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CLASSIC AMERICAN

DETECTIVE FILMS

by Morton Marcus

Mystery writer Raymond Chandler called them contemporary Knights-errant. To us, they are the down-at-the-heels private eyes, gumshoes, and police lieutenants who roamed the seedy back streets of urban America's gaslit shadowed forests. Armed with a code of personal honor and a sense of elemental justice, they use quick wits, heavy fists, and hair-trigger .38's in order to survive and protect others. They have crazy names, but all are distinctive, the subject of Classic American Detective Films, the most extensive film festival in San Mateo County history. In our minds, these characters are all alike —

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Mystery writer Raymond Chandler called them contemporary knights errant. To us, they are the down-at-the-heels private eyes, gumshoes, and police lieutenants who saunter down the asphalt paths of urban America's girder-shadowed forests. Armed with a code of personal honor and a sense of elemental justice, they use quick wits, heavy fists, and hair-trigger .38's in order to survive and protect others. They have many names, but all are detectives, the subject of Classic American Detective Films, *the most extensive film festival in Sash Mill Cinema history. In our minds, these shamuses are all alike —*

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– carbon copies of the chivalric hero, except that these

men dress in double-breasted suits. But scratch any one of these flatfoots — whether he be played by Bogart, Ford, Stewart, Andrews, Nicholson, or Forrest — and a snoop of a different order appears. For these detectives are not the champions of justice and the American way that our time-blurred brains remember. And therein, pal, hangs a tale . . .

America's popular image of itself changed after World War II. An image, remember, is not how we are, but how we choose to see ourselves, and after the war we could no longer view ourselves as folksy innocents, a community of small-town neighbors always ready to help each other without personal motives of gain, who turned bashfully aside when thanked, with exclamations of "shucks" and "golly." The Depression had eroded the foundations of that image, and the war toppled it. Too many returning soldiers had witnessed man's brutality to man in Europe and the Pacific, as well as in the structure of the military. And too many munitions factory workers (male and female) had journeyed from their small-town existences to become embroiled in other ways of living and thinking.

The change in attitude that resulted, a cynicism born of notions of betrayed innocence, is usually attributed to the fact of the Bomb, the almost immediate emergence of the Cold War, the House Un-American Activities Committee and Joe McCarthy's witch-hunts of the late forties and early fifties, and the Korean conflict, which dragged many weary WWII veterans back into uniform.

But to me that change of self-image, certainly the dissemination of the cynical attitude that embodied it, in large part came from the the Hollywood films of the time, a generous selection of which make up most of the current festival.

Few screwball comedies were popular after the war, and Frank Capra, the Lord High Muckamuck of folksy Americana, made only one successful postwar film of small-town manners, *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) with James Stewart, a film which pointedly takes place almost entirely on a forbidding winter night — at what symbolically is the hour of universal death. (By the way, even Stewart's image as an actor changed after the war. He went from a mush-mouthed, prewar innocent to a sour, disillusioned postwar loner.)

But the films I'm speaking about, the films that form the bulk of this festival, were not comedies. They dealt with crime, violence, and obsessive sexuality, and inevitably took place in the cities of America, nighttime cities full of ominous shadows, cheap hotels, and late-night corner diners or swanky nightclubs. These films enjoyed great popularity from the war years to the mid-fifties, and their success proves that they were tapping something responsive in the American public.

That responsiveness had less to do with the depiction of America as a place of crime than it did with the forbidding atmosphere of these films, an atmosphere of all-pervasive corruption, which the audiences realized was somehow "right" in the same way they recognized the validity of these films' inhabitants — pathetic rogues' galleries of oddballs and misfits privately isolated in their loneliness and longings while publicly grubbing for the shoddy coins of respectability and power. Nothing came to any good. Life's desperate situations didn't work out the way one thought they would. Irony. Nihilism. An all-encompassing fatalism. — These were the deadly virtues evoked in the classic Hollywood detective films of the late forties.

It took the French to identify the unique characteristics of this kind of film and give it a title: *film noir* (or "black film," which they named for its use of shadowy night scenes and its depiction of the darker aspects of man's nature). More than a genre, it was a style, a mood, a sense of uneasiness, really, at what was waiting around the corner, or what lay just under the genial surface of everyday life. The Bomb, McCarthyism — let's say *film noir* reflected the discontent and paranoia of the times as well as a coming to grips with a side of American experience that Hollywood had refused to deal with before.

The protagonists of these films weren't all detectives. They were men from all walks of life who somehow had become estranged from society. Many times they were veterans or convicts who found it difficult, if not impossible, to re-adjust to the life of the community. But a good deal of the time they were cops or private eyes, people who dealt with the sordid side of life and could function in the seamier parts of the city. Many times these men were disillusioned idealists, cynical tough guys who had seen the worst of human behavior yet held on to a code of decency. All were loners, many obsessed with avenging the death of a friend, a relative, or a girlfriend. All were men who valued their privacy, who, by staying apart, maintained dignity and values. Many were betrayed and found trust hard to establish with anyone. Some had lost their ability to respond emotionally; and still others were obsessed, half-crazed with righteousness or vengeance, and revealed through psychotic behavior actions of Freudian significance. In a word, they were men who had been maimed mentally as well as physically by the world of cities, American cities, but somehow continued seeking redemption and solace for us all.

The women in these films were of several types, led by the women of mystery, who lied to, betrayed, and imperiled the protagonist, and with whom, in many cases, the protagonist was obsessed. Her behavior was either totally calculated to achieve a specific goal (usually material) or was clearly psychotic. On the other extreme was the innocent maiden whom the protagonist had to protect. Somewhere in the middle was the self-sufficient woman (usually a secretary, mother, or nurse) who was, revealingly, usually depicted as asexual.

Until 1940, American movies had ended happily or with "socially affirming acts" in all but half a dozen cases. Think of it: only a half dozen unhappy endings in the first fifty years of American film! *Film noir* put an end to that with a succession of films that either concluded pessimistically or ambiguously, or to put it another way, concluded more realistically than before. And when the protagonist's cause did win out, his triumph more often than not was marred by ironies, pyrrhic victories, unpleasant self-realizations, or visions of society and the cosmos as structures that were unstable, disintegrating, or beyond his power to control.

Highly entertaining because of their original stories and offbeat characters, filled with a strangely foreboding atmosphere that touched the audience at a deeper level than mere suspense, these tales of the city continue to hold an almost hypnotic fascination for the viewer, as if in them he or she has found an elemental truth about American life, or life in general, that one is usually loathe to acknowledge.

Film noir faded from the screen with the coming of national prosperity in the mid-fifties. But it had taken us through the traumatic years of transition and re-evaluation that followed World War II. Before *film noir*, we saw ourselves in a mirror of fantasy and self-deceit. With *film noir*, we confronted the dark side of our national psyche, and if at times that exploration seems excessive, too nihilistic, even grotesque, remember it provides a fitting balance to what came before, and points to an increasingly psychological realism that will be part of American film thereafter. But maybe the most important aspect of *film noir* is not its historical significance, but the fact that so few of these films are dated, so many of them are still provocative, and almost all of them are so exciting and entertaining. To their makers, I say that's quite an achievement. To you, I say come and enjoy.

THE THIN MAN

Morton Marcus, poet and novelist, teaches film at Cabrillo College. He will offer *A History of Science Fiction Film* this coming Spring, and his new book of poems, *Pages From A Scrapbook of Immigrants*, will be out this Summer.

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