948]). The lingering shot of Jennings in the hallway, and the ominous audio-visual effects that accompany it, would seem, at first, to underline and emphasize these suspicious aspects of the character.

![Figure 2-4. Expressive framing and lighting (*The Narrow Margin* (Richard Fleischer, 1952))]

Indeed, upon a first viewing of the film, this apparent attempt at emphasis can seem laughably overdone. We may chuckle at the scene because, to borrow a phrase from V.F. Perkins, it appears to be “straining after expression” ([1972] 1993: 120).³ Throughout *Film as Film*, Perkins argues that a filmmaker’s ability to impose meaning upon an image, to make filmed objects signify, “is inhibited by his first two requirements: clarity and credibility” ([1972] 1993: 68). A film’s audience, he suggests, “has to know what is happening, of course, but it must be convinced by what it sees” ([1972] 1993: 69). A filmmaker must be loyal to the integrity and coherence of the projected world. This rule applies to both the fictional world’s basic physical properties (spatial

---

³ I credit Robert Ray with encouraging me to think about the moment from this perspective.
coherence, a respect for the general laws of Newtonian mechanics) as well as to the “artistic” organization of the mise-en-scène. Significant effects of lighting, blocking, or color must emerge “naturally”; they cannot be imposed by fiat. “What happens on screen,” Perkins writes, “must not emerge as a directorial ‘touch,’ detached from the dramatic situation; otherwise the spectator’s belief in the action will decrease of disappear” ([1972] 1993: 77). For a viewer to care about the events unfolding on screen, that is, he or she must not feel deliberately manipulated.

Perkins himself argues that credibility and significance can be conceived as two opposed poles, and that individual movies might be ranged along a linear axis between them. I would like to suggest, however, that it might be more critically productive to split them into *two* axes which intersect perpendicularly to create a Cartesian plot comprised of four distinct quadrants: (1) credible/significant, (2) not-credible/significant, (3) credible/not-significant, and (4) not-credible/not-significant. Of these categories, the final two are of little interpretive interest. Category (3) would simply comprise all moments in traditional narrative films in which the mise-en-scène’s only purpose is to approximate successfully what things would look like if the situation depicted were “actually” happening, while Category (4) would include films that strive for this verisimilitude but that, for whatever reason, ring false for the audience. Such feelings of falsity could be created by, among other things, overly rigid or stagey blocking, poor acting, or lighting effects that don’t match with a scene’s expected sources of illumination.

When we turn to those moments that do strive for some richer symbolic or significant meaning, however, things become slightly more complex, and the balance between the credible and the significant becomes more delicate. Expressive lighting
effects of the sort found in *The Narrow Margin* can prove especially tricky in striking such a balance. As Perkins puts it,

> Light is less flexible, less readily subject to rapid alteration than composition, which evolves with every movement of object, character, and camera. Within any given setting, we expect the source of illumination—a whether it is shown or deduced—to remain constant unless we are given an acceptable reason for a change. A character on the screen can turn lights on and off at will. The director behind the camera does not have the same freedom unless he is willing to draw attention to himself at the expense of the film’s action. ([1972] 1978: 83)

Examples from two other films may help illuminate (if you’ll pardon the pun) this general proposition:

**Anatomy of a Murder (Otto Preminger, 1959).** The night before her husband, Frederick, is set to go on trial for the murder of Barney Quill, the man she claims raped her, Laura Manion (Lee Remick) is out drunkenly dancing to jazz music at a local speakeasy. Concerned about what this sort of behavior might do to her reputation in the eyes of the public and the jury, her husband’s lawyer, Paul Biegler (James Stewart), escorts her out of the bar. As they walk first across the parking lot and then, after an elided car trip, in the trailer park the Manions call home, Laura and Biegler move in and out of dark, ink-black shadows created by the towering pines of Michigan’s Upper Peninsula. As they talk at a picnic table outside of the Manions’ trailer, both characters’ faces are, at times, almost perfectly bisected by these shadows.

In addition to being visually striking, the lighting here also serves to provide a keen visual metaphor for the film’s central thematic concerns. At bottom, *Anatomy of a Murder* is a film about the un-decidability of both events and of other people, about the impossibility of knowing the whole “truth” of any given situation, and about the fact that all judgments, legal or otherwise, can only ever be based on partial information. The film
turns on unanswered questions: Was Laura raped, or was it consensual? Did Frederick Manion kill Barney Quill in a moment of temporary insanity, or was it a premeditated act of vengeance, or simply the outburst of a jealous cuckold? Is Laura a manipulative “good-time girl,” or a scared woman trapped in an abusive relationship? Is Paul Biegler a simple and moral country lawyer, or a ruthlessly intelligent man who assumes a compone demeanor to win over judges and jurors? The shadows here both underline the Janus-faced quality of these characters and, by obscuring their faces and stymieing our ability to get a clean look at their expressions, emphasize the “un-readability” of other people. And yet, though heavy, the symbolism at work is not forced into the scene. The lighting effects grow naturally out of the situation: a rural trailer park in northern Michigan is not likely to be extraordinarily well lit at nighttime, and the region’s thickly forested landscape would obscure what little light there might be. The scene is thus both eminently credible and richly significant.

In a Lonely Place (Nicholas Ray, 1950). Hollywood screenwriter Dixon “Dix” Steele (Humphrey Bogart) is having dinner the home of his friend, police detective Brub Nicolai (Frank Lovejoy). The conversation turns to the recent strangling murder of a young hat-check girl named Mildred Atkinson, which Brub is investigating. Dix, having been the last person to see the dead woman alive, had originally been a suspect of the investigation, but was cleared when his neighbor, Laurel Grey (Gloria Grahame), told police that she had seen Atkinson leave the apartment alone and had not seen Dix follow her. During the dinner conversation, Dix offers to help Brub visualize the murder. He arranges the detective and his wife in chairs sitting next to one another (to stand for the car in which Atkinson was killed) and then sits down across from them. He leans
toward the camera and begins to describe the murder. As he does so, Ray alternates between shots of him and shots of the Nicolais reacting. After holding for an extended beat on the couple as Dix describes the act of strangulation from off-screen, Ray returns to the shot of Bogart, but with a drastically different lighting set-up. Where, before, Bogart’s face had been lit naturalistically, now his face and eyes are brightly illuminated by an unknown source, making him look demonic.

The lighting here is obviously meant to underscore the strange relish Dix appears to be taking in “visualizing” the murder. As he describes, in gory detail, the “wonderful” feeling of a throat crushing under the pressure of an arm he seems to pass into a trance. We already know that Dix is prone to violent outbursts, and from this point on the film, having cleverly elided the night of the murder (we cut from Dix saying goodbye to Mildred to him being awoken by the police the next morning), will work to undermine our belief in his innocence. The light, then, might be said to symbolize the inner flame of Dix’s rage. The only problem, of course, is that since the light has absolutely no diegetic source, and Ray has manipulated the lighting partway through the scene without explanation, the moment rings utterly false, and whatever dramatic impact the scene might have had is radically reduced.

In each of these instances, expressive lighting is employed to convey something about the films’ characters via purely visual means. In Anatomy of a Murder, this additional “significance” grows directly and naturally out of the “credible” staging of the action. The lighting of the trailer park scene would make perfect sense even in the absence of any thematic resonance. In In a Lonely Place, on the other hand, the “significant” meaning is the lighting’s sole raison d’être. The first is an example of
effective storytelling, while the second is liable to produce titters among the audience. With these two examples in mind, how might we “place” the shot of Jennings’s face bathed in flashing lights on our hypothetic credible/significant Cartesian plot?

On a first viewing, the scene seems to bear the most resemblance to the moment from *In a Lonely Place*. Though the flickering lights and clattering train wheels in Fleischer’s film *do* have a diegetic provenance, the arrival of the train at a tunnel at just the right moment, timed to perfectly synchronize with Jennings turning his gaze down the hall toward the exiting Detective Brown, seems too pat. Paul Maxey’s performance further adds to the sense of apparently forced significance. His movement as he braces himself against the wall is robotic, unnatural. One gets the sense that he was told to stand there and wait for the lights to stop, even if such an action would make little sense in the dramatic context of the moment.

Our reading of the scene changes somewhat when one re-watches it in light of the later revelation that Jennings is, in fact, an agent of the railroad. The flashing lights will have ceased to function as a sign of Jennings’s villainy and will have instead become simply decorative or ornamental. The effect may still seem awkward, forced, not “credible,” but that awkwardness is no longer accompanied by the sense that the filmmakers are trying too hard to force significance into the image. We *may*, however, feel that we have been tricked, or duped, or lied to. But while the film, both here and in the other moments analyzed above, certainly engages in a fair share of misdirection, can we say that the image here has lied to us? A comparison between the scene and a hypothetical rendering of the same scene in prose might clarify things here. Were one to be reading a novel of *The Narrow Margin* that included in its treatment the line, “the fat
man was working with the criminals,” that would be an example of a text “lying.” If, on
the other hand, the prose treatment merely described the train entering the tunnel—i.e.
“Brown walked away down the hall. The fat man turned to watch him go, and as he did
so the train passed into a tunnel. The clattering of wheels echoed off the walls and
flickering lights filled the cabins.”—the passage would lack any of the suggestive
character of the filmed event. A prose description would fail to fully convey the
connotations of the precise way in which the light flashes over Jennings’s face,
connotations which, like the femme fatale/good woman dichotomy and canted angles
discussed above, are native to film noir.

One solution to the prose writer’s problem in adapting the scene might be to
focus the description on Jennings’s face, using adjectives that would work like the film’s
flashing lights to confirm the audience’s suspicions: “The stranger watched menacingly
as Brown walked away from him.” And yet, this too would fail to have quite the same
effect, or work in quite the same way, as the visual treatment. The main problem with
this approach is that it would fix the meaning of Jennings’s expression in a way that a
film image, by itself, would not. Moreover, were one to return to such a passage later,
knowing that Jennings is an officer of the law, the “menacingly” would come to seem
inexplicable. Seymour Chatman, distinguishing between the “descriptive” capabilities of
film and literature, writes that “The film shows only features; it is up to the audience to
interpret them—that is, to assign them adjectival names. As Ernest Callenbach puts it,
this inconclusiveness ‘is the magic of cinema, its aesthetic ‘purity’ or perhaps its
inherent capacity for discretion and indirection’” (1990: 43). The shot of Jennings, along
with the shots of Mrs. Neall and Ann Sinclair discussed above, take full advantage of
this “capacity for discretion and indirection.” The film, in these moments, presents us with images, for which we, drawing upon both established narrative context as well as our knowledge of established generic tropes, supply the (ultimately incorrect) adjectives. The film’s narration cannot be blamed for lying to us because it has not, itself, presented any definitive description. Unlike a prose phrase like “watched menacingly,” the meanings of cinematic signifiers like flashing lights or canted angles are contingent, indefinite, shifting. As with the framing effects employed in the Detective Brown/Mrs. Neall scenes, what appears at first to be over-weighted with significance becomes, on subsequent viewings, mere decoration.

As we have seen, The Narrow Margin is a film that consistently draws upon well-established film noir conventions to mislead its audience into drawing the wrong conclusions about its characters and narrative situation. It is a film, we might say, about the deceptiveness of appearances, and the danger of relying too heavily on stereotypes and conventions for an understanding of the world. The film more or less puts this idea front and center in one of its very first scenes. As they take a cab from the train station to Mrs. Neall’s downtown apartment, Forbes asks Brown what he predicts Mrs. Neall will look like.

Forbes: Bet you’re wondering the same thing I am, what she looks like.
Brown: I don’t have to wonder. I know.
Forbes: Well, that’s wonderful, Walter. Nobody’s seen her, but you know what she looks like. What a gift! […] So, what about this dame?
Brown: She’s a dish.
Forbes: What kind of dish?
Brown: Sixty-cent special. Cheap, flashy, strictly poison under the gravy.
Forbes: Amazing, and how do you know all this?

Brown: Well she was married to a hoodlum, wasn’t she? What kind of dame would marry a hood?

Forbes: Oh, all kinds…

Forbes may be taken here as giving voice to one of the film’s primary theses. The film works to suggest that we in the audience, like Brown, are all too willing to fall back on received expectations when it comes to imagining what a gangster’s wife is “supposed to” look like. But, we might ask, from whence do these expectations arise? Why, that is, do we associate Mrs. Neall’s taste for jazz and oversized jewelry with seediness and deviance? Or, in the other direction, Ann Sinclair’s blonde hair with innocence and purity? Or Jennings’s corpulence with villainy?

In *S/Z*, Barthes analyzed the role played by stereotypes such as these in nearly all works of popular fiction. Such texts, he argue throughout, draw to a degree upon what he terms “cultural codes,” which take the form of passing, implicit “references to a science or a body of language” (1975: 20) collectively possessed by a culture. These “codes of knowledge” and wisdom can take many forms, from references to “traditional human experience” such as the narrator’s claim in the opening sentences of Balzac’s *Sarrasine* that he “was deep in one of those daydreams which overtake even the shallowest of men, in the midst of the most tumultuous of parties,” to the use of stereotypical descriptors (Balzac: “The Count de Lanty was small, ugly, and pockmarked; dark as a Spaniard, dull as a banker”). These “codes,” with which the author of the classical text can reasonably presume his audience to be readily familiar, may thus be drawn on as a sort of short-hand. Rather than spending time describing in
detail the specific character of the Count de Lanty’s dullness, Balzac supplies a simple simile and can count on his reader to do the rest of the work.

When we look at things in this context, we can easily see why studio-era Hollywood would make such widespread use of “cultural codes.” Based on an industrial model in which efficiency and rapid production were king, these codes provided filmmakers with effectively “readymade” signifiers that could be plugged into any film, saving precious time and screenplay pages in the process. The reliance on such stock signifiers may also be seen as a component of the process that Noël Burch, in tracing the evolution of mainstream narrative cinema (or the “Institutional Mode of Representation,” in his parlance), has called the “linearization of the iconographic signifier”—the push to make the meaning of any given cinematic image as clear, legible, and “transparent” as possible (1979: 81).

As Barthes reminds us, and as his name for them implies, “cultural codes” are not “natural” signifiers, and the meanings that become attached to them do not necessarily result from anything inherent in the objects themselves. Rather, these “citations,” he writes,

are extracted from a body of knowledge, from an anonymous Book whose best model is doubtless the School Manual. For this anterior Book is both a book of science (of empirical observation) and a book of wisdom, and, on the other hand, the didactic material mobilized in the text…generally corresponds to the set of seven or eight handbooks accessible to a diligent student in the classical bourgeois education system…. Although entirely derived from books, these codes, by a swivel characteristic of bourgeois ideology, which turns culture into nature, appear to establish reality, “Life.” “Life,” then, in the classic text, becomes a nauseating mixture of common opinions, a smothering layer of received ideas (1975: 205-6).

Thus, the relationship between these signifiers and their connotative meanings is formed not by some natural relation between signifier and signified, but rather through
the repetition of the association across a range of texts, a repetition driven by the needs of “bourgeois ideology” to conceal its own constructed nature. There is nothing inherent in cigarettes or jazz that makes them “mean” seediness or criminality; there is only the endless succession of seedy and criminal characters that smoke and listen to jazz. This repetition, this “migration” (to use Barthes’s term) of cultural codes from text to text re-affirms the semantic relationship, “naturalizing” it and imbuing it the authority of “common knowledge.” Thus, Detective Brown “knows” what sort of woman Frankie Neall’s widow must be because the culture has educated him accordingly, and Internal Affairs, like a filmmaker constructing a femme fatale, can simply dress their agent according to the established codes and count on Brown, their audience, to fill in the rest of the story.

It is within this realm of culturally entrenched signifiers that The Narrow Margin intervenes. The film toys with many of film noir’s major generic tropes, subtly disrupting the process of meaning circulation described by Barthes. We might say that the film’s “point” (or one of them, anyway) is that not all women who would fall for a crime boss are vampish femme fatales, just as not all women who listen to jazz are criminals, and not all gruff men caught patrolling a train’s corridors at night are robbers. The film, which relies so heavily on well-worn character types, becomes, in the end, a strange sort of argument for individuality, with Forbes’s reply to Brown’s rhetorical question about the type of woman who would marry a gangster (“oh, all kinds”) standing as its thesis statement.

At another level, The Narrow Margin may also be seen as a response to noir’s typical handling of the relationship between the noir world and that of ordinary, domestic
experience. If most noirs—including those analyzed in this dissertation—hold these worlds as easily distinguishable opposites, Fleischer’s film suggests that the line dividing them is narrow indeed. In this world, the “femme fatale” and the “good woman” prove to be utterly meaningless categories, useful only for deceiving those who actually believe in them. A gangster’s wife might be a kind woman and a caring mother, while a police agent may enjoy listening to jazz (at one point we see the fake Mrs. Neall listening to her records while alone in her compartment, suggesting that it wasn’t all an act). The film, in retrospect, encourages us to look again at the images it presents, to scrutinize and ask questions of them, rather than simply accepting our initial impressions as truth.

At stake here, ultimately, is the generally-held belief that classical cinema strives after “transparency.” This notion was most forcefully put into circulation by the cine-semioticians at Cahiers du cinema and Screen in the 1970s. Following Barthes’s line of argument from S/Z (along with the earlier Writing Degree Zero [1953]), critics and theorists like Jean-Luis Comolli, Noël Burch, Colin MacCabe, and Stephen Heath argued that Hollywood cinema worked tirelessly to conceal the production of meaning, naturalizing its conventions and formal protocols (of editing, of cinematography, of mise-en-scène) under the aegis of an illusory realism. Such conventions, these critics argued, serve to make the cinematic image “transparent” in two ways: first, by making its contents clearly and instantly “legible” to a viewer, and, second, by making the events depicted appear as though occurring “naturally,” as if viewed through an open window, rather than as the result of the material process of filmmaking. Furthermore, it is precisely this apparent, illusory transparency that accounts for the classical cinema’s
power as a tool for ideological dissemination. Believing its mode of representation to be entirely natural, this line of thinking goes, the cinema-goer is likely to accept the classical film’s (explicit or implicit) ideological messages without question.

While these propositions no doubt hold true for a large number of ordinary Hollywood films, Screen’s totalizing approach ultimately underrated the potential complexity of the classical style, a point that Wilson’s aforementioned Narration in Light makes abundantly clear. Conceived as a series of “studies in cinematic point of view,” the book first considers, and then criticizes, the standard line about the supposed “transparency” of classical narrative film. While he concedes that “transparency of the image is something at which classical film narration characteristically aims, and it is an effect that, on the whole, characteristically succeeds,” Wilson goes on to warn critics not to take this “transparency”—or related notions such as “reliability,” “invisibility of editing” and “explanatory closure”—as a “blueprint for the simple and mechanical operation of the ‘Hollywood narrative product’” (1988: 59). Rather than allowing “transparency” and its related terms to “define a kind of filmic storytelling which is thought to be immediately recognizable, obvious in the intentions it satisfies and the functions it serves, [and therefore] dismissable as an object for serious, nontherapeutic critical contemplation,” Wilson encourages us to “rethink, sometimes in a fairly radical way, our ideas of what there might be to see in a film or, more specifically, in a film belonging to one or another apparently well-worn genre” (1988: 61).

To buttress his thesis, Wilson provides lengthy analyses of some well-known Hollywood films, including Fritz Lang’s You Only Live Once (1937) and Hitchcock’s North by Northwest (1959), which present “central characters whose perception and
comprehension of their personal circumstances are shown to be dim, distorted, and severely restricted in relation to their need to see and understand the situations in which they act.” In presenting these characters’ situations via complicated strategies of narrational point of view, he goes on to argue, the films moreover “raise questions about the actual and potential illusions of spectatorship at the cinema” and thus “double back upon the viewers themselves” certain lessons “about perceptual malfunction and misalignment” (191). While *The Narrow Margin*’s narrative machinery may be somewhat less intricate than that of *You Only Live Once* or *North by Northwest*, it shares with those films many of the features Wilson enumerates. Detective Brown is certainly shown to have a “dim and distorted” understanding of his personal (and professional) circumstances, and the film, as we have seen, uses point-of-view strategies to align his basic misapprehension of the situation with ours as viewers.

What’s more, the film repeatedly returns to a visual motif that functions practically as an objective correlative for both the “doubling back” process Wilson identifies, and for the larger “myth” of cinematic transparency itself. As Brown traverses the train’s hallways and compartments, Fleischer repeatedly includes and emphasizes the vehicles’ many windows. Sometimes this involves shooting through the window of a connecting doorway, sometimes it involves showing characters looking at the reflections of others in exterior windows, as when Brown surreptitiously observes Kemp’s activities in the lounge car. The most baroque instance of this comes the film’s climax, as Brown uses the reflection of a neighboring train to monitor the movements of Densel, who has locked himself in an adjacent compartment with Ann and is threatening to kill her.
Fleischer shoots the scene in such a way that three different images (Brown’s reflection, the train outside, and Densel and Ann) are concatenated within a single frame.

Figure 2-5. Reflective surfaces [The Narrow Margin (Richard Fleischer, 1952)]

At the literal level, what these images remind us of is the fact that the transparency of even real windows is less absolute than we might believe. Taken together with the film’s more general investigation of the unreliability of appearances we might read these images as a small lesson on perception. It is what we ourselves bring to bear on the things and people we see on screen—the accumulated baggage of preconceived notions and reflexive stereotypical beliefs—that often acts as the biggest obstacle to seeing those things clearly. Many movies—most movies—rely upon these pre-existing ideas, and thus seem to confirm them as true. This, of course, is how ideology generally works. What, then, is the import of Fleisher’s film? Wittgenstein, in discussing the importance of learning to see the aspects of things, has this to say: “What is the philosophical importance of [experiencing an aspect]? Is it really so much odder than everyday visual experience? Does it cast an unexpected light on them?”
CHAPTER 3
MINISTRY OF FEAR: UNSUTURING THE SYSTEM OF THE SUTURE

Fritz Lang’s *Ministry of Fear* begins with a scene of apparent normalcy. Recently released from a two-year sentence in sanitarium for the “mercy killing” of his terminally ill wife, Stephen Neale (Ray Milland) stands at a train ticket window in the small English village of Lembridge. He wishes to purchase a ticket to London where, he told the sanitarium’s supervising doctor, he longs to lose himself in the metropolitan masses. As he stands at the ticket window, cheerful music coming from the nearby village square catches his attention. It turns out to be coming from a village fete. Perhaps drawn in by the incongruousness of such a seemingly innocent event occurring in the midst of wartime deprivation and the cataclysmic destruction wrought by the Blitz, or perhaps simply looking to kill some time before the night train arrives, Neale wanders over to explore the festivities. There he finds the standard compliment of charity fair activities, including a treasure hunt for children, a weight-guessing contest whose prize is a cake made with real eggs (a rare treat in wartime) and a fortune-teller’s tent. After failing to win the cake with a guess of “three pounds, five ounces,” Neale pays a visit to the fortune-teller.

In the dark of the tent, she takes his palm and, after telling him she is legally barred from predicting the future, traces a line and declares, “Well, you have made one woman happy!” Taken aback, Neale quickly withdraws his hand and says, “Forget the past, just tell me the future.” Mrs. Bellane appears shocked by this, and rather than continuing with the palm-reading leans forward to cryptically whisper, “My instructions are these. What you want is the cake. You must give the weight as four pounds, 15½ ounces.” Neale, un-phased by this strange turn in the conversation, thanks her for the
tip and exits. Back in the fete’s open area, he guesses the weight he was given and is immediately met by a derisive silence from the gathered crowd, with one elderly woman mockingly commenting, “My, anyone could tell that you’re a bachelor.” The woman running the stand, however, quickly interjects and proclaims that Neale has, in fact, guessed correctly. He thanks her for the cake and the crowd stands and watches him in dead silence. Again seemingly un-phased by this odd behavior, Neale makes his way toward the exit. There he crosses paths with a thin blonde man wearing a long dark coat (Dan Duryea), who rushes to the fortune-tellers tent. Moments later, the women running the weight-guessing contest jog up to Neale and inform him that they have made a mistake: the real weight of the cake is three pounds and two ounces, and the blonde man won it with a guess of three pounds and eight ounces. Much to their dismay, rather than hand the cake over, Neale states that the cake is still his, as his original guess was even closer. Before they can offer further protest, he turns and leaves. On the train back to London, he is joined in his compartment by a seemingly friendly blind man who turns out to be neither friendly nor blind, attacking Neale and attempting to flee with the cake while the train is stopped during an air raid, only to be killed by an errant Nazi bomb. Eventually, Neale will learn that both the participants at the fete were actually members of a Nazi spy ring and that the cake contained microfilm destined for Germany.

We would seem to have here a standard film noir set-up: a depiction of normal, ordinary life disrupted by the unexpected emergence of some dark or criminal force. And yet, even before the odd occurrences begin to accumulate, and long before the complete contours of the Nazi plan are revealed, something feels off about the scene. An odd, unsettling quality seems to course just below its surface, presaging the
strangeness to come. Tom Gunning, in his monumental 2000 study of Lang’s work, identifies *Ministry of Fear’s* opening as being “among Lang’s most uncanny sequences” and suggests that “Lang creates a strange atmosphere here precisely by stressing the improvised everydayness of this event” (2000: 294). To appreciate the achievement of *Ministry of Fear* will require an understanding of the exact formal procedures Lang uses to create this strange atmosphere in the depiction of such an apparently ordinary event. Before we can do that, however, it may first be worth considering the film’s general reputation within the existing critical literature on Lang.

Despite the plaudits he lavishes upon the opening sequence, the above-quoted passage represents the only truly substantial discussion of the film in Gunning’s 500-page opus. Though it is not the only film he excludes from detailed analysis, its relative absences in telling, and reflective of the wider neglect of the film in critical and academic circles. Though scholars like Reynold Humphries (1989) and Jakob Isak Nielsen (2015) have analyzed it from more academic perspectives, the writing on the film pales in comparison to the voluminous work that has accrued around other Lang noirs like *The Woman in the Window* (1944) and *Scarlet Street* (1945). Gunning ultimately declares it a “minor” work, and this judgment is more or less echoed in most of the major studies of Lang.

Even the director himself was somewhat dismissive of the film. When asked about it in an interview with Peter Bogdanovich, Lang claimed that his work on the film was less an artistic endeavor than a routine assignment ruined by studio interference.

I signed a ten-week contract, but when I came back here and saw what they had done with the script, I was terribly shocked and I said, “I want to get out of this contract.” The agent said I couldn’t—maybe he was just too lazy—I don’t know. Anyway, I had signed a contract and I had to fulfill it,
that’s all. I saw it recently on television, where it was cut to pieces, and I fell asleep. (1997: 205)

Though somewhat more sympathetic to the film, Lang’s biographer Patrick McGilligan confirms his claim that the production was plagued by an unusual amount (by Lang’s standards) of studio involvement. According to McGilligan, the film was the brainchild of Seton I. Miller, a screenwriter at Paramount who, in the mid-40s, began “branching out as a producer.” Because he held both credits, Miller blocked Lang from having any input on the script, frustrating the director. Furthermore, McGilligan goes on to note, Paramount unilaterally selected the film’s cast and crew without consulting Lang. Ray Milland was tagged for the leading role before Lang was even brought on and, in McGilligan’s words, “the studio was giving Marjorie Reynolds a big push, and the director had no choice but to accept the actress—one a brunette, now a blonde for her Viennese impersonation—as his female lead” (1998: 305). Nonetheless, McGilligan finds some things to appreciate about Lang’s “compulsory imitation of Hitchcock,” deeming it “an eminently watchable film.” “It has the studio patina,” he writes, “that *Hangmen Also Die*—and Lang’s weak-budgeted ‘independent’ films—lack. The production is handsome, the scenes atmospheric and beautifully mapped out” (1998: 306).

I would suggest that it is precisely these qualities of the film that McGilligan finds praiseworthy—its “studio patina” and eminent “watchability”—that have caused more serious-minded critics like Gunning to pass over it in relative silence. Though, as Lotte Eisner points out, it is “full of typical Langian concerns” and its story of a shadowy organization operating secretly amongst polite society places it “directly in the line of *Mabuse and Spies,*” (1986: 239) it simply feels somewhat un-Langian. This feeling is
largely a matter of tone. Where the *Mabuse* films elevated a simple crime syndicate to the status of metaphysical evil, here the actual world-historical evil of Nazism is represented by a band of bumbling caricatures whose elaborate espionage plot is foiled almost single-handedly by an ordinary citizen. Moreover, in adapting Graham Greene’s novel for the screen, Miller and Paramount excised a number of elements that might have imbued the film with a greater sense of Langian dread. For instance, the book’s protagonist, Arthur Rowe, poisoned his sick wife without her knowledge and left her to die alone, and the guilt from this act has left him profoundly haunted. In contrast, the film’s Stephen Neale simply purchased the poison but could not go through with the act—it was his wife herself, who, finding the poison hidden in their home, chose to commit suicide. Though by no means removing all darkness from the character’s backstory, this change considerably lightens the burden carried by Neale, and makes Eisner’s claim that the film is about “the ambiguity of guilt” (1986: 239) seem a slight overstatement.

Milland and Reynolds’s performances in the lead roles further add to the film’s relatively light tone. Though Milland was certainly capable of projecting a deep sense of pathos (cf. Billy Wilder’s *The Lost Weekend*, made one year after *Ministry of Fear*), here he is mostly affable and good humored, even when confronting murderous Nazi agents. Indeed, it is in this respect that McGilligan’s remark about the film being Lang’s “compulsory imitation of Hitchcock” seems most apt, as Milland’s Neale more closely resembles the character of Robert Donat’s Hannay in *The 39 Steps* (1935)—a similarly affable ordinary citizen who stumbles, by accident, upon a vast international conspiracy and eventually helps foil it—than he does the haunted, pathetic characters played by
Henry Fonda, Glen Ford, and Edward G. Robinson who populate so many of Lang’s other American films. Marjorie Reynolds, in contrast, is simply given little to work with. Where films like *Scarlet Street* (1945) and *The Blue Gardenia* (1953) presented audiences with psychologically complex, fully realized female characters, Reynolds’s Carla Hilfe is ultimately little more than a thinly drawn love interest for Neale. Even when she is forced to kill her brother after he reveals himself to be the Nazi’s lead spy, the film does little to convey any sense of deep emotional or psychological turmoil.

Formally, too, the film seems to resemble in many ways a conventional Hollywood thriller. In his recent essay on the film, Jakob Isak Nielsen writes that “many of the film’s stylistic choices are… in accord with the norms and conventions of the time.” Specifically, Nielsen points to the fact that the film’s average shot length of 10 seconds is “typical of its time,” and posits that “the editing pattern of the film generally respects continuity principles” and that Lang’s “cinematographic choices” are nearly all submitted to narrative motivation (2015: 432). While Nielsen goes on to note that “the film also houses distinctly Langian idiosyncrasies,” including “popular Lang motifs such as hands and clocks, the use of rhyme and echo” and “a mood of paranoia and claustrophobia,” he never entertains the possibility that the film is anything but conventional when it comes to the issues of scene construction or découpage. Indeed, for Nielsen, the formal interest of the film arises precisely from the tension between its “Langian idiosyncrasies” and the conventions of classical Hollywood (2015: 433).

But are the film’s editing patterns really all that typical? To support his argument, Nielsen simply enumerates the presences of a number of conventional Hollywood cutting strategies (“eyeline matches [and] POV sandwiches,” “the use of varying field
size according to emotional intensity”) and then moves on, as if the mere presence of these devices were enough to stamp the film’s découpage as purely ordinary. Such an argument rests on a worryingly binary proposition about film style, one that divides films into two opposed categories: those that respect basic continuity principles and those that violate them. Because Ministry of Fear presents legible action occurring in coherent spaces, and because it links shots together according to the principles of the match cut, it can be said to work in the same way as any other Hollywood film.

Close attention to the actual construction of individual scenes, however, reveals something more at work. We might take the scene at the charity fete as a case in point. As noted above, the scene possesses a strange, uncanny quality even before anything outright strange has actually occurred. But what accounts for this quality? None of the elements Nielsen identifies as “Langian idiosyncrasies” are in evidence here. The mise-en-scène is neither nightmarish, expressionistic, nor particularly claustrophobic. Though clearly a studio creation, both the town square and the fairgrounds have been constructed with an eye toward verisimilitude, and the extras who move about the area look like average, everyday people. And yet, still, something seems “off,” and while watching the sequence it is impossible to shake the sense of a deep disquiet lurking just beneath the scene’s placid surface.

The sequence begins with a medium long shot of Neale as he approaches the train station’s ticket window. Finding it closed and no one present, he knocks and an attendant soon arrives and Neale requests a ticket to London. “Yes, sir,” the man replies, “in the blink of an eye.” As he turns to retrieve Neale’s ticket, we hear for the first time the distant strains of music coming from the fair. As if just now hearing them
too, Neale turns and looks off screen. Lang then cuts to a high-angle shot of the fair itself, before returning to a closer medium shot of Neale at the window, still looking off screen. “What’s happening over there?” he inquires. “That’s our charity fete,” the attendant replies. “The ladies are doing themselves proud tonight,” he continues, as Neale once again turns his gaze toward the edge of the frame, “you might want to have a look at it and spend a shilling or two. It’s well worth it.” After asking if the man will watch his belongings while he’s gone, Neale turns to exit, and a dissolve takes us to the gate of the fairgrounds as he approaches.

Figure 3-1. Unconventional editing [Ministry of Fear (Fritz Lang, 1944)]

Already we may begin to a note a number of curious features in the way Lang has chosen to construct this apparently very simple three shot sequence. The most obvious is in the relationship between the shots themselves. Convention would lead us to expect that Neale’s glance off screen in the first shot would be followed by either a direct point-of-view shot, or at the very least, a shot that roughly approximates Neale’s perspective. Instead, Lang supplies a shot utterly detached from Neale’s, or any other character’s point of view, a shot whose third person objectivity is all the more emphasized by the camera’s distanced, high-angle placement. Such shots, which
reduce mise-en-scène to a distantly viewed geometric pattern, are by their very nature somewhat alienating and unsettling, and were, for this very reason, a favorite of Lang’s throughout his career (see, for instance, the opening shot of M). Here, though, the unsettling and alienating effect of the shot is heightened further by its relationship to the two shots sandwiching it. Because Neale’s glance off-screen in the first shot has primed us to expect an eye-line match, the high-angle shot carries with it the connotation of a point-of-view shot, as if we have suddenly come to inhabit the perspective of some unseen alien observer.

To understand the complexity of what is occurring here, we might think of this moment in terms of what Noël Burch once described as the three possible “attitudes” the camera can adopt toward the events it records:

The camera can…“look through the eyes” of one or other of the characters; it can make itself “voyeur,” in other words behave in such a “distant” way toward what is being filmed so as to make us “forget” its presence; the camera can be “author,” in other words its “gaze” can be so oriented as to stress the fact that there is someone behind the camera who knows what is going to happen and who, at times, chooses to anticipate the actors’ behavior, even to the point of guiding our attention away from the characters’ actions. (1980: 301)

Taken by itself, the high-angle shot of the fairgrounds would seem to be a relatively straight-forward example of the second of these “attitudes,” but because the preceding shot has cued us to expect the first type instead, a sort of blurring between Burch’s categories occurs. Moreover, far from making us “forget” the camera’s presence, the sequence’s violation of our expectations makes us, for a brief moment at least, aware of the camera in a way we would not have otherwise been. In a sense, this brief three-shot sequence might be seen as sharing a family resemblance with the “false” POV shots systematically employed by Michelangelo Antonioni in films such as L’Avventura (1960),
in which a character will suddenly walk into the frame of a shot originally cued as coming from his or her perspective, or with the moment in the final episode of HBO’s *The Sopranos*, in which Tony Sporano (James Gandolfini) enters a restaurant and appears to “see” himself already sitting at a table. While the moment from *Ministry of Fear* is not nearly as ostentatious in its flaunting of convention as these examples, it nonetheless introduces a minor disturbance into the continuity system’s normally smooth articulation of images, while simultaneously suggesting a foreign, observing presence behind the camera.

Things become even stranger once we move on to consider the fourth shot in the sequence, depicting Neale’s arrival at the fete. Where the sequence had earlier seemed to imply that the fairgrounds and the train station were in somewhat close proximity, the use of a dissolve here suggests a temporal ellipsis of unknown duration, indicating that Neale has had to do more than simply walk across the street to arrive at his destination. Thus, any certainty we might have thought we had about the geographical layout of Lembridge is suddenly scrambled, further disorienting our relationship to the world of the film. Moreover, Lang here subtly introduces a disjunction between what we know and see and what Neale knows and sees. When we could assume that the train station and fairgrounds were located close together, we could take the high-angle shot of the fete as showing us what Neale was looking at when he glanced off-screen, even if our perspective differed greatly from his. Now that the dissolve has implied that the fairgrounds and station are, in fact, a considerable distance from one another, we realize that what we saw in the sequence’s second shot was something completely
different from what Neale was looking at. Indeed, the object of Neale’s glance will remain for us forever a mystery.

Burch, in *Theory of Film Practice*, draws a distinction between two types of off-screen space, the “concrete” and the “imaginary,” with the former referring to an area of space that we have seen but which is at present out-of-view, and the latter referring to an area we know to exist, but which has not yet been shown to us (Burch 1973: 21). The typical procedure in classical filmmaking is to consistently convert “imaginary” space to “concrete” space by, for instance, having a character look off screen and then cutting to what he or she is looking at. The segment from *Ministry of Fear* under examination appears to follow this basic procedure, only then to undermine it with the dissolve to the fairground’s entrance. The first shot’s off-screen space, which had seemed to be made concrete, in fact remains fully “imaginary.” The unknown, and unknowable, quality of Lembridge’s layout is further heightened by the fact that the town itself is an invention of the film—an imaginary garden with real Nazis in it, so to speak—preventing us from checking its fictional geography against a map of any kind.

Many films, of course, fabricate whole cities out of only a few select spaces. In fact, this was the preferred method of constructing fictional spaces in classical Hollywood, where a series of isolated studio sets were called upon to stand in for an entire world. Take, for instance, the opening scene of *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942). As the camera pans down from a shot of the city’s skyline (in reality a matte painting), we are shown a bustling street. At the top of the frame, the street recedes from view, and buildings prevent us from seeing what’s going on around corners and down other streets. At no point, however, do we question that the city does continue
and things are happening. More importantly, we are not led by the film to wonder about the specifics of what is going on around those corners. Indeed, one of the major goals of Classical Hollywood’s formal and narrative protocols was to forestall the asking of questions such as those. The implicit promise of Hollywood-style storytelling was that everything that needed to be seen would be shown (unless, as noted in the previous chapter, generic or narrative demands required withholding certain information), and everything else was of little immediate concern. Thus, a film like Casablanca lets us know that a world exists beyond the events it limits itself to showing, but assures us that we need not worry about anything occurring there.

Neale’s insistent glance off-screen, however, activates the space, piquing our interest in what might be there. Even though we might surmise that nothing of any real significance might occupy it, we still experience the desire to see the space for ourselves. The film’s subsequent refusal to satisfy that desire thus introduces a tangible gap into our experience of the film’s world, one that unsettles, if ever so slightly, our total absorption in its unfolding events. A piece of the world, in effect, is missing. This missing piece, however insignificant it may ultimately be, emphasizes the limitations of the frame, alerting us to everything that is left out, reminding us that the camera can never show everything and that there is always something more beyond the frame’s boundaries.

---

1 Humphries (1989) identifies the “insistent” off-screen gaze as “central to the Langian textual system,” (41) and in addition to Ministry of Fear identifies key examples of its functioning in Hangmen Also Die (1943) and The Blue Gardenia (1953). Humphries ultimately relates Lang’s use of this device to the larger theoretical issue of the cinematic “suture,” which will be discussed at some length later in this essay.
This play of on-screen and off-screen space continues as the scene unfolds further. At the fairground’s gate, Neale engages the ticket seller in a brief conversation, handled in brief shot/reverse-shot sequence. Following this moment, Lang cuts to a shot taken from inside the fairground to track Neale’s entrance and follow his movements. Immediately upon entering, a child’s ball bounces in from off-screen, accompanied by a girl’s voice urging Neale to “catch it.” He does, and the girl herself soon enters to reclaim the ball. A number of things are worth noting about this small moment. First, for viewers familiar with Lang’s oeuvre, the image of a young girl playing with a ball must immediately call to mind the sequence depicting the killing of young Elsie Beckmann at the beginning of M (1931), where a shot of Elsie Beckmann’s ball rolling unaccompanied from a wooded area metonymically suggested the young girl’s unseen murder. This intertextual allusion thus subtly introduces dark intimations of death and violence into the sunny, cheerful fair scene. Moreover, the moment once again stresses the difference between our perspective and Neale’s — he, no doubt, could see both the ball and the girl ahead of time, while their entrance into the frame takes us completely by surprise.

The shot, too, like the earlier high-angle shot of the fairgrounds, suggests the presence of an observer watching the action, an effect accomplished by means of a small handful of somewhat idiosyncratic filmmaking choices. First is the framing itself, which is somewhat more distant than is dramatically necessary, and thus seems just slightly unnatural. The second is the timing of the cut. Rather than waiting until the end of Neale’s conversation with the ticket-seller and employing a match-on-action as Neale turns to enter the park, Lang cuts to the long-shot a beat early, before the ticket-seller
delivers her final line. The cut thus appears, at first, unmotivated by screen action, rendering the fundamental disjunctiveness of the shot change momentarily visible in a way that Hollywood’s continuity protocols typically sought to avoid.

The sense that we are sharing our view of the scene with an observing presence is further emphasized as the film continues. Lang films the entirety of Neale’s short walk through the park toward the weight-guessing stand in a single tracking shot. Keeping its distance as if not wishing to arouse suspicion, the camera follows his movements intently. As it does so, groups of the fair’s patrons move into and across the frame, entering from and exiting in all possible directions, continuously keeping alive our sense of off-screen space, and of the limitations of the camera’s situated viewpoint. Occasionally, too, the camera will pass by a figure in the extreme foreground, which briefly occludes its, and our, view of Neale.

Figure 3-2. Distant framing of Stephen Neale (Ray Milland) *[Ministry of Fear* (Fritz Lang, 1944)]

Lang’s handling of the sequence’s next shot is even more idiosyncratic. Once Neale arrives at the weight-guessing stand, the film cuts to a new set-up, with the camera positioned behind the counter and looking out at Neale. After the woman
working at the stand explains the rules to Neale and he agrees to give it a try, the camera tracks left, reframing Neale in ¾ profile. After he submits his guess, the camera again pans left, to bring into a view another of the fair’s organizers, standing intently at the edge of the tent. As Neale moves in her direction, the camera once again tracks to follow him. The woman at the side of the tent stops his progress to encourage him to visit the fortune-teller, and another of the fair’s organizers enters from the right side of the screen. He good-naturedly agrees to go see Mrs. Bellane, exiting to the left. The camera stays on the two old women for a moment as they praise Neale for being a good sport, before cutting to another relatively distant long shot as he prepares to enter the fortune-teller’s tent. What is most odd about this shot are the two shifts in camera angle that occur while Neale is engaging with the woman running the game, and they are odd because they seem, at first blush, dramatically unnecessary. Indeed, one can easily imagine a version of the scene handled by a single, stationary set-up, with a leftward pan at the end motivated by Neale’s movement away from the tent.

The scene at the weight-guessing tent is not the first time Lang has employed oddly timed camera movement in the film. The film’s opening sequence ends with a similarly ostentatious flourish. Neale, having just reached the end of his two-year sentence, is being accompanied to the sanitarium’s gate by his doctor. The shot begins with a high angle shot, showing the gate, the pair as they approach, and the sidewalk in front. As they approach and a guard opens the gate, the camera slowly tracks down to ground level and in toward Neale as he walks out toward the street, centered in the frame. Neale and his doctor say their goodbyes, and Neale takes his leave, exiting at the left of the frame. As with the later shot at the fair, the camera lingers for a moment
after he exits, as his doctor and the guard watch him go. Then, without warning, it quickly pans to the left, picking Neale up as he walks away, and revealing a sign reading LEMBRIDGE ASYLUM, tracking further in, as Neale once again walks out of sight.

Lang’s direction in these moments recalls a shot from Robert Flaherty’s *Moana* (1926) discussed at length by Gilberto Perez in *The Material Ghost*, which features similarly assertive camera movement. The shot begins by showing a boy beginning to climb a tree, as he exits at the top of the frame, Flaherty pans up to show the next “leg” of the climb. The boy again disappears, and Flaherty repeats the upward pan. Perez identifies this moment as a definitive example of the difference between what he terms the “narrative” and “dramatic” approaches to filming an action. Of the scene from *Moana*, Perez writes

> [T]he climb is an event with a built-in beginning, middle, and end that could simply have been recorded in the manner of Lumière, from a fixed camera position sufficiently far back to take in, all in one view, the whole tree and the boy climbing it from the bottom to the top. But Flaherty chooses his own beginning, middle and end, which are not simply those of the event. Like a narrator, he makes a sequence of something that is not: he shows us the tree a piece at a time…as of he were telling us about it (1997: 54).

The scene, he argues, may thus be considered “narrative.” He contrasts this with the more traditional “dramatic” approach—associated with most mainstream films dating back to Griffith—which treats film as an extension of theater, using its vast array of spatial and temporal articulations to fulfill the theater’s goal of “enact[ing] a story and mak[ing] it present for the audience” (Perez 1997: 56). Editing and camera movement, in this approach, may fragment the space of the staged event, breaking it into sequential components, but these devices are ultimately employed as
“refinement[s]...of what is done on stage: presenting the fact of a sequence to the exclusion of all other possibilities” and giving us “the feeling that we are being shown all that matters, the right thing at the right time” (Perez 1997: 65). A film becomes a “narrative,” Perez argues, only when it approaches its story at one remove, acknowledging the camera’s role as mediator between audience and the film’s world, and calls attention to the situatedness of any given view on that world. For instance, of a scene from Jean Renoir’s *The Rules of the Game* (1939), whose camera movement he compares to the shot from *Moana*, Perez writes, “the way the camera here moves and pauses and keeps moving is something we register as a gesture of looking, a distinctive way of directing our seeing. We sense a mediating gaze between us and the scene, and the arrangement this makes on the screen is a narrative sequence” (1997: 69). It is our awareness that what we are seeing is only a constructed, partial representation of events that transforms film from drama into narrative.

Though *Ministry of Fear* is hardly as sustained an exercise in experimental narrative form as a film like *The Rules of the Game*, or even Lang’s own earlier German-period work (cited approvingly in passing elsewhere by Perez), it nevertheless consistently codes its shots, as we saw above, as “gestures of looking,” and the use of this device serves a number of distinct ends in the film. First, and most immediately, the implication that a presence unnoticed by the film’s protagonists is silently observing their actions is quite fitting for a film whose subject is vast international conspiracies and covert spy rings operating in plain sight. As Gunning notes throughout his study of the director’s work, Lang returned again and again over the course of his career, from *The Spiders* (1919) onward, to themes of surveillance and conspiracy, and of the
relationship between technology, vision, and knowledge in modern society. While *Ministry of Fear* is less explicitly interested in the technological dimension of these matters than, for instance, the three *Dr. Mabuse* films, it still operates well within the bounds of the paranoid conspiracy thriller genre that those films helped define. The camerawork in the opening sequences, then, may at one level simply be understood as a formal cinematographic figure for these themes.

As the film progresses, it will seem to provide an on-screen counterpart for the observing presence suggested by the cinematography, a potential source for the camera’s surveilling gaze. After returning to London and beginning his investigation into the strangeness he encountered in Lembridge, Neale meets with Marjorie Reynolds’s Carla Hilfe and her brother, Willi (Carl Esmond), a pair of Viennese siblings who help run the organization that sponsored the charity fete. He and Willi eventually decide to pay a visit to the fortune-teller, Miss Bellane. When they arrive at her parlor, however, Neale is shocked when a woman (Hillary Brooke) much younger, and much comelier, than the one he met at the fair introduces herself as the psychic. She explains that the woman he met at the fete was not a psychic at all, but rather a local dowager who asked if she could fill in when the real Mrs. Bellane was called back to London. This mystery (apparently) cleared up, Mrs. Bellane invites Neale and Willi to participate in the evening’s séance. Just before it begins, the Dan Duryea character, who was meant to win the cake appears and is introduced as “Mr. Cost,” enters the room. The attendees sit in a circle and link hands and the séance starts. Soon, a woman’s voice begins to echo in the darkness, accusing someone in the room of killing her. Shaken by these ghostly words for reasons that will become obvious once we learn of what happened to
his wife, Neale breaks the circle. Suddenly, a gunshot rings out, and when the lights are turned back on, Cost lies dead on the ground. Neale is the chief suspect, but he escapes before the police arrive.

Now a fugitive, he continues his investigation on his own. As he does, he begins to notice a stern-looking, well-dressed man (Percy Warren) tailing him on repeated occasions, following and watching as Neale journeys through the bombed out streets of London. Indeed, the man seems always to know where Neale is or where he is going to be, appearing first when Neale returns to the office of George Rennit, the private detective he had hired to help him and again, sometime later, in an Underground station where Neale and Carla Hilfe have taken refuge during a Nazi bombing raid. Gaunt and dressed in a black, three-piece suit, the man projects a decidedly sinister aura. As a result of his appearance, combined with the fact that the film has thus far worked to imply that spies are everywhere, we, like Neale, are led to assume that he is working with the Nazis. This assumption will prove to be wrong. After Neale survives the explosion of a Nazi bomb meant to kill him, he awakens in a hospital room to find the man rocking menacingly in a chair by his bedside. After a brief bit of conversation, he reveals himself as Inspector Prentice of Scotland Yard, and explains that he has been following Neale as part of an investigation into the murder of George Rennit, whose body had been found bludgeoned to death.

Taking the film’s visual presentation of Prentice together with its association of his activity with the “paranoid” camera style seen throughout the film, we might begin to identify a surprising ambivalence in Ministry of Fear’s seemingly straight-forward politics. By leading us to believe, at first, that an officer of Scotland Yard was actually a
Nazi spy, the film suggests the existence of certain commonalities between the two sides fighting the war. Indeed, Lang’s treatment of the Prentice character may be seen as a slightly less radical cousin to the famous scene in *M*, in which the filmmaker cut between simultaneous meetings of the police force and the criminal underworld to imply an equivalence between the two. While *Ministry of Fear* by no means goes this far—once Neale has proven both his innocence and the existence of the Nazi cabal to the authorities, they prove understanding and helpful, and Prentice ends up saving Neale and Carla during the film’s climactic rooftop shoot-out—it does point to troubling implications about the world of the film. The parallels, along with the observational style of filming, suggest a world in which wars are fought not by uniformed soldiers on the frontlines but by shadowy espionage networks hiding in plain sight in the heart of ordinary society.2

But the use of “observational” camerawork produces effects beyond mere thematic expression. In his discussion of the difference between drama and narrative, Perez cites Bertolt Brecht and his “alienation effect” as a key historical example.4 For Brecht, the goal of the alienation effect, of course, was to transform the theatrical audience from a mass of passive spectators immersed in the drama’s unfolding action into a body of actively engaged participants who regard that action critically, at a distance. When watching a Brechtian work, we are, as Perez puts it, “distanced from the

---

2 In this, the film might be seen as a key thematic predecessor to the cycle of Cold War espionage thrillers which was kicked off 15 years later by *North by Northwest* and which reached its apotheosis during the Nixon administration with films like Alan Pakula’s *The Parallax View* (1974) and Sydney Pollack’s *Three Days of the Condor* (1975).

4 Brecht, it might be noted, was a personal friend of Lang’s and the two collaborated on the story for *Hangmen Also Die!* (1943), which would remain the playwright’s only Hollywood credit.
played scene, as the played scene is distanced, made distinct, from what happens in
the scene being played” (1997: 82). One of Brecht’s preferred methods for achieving
this distancing effect was to undercut the audience's tendency to identify with one or
more of the characters in the play, to short-circuit the mechanisms whereby a spectator
comes to see the world through the perspective of these characters and to relate to their
plight on a direct, personal level. If in the traditional theater the spectator, performer,
and role were meant to converge on a single, shared point-of-view, the Brechtian “epic"
theater seeks to disrupt this convergence, keeping the audience always at arm’s
distance.

As we have already seen, the camerawork of Ministry of Fear’s fair scene
accomplishes something similar to this effect, consistently stressing the difference
between our perspective on the film’s world and that of Neale’s, between what he sees
and knows and what we see and know. Lang maintains this epistemic situation
throughout the film, with our knowledge of the film’s world consistently either trailing
behind, or running ahead of Neale’s. There are, for example, other shots that repeat the
general approach we saw in the fair scene, with Neale looking off-screen at something
and the film either delaying its revelation to the audience, or absolutely refraining from
showing us the object of his gaze. One representative instance comes near the end of
the film. After Neale has convinced the authorities that he is neither a madman nor a
dangerous criminal, they allow him to assist in their investigation into the Nazi’s spy
ring, eventually accompanying Prentiss and some other Scotland Yard agents to the
shop of a tailor named Travers that they believe to be involved, and who ends up being
“Cost,” the man played by Dan Duryea who was supposedly killed at Mrs. Bellane’s séance.

Upon entering the tailor’s shop, Neale inquires after Travers and is instructed by an employee to wait in the shop’s fitting area. He complies and takes a seat in leather armchair. Lang then cuts in to a medium shot, framing Neale against an enormous mirror hanging at the back of the room. As the shot continues, Neale briefly glances off screen to the right, before the assistant returns to announce Travers. This shot, among the most remarkable in the entire film, stresses the difference between our perspective and Neale’s in two ways. First, as already noted, we have Neale’s glance off-screen and Lang’s refraining from showing us its object (made stranger here by the lack of any aural cue on the soundtrack to motivate Neale’s head-turn, or to hint at what might have caught his attention). Second, and more intriguingly, we have the mirror hanging on the wall behind Neale, whose presence gives us a view of the space “behind” the camera, which Burch identifies as often being the vaguest and least defined of the film frame’s six off-screen segments. In addition to giving us a view of this normally-hidden space, the mirror also gives us a sense of what Neale himself is looking at when he turns back toward the camera, but with one crucial difference: our view is reversed.

The film also extends this disjunction between our knowledge and Neale’s to larger scale matters of plotting and character. This effect is most readily apparent in its handling of the revelation of the specific nature of Neale’s crime. While Greene’s novel provides these details relatively soon after it begins, the film waits until near its final act, when Neale explains to Carla what happened during the night when they take shelter from a bombing raid in London’s underground. Until that moment, all we have to go on
is Neale’s bristling whenever the subject of love or marriage is brought up, along with
the ghostly whispered accusations at the séance. While we are not likely to suspect
Neale of being an outright monster (both because that characterization would go
against all Hollywood convention, and because Milland’s performance hardly suggests a
capacity for true malice), the film’s refusal to dispel our suspicions and absolve him of
guilt until somewhat late in the proceedings encourages us to regard him with at least a
small degree of suspicion. This suspicion again distances us from Neale, further
disrupting any easy and unproblematic identification we might have had with the
character.

This dynamic also cuts the other way at times, with the audience occasionally
learning key information before Neale does. A key example of this device occurs during
the scene in which he is attacked by the fake blind man in the train car following the
fete. As the train leaves the station, the stranger strikes up a conversation with Neale,
who eventually offers him a piece of cake, which the man begins to crumble (in search
of the microfilm, we will later realize). Lang handles this exchange with a relatively
traditional shot/reverse-shot editing pattern, alternating between shots taken from
Neale’s perspective and shots taken from that of the “blind” man, seemingly showing us
what he cannot see. At the sequence’s end, however, Lang introduces an interesting
twist. As Neale puts the cake away and places the box on the seat next to him, he
briefly turns away from the blind man. On cue, Lang cuts to the man’s face as his eyes
come alive, revealing his ruse to the audience. Having thus briefly shared Neale’s
perspective during the shot/reverse-shot exchange, the camera here effectively re-
asserts its independence.
To get a better sense of what Lang is doing in these scenes, we might compare his approach to point of view with that of a film like *The 39 Steps*, with which, as noted above, *Ministry of Fear* seems to have numerous thematic and narrative affinities. Like *Ministry of Fear*, Hitchcock’s film begins with an ordinary man—Robert Donat’s Hannay—attending a public entertainment event (here a Music Hall variety show) and unwittingly becoming embroiled in an international espionage plot. The film opens with a panning shot of the Music Hall’s marquee, before cutting to the ticket booth, which is approached by a man in a heavy coat whose face we cannot yet see as it is cut off by the top of the frame. As he enters the theater the camera follows his progress with a tracking shot which starts at his feet before panning up, revealing Donat’s face for the first time in profile, as he sidesteps through a row of spectators to claim his seat, before finally settling in behind him, as if taking its own seat. The show begins, and Hitchcock supplies a short montage of establishing shots, providing a sense of the theater’s layout and the size of the crowd gathered. Many of these shots seem, like shot of Hannay taking his seat, to originate from the position of a member of the crowd. During the show’s first act—a routine in which “Mr. Memory” answers random trivia questions from the audience—Hitchcock alternates between shots of the stage performers and shots of the audience, with Hannay often centered. What’s worth nothing here is the way Hitchcock works to align our perspective with Hannay’s, even before we have truly “met” the character. Though the film attributes comparatively few shots directly to Hannay’s point-of-view here, most of the scene’s “unattributed” shots occupy a perspective comparable to his. We may not see exactly what he sees at any given moment, but we can be sure that our views are mostly similar. As the film continues, Hitchcock will only
strengthen this bond between audience and protagonist, increasingly employing direct point of view shots and making sure, throughout, that we experience the film's unfolding events alongside the character.

Hitchcock’s approach to scene construction in *The 39 Steps*, and throughout his career, might be seen as an example of what *Screen* theorists once christened “the system of the suture.” As first described by Jean-Pierre Oudart, and later refined by critics like Daniel Dayan and Stephen Heath, cinematic suturing is the process by which a (classical, narrative) film effectively “seals” the viewer’s imagination into its diegesis, to use Dayan’s phrasing. For the theorists of suture, the shot/reverse-shot figure was fundamental to this process. Dayan, in glossing Oudart’s original theorization, suggests that the process turns on its ability to distract the viewer from noticing the essentially limited view presented by any given cinematic framing. When “the viewer discovers the frame,” Dayan writes, he also

- discovers that the camera is hiding things, and therefore distrusts it and the frame itself, which he now understands to be arbitrary. He wonders why the frame is what it is….He feels dispossessed of what he is prevented from seeing. He discovers that he is only authorized to see what happens to be in the axis of the glance of another spectator, who is ghostly or absent. This ghost, who rules over the frame and robs the spectator of his pleasure, Oudart proposes to call “the absent one” (*l’absent*). (Dayan 1976: 448)

To notice the frame, then, means to recognize the presence of the camera, to become aware of the image’s conditions of production, its existence as the product of labor and intention. The reverse shot, Dayan goes on to argue, stymies this recognition, by showing that the camera is not there, that there is no “absent one,” that the world of the film is unified, and that the views of it that we are shown may be plausibly attributed to the characters who inhabit it. The suturing reverse shot thus works, like the other
elements of classical cinema’s continuity system, to conceal the fundamentally
fragmentary nature of cinematic articulation, to create the illusion of unity and to hide
the fact that what we are watching is merely a series of fragments filmed and arranged
in a purposeful and deliberate manner.

Though the Oudart/Dayan argument may rightfully be accused of overreaching in
certain respects, as William Rothman (1975) showed in an illuminating challenge to the
theory of the suture, the notion of the “absent one” provides a useful metaphor for
grasping what Lang is up to in Ministry of Fear. If most classical cinema seeks to
conceal the frame, Ministry of Fear insists upon it, raising, in the process, questions
about the source of the film’s images that the classical system was designed, in part to
forestall. It thus points us, if only obliquely, to the process of its own making, the
conditions of its production and existence, inviting us to regard it as a constructed
object.

Finally, as with The Narrow Margin and its windows that evoke the film screen,
Ministry of Fear’s self-reflexive elements find further expression in certain aspects of the
mise-en-scène. One scene, in particular, stands out in this regard. After going on the
run following Cost’s “murder,” Neale takes refuge in a bookstore owned by a friend of
the Hilfes. Carla visits him frequently, and one evening while she is there the store
owner asks if they would deliver a suitcase full of books to Dr. Forrester, a famed
psychiatrist and author of the book The Psychoanalysis of Nazidom. When Neale and
Carla arrive at the given address, however, they find the apartment devoid of any signs
of habitation beyond a few pieces of furniture. Its shelves and dressers are completely
empty, and when Neale tries to use the phone he finds it dead. The suitcase, they soon
realize, contains a bomb, and the entire errand was, in fact, a trap laid by the Nazis to kill them. What is most interesting about the scene, however, is the way the empty apartment evokes an “undressed” film set, replete with a non-functional prop telephone. Here, then, the material process of Hollywood filmmaking becomes, for a moment, partly visible.

Looked at in this way, the scene might also be seen as highlighting certain odd parallels between Neale’s situation and that of the audience watching the film. Throughout his adventure, Neale repeatedly encounters situations that seem to have been staged for him by some mostly unseen power, which are populated by men and women using fake names and playing various roles and which are filled with ordinary and everyday objects (a cake, a suitcase, a pair of scissors) invested with strange and beguiling significance. Is this not, in some ways, an apt description of the movies?
CHAPTER 4
THE BIG SLEEP: THE CONSTRUCTION OF HOLLYWOOD FANTASY

We begin in the heart of Howard Hawks’s The Big Sleep (1946), on a bustling Los Angeles street. Phillip Marlowe (Humphrey Bogart) has been hired by a decaying California oilman named General Sternwood (Charles Waldron) to investigate a man named Arthur Guinn Geiger, who has been blackmailing his youngest daughter, Carmen (a reckless wild child played with amatory verve by Martha Vickers).\(^1\) Geiger, it turns out, is owner and proprietor of a rare books store. Marlowe, suspecting this shop to be a front, tests the woman he finds working there (Sonia Darrin’s Agnes, who will show up again later) by asking about two non-existent books (a “Ben Hur, 1860, third edition, with an erratum on page 166,” and a complete “Chevalier Audubon, 1849”). After confirming her total ignorance in first editions, and observing a furtive middle-aged man buzzed into the store’s back room, Marlowe ambles across the street to the Acme Book Shop and enlists the help of the never-named young woman working there (Dorothy Malone, in one of her first credited appearances) in identifying Geiger. Their conversation quickly turns flirtatious, and the comic nature of the banter almost immediately deflates whatever narrative momentum the mystery plot had been gaining.

Proprietress: You begin to interest me, vaguely.

Marlowe: Well, I’m a … private dick on a case [she looks him up and down]. Perhaps I’m asking too much? Although it doesn’t seem too much to me, somehow.

Proprietress: [smiling] Well, Geiger’s in his early 40s, medium height, fattish, soft all over, Charlie Chan mustache, well-dressed, wears a black hat, effects a knowledge of antiques and hasn’t any … and, oh, yes, I think his left eye is glass.

\(^1\) A version of this chapter appeared as “Only in Dreams: The Big Sleep and Hollywood Fantasy” in Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism, 6 (2015).
Marlowe: You’d make a good cop.

This exchange marks the end of the scene in Raymond Chandler’s novel, but Hawks keeps the sequence going. It begins to rain and the proprietress notes, with perceptible suggestiveness, that it will be another hour or so before Geiger leaves his store for the day. Marlowe quickly avers that his car is parked around the corner, but then catches her making eyes at him and, alluding to the “Bottle of pretty good rye” stashed in his pocket, states that he’d ‘Much rather get wet’ inside. She closes up, and they move to a desk near the back of the shop, where he gently cajoles her into removing her glasses and letting her hair down. A dissolve, signaling the hour has passed, returns us to the front window, which looks out upon a now-darkened, rain-slicked street. Lowered lighting and romantic strings on the soundtrack (the first instance of music in the sequence) eliminate any doubt about the act that has transpired without gratuitously calling our attention to it. The proprietress observes Geiger exiting his shop and Marlowe leaves her with a conciliatory pat on the arm: “So long, pal.”

What are we to make of this remarkable scene? For one, in a film defined in large part by digressive storytelling, it seems the most radically digressive moment of all. Andrew Klevan has written that the whole scene ‘is like a “witty aside”’ (2011), and David Thomson, in his BFI Classics volume on the film, presents it as Exhibit A in support of his claim that The Big Sleep “is one of the most formally radical pictures ever made in Hollywood.” The scene is “instructive,” he writes, because

It could be cut from the picture without any damage ....The Acme scene, the horse-riding conversation, and the screwball telephone conversation with police headquarters could all go without any loss in information or plot recognition. With this exception: without their pleasure, their fun (however queasy we might feel about it), we might be made more aware that we don’t know what the hell the film is about. (1997: 63)
Thomson argues that *The Big Sleep* gambles with the idea that, in Hollywood filmmaking, narrative coherence is less important than the “fun” and “pleasure” of individual scenes and moments. Hawks himself would claim something to the same effect in his late-career interviews with Peter Bogdanovich, compiled in *Who the Devil Made It*, stating that, “As long as you have a good picture—it doesn’t matter if it isn’t much of a story” (1998: 334).

But the explanation that the scene exists merely as a fun diversion seems somehow inadequate. Klevan, quoting Manny Farber, suggests that the scene is “given density by . . . “those tiny, mysterious interactions between the actor and the screen”” (2011). But what is the specific character of this density, and what lies behind the ‘mystery’ of the actors’ gestures? Thomson, elsewhere in his study, writes that “there is not one moment in the movie of *The Big Sleep* when proceedings get out in the potent open air of southern California” (1997: 10). The claim is true on the merits: made at Warner Brothers’ in the mid-40s, just before the full flowering of film noir and the mainstreaming of location shooting, the film is entirely studio-bound. Even the lovely, apparently bustling street crossed by Marlowe on his way to the Acme is a soundstage creation. The world of the film is a fantasy, a dreamlike construction utterly detached from the “reality” of Los Angeles as it actually exists. And yet, I’d like to argue, the scene at the Acme points, if only metonymically, to exactly that other L.A. from which the rest of the movie so willfully divorces itself—the L.A. where, every day, people get out of bed, go to work, and come home, all without ever encountering blackmail rackets or murder plots.
Stanley Cavell has suggested that one of film’s principal capabilities as an art is its ability to “juxtapose modes and mood of reality as a whole” and ‘taunt them with one another” (1978: 7). Thus, for instance, Frank Capra and his cinematographer Joseph Walker’s expressionist lighting in *It Happened One Night* suggests “the experience of an ecstatic possibility, as of a better world just adjacent to this one, one that this one speaks of in homely symbol, one that we could (in social justice, in romance) as it were, reach out and touch; if only …. ” (1985: 137). In *The Big Sleep*, we find an inverted version of this relationship. Here we are presented not with an everyday taunted by the transcendent, but with a dream world that, for a brief moment, seems to make contact with the ordinary. The ramifications of this juxtaposition of modes and moods, however, may only become clear once we consider the scene at the Acme in relation to the film as a whole. Before we can mount that particular critical examination, however, we must know something about how, and why, the film got made at all.

*The Big Sleep* was conceived in the backseat of a limousine. As Todd McCarthy tells the story, Hawks and Jack Warner were riding back to the studio together following a preview screening of *To Have and Have Not* (Howard Hawks, 1944) when the studio chief, wowed by Bogart and Lauren Bacall’s chemistry and certain that the film would be a success, asked Hawks if he had any ideas for an immediate follow-up. Hawks averred that he and William Faulkner (working at Warners’ as a screenwriter at the time) had been “kicking around” the idea of adapting *The Big Sleep*, a property that had intrigued the studio since the book’s initial publication in 1939. Warner, McCarthy writes, “didn’t hesitate to give the go-ahead, feeling that the Hawks-Chandler-Bogart-Bacall combination was as close to a sure thing as he could get” (2000: 379).
While an intriguing piece of raw material, the novel would not yield the Bogart / Bacall showcase vehicle Warner wanted without some significant remodeling. The first problem confronting the filmmakers was the storyline. In the novel, the character that would come to be played by Bacall—Vivian, the elder Sternwood daughter—is of secondary importance. She and Marlowe have but one romantic encounter, which he unceremoniously breaks off. Moreover, the novel’s focus is on the mystery itself, and not on Marlowe’s romantic dalliances. Solving this problem was a two-fold process. For the film’s first cut, Hawks and his collaborators enlarged Vivian’s role (at the expense of Carmen, who plays a much bigger part in the book) and wrote in the love story, transforming, in the process, their initial meeting from a more-or-less straight forward confrontation, in which Vivian comes across as merely spoiled, to a sexually-charged back-and-forth exchange (described in detail below). They maintained, however, a focus on the mystery plot. After viewing this cut, Warner demanded substantial changes, feeling the film had too much plot and too few explosive Bogart / Bacall scenes. Most significantly, a scene in which Marlowe explains the tangled story of blackmail and murder to the District Attorney, revealing in the process who was behind the murder of the Sternwood chauffeur Owen Taylor, was replaced by a scene in which Marlowe meets Vivian at a nightclub and the two engage in bit of comic flirtation built around horse racing double entendres. The murder of Owen Taylor would remain unexplained.

A second problem posed by the novel was the characters themselves, both of whom were tinged by Chandler’s overriding cynicism and thus ill at ease with Hawks’s tendency toward apolitical “fun.” As Robin Wood puts it in his book on Hawks’s work,
the “atmosphere” in Chandler’s world was simply “too stifling for Hawks to breathe in happily” ([1968] 2006: 186). Thus, both Vivian and Marlowe had to be, in effect, “de-Chandlerized,” their rough edges sanded down to perfect smoothness. For Vivian, this process involved uprooting the character, and her family, from the well-defined, if somewhat over-determined, socio-economic position Chandler grants the Sternwoods. During the novel’s initial scene at the family’s mansion, Chandler has Marlowe note two telling details. First, over the main hall’s mantel hangs a portrait “of an officer in full regimentals of about the time of the Mexican war” that Marlowe assumes is a depiction of General Sternwood’s grandfather ([1939] 1988: 4). Second, as he is leaving, Marlowe gazes down from the hill upon which the Sternwood house rests and sees “some of the old wooden derricks of the oilfield from which the Sternwoods had made their money” (21). With these two details, Chandler firmly locates the Sternwoods’ mansion within a concrete socio-economic context. The oil derricks invoke American industrialism, along with its attendant history of robber barons, environmental destruction, and labor exploitation. On the other hand, the portrait over the mantel, with its intimations of past military glories, suggests a vision of the family’s decline from nobility to decadence.

Suffice it to say, such baggage would make Vivian a tough sell as a sympathetic love interest, and so the filmmakers summarily excised both details. In doing so, they effectively mystify the source of the Sternwoods’ wealth, rendering it practically mythical. In fact, Hawks never even provides an establishing shot of the mansion itself, or any clue to its exact geographic location within Los Angeles. Freed from the novel’s concrete contextualization, and from the snap judgments such contextualization would
trigger in audiences, the Vivian character becomes an empty vessel for Bacall to fill with her nascent star persona.

Marlowe, too, is similarly stripped of many of the original character’s defining characteristics. Chandler’s Marlowe is, at bottom, something of a wounded idealist, an errant Romantic who, through the contingency of circumstance, has ended up in a sometimes brutal and always shabby line of work. He’s the sort of character given to making pronouncements like the following, from *The Long Goodbye*, delivered after a one-night tryst with a woman he barely knows:

> We said goodbye. I watched the cab out of sight. I went back up the steps and into the bedroom and pulled the bed to pieces and remade it. There was a long dark hair on one of the pillows. There was a lump of lead in the pit of my stomach.

> The French have a phrase for it. The bastards have a phrase for everything and they are always right.

> To say goodbye is to die a little. ([1953] 1988: 365)

Much of Chandler’s handling of the character is predicated upon the interplay between Marlowe’s often-gruff “public” behavior (roughing up thugs, expressing cruel indifference toward the women he encounters) and reflective first person digressions like the above.

The two other more or less straight adaptations of Chandler’s work—*Murder, My Sweet* (Edward Dymytryk, 1944) and *Marlowe* (Paul Bogart, 1969)—largely retain this characterisation.2 *Murder, My Sweet* casts Dick Powell in the role, and though visibly

---

2 I am leaving aside both 1947’s *Lady in the Lake* (Robert Montgomery), the two mid-1970s Chandler adaptations starring Robert Mitchum, and Robert Altman’s *The Long Goodbye* (1973, with Elliot Gould) from this comparison The reason for excluding the former, a failed experiment in point of view filmmaking in which the camera is meant to ‘stand in’ for Marlowe, should be clear. As for the 70s films, the 60-year-old Mitchum’s characterization is simply too far afield of both the books’ and the other adaptations, to be of any genuine comparative interest, while Altman’s film is less an adaptation than a work of postmodern pastiche.
older, his appearance still carries unmistakable traces of the fresh-faced ‘juvenile’ that sang and danced his way through Busby Berkeley musicals in the early 30s. His line delivery often shifts between a hard-boiled pastiche and a drawling, Dandy-ish lilt. Slim and upright in posture, Powell has a bearing and demeanor that suggest a classic Gentleman Detective fallen on hard times—something of a slangy, déclassé variation on William Powell’s Nick Charles. *Marlowe* updates the setting of its story to the brave new world of Nixon-era Southern California, but its Marlowe is still recognizably derived from Chandler’s original conception. Anticipating his performance as TV’s Jim Rockford on *The Rockford Files*, James Garner portrays the character with a mix of affable bemusement and earnest sensitivity. The look of mournful resignation on his face at the film’s conclusion, after having witnessed a sudden murder-suicide brutally tie up the remaining loose ends in his current case, comes closer than any moment in any of the films to capturing the complex pathos of Chandler’s prose.

The Bogart-Hawks conception of the character, on the other hand, is a different animal entirely. Though Bogart was capable of playing gruff men with a hidden sentimental or romantic side (as *Casablanca* [Michael Curtiz, 1942], in particular, makes evident), this dimension of his star persona is all but entirely excluded from the film. As he did with Cary Grant in *His Girl Friday* (1940), Hawks whittles the Bogart persona down to its most basic and superficial elements, presenting an image of effortless, unflappable cool—an amused stare beneath arched eyebrows, a cigarette dangling nonchalantly between gently pursed lips. This Marlowe glides through his world like a slightly disheveled *bon vivant*, greeting violence and intrigue with a smirk. Nothing in the performance suggests the battered romanticism, or the faint stench of failure, that clings...
to Chandler’s Marlowe. Surely, this is the Bogart *Breathless*'s (Jean-Luc Godard, 1960) Michel Poiccard (Jean-Paul Belmondo) had in mind as he gazed into that movie theater display case.

The aura of effortless cool falters only once, but not to reveal a wounded idealist hiding behind the hard-boiled exterior. At the film’s climax, Marlowe, accompanied by Vivian, contrives to have the gangster Eddie Mars gunned down by his own men. Mars is the man ultimately responsible for the film’s many blackmail and extortion rings, and, indirectly, for his henchman Canino’s (Bob Steele) murder of a small-time crook named Harry Jones (Elisha Cook, Jr.), which Marlowe had witnessed helplessly from an adjacent room, an event which spurs an acute desire for vengeance in the detective. As Marlowe reveals his plan to Mars, he seems to be overcome by waves of sadistic glee. Eyes radiating wrath, he details his plan through clenched, bared teeth. His face in this moment recalls a passage from Chandler’s text, but not one having to do with Marlowe.

At the novel’s end, Carmen Sternwood, in the grips of a psychotic episode, attempts to kill Marlowe for earlier rebuffing her sexual advances: “The gun pointed at my chest. Her hand seemed to be quite steady. The hissing sound grew louder and her face had the scraped bone look. Aged, deteriorated, become animal. And not a nice animal” ([1939] 1988: 219). In this moment, Bogart’s Marlowe reveals a capacity for violence utterly foreign to the other iterations of the character, a capacity that seems, in the scale of its fury, to be practically inhuman. He is like a wrathful god, meting out divine judgment.

This process of effectively de-coupling the film’s characters from their literary antecedents, along with having Bogart and Bacall play them as more or less direct
continuations of their roles in *To Have and Have Not*, has a profound impact on the finished film’s texture. Because its narrative line has been so systematically attenuated to make room for more Bogart and Bacall “set pieces,” individual scenes throughout the film often feel less like moments in a developing story, featuring characters with pasts and futures, than like autonomous episodes cut off from any larger narrative ‘reality.’ These scenes have a strange, almost timeless quality about them, one redolent of what Erich Auerbach, in *Mimesis*, identified as the Homeric approach to storytelling. Homer’s style, Auerbach writes, is “scrupulously externalized” and “narrated in leisurely fashion” ([1946] 1968: 3). Homer, he goes on to say, “knows no background. What he narrates is for the time being the only present, and fills both the stage and the reader’s mind completely” ([1946] 1968: 4). For the Homeric epics, finally, “delight in physical existence is everything . . . . and their highest aim is to make that delight palpable to us” ([1946] 1968: 13). The episodes and digressions of the great poems detach from the ongoing stream of narrative action to establish themselves as self-sufficient entities.

Illustrative of this tendency in *The Big Sleep* is the first encounter between Marlowe and Vivian. Immediately following Marlowe’s initial meeting with General Sternwood, the butler, Norris, informs him that “Mrs. Routledge”\(^3\) would like to see him. As he enters her room, the camera frames him in a medium-long shot, tracking his movement to the left across the expansive, luxurious space of the room, until he and the camera find Vivian mixing a drink at a small liquor table near the window, her back

---

\(^3\) The fate of Vivian’s first husband is one of the film’s unsolved mysteries. In the novel, she is married to Rusty Reagan (who becomes ‘Sean’ in the film), a former confidant of the General who has recently gone missing. Regan’s disappearance – which turns out to be permanent – figures heavily in both versions of the story.
turned. Hawks holds the shot for a beat, just long enough for us to get a sense of the
characters’ relative positions. As Marlowe introduces himself, Hawks inserts a medium
shot of Bacall who, continuing to pour her drink, turns her head slightly to size the
detective up, turns back to finish pouring, and sets the bottle down before finally turning
and walking toward him, the camera following in a right-ward track and coming to rest
on a balanced two-shot. Vivian immediately begins tossing well-aimed, playful barbs:
“So you’re a private detective. I didn’t know they existed, except in books. Or else were
greasy little men snooping around hotel corridors. My, you’re a mess.”

Marlowe replies, and Hawks cuts to a second, closer two-shot, taken from a
slightly more oblique angle than the first, then quickly follows with a close-up insert of
Vivian as she begins to inquire about her father’s reasons for wanting to hire Marlowe.
As they talk, Hawks holds this shot, allowing Marlowe to offer a reply from off-screen,
before cutting back to the previous shot, as Marlowe begins needling her about offering
him a drink. As Vivian becomes increasingly frustrated, the film cuts on a perfect axial
match to a shot giving Bacall centre stage to deliver an exasperated “help yourself!” and
theatrically point her thumb over her shoulder, directing Marlowe to the bar. She then
walks past him and the camera follows, maintaining the balanced two-shot even as they
reverse screen positions. It would be difficult to overstate the elegance of this re-
framing, which also suggestively brings Vivian’s bed into view in the background,
simultaneously underlining the dialogue’s flirtatious undercurrent and pointing to
Vivian’s relative lack of independence. While her father conducts his meetings in a
lavish greenhouse, and Marlowe will conduct his in his private office, Vivian has only her
bedroom.
Perhaps wishing to maintain her facade of cool detachment, Vivian soon turns and walks toward the room’s opposite window, the camera following and reframing her in a long shot. After a quick insert of Marlowe tugging his ear and walking in her direction, Hawks returns to that set-up, giving us a shot that effectively mirrors the scene’s initial blocking, with Marlowe in the foreground and Vivian looking at him from near a window. As they continue to talk, he employs a series of reverse-angle medium shots, before returning to a slightly closer long shot of Vivian, who, having had her fill of Marlowe’s insouciance slams her drink down on the windowsill in frustration. Regaining her composure, she walks toward the camera, as Hawks once again reframes into a balanced two-shot. As they talk, Vivian walks away from Marlowe and toward the camera, turning her head over one shoulder to continue speaking with him. Bacall’s movements in this moment are deliberate and stiff, conveying a performed aloofness on Vivian’s part. The film cuts to a second close-up of Vivian and, as with the first, holds it while Marlowe offers a reply from off-screen. We then return to the two-shot, the conversation winds down, and Marlowe exits, the camera following him on the way out in a tracking movement that rhymes with the one which opened the scene.

Writing about this scene, Thomson highlights the obvious artifice of its dialogue, suggesting that it is “only plausible if we see Marlowe and Vivian as a fond couple who make an aphrodisiac show of hostility in which she gives him the very lob he can smash” (1981: 122). Indeed, here and throughout the film, the dialogue between the two has the distinct character of a well-rehearsed routine, with some scenes (such as their improvisatory, collaborative prank phone call to the police) feeling practically like sketches from a comic variety show. Adding to this impression of artifice are the
performances, with Bacall’s deliberately theatrical gestures and line readings perfectly off-setting the practiced nonchalance of Bogart’s. The scene conveys an unshakable sense that these two already know each other, and well.

This sense is further heightened by the scene’s formal construction, which demonstrates a thoroughly planned design. Built around matching elements in both its mise-en-scène and cinematography (two windows, two shot/reverse-shot sequences, two close-ups of Bacall, the rhyming tracking shots which enclose the sequence), the scene is almost perfectly balanced in its construction and elaboration. The compositions of each individual frame are similarly balanced, most noticeably in the scene’s numerous re-framings. As Bogart and Bacall move around and past each other, circling and sizing one another up, the compositions never become imbalanced. The blocking has the thorough, worked out precision of a well-choreographed *pas de deux*. The editing, too, with its alternation between establishing two-shots and shot/reverse-shot sequences has a rhythmic, musical quality.

![Figure 4-1. Rhyming mise-en-scène (*The Big Sleep* (Howard Hawks, 1946))](image)

The precision and balance of the découpage here suggest a degree of planning, and an eye for aesthetics, that would seem to challenge the generally held perception
that Hawks, in Andrew Sarris’s words, “does not choose to use technique as reflective commentary on the action” ([1968] 1996: 54). In order to see just how much Hawks’s treatment of the scene exceeds mere pragmatism, one need only compare it to Michael Winner’s handling of the same material in his 1978 version of Chandler’s novel. Moving the story (inexplicably) to London, Winner’s film transforms the Sternwood home from the California mansion of the original to a sprawling manor house. Vivian’s room is cavernous, high-ceilinged, and ostentatiously appointed. As the sequence unfolds, Vivian sits perched on the arm of a sofa while Marlowe stands perfectly still. Their conversation is handled with a series of alternating close-ups and medium shots, with establishing shots inserted occasionally throughout. The film cuts on almost every line of dialogue, an approach that results in the scene containing an astonishing 33 shots over the course of its 1:46 runtime. The rapidity of the editing prevents a consistent mood from developing, leaving the scene lifeless and inert. The blocking and mise-en-scène further exacerbate its lifelessness. The scale of the room, and the distance Vivian keeps between herself and Marlowe, seem designed to communicate an icy aloofness, yet the various establishing shots interspersed throughout the sequence display oddly cramped framing. Taken from over the actors’ shoulders, rather than from a more objective position perpendicular to the action, they compress the image horizontally, producing the (one suspects unintended) effect of distorting space and partially de-emphasizing the distance between the two.

This comparison strikingly illuminates the artistry lurking behind Hawks’s apparently functional approach, highlighting the deliberate expressiveness of his framing, blocking and cutting. These elements combine in The Big Sleep to suggest a
world subject to an extreme degree of organization, a world in which people seem to
move as if participating in a well-rehearsed dance, even in moments of apparent
conflict. Such an approach is apparent throughout the film, as in a number of shots in
which Bacall is framed perfectly by some element of the background décor. Small
touches like this contribute significantly to the feeling that we are observing a world
absolutely in sync with itself. What’s more, the sheer engineered balance and perfection
of these stylistic elements paradoxically calls our attention to the fabricated nature of the
film’s world. If Ministry of Fear called our attention to the process of scene construction
by introducing gaps and discontinuities, The Big Sleep accomplishes a similar feat by
opposing means. The practically mathematical precision with which its scenes are
constructed cannot help but remind us that what we are watching is staged fiction.

Perhaps no single scene better exemplifies that rigor of Hawks’ design than the
one in which Marlowe goes to confront the small time criminal Joe Brody (Louis Jean
Heydt), who has come into the possession of nude photographs of Carmen that were
originally taken by the now deceased Arthur Gwynn Geiger, and is using them to
continue Geiger’s blackmail scheme against the Sternwoods. After a brief exterior shot
of Brody’s apartment building (the Randall Arms) in which Marlowe pulls up in his car
and spies Vivian arriving, the sequence begins with Marlowe ringing Brody’s door and
portraying himself as a potential partner in crime (“You’ve got Geiger’s stuff and I’ve got
his sucker list. Don’t you think we ought to talk things over?”). Brody lets him in and
Marlowe walks past him into the apartment, while Brody, trailing behind, surreptitiously
pulls a gun from his pocket. Hawks captures their movement in a single shot, which first
tracks with them into the room, and then, having found a centered position, pans gently
to the left just as Marlowe pivots to see Brody pointing the gun at him. The resulting composition is a well-balanced tableau, practically painterly in its precise geometric arrangement. The actors stand equidistant from the frame’s edges, with rhyming elements of décor (a flower pot and a lamp) flanking them and a curtained doorway in the background between them. The barrel of Brody’s gun lines up almost perfectly with the edge of the background doorframe, while Marlowe’s hat fits neatly in its upper corner.

A short shot/reverse-shot sequence follows, before Hawks presents a closer version of the original establishing shot, with the actors clearly having been repositioned—sacrificing strict continuity—to retain the original composition’s balance in spite of the tighter framing. They are closer together, and the opening of the curtain is now directly between them. Marlowe, having inferred that they were hiding in the back room, calls on both Agnes and Vivian to come out from behind the curtain. Vivian and Marlowe almost instantly get into a spat (she says she doesn’t need or want his help), and Brody’s attempts to take control fall on deaf ears, despite his brandished pistol. Marlowe takes Vivian by the arm and leads her to the couch, as Hawks and Hicox once again expertly recompose on the fly, settling on a new composition in which Bacall is perfectly centered between the seated Bogart and the still standing Heydt. The film then cuts to a reverse angle, bringing Agnes back into the picture, using the now-centered Bacall as a visual anchor to keep continuity.

Following another short shot/reverse-shot sequence, Hawks provides the scene’s third perfectly balanced group shot. As Marlowe presses Brody for more information about the Geiger/Carmen situation he stands up from the coach and walks forward,
stepping into yet another geometrically precise composition. Bacall is once again perfectly centered between the two men, and is framed from behind by the apartment’s window, the curtains of which bisect the frame. Marlowe finally talks Brody into handing over the pictures of Carmen, but as he walks toward the desk, the doorbell buzzes. Producing a second gun and handing it to Agnes to keep watch on Marlowe and Vivian, Brody moves to the door to answer it. When he does, Carmen enters, pointing a gun of her own, and backs him into the sitting area. Marlowe, taking advantage of the distraction, grabs the gun from Agnes’s hand, while Brody attempts to disarm Carmen by tripping her. Carmen crawls forward to reclaim her gun, but Marlowe beats her to it and kicks it to himself, before turning the gun he stole from Agnes on Brody, preventing him from drawing his own. This action unfolds quickly, but with the precise choreography of a dance. Bogart’s movements, in particular, are as elegant and exact as a practiced pirouette.

Now in the driver’s seat, Marlowe takes the photographs from Brody and sends Carmen home with Vivian. After they leave, the three remaining characters settle back into the sitting area as Marlowe attempts to tie up some loose ends. Hawks stages this dialogue in yet another expertly composed group shot. The frame is divided roughly according to the rule of thirds, with Brody standing near a side bar, Agnes sitting on the coffee table, and Marlowe perched on the arm of the couch. As the conversation unfolds, Brody eventually moves to an armchair, while Marlowe gets up and walks over to his desk, which allows Hawks again to demonstrate his mastery of reframing, as the three eventually settle into a perfectly arranged composition, the tops of their heads forming a descending line of perspective that terminates at the bulb of a lamp in the
background. Marlowe, as he finally begins piecing the puzzle together, starts to pace around the room. As he does so, Hawks uses a few subtle camera movements (a dolly in, a few slight pans) to ensure that the tripartite screen division remains intact. Bogart occasionally steps between Darrin and Heydt, creating an overlap in their blocking, but this arrangement is always only temporary, as he eventually moves back to his own designated third of the screen.

Figure 4-2. Artful composition [The Big Sleep (Howard Hawks, 1946)]

At last, the door buzzes again. Brody gets up to answer, only to be greeted by two bullets to the midsection. Marlowe then runs into the hall to pursue the gunman, bringing the apartment sequence to a close. All told, the scene contains the entrances and exits of four characters, multiple pulled guns, a scuffle, and the consistent movement of characters around and within the space of the apartment. Yet, despite all this activity, Hawks never allows a hint of true chaos or disorder to disturb the austere elegance of his compositions. The scene, like the film that contains it, seems less a realistic depiction of human struggle and conflict than a pulpy re-imagining of Keats’s Grecian Urn, its characters like ‘marble men and maidens’ preserved in artful
composition, fated to flirt with and shoot at one another for eternity in Hawks’s perfectly polished urban pastoral.

Returning to the scene at the Acme, we might immediately note a number of formal features distinguishing it from the rest of the film. First, its compositions are altogether more casual and relaxed than those we saw in the two sequences discussed above. In two-shots, the actors are often just slightly off-center, and the mise-en-scène simply feels more natural. Items of décor do not feel as though they were strategically placed for maximum compositional balance, as with the lamps and potted plants in Joe Brody’s apartment or the twin windows in Vivian’s room. The editing, too, is more reactive, following the action rather than imposing a rhythmic pattern onto it. Everything about the sequence feels less meticulous, less “worked-up” than most of the rest of the film. It contains a whiff—if only a whiff—of genuine spontaneity and surprise largely missing elsewhere. No doubt, the scene was just as planned out as everything else, but its design is less obvious, less consciously expressed in painterly compositions or geometric blocking. Its joints are less concealed, its surfaces just slightly less smooth.

Figure 4-3. An unbalanced medium-shot of the proprietress (Dorothy Malone) and Philip Marlowe (Humphrey Bogart) [The Big Sleep (Howard Hawks, 1946)]
Heightening the scene’s faint sense of genuine spontaneity are the performances, which differ in tone and texture from everything else in the film. With Bogart, this difference mostly results from the scene giving him the opportunity to express genuine, rather than mock, surprise. When the proprietress removes her glasses, Marlowe is distractedly looking down at the desk and saying something to himself, enabling the audience to see her new look before Marlowe. As he raises his head, he lets out a ‘hello’ whose tone and delivery suggest the pleasant shock that occurs when things go better than one ever hoped they could. The plot of *The Big Sleep* provides many twists and unexpected turns, but throughout them all, Marlowe keeps his head while everyone else is losing theirs. Murder, deception, betrayal—none of these seem to phase him. Dorothy Malone with her hair down, though, leaves him momentarily speechless.

But what ultimately carries this scene, investing it with a weight exceeding mere Hawksian “fun,” is Malone, who effectively sketches a life in less than 20 lines of dialogue. Clearly conveying that she is not of Marlowe’s and the Sternwood’s world, the *noir* world, her come-ons hover between confidence and reticence. She has mastered the body language of flirtation, but the gestures themselves (the bit lower-lip, the arched eyebrows) seem held in inverted commas—knowingness masking the uncertainty and felt danger of genuine frisson. In a movie dominated by a sense of intoxicating mystery, she provides a puzzle of her own. Unnamed and never seen again, we are left asking ourselves, “Just who is this woman?”

Here’s what we might infer from the evidence. She is reasonably well-educated (she demonstrably knows more about old books than the similarly aged Agnes, and her
judgment of Geiger as someone who “affects a knowledge of antiques but hasn’t any” suggests the sort of knowing insolence possessed only by the young and intelligent; she is romantically unattached; and she has a sharp eye for small details (“You’d make a good cop”). We might further infer that while her job may provide some degree of intellectual fulfillment, she ultimately finds it a less-than-stimulating way to spend her days and, as a result, spends a non-negligible amount of time watching the world go by outside the shop’s window (how else would she know so much about Geiger’s appearance and daily routine?). Finally, we might assert that the readiness with which she engages Marlowe in flirtation indicates that she knows his type and has previously thought (or fantasized) about what she might do should someone like him come sauntering in on a slow day.

Smart, with a keen visual sense, employed and in possession of disposable income with no family to support, bored by the deadening routines of daily life and in search of some temporary excitement: she is, in short, just the sort of person who might go to see a Howard Hawks movie on her day off. It should come as no surprise, then, that the scene ends with her watching Bogart walk away in the rain through a window that is unmistakably redolent of a movie screen. The camera’s position at this moment is important. Gerald Mast, in his 1984 study of Hawks, argues that The Big Sleep represents an interesting, subtle experiment in the manipulation of cinematic point of view. Although Hawks forgoes voice-over narration and rarely employs direct point-of-view shots, Mast argues that the director effectively maintains the novel’s first person perspective. “Hawks,” he writes, “chooses to confine the audience’s knowledge of events to Marlowe’s own knowledge . . . . Marlowe is—or might be—present in every
single scene and shot in the film” (1984: 279). Here, significantly, Hawks breaks this pattern and, for the first and only time, aligns our perspective with that of someone looking at Marlowe, rather than with the detective himself. The film is inviting us here, for however a brief a moment, to sympathize with and see the world from the perspective of the proprietress.

This moment most draws our attention to the distance between the world the proprietress lives in and the world of fantasy Marlowe takes with him when he leaves. The window is both a screen and a barrier, allowing one last glimpse at another world before it disappears from sight. She may wish to live the fantasy forever, but she can’t. Why? What makes her unfit for permanent residence in Marlowe’s and the Sternwood’s world? Malone’s performance provides the answer. Her flirtations and come-ons have a distinctly performative air. If Bacall’s Vivian is simply the embodiment of Hollywood’s ideas about glamour and seduction, then Malone may be understood as playing a character that has taken these ideas and used them to fashion a mask. She is not a film noir siren, but rather an ordinary woman who is playing at being a film noir siren.
The mask, however, occasionally slips. For instance, note the way she looks at Marlowe, after taking her glasses off and before he notices, and breaking out in a beaming smile once he signals his approval. Her face here first expresses an earnest excitement, and bated expectancy, wholly out of keeping with the icy cool that permeates so much of the film’s atmosphere. The smile, meanwhile, suggests both that she has impressed herself with the success of her own performance, and that she is taking genuine pleasure in being admired. Hawks’s choice to frame her in a more or less “objective” medium shot, instead of cutting in for a more suggestive close-up or employing an “eroticizing” effect like soft focus, emphasizes the complexity of her emotional response rather than simply highlighting her newfound sultriness. We are reminded, again, that we are watching an ordinary woman play at Hollywood glamour rather than transform into its embodiment.

The mask slips definitively at the scene’s conclusion, and the result is an astonishingly delicate moment. After the fade back to the front window, Malone enters the frame first, peers over the curtain, and then turns back to the camera as Marlowe follows. The smile is gone, replaced by a look of mild resignation. “I hate to break it to you,” she says, her voice more matter-of-fact than before, “but that’s Geiger’s car over there.” As Marlowe approaches the window, she watches him and her face conveys the dawning realization that this is, indeed, the end of the affair. Marlowe begins to say his goodbye with a “Well, thanks,” and the proprietress’s face brightens briefly. He turns to leave and she reaches out to grab his arm fondly, but her hand slips off. He’s practically out the door already when, her voice betraying an eager (too eager) hopefulness, she attempts to initiate another flirtatious volley: “If you ever want to buy a book?” Her serve,
however, sails harmlessly into the net. “*Ben Hur*, 1860?” Marlowe responds
dispasionately and with a hint of regret. “With duplications …” she begins to reply, but
her voice trails off into a meek “So long,” as the hopeful smile fades from her face.
Marlowe pats her shoulder once more and leaves, his playful but empty “So long, pal”
providing only cold comfort. He exits and her hand, the same hand that had reached out
and missed Marlowe’s arm and that, until now, had been suspended at waist height,
drops in disappointment. She turns to the window, Hawks stays with her for a single
beat—just long enough for us to register her disappointment—and then, as if offering
his own “So long, pal,” cuts to the front of Geiger’s store. The story must continue.

Many critics have noted the importance of body language and gestures in
Hawks’s work. Jacques Rivette, for instance, in the 1953 essay that firmly placed
Hawks on the agenda of serious film criticism, writes, “It is actions that he films,
more recent essay, notes that “the thematic and moral issues at stake in [Hawks’] films
are given cinematic life through physical action” (2007: 33) and that “throughout
Hawks’s work, we often find actors defining a character through the repetition of a single
hand gesture” (34). In line with this general tendency, the role of gesture proves vital in
the Acme scene. More specifically, it is the proprietress’s gestures in the scene’s
concluding moments (the missed tug at Marlowe’s arm, the eager smile, the dejected
dropping of the arm) that mark her as unfit for permanent residence in the world of the
film. In a fictional universe dominated by characters that seem at times to move with the
confidence and precision of a dance troupe performing well-known routines, her
awkwardness in this moment stands out. She is halting and hesitant in her movements,
entirely lacking in Vivian’s breezy gracefulness. Her body language betrays her, signaling the sea of emotions (regret, disappointment, longing) roiling beneath the easy-going, flirtatious façade. She is, at last, simply too human to fit in *The Big Sleep*'s land of gods and monsters, so the film, like Marlowe, must leave her behind.

Thomson rates the scene as being “among the most beautiful and treacherous things in *The Big Sleep*” (1981: 124). But treacherous for whom? In Thomson’s view, it is we in the audience who risk being too easily seduced by scene’s, and the film’s, easy-going charms. These charms, Thomson argues, mask a sinister, chauvinist, adolescent view of the world. “*The Big Sleep,*” he writes, “is a seemingly infinite realization of male fantasies. I say infinite because the film encourages the feeling that it might go on forever. Moreover, the authority and ease of the style cloak the automatic chauvinism of the attitude” (1981: 125). The scene, for him, is a trap, slyly cajoling us into sanctioning Marlowe’s behavior and the—frankly misogynist—ideology that he sees underwriting it:

Womanhood is rated in the sequence as the meek imprint of a man’s dream about spectacles and hairstyles, about the facile availability of afternoon romances, and the complacency that ‘So long, pal’ is an adequate exit line […] *The Big Sleep* is so witty and cool that it seems ponderous to disapprove of its ethics. Thus there is the temptation to share in its treatment of the proprietress as just another element in the camp panorama. (1981: 125)

Sustaining this position, however, requires the suppression of both the sequence’s numerous cues that we are meant to empathize with the proprietress, as well as the emotional particularities of Malone’s performance outlined above. Of the scene’s conclusion, Thomson writes “She does nothing to protest, to ask what now, what next, what about me? What did this mean? She has behaved like a placid whore, an available young bitch. And Marlowe has sought no more” (1997: 62). This comment strikes me as
a profound mischaracterization of what happens. The proprietress may not scream in protest, or demand answers to the questions Thomson claims she never raises, but no one paying anything like close attention to Malone’s performance could possibly construe her as conveying happy acceptance. That the scene is uncontestably troubling from the perspective of gender politics makes the complex earnestness of this performance all the more affecting. The painful impact of acting in accord with male desire is written all over her face and in her gestures, though the camera’s distance makes us work to notice.

Figure 4-5. The proprietress’s disappointment [The Big Sleep (Howard Hawks, 1946)]

In his essay “The Thought of Movies,” Cavell posits that “if it is part of the grain of film to magnify the feeling or meaning of a moment, it is equally part of it to counter this tendency . . . . It is as if an inherent concealment of significance, as much as its revelation, were part of the governing force of what we mean by film acting and film directing and film viewing” ([1983] 2005: 94). Hawks neither overtly conceals nor overtly highlights the proprietress’s disappointment. Her bodily gestures and facial expressions are there for anyone to see, but our attention is not called to them. Just as Hawks
earlier refused the expected “erotic” close-up after the she let her hair down, here he refrains from cutting in to emphasize her dismay. Cavell goes on to suggest that “to fail to guess the unseen from the seen, to fail to trace the implications of things—that is, to fail the perception that there is something to be guessed and traced, right or wrong—requires that we persistently coarsen and stupefy ourselves” ([1983] 2005: 96). Marlowe may callously ignore the proprietress’ silent distress, but that doesn’t mean that we must as well.

What is finally put in danger by the scene is not the audience’s moral rectitude or ability to recognize the casual chauvinism of male fantasy. Rather, it is the integrity of that fantasy itself that the scene very nearly shatters. Like a parlor trick, The Big Sleep only works if it can keep the audience from asking too many questions (“Who killed Owen Taylor?”). So long as the machinery hums along with balance and precision, so long as the actors hit their marks and the elegant compositions continue to assure us, as Thomson puts it, “that the whole thing is a game, an artifice” (1997: 64) we are not likely to question the ethics of the enterprise. But the moment something like real, unguarded feeling enters the picture, things begin to break down.

We might now return to Cavell’s argument about film’s ability to “taunt” fact and fantasy with one another, its “unaided perfect power to juxtapose fantasy and reality” (1988: 188) and, at last, adjudicate The Big Sleep’s contribution to the history of films that take advantage of this power, that test its limits. Among the films cited by Cavell are Hitchcock’s Vertigo (1958), which shows the way a fantasy, believed in too fully, might fatally mangle one’s relationship with the world, and Luis Buñuel’s Belle de Jour (1967), which pictures fantasy as a place of escape and rejuvenation. Unlike these films, The
Big Sleep does not explicitly thematize the relationship between fantasy and reality, but the Acme scene proves no less instructive on the topic as a result. We may take it, at last, as a parable about the very conditions of existence for a fantasy like The Big Sleep itself, about its necessary remove from the world of ordinary and everyday life. The Big Sleep can only sustain itself in the absence of human voices that might wake it.
CHAPTER 5
LAURA: THE RESISTANCE OF REALITY

It is Tuesday morning in Manhattan. Laura Hunt (Gene Tierney), having returned from a weekend in the country the night before to find herself believed murdered, opens the door to her apartment and welcomes in the detective working the case, Mark McPherson (Dana Andrews). Upon her return home the previous night, she had found McPherson fast asleep in her sitting room, her shock at the discovery of a stranger sleeping in her home being quickly overtaken by his shock at the intrusion of an apparent ghost. After the confusion had been (partially) cleared up, and a brief informal interview regarding her whereabouts over the weekend conducted, McPherson had instructed her to stay put overnight (an order she went on to disobey, sneaking out to see her fiancé, Shelby Carpenter [Vincent Price], a person of interest in the case), promising to return in the morning to continue the investigation. He arrives carrying a bag of groceries. “What’s that?” she asks innocently, acknowledging the bag. “Breakfast,” he responds, somewhat coldly. “You didn’t buy any when you went out last night.” Having caught her off guard by showing that he knows about her movements the night before, he turns and walks into the kitchen. After pausing for a moment to re-gather herself, Laura follows.

In the kitchen, McPherson, stone-faced, offers to make bacon and eggs if Laura will make some coffee. “Suppose you set the table while I get breakfast,” she responds with fresh confidence. Moving past him, she begins filling a carafe with water and asks, somewhat playfully, “Do you always sound like this in the morning?” “You didn’t tell me you could cook,” he responds, a hint of good humor in his voice. “My mother would always listen sympathetically to my dreams of a career…” she says as she finishes.
filling the carafe. Confidently turning on her heel and striding toward the stove, she
follows this set-up with its punch-line: “and then teach me another recipe.” As she lights
a burner on the stove the kitchen’s service door opens, and her maid, Bessie, enters.
Upon seeing Laura, whom she still believes to be dead, she lets out a shriek and begins
sobbing uncontrollably. McPherson and Laura console her, explain the situation, and
then, as a means of calming her down and assuring her that nothing supernatural has
occurred, ask her to take care of the breakfast preparation, with Laura soothingly
inquiring, “Would a ghost ask for eggs?”

Figure 5-1. Laura Hunt (Gene Tierney) making coffee [Laura (Otto Preminger, 1944)]

This brief domestic interlude occurs more than two-thirds of the way through Otto
Preminger’s Laura (1944) and would seem, at a glance, to be the very definition of
incidental—a bit of breath-catching before the plot picks back up for the final act’s
sequence of melodramatic confrontations and revelations, in which we learn who was
actually killed in Laura’s apartment (an acquaintance of hers named Diane Redfern,
with whom Shelby had been having an affair) as well as who committed the murder
(Waldo Lydecker [Clifton Webb], Laura’s mentor and a well-known gossip columnist and
The scene could have proceeded directly from McPherson’s arrival to the arrival of Bessie and the story would seemingly not have suffered any impact, one way or another. Film criticism seems to have taken the scene’s apparently inessential quality at face value, as the moment has received scant attention in any of the existing critical writing on the film.

Stanley Cavell, however, has repeatedly insisted on the importance, and the significance, of such forgotten, seemingly secondary moments. Such moments, for him, are wont to contain multitudes. In his essay “A Capra Moment,” ([1985] 2005) he demonstrates a procedure for reading such moments, for excavating the complex meanings often nestled within their apparent ordinariness. Taking a simple shot of Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert walking down a road in *It Happened One Night* (1932) as his starting point, he breaks his description of the shot into a set of constitutive phrases (“On the road / walking / together / away from us”) and then takes each up, in turn, as the subject of detailed analysis. In tribute to Cavell’s work, I have chosen to structure this essay similarly, and have settled on the following tripartite description of my own chosen moment: “In the kitchen / making coffee / held in medium-long shot.”

We begin with the kitchen. In her 2000 book *Reading Hollywood*, Deborah Thomas argues that spaces occupy a privileged role in the construction of meaning in classic Hollywood films. Drawing on a wide variety of examples, she demonstrates how Hollywood films often generate meaning by stretching their action across a series of semantically charged spaces, often joined together in large scale systems to articulate the various binary oppositions that often form the core of Hollywood films’ thematic content. John Ford’s *My Darling Clementine* (1946), for instance, maps the Hollywood
western’s fundamental underlying conflicts—order vs. freedom, society vs. the individual—onto a geographic opposition between the open, unsettled West and the civilized urban environment “back East.” Film noir on the other hand, often contrasts a hellish, crime-ridden inner city with the “safety” of leafy suburbs and small towns. In *Laura*, however, we find a radically different configuration of space, one that is quite unique in noir.

The first thing we might note about *Laura*’s treatment of space is its almost total exclusion of the imagery typically associated with the noir city. Though set in New York, the film deliberately restricts its presentation to a very narrow slice of metropolitan life. Nowhere in this New York do we find the speakeasies, cheap hotels, and dingy tenement houses that populate the classic noir city. Instead, Preminger focuses entirely on the city’s economic elite and, outside of a small handful of exterior establishing shots and brief scenes conducted in Madison Ave advertising offices, his camera largely remains within the lavishly appointed penthouse apartments this social subset calls home. As a result, the film’s version of New York comes to feel remarkably small. Indeed, in both its *dramatis personae* (a relatively tight-knit, practically incestuous social circle) as well as its basic narrative structure (in which a series of small betrayals and infidelities leads to an explosion of violence), the film resembles a small-town melodrama that has been relocated to Manhattan.

As a result of this spatial constriction, the meaning of the film’s spaces rests not in large-scale distinctions between diametrically opposed locations, but in small distinctions among various areas and rooms within the film’s primarily domestic settings. We might begin unpacking the kitchen scene, then, by taking inventory of some ways in
which the kitchen itself fits within the film’s overarching system of spaces. The first, and most obvious, thing to point to here would be the fact that this moment is the only time in the film that Preminger actually shows us the kitchen, though he alludes to its presence on two other occasions. The first comes three scenes prior to this one, during the second day of McPherson’s investigation. Having just finished interviewing Bessie about the murder in Laura’s apartment, McPherson greets the arrival of Shelby Carpenter, Waldo Lydekcer, and Ann Treadwell (Judith Anderson), Laura’s aunt. As the group arrives, we glimpse Bessie disappear behind the kitchen doors to fetch some ice and highball glasses, in response to McPherson’s request, but the camera does not follow her. She soon returns to the drawing room, entering from off-screen, before exiting the frame again to return to the kitchen. The scene thus “activates” the kitchen as a significant off-screen space, while at the same time suggesting that the actions occurring within it at this time are not important enough to warrant showing, unlike those that occur during the later scene between McPherson and Laura.

The second time the kitchen is alluded to, but not directly shown, is near the end of the film, when Waldo, recently revealed to us as the mystery killer, sneaks into Laura’s apartment in order to “correct” his earlier mistake of shooting Diane Redfern. Preminger cuts from a shot of Laura, preparing for bed while listening absent-mindedly to Waldo’s radio show (revealed to be a prerecording at the end of the broadcast) to a shot of the kitchen door, bathed in shadow, as Waldo slowly creeps through it and into the apartment’s foyer. Since we’ve already been made aware of the service door’s presence at the back of the kitchen, Preminger can refrain from showing Waldo actually making his way through the room on his way to Laura’s chambers. Ultimately, the fact
that Laura’s kitchen appears only once isolates it as something of a unique space, and thereby suggests that the apparently incidental action that unfolds within it during this, its lone appearance, might be worthy of our attention.

Adding to the kitchen’s uniqueness is its mise-en-scène, which differs greatly from that of the film’s other spaces. To understand the significance behind these differences, we’ll need to pay specific attention to an element of film expression that has, until very recently, received little sustained attention from theorists or critics of the cinema: texture. Lucy Fife Donaldson, in her 2014 book *Texture in Film*, has done a great deal to introduce this useful critical concept into the lexicon of film analysis, and much of the following discussion is indebted to her work. At the conclusion of her study, Donaldson suggests that the most important aspect of an analysis of a given film’s texture is not our ability “to distinguish exactly which element of a film’s construction is responsible for [that] texture,” but rather “what is most significant is the interrelationship of elements.” Effective criticism, then, must “consider the fine detail, its structuring and place in the fabric” (Donaldson 2014: 168).

Laura’s kitchen is sleek, clean, and functional. Its surfaces are mostly plain white, with some polished chrome (pots and pans on the counter; the ventilation fan on the stove) and reflective glass (the cabinet doors), whose accents add a “modern” flair. The room’s décor is dominated by precise geometry and right angles, with both its light fixtures and its refrigerator bearing the unmistakable stamp of Art Deco’s influence. Moreover, the room is somewhat small, cramped even, suggesting that its purpose is primarily functional rather than decorative—the sort of kitchen prevalent in the early part of the 20th century, before the postwar domestic revolution had radically re-organized
the American home and transformed the kitchen into a center of social activity.

Somewhat paradoxically, the small size also imbues this cold and functional space with a sense of intimacy much greater than many of the film’s other, larger spaces.

Figure 5-2. Modern décor in Laura’s kitchen [Laura (Otto Preminger, 1944)]

The kitchen, then, stands in almost total visual opposition to the rest of Laura’s apartment, with its cavernously high ceilings and extravagant decor. If the kitchen suggests cool modernity, the rest of Laura’s apartment recalls nothing so much as the elaborately decorated late-19th century “phantasmagoric” interiors identified by Walter Benjamin as one of the primary material sources of the rise of the detective story.¹ Preminger further accentuates the difference between these spaces in the way he handles the transition between them.

The scene fades in on a long shot of the door as Laura enters the frame to answer it. The distant framing emphasizes the apartment’s furnishings, foregrounding a side-table covered in all manner of antique and “exotic” looking decorative items,

¹ See the section titled “Partially Furnished Ten-Room Apartment” in Benjamin’s “One-way Street” ([1928] 2009: 50)
including a Grecian vase and an ornate glass lamp. As Laura greets McPherson, the camera tracks in to frame the characters in a two shot, before panning to the right as they make their way toward the kitchen entrance, which briefly brings Laura's enormous antique grandfather clock into view. The two disappear into a short communicating passage (the exact size of which we are never allowed to see), and Preminger cuts on action as they enter the kitchen. The use of a somewhat hard cut here—rather than, say, a continuous tracking shot—to take us from one room to the next underlines the clash between their differing decors, drawing a stark comparison between them.

Furthermore, though obeying all continuity principles, the cut itself is somewhat jarring, due in no small part to a strange overlap in the action depicted “across” the match: the first shot ends with McPherson completing his turn into the kitchen while the second begins with him still in the short hallway. Noël Burch, in Theory of Film Practice, points out that “time reversals” such as this “are commonly used on a very small scale...as a means of preserving apparent continuity” (1973: 7). The overlap here, however, is just slightly too long to pass completely without notice. Whether intentional or not, this slight hiccup in continuity seems to elongate the distance between the two rooms, suggesting their near-complete removal from one another.

Were the opposition between these two spaces merely visual in character, all of this would be of little interpretive interest, but the mise-en-scène here serves an important expressive function as well by giving us insight into the dynamics of Laura and Waldo Lydecker’s relationship. The presence of the clock is key here, as we learn early in the film that it was a gift from Waldo, and will come to learn that the shotgun used to kill Diane Redfern is hidden in a secret compartment at its base. As Christian
Keathley has argued, the clock may be seen as something of an objective correlative for Waldo’s personality: “Waldo, like the clock, holds himself rigidly, royally, proudly erect, in complete control of his body at all times” (2005: 167). The clock’s presence in Laura’s apartment (emphasized throughout by its persistent background ticking) signals Waldo’s decisive influence over Laura’s life, his wish to mold her in his own image. We might infer, too, that the ornamental décor of her apartment in general owes more to Waldo’s taste and influence than to any of Laura’s own preferences. From the start, the film associates his character with just the sort of antique and rococo objects that fill Laura’s parlors. The film’s opening shot, in fact, is of a glass case filled with such collectibles in Waldo’s own apartment, with his own, matching grandfather clock visible behind it.2

Figure 5-3. Matching clocks in the apartments of Laura and Waldo Lydecker (Clifton Webb) [Laura (Otto Preminger, 1944)]

Waldo, as Richard Dyer has observed, sees himself as Laura’s tutor, responsible for effecting the “transformation of a rather ordinary, if pushy, young woman into the epitome of high-class glamour, a woman worthy to be seen on his arm and sit among

---

2 As Richard Dyer ([1978] 1998) has pointed out, a taste for such objects was typical Hollywood shorthand for connoting queerness (see also the décor of Arthur Guinn Geiger’s house in The Big Sleep). The use of such characterization, along with the casting of (in Dyer’s words) the “practically ‘out’” Webb, is obviously meant implicitly to code Waldo as “perverse.”
his antiques” ([1978] 1998: 124). Over the course of the first two thirds of the film, this is the only Laura we are exposed to, and we are left, more or less, to take Waldo at his word when he tells us that she was a perfect vision of the feminine ideal. When the real Laura turns up, however, we quickly realize that the “perfect” Laura was mere fiction, that she in fact remains much more of “an ordinary, if pushy, young woman” than “the epitome of high-class glamour.”³ And nowhere is Laura’s ordinariness made more apparent than in the kitchen scene, which takes place in the one room in her apartment free from Waldo’s influence.

Thomas, in her discussion of space and meaning in Hollywood film, argues that films made in a melodramatic mode (a category into which Laura fits, if somewhat uncomfortably) often turn on a distinction between public and private spaces, and on the different types of “performances” that occur within those spaces—namely, whether characters “are putting on a face and taking on a role for the benefit of others, or are revealing something like an ‘authentic’ self that lies beneath the surface presentation” (2001: 40). While Thomas goes on to argue that many melodramas (particularly those of the Sirkian or “small town” variety) work to undermine and eventually liquidate this opposition as a way of suggesting “that their characters are constituted by their roles and that there is no further ‘authentic’ self to be found,” Laura ultimately holds on to the distinction between artifice and authenticity. I’d argue, in fact, that its entire thematic architecture rests upon it. This apparent belief in “the dubious concept of authenticity”

³ This was a point of complaint for Thomas M. Pryor (1944), who reviewed the film in the New York Times: “Now, at the risk of being unchivalrous, we venture to say that when the lady herself appears upon the scene via a flashback of events leading up to the tragedy, she is a disappointment. For Gene Tierney simply doesn’t measure up to the word-portrait of her character. Pretty, indeed, but hardly the type of girl we had expected to meet”
may strike contemporary sensibilities as somewhat naïve, but it remains nonetheless an integral part of the film’s project.

In any case, Laura’s kitchen, with its small size, focus on functionality, and lack of ostentatious décor, is certainly coded as a “private” space, and Laura certainly seems to be at her most “authentic” during her brief time inhabiting it. Tierney’s performance is key here. She moves in and around the room as if master of the domain. Her gestures are both precise and breezy, as she strides from sink to stove with her head aloft, turns the stove burner on with a practiced casualness, and tosses off the bon mot about her mother with cool confidence. The reserved aloofness that characterizes performance in many of the film’s other scenes is nowhere to be found here. Her clothing, too, emphasizes her “fit” with this particular space. Just as the room is adorned with Art Deco accents, Tierney’s tightly curled hair, loose fitting blouse, and billowy pajama pants embody the aesthetic ethos of the style moderne. She is practically a perfect illustration of Victor Arwas’s description of Deco’s favorite female subject: “slender and boyish in shape, hair bobbed….dressed in fashionably floppy pyjamas” (quoted in Fischer 2003: 31).

Further emphasizing the “authenticity” of this moment is the dialogue, which fills in crucial aspects of Laura’s character. In a remarkable bit of semantic condensation, the audience is able to infer from one line—“My mother would always listen sympathetically to my dreams of a career…and then taught me another recipe”—a number of things about Laura’s background, class origins, and general attitude toward the world. The use of “dreams” rather than “goals” or “ambitions” to refer to her youthful professional aims suggests that her job on Madison Avenue was anything but
preordained, that she comes from a family that saw a career in the big city as a silly adolescent fantasy rather than a genuine career option. The implied provincialism of her upbringing is further emphasized by the remark about her mother’s focus on what we might call “domestic education,” which points to a home life marked by staunch, traditional values, values that Laura herself, we can infer, has decisively rejected (“I never have been, and I never will be, bound by anything I don’t do of my own free will,” she will later declare to McPherson). The scene thus establishes a complicated, ambivalent relationship between Laura and her upbringing—though stifling, it left her with a certain set of practical skills that set her apart from the “helpless” children of privilege one might expect to find among the Park Avenue social set. More importantly, however, the scene effectively replaces the flat, idealized version of “Laura” we’ve been given by the film thus far with well-rounded character in possession of a complex inner life and a “rounded” personality.

We might, furthermore, compare the way in which Laura handles a private, everyday activity like making coffee with the film’s depictions of Waldo in similar situations. First, during the film’s opening scene, we, along with McPherson, are given a glimpse of Waldo’s morning routine. As the detective paces around examining the columnist’s collection of antiques, Waldo’s voice calls from off-screen and beckons McPherson to enter the bathroom, where he is taking his morning bath. Significantly, the door to the bathroom is half-open, immediately suggesting a porous relationship between the “public” and “private” spaces in Waldo’s life. Preminger handles McPherson’s entrance into the bathroom in a long shot, giving us a chance to see the
room’s ornate and elaborate furnishings, including two chairs that sit facing the bathtub—an indication that Waldo frequently holds court here.

As McPherson introduces himself, a hard left pan (perhaps the most ostentatious camera movement in the entire film) reveals Waldo sitting half-submerged in an enormous marble bathtub. In front of him is a typewriter on a swiveling shelf, and behind him rests a telephone on a second, similar shelf. The mise-en-scène thus works to suggest that this most private of rooms is in fact the epicenter of Waldo’s public life, the place in which he receives guests, writes his column, and makes important phone calls. His private life has been put on display, turned into a performance for (what he imagines to be) an adoring public. This desire to transform the private into (semi) public performance is confirmed later, during a flashback sequence in which Waldo details for McPherson the history of his relationship with Laura.

After telling of how they first met when she approached him about endorsing a pen for an advertising campaign she was working on, and of how he subsequently helped her “rise to the top of her profession,” he provides some details of their shared private life, stating that “on Tuesday and Friday nights we stayed home, dining quietly, listening to my records. I read my articles to her; the way she listened was more eloquent than speech. These were the best nights.” These words are accompanied by a string of images that will be discussed at more length below. What’s important for our current discussion is the shot of Waldo and Laura making dinner. Two things are worth noting here. The first is that, despite the fact that Laura is the ostensible subject of this flashback, Waldo is the one centered in the frame. Moreover, Preminger has framed and blocked the shot so that Waldo is facing outwards, toward the audience, rather than
toward his dining companion. Second, the location of this dinner preparation is not the kitchen, but rather the dining room. In nearly every respect, then, we find here, as in the earlier bathroom scene, an emphasis on display and performance. Preminger’s framing and mise-en-scène in both moments work to suggest a certain theatricality in Waldo’s performance of ordinary routines.

Figure 5-4. Waldo performing domesticity [Laura (Otto Preminger, 1944)]

Waldo’s behavior in these moments might be read as an example of a process that Cavell has argued as being a central concern of melodrama: the “theatricalization of the self.” This theatricalization, he argues, is the corollary of Cartesian skepticism, of the unwillingness to, in his favored formulation, “acknowledge” the existence of others. For Cavell, the purest form of this “acknowledging” is marriage, or at least, the idea of marriage, which he understands “as the scene in which the chance of happiness is shown to be the mutual acknowledgement of separateness, in which the prospect is not for the passing of years (until death do us part) but for the willing repetition of days, willingness for the everyday” (Cavell 1988: 178). Of the relationship between this domestic ideal, the threat of skepticism, and melodrama, he writes
If some image of marriage, as an interpretation of domestication...is the fictional equivalent of...the ordinary, or the everyday, then the threat to the ordinary named skepticism should show up in fiction’s favorite threat to forms of marriage, namely, in forms of melodrama. Accordingly, melodrama may be seen as an interpretation of Descartes’s cogito, and, contrariwise, the cogito can be seen as an interpretation of the advent of melodrama—of the moment (private and public) at which the theatricalization of the self becomes the sole proof of its freedom and existence. (Cavell 1988: 130)

Returning to *Laura*, we might view the kitchen scene as a brief image of the sort of ordinary happiness Cavell has in mind when he writes about marriage. Moreover, Waldo’s murderous desire to possess Laura and mold her in his own image, rather than allowing her simply to be her own ordinary self, can be taken as a perfect figuration of the threat to the ordinary posed by the forces of melodrama.

Looked at in this light, we can begin to discern the self-reflexive character of the film, since, as noted above, *Laura* is itself in many ways a melodrama, and Waldo’s murderous desire is the very engine of its narrative. The film might be read, in part, as a rejecting or critiquing of these very forces that propel it forward. Having uncovered this self-reflexive dimension, we might now ask what else might the film—and the kitchen scene in particular—have to say about Hollywood filmmaking. To answer that question, we must turn our attention to the second part of our description of the scene’s action: “making coffee.”

Eight years after *Laura’s* release and half a world away, we find another instance of a film depicting a woman making coffee one morning, one which has received quite a lot more critical attention than our moment from *Laura*. I am speaking, of course, of the scene depicting the young maid’s morning routing in Vittorio De Sica and Cesare Zavattini’s *Umberto D.*, a scene that famously sent André Bazin into ecstatic reverie:
We see how the grinding of the coffee is divided in turn into a series of independent movements: for example when she shuts the door with the tip of her outstretched foot. As it goes in on her the camera follows the movement of her leg so that the image finally concentrates on her toes feeling the surface of the door. Have I already said that it is Zavattini’s dream to make a whole film out of 90 minutes of the life of a man to whom nothing happens? … De Sica and Zavattini are concerned to make cinema the asymptote of reality—but in order that it should ultimately be life itself that becomes spectacle, in order that life might in this perfect mirror be visible poetry, be the self into which film finally changes it. (2011: 117)

Gilles Deleuze, too, saw the scene represented as a key example of the so-called “time-image,” writing about it at length in a passage that seems to deliberately echo Bazin’s own critical appreciation:

[T]he young maid going into the kitchen, making a series of mechanical, weary gestures, cleaning for a bit, driving the ants away from a water fountain, picking up the coffee grinder, stretching out her foot to close the door with her toe. And her eyes meet her pregnant woman’s belly, and it is as though all the misery in the world were going to be born. This is how, in the course of an ordinary or everyday situation…what has suddenly been brought about is a pure optical situation to which the little maid has no response or reaction. (1989: 1-2)

And for Andrew Klevan, who cites both Bazin and Deleuze, the scene is perhaps the ultimate example of narrative filmmaking’s potential to produce “undramatic moments.” The scene’s “interest,” he writes, “lies in the apparent innocuous use of objects,” and its “significance…is disclosed by the non-energetic arrangement of body, environment, and object” (Klevan 1999: 47).

For each of these critics, the moment from Umberto D. represents a limit case of a certain type of cinematic expression. For Bazin, in particular, it stood as a monumental achievement of the sort of cinematic realism he held so dear, a moment that harnessed the camera’s capacity to automatically record “life” as it really happens. Moreover, it represented for him a forceful counter to those forms of “expressionistic”
cinema that seek to impose significance, to “urge” well-defined subjective meaning, into
the filmic image.

But why this moment? What is it about a simple depiction of a young woman
making coffee that so struck these critics’ fancies? Why this scene, and not one of the
other innumerable depictions of ordinary life in Neorealism? In an essay for Critical
Inquiry article, Lesley Stern identifies “the accoutrements of coffee making” as part of a
series of objects that seem, in her words, “cinematically destined,” a series which also
includes “telephones, typewriters, bank notes, guns, dark glasses…rain drops and tear
drops, leaves blowing in the wind, kettles, cigarettes” (2001: 335). We might trace the
roots of the idea that film possesses a natural capacity to, in Stern’s words,
“materializ[e] these objects” and “invest them with pathos” and “render them as moving”
to Walter Benjamin’s long-ago observation about film and photography’s capacity to
render visible an “optical unsconscious”:

Even if one has a general knowledge of the way people walk, one knows
nothing of a person’s posture during the fractional second of a stride. The
act of reaching for a lighter or a spoon is familiar routine, yet we hardly
know what really goes on between hand and metal, not to mention how
this fluctuates with our moods. Here the camera intervenes with the
resources of its lowerings and liftings, its interruptions and isolations, its
extensions and accelerations, its enlargements and reductions. (Benjamin
1969: 237)

In many respects, the process of making coffee—with its series of routinized
movements performed half-unconsciously in the drowsy haze of the early morning—is a
perfect candidate for the application of the camera’s power to intervene. It is not hard to
see why critics committed to an understanding of the cinema as a principally
“revelatory” medium would fixate upon a scene like Umberto D.’s.
What, though, can *Umberto D.* and André Bazin and theories of the film camera’s revelatory capabilities teach us about a film noir made by Otto Preminger at 20th Century Fox in 1944? On the one hand, Preminger has often been heralded as among the most “Bazinian” of Hollywood directors, with his champions (V.F. Perkins, Christian Keathley, his biographer Chris Fujiwara) focusing their accolades on his supposed “objectivity” as a filmmaker, his preference for long takes that force a viewer to pass his or her own judgments upon the films’ characters without undue guidance. Perkins, in an introduction to a special issue of *Movie* on the director’s work, puts the case most forcefully, writing that Preminger’s “aim is to present characters, actions, and issues clearly and without prejudice,” that “he is concerned to show events, not demonstrate his feelings about them,” that “he rejects every stylistic, emotional or narrative distortion,” and that in his films “action and character cannot be falsified or exaggerated in order to emphasize a theme” (Perkins 1972: 43). Such laurels, though, tend to accrue most voluminously around Preminger’s later work, and in particularly around movies like *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959) and *Advise & Consent* (1962)—films that deliberately set out to explore the moral ambiguity that haunts America’s legal and political institutions. Though it boasts a remarkable degree of stylistic continuity with the films that would follow, a pulp detective melodrama like *Laura*, with its apparently clear delineation between “good” and “evil” characters, would seem much more straight-forward, and much less “philosophical,” than Preminger’s idea-rich masterpieces of the late 50s and early 60s. Moreover, it would seem to be as far from Neorealism, aesthetically and ideologically speaking, as a film could possibly be.
Indeed, Preminger’s treatment of the maid Bessie supplies a particularly poignant example of the stark differences between Hollywood and neorealism. Earlier in the film, before Laura’s return, a scene occurs in which Bessie, having been questioned by McPherson, goes to the kitchen upon his request to fetch some drink glasses. She disappears off-screen, and her actions in the kitchen are never shown. Similarly, once Laura hands off the breakfast-making responsibility, the scene in the kitchen simply ends, and an ellipsis carries us to a slightly later point in the morning. These moments reveal where neorealism departs from classical filmmaking’s conceptions of what matters. Neorealism, that is, was concerned precisely with what Hollywood films left out.

Looked at from a slightly different perspective, though, Laura might be seen as articulating, semi-allegorically, the representational logic Perkins identified in Preminger’s later work even if it doesn’t itself fully embody it. We might, in fact, take the film as an attempt, if only a partial one, to articulate a “theory” of film and its representational possibilities that bears a striking family resemblance to Bazin’s theory of the medium’s “ontology,” its umbilical connection to the real. As we saw above, Laura’s narrative dramatizes a conflict analogous to the clash between imposed meaning and the obstinate recalcitrance of reality that Bazin saw as undermining Soviet Montage’s claim to be “pure” cinema. Here, though, this takes the form of the male characters’ desire wish to transform a real woman into a fantasy object. In “The Evolution of the Language of Cinema,” Bazin famously drew a distinction between those filmmakers who put their “faith” in the “image,” and those who put theirs in reality ([1968] 2004: 40). Translating Laura’s plot into these terms, we might say that it depicts a group
of men who become so infatuated with the “image” of Laura that they ignore, denigrate, or, in Waldo’s case, seek to destroy the “reality.”

As many critics have pointed out, Laura herself functions, by and large, as a screen onto which the film’s male characters project their own subjective fantasies of sex and femininity. Angela Martin, for instance, writes in an essay examining “the central women of 40s film noirs,”

As is often the case, Laura only expresses anything of the *femme fatale* inasmuch as it is projected through the behavior of the men around her. Her attraction for them becomes ‘fatal’, not because of anything she does, but because they make the mistake of thinking they can own her and then speak for her/speak her …. Laura herself becomes a silent and still (painted) image during her long weekend absence, which gives the other characters limitless space to recreate her in their own terms (Martin [1978] 1998: 213).

By making the source of Waldo’s murderous rage his frustration at Laura’s refusal to “live up to” his idealized image of her, the film effectively casts the wish to mold a recalcitrant reality according to one’s own desires as a fundamentally pathological urge. The only way to make the world itself comport with one’s fantasies of it, the film suggests, is to render it lifeless.

Of course, if that were the full extent of the parallels between Preminger’s film and Bazin’s theory, this would be a tenuous argument indeed. Everything said above about the film’s depiction of the baleful effects of male fantasy could just as readily be said about, say, *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958), and yet that film could hardly be construed as a brief in favor of Bazinian realism. In *Laura*, however, this investigation into the damaging forces of desire sits alongside an implicit consideration of the film medium’s place within a broader media landscape. In *The Cinema Dreams Its Rivals*, Paul Young identifies a number of movies that he classifies as “media fantasy films,” or
works that “express anxiety about new media’s competition with the cinema…in ways that speak less to economic competition than to the qualities of ‘film’ as a medium in comparison to its newer rivals” (2006: xxii). Such a model proves productive for thinking about *Laura*, as the film conjures not one “rival” form of art or media, but three: advertising, painting, and the radio. Moreover, it associates all three with the deceptive manipulation of reality—and with the character of Waldo Lydecker. In doing so, the movie mounts an implicit argument for film’s *unique* ability to represent the world “truthfully.”

The critiques of advertising and painting are readily apparent. The film presents the former as trafficking in outright lies, with Waldo at one point endorsing an ink pen without ever having written with it. The latter, meanwhile, in the form of the famous portrait of Laura that hangs over her mantle, is criticized for its capacity to overly “idealize” the world; the Laura presented there is the “fantasy” Laura presented to us by Waldo. In fact, the painting itself, as a prop, stands as a sort of meta-commentary on everything being discussed here. According to Preminger biographer Chris Fujiwara, after taking over the film from Rueben Mamoulian, the director “scrapped some of [the original] sets, and in doing so, got rid of the portrait of Laura that had been commissioned by Azadie Newman, Mamoulian’s wife. Preminger substituted a photograph of Tierney by studio photographer Frank Polony, enlarged and brushed with paint” (2009: 43). The film’s central image of fantastic falsity is thus itself a photograph that has been subjected to “artistic” alterations.
It is radio, though, that comes in for the most sustained critique. The film refers to the medium explicitly only once, at its climax. As Laura prepares for bed, she turns on the radio in her room, and Waldo’s voice begins to fill the air. As she listens, believing his vocal presence on the radio confirms his physical presence elsewhere, Preminger cuts to Waldo, who has snuck into the apartment, as he retrieves the shotgun used to kill Diane Redfern from a grandfather clock in the apartment’s main hall. Sneaking silently toward the bedroom, his own detached voice continuing to issue from the radio and dominate the film’s soundtrack, he arrives at the bedroom just in time for his voice to be replaced by that of an announcer, who reveals that what we’d just been listening to had been recorded in advance. The film thus plays upon the fact that radio, with its inherent promise of “live-ness” can effectively “fake” the actual presence of a speaker on the other end, which Waldo has here used to his advantage. Because a broadcast itself carries no signs of its true provenance, a pre-recorded event and a live transmission can only be distinguished via the “external” marker of a tacked on announcement (which itself may be taped or live). This, of course, is in great contrast to
film, a medium that, as Cavell has emphasized throughout his work, always calls attention to its distance from us, its presence as an absence. Where the radio offers the implicit promise that the voice you hear emanates from somewhere in your world, a film can only ever offer a view (or a series of views) onto another world, a world viewed (so to speak).

Preminger’s handling of this sequence works retroactively to associate the radio medium with a number of earlier scenes. As the climax unfolds, Waldo’s radio broadcast comes to occupy the aural “space” of a voice-over narration, recalling prior instances of the film that made use of Waldo’s voice over in more “traditional” ways, the most substantial example of which occurs during the flashback sequence mentioned above. The prominence of Waldo’s narration waxes and wanes over the course of the sequence. It is foregrounded most completely as he describes Laura’s supposed “transformation” and their life “together.” We might consider, for a moment, the relationship between word and image in this brief segment. Taken by themselves, the brief shots that accompany Waldo’s narration are incredibly “thin”—overly posed, artificial, and lacking any real visual density. They serve merely as illustrations of the narration and are more or less devoid of any significant content beyond that. What we are given here, then, is an example of a mode of cinematic narration wholly dependent upon the imposition of a verbal “meaning” external to the images themselves.
A contrasting mode of narration is offered by the flashback’s conclusion. As Waldo tells McPherson about his final phone conversation with Laura, Preminger includes a shot of Laura on the other end of the line. During an initial viewing, the shot seems hardly notable. Repeated viewings, however, reveal an important detail: the outfit Laura is wearing is the same as the one she is wearing when she returns home to find McPherson asleep in her living room. Waldo, of course, could not have actually known this. We might thus take the shot’s inclusion to be Preminger’s way of asserting his camera’s independence from Waldo’s point of view—or from any rooted, subjective point of view, for that matter. Rather, what we have here is a mode of narration predicated on the camera’s ability simply to record and present things as they are, free of imposed meaning or explanations. The moment in the kitchen, then, with its apparent insignificance combined with the concrete specificity of Tierney’s performance (the confidence in her voice, the way she strides across the room) may be seen as belonging to this second mode of presentation.
Having now broached the topic of modes of presentation and narration we might now shift our analysis away from the semi-abstract concerns of ontology and medium specificity and toward more concrete matters of style and form. As noted above, Preminger has often been praised for employing a style whose hallmarks (long takes, composition in depth, avoidance of expressive or analytical editing) are analogous to Bazin’s preferred aesthetic. During its first two thirds, *Laura* more or less comports with these general protocols — though its somewhat small-ish sets limit the extent to which deep focus might be fully employed, particularly in comparison to Preminger’s later work. Its average shot length is 21 seconds, roughly double the period’s “normal” ASL, and conversations among characters are typically handled in lengthy medium-long group shots, rather than with the more standard “concertina” breakdown approach. When cutting does occur in these scenes, it is typically among different medium and medium-long shots, rather than alternating close-ups. Furthermore, the editing is almost always used for functional, rather than expressive, purposes.

For an example of this approach, take McPherson’s interview with Bessie. The scene begins with a medium long shot of McPherson seated on Laura’s desk and placing a call to a local liquor store to ask about a mysterious bottle of whiskey found in the apartment. Preminger holds this shot for the duration of the call, before the entrance of a second officer, announcing Bessie’s arrival, motivates a slight leftward pan. As Bessie enters and walks to the desk, the camera pans back to the right, before coming to rest on a medium-long two-shot. Preminger holds this shot as the maid admonishes the detective for going through Laura’s private things, including her diary, refraining from cutting to inserts emphasizing either her anger or his bemused response. McPherson
eventually stands and walks toward the fireplace at the back of the frame, and, after a beat, Bessie follows him. An unobtrusive match-on-action (the first cut of the scene) takes us to a medium two-shot whose framing is slightly tighter than the first shot at the desk. The two face each other, with McPherson turned slightly away from the camera and Bessie in full profile. Bessie proclaims her absolute innocence and delivers a short soliloquy about her devotion to Laura. Despite the tense, emotional tenor of this moment, Preminger again refrains from cutting in to show either character's expression, even though both actors' faces are somewhat obscured (Andrews's by the oblique blocking, Dorothy Adams’s by the shadows created by her hat).

After she has said her piece, McPherson turns and walks back toward the desk and the camera follows. He removes the mysterious whiskey bottle from the desk and asks about it, prompting Bessie to walk over to him. Bessie eventually reveals that she had found the bottle, along with two used glasses, near "Laura’s" body and had moved them to prevent people from "getting wrong ideas" about the deceased. As she says this, Preminger cuts to a second medium shot from a slightly different angle. This cut is the only one in the scene not motivated by character movement, and its purpose, unlike the others, does seem somewhat expressive, in the sense that it works to underline Bessie’s revelation.⁵ As far as “emphatic” editing goes, however, this instance is still remarkably restrained. Preminger also holds the shot until McPherson ends the conversation, thereby dissipating the impact of the initial cut. All told, the conversation runs nearly three minutes and is handled in only four shots, for an ASL of 22.5 seconds (just slightly longer than that of the film as a whole).

⁵ An unusually poor match here suggests that this final shot may have been filmed during retakes.
This general approach to *découpage* dominates until Laura makes her surprise reappearance. Her initial entrance into the film, as McPherson sleeps soundly beneath her portrait, is presented in a long shot that, for Chris Fujiwara, embodies Preminger’s relentlessly objective approach to cinematography and mise-en-scène. After first exploring a different, more “expressionistic” way in which the scene could have been handled (by “having Laura…walk into a spotlight…for a star close-up that would respond in the most unambiguous way to the audience’s desire”), Fujiwara writes that “Preminger and [cinematographer Joseph] LaShelle rigorously refuse such an approach. After the cut, Laura is simply there in the shot: we don’t see her come in. The lighting is bright and even: a mundane, normal lighting, and Laura is shown full-figure, not in close-up” (Fujiwara 53). As soon as Laura wakes McPherson, however, Preminger’s approach changes drastically. He abandons the “intra-sequence” cutting (to borrow a phrase from Brian Henderson6) of earlier scenes and instead opts for a more traditional “concertina” approach, with establishing shots and alternating close-ups.

![Laura’s return filmed in long shot](Laura (Otto Preminger, 1944))

---

6 See Henderson’s chapter on “The Long Take” in *Critique of Film Theory* (1980)
The conversation begins with a medium long two shot, with the camera favoring, though not in exact accordance with, McPherson’s point of view, and Laura standing next to the portrait above the mantle. As Laura threatens to call the police, Preminger cuts in to a close-up of her, before quickly cutting to a reverse shot of McPherson, and then back to Laura. McPherson assures Laura that he is the police, and Preminger returns to the initial establishing set-up to show him removing his badge from his pocket before once again cutting back to a brief close-up of Laura as she asks, “What’s this all about?” A brief two-shot follows as McPherson asks Laura where she’s been, and we return again to the close-up as she explains that she’d gone to the country for the weekend. Preminger returns to the two-shot before tracking with McPherson as he walks to a side-table and retrieves a newspaper that, presumably, contains a story about the murder, which he hands to Laura. Preminger refrains from cutting to an insert shot of the headline, leaving us to focus our attention solely on Laura’s reaction to what she sees. She sits down in shock, and the camera subtly tracks in just as McPherson inches closer to Laura, the movement of camera and performer perfectly in sync. Eventually he suggests she change out of her wet clothes (it had been raining that evening), and as she gets up to do so the camera briefly stays behind with McPherson, tracking into a close-up before slowly dissolving to Laura’s bedroom door.

She exits carrying a dress found hanging in her closet, declares it to have been Diane Redfern’s, and notes that it wasn’t hanging there when she left for the weekend. Informing McPherson that Diane had been one of her agency’s models, and she’d been “just about my size,” she shows him an advertisement featuring the model. Preminger cuts to an insert of the magazine as McPherson coolly deadpans “she was beautiful,
wasn’t she?” A slightly low-angled two-shot follows, as Laura begins to put the pieces together. McPherson then takes the magazine from her and walks over to her desk (the same desk at which he conducted his interview with Bessie), the camera following and reframing them in a two-shot, with McPherson standing to the left and Laura seated to the right. Preminger handles the ensuing conversation with a seven shot shot/reverse shot sequence that alternates between shallow-focus close-ups of Laura and a less shallowly focused medium profile shots of McPherson. Part-way through the sequence, McPherson moves away from the desk and over to the fireplace, just as he had done during his interview with Bessie. He asks Laura a question about her upcoming nuptials with Shelby Carpenter, and Preminger cuts briefly to the close-up for her response, before returning to McPherson and panning with him as moves back into the desk, bringing Laura back into view for a re-establishing two-shot.

The interview turns confrontational as McPherson accuses Laura of knowing that Carpenter had a key to the apartment, and she quickly stands up and angrily responds that she “knows nothing of the sort,” with the camera tracking in to underline the moment. Preminger then cuts to a shot of Laura taken from over McPherson’s shoulder as she begins to divulge the details of the Carpenter/Diane Redfern relationship. She turns and walks to the other side of the desk, putting distance between herself and McPherson, and the camera follows in a re-framing action that causes the detective to briefly slide out of the frame. He then moves to the opposite side of the desk, leaning over it aggressively as he presses her about how much she actually “loves” the philandering Carpenter. A last, brief shot/reverse-shot sequence follows (four shots), where Laura is once again shot in shallower focus than McPherson. Finally, a tracking
shot follows the two back into the parlor as McPherson prepares to take his leave, instructing Laura that she is not to leave the apartment or use the telephone. Just before leaving, he asks her whether or not she still plans to marry Carpenter, and she tells him she does not. He wishes her goodnight and exits the frame. The camera stays with Laura. The sound of a door closing is heard off-screen (an echo of the way Laura’s initial entrance had been handled), and she immediately turns and walks to the phone, the camera following. She moves to pick up the receiver, but then hesitates, and Preminger cuts to her building’s basement, where another detective is working a phone tap, moving us to the next scene.

All told, this scene runs for five minutes and is composed of 26 shots, which works out to an ASL of 11.5 seconds, nearly half that of the film as a whole, and much closer to the period’s typical average. The question, then, is how we might account for this sudden change in découpage. A critic unsympathetic to the film, and to Hollywood filmmaking practices more generally, might suggest that this is merely an instance of some of the industry’s more “regressive” formal protocols overwhelming the director’s preferred style: since Gene Tierney is the star of the film, she is given star close-ups, regardless of whether or not those close-ups fit with the rest of the film’s formal construction. One might then add as a corollary to this explanation that the handling of the sequence is a perfect example of Hollywood’s typical handling of conventionally attractive actresses. In such a reading, the close-ups of Tierney would be taken an example of the sort of fetishizing objectification that Laura Mulvey identified as lying at the heart of classical cinema’s apparatus of “visual pleasure” and would be seen as belonging to the representational tradition that once led Mary Ann Doane to declare that
“at moments it seems as though all the fetishism of the cinema were condensed in the image of the face, the female face in particular” (1991: 47). In fact, Kristin Thompson, a critic who typically poses her own work in opposition to the Screen-style theorizing of scholars such as Mulvey and Doane, has mounted just such an argument regarding the film’s treatment of Laura.

Drawing on the work of both Mulvey and the art historian John Berger, Thompson writes that “Laura, a film about a man who falls in love with a portrait…offers Gene Tierney as an object of contemplation for the cinema spectator” and that “the character Laura is almost perfectly designed to fit the role of the passive visual object” (Thompson 1988: 183-4). While I would agree with Thompson’s claim that the film “raises [the treatment of the woman as a visual object to be possessed by a male spectator] to the level of the subject matter itself,” I would disagree with her conclusion that the film lacks a critical dimension in this regard, or that its presentation of Laura as an “object of contemplation” is at all simple or straightforward.

What Thompson ultimately fails to consider—somewhat surprisingly, given her commitment to formalism—is the placement of these objectifying images of Laura within the film’s overall visual pattern, their relationship to the film’s other shots. Here, then, we return again to the question of the film’s découpage, and of the effect and purpose of the somewhat jarring shift from the more “objective” long-take approach to the close-up heavy style for the film’s final third. In a 2012 essay on the director’s 1958 melodrama Bonjour Tristesse, Christian Keathley argues that Preminger’s general avoidance of close-ups or reverse angle cutting means that, when he wishes, he can deploy these techniques in a richer and more expressive manner than could a filmmaker who relies
on them for every conversation between characters. Preminger’s infrequent close-ups carry weight, that is, because of their infrequency, which renders them visible to the audience in a way they wouldn’t be in a movie that employed them in a more perfunctory way. More generally, Keathley’s argument might be seen as an extension and working out of a general point that is central to this dissertation’s understanding of film style: that judicious and selective application can imbue even the most run-of-the-mill cinematic devices with great expressive potential. Or, to put a finer point on it: context matters. For a relevant example of this, we might think of the use of eyeline matches and point-of-view shots in Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*: a device “typically” used merely to show what a character sees is, in that film, transformed into a profoundly disturbing vehicle for conveying the all-consuming power of obsession.

We might view the use of close-ups in Laura’s introductory scene in a similar way. Consider, for instance, the way Preminger moves us into the sequence. First, we have the initial shot of her arrival, taken, as we’ve already seen, from an unusually long distance as if to underline its objectivity, its detachment from any subjective point of view. Second, we have the establishing two-shot of Laura and McPherson, with Laura standing next to her own portrait, and the contrast between the real and the ideal could not be any starker. Laura herself is dressed fashionably, to be sure, but her appearance is somewhat disheveled and she is soppy from the rain—she is hardly an image of impossible feminine glamour. It is only then, after these two more or less “objective” shots, which stress Laura’s more ordinary qualities, that we are finally given the awaited star close-up in radiant soft focus. Preminger, however, is quick to follow this with a reverse-angle shot of McPherson, deliberately associating the close-up with his
subjective perspective. The return, shortly thereafter, to the two-shot serves to re-emphasize the contrast between the real Laura and her painted counterpart. The alternation between the longer establishing shots and the shallow-focus close-ups might be seen, like the similar alternation found in *Double Indemnity* discussed above in Chapter 1, as serving a comparative purpose, contrasting McPherson’s view of Laura— informsd as it is by his infatuation with the idea of her—with the objective “fact” of her actual existence. The close-up would then be seen as figuring the attempted imposition of the ideal/fantasy version of Laura, as represented by the portrait, onto the reality of Laura herself.

![Figure 5-7. Alternating long shots and close-ups of Laura](Laura (Otto Preminger, 1944)

Laura and McPherson’s eventual coming together will turn on his ability to disentangle fantasy and reality. To see whether or not he is able to accomplish this, we might turn to the scene in which McPherson, apparently suspecting that she killed Diane Redfern in a jealous rage, arrests Laura and brings her to the police station for questioning. Thompson identifies the interrogation scene that follows as marking Laura’s ultimate submission to McPherson’s brand of rugged male dominance, but a
closer look reveals something more complex at work. At the start of the scene, McPherson leads Laura into the interrogation room and instructs her to sit down. In front of her stand two large lamps. McPherson climbs onto the table from the opposite side and switches them on, bathing Laura’s face in light. To emphasize the effect, Preminger cuts into a close-up, and as the two exchange words he again, as in their first meeting the night before, employs reverse-angle editing. Here, though, the device takes on a more sinister air, with McPherson’s elevated position and badgering tone, the camera’s tight framing, and the almost blindingly bright lights combining to produce a feeling of cruel entrapment. What’s more, the lights themselves visually evoke—or perhaps parody—the very three-point lighting apparatus responsible for the look of Hollywood’s glamorous close-ups. In fact, if it were uprooted from its narrative context, the image of Tierney’s illuminated face resembles nothing so much as a still taken during a screen test. Here, then, we find the formal process we identified earlier, whereby the soft-focus close-up was made to represent forceful imposition of male desire onto a resistant female subject, echoed within the film’s mise-en-scène itself. Thompson, at one point, avers, “We may actually find [Laura’s] submission to [McPherson] unpleasant, but probably only if we are aware of the film’s strategies of exploitation of her” (Thompson 1988: 194). Such a statement implies that Preminger wishes to conceal these “strategies” from the audience. The interrogation scene, however, would seem to be deliberately calling our attention to them.

7 Significantly, Thompson’s analysis of this scene restricts itself almost entirely to a bare summary of action, paying no attention whatsoever to formal matters such as mise-en-scène, editing, or performance.
In any case, Laura, understandably bothered by the lights, eventually asks McPherson to turn them off, and it is here that the scene’s psychological and emotional complexity begins to reveal itself. Following Laura’s request, Preminger cuts to the reverse shot of McPherson, whose face betrays, through pursed lips, a certain degree of sympathy, perhaps even minor regret, as he reaches over and switches off the lamps. Laura, her face now half shrouded in shadow, looks up and offers an acerbic “thanks” before coolly re-affirming her absolute innocence. McPherson, apparently provoked by this assertion, climbs down off the table and aggressively circles around to Laura, tossing aside a chair in frustration as he does so. Bearing down on her, he continues the questioning as Laura, without ever really losing her composure, parries his questions and allegations. McPherson circles back to the other side of the table, again pausing briefly to cast frustratedly a chair aside. Two aspects of the way this moment plays out challenge Thompson’s reading. First, McPherson’s difficulties with the room’s furniture—captured by Preminger’s unforgivingly objective camera, which relentlessly pursues him around the room—work to undercut any notion that he is in
total control of either the situation or his own emotions. Second, Laura’s steely reserve in the face of his aggressive, badgering approach conveys something other than mere willful “submission.”

Eventually, McPherson begins to ask her about her relationship with Shelby Carpenter, specifically about her decision to reconcile with him after telling McPherson that she had decided to break off the engagement during her weekend in the country. She reveals that Carpenter had, in fact, convinced her to pretend to remain together so as to ward off suspicion of guilt in the murder. After Laura supplies a justification for her actions (“He’d gotten himself into an awfully suspicious position, and he’s just the sort of person people are willing to believe the worst about”), McPherson comes to the heart of the matter and asks her if she’s still in love with Carpenter and she admits, as if coming to the realization on the spot, that she doesn’t “think she ever could have been.” Having got the information he was looking for, McPherson reveals that the whole “arrest” had been a ruse and Laura, understandably taken aback, stands up and sternly admonishes him as Preminger holds on a two-shot in profile, suggesting that the two are now again on more or less equal ground.

As her eyes bore into him, he attempts to explain himself, saying that he “was 99% sure” she was innocent, but “had to get rid of that 1% doubt.” Unimpressed by this justification, she asks if there couldn’t have been some “easier way of making sure.” McPherson’s gruff exterior breaks, he sheepishly looks away (her eyes continue to glare) and, in a conciliatory tone, concedes that he had “reached the point where [he] needed official surroundings.” And it is only after this confession—this admission of doubt and fallibility accompanied by body language that suggests a plea for
forgiveness—that Laura, too, begins to soften. A small smile breaks across her face and, as he looks back up at her, Preminger cuts into a brief close-up (the first such POV shot since their first encounter) as she relents, saying “then it was all worth it, Mark.” Thus, far from being depicted as cowing to McPherson’s blustery shows of aggression and dominance, Laura is in fact presented as only “coming around” when McPherson—recognizing the obvious dishonesty and, indeed, cruelty of his actions—comes to her with his head bowed in a plea for forgiveness. The framing and composition further stress the pair’s equality in this crucial moment, which marks the beginning of what Waldo, in a subsequent scene, will derisively refer to as their “disgustingly earthy relationship.”

But of course we, the audience, will not be granted access to that relationship’s later developments. We will not see Laura and McPherson involved in the day-to-day routines that define ordinary, “earthy” domestic life. The film has no room, that is, for extended depictions of what Cavell calls the “willing repetition of days, willingness for the everyday,” (1988: 178) or for the life in which “nothing happens” that the neorealist paragon Cesare Zavattini dreamt of bringing to the screen (1978: 67). This brings us to a final point about the relationship between Hollywood filmmaking and representations of the ordinary, one that Laura, perhaps unintentionally, dramatizes. While at the levels of plot and theme, the film is on the side of the ordinary, and opposed to aestheticism and the forced imposition of meaning, it can only visually depict the ordinary in fleeting moments like the coffee-making scene. The rest is all glamour, fantasy, and murderous intrigue—the stuff Hollywood dreams are made of. Early in the film, McPherson asks Waldo about a misrepresentation of a murder that Waldo had included in a column
written two years ago, and Waldo’s response may be taken as an effective summary of his basic worldview:

McPherson: Two years ago, in your October column, you started out to write a book review, but at the bottom of the column, you switched over to the Harrington murder case.

Lydecker: Are the processes of the creative mind now under the jurisdictions of the police?

McPherson: You said Harrington was rubbed out with a shotgun loaded with buckshot, the way Laura Hunt was murdered night before last.

Lydecker: Did I?

McPherson: Yeah. But really he was killed with a sash weight.

Lydecker: How ordinary. My version was obviously superior. I never bother with details, you know.

Preminger may intend us to take this as merely another indicator of Waldo's decadence. His film, however, shares more with Waldo’s view of things than it might wish to let on. In some respects, Laura can be found guilty of the charges of “sweetening” reality that Zavattini leveled against the American cinema tout court. In other respects, though, we can sense within it a faint but palpable desire for a new approach to seeing, and filming, the world.
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION: REFLECTIONS ON METHOD

Since this dissertation has been concerned with examining self-reflexive moments in Hollywood film noir, it would seem fitting for this conclusion function as a self-reflexive moment for the dissertation itself, a space to reflect upon its own conditions of production. In doing so, I hope to address questions of method in film analysis, exploring how this project might be seen as presenting both a traditional critical and analytical argument as well as a demonstration of a certain way of studying cinema as an object of scholarly inquiry.

This project began not as an analysis of stylistic self-reflexivity in film noir, but as an exploration of depictions of ordinary, everyday life in the movies. My interest in such depictions grew directly out of my encounter with the work of Stanley Cavell, and, through it, an encounter with his own chief influences -- Emerson, Thoreau, and Wittgenstein. Cavell’s interest in the ordinary derives primarily from a desire to found a philosophical system on “an intimacy with existence” and lived experience as a means of staging a “recovery from skepticism” (1985: 26). For him, this project means following Wittgenstein in abandoning the abstractions and generalities of metaphysics, which he sees as symptomatic of an intellectual “condition of boredom,” a “false or fantastic excitement” driven by an “intellectually fatal” lack of interest in the concrete experience of the everyday (1985: 7). For Cavell, philosophy should endeavor, in William Wordsworth’s words, to “make the incidents of common life interesting,” and to prompt its readers to become interested in, to take an interest in, their own experience of the world.
Cavell’s dedication to the ordinary also underwrites his interest in film as an object of study. In an argument reminiscent of André Bazin and Walter Benjamin, he suggests that film is drawn to the “physiognomy of the ordinary,” to depictions of everyday activity, and that it possesses the ability, unique among the arts, to render visible the “density of significance passing by...in our lives” (2005: 206). Thus, he argues, film can alert us to “the ways in which we miss our lives” and illuminate “the absolutely obvious, to which, at every moment, we are oblivious” (2005: 206).

Inspired by these remarks, I turned my attention to a genre largely neglected in Cavell’s own writing on the movies: film noir. The noir cycle, as noted several times in the chapters above, has an interesting relationship with depictions of the ordinary and the everyday. Though primarily concerned with explorations of criminal deviance and the urban underworld, many individual noirs use scenes of “normal” domestic life as a point of contrast, often portraying the noir world as a threat to the safety and stability of ordinary life (for key examples of this pattern other than the films discussed here, see Anthony Mann’s Desperate (1947), Andre De Toth’s Pitfall (1948), and William Dieterle’s Dark City (1950)). The ordinary for noir, then, is often simultaneously a structural necessity and a secondary concern. The films themselves often seem to grow bored with domesticity and one can sense, in certain scenes, a restless desire to get back to the seedier noir world. Noir itself, that is, seems often to mirror the disregard for the ordinary that Cavell sees as haunting so much of western philosophy.

Having chosen my object of study, I set to work watching the movies, searching out depictions of the ordinary and uneventful that struck me most forcefully. Once I discovered these moments, however, the question became what to do with them.
Emerson, in a passage frequently cited by Cavell, discusses the relationship between intuition and knowledge, claiming that “primary wisdom” is “Intuition” while “all later teachings are tuitions.” Glossing this comment, Cavell suggests that “the occurrence to us of intuition places a demand upon us, namely for tuition; call this wording, the willingness to subject oneself to words, to make oneself intelligible (2003: 4-5). With my selection of moments I had what amounted to a set of intuitions demanding a set of “later teachings,” or “tuitions,” to make them intelligible. But what form, I was left to ask, should these tuitions take?

Wishing to preserve some sense of the individuality of the films under discussion, and to prevent the project’s focus on everyday from freezing into an overly-generalized thematic concern, I resisted the urge to read the moments as merely exemplary or reflective of broader cultural and social trends, such as the reorganization of daily life in the postwar west analyzed by sociologists like Michel de Certeau and Henri Lefebvre. Rather, I sought to use the moments as windows into the films themselves, employing the procedures of style-based analysis discussed in Chapter 1 to situate the depictions of the ordinary within the film’s overarching formal and narrative structures. I did this with no clear argument in mind, but in working through the moments and the films in this way, I discovered the consistent trend of critical self-reflexivity that eventually became the project’s organizing subject.

In many respects, the method employed here shares certain features with what has come to be known in recent years as “cinephile criticism,” a movement in film studies that seeks to both to restore respect for unreconstructed cinephila in academic circles (where it had long been derided as naive), and to derive from the experience of
cinephila a method for doing academic analysis. This movement has largely been spearheaded by Christian Keathley, whose 2005 book *Cinephilia and History, or The Wind in the Trees* represents its clearest expression.

Less a study of the idea or experience of cinephilia itself than an exploration of how it has been, or might be, put into practice by critics or scholars, the book works as both an intellectual history of a certain strain of film criticism and as provocative call for new approaches to the task of writing and thinking critically about films. For Keathley, “cinephilia” refers to something more complex, and narrower in scope, than the simple “love of cinema” that its Greek-derived nomenclature suggests. Rather, the true cinephile is a person drawn not just to movies in general, but to specific, typically “fleeting or evanescent” moments. He himself defines this “element of….spectatorial experience” as:

The fetishizing of fragments of film, either individual shots or marginal (often unintentional) details in the image, especially those that appear only for a moment….Whether it is the gesture of a hand, the odd rhythm of a horse’s gait, or the sudden change in expression on a face, these moments are experienced by the cinephile who beholds them as nothing less than an epiphany, a revelation. (2005: 7)

The over-arching goal of Keathley’s project is to “remobilize” and “reintegrate” the experience of these moments into “contemporary film studies” without—and this is the tricky part—destroying their fugitive, revelatory power. These moments, Keathley suggests might, if we let them, provide new paths of entry into both individual films as well as film history more generally.

Cavell himself had anticipated such an approach in his essay “A Capra Moment” (mentioned briefly above in Chapter 5). The essay begins by considering a brief shot from Frank Capra’s *It Happened One Night* showing Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert
walking away from the camera on a country road. It is “a moment,” he writes, “whose apparent commonplaces or evanescence found no place in [the] long, difficult chapter on the film” in his 1981 book *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (1985: 136). Subjecting it here to detailed analysis – giving tuition to his initial intuition – he discovers the moment to exemplify what he sees as the film’s deep-rooted affinity with the American transcendentalism, revealing new connections between Capra’s vision of America and that of Whitman and Emerson, and between Hollywood cinema and the literary tradition of the United States. Even a film’s most apparently commonplace and incidental shots or sequences, “A Capra Moment” suggests, might contain multitudes.

The question that remains, then, is what value might this approach have for academic film studies? For one, it allows for – indeed, courts – the possibility of surprise, turning critical analysis and interpretation into a process of discovery. As I hope this dissertation itself has demonstrated, such an approach can lead to interesting and unexpected critical revelations, revealing new aspects of both individual films and of broader periods in film history. Furthermore, beginning with the concrete details of a single film, or a series of films, rather than pre-established theoretical or historical models helps foster a relationship between the scholar and his or her object of study that gives the latter, in Cavell’s words “a say in its own interpretation,” one that is open to letting films “teach us how to look at them and think about them” (1981: 25).

Reflecting on the approach demonstrated in “A Capra Moment” in a 2005 interview with Andrew Klevan, Cavell insists that scholars and critics should find ways of shaking ourselves out of our habitual habits of film viewing and interpretation. “It can be
the smallest detail," he avers, “but if the compass needle just jogs, and you walk just a bit out of the way, everything can come out fresh, one’s relation to the familiar is enlivened, the hard surface is broken” (2005: 185). As Robert Ray (2013) has pointed out, Cavell’s language here, with its invocation of the experience wandering in the wilderness with a compass, derives from Thoreau, who frequently argued for the value of getting lost, if only temporarily (2013: 178). “In our most trivial walks," Thoreau writes in *Walden*,

we are constantly, though unconsciously, steering like pilots by certain well-known beacons and headlands, and if we go beyond our usual course we still carry in our minds the bearing of some neighboring cape; and not till we are completely lost, or turned around—for a man needs only to be turned around once with his eyes shut in this world to be lost—do we appreciate the vastness and strangeness of Nature. (1992 [1966]: 115)

The cinephile or “Capra Moment” approach provides an analogous experience for the film scholar, a means of re-activating, of making new, even the most apparently well-trodden and familiar films and genres—a means of discovering extraordinary things in seemingly ordinary movies.
LIST OF REFERENCES


*The Big Sleep* (1944) Directed by Howard Hawks [Film]. USA: Warner Brothers.


*Double Indemnity* (1944) Directed by Billy Wilder [Film]. USA: Paramount.


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Nathaniel Robert Deyo received his bachelor’s degree in English from Michigan State University in 2009. He graduated from the Department of English at University of Florida with a doctoral degree in Film and Media Studies in the spring of 2016.