

FILM NOIR AND THE WESTERN

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FILM NOIR AND THE WESTERN

By Edward Recchia

EVER SINCE *FILM NOIR* sprang into the public's consciousness in the late 1940s, film critics have gradually refined their assessment of what seemed an untypically moody film style to have sprung out of a normally upbeat American film industry.¹ For example, in modifying the definition offered by the French critics who originated the *film noir* label, Jon Tusks makes it clear that he does not feel, as they did initially, that *film noir* need be a crime film (150), and he certainly does not feel that it constitutes a genre: ". . . it is to the contrary," he says, "a film style, a movement in film making similar to German Expressionism or Italian Neo-Realism, and was no doubt engendered by similar feelings of social desperation" (159).²

Ironically, Tuska helps define this distinctly American *non-genre* by distinguishing it from the two most recognizable of American film genres, the Western and the gangster film. "Film genres," he says:

. . . constitute artificial and commercial fabrications created by an essentially narcissistic industry, but the final result is the same. In the gangster film, crime could not be shown to pay; in the romance and the Western, the ending was usually a happy one, not because of any special quality in the events or the characters, but because of the narrative conventions of the genre. *Film noir*, as a cinematic movement within the Hollywood system, sought to repudiate these conventions. . . . (152)

Tuska's point is echoed by Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward, editors of *Film Noir: An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style*, who feel that the low-key lighting, tight framing, and dark, shadowy settings that mark *film noir* reflect not just an underlying philosophical *malaise* that was beginning to beset filmmakers' consciousnesses at the time but also certain restrictive economic and social conditions within the film industry itself (1), while the Western is "conceived with a different aesthetic in mind" (325). They therefore relegate both the Western and the gangster film to their encyclopedia's appendix (325-27).

Nevertheless, during the late 1940s, when *film noir* was very much in style both in Hollywood's and the public's eyes, some directors clearly attempted in various ways to incorporate *film noir* techniques into Western formats. The degree of their relative success or failure illuminates the nature both of the Western and of *film noir* itself, while

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providing some insight into the shifting values of the American viewers who watched these films over the years.

One of the most striking ironies inherent in the shotgun marriage that some directors tried to force between *film noir* and the Western is that if we were only to look at the protagonists of both types of film, it would seem that the Western is a perfect match for *film noir*. The Western gunfighter, like the private eye of the typical *film noir*, is an outsider, usually riding on the outskirts of the law and bordering as much on being a lawbreaker himself as on being a law enforcer; like the private eye, the gunfighter is isolated—physically, socially, and psychologically—his lonely nighttime camp under the stars foreshadowing the private eye's shabby bachelor digs in the heart of a modern city; like his brother of the future, the gunfighter faces a sad, even a tragic fate, for both he and the private eye are helping bring about a social order that is actually too "civilized" to accommodate the life styles they themselves have chosen to live.³ Nevertheless, both men *do* bring about social order before they either literally or figuratively ride off into the sunset.

In the process of bringing about that order, they fight, as Robert Warshaw says of the gunfighter, not so much for abstract ideals of social order as for their own individual honor: "We know [the gunfighter] is on the side of justice and order, and of course it can be said he fights for these things. . . . [but] What he defends, at bottom, is the purity of his own image—in fact his honor" (93-94). The speech that Humphrey Bogart, as Sam Spade, makes to Brigid O'Shaughnessey at the end of *The Maltese Falcon* stands in spirit not only for the private eye's code of honor but—granting the dialectical differences—for the gunfighter's as well:

"When a man's partner's killed, he's supposed to do something about it—it doesn't matter what you thought of him; he was your partner and you're supposed to do something about it.

—and it happens we're in the detective business. Well, when one of your organization gets killed, it's bad business to let the killer get away with it. It's bad all around for every detective everywhere."

In other words, to use the gunfighter's parlance: "A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do." And in the process, social order is affirmed.

Yet despite the similarities between their respective heroes, there still remains that essential difference between the films themselves: underlying the Western is an indefatigable sense of optimism; underlying the

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detective film is a critical vein of cynicism, if not pessimism. In the Western, the frontier is still to be conquered; in the detective film, there is already that smell of a civilization in the early stages of decay. Both attitudes permeate their respective films to the extent that the negativism of one is clearly distinguishable from the positiveness of the other. In a sense, the *film noir* private eye is a hero because he swims against the tide of society's corruption, while the Western gunfighter is a hero because, no matter how much a loner he may be, he is ultimately in the vanguard of social progress.⁴ Consequently, even though both ultimately uphold social order and punish or eliminate the bad guys, we frequently get the impression that the private eye has done so only to satisfy the Hays office and the mainstream values that dominated American society of the day, and that, given their druthers, the creative people behind the film would have preferred to show evil in some way winning out, simply because they grudgingly believed that's the way life is.

Mainstream values were eventually to change, of course, but not immediately. The post-war period was an era, after all, when the anti-hero was being given birth, Venus-like, between the covers of novels of young, rebellious authors like James Jones and Norman Mailer, and the developing social criticism of the twenties and thirties that had to be held in abeyance during the war years was slowly reviving in literature and on the stage. Hollywood might well have felt the same desire to deconstruct heroic images, but neither market realities nor accepted social codes would yet allow that in a medium designed to entertain a mainstream America looking optimistically towards the rewards of post-war living. Filmmakers could create in the private eye a modern-age gunfighter suffering a bad case of *angst*; but the Western gunfighter himself, and his vital role in affirming the myths of progress that had been deified through the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, could not really be tampered with. He affirmed what America had long stood for—progress, the building of a nation—and there was little reason for the general public to doubt such progress following the war. As a result, no matter how many *film noir* trappings the Western hero donned, ultimately he was covered by the epic mantle that all representatives of their nation's ideals must perforce wear. The Westerner might become a more complex human being as Westerns became more sophisticated, but he usually remained larger than life, as were the mythical (as opposed to the real-life) gunfighters of the Old West.

One of the most obvious examples of that heroic stature is John Ford's version of Wyatt Earp in the 1946 classic, *My Darling Clementine*. Although Ford uses many typical *film noir* techniques—namely, low-key lighting with dramatic use of back and sidelighting; wide-angle, deep-focus photography; closed-framed interior shots; understated dialogue—those techniques are primarily used to create an illusion of realism. Even though that realism was probably far more sanitary and ordered than was life in the real West, it is *film-version* “reality” nevertheless: a romanticized verisimilitude rather than a reflection of a cynical or pessimistic outlook towards the Old West. Therefore, although Ford's Wyatt Earp, played by Henry Fonda, is given a revenge motive, which somewhat complicates his personality and leads Silver and Ward to suggest that Earp borders on being a *noir* protagonist (325), his real attraction is that he can, despite his outwardly mild demeanor, outshoot, outthink, and outfight the dastardly Clantons, who clearly stand in the way of civilization's progress. Then, after Earp has done his work, he kisses Clementine chastely on the cheek and heads on his way—significantly, towards the western horizon, in order to suggest the inevitable conquest of the frontier by the social order that Earp represents. So although Earp has what Silver and Ward describe as the “tonality” of the *noir* hero (325), he conforms to the Western stereotype nevertheless.

Other Westerns that followed attempted to create yet more complex heroes and more complex versions of human nature; they also relied on *film noir* techniques in a more obvious manner. Two notable examples of attempted *film noir* Westerns created in the late forties both star an apt personage to portray a *film noir* hero. Robert Mitchum, star of other such *films noirs* ranging from the prototypical *Out of the Past* (1947) to the marginally *film noir* but brilliantly frightening *Night of the Hunter* (1955), starred in two back-to-back Westerns in 1947 and 1948: *Pursued* and *Blood on the Moon*. The titles of the two films, blending images of violence with the atmosphere of alienation and obsession that Silver and Ward say lies at the heart of true *films noirs* (4-5), clearly indicate both films' *noir* aspirations. As a matter of fact, the earlier of those two films is cited by at least one critic, Bruce Crowther, as qualifying for *film noir* status (106), and even Silver and Ward, who insist that there can be no such animal as a *noir* Western, seem to lean towards categorizing it as *noir*, primarily on the basis that

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it has characteristics of “psychological melodrama” which outweigh its “Western” qualities (325-26).

The title of the earlier of the two films not only indicates the physical pursuit of Jeb Rand, played by Mitchum, by a man bent upon killing him to avenge the family honor, it also refers to Jeb’s vivid nightmares of a childhood traumatic experience in which his family was violently wiped out by this same avenger. Filmed against the stark backdrop of New Mexico’s craggy mesas and canyons by James Wong Howe and directed in melodramatic fashion by Raoul Walsh, the film provides a barren *mis en scene* that suggests a more complicated moral and psychological dilemma than the actual plot delivers. Basically, because Jeb’s father has been having an affair with the wife of Grant Callum’s brother, Callum (played by Dean Jagger) kills Jeb’s father and the rest of Jeb’s family, while young Jeb hides beneath the floorboards of the family cabin. Later, Mrs. Callum (played by Judith Anderson), her husband apparently killed in the feud, finds Jeb and runs away, taking Jeb and her own two children with her. As Jeb grows up, he falls in love with his “sister,” played by Theresa Wright; but their budding romance is disrupted by Grant Callum’s reappearance and his determined efforts to erase the last evidence of a blemish on his family escutcheon.

All of this is told in flashback, which is another major component of many *films noirs*; but while the film attempts to keep a mystery of the source of the nightmares that occasionally keep recurring to haunt the adult Jeb, ultimately the source of those problems is neither the kind of guilt that drives, say, Fred MacMurray’s Walter Neff in *Double Indemnity*, nor the kind of obsession that haunts John Garfield’s Frank Chambers in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. Neither is it the kind of moral flaw that makes us understand that no matter how much we may sympathize with Richard Widmark as Harry Fabian in a film like *Night and the City*, we know that ultimately he has brought his troubles upon himself—just as another Mitchum character does in *Out of the Past*.

No, in this film, Mitchum’s character is guiltless, and the brief visions of a past nightmare incident are set up more as a puzzle, meant to intrigue the viewer of the film rather than to provide any deeper insight into a complex protagonist or into convoluted moral questions. Perhaps simply because the film is a Western, the hero must, ultimately, remain

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innocent enough so that we can't see him as anything less than basically good. In the era of the "pure" Western, at least, such seems a necessary ingredient. Whatever the reason and whatever the "psychological" trappings around him, the Mitchum character himself never wavers from being unrelentingly honest and straightforward; only those around him harbor confused and dark motives, while he remains unbesmirched and ultimately wins the girl and the riches that promise a happy future.

Blood on the Moon ends as optimistically, but at least in this film, the moral choices facing the protagonist are murkier and harder to reconcile; and as the title suggests, the filming technique is more obviously directed toward creating a night-time, violent *noir* effect than were even the suggestive settings utilized by James Wong Howe and Raoul Walsh in *Pursued*. In this film, Mitchum plays Jim Garry, a gunfighter with a shady past, who is summoned by rancher Tate Rilling, played by Robert Preston, to drive a competing rancher, John Lufton, out of business so that Rilling can get control of the land in the name of the settlers he supposedly represents. Even though he has reservations about the shadiness of the deal, Garry reluctantly agrees to work with Rilling. It is only after he sees the unscrupulous extent to which Rilling is willing to go and the suffering being inflicted upon both ranchers and settlers alike that he regrets his decision. (The fact that he is gradually falling in love with Lufton's daughter, Amy, doesn't make things any easier, either.)

Although he now faces a true moral dilemma, Garry nevertheless follows the *noir* hero's code and sticks to his original commitment, no matter how uncomfortably that sits with his sense of right and wrong. However, whereas in the typical *film noir* the protagonist might follow through with that commitment in order to achieve what he has agreed to achieve, no matter what the cost, the film reverts to typical Western format by letting Garry off the hook when Rilling tries to double-cross him, thus calling off all bets. Garry is then free to help Lufton defeat Rilling, to win the girl—and, just as Jeb Rand in *Pursued*, to face the likelihood of living happily ever after.

Technically, the goodly number of nighttime scenes in this film give impetus to the use of low-key lighting that conforms to the ambiance of an Old West illuminated at night only by moonlight, campfires, and lanterns or candles, while at the same time creating suggestions of violence lurking throughout the film. In many ways, despite the formulaic ranchers-vs. settlers plot situation and the manipulations that

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allow the hero to join the ranks of the “good guys” by the end of the film, the film’s initial conception of Garry is original enough, and the moral dilemma he faces intriguing enough, and the acting of even a young Mitchum suggestive enough to place this film as close to the spirit of *film noir* as it may be possible for a classic Western to come.

That’s “classic Western.” When what Robert Warshow has referred to as the “anti-Western” (95) began to evolve about the same time that *film noir* sprang into the French critics’ notice, it found the same philosophical foundation upon which to stand as did *film noir* itself. The anti-Western was eventually to see in life more defeats than victories, in the frontier movement more violence and exploitation than progress and building, in the Western personality more venality and meanness than heroism and self-sacrifice. By the 1970s it was to become as single-mindedly negative as the classic Western had been positive, and it was to lose, in its attempt to provide alternative values, that feel for the moral ambiguity that makes both the Western hero and the *film noir* anti-hero brothers, albeit under very different skins.⁵ But in its earliest form, as with William Wellman’s 1943 film adaptation of Walter van Tilburg Clark’s novel, *The Ox-Bow Incident*, the Western formula could be used to demythify some of the assumptions upon which the Western legend and our nation’s sense of its own righteousness were built, and elements of *film noir* began to work themselves more successfully into a story in which moral issues are vividly dramatized in a way that shows the human equation to be too complex for easy formulation.⁶

The dark nighttime scenes in which much of the film’s story takes place underscore the drama of a group of rustlers about to be hanged at daybreak by a band of vigilantes, and cinematographer Arthur Miller’s tightly framed shots bring the viewers into close proximity with the humanity of the characters. Not only are the posse members shown to be driven by various forms of self-aggrandizement or fear of admitting their own inadequacies, but even the film’s nominal “hero, played by Henry Fonda, finds it impossible to summon up the necessary blend of moral courage and physical prowess that would enable him to stop a lynching that he suspects is wrong in its choice of victims and *knows* is wrong in its moral basis.

Another, later Western, *The Gunfighter* (1950), is a subtle variation of the classic Western pattern with an inherent social point. In the forefront of an army of filmic “adult” Westerns that would eventually

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compete with the “adult” Western of television, *The Gunfighter* is a small, tightly constructed masterpiece, not only focusing on the historical *denouement* that is an acknowledged part of the gunfighter myth—the ironic fact that in paving the way for an ordered society, the gunfighter has created a social condition that is more suited for motor cars than for lone horsemen—but also emphasizing the humanity, the weaknesses, the suffering, and the doubts of the gunfighter once he has become a social outcast rather than a heroic nobleman in buckskin. In this example of what Jack Nachbar calls an “elegiac” Western (6), the gunfighter is not an ex-lawmaker but a fugitive lawbreaker, and the people he encounters represent the kind of human frailties and vices that provide as much a commentary on the present day as on the past. Director Henry King’s gunfighter, sensitively played by Gregory Peck, not only foreshadows the kind of complex humanity and vulnerability that would dominate the cowboy heroes that the James Stewarts, Gary Coopers, and Richard Widmarks would play for the next two decades, he helps establish the path that TV heroes like Cheyenne Bodie and Matt Dillon would soon be walking, also.

King’s directorial technique is less dramatic than that of earlier *film noir* directors, but perfectly in keeping with the understated moral and emotional tone of his drama: rather than creating strongly contrasted dark and light areas on the screen, he tends towards muted shades of gray—always low-key, but with contrasts played down. Instead, he creates a constrained, shadowy world by tightly framing his exterior shots and placing much of his action inside, where the soft interior lighting will naturally play down any sense of the magnificent scenery outside or of an exuberant folk populating that scenery. It is already the seemingly civilized society of the same kind of big city that a Sam Spade or a Philip Marlowe might comfortably saunter through some years later; but the streets are as yet unpaved, the buildings only as tall as their false fronts make them appear. The same sense of human concupiscence, of thwarted dreams, of invidious ambitions that Spade and Marlowe will encounter—these are shown to exist even at this early stage of American civilization, however, and the film focuses on these less-than-heroic qualities.

Like the more modern, city-bred *films noirs*, *The Gunfighter*, too, is a “small” drama, almost as comfortable within the confines of an eleven-inch black-and-white TV screen as on a standard movie screen. However, as Hollywood developed in technicolor and cinemascope two

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of its strongest weapons in the battle with television for the viewing public's allegiance, *film noir* naturally disappeared with the decline in the popularity of black-and-white feature films; and Hollywood, naturally enough, used its technical superiority to highlight the Western's greatest asset—the grandeur and expanse of the American West. Had his film been shot in black and white, the John Ford who created an exuberant outdoor encomium to the Old West even as he prophesied its end in *The Searchers* (1956) might have turned John Wayne's Ethan Edwards, who integrates an all-too-human intolerance and prejudice into an otherwise classically epic Western personality, into the closest a traditional Western hero could come to being a *noir* protagonist. But by then, it was the expanse of the West, the staggering beauty of the stark mesas and bluffs of Monument Valley, that Ford could more naturally play up now that technicolor was available to him; and it was as legitimate a way to honor the West as any other.

Likewise, in *Shane* (1953), despite the dark, realistic interior shots and the understated dialogue, the grandeur of the exterior shots gives the film's characters a heroic stature that clearly overwhelms any vestigial *film noir* techniques that the film inherited. And unlike Ethan Edwards, Shane demonstrates none of the personal quirks and shortcomings that make Edwards human. Like the scenery, his character has a grandeur that makes him larger than life and a symbol of all the values that the Western encompasses, rather than a simple, flawed mortal. That makes him a fitting character for a film that is a conscious paean to our Western mythology, but it removes him a considerable distance from the morally indecipherable world of the *film noir* hero.

With the dominance of color and wide screen, then, *film noir* was to experience a hiatus. To a great extent, the classic Western did, too, as the anti-Western and revisionist Westerns filled the screens during the 1960s and 1970s. Films, ranging from the seriocomic *Little Big Man* (1970) through the brutally violent *The Wild Bunch* (1969) to the harshly realistic *A Man Called Horse* (1970) and *Soldier Blue* (1970), aimed at deglamorizing many long-standing myths about the settlement of the west. With that dominant preoccupation with the downside of our history, the key ingredient of the Western, the humanity represented by the gunfighter and settlers who are a modern audience's connection with the heart of the Western myth, also tended to be downplayed. As Robert Warshaw has remarked about the earliest anti-Westerns, "If the 'social problems' of the frontier are to be the movie's chief concern

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. . . the hero himself, the film's central figure, now tends to become its one unassimilable element, since he is the most 'unreal'" (99). Since in the Western, as in *film noir*, the viewer needs a recognizably human element to connect with, the shifting of the locus of the film drama to more overt social "lessons" tended to diminish the viewer's naturally empathetic relationship with the protagonist even as it diminished the previously accepted values that the protagonist stood for in the older Westerns. With the only substitute Western heroes to be found in the comic-book-like protagonists of the "spaghetti" Westerns, the Western itself was to suffer a more than two-decades long fall from grace in both the public's and the critics' eyes.

However, the fairly recent revival of the Western's popularity, best indicated by the awarding of the 1992 Academy Award for Best Picture to Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven*, may also signal the possibility of a newer and richer blending of the Western format with *film noir*. Like many anti-Westerns of the sixties and seventies, Eastwood's film seems to dwell on the underside of the rugged individualism that has long been celebrated as part of the Western spirit, emphasizing much of the brutality and destructiveness that rises from it, yet at the same time showing respect—and even something more than a sneaking admiration—for the courage and perseverance that constitute the flip side of that spirit and that contributed (even though less attractively than we have wanted to believe in the past) to the settling of a wilderness. By acknowledging that inherent ambiguity in the Western paradigm, Eastwood is able to blend the social realism of the anti-Western with the sense of human nobility that the traditional Western gunfighter and the *film noir* private eye shared, sustaining that "pull between pessimism and the omens of darkness and the eternal hope of American individualism" that Kaminsky describes as central to *film noir* (48).

"The mature Western is not about good guys in white hats and bad guys in black hats, it does not romanticize violence, and it does not consist of one action scene after another," says Blake Lucas (396), and certainly Eastwood's protagonist, William Munny, would not be adequately represented by either color hat. Munny seems at various times bumpkin, villain, antihero, and hero; and Eastwood's own cryptic assessments of Munny's character for interviewers reflects the film's sense that the human personality can't be summed up in one neat equation.⁷ Neither does Gene Hackman's character, the sheriff Little Bill Daggert, wear just a black hat. His motives in wanting to keep his

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town clean are noteworthy; but he gets carried away by his success in humiliating and running English Bob (Richard Harris) out of town, and his infatuation with his own excessive brutality leads finally to his death. ("I tried to make him human and a monster at the same time," says Hackman [qtd. in Tibbett 16]).

In fact, nobody is clearly good, clearly bad, or clearly justified in his or her motives—not the whores who advertise for a gunfighter to kill the two men responsible for cutting one of them; not the youngest of the two men, who obviously is repulsed at his partner's action in attacking the whore; not Munny's partner, Ned Logan (Morgan Freeman), who is attracted as much by a chance to recapture some of the romance and adventure of his gunfighter past as the desire to earn the whores' bounty on the two cowboys; not the "Schofield Kid," who kills and then is appalled at having taken a life. Nothing is as neat as it was in the old Westerns; nobody stands clearly on the side of right or wrong as they do in the anti-Westerns. They stand in a kind of moral shadowland, without a vivid, strong light that can be labeled "truth" to define reality clearly, either for them or for the audience.

The film's form reinforces this murky moral perspective and harkens back to the techniques that underlay traditional *films noirs*. John C. Tibbett makes a particular point of the fact that *Unforgiven* was "executed in mostly muted colors and available light" (15), and he quotes Eastwood himself on the desired effect of that technique: "My approach to *Unforgiven*—and to *Pale Rider* and *Bird* before it—was to forget that we're shooting in color. It's as if we're shooting in black and white and getting the kind of look you saw in something like John Ford's *My Darling Clementine*. . ." (qtd. in Tibbett 15). The contrast between the low-key lighting in the interior shots and the bright exterior daytime shots emphasizes both the grandeur of the outside scenery and the scrabbling, bare-bones existence led by the William Munnys, the whores, the Ned Logans, the Schofield Kids, and the Bill Daggerts, who live on the edge, between sunlight and shadow, and whose personalities veer, sometimes to seeming heroic heights, sometimes to levels of bestiality, sometimes in both directions at once.

The final scene before the Epilogue seems almost a parody of the Western conventions, as Munny threatens the town with destruction if they don't provide Logan with a decent burial and (he seems to add it as an afterthought) treat the whores with respect. It is as though he has watched a Western film himself and is trying to live up to the image

of what a celluloid hero is supposed to be like. The conventions of the shot itself—a low angle shot making him appear heroic, while an American flag flutters in the background and the avenged prostitute looks on half-admiring, half-afraid—clash with the brutal nature of his recent actions and the bullying delivery of his speech. Yet this is a man who has just affirmed his existence, even if in the most destructive of ways: in that moment of truth as he and Daggert faced each other, both had defined each other as capable of the kind of heroism that Western films and Western myths are made of.

Munny by killing—and Daggert by dying—both confirm the degree to which humans will go to assert their right to be called human. There may be no real rhyme or reason for the action; the motives may be shot through with impulses that are venal and stupid, but at some point the human being defines himself or herself by action, not by worrying too much about motive. Both Munny and Daggert seem to represent this mentality, and it is a mentality that they share with the typical *noir* hero. Finally, “a man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do”—perhaps because there’s no way to figure out what’s right or wrong. It is probably appropriate, then, that Eastwood has Munny ride off into the darkness rather than into the sunset at the end of that sequence, so that the film does not provide a neat sense of closure to a reality that does not conform easily to prescribed patterns.

In the wake of the social revolution in the 1960s and 1970s that seemed to erupt out of those early tremors of dissatisfaction recorded by early *films noirs*, modern America may be frustrated at its inability to integrate all of its traditional definitions of morality, sexuality, gender roles, family, patriotism, religion, ethnicity, and social responsibility into the new and often less attractive realities it faces today. However, as Henry James has said, “Humanity is immense, and reality has a myriad forms; the most one can affirm is that some of the flowers of fiction have the odor of it, and others have not. . .” (34). A modern form of James’s fiction—motion pictures—can provide that same “odor” of reality. *Film noir* won the attention of critics in the past because of its bluff honesty, its attempt to fathom character and the darker side of the human spirit, and its willingness to face the truth unblinkingly. If it has actually achieved a successful union with a genre often characterized by modern critics as having cosmetically enhanced American history, then perhaps the merger of the two forms indicates that modern America is finally finding ways to reconcile past beliefs with present

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realities, so that through its films it can begin appreciating the rich immensity of its own humanity.

NOTES

¹Most critics agree on *film noir*'s basic characteristics. David Cook's description is representative: ". . . *film noir* (literally, 'black film') [was] discovered and named by French critics in 1946 when, seeing American motion pictures for the first time since 1940, they perceived a strange new mood of cynicism, darkness, and despair in certain crime films and melodramas. These were films which carried post-war American pessimism to the point of nihilism by assuming the absolute and irredeemable corruption of society and of everyone in it. . . .

" . . . Moral ambiguity is translated into visual style . . . through what has been called 'anti-traditional' cinematography. The pervasive use of wide-angle lenses permits greater depth of field but causes expressive distortion in close-ups; low-key lighting and night-for-night shooting . . . create harsh contrasts between the light and dark areas of the frame, in which the dark predominates, paralleling the moral chaos of the world they represent." (404-05, 406)

²Tuska cites Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton, "A *Propos du Film Noir Americain*," *Positif* (Dec. 1956) 66-70. (Tuska 280n)

³Robert Warshow provides the seminal explanation of the gunfighter's tragic-heroic role in his essay "Movie Chronicle: The Westerner," in *The Immediate Experience* (89-106). His treatment of the gangster in that essay and in the preceding "The Gangster as Tragic Hero" (83-88) suggests the further comparison between the gunfighter and the private eye.

⁴John Cawelti provides a succinct explanation of the classic Western's social significance in *The Six-Gun Mystique*, saying at one point that "the Western story is set at a certain moment in the development of American civilization, namely at the point when savagery and lawlessness are in decline before the advancing wave of law and order, but are still strong enough to pose a local and momentarily significant challenge" (65). It is this "epic moment" that the Western film depicts, with the gunfighter representing civilization's conquest of the frontier (66, ff).

⁵That ambiguity is essential, according to Warshow: ". . . the Westerner comes into the field of serious art only when his moral code, without ceasing to be compelling, is seen also to be imperfect. The Westerner at his best exhibits a moral ambiguity which darkens his image and saves him from absurdity; this ambiguity arises from the fact that, whatever his justifications, he is a killer of men" (95). Likewise, Kaminsky points out an equally important ambiguity in the *film noir* hero: "The heroes of the films were as off-beat and cynical as the pessimism of the films merited. At the same time, however, they displayed a romantic heroism, a streak of knightly valor stemming from the constant belief of American popular culture that a good man can somehow hold the world together, right wrongs, and reaffirm existence" (48).

⁶Warshow says that with an infusion of social consciousness and "deeper seriousness" in such films as *The Ox-Bow Incident*, "the outlines of the Western movie in general have become less smooth . . . [and] the true theme of the Western

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movie is not the freedom and expansiveness of frontier life but its limitations, its material bareness, the pressures of obligation. . ." (95, 96-97).

Tibbett, commenting that "Eastwood himself is content to leave the ambiguity intact," quotes Eastwood as saying, "We all hope we change for the good . . . and we hope Will Munny at last has changed for the good. But sometimes you wonder if we aren't really just going in circles, chasing our tails. And Munny *does* at the end revert back to what he's been, doesn't he? Maybe he hasn't really learned anything" (17). Eastwood makes similar comments in his *Rolling Stone* interview and in an interview with Peter Keogh: "[Munny's] constantly trying to talk himself into thinking he's worthy. . . . This guy is in desperation, but it's a combination of wanting to take care of his kids and the allure of adventure" (qtd. in Keogh 15).

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