

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

# ***Reservoir Dogs and the Noir Male***

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of

**Master of Arts**  
in  
**Media Studies**

at Massey University, Palmerston North  
New Zealand.

**Murray Bruce Perkins**

**1999**

## Abstract

This thesis presents a study of the *noir* male – the protagonist from the body of films known as *film noir*. The purpose of the study is to show that a composite of the *noir* male character can be found constructed in Quentin Tarantino's 1992 directorial debut, *Reservoir Dogs*. This is achieved through a comparative study of *film noir* theory, especially as it relates to the *noir* male character, and *Reservoir Dogs* and its characters.

There are three parts. First is the establishment of the theoretical approach of neoformalism, predominantly as defined by Kristin Thompson in her 1988 text, *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis*.

The second part is an examination of the theory of *film noir*, in order to draw a clear picture of what constitutes the characteristics of the *noir* male and his supporting environment. This includes the origins of *film noir* and the *noir* male; visual style; the urban setting; chronology of *noir*; common themes; the femme fatale; the *noir* protagonist himself; and *neo noir*. It is a premise of the thesis that the nature of the *noir* male is encapsulated in, and reflected by, the common components of *film noir* films. This premise is supported in the discussion.

The third part is a reading of *Reservoir Dogs*, with a focus on the characters and their interaction with the film, and each other. This includes discussion of the social influences which mark the environment of *noir*; the popular culture influence; the way *Reservoir Dogs* and *noir* challenge the spectator; discussion of the chronological structure of *Reservoir Dogs*; the relationship of transgression, which characterizes the *noir* male's interaction with the femme fatale role; the urban setting; and the theme and mood of *film noir*.

Drawing together these parts it is possible to conclude that the characters of *Reservoir Dogs*, supported by the environment and relationships created in the film, form a composite representation of the *noir* male.

## Contents

<b>I. Introduction</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>II. Literature Review</b>	<b>6</b>
Neoformalism	6
<i>Film Noir</i>	9
Quentin Tarantino and <i>Reservoir Dogs</i>	12
Conclusion	15
<b>III. Neoformalism</b>	<b>17</b>
The Nature of the Artwork	18
Why Not Psychoanalysis?	20
Defamiliarization	23
Meaning	27
Device	29
Backgrounds	32
The Spectator	35
Schemata	37
Analysis	38
The Dominant	42
Conclusion	44
<b>IV. <i>Film Noir</i></b>	<b>46</b>
Origins of <i>Film Noir</i>	46
Genre, Cycle, Style.	49
The Noir Look	53
The Dark Side of Town	54

Shadows on the Face of the Clock	56
A Day in the Life... Down the Mean Streets	58
The Femme Fatale	59
The <i>Noir</i> Male	64
<i>Neo Noir</i>	69
Conclusion	71
<b>V. <i>Reservoir Dogs</i></b>	<b>74</b>
<i>Reservoir Dogs</i> – Who Killed Nice Guy Eddie	75
<i>The Killing</i> – A Day at the Races	76
<i>Backgrounds</i> and the Origins of <i>Reservoir Dogs</i>	78
<i>The Dominant</i> and Popular Culture in <i>Reservoir Dogs</i>	85
Blood on the Walls – <i>Defamiliarization</i> and Challenging the Spectator	88
<i>Device</i> and the Fragmenting of Time	91
<i>Meaning</i> and the <i>Noir</i> Male’s Transgression	96
<i>Meaning</i> and the City	101
<i>Meaning</i> – Theme and Mood	103
Conclusion	107
<b>VI. Conclusion</b>	<b>109</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>113</b>

**I.**

# **Introduction**

*I always know the structure I am going to employ in advance, and all the whys and the wherefores of the story when I start writing, but there's always some unanswered questions, ideas I want to explore. I don't know how effective they're going to be, but I want to try them out.*

**Quentin Tarantino** (*Reservoir Dogs* xii)

The primary focus of this thesis, will be the protagonist of *film noir* – the *noir* male. The primary purpose of this thesis will be to show that this character is constructed in the Quentin Tarantino film, *Reservoir Dogs* (1992). This aim will be achieved through a comparative study of *film noir* theory, especially as it relates to the *noir* male character, and *Reservoir Dogs* and its characters.

Putting aside the literature review which follows this introduction, the thesis has a three-part structure. The first part is an examination of neoformalism, the theoretical approach with which the thesis will tackle the examination of *Reservoir Dogs* in conjunction with *film noir*. The discussion of neoformalism will focus predominantly on the work of Kristin Thompson in her book *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis*. Thompson's 1988 book is the most definitive work on defining neoformalism. It will be discussed further as a text in the literature review. This chapter should give the reader both an appreciation of the theory and an understanding of the concepts which will be applied in a practical context later in the thesis.

The second part of the thesis is an examination of the theory of *film noir*. The examination is predominantly text-based, but it will include discussion of, and reference to, a number of well recognized classical *film noirs*. The intent of the discussion is to draw a clear picture of what constitutes the characteristics of the *noir* male and his supporting environment. As part of this discussion it is necessary to look at *film noir* as a whole. It is one premise of this thesis that the nature of the *noir* male is encapsulated in, and reflected by, the common components of *film noir* films. This premise will be supported in the discussion, and will be important to the recognition of the *noir* male in *Reservoir Dogs*. The *film noir* chapter will discuss the origins of *film noir*; the visual style of *noir* and what it represents; the significance of *film noir*'s urban setting; the

importance of its chronological structure; the common recurring themes that can be found; the influence of the femme fatale role on the *noir* male; and the *noir* male protagonist himself. The discussion of *film noir* will also recognize the debate over the classification of *film noir* as either a genre, a style, or a historical cycle of films. However the thesis is not concerned with adding to the debate, and rather will focus on the well defined common characteristics of *film noir*, regardless of how they might be labelled. Finally, this chapter will consider the place of *neo noir*, and what this contemporary form of the *noir* film adds to the theory on *film noir* generally.

The third part of the thesis is predominantly a reading of *Reservoir Dogs*. In this third part the thesis will apply neoformalism and the theory of *film noir* as they were presented in the preceding chapters. The focus will be the *noir* male, however the discussion will also include more general reference to *film noir* in order to underline the existence of the conditions and the environment which supports the *noir* male characterization. This will include a comparative discussion of the social influences which mark the environment in which *film noir* flourishes, and an examination of the influence of popular or 'low' culture on *noir*, and which, as it will be noted, Quentin Tarantino appropriates for his films. The chapter will also discuss the way *Reservoir Dogs* challenges the spectator, comparing this to the reception of classical *noir*. With a basis which is consistent with *film noir* and the *noir* male environment having been established, the chapter will deal more specifically with the characters in *Reservoir Dogs*, noting how they, along with other complementing characteristics, present a composite of the *noir* male. This will include discussion of the chronological structure of *Reservoir Dogs*, and the influence on the characters; a discussion of the relationship of transgression which is played out by the *noir* male with the femme fatale role; the influence of the urban setting on the character of the *noir* male; and the theme and mood of *film noir* as it relates to the *noir* male as recognized in *Reservoir Dogs*.

This chapter on *Reservoir Dogs* will also include reference to one other film specifically, Stanley Kubrick's *The Killing* (1956). The film has been selected for two particular reasons; first, it is a recognized *film noir* from what is considered to be the end period of the cycle of classical *noir* films from the forties and fifties; and second, it has often been cited as a particular influence on the production of *Reservoir Dogs*.

By drawing together the discussion as it has been outlined above, it will be possible to form the conclusion that the characteristics of the *noir* male are the defining character traits of the male characters of *Reservoir Dogs*. The establishment of this conclusion will complete the following thesis.

## **II.**

# **Literature Review**

In a well reported quote, Quentin Tarantino talked of liking 'kitchen sink' movies. That is, movies that have 'everything but...' (Tarantino, 'A Rare Sorrow' 32) The following will not be a 'kitchen sink' literature review, rather I will endeavour to draw attention to the literature which has had the most influence on the thesis.

In reviewing the literature for this work I have found myself looking at material which can be grouped distinctly into three areas. The first is that of formalist writings. The second is material related to *film noir*. The third is material related to Quentin Tarantino and his films. The following chapter will deal with these three areas separately, noting however, that the material is to be drawn together in the body of this thesis and so the areas will eventually interrelate.

### **Neoformalism**

Despite the use of additional theoretical texts where specific formalist definitions provide clarity to the discussion, this thesis will be focusing on Kristin Thompson's model of formalist film theory, neoformalism, as outlined in her book, *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis*.

Kristin Thompson is one of two authors in particular, who have dominated the contemporary literature on formalist film theory. The other author is David Bordwell. Together, Thompson and Bordwell have written books on film art and history, but it is two books especially that are widely cited in discussions of formalism; one is David Bordwell's *Narration in the Fiction Film*, and the other is the aforementioned *Breaking the Glass Armor*. Preceding *Breaking the Glass Armor*, Kristin Thompson wrote *Eisenstein's Ivan the Terrible: A Neoformalist Analysis*, a work which provides much of the groundwork for *Breaking the Glass Armor*.

While Bordwell's *Narration in the Fiction Film* is an influential and well cited text in the contemporary utilization of formalism as a theory, it is Thompson who most ardently purports 'neo' formalism as a method of film analysis. Bordwell himself does not use this term. Thompson makes it clear that the origins of her work are in Russian Formalism, a movement initiated by Russian literary critics in the mid to late 1910s, and justifies the use of the new label,

‘since Russian Formalism was a method of literary study, some changes must be made before it can be applied to other arts. At times, the critic must fill in gaps in the original method. Hence film study demands a ‘new’ formalism.’ (*Ivan the Terrible* 8)

At the beginning of *Eisenstein’s Ivan the Terrible: A Neoformalist Analysis* Thompson takes Russian Formalism and compares it to New Criticism and Structuralism. It is not Thompson’s purpose to highlight any perceived faults of the latter two theories, and in so doing promote formalism as the preferred method. Rather, Thompson’s purpose is to ‘place Russian Formalism before going on to derive my (her) own method from it.’ (ibid., 9)

Thompson chooses New Criticism as it is a theory which Russian Formalism has often been compared to, and structuralism as it’s another ‘better known’ theory. (ibid.) Through the comparative presentation of the three theories, Thompson aims to ‘indicate that Russian Formalism stands somewhere between the two other theories and that it overlaps slightly with each.’ (ibid., 10) As Thompson sets about indicating this she also lays out the basic tenets of Russian Formalism and explains how these tenets are adaptable from their originally literary basis, to film.<sup>1</sup>

On this point, Thompson and a number of other writers on film theory seem to stand apart. Thompson is clear in her view that a ‘new’ type of formalism is necessary. She states, ‘In spite of much effort on their parts, the [Russian] Formalists did not create a system for looking at the cinema that logically grew out of their already-established literary theory.’ (ibid., 31) And then Thompson concludes, ‘On the whole, then, the [Russian] Formalists’ writings on cinema are of little use in this analysis.’ (ibid.) However, as already mentioned Thompson’s work is based in Russian Formalism, and

---

<sup>1</sup> This thesis does not seem to be the place to define each of these three theories, and I do not believe there is the space to adequately do so, in any case. Neither New Criticism, or Structuralism, themselves are necessary for our understanding of neoformalism in itself. An understanding of specific features of Russian Formalism will become more apparent as they are discussed in their relation to neoformalism in the following chapter. In order to understand the ‘place’ of Russian Formalism among critical theories, an issue which is very much (if not less than) peripheral to this thesis, the reader is directed to Thompson’s *Eisenstein’s Ivan the Terrible*.

she still uses the Russian Formalists' writings in her explanations, 'when they seem to offer the clearest definition of a given term or concept.' (*Breaking the Glass Armor* 6)

J. Dudley Andrew, is much more generous toward the Russian Formalists, arguing that, 'While not all formative theorists might accept them, the Russian Formalist positions are perfectly consistent with formative film theory.' (Andrew, *The Major Film Theories* 79) Pam Cook would agree with this statement judging by her comments on Sergei Eisenstein the Russian director, and a formalist, '...it is difficult not to see Eisenstein's contribution to the Soviet cinema debates as profoundly significant, or not to see him as the first, and perhaps the greatest, major film theorist.' (*The Cinema Book* 203) David Bordwell claims, 'it is not implausible to draw upon the work of the Russian Formalist critics of the 1920s...' (*Narration in the Fiction Film* xii) He also suggests, while discussing the work of Noël Burch, 'That very few film scholars have followed up Burch's insights (and those of Eisenstein and the Formalists...) is no reason to ignore them, especially if they can help us explain the specific workings of particular films.' (ibid., 279)

Bordwell's comments tend to reflect those of Thompson however, more than J. Dudley Andrew, in so much as Thompson (as noted above) is also happy to draw on the Russian Formalists' theories when they can help to explain specific workings. In many ways the strongest argument to suggest that the position supported by Andrew is weaker than that of Bordwell and Thompson, is the fact already mentioned, that Russian Formalism is intrinsically a literary theory. As Thompson suggested in her justification of the new label, the practical differences between the media of literature and film alone, suggest that some adaptation of the theory is reasonable.

Reading about formalist theory in general we are confronted with a particular consistent criticism, or at least a consistently acknowledged failing in the Formalist theory. That is, it is of no use in the analysis of realist films. Louis Giannetti notes that, 'Film theorists can be divided into **realists** and **formalists**, just as filmmakers tend to favor one style or the other.' (415) Giannetti takes the formalist idea of defamiliarization, the view that the value of the medium is measured by how different it is from reality or other comparative artworks, and argues that this cannot be helpful in explaining realist cinema, which is by definition as close as possible to mirroring

reality. However, Giannetti's view seems fundamentally flawed when even the most realistic of realist films is still a film, an artificial medium. In his own text Giannetti presents images from recognized realist films and indicates where deliberate decisions have been made to present an image in a particular way, which is more than simply realistic. (415-424) For example, in the Italian film *Open City* (1945), Giannetti notes the deliberateness of an allusion to crucifixion (416) – a purposeful representation beyond the straightforward mirroring of reality, and which clearly invites interpretation.

Thompson, in particular, sets out to answer the criticism that neoformalism as an approach is not useful for the study of realist films by applying a neoformalist analysis to two films which are considered good examples of realistic films, *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) and *The Rules of the Game* (1939). (*Glass Armor* Part Five, Chapters 7 & 8) Giannetti himself, describes the first of these films as an example of realism. (420-421)

Thompson admits, 'The word 'formalism' conjures up notions of bizarre, highly stylized films', but adds, 'since neoformalism takes all devices within a work to be part of its form, realistic films can be analysed for their formal structures as well.' (*Glass Armor* 45) Bordwell and Thompson both respond to questions of reality in a film by reference to *realistic motivation*. (*Narration in the Fiction Film* 36; *Glass Armor* 16)

If there is one theory which both Thompson and Bordwell single out for attack, it's psychoanalysis. In each of their books they make reference to the shortcomings of this theory. In the following chapter I will be looking at the reasons for the dismissal of this theory. Of particular interest is that psychoanalysis is, possibly more than any other single theory, used in the study of *film noir*. Again, the following chapter addresses this issue.

### ***Film Noir***

The second body of work which has been drawn on for this thesis, is the theory of *film noir*. The acknowledged first reference to *film noir* in literature came from the French film critic Nino Frank, writing after the Second World War, in *French Cineaste*. It was not until much later that the American film fraternity adopted the term and applied it retrospectively.

Since this adoption and the emergence of *film noir* as a recognized form of film, numerous books and articles have been written. It would be well beyond the scope of any thesis to accumulate all that has touched upon *film noir*, with new works continuing to hit the shelves without sign of abating.

Rather, I have selected anthologies on the subject and works specific to *film noir* as it relates to this thesis. These include, *The Movie Book of Film Noir*, edited by Ian Cameron, *Shades of Noir: A Reader*, edited by Joan Copjec, *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity*, by Frank Krutnik, and a miscellany of other works including, *Film Noir: The Dark Side of the Screen* by Foster Hirsch, *Film Noir: Reflections in a Dark Mirror* by Bruce Crowther, *A Reference Guide to the American Film Noir: 1940-1958* by Robert Ottoson, *Dark City: The Film Noir* by Spencer Selby, and the Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward edited book, *Film Noir*.

These books and additional articles generally follow similar lines in arguing the components which constitute *film noir*. One area which is probably the most diversely (but not necessarily widely) debated is the status of *film noir* as either a genre, or a certain style usually within the gangster or thriller genre, or a cycle of films confined to the period from the forties to the late fifties.<sup>2</sup>

Many writers seem to ignore the debate, most others address it only briefly. However, there are writings giving time to specifically addressing the question, Frank Krutnik's text for example. Krutnik acknowledges the difficulty embodied in the debate, saying, 'like the body of films it is seen to comprise, the 'history' of *film noir* is fractured and amorphous, putting up resistance to any workable process of categorisation.' (*In a Lonely Street* x) In the anthology, *Refiguring American Film Genres*, Vivian Sobchack discusses *film noir* and its context, looking to define *noir* beyond the social environment which is often regarded as its necessary cradle. While she focuses almost entirely on the classical *film noir* period, she accepts the existence of later *noirs*, citing *The Two Jakes* (1990) and 'even' *Barton Fink* (1991) among the, 'current Technicolor *film noir* renaissance.' (147)

---

<sup>2</sup> The films of this 'cycle' can be referred to as classical *film noir*, by those that believe *noir* exists beyond this original body of films at least. This thesis will use the term. For those that argue *noir* is confined to the forties/fifties cycle, they are simply the only *film noir*.

It is not a function of this thesis to classify *film noir* as either a genre, style, or cycle. Anything resembling a thorough discussion would necessarily involve debate over genre theory itself, and this is beyond the scope of this thesis. Nevertheless the question will be acknowledged in more depth in the chapter dealing with *film noir* specifically, and related issues such as generic transformation, as raised by John Cawelti in 'Chinatown and Generic Transformation in Recent American Films', will be recognized.

Many writers of *film noir* texts focus solely on the classical *film noirs* – as noted, those films accepted as forming the body of original *noirs* in the forties and fifties. These texts on classical *noir* offer fundamental information about the nature of the films.

Writing in *The Movie Book of Film Noir*, for example, Peter William Evans, Michael Walker, Leighton Grist and V.F. Perkins, among others, offer valuable work on specific classical *film noirs*, including *The Big Sleep* (1946), *Out of the Past a.k.a. Build My Gallows High* (1947), and *Double Indemnity* (1944). These writings on classical *noirs* are invaluable for helping define *noir* in context and in assessing the form of *film noir* in the post-classical *noir* cinema, of the seventies, eighties and nineties. It is necessary for any understanding of contemporary *noir* films to know where the style and/or genre came from.

Despite arguments that *film noir* does not exist beyond its classical period, there are numerous articles on later *noirs*. *The Movie Book of Film Noir*, and *Shades of Noir*, both contain articles on contemporary films; Leighton Grist's 'Moving Targets and Black Widows: Film Noir in Modern Hollywood' (Cameron 267), and Fred Pfeil's 'Home Fires Burning: Family Noir in Blue Velvet and Terminator 2' (Copjec 227). These supporters of contemporary *film noir* suggest that *noir* has undergone a 'critical and industrial renaissance' since the end of the sixties (Grist, 'Moving Targets and Black Widows' 267).

B. Ruby Rich adds to this work with the *Sight and Sound* article, 'Dumb Lugs and Femme Fatales'. The article updates *noir* to the nineties, suggesting a new form, *neo noir*. Rich's argument is to differentiate the classical *noir* from contemporary *noir*, basing the distinction predominantly on the historical period setting rather than the

historical context of production. Rich notes that *neo noir* films are resolutely contemporary, that they take the mood and characters from the classical *noir*, but not the historical environment. (8) By Rich's argument the film *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1995) with its 1948 setting is not *neo noir*, despite being a recent film (this type of contemporary film, faithful to all the characteristics of the classical *noir*, has been referred to as *retro noir*). Whereas John Dahl's *Last Seduction* (1994) with its contemporary setting, is a *neo noir* – the mood and character of *noir* in a contemporary environment. Most critics do not adhere to Rich's *neo noir* label however, referring to the films simply as contemporary, later, or in this decade, nineties, *film noir*.

A strong influence affecting the work on *film noir* is psychoanalysis. Krutnik largely defines his *noir* male with reference to Freudian terms, and Deborah Thomas does psychoanalytical study of *film noir*, in her two articles in *The Movie Book of Film Noir*; 'How Hollywood Deals With The Deviant Male' and 'Psychoanalysis and Film Noir'. Both writers make observations on *film noir* which are consistent with accepted theory, and opting for a neoformalist approach in this thesis, over psychoanalysis, does not undermine the value of these works to this study.

### **Quentin Tarantino and *Reservoir Dogs***

Quentin Tarantino is somewhat of a phenomenon. After bursting onto the Hollywood (and world cinema) scene with *Reservoir Dogs*, an incredible collection of articles have been penned about the young writer/director/actor. In 1994, six months after Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994) won the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival, Peter Biskind puts the number at about 3,000 pieces. ('An Auteur is Born' 96) The quantity has certainly increased since then. However, despite this vast body of work on Quentin Tarantino and his films, few of the observations are of an academic nature.

The literature on Quentin Tarantino is often related to the director as a personality. Discussion of his background, likes and dislikes, and his views on issues such as violence especially, seem to keep most writers occupied. These works are nevertheless useful in looking at the social, personal, and artistic influences on a given film – *Reservoir Dogs*, for example.

One of the most definitive publications on Quentin Tarantino is Jami Bernard's *Quentin Tarantino: The Man and His Movies*. Bernard has interviewed an impressive number of colleagues, friends, and relatives, as well as accessing information at Miramax and the William Morris Agency (Tarantino's agents). With the body of material that she has collected she has constructed an interesting 'behind-the-scenes' of all things Tarantino, including his films and other projects he has been associated with. Although it predates his most recent film, *Jackie Brown* (1997), the book gives a lot of time to *Reservoir Dogs*. It is not a particularly academic work, however the book is, arguably, the best single resource for more general information.

Another source of useful information for this thesis are the screenplays written by Tarantino. Faber and Faber have published these screenplays, adding some background on Tarantino and an interview between Tarantino and Graham Fuller to the *Reservoir Dogs* screenplay. This interview is presented again as 'Quentin Tarantino on' various subjects, in the introduction of the screenplay for the film, *True Romance* (1993). The repetition is representative of most of the information that can be found on Tarantino. In multiple interviews Tarantino appears to respond to topics with stock answers. These are recycled in various articles creating a strong body of supporting work.

While the percentage of academic writing on Quentin Tarantino and his films has been low amongst the vast total of work focusing on the director and his output, there has nevertheless been some specifically academically orientated writing.

Peter and Will Brooker locate Tarantino in postmodernism and write a broad ranging article, 'Pulpmoernism: Tarantino's affirmative action', highlighting his achievements as a master of the postmodern. They sum up their discussion, succinctly stating, "Royale with cheese" says it all. Junk is King.' (99) Brooker and Brooker also offer an interesting discussion of the character relationships intermingling throughout Tarantino's films.<sup>3</sup> Brooker and Brooker's claim on Tarantino on behalf of postmodernism is one that is echoed by a number of groups, including supporters of *neo*

---

<sup>3</sup> For interest only, examples include Scagnetti, both a central character in *Natural Born Killers* and the parole officer of *Reservoir Dogs* Vic Vega, who is the brother of Vincent Vega from *Pulp Fiction*. Among the more interesting observations is the suggestion that such cross referencing leads to the assumption that *Reservoir Dogs*' Mr. Brown and *Pulp Fiction*'s Jimmie are the same character. (Brooker and Brooker, 93)

*noir*. It seems something of the nature of Tarantino's films that they are so susceptible to interpretation.

Robert Hilferty, writing in *Cineaste* presents another interpretation of Tarantino and *Reservoir Dogs*, with a detailed reading of the film as a homosexual subtext.<sup>4</sup> He is adamant that his reading is an accurate unraveling of the narrative and character relationships. Hilferty's suggestion that the film is primarily decipherable as a homoerotic, and at the same time homophobic, text is a little limiting. Nevertheless, the reading offers some interesting points which can be considered in relation to the *noir* male and these will be addressed when attention is turned to *Reservoir Dogs* in the later chapter.

*Sight and Sound* has produced a good number of articles about Tarantino, even enlisting Tarantino to contribute himself. From reviews, to interviews and articles about the films specifically, or violence or gangsters generally which incorporate *Reservoir Dogs* or *Pulp Fiction*, the publication is a solid source of material. Outside of *Sight and Sound*, Peter Biskind writes a comprehensive piece in *Premiere*, 'An Auteur is Born'. While interesting and information laden, the article still offers only a small measure of critical insight and, like Bernard's book, it is predominantly background information

Other miscellaneous sources of information on *Reservoir Dogs* can be found in articles on its other participants, specifically interviews with Harvey Keitel, Steve Buscemi, and Tim Roth. These sources offer good alternative perspectives from Tarantino's. Amy Taubin writes a piece focusing on Tim Roth as Mr. Orange, 'The Men's Room', which includes a good critical reading of *Reservoir Dogs*. She notes that, '*Reservoir Dogs* conflates masculinity, violence, and the underclass', and that, 'Tarantino's version of masculinity is deeply regressive, specifically rooted in the 70s mass culture of his own childhood.' (Taubin 4) Her points support the view of a 'low' art, popular culture vision in Tarantino's work – a vision which will be addressed later in the thesis.

---

<sup>4</sup> Apparently, when confronted with such a reading of *Reservoir Dogs*, and other variations on the theme, Quentin Tarantino responded with interest and 'delight' that he and his work were being speculated about, 'Are there other things like that, you know, weird stuff? Groups that are claiming me?' (Bernard 211)

This thesis is also looking at the Stanley Kubrick film *The Killing*. Although this film will be receiving significantly less attention than *Reservoir Dogs*, material has nevertheless been accessed as it relates to Kubrick and his film. Gene D. Phillips text, *Stanley Kubrick: A Film Odyssey* has a chapter devoted to *The Killing*. Unfortunately the chapter consists almost entirely of an extended synopsis of the film, with very little critical review or background information. Phillips does, however, acknowledge the *film noir* connection with the film's chronology – a point which will be returned to. A piece which offers more commentary on Kubrick as a filmmaker, is Thomas Allen Nelson's *Kubrick: Inside a Film Artist's Maze*. Nelson's writing offers both commentary on the film and, more importantly, critical review of Kubrick's work as it relates to the film.

### **Conclusion**

The chapters which follow are not limited by the literature discussed above. Other miscellaneous texts and media such as a recorded radio interview, television documentary, and various feature films, not least of all the films of Quentin Tarantino, have been used in, or simply helped shape, this work. The writings discussed here however, have formed the backbone of the literature for the thesis, with their influence being invaluable. Finally, while these texts have been categorized into three distinct groups for their review, it is the intention of this thesis to systematically demonstrate the interrelation of these texts through a neoformalist examination of *film noir*, *Reservoir Dogs*, and the *noir* male.

### **III.**

## **Neoformalism**

*All cultures seem to have had art, and they all recognize the aesthetic as a realm apart. Neoformalism is a modest approach, seeking only to explain that realm and its relation to the world. It does not seek to explain the world as a whole, with art as a corner of that world.*

**Kristin Thompson** (Thompson, *Breaking the Glass Armor* 9)

The following chapter is not intended, nor does it have the capacity, to be a comprehensive study of neoformalism as an approach to film analysis. Rather, the following is intended to be a guide to neoformalism, predominantly as it is formulated by Kristin Thompson. It is the aim to present neoformalism's main characteristics so that they can be understood as they are utilized in the later chapter dealing with the film, *Reservoir Dogs* and in a lesser comparative capacity, the film, *The Killing*.

As discussed in the preceding chapter, neoformalism is a 'new' formalism, but one which is firmly based in the original Russian Formalist tradition. As such, the basic tenets of the theory are the same, even though Russian Formalism was/is essentially a literary theory. The original literary formalists included Roman Jakobson, Viktor Shklovsky, Yury Tynyanov, and Boris Eikhenbaum. It was Viktor Shklovsky who made one of the most definitive of formalist statements,

'Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar" to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object itself is not important.' (Andrew, *The Major Film Theories* 80)

## The Nature of the Artwork<sup>1</sup>

The idea that the realm of art and reality are necessarily different is fundamental to formalism. This idea was so crucial to the formalist idea of art that Rudolf Arnheim suggested in his 1933 book, *Film as Art*, that as a form of art, film was finished. His justification was that the sound film demanded an 'aural fidelity to nature'; that is, the sound film demanded that the sounds mirrored the actions on screen, when an actor opened and closed his or her mouth words should be heard. This necessity meant the previous exclusively visual nature of film was anchored to aural reality and could no longer be freely rearranged. (Bywater and Sobchack 167) 'For Arnheim film was a visual art whose basic property was not the ability to capture nature's image but to rearrange those images into new and affective patterns.' (ibid.)

Time has proven Arnheim to be wrong about the sound film. Art cannot be confined to the visual, and the aural can be rearranged as surely as the visual can. As we come to understand the formalist concepts of defamiliarization we shall see how the aural dimension can aid art in so much as it provides another device which can be utilized to defamiliarize the artwork. Nevertheless Arnheim's views were well received in avant-garde and experimental film-making circles and corresponded with those of the Russian Formalists in the necessity that art and reality are different. But Arnheim requires that art should not mimic reality, otherwise it ceases to be 'art'. For the formalist, art and reality cannot be other than different by virtue of their very nature.

The formalist sees art as separate from reality by consideration of our perceptual attitudes. The formalist makes a distinction between practical and non-practical perception. Practical perception is necessary for our everyday existence. As we live and work, we filter the stimuli that surrounds us in order to achieve that which we set out to accomplish. For example, if we drive to work we focus our attention on the road in front of us, the speed which we are driving, other cars which we endeavour to avoid crashing into. Practically, if we did not filter the stimuli which surrounds us we would constantly fail to succeed in what we set out to do. When perceiving art however, we do not have a practical end to meet. Rather, the art does not have a practical impact

---

<sup>1</sup> The subtitle is adopted from Thompson's *Breaking the Glass Armor* page 7.

upon us. How do we understand this to be so? Consider our reaction to a person being shot in front of our eyes; in the one instance the person is truly in front of us, on the street; in the second instance, the person is on a cinema screen. One provokes, or would provoke, a very different response than the other.

This then, is how neoformalism perceives art. Something special about this perception of art is the way it avoids the 'communications model of art' distinction between 'high' and 'low' art. The communications model of art involves three components, the sender, the medium, and the receiver. The process is the passing of a message from a sender to a receiver via a medium. This can be person to person speech, television, radio, etc. (Thompson, *Glass Armor* 7) This is a naturally reasonable model because we sense this happening when we understand the theme of film, or comprehend the unfolding story in a novel. We understand that something has been communicated to us. We can take this model further and understand that some forms communicate a 'message' better than others and some forms fail completely to communicate a message; they simply entertain, maybe. Here then, is the development of 'high' and 'low' art; the valuable and the trivial. If an artwork transmits a grand philosophical idea or some worthwhile social commentary then it is valued over work which does not have such characteristics.

'Art for art's sake' is a traditional way to avoid the communications model, and a position the Russian Formalists are assumed to have advocated. If art is assumed to exist merely for its own sake, simply to give pleasure in itself then we move from the practical sphere of the communication of ideas to the aesthetic sphere of beauty, emotion, and feeling, but we do not lose a distinction between 'high' and 'low' art. Why not? Because aesthetic qualities are able to be judged in themselves, and those with 'taste' tell us that some things are simply more beautiful than others, and their positions in the world of art apparently justify their distinction. 'Pop art' is popular art simply because the 'other' is beyond the true aesthetic appreciation of the masses.

So, when the neoformalist attends to art on the basis of the distinct perceptual attitude we bring to it, the neoformalist avoids the communications model and the distinction between 'high' and 'low' art. Why? Because it doesn't matter whether an artwork encapsulates lofty ideas or whether it presents a half naked woman being cleft

in twain with a chainsaw; both presentations have an equal capacity to engage our perceptions and in both cases we necessarily perceive the artwork as *other* than reality.

### Why Not Psychoanalysis?

This assumption that neoformalism makes; the distinction between the aesthetic and nonaesthetic, sets it against psychoanalytic film theory. Essentially, neoformalism takes the artwork as distinct and separate and, utilizing assumptions about how art works, moves toward a more general theory taking in the relationship of the artwork with society (despite the distinction between art and the everyday world, neoformalism does not deny that art is dependent on society – the relationship is just not presumed to pre-exist in a particular fashion). Psychoanalysis on the other hand, brings general theories about the relationship of art and society to the artwork. Bringing preconceived notions of relationships to the artwork leads to interpretations that Thompson describes as, ‘of the cookie-cutter variety’. (ibid., 28) Granted, neoformalism brings preconceived ideas to the artwork, but these ideas are about the way the artwork functions, not about meanings the artwork holds. What neoformalism brings to art is comparable to the knife we might use to cut a cream covered cake. It’s what is required to open up, to uncover layers, to see what lies within. Psychoanalytic assumptions might be compared to the foreknowledge that, once cut into, the cake will be chocolate sponge.

Or, to put this paragraph/summation another way, neoformalism does not apply specifics which may or may not be apparent in the film, adapting the reading of a film to fit a theoretical approach. Neoformalism, rather, is an ‘aesthetic approach ... (which) refers to a set of assumptions about traits shared by different artworks, about procedures spectators go through in understanding all artworks, and about ways in which artworks relate to society.’ (ibid., 3)

It is important to mention psychoanalysis, while discussing neoformalism as the theoretical approach this thesis will take, because psychoanalysis is an approach which is heavily utilized in the study of *film noir*. Many theorists would argue that *film noir* cannot be fully understood without reference to psychoanalysis. Deborah Thomas,

writing about psychoanalysis and *film noir*, suggests a 'reason for scrutinizing the genre through the lens of psychoanalysis is that *film noir* is openly asking for it.' (Thomas, 'Psychoanalysis and Film Noir' 72) Simple as that? Presumably no, and we'll see why.

Kristin Thompson highlights the difficulty with the psychoanalytic method by noting that because the method exists before the film, it's assumptions must be broad enough to accommodate any film.

'Every film must then be considered in some way 'the same' in order to make it conform to the method, and the method's broad assumptions will tend to iron out the differences. If every film simply plays out an Oedipal drama, then our analyses will inevitably begin to resemble each other.' (Thompson, *Glass Armor* 4)

Thompson notes that the utilization of pre-determined patterns in film studies have become common. (ibid., 14) Psychoanalysis is no exception to this, leading to the method 'dictating a narrow range of meanings ahead of time, which the analyst will necessarily find present in the film.' (ibid., 14)

Another concern is the role of the spectator. Neoformalism treats the spectator as active in the understanding of a film. In psychoanalysis the viewer must be a passive receiver of the text. If the film experience continually replays for the viewer, 'the mirror phase of entering into the imaginary, or imitates dreaming, or reminds us of the mother's breast in our infancy', (ibid., 28) then this experience is presumed to be true for all viewers. If the viewing experience is the same for all viewers, then there is nothing to account for the different prior experiences different viewers bring to the cinema, and the film must be considered to exist outside of a viewer's cultural or historical experience. If it did not, the interpretation would be different and the experience, unconscious or conscious, would have to be different for different audiences. Talking with a friend after watching a movie makes it clear that different viewers will have varying experiences and see different things – indicating a problem with this aspect of psychoanalysis. As Thompson adds, 'If the spectator performs no significant conscious activities in viewing, then he or she is not using experience gained

in the world and from other artworks.’ (ibid., 28) Neoformalism assumes that the spectator brings prior experiences from the world and other artworks to the cinema – an idea which will be discussed more fully.<sup>2</sup>

Naturally, when one theory attacks another it opens itself up to counter attack. Critics of David Bordwell have suggested that neoformalism’s apparent lack of ambition to address ‘broader cultural, economic, or ideological questions about the filmmaking institution’, or questions of ‘sexuality or fantasy’ mean these questions would be lost to critical studies of film altogether if neoformalism is adopted as a ‘new orthodoxy’. (Maltby 442) There is also dispute focusing on what it is assumed Bordwell’s interpretation of criticism is. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, argues that,

‘Like it or not, criticism is an engagement with the world. Films do not exist in a universe in which there are only films, and knowledges do not exist in a universe in which there is only one kind of knowledge. Writing about film is inevitably contaminated by the need to write not only about *Apocalypse Now!* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979), but about Vietnam, not only about *Malcolm X* (Spike Lee, 1993) but about Malcolm X, and also vice versa, and to apply not only aesthetic but political, socioeconomic, and psychological judgement.’ (Nowell-Smith 296)

All theories benefit from criticism and to a large extent a theory cannot be fully defined without criticism. These two criticisms don’t seem totally unfair. Thompson addresses them to a degree when she suggests that neoformalism is a modest approach which seeks only to explain the realm of art and its relation to the world, without seeking to explain the world completely. (Thompson, *Glass Armor* 9) No theory can adequately and appropriately address all the issues of film in one clean swoop, and no theory will step forward and seriously present itself as having all the answers to all the questions. Neoformalism is accused of not addressing questions of film’s relationship to the wider world, but neoformalism does address the wider world when it considers

---

<sup>2</sup> The ideas of this paragraph generally, are drawn from Kristin Thompson *Breaking the Glass Armor* page 28.

that such issues come into play within the film itself; it does this by reference to *backgrounds*, and just how this works will be discussed later in this chapter. Without pre-empting that discussion consider the psychoanalytic interpretation of vertical lines on the screen as meaning the character is 'imprisoned'. One example being the staircase scene in *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940). Such an interpretation is common enough in film analysis, that it may be the reasonable normal interpretation of an average viewer. If it is recognized as common knowledge, then the neoformalist can allude to the same interpretation as familiar enough to form a background.

Finally, returning specifically to regarding psychoanalysis, it is important to note that the neoformalist has available much that constitutes the psychoanalytic method. 'For one thing the textual cues that psychoanalytic criticism points to – the repetition and variation of motifs, the use of glances, patterns of symmetry in narrative structure – are wholly available to neoformalism as well.' (ibid., 28)

There is no specific intention here to negate psychoanalysis as a method, or to undermine any psychoanalytic readings of a film. It must simply be acknowledged that despite its popularity with readings of *film noir*, psychoanalysis is not without its flaws and neoformalism must be seen as a viable alternative to the analysis of any film including, for our purposes, *film noir*. I will not be ignoring psychoanalytic readings of *film noir*, nor do I intend to side step issues raised from a psychoanalytic analysis of any particular *film noir*, or characteristic of *noir*. Rather, where the issue raised or the reading made, appears appropriate it will be possible to justify the inclusion of it within a neoformalist approach. It will not be a case of adopting psychoanalysis alongside neoformalism, nor utilizing the psychoanalytic method alone.

### **Defamiliarization**

What are the concepts that neoformalism offers, with which we can utilize the approach to analysis the film? It is the answering of this question which will constitute the remainder of this chapter.

It could well be argued that if formalist theories had one key component it would be the concept of defamiliarization. As noted in an earlier quote from

Shklovsky, art exists to recover the sensation of life, to make the stone *stony*. The way that formalism sees art achieving this is through the process of *ostranenie* or ‘making strange’, a term coined by Shklovsky. The concept embodied in this term is most commonly referred to as defamiliarization. Consider this,

‘If we start to examine the general laws of perception, we see that as perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic... Such habituation explains the principles by which, in ordinary speech, we leave phrases unfinished and words half expressed... The object, perceived in the manner of prose perception, fades and does not leave even a first impression; ultimately even the essence of what it was is forgotten... Habitualization devours work, clothes, furniture, one’s wife, and the fear of war... And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life.’ (Shklovsky; Thompson, *Glass Armor* 10)

Victor Shklovsky’s description of habitualization leads to his quoted statement on the purpose of art. To make objects ‘unfamiliar’, to make perception difficult. In essence, to ‘make strange’ and break the habitual.

It is not really a difficult step to take, to recognize and accept that film as a medium defamiliarizes reality. It cannot be other than different, because it *is* different. Undeniably there are examples which suggest that the cinema experience can feel like reality. When the Lumière’s first presented audiences with the filmed image of a moving train in 1895, it is reported that the viewers of the new medium ran to avoid being hit by this soundless and colourless image. (Perkins 55) Other examples include Cinerama and 3D. These are cinema mediums designed specifically to give the audience a physical experience which they can equate with reality. But as V F Perkins notes,

‘After less than ten minutes of *This Is Cinerama* the sense of being transported around the world began to be replaced by a more conscious appreciation of the techniques by which the world was so convincingly brought into the cinema.

The illusory environment...is too inconsistent with what we know about our actual situation for a lasting deception.’ (56)

Such a fleeting deception is equally true of 3D, and surely true of a first cinema experience by individuals entirely uninitiated in the technology. As quickly as many of the Lumière’s first audiences panicked, most surely, must have become awed by the spectacle of something so much part of their everyday lives presented as it was, and laughed at their initial reaction to the unreal and harmless image.

In all cases, what follows the realization that the image presented is an image, is an understanding that while recognizable as an image of reality (in the case of the Lumière’s train, Cinerama, and usually 3D) it is presented in an intriguing and unfamiliar context. And in this new context brings a heightened perception and a breaking of the habitual response to the particular stimuli.

Well and good. But, most of us are entirely familiar with the cinema experience. We understand that it is not reality, but we put that understanding aside. We allow ourselves to ‘suspend our disbelief’. In so doing, the cinema experience *per se* is quite familiar to our everyday lives and the perception of common cinema devices *is* habitual. As Kristin Thompson notes,

‘If a series of artworks uses the same means over and over, the defamiliarizing capabilities of those means diminishes; the strangeness ebbs away over time.’  
(*Glass Armor* 11)

As the strangeness ebbs away, and the defamiliarized becomes familiar, our perception of the stimuli becomes increasingly automatic. Neoformalism labels this process of familiarized perception, *Automatization*; the converse of defamiliarization.

We have talked of art defamiliarizing reality, and we have suggested that with increased familiarity of the medium and its devices the perception of art becomes habitual, automatized. In order to retain its function to defamiliarize, the artwork must defamiliarize itself. The early literary formalists were able to internalize defamiliarization, ‘that is to say, instead of having to talk about literature

defamiliarizing reality, they could begin to refer to the defamiliarizing of literature itself.’ (Seldon 36) The need for this in cinema was recognized early enough. The 1920s avant-garde artist, Hans Richter, noted,

‘The main aesthetic problem for the movies, which were invented for reproduction, is, paradoxically, the overcoming of reproduction.’ (Andrew, *Major Film Theories* 81)

Presumably Richter was referring to the reproduction of reality. But his comment is equally viable when related to the reproduction of cinematic devices. In relation to this aesthetic problem, Thompson notes that,

‘Automatization may nearly wipe out the defamiliarizing capacities of ordinary, unoriginal artworks, such as B westerns. Such ordinary works tend not to defamiliarize the conventions of their genre of classical Hollywood filmmaking.’ (*Glass Armor* 11)

Thompson writes ‘nearly’ in regard to the complete loss of defamiliarization in the most standardized of (relatively) cheap classical genre films. ‘Nearly’ because it is assumed that even if only slightly, one work will differ from another, offering something new to the viewer. But some films offer much more than slight differences. With defamiliarization we have a means to identify more original works. We can appreciate the work of those that heed the Russian Formalists’ cry, “Make the object strange!” (Andrew, loc. cit.) We can appreciate the talent of those who, ‘take an object or activity and wrench it from the flow of life.’ (ibid.) In these most defamiliarizing artworks previously automatized devices are taken and used in ‘perceptually fresh ways’, (Thompson, *Ivan the Terrible* 14) and new devices may be revealed.

Certainly some artworks will be so original as to retain their defamiliarizing capacity over a great period of time and in the eyes of most viewers. But it is more usual that what may be unfamiliar to one generation will be familiar to the next. Thompson notes that,

‘the constant need to avoid automatization... explains why artworks change in relation to their historical contexts.’ (*Glass Armor* 11)

Whether defamiliarization of, and in, the artwork enlivens the dull automatic perception of only one viewer, or of a cinema full of viewers, it is a feature of the artwork that the neoformalist critic looks for and values.

### Meaning

The concept of meaning is an important part of the film experience. The neoformalist treats this concept as a formal component in the work. That is, meaning is not the end result of the work, but one of the devices a filmmaker uses to construct the work. (ibid., 12)

Meaning in a film can be either *denotative* or *connotative*. There are two types of denotative meaning, *referential* and *explicit*, and two types of connotative meaning, *implicit* and *symptomatic*. We will look at each in turn.

Thompson notes that referential meanings are those where, ‘the spectator simply recognizes the identity of those aspects of the real world that the work includes.’ (ibid.) For example, in films based on true life events we are aware that the characters are representative portrayals of real persons.

Explicit meanings are the more abstract ideas which a film states outright. (ibid.) For example we can say that *Pulp Fiction* is, on one level, making an anti-racism statement; Vincent Vega is white, his colleague and friend Jules Winnfield is black; Marsellus Wallace is black, his wife Mia Wallace is white; Jules’ friend, Jimmie, is white and his wife (who we briefly glimpse) is black; racial slang is freely utilized in a manner which (debatably) tends to dilute its natural offence and reclaim it from racist purpose. These elements are intentionally included in the film, and we can assume by their clarity that the film is making an active ideological statement about racial relations. If these issues were less explicitly presented, and if we had to interpret them to find meaning, then this meaning would be implicit. I believe they are clearly presented without the need for interpretation, hence the meaning is explicit.

Both referential and explicit meanings are laid out in the artwork. Therefore, whether or not we recognize or understand these meanings depends on what prior knowledge, or experience, from the world and other artworks we bring to the viewing event. Thompson notes,

‘We tend to look for referential and explicit meanings first, and, when we cannot account for a meaning in this straightforward way, we then move to the level of interpretation.’ (ibid.)

Interpretation is covered by connotative meaning – implicit and symptomatic. When we are presented with a scene which has no obvious meaning, a lengthy shot of someone riding through the desert, for example, we have to interpret to discern meaning. Maybe we can think of a justification for the image on a referential level, but what if the image lasts for several minutes – does the referential meaning justify the amount of time given to the shot? If not, how do we justify this? We have to interpret it. In David Lean’s *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) we cannot justify the long take of a character riding from the desert horizon toward the camera by suggesting that the scene is intended to demonstrate the vastness of the desert simply because it presents a desert, and it’s vast – were the scene much shorter, maybe we could. Because of the length, and the deliberateness of the shot we are drawn to interpret it to make meaning from it. Maybe it is intended to suggest the larger-than-life personality of Lawrence, for example, by presenting a larger – longer – (than usual) film image. This would be an implicit meaning.

The last level of meaning, symptomatic, covers the aspects of meaning in a film that go beyond the film itself. That is, when the film can be seen as part of a larger whole – maybe as part of a wider social trend or as representative of the views of social groups – without explicitly stating them. For example, in *Pulp Fiction*, Jules allows Pumpkin and Honey Bunny to leave the diner with the wallets and money, etc, they have stolen from it’s patrons, even though he is clearly in a position to have these items returned. Jules is one of the film’s main characters; he has been constructed to receive audience support. Such an action by this character might suggest that the film itself is,

at best, ambivalent about such social problems as armed robbery. If this is true then on a symptomatic level we may interpret the film's ambivalence, and therefore the film itself, as indicative of some continuation in the debated decline of North American social values.

Finally, meaning may play a role in the defamiliarization of a film; both by the introduction of new meanings, or more commonly, new and unfamiliar treatments of existing meanings. Countless films replay themes, meanings, as old as recorded drama, yet innovative treatment defamiliarizes the themes. On the other hand, well known automatized meanings may be used to justify the inclusion of stylistic elements which themselves are defamiliarizing.

### Device

'The word *device* indicates any single element or structure that plays a role in the artwork – a camera movement, a frame story, a repeated word, a costume, a theme, and so on.' (Thompson, *Glass Armor* 15)

Meaning, for example, is a device. The neoformalist examines devices using the concepts of *function* and *motivation*. (ibid.) Most simply stated, the function is, 'the purpose served by the presence of any given device.' (ibid.) The relationship between the function and the device is one of almost constant flux. A single device does not always serve the same purpose, and a particular purpose may be served by different devices. The function, or purpose, of a device may change within a film, and it can certainly change from film to film, especially over time.

'Devices themselves become automatized quite easily, and the artist may replace them with new devices that are more defamiliarizing. But functions tend to remain more stable, since they are renewed by a change of device, and they persist longer historically than do individual devices. We may call different devices that serve the same function *functional equivalents*.' (ibid.)

Now, I find myself at the cinema watching a film and I recognize a number of devices. I also understand the function they serve. But if we take two steps back we can ask another question. What justifies the inclusion of a particular device in the first place? The answer lies with the *motivation*. Russian Formalism gives us three types of motivation, *compositional motivation*, *realistic motivation*, and *artistic motivation*. Contemporary formalism, Neoformalism, gives us a fourth, *transtextual motivation*.

Compositional motivation is the use of a device to promote causality; devices which give us information to follow the story. The device itself may not be plausible, but we suspend our disbelief and accept it's necessity to maintain the story. Sometimes plausibility is important. Realistic motivation is the justification of devices by reference to the 'real' world. We can appeal to our knowledge from our experience of everyday life and/or, importantly, we can look to established standards of realism from previous works.

Another way to justify a device is transtextual motivation; an appeal to conventions from other artworks. (ibid., 18) Bordwell suggests the clearest case of this is genre, 'in a Western, we expect to see gunfights, barroom brawls, and thundering hooves even if they are neither realistically introduced nor causally necessary.' (*Narration in the Fiction Film* 36) We can justify the inclusion of these devices simply because the accepted conventions of the Western genre allow them.

The fourth type of motivation is artistic. Art for art's sake. Bordwell describes this as rare because it exists when something is presented simply for its own sake. (ibid.) Thompson, on the other hand, suggests that in a sense all devices have some artistic motivation. Thompson clarifies this,

'many, probably most, devices have an additional, more prominent compositional, realistic, or transtextual motivation, and in these cases artistic motivation is not particularly noticeable – though we can deliberately shift our attention to the aesthetic qualities of the work's texture even if it is densely motivated. Yet in another sense, artistic motivation is present in a really noticeable and significant way only when the other three types of motivation are withheld.' (*Glass Armor* 19)

Which suggests that, ‘artistic motivation can exist by itself, without the other types, but they never can exist independently from it.’ (ibid.) Bordwell’s view is that the first three types of motivation often cooperate with each other. In an example with Marlene Dietrich he states,

‘If Marlene Dietrich sings a cabaret song, we could justify it compositionally (it’s here that the hero meets her), realistically (she plays a cabaret singer), and transtextually (Marlene sings such songs in many of her films; it’s one aspect of her star persona).’ (Bordwell, loc. cit.)

Of course, these three types of motivation may work independently of each other also. But Bordwell clearly differs from Thompson by claiming that artistic motivation is a ‘residual’ category only which is distinct from the other three, and that ‘the spectator has recourse to it only when the other sorts do not apply.’ (ibid.) Thompson takes her view of artistic motivation further, finding in it greater opportunity for defamiliarization. In particular, Thompson gives a lot of space to *parametric form*.<sup>3</sup> Generally, parametric form is in play when the abstract functions of stylistic devices play a significant independent role in the film, or simply foreground themselves more than they contribute to meaning.

Both Thompson and Bordwell highlight the difficulty of discussing parametric cinema. Bordwell states that it is controversial, with the very name posing a problem. (ibid., 274) Thompson writes, ‘this is a very difficult concept, and one which has little currency in film studies.’ (*Glass Armor* 247) Because of the complexity, an adequate discussion of parametric cinema will absorb a significant amount of space and time, and because it has little influence on the body of this work the concept will not be discussed further.

A final related concept is the *baring of the device*. A device is bared when the formal function of the device is foregrounded. In ‘art-house’ oriented cinema, where innovation is more common, the function that a device serves may be foregrounded in

---

<sup>3</sup> Thompson uses the last four chapters of *Breaking the Glass Armor* (chapters 9-12) to discuss this. Bordwell also discusses it in *Narration in the Fiction Film*, chapter 12.

order that the viewer can adjust their viewing experience to accept it. In classical cinema where devices are more systematically utilized, 'laying bare' the device is not very common. For example, a western such as *Unforgiven* (1992) relies heavily on accepted devices of its genre to convey meaning and relay the story. Because we can process these devices easily we can contentedly watch the film without particular conscious regard to them.

### **Backgrounds**

To the neoformalist, a film should be considered within a historical context. This does not mean that we need to understand the history of cinema or have an educated understanding of what constitutes classical Hollywood. Nor does it mean that we should be aware of the family history of the Ptolemys, or the political history of the Roman Empire, to appreciate or enjoy Elisabeth Taylor in *Cleopatra* (1963), or Kirk Douglas in *Spartacus* (1960). Rather, placing film in a historical context may mean no more than the history of our own viewing of film, or our own prior experience of the world,

'the spectator cannot engage with the film except by using viewing skills learned in encounters with other artworks and in everyday experience... Our most frequent and typical experiences form our perceptual norms, and idiosyncratic, defamiliarizing experiences stand out in contrast.' (ibid., 21)

Our perceptual norms, the things which we know and are familiar with from previous exposure, experience or understanding, are referred to by the neoformalist as *backgrounds*. Neoformalism recognizes that any film, 'is at once symptomatic of the larger backgrounds and also important in itself as a historical development of those backgrounds.' (Thompson, *Ivan the Terrible* 18) The background is therefore very relevant to the analysis of a film when considered as one of a type of film. Thompson notes that, 'Formalist studies emphasize the individual work in the context of its genre

and more specifically in the context of its place in the historical development of that genre.’ (ibid.)

The background allows the neoformalist to include within the study of an individual film, questions commonly raised in auteur and genre theories. Questions related to film within a larger body of related work, either by directorial influence or other shared characteristics. But,

‘Neoformalism does not propose the elimination of auteur, genre, or any other kind of film study. Rather, it would change the traditional emphasis of such approaches by breaking the closed limits of contextualist study. The concept of the background demands that every study place at least two contexts side by side thus achieving a true contextualism, since ‘context’ implies the placement of an object against a larger system that renders its traits intelligible through relations of similarity and difference.’ (ibid., 20)

The differences which we might find in comparing one film with others, which we might consider genre forerunners, is part of the defamiliarizing process. Through an analysis of backgrounds we come to understand defamiliarization in the artwork. Naturally without any perceptual norms to draw upon all work would be unfamiliar.

There are three types of background; firstly, the everyday world; secondly, other artworks; and thirdly, an understanding that the artistic use of film is different to the practical applications of film such as advertising or reporting and is therefore distinct in certain ways. We can briefly look at each of these type of background and will do so in reverse order.

Thompson says of the third category, ‘By failing to fulfill a practical, communicative function, the aesthetic techniques of film call attention to themselves.’ (ibid., 48) Artistic motivation, for example, is highlighted here. This type of background has the least scope for expansive examination in itself, despite it’s potential dominance in certain types of film. It nevertheless warrants recognition.

The second type of background can be utilized to good affect. By comparing a film to other artworks, the particular features of the work in question can be revealed.

Thompson uses the example of comparing a John Ford western with other western genre films. (ibid.) In making this comparison the elements which are unique to Ford, over the genre features which are common to all westerns, can be revealed. The example is equally applicable to any other genre, or if making a comparison with genre films from one period and films of the same genre from another period. There are numerous comparative possibilities for examining artworks in this way.

The first type of background – reality – is the most important of the three to our basic understanding of the cinema experience. Clearly, an understanding of many of the basic conventions of cinema come from viewing other artworks. But even if we haven't seen other films, we quickly learn that the images on screen are representations, not real people; when they walk off screen they don't disappear in some magical void, they move out of the camera range at the time of filming. With an understanding of such basic cinema conventions we can watch and enjoy a western for the very first time, without needing to know what elements are common genre traits. Hence, an understanding of backgrounds from other artworks is important and can be extremely useful in analysis, but it is not as necessary to basic film comprehension as the real world is as a background.

It's worth remembering that what we perceive as 'real world' backgrounds are often those created indirectly by other media, such as our perspective of historical situations. On one hand we understand something as reality based, but on the other, our understanding may be formed by another artwork. Hence the two types of background can cross, and Thompson notes that the filmmaker has, 'great freedom in playing off viewer expectation and understanding.' (ibid., 50)

Still, the main function of reality as a background is to understand the mundane elements of cinema, such as that people on film represent people as in life, with recognizable mental and physical characteristics like emotions and movement. From reality we understand that the image of a car is normally instilled with all the characteristics of a car in the real world – except maybe in a James Bond film. By understanding a film's background in reality, we are aware that when we see an image of a hand writing we know that the hand is attached to a whole person.

Furthermore, the background of reality enables us to recognize referential meaning and Thompson adds that, 'we (also) need everyday knowledge to comprehend how films create symptomatic meanings in relation to society.' (*Glass Armor* 21)

Because an understanding of referential and symptomatic meaning within an artwork is so much drawn from an understanding of the given background of the film, it can be difficult to fully comprehend these types of meaning in older films – simply because we do not have access to the period of the real world that forms the background. This unfamiliarity in older films is important when we consider historical developments of types of film. With this in mind, it is finally useful to re-emphasize the role of defamiliarization in backgrounds. Thompson summarizes it best,

'Defamiliarization depends on historical context; devices that may be new and defamiliarizing will decline in effectiveness with repetition... Highly original artworks tend to foster imitation, and devices are introduced, used, and dropped. As the original background becomes more remote, an older artwork may once again seem unfamiliar to a new generation of audiences. We constantly see examples of artworks going through cycles of popularity, being revived as norms and perceptions change.' (ibid., 25)

In the chapter to follow, when we consider *Reservoir Dogs* in the context of historical *film noir*, the question of backgrounds will be quite relevant.

### **The Spectator**

Much of neoformalist theory demands that the viewer take an active role in the cinema experience. With an understanding of the role that backgrounds play in the analysis of the film text, we know that backgrounds are necessary for the recognition of referential and symptomatic meaning. The recognition of referential meaning alone implies that the role of the spectator is active. It's reasonable to suggest that if the viewer is not active then the film is presumably being missed.

The spectator's role can be grouped into four processes; *physiological*, *preconscious*, *conscious*, and *unconscious*.

The physiological process covers the automatic activities of the brain and the senses, such as the perception that the still images projected in rapid succession against a screen are moving images, or comprehending the sound waves from the speakers as dialogue and recognizable sound effects.

Preconscious activities are similar in that they are essentially automatic, and we do not normally consciously consider them when we participate in the viewing of a film. Preconscious activity involves the processing of information – often basic cinematic techniques – which we generally take for granted, such as the recognition of camera movement within a shot as a moving point of view, not moving scenery. These activities are different from physiological activities in that we can recognize our comprehension of the devices as mental processing of the information, to make sense to us. With the physiological we cannot change our perception without altering our physiology. To borrow Thompson's example, we cannot see the images on a cinema screen as a series of still images separated by black spaces, even though we know that is what they are.

Conscious activities are those we are generally aware of. When we contemplate character relationships, put different aspects of a story together, or ponder the significance of a particular image, we engage in conscious activities. This level of spectator participation is the most interesting for the neoformalist as it is on a conscious level that we interact most actively with the film. Defamiliarization, for example, is recognized at this level.

A fourth level is the unconscious. Neoformalism does not deny unconscious activity on the part of the spectator. But for reasons discussed earlier while looking at psychoanalysis, neoformalist theory does not accept that the unconscious is a significant part of the viewing experience. Neoformalism remains predominantly interested in the spectator's conscious activities.

## Schemata

We have already acknowledged the viewer as an active participant in the cinema-going experience. David Bordwell, adopting a constructivist theory, considers that all of the viewer's activities are based upon 'goal-oriented' processes. Bordwell explains, 'Sensory stimuli alone cannot determine a percept, since they are incomplete and ambiguous. The organism *constructs* a perceptual judgement.' (*Narration in the Fiction Film* 31) Bordwell continues by suggesting that the spectator engages in hypothesis forming,

'Perception becomes a process of active hypothesis-testing. The organism is tuned to pick up data from the environment. Perception tends to be anticipatory, framing more or less likely expectations about what is out there... The organism interrogates the environment for information which is then checked against the perceptual hypothesis. The hypothesis is thus either confirmed or disconfirmed; in the latter case, a fresh hypothesis tends to appear' (ibid.)

Bordwell adds that, 'organized clusters of knowledge guide our hypothesis making. These are called *schemata*.' (ibid.) These schemata constantly surround us, Thompson notes that we are provided schemata from other artworks, from film theory and film criticism, and from everyday life. (*Glass Armor* 30) Drawing on this vast array of schemata the viewer is cued by devices in the work. Using these cues the viewer can construct their hypothesis. In the classical cinema this hypothesis forming operation tends to be more straightforward as the familiar schemata are more likely to be mimicked. These familiar historical schemata are essentially the norms of prior experience which have already been discussed as 'backgrounds'.

Increasingly, filmmakers seem aware of the audience's understanding of historical schemata and use this knowledge to play off the probable hypotheses by transparently twisting audience expectations. In the most original films an audience may initially be without all the necessary schemata to form any viable hypothesis.

The neoformalist might be accused of considering such original films the most valuable because of the extent to which they defamiliarize cinema. However neoformalism equally values the most classical and formulaic of films – believing that with an understanding of the way in which we construct hypotheses, by making the audience actively aware of the spectator processes they engage in, the automatized response can be lifted out of the viewing experience and the artwork can be re-defamiliarized.

### Analysis

In the practical analysis of a film, the neoformalist employs a range of others concepts and terms in addition to those already mentioned. Two of these concepts are *roughened form* and *delays*. Roughened form is the more general and it covers, ‘all types of devices and relations among devices that would tend to make perception and understanding less easy.’ (ibid., 37)

The chronology of *Pulp Fiction* is an example of roughened form. In the middle of the feature the character, Vincent Vega, is shot and killed. But later in the film, the character continues to play an active role and the end of the film sees him leaving a café. The action within the film is altered to present certain events at particular times, without regard to the actual chronology of the events. As we will see, roughened form is equally evident in *Reservoir Dogs*.

A common type of roughened form is the creation of delays. Delays are devices which hold off the ending of a narrative until it is appropriate to the design of the artwork to have the work end. Delays work within a pattern which is referred to as *stairstep construction*.

‘This metaphorical term implies stretches of action in which the events progress toward the ending alternating with other stretches in which digressions and delays deflect the action from its direct path.’ (ibid.)

Stairstep construction has two features – just as stairs have two planes; perpendicular and horizontal. The perpendicular of a staircase is that plane which takes us in the direction of our destination, up or down. Equally, there are devices in a film which are necessary for the progression of the narrative. Devices which drive us toward the end of a film are called *bound motifs*. Then, there are those parts of the stairs which do not take us directly to the next level (as necessary as they are). On these horizontal planes we can linger and take a break. In the film, these are the devices which delay the narrative progression. They are often peripheral actions, actions which could be changed or even removed altogether without altering the basic causality of the film. These devices designed to delay, are called *free motifs*.

Thompson states simply, ‘Roughened form, stairstep construction, and bound and free motifs, then, are the general components of a film’s overall form.’ (ibid., 38)

Another pair of useful concepts in the neoformalist armoury are the *fabula* and the *syuzhet*. The distinction between these two is particularly useful in the analysis of a film such as *Reservoir Dogs*, as will become apparent later in this thesis. The distinction is between the story we understand; chronologically ordered and complete. And the way that story is presented; not necessarily in chronological order and not necessarily complete in terms of information presented to the viewer.

David Bordwell gives a succinct, but fuller explanation of the *fabula*,

‘The imaginary construct we create, progressively and retroactively, was termed by Formalists the *fabula* (sometimes translated as “story”). More specifically, the *fabula* embodies the action as a chronological, cause-and-effect chain of events occurring within a given duration and a spatial field... The *fabula* is thus a pattern which perceivers of narratives create through assumptions and inferences.’ (*Narration in the Fiction Film* 49)

The *syuzhet*, in Thompson’s words,

‘is the structured set of all causal events as we see and hear them presented in the film itself. Typically some events will be presented directly and others only

mentioned; also, events often will be given to us out of chronological order as when flashbacks occur or when a character tells us of earlier events which we did not witness.’ (*Glass Armor* 38-39)

Thompson adds that, ‘Our understanding of these syuzhet events often involves rearranging them mentally into chronological order.’ (ibid., 39) This chronologically (and causally) ordered construction being the *fabula*.

Within the syuzhet we can define two concepts. The *proairetic* and the *hermeneutic* lines.<sup>4</sup> The proairetic line refers to the causality within the narrative which provides us with the information to link one action with another. The hermeneutic line is the enigmas posed by the narrative through the withholding of information. These two lines interact and keep us interested. Through the proairetic line we find gratification in our comprehension of the plot. In the hermeneutic line we are challenged by ongoing questions which maintain our hypothesis forming activity. (ibid.) Together, the most important function of the proairetic and hermeneutic lines, is to impel us towards the construction of the *fabula*.

With an emphasis on the noir male character to follow in this thesis, neoformalism’s attitude to characters in a narrative is an important feature. Thompson regards the characters as the main force behind various causal events in a narrative, although acknowledging the input of ‘social and natural forces’ also. Characters are not considered real people in neoformalism, rather they are a collection of ‘traits’. These traits act as characterizing devices in the narrative. So,

‘as with all devices and collections of devices, characters must be analyzed in terms of their function in the work as a whole... we can find various functions for characters: providing information, providing the means for withholding information, creating parallels, embodying shapes and colors that participate in shot compositions, moving about to motivate tracking shots, and any number of others.’ (ibid., 40-41)

---

<sup>4</sup> Thompson borrows the idea of the proairetic and hermeneutic lines from Roland Barthes.

In fulfilling some of the functions mentioned above the character may seem trivial. However, even those characters whose presentation is well defined and who have multiple traits do not necessarily reflect true psychological patterns of behaviour. While characters are generally the primary focus of a film and may appear very like 'real people', they remain 'artificial and device-bound'. Characters are always a construction built with 'character-creating devices'. (ibid., 41)

For the purpose of neoformalism the *narration* is the 'process whereby the syuzhet presents and withholds fabula information in a certain order.' (ibid.) There are three properties which can be used to analyse narration. The level of *knowledgeability*, *self-consciousness*, and *communicativeness*.

On one level, knowledgeability refers to the *range* of fabula information that the narration appears to have access to. Different films will divulge less or more information as, in many cases, genre dictates. For example, a mystery will probably have more background information and withhold intermediate information. An action film, on the other hand, will probably offer information at an even rate as the film progresses. Information is often held by characters. Central characters in the film will usually provide more information than secondary characters. But secondary characters will usually fill gaps in the fabula through the provision of additional information.

A second level on which to consider knowledgeability in narration is *depth*. This refers to the information we are provided, of a character's mental state; information we might receive from point-of-view shots, reaction shots, or devices such as dream sequences. The two levels are independent. For example, a film may provide a lot of objective fabula information, but give us little information about the reaction of characters to the fabula events. (Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* 57-58; Thompson, *Glass Armor* 41-42)

The self-consciousness of narration refers to how much the film, 'acknowledges to a greater or lesser extent that it is directing its narrative information at an audience.' (Thompson, *Glass Armor* 42) Quite often an object may be revealed to the audience by way of a tracking-in shot or a cut to close-up – maybe the object is something a character who has just left the room has left behind. The shot is not motivated by a character's point-of-view, or otherwise disguised by character actions. In such cases the

narration is being self-conscious; the viewer is aware that information is being provided specifically for their benefit. When the provision of information is always masked by character driven motivations we will not be so aware that we are being fed the information. In such cases the narration is less self-conscious.

How communicative a film is, is measured by how much information the film provides in relation to information that is withheld. It is different to a film's knowledgeability because a film can demonstrate that it knows something, but withhold the knowledge from the audience. For example, 'if we have been waiting to learn the identity of a mysterious masked character, and the scene fades out just as that person strips the mask off, the narration is flaunting its own refusal to communicate information it could potentially reveal to us.' (ibid.)

### **The Dominant**

'Defamiliarization is an effect of the work, rather than a structure. To analyze the specific form it takes in each work, the neoformalist critic uses the concept of the *dominant*.' (ibid., 43)

The dominant is a vital feature of formalist theories. The dominant permeates the work. It governs the devices, deciding which will be *foregrounded* to defamiliarize the work and which will play a lesser role. These foregrounded devices then, in turn, cue us back to the dominant. The dominant is not simply the domineering structure of the work, stretching itself over a film's reels, keeping a tidy grasp on the devices and providing unity. Boris Eikhenbaum did formulate such a view,

'It happens only rarely that the motive factors of an esthetic object participate equally in the effects of the whole. On the contrary, normally, a single factor or a configuration of them comes to the fore and assumes a leading role. All the others accompany the dominant, intensify it through their harmony, heighten it through contrast, and surround it with a play of variations. The dominant is the

same as the structure of bones in an organic body: it contains the theme of the whole, supports this whole, enters into relation with it.' (ibid., 90)

But Eikenbaum put forward a later view, and one which was utilized by the Russian Formalists. A view in which he saw a dialectic tension among the components of a work, not a harmonious correlation. (ibid.) Eikenbaum argued that,

'The work of art is always the result of a complex struggle among various form-creating elements; it is always a kind of compromise. These elements do not simply co-exist and 'correlate'. Depending upon the general character of the style, this or that element acquires the role of the organizing *dominant* governing all the others and subordinating them to its needs.' (ibid.)

These two views have a significant result for the spectator. In the first instance the spectator is positioned to reflect upon a unified and static whole. In the second case, the spectator is challenged by the form of a dynamic work into an active viewing. (ibid.) Thompson writes,

'The dominant, then, has come to mean the concrete structures within the work of foregrounded, defamiliarized devices and functions, interacting with subordinated, automatized ones.' (ibid., 91)

So, what does this mean to the viewer of a given film? Thompson suggests that we, the spectator, can see the dominant as governing the perceptual-cognitive 'angle' which we are cued to adopt when we view a film against that film's backgrounds. (ibid.) It follows from this that the dominant is necessary to position the artwork historically,

'the dominant is a guide to determining saliency, both within the work and in the work's relation to history' and, 'in comparing the work to its context, we can determine through the dominant its most salient relationships to other works.' (ibid., 92)

Therefore, in the dominant we can see the prominent features of a genre, for example, evolving over time as the defamiliarized becomes familiar and the foregrounded interacts with the subordinated devices. Seldon and Widdowson give us a summation of this, in a discussion of Russian Formalism as a literary theory. It is equally applicable to film,

‘Rather than look for eternal verities which bind all great literature into a single canon, the Formalists were disposed to see the history of literature as one of permanent revolution. Each new development is an attempt to repulse the dead hand of familiarity and habitual response.’ (Seldon 37)

### **Conclusion**

Concluding this chapter, it is important to note that neoformalism is not yet a complete theory. Kristin Thompson acknowledges, ‘much more reflection and research needs to be done.’ However, ‘neoformalism offers a reasonable sketch of an ontology, epistemology, and aesthetic for answering the questions that it poses.’ (*Glass Armor* 29)

This discussion has not intended to exhaustively examine the neoformalist approach. However, we are now equipped to use neoformalism in a practical context. This practical context will be the chapter exploring *Reservoir Dogs*, *film noir*, and specifically the *noir* male character.

**IV.**

***Film Noir***

*Amid the seeming confusion of our mysterious world, individuals are so nicely adjusted to a system, and systems to one another and to a whole, that, by stepping aside for a moment, a man exposes himself to a fearful risk of losing his place forever.*

**Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Wakefield, Twice-Told Tales***  
(Thomas, 'How Hollywood Deals with the Deviant Male' 59)

In order to understand how the male characters in *Reservoir Dogs* can be recognized as belonging to the tradition of *film noir* male characters, it is clearly necessary to understand what constitutes the *film noir* male to begin with. It is an argument of this thesis, that the protagonist of *film noir* is a composite of all that constitutes *film noir*. That is, the traits of the *noir* male are reflected in the other perceptible components of *film noir*, and in a complementary interrelationship these components help define the *noir* male. Therefore, in this chapter we will look at each of these components, recognizing their relationship to the *noir* male, and at the conclusion of this chapter we will draw these traits together and construct the male of *film noir*.

### **Origins of *Film Noir***

In post-war France a French film critic, Nino Frank, writing in *French Cineaste* coined the term "film noir" in reference to the July/August 1946 release of these American films; *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *Murder My Sweet* (1944), *Double Indemnity* (1944), *Laura* (1944), and *The Woman in the Window* (1944). (Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street* 15) Previous to these releases, US films had been absent from French screens for the duration of the Second World War.<sup>1</sup>

The term, which literally translated from French means 'black' or 'dark' film,<sup>2</sup> was used to describe what the French critics recognized as a focus on the darker side of human nature, portrayed with an emphasis on the urban environment and visually

---

<sup>1</sup> While consensus of opinion suggests that Krutnik is correct on this origin of the term 'film noir', it is also suggested that the term originates in the thirties in relation to moody downbeat melodramas such as *Quai des Brumes* (1938) and *Le Jour se Leve* (1939). (Walker, J., *Halliwell's Filmgoers Companion*)

<sup>2</sup> As a noun 'noir' is translated as 'black', however as an adjective (as is its function in the term *film noir*) 'noir' translates as either 'black' or 'dark'.

through the use of light/dark contrast and shadowy imagery in the cinematography. These traits of *film noir* were a marked contrast to the practical, small town idealists presented in the films of Frank Capra, such as *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), or *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), which had dominated the immediate pre-war American cinema.

Unfortunately, the origin of the *film noir* films is not so clear as the origin of the term *film noir*. Clearly, there are a range of determinants and to suggest that there was a single defining influence would be ridiculous. As Frank Krutnik points out,

‘A diverse, often bewildering array of ‘sources’ and ‘influences’ is customarily proposed as a means of accounting for both the historical formation of *noir* and the variegated nature of the *film noir* corpus.’ (ibid., xi)

Certainly, we can confidently point to a few widely accepted influences. Most notable among these is the ‘hard-boiled’ crime fiction of the thirties and forties pulp magazines<sup>3</sup> with writers such as Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain, and Cornell Woolrich. Hollywood began purchasing the material in the thirties, for example MGM bought the rights to Cain’s *The Postman Always Rings Twice* in 1934, and *Double Indemnity* was acquired by Paramount in 1936. But the self-regulatory censorship of the Hays Code precluded faithful film adaptations at this time. By the beginning of the forties however, the tight rein on matters of sexual content and violence was loosening and the ‘hard-boiled’ words of the pulp fiction were being transformed for the screen with the pulp style intact.

There were practical reasons, brought about by the War, which saw the increased popularity of these writers as the forties continued. Wartime paper rationing caused a decrease in the amount of new fiction being published. The pulps were seen as commercially successful sources employing writers who could work quickly and

---

<sup>3</sup> So-called because of the cheap pulpwood paper on which they were printed. These magazines were born around 1910 from the earlier ‘dime-novels’. The most significant of the crime pulps (like film they were published in various genre forms – crime being only one of these) was *Black Mask*. Hammett, while not the first to write in the ‘hard-boiled’ style, was the most influential of the early writers, with his ‘Continental Op’ first appearing in *Black Mask* in Oct. 1923. Hammett’s stories were popular and other writers were encouraged to follow his style.

efficiently, with deadlines in mind. As for Hollywood, the November 1943 issue of *Variety* notes,

‘Shortage of story materials and writers now has film companies seriously ogling the pulp mag scripts and scripters. It marks the first time that Hollywood has initiated a concerted drive to replenish its dwindling library supplies and its scripter ranks from the 20c-a-word authors of the weird-snappy-breezy-argosy-spy-crime-detective mag school.’ (ibid., 37)

Another influence on the development of *film noir* was the popularization of Freudian psychoanalysis in American society generally, and in Hollywood specifically. A trend which developed after World War One and which, by the forties according to Frank Krutnik, was entrenched in Hollywood’s productions with increasingly common references to psychiatrists, psychoanalysts, the unconscious, and the subconscious. (ibid., 45) In crime films this trend was evident in the personalization of the crime. ‘This fascination with internal, subjectively-generated criminal impulses has widely been recognized as a crucial characteristic of 1940s *film noir*.’ (ibid., xii)

Finally, we can look at the sociological shift in American society brought on by its involvement in World War Two, following a pre-war attitude of isolationism. The most notable change ‘at home’ was that of the role of women, with a filtering impact on other societal components. With large numbers of men being drafted to the War effort, the women left at home were strongly encouraged to join the workforce and fulfil their duty to their country. Krutnik notes,

‘The new prominence of women in the economic realm was matched by a wide-scale and rapid redefinition of their place within culture. These changes set in motion a temporary confusion in regard to traditional conceptions of sexual role and sexual identity, for both men and women.’ (ibid., 57)

In its role as a social and cultural barometer, and for the economic reason of meeting audience interests, Hollywood was compelled to address the issue. *Film noirs*

male protagonist and the *femme fatale* can be seen as examples of the ambiguities in gender roles which the War period instilled, and which Hollywood sought to, and did, reflect. The post-war period was no less a time of social upheaval as the returning servicemen found the family ideologies they left behind irreversibly altered. Post-war period *noirs* continued to mirror these concerns.

Deborah Thomas in her essay, 'How Hollywood Deals with the Deviant Male', relates the *noir* male to the era which gave birth to this character in film,

'The War and its conclusion provided crisis points which crystallised the contradiction in America's expectations of its men by imposing sudden and extreme shifts in the norms invoked. What was normal during the war – such as close male companionship, sanctioned killing, and 'easier' and more casual sexual behaviour, all heightened by the constant possibility of one's own sudden death - became deviant in the context of post-war calm, though such elements lingered on in the film noir world as the focus both of longing and of dread. Post-war men had much to gain from returning to their previous secure position within society (and identifying with the law, rather than with lingering desires now become explicitly transgressive), but perhaps much to lose as well.' (59-60)

### **Genre, Cycle, Style.**

While it is not of functional importance to this thesis, the question of categorizing *film noir* cannot be overlooked in any expanded discussion of the subject. Ignoring the question also leaves certain possible inconsistencies associated with a single categorization of *film noir*, unacknowledged.

It is one of *film noirs* enduring problems that a debate exists between those that argue it is a historical cycle rigidly set within forties and fifties Hollywood, those that see *film noir* as a genre, the traits of which are equally found in contemporary cinema, and those that see *film noir* as a style, or even a tone or mood, existing within other genres, and not necessarily in a singular historical context. Frank Krutnik notes the problem in the introduction to his discussion of *film noir*,

‘...the academic ‘film community’ (especially in the United States) is marked by a division, at times, radical, between opposing camps of ‘theorists’ and ‘historians’. Noir can be ‘press-ganged’ into the service of either faction.’ (Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street* ix)

Foster Hirsch considers Paul Schrader’s opinion that, ‘Film Noir is not a genre. It is not defined, as are the western and gangster genres, by conventions of setting and conflict, but rather by the more subtle qualities of tone and mood.’ (71) But Hirsch disagrees with Schrader and continues, suggesting that *film noir* should be considered as a genre.

‘A genre, after all, is determined by conventions of narrative structure, characterization, theme, and visual design, of just the sort that noir offers in abundance. Noir deals with criminal activity, from a variety of perspectives, in a general mood of dislocation and bleakness which earned the style its name... The repeated use of narrative and visual structures which soon became conventional, depending on a shared acknowledgement between the film-makers and the audience, certainly qualifies noir as a genre, one that is in fact as heavily coded as the western.’ (72)

However, there are problems associated with calling *film noir* a genre. One such problem is the lack of historical institutional structure which saw producers, directors and screenwriters deliberately making genre films such as the western, musical, or the straight gangster film. As a retrospective label, clearly nobody was knowingly making films that would be called *film noir*, at the time the early *noirs* were produced.

Another problem with classifying *film noir* as a genre is the apparent inconsistency with other established genres. Such inconsistency can be seen by looking at the *noir* protagonist. While this male character always shares traits from one *film noir* to the next, his role can be very different. These types of *noir* male will be addressed later in the chapter, but they can include detectives or victims, or at the other end of the spectrum, criminals. Depending on the type of character driving the

narrative, *film noir* can appear to have very different generic vehicles.<sup>4</sup> With these different characters, genres such as the detective film, the thriller, or the gangster film, all seem like reasonable frameworks for *film noir*. This would suggest that at best, *film noir* is a sub-genre, and to label it an independent genre would frequently seem inconsistent with gangster, thriller, or detective films.

There are possible answers to the lack of institutional foundation, or *noir's* apparent inconsistencies with other genres, which allow *noir* acceptance as a genre. One such answer would be generic transformation, the idea that genre classification itself is fluid and adaptable. In his article on generic transformation, John Cawelti suggests that generic transformation, as a creative force, can regenerate past forms and provide us with new sets of generic constructs. (511) Rick Altman supports the idea of fluid, transformative genres and adds that through a process of criticism and changing context a film can effectively be transferred altogether, from one genre to another – a process of ‘regeneration’. (35)

By allowing that genre can supersede not only its historical production context, but also its original generic constructs, it is possible that *noir* as a genre can be formulated over existing genres such as the crime film or the detective film. This movement suggests that labelling *noir* as a genre is not inconsistent, but rather an acknowledgement of new generic constructs from existing generic forms

Another possible answer to the problem of generic inconsistency in *film noir* is to minimize the emphasis on genre altogether, and adopt more of an ‘X’ factor approach. Refusing to label *noir* in singular terms is an approach Frank Krutnik adopts. In his discussion of *film noir* and genre in, *In a Lonely Street*. Krutnik does use labels such as trans-generic as descriptive of *film noirs* co-existence with other genres, but he is most comfortable with a less specific approach, recognizing *noir* as having both generic and stylistic, as well as cyclic, manifestations. Ultimately Krutnik’s view on not pigeonholing *film noir* is an acceptance that the disparate collection of films which form the ‘*noir* corpus’ are beyond singular consistent categorization, and he prefers to think of *film noir* as a variegated and multi-faceted ‘*noir* phenomenon’. (24) With

---

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that while *film noir* does draw character roles from other genres, suggesting variations of crime or detective films, there is a uniformity in the nature of the characters, which is *noir*. In other words, we should not confuse the role the character plays with the basic nature of the character.

arguments offered on all sides, Krutnik's distinctly 'middle ground' is maybe as accurate a conclusion as can be found.

Finally, if there is doubt that an easy answer is being overlooked, we can consider Marc Vernet's comments,

'what is completely strange in discourse on *film noir* is that the more elements of definition are advanced, the more objections and counter-examples are raised, the more precision is desired, the fuzzier the results become; the closer the object is approached, the more diluted it becomes.' ('Film Noir On the Edge of Doom' 4)

Without doubt then, a thorough examination of the issues required to adequately address the problem of categorizing *noir* is beyond this thesis. It is not realistically possible to do more than acknowledge the problem and offer some very brief responses. Certainly, I believe *film noir* is more than a visual style or a mood. There are genre-oriented characteristics which recognized *film noirs* have. On this point I sway towards Hirsch's arguments. However, it is neither a purpose or intention of this thesis to take a specific position over the categorization of *film noir*. Rather, it will serve this thesis's purpose to accept that whether a genre, sub-genre, cycle, or style, there exists a recognized body of characteristics which, when found together in a film, earn that film the label, *film noir*. It is these common characteristics which are the basis for this discussion of *film noir* and the *noir* male. For the sake of having a label to use, *film noir* will periodically be referred to in this thesis as a genre. However, the usage is not intended to infer a view of definitive classification.

## The Noir Look

One of the defining conventions of *film noir* is its visual style. Michael Walker lists features of this style,

‘the use of low-key lighting to create unusual shadows and chiaroscuro effects, a high proportion of night scenes, off-angle camera compositions, deep-focus shots framing characters in cluttered, claustrophobic interiors, a greater or lesser sense of expressionist distortion, and so on.’ (25-26)<sup>5</sup>

With much use made of expressionist lighting, *film noir* has a firm visual foundation in German Expressionist films like, *The Cabinet of Dr. Calligari* (1919). Foster Hirsch notes that, ‘The cinematic origins of film noir can be traced to the German Expressionist films of the late 1910s and twenties’ (53). A dominant feature of German Expressionism is the stark, contrasting, cinematography. In the case of ‘*Calligari’s Cabinet*’ this is enhanced by the fantastical pseudo-cubist setting.

The emphasis on low-key lighting and the creation of shadows to produce stark visual contrasts is typified in such films as, *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940). In one particular scene, John McGuire’s character, Mike Ward, chases the stranger, Peter Lorre, down his boarding house’s flight of stairs. The wooden stair banisters, and the shadows cast, places both characters in one visual cage, suggesting that their fates are dramatically linked – as is the case. Creating this visual representation also serves to highlight the protagonist’s ambiguity; placing him within the frame, connected to the stranger, suggests the connection between the two on a psychological level – foregrounding the negative side to the protagonist’s character. The image is a good example of the way in which the visual style of *noir* reflects the character of the *noir* protagonist.

---

<sup>5</sup> Walker makes an important disclaimer against this group of features, stating,

‘This is not to claim that all films that show a preponderance of such stylistic features are necessarily films noirs...Nor, in order to be considered film noir, would a film necessarily have to possess all or most of such features.’ (26)

Michael Walker offers a good working definition of expressionism functioning in this way, noting that 'Expressionism serves as a convenient shorthand for the notion of the outer world expressing the inner world of the characters.' (26) Walker describes Expressionism further, stating, 'It is a 'heightened' form bringing into play exaggeration, distortion, the grotesque and the nightmarish.' (ibid.) Walker also notes the correlation between the mood of German Expressionism and that of many *films noirs*; a bleak, fatalistic, claustrophobic mood with overtones of madness and despair. (ibid.) In conjunction with the influence of German Expressionism, the B movie played an important role in the development of *noirs* visual style.

Bruce Crowther notes that while the cinematographers skills were well honed in the thirties and forties, they were largely bound by studio demands on style and were prevented from visual experimentation. 'The result was usually flat, bright lighting which resulted in every portion of the frame being clearly visible.' (61) This contrasted strongly with the German techniques, introduced to Hollywood by German expatriates, 'eager to continue their dramatic use of light and shade to reflect visually the violent contrasts of psychological unrest which fascinated them.' (ibid.) What the B film did for *film noir* was to loosen the formulaic demands of the studio and allow for experimentation. In the B arena the studios were not risking a large financial stake, and this lessened concern in the commercial success of the film worked as a liberating factor in the industry. The impact was not confined to the visual style of *film noir*, with the films treading fresh ground in other areas also, making good use of this field for experimentation. Robert Porfirio notes simply, 'film noir included large numbers of 'B' films.' (213)

### **The Dark Side of Town**

Another particular feature of *film noir* is the city. Like the cinematography/visual style, where the *noir* environment is established says a lot about the *noir* male. The noir film is almost exclusively set in an urban environment, and this location carries with it all the connotations of the protagonist.

Looking through a list of *film noir* titles gives an appreciation of the role that the city plays in the genre. *Film noir* has many films titled like, *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950), *Cry of the City* (1948), *The Naked City* (1948), *Nightmare Alley* (1947), *Scarlet Street* (1945), *Union Station* (1950), *Where the Sidewalk Ends* (1950), *While the City Sleeps* (1956), and later *Chinatown* (1974).

Deborah Thomas devotes some considerable time to discussing 'The Urban Setting' of the noir film. She notes that,

'...one of the most salient characteristics of film noir is its urban setting. The overwhelmingly negative view of this milieu which film noir takes for granted is by no means novel, but belongs to a long American intellectual tradition of antipathy towards the city.' ('How Hollywood Deals with the Deviant Male' 60)

Thomas continues, noting that,

'the city became progressively seen as the place from which civilization was *absent*, this alleged absence of civilization largely linked to a sense of the city as an alien place.' (ibid. 61)

The perspective of the city as an alien place is a perspective held by, and seen via, the traditional white middle-American rural, or small town, culture. Deborah Thomas suggests that the immigration of Irish and Italian Catholics, Jews, blacks and Hispanics gave the cities to which most drifted an 'otherness' which contrasted with the 'us-ness' of the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant version of 'American-ness'. While immigration was also impacting on the rural communities, the immigrants tended to be Scandinavian, or other northern Europeans, whose race and religion allowed for a relatively painless integration. Thus the cities were singled out within society as the dominating haunt of recognizably alien communities. (ibid.)

The city in *film noir* can be seen in a different light than other films predominantly set in the city. While we have already acknowledged the difficulty of making generic distinctions where *noir* and crime films are concerned, with one side of

the argument contending that the gangster film and the *noir* film are generically the same. Michael Walker nevertheless sets the traditional gangster film apart from *film noir* in relation to urban setting,

‘In the gangster movie, the city may be dangerous, but it is also exciting, and the hero moves through its setting with a breezy confidence and sociability; in film noir, it is, rather, bleak and isolating, and the hero tends to take to the streets uneasily, aware of himself as an outsider.’ (30)

This differentiation provides an important feature in recognizing the *noir* characteristics within *Reservoir Dogs*. The point will be returned to in the following chapter.

Finally, and importantly, the physical location of *film noir* reflects on its ‘owners’; those who live and work within the films environment. (ibid., 31) Again this is a point which will be explored more fully in the next chapter, where it will become clear that while particular settings in other films are reflections of the characters involved, this is particularly the case in *film noir* where subtle alterations more accurately reflect psychological states than in other Hollywood genres.

### **Shadows on the Face of the Clock**

The chronology of the *noir* film is another issue I wish to discuss. Many *noir* films play with time, and not only in the way that classical Hollywood cinema utilizes the film medium to turn a characters lifetime, or the travels and adventures of a character over days, weeks, or months, into an hour and a half or two hours. That the cinema condenses time is a standard and accepted feature. After all, no story could seem to be so interesting as to occupy this cinema time, representing it in real time, and maintain the audiences interest. It is a very rare film such as *High Noon* (1952) which plays out it’s cinema time in real time.

Although the ordinary condensing of time that occurs in the classical cinema is a standard device of *film noir*, the genre often jumbles it’s time sequence. The device can

leave the audience feeling not unlike the protagonist himself, whose psychological state is reflected in this confusion and apparent lack of chronological cohesion. *Stranger on the Third Floor* provides a good example of the way the *noir* film uses the chronological sequencing of events to unbalance both the viewer and the protagonist's characterization. Foster Hirsch notes that,

'Noir's recurrent use of jumbled time sequences, its sometimes delirious flashbacks within flashbacks, support the characterizations, which are also, and often spectacularly, crooked rather than straight, devious rather than forthright. Like the handling of time, motivation and identity in noir are frequently oblique, confusing.' (74-75)

In his overview of international film history, Robert Sklar discusses how time operates in *Double Indemnity*, raising what can be seen as a parallel to *Reservoir Dogs*. He discusses two temporal movements in the film which he labels real time and remembered time. Noting that, 'Gradually the narrative brings 'real' time and memory together, while the unusual juxtaposition of temporalities gives the spectator a premonition of what will occur/has occurred in the flashback story.' (309)

The reasonable merging of the chronological chaos in *Reservoir Dogs*, which we use to construct a cohesive series of events, is an example of this juxtaposition of real and remembered temporalities. But *Reservoir Dogs* is not as tidy as *Double Indemnity*, having numerous temporal lines which do not always merge well. One clear example of temporal lines merging comes towards the end of the film when the shooting of Mr. Orange by a lady driver connects with the scene of a bloodied and agonized Mr. Orange writhing in the back seat of a car – a scene which follows the opening credits.

Among most writers the flashback is considered the dominant temporal device of *film noir*. While using this device, *Reservoir Dogs* is equally well described by Foster Hirsch's 'jumbled time sequences'. Comparison can also be made with the dream sequence in *Stranger on the Third Floor*, an integrated part of the narrative which has no reality in the film whatsoever. The device has similarities to the 'commode story' in *Reservoir Dogs* which mixes different temporal lines with a visual

scene which has no reality in the film. Discussion of the chronology of *Reservoir Dogs* will be continued in the following chapter.

### **A Day in the Life... Down the Mean Streets**

What is it that *film noir* stories have in common? Bruce Crowther notes that while there are a range of richly varied storylines in *film noir* there are nevertheless certain recurring themes, among these,

‘The principle character is almost always a man; he is usually isolated, either physically or mentally, from his surroundings. He is often foredoomed and, aware of his ultimate fate, he faces it with stoic resignation. The stories are usually told in the first person and a narrating voice-over is sometimes used to express bleak resignation at what is being done to the story’s protagonist. Fatalism is essential, because there is often an element in the past of these men – an event or an act – from which the story and the seeds of their own ultimate destruction develop. However hard they might try, film noir heroes can never escape their past.’ (10-12)

While Crowther offers a taste of what the *film noir* story might hold, James Damico attempts more specifically to summarize the *noir* storyline,

‘Either because he is fated to do so by chance, or because he has been hired for a job specifically associated with her, a man whose experience of life has left him sanguine and often bitter meets a non-innocent woman of similar outlook to whom he is sexually and fatally attracted. Through this attraction, either because the woman induces him to it or because it is the natural result of their relationship, the man comes to cheat, attempt to murder, or actually murder a second man to whom the woman is unhappily or unwillingly attached (generally he is her husband or lover), an act which often leads to the woman’s betrayal of the protagonist, but which in any event brings about the sometimes metaphoric,

but usually literal destruction of the woman, the man to whom she is attached, and frequently the protagonist himself.' (Nachbar 66)

Damico's structure, as any single structure would be, is clearly limited, and should not be read as representative of all *film noir*, any more than a film should be denied as *noir* if it fell short of this model. But the basic features are to be found in the vast number of, especially, classical *film noirs*. Despite the comfort of a tidy, single storyline with which to define *noir*, it is more accurate use Crowther's more general idea of recurrent themes.

Through a description of thematic and tonal similarities within the films, Krutnik gives a similar indication to Crowther, as to what type of storyline constitutes a *film noir*. He mentions the recurrence of 'key words' noting among these, 'street', 'city', 'dark', and 'night', going on to list film titles utilizing these particular words. He adds to this the use of expressions from the 'hard-boiled' crime idiom. More important to this particular discussion however is,

'the suggestion of a fatalistic or 'existential' thematic, or 'moods' of despair and paranoia (and) the promise of a delirious combination of violence, death and sexuality.' (Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street* 18)

If we adopt this combination we can, with very few exceptions, apply this to the body of *film noir* films.

### **The Femme Fatale**

We can now move our discussion to the characters of *film noir*. While the focus of this work is the *noir* male, the *femme fatale* is an integral part of the films. I will suggest that while her physical presence is not vital in order to label a film *noir*, the role that she fills in regard to the *noir* male should always be present in any *noir*, in some form.

Of course, the femme fatale herself is almost without exception, actually present – although not in *Reservoir Dogs*. Understanding the role of the femme fatale will enable us to see this role at work in *Dogs* without the female character.

The original release title of the film *Gun Crazy* (1950) was *Deadly is the Female*, which is possibly the most appropriate of any *film noir* title when considering the role of the femme fatale. Selecting any number of *film noirs* we can find this deadly female in action. In *Out of the Past* (1947), the Robert Mitchum character, Jeff Bailey/Markham, winds up dead post-involvement with the character, Kathie Moffet. Walter Neff in *Double Indemnity* meets an end at the hands of the femme fatale, Phyllis Dietrichson. In the film *Gun Crazy*, it is Bart Tare whose death is a product of his involvement with Annie Laurie Starr. Just as there is an array of examples of this deadly female killing, or causing to be killed, the *noir* male. There are examples where the femme fatale is not so deadly, or where her deadly abilities are ambiguous. What then, are the particular characteristics of this ‘erotic’ or ‘phallic’ woman that we call *noirs* femme fatale? And, is there a balancing influence? Deborah Thomas states that, ‘Women function within film noir as agents both of prescriptive normality and of its transgression, oppressive in the former role and dangerous in the latter.’ (‘How Hollywood Deals with the Deviant Male’ 64)

More often than not the female is the motivation behind the transgression of the male. In *Double Indemnity* the *noir* male, Walter Neff, has a desire to transgress which is itself a motivation. But Dietrichson, the femme fatale, nevertheless provides the opportunity for transgression, and it’s her persuasion which tips Neff. Despite a perverse desire to foil the system, Neff would never actually do so without the encouragement of Dietrichson. On the other hand, in *Out of the Past* and *Gun Crazy* the protagonist’s transgression is purely motivated by the desire to have a relationship with the femme fatale.

In forming a construct of the femme fatale it is useful to look at this characters origin. Like the male protagonist and the *noir* film itself, the femme fatale can be placed in relation to war and post-war attitudes. She can be described as ambitious and independent, and an erotic spectacle seeking to advance herself by manipulating her sexual allure and controlling its value. In comparing this model with the female of the

pre-war screwball film, where love is more satisfying than money or ambition, the femme fatale represents the post-war shift in female attitudes toward work and independence.

In the *noir* film the femme fatale is both fascinating and feared. It is often the femme fatale who spawns the male paranoia and anxiety that is central to *noir*, through the males agonizing decision of whether or not the female, to whom they may be fatally attracted, can be trusted. Potentially the decision to trust is fatal. When Jeff trusts Kathie in *Out of the Past*, and Bart puts his trust in Annie in *Gun Crazy*, as he would a paternal figure, both end up dead with their masculinity, a key component of the *noir* male, destroyed.

While psychoanalytical perspectives are not intended to impact strongly on this thesis, they do offer valuable and, to some extent, unavoidable insights. Freud sets out four preconditions which are applicable to the *noir* male's helpless desires toward the femme fatale.

'First, that the beloved must be attached to someone else, usually a husband, so that there must be an injured third party [such as in *Double Indemnity* or *Out of the Past*, for example]; second, that the woman in question should be in some way, as Freud puts it, of 'bad repute sexually, whose fidelity and reliability are open to some doubt' [As is the case with Gilda in the film of the same name, *Gilda* (1946)]; third, fidelity to one love-object is impossible, with the compulsive lover repeating his obsession with a series of women; fourth, that lovers of this type are characterized by a desire to 'rescue the woman they love', such men being convinced of these women's need of them.' (Evans 170-171)

Along these same psychoanalytic lines, Jonathan Buchsbaum adds that the anxiety over passive homosexuality, 'creates the need for the femme fatale, as the protagonist requires her in order to rehearse aggressive masculinity, which in turn, helps him to deny any anxieties over weakness'. (Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street* 146) However, we generally find that the weakness is not overcome, but rather becomes a product of the relationship between the *noir* male and the femme fatale.

In the film *Gun Crazy* we find an example of this. Although Bart Tare is a weak individual to begin with, requiring a gun – a phallic extension – to be a man (suggesting he is not a ‘real’ man – lacking any phallic power in his own right), his weakness is accentuated by his relationship with Annie who dominates him with her own phallic power through her gun, placing her in the position of paternal surrogate. Annie with her acquired power is able to knowingly encourage the man to transgress against the law, and using her sexuality as femme fatale ensures that by his own choice Bart does transgress.

In *Out of the Past*, Kathie Moffet is perhaps one of the most complete of the femme fatales of forties *film noir*. She is very deadly. She is responsible for the deaths, either directly or indirectly, of the characters, Fisher, Eels, Stefanos, Whit and Jeff. Iconographically also, she is the embodiment of the femme fatale as Janey Place describes this *noir* character.

‘The iconography is explicitly sexual, and often explicitly violent as well: long hair... make-up... Cigarettes with their wispy trails of smoke can become cues of dark and immoral sensuality, and the iconography of violence (primarily guns) is a specific symbol (as is perhaps the cigarette) of her “unnatural” phallic power.’ (43-45)

Kathie, through the course of the film, usurps phallic power by killing Whit and cutting off Jeff’s last avenue of hope. She represents a symbolic castration, both by her sexual power as a woman and her acquisition of phallic dominance. Her phallic strength over Jeff is evident from the start of their relationship. Jeff tells her, ‘You’re gonna find it very easy to take me anywhere.’ So she does – to the ultimate and fatal downfall of Jeff.

Important to note, is that in *Out of the Past* there is a secondary femme fatale, Meta Carson, who reinforces the traits that can be found in Kathie. Meta Carson’s explicit sexuality is also related to death and transgression. The point of interest is the possibility of more than one femme fatale in a film.

The duplicity of the femme fatale is another trademark. In *Double Indemnity* Phyllis Dietrichson has a hidden agenda regarding Walter Neff. In the final scene where they confront each other, the intention of each is that the other must die. After Phyllis fires a first shot at Walter he questions her and she replies,

‘Walter: *Why don't you shoot again, baby? Don't tell me it's because you've been in love with me all this time.*

Phyllis: *No, I never loved you, Walter, not you or anybody else. I'm rotten to the heart. I used you just as you said. That's all you ever meant to me. Until a minute ago – when I couldn't fire that second shot. I didn't know that could happen to me.*’

To which Walter replies, ‘*I'm not buying*’, and he shoots and kills her.

Comparing *Double Indemnity* with *Out of the Past*, we can note particular subtle differences in the degree of ‘darkness’ in the femme fatale. For all that *Double Indemnity* is a classic of the genre, and as much as it fulfils the ingredients of *film noir*, including Phyllis Dietrichson as femme fatale, Dietrichson exhibits a weakness which Kathie Moffet does not. Specifically, Dietrichson fails to finish Neff off quickly with a second shot. The wound to Neff is nevertheless fatal, but the weakness of Dietrichson allows Neff time to re-establish his masculinity to some degree through his Dictaphone confession to Keyes. In *Out of the Past* there is no similar weakness. The *noir* male characters and the femme fatale, Kathie, all die ‘beyond’ mainstream society without redemption or restoration. In her final weakness Phyllis Dietrichson demonstrates that she is not wholly beyond the law and society, and that the nature of the femme fatale has more than one level.

A final aspect of the femme fatale is her opposite, another *noir* character – the domestic woman. This character, not necessarily a feature in every *film noir*, serves to highlight the transgressive nature of the femme fatale and offer the *noir* male an alternative that we watch him actively, and by choice, reject in favour of the transgressing woman. In *Out of the Past* the domestic woman is Jeff's small-town

girlfriend, Ann Millar. For Bart Tare in *Gun Crazy* she is his sister, Ruby. Like all alternatives to the femme fatale, both are representatives of small-town domesticity and seek to reinforce the *noir* paranoia of the big city and the unwholesomeness, the femme fatale included, that is bred there. Part of the willful transgression of the male involves the rejection of this domestic 'angel' in favour of the femme fatale.

### **The *Noir* Male**

As the single most dominant component of *film noir* there is, suitably, a substantial amount of literature concerning the protagonist of the genre. In order to fathom a clearer understanding of the *noir* male I will divide discussion into particular types of *noir* male, recognizing the particular types of *noir* film as broken down by Frank Krutnik. Adopting Krutnik's differentiation between films makes the discussion of the characteristics of the *noir* male more systematic. For Krutnik the film and character distinction goes hand-in-hand. Krutnik's distinctions might be considered to accommodate the genres, or sub-genres, depending on how the categorization is defined, of the gangster, the detective film, or the thriller. Having already raised the issue of genre categorization, it is not my intention to re-visit it here. What I would reiterate is that while the different types of *noir* male do suggest the existence of different generic forms, the character/role types are united as *noir* males by underlying character traits which define their *noir*-ness.

Before discussing Krutnik's categorization, we can look at the origin of the *noir* male. By looking at the origins of the *noir* film and the femme fatale we already have an indication of the background of the character. Deborah Thomas gives a succinct explanation of *noir* male origins by pointing out the effects of the War period in the United States. Her comments have already been noted earlier in this chapter. To recap, she suggests that the environment of the war was in profound contrast to the world which the returning American soldier found back home. The contrast between the two worlds was exacerbated by the expectations of American society which drove the American male in opposing directions for each environment, confusing his sense of acceptability and normality. What was permissible and reasonable in war, then became

deviant in the postwar peace. The shift in values provided the American male with a conflict between accepting the laws of normal living and returning to society, or retaining a psychological hold on his war-instilled nature and deviating from society. The *noir* film, and the *noir* male was a representation of this deviant or simply divided male and his inability to adequately re-adjust.

It is also the case that the social dynamics of the classical *noir* male's origin are true for contemporary *film noir*. In an exploration in the following chapter we will find evidence in support of later *film noirs*, of the same social dividedness and male alienation which contributed to the character of the original *noir* male in the forties. We can now turn to Krutnik's list of categories for *noir* films, and the types of protagonist they produce.

1. *The Investigative Thriller* – Where the protagonist, often a professional detective, seeks to restore order – and to validate his own identity – by exposing and countermanding a criminal conspiracy.
2. *The Male Suspense Thriller* – Which is the inverse of the above, in that the protagonist is in a position of marked inferiority, in regard both to the criminal conspirators and to the police, and seeks to restore himself to a position of security by eradicating the enigma.
3. *The Criminal-Adventure Thriller* – Where with the aid of a woman, the protagonist becomes engaged in either a willful or an accidental transgression of the law, and has to face the consequences of stepping out of line. (*In a Lonely Street* 86)

Foster Hirsch concisely labels character types from these three types of film, 'The investigator, the victim, and the psychopath are the central figures in noir's basic story patterns.' (167)

The investigator clearly fits into the *investigative thriller*, and how Hirsch regards his victim makes him applicable to the *criminal-adventure thriller*. Hirsch describes his victim as, 'accused of a crime he did not commit, or slipping into crime because of a momentary lapse, or because he is seduced by an alluring woman.' (ibid.)

The victim or the investigator may be applicable to the *male suspense thriller*, but this is more so the domain of the psychopath, a character whose traits may be found in the *criminal-adventure thriller* along side the femme fatale too. This character is commonly *noirs* gangster. Hirsch describes the character as the,

‘dark underside of the noir victim – far gone before the film opens, he remains trapped in an ongoing nightmare. The stories which focus on the pathological criminal, probing and exposing his mania, are the grimmest in the canon.’ (ibid.)

As Hirsch points out, all *noir* stories have in common a number of the features that have been discussed in this chapter; the characters are no exception – overlapping from one kind of narrative to another. More often than not, however, one of these three basic character types will come to dominate the film and thus the film will tend to reflect one of the three types offered by Krutnik; *investigative*, *male suspense*, or *criminal adventure*. Each of these types also reflects basic generic forms, which, depending on the critical perspective, either house *film noir*, or function within it.

Of relevance to the presence of the *noir* male on screen is nature of the *noir* actor. In the nature of the actor we can learn something more of the character. Foster Hirsch notes that,

‘Performing in a constricted area both physically as well as emotionally, the noir actor has a glacial presence. He does not open up the frame, claiming screen space for himself, but plays close to the chest, remaining a figure in the noir landscape, one element in the film’s overall composition.’ (146)

We can find examples where *noir* actors both fit and break this mould. Alan Ladd and Veronica Lake are credited with being ‘utterly deadpan’, with a ‘dazed, mannequin-like quality’, exactly suited to *noir*. (ibid., 147) On the other hand the *noir* film *White Heat* (1949) has James Cagney playing a gangster with an ‘all-out intensity’, earning the film the description in *Life*, “A wild and exciting picture of mayhem and madness.” (Walker, J., *Halliwell’s Film Guide* ‘White Heat’) Humphrey Bogart’s face

lent itself wonderfully to *film noir*. Movie stills with Bogart epitomize the *noir* male's external expression, with quiescent displays of worry, regret, pain – an inner turmoil which eats at the *noir* male, a product of the conflict which absorbs him. Physically, Sterling Hayden in *The Asphalt Jungle* demonstrates Hirsch's view like a visual aid for the criteria. A large physical presence, Hayden plays his role so 'close to the chest' it's surprising he can still breathe. For size he ought to dominate the screen, but he rarely does. Rather he plays a fine *noir* protagonist, internalizing his physical strength and appearing both quietly dangerous, and vulnerable. At its best, the face of the *noir* actor is able to portray all that constitutes the essence of the *noir* male. A large part of this essence being internal division.

'He is caught between his conscience (which can be seen as an internalized version of America's expectations of its men) and those desires which violate such norms and find expression, to a greater or lesser extent, in the films.' (Thomas, 'How Hollywood Deals with the Deviant Male' 59)

Considering the divided nature of the *noir* male it is interesting to note that, 'This dividedness may be projected on to other characters who represent the separate aspects of the hero.' (ibid.) In other words, the *noir* male's character traits may be found in part, in other characters.

*Film noir* dramatizes points of crisis which are often implicit in the life of the protagonist. (ibid., 68) So, the external action is a reflection of the conflict inside the *noir* male and this divided character who is struggling with, for example, a moral dilemma is the catalyst for the *noir* story. *Double Indemnity* sees Walter Neff struggling with his desire to transgress against the insurance company which he works for; to beat the system and do it right. This desire is countered by his personal ethic, his moral awareness, fostered by his paternal relationship with Keyes. In his voice-over narration, which also serves as a confession to Keyes, Neff states,

'It was all tied up with something I'd been thinking about for years. Since long before I met Phyllis Dietrichson. Because – you know how it is, Keyes – in this

business you can't sleep for trying to figure out all the tricks they pull on you. You're like the guy behind the roulette wheel, watching the customers to make sure they don't crook the house. And then one night you get to thinking how you could crook the house yourself, and do it smart. Because you've got that wheel right under your hands ... Look, Keyes, I'm not trying to whitewash myself. I fought it, only I guess I didn't fight it hard enough.'

The internal division that Neff is struggling with is reflected by the film in the conflict between Neff and Phyllis Dietrichson.

Looking at the male suspense thriller we can find another particular aspect of the *noir* protagonist. *The Oxford English Dictionary* contains various entries for the word 'suspense', among them the following which is particularly applicable to the discussion,

'A state of mental uncertainty, with expectation or desire for decision, and usually some apprehension or anxiety.'

This situation is more than the postponement, or the forestalling, of the eventual triumph of the hero (both as a hero and as a man), it is a traumatic uncertainty as to whether such a resolution is even possible. For example; the character, Michael Ward, from *Stranger on the Third Floor*. A 'star reporter' and a key witness in a murder trial, Ward begins to doubt the guilt of the defendant Joe Briggs. His involvement in the trial was his 'big break', earning him a promotion and enabling his marriage with his girlfriend to go ahead. The conflict he feels at the good fortune of the trial for himself, versus the death sentence given to Briggs based on his testimony, is reflected in the paranoia he exhibits, and the darkness of his character represented in the cinematography. Inevitably caught up in a murder himself, we – the viewers – are left in some doubt about the true nature of Ward's character. Is he innocent? What he witnessed regarding Briggs crime is dubious for such a strong testimony, and we find a satisfactory resolution is in doubt until the end.

Even at the end Ward exhibits a characteristic which is strong in the *noir* male; guilty, even if innocent. That is, Ward is exonerated at the conclusion of the film as far

as the actual crime is concerned, but he remains transgressive because of his desire to commit the crime. He remains a divided *noir* character. His desire is not overturned and his re-integration to society as a 'normal' masculine figure is incomplete – as is the resolution of he and his darker nature, represented by his unsettled relationship with his environment at the film's end.

Discussion of the *noir* male will continue in the following chapter; expanding on this review with more film based work. In this next chapter, the relationship between the *noir* male and the other characteristics of the *noir* film will become clearer still.

### *Neo Noir*

'To be sure, *noir* itself never died out in the first place. It's been one of the most enduring genres in the history of American, if not world, movies.' (Rich 8)

In recent years there has been a resurgence of *film noir*. It may be possible to date this back to *Chinatown* in 1974 or *Body Heat* (1981), or any number of other films that are recognized in one way or another as *noir*. There is no doubt that it is a popular genre to work with and emulate, Dennis Hopper in 1990 described *film noir* as, 'every director's favourite genre'. (Grist, 'Moving Targets and Black Widows' 267) The fresh emergence of *noir* films with a large profile in the nineties is a unique jump from the *noir* films which stepped out in the sixties and seventies. Foster Hirsch claims that,

'In the sixties and seventies the genre was clearly a self-consciously resurrected form. Thrillers made 'in the noir style' became a nostalgic exercise, touched with that note of condescension which often results when one generation reconstructs artifacts of an earlier era's popular culture.' (202)

While this is a very critical view of the genre in the sixties and seventies, it is not applied without exception. Hirsch notes that Robert Altman did not merely recreate or mimic a defunct genre, rather in his version of *The Long Goodbye* (1973) he offers aggressive changes with cynical revisions apt to the seventies. (203) Leighton Grist

traces 'new' *film noir* from the 1966 film *Harper*. The similarities with classical *noir* include a generically typical plot, but the differences are more interesting;

'a number of signifiers of modernity, distinguishing marks of industrial and historical context: an updated California setting, the use of colour, greater sexual frankness (if not, in this case, openness), the casting of a recognizably contemporary protagonist/star (Paul Newman), the transmission of decidedly modern attitudes and mores.' (Grist, loc. cit.)

These developments are applicable to the contemporary *noirs* that are appearing on our screens now. There are two distinct contemporary forms that are identified by B. Ruby Rich, the *nineties noir* and the *neo noir*. Regarding a nineties noir film she states,

'...it qualifies as a high-class Hollywood addition to 90's noir, an adjunct to rather than a member of neo noir. The period setting is as much a giveaway as the label: Franklin is faithful to Mosely's postwar setting, whereas the neo noir films are fixedly contemporary, borrowing mood and character but never trappings or dates from their forefathers.' (8)

So *neo noir* is *noir* with the influence of contemporary society and cinema clearly present in its historical setting and costuming, rather than an attempt to faithfully reproduce the classical *noir* style. Concerning modern *film noir*, Foster Hirsch notes that the conventions such as the importance of the city and the portrayal of personality through the visual imagery have not changed. Nor has the notion of the protagonist as a divided individual, a complex character with the potential for violence. (205) But the new *noir*, for all its necessary similarity to earn its label, is not all encompassing of the *noir* tradition. It stems not so much from the early *noirs*, but from the end-of-the-line dramas where nobody can be trusted and the final frame may come with still no explanation offered; the type of film that categorized the last of the classical *noirs* such as, *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955) and *Touch of Evil* (1959). (Rich 8)

As noted, the basic character of the *noir* film is not altered in *neo noir*, and this is particularly true of the character of the *noir* male. After all, *neo noir* is still *film noir* – it is a useful sub-genre only (using the classification of genre to make the point), with which to more specifically categorize a film which displays subtle developments from its parent genre. However, to a degree it is useful to recognize *Reservoir Dogs* as more specifically *neo noir* than *film noir*.

There are certain characteristics in *Reservoir Dogs* which can clearly be seen as *neo noir*. For example,

‘In neo noir ... No one can be trusted, everything is déjà vu, and happy endings aren’t even a dream in anyone’s head. The style is over the top, the camerawork flashy and giddily self-conscious, and the script tends to a certain smugness toward its own characteristics.’ (ibid.)

Quentin Tarantino is a master of *neo noir*. B. Ruby Rich describes him as its ‘magician’. (ibid.) Quentin Tarantino is also a self-confessed Elmore Leonard fan. He has claimed that in his scripts he has tried to bring an Elmore Leonard style story to the screen. (Tarantino, *Reservoir Dogs* xii) Since this statement Tarantino has filmed the Elmore Leonard novel *Rum Punch*, as *Jackie Brown* (1997). It is this style which also signals Tarantino as a writer/director of *neo noir*. Martin Amis, reviewing Elmore Leonard’s new book, wrote about him, ‘He (Leonard) understands the post-modern world, the world of wised-up rabble and zero authenticity.’ (Rich 8)

This is Tarantino too, and as Ruby Rich points out, ‘That, dear reader, is the universe of Neo Noir.’ (ibid.)

## Conclusion

The *noir* male is a composite character. His construction is a mirror of almost all that is *film noir*. The darkness of the *noir* look indicates the darkness of the *noir* male soul. The contrast of shadow and light reflect the internal division with which the protagonist struggles; the confusion inside can be seen in the confused chronology. The

male in *noir* is outside the accepted 'norm' of mainstream society, just like the city in *noir*; an alien place.

In the chapter past we have outlined the basic features of *film noir*, thinking of their relationship to the *noir* male. In the following chapter we will relate these features to *Reservoir Dogs* and its characters, reconstructing the *noir* male as we go.

V.

*Reservoir Dogs*

*What the fuck am I doing here? I felt funny about this job right off. As soon as I felt it I should have said 'No thank you', and walked. But I never fucking listen. Every time I ever got burned buying weed, I always knew the guy wasn't right. I just felt it. But I wanted to believe him.*

**Mr. Pink** (Tarantino, *Reservoir Dogs* 20)

*He was the only one I wasn't a hundred per cent on. I should have my fucking head examined for goin' forward when I wasn't a hundred per cent. But he seemed like a good kid, and I was impatient and greedy and all the things that fuck you up.*

**Joe Cabot** (Tarantino, *Reservoir Dogs*

106)

In the following chapter I will be using neoformalism and *film noir*, as they were outlined in the previous chapters, for a study of Quentin Tarantino's directorial debut, *Reservoir Dogs*. The purpose of this application of neoformalism and *film noir*, will be to show that the characters in *Reservoir Dogs* present a composite construction of the *noir* male. As was indicated in the previous chapter, the *noir* male reflects the other characteristics which define *film noir*, within the traits which constitute his own character. The existence of the other defining characteristics of *film noir* therefore supports and strengthens the character of the *noir* male. To support the argument that the *noir* male character exists in *Reservoir Dogs*, it is necessary that the film also have other *noir* characteristics. As such, the film *Reservoir Dogs* as a whole, will be shown to contain many of the basic elements of *noir*, and that these elements support the construction of the *noir* male in *Reservoir Dogs*.

Specific comparative reference will be made with the Stanley Kubrick film, *The Killing*, a recognized *film noir*.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Killing* is listed as a *film noir* by Silver and Ward in their comprehensive collation. It is also mentioned by other writers on *film noir*, including Frank Krutnik.

## *Reservoir Dogs* – Who Killed Nice Guy Eddie?

Before dissecting *Reservoir Dogs* it will be useful to have a brief synopsis of the plot and an outline of the characters which will be discussed as the chapter proceeds.

*Reservoir Dogs* is Quentin Tarantino's directorial debut, and his third commercial screenplay behind *True Romance* (1993) and *Natural Born Killers* (1994). Of the three, *Reservoir Dogs* was released first – in 1992 – after premiering at the Sundance Film Festival.

With the exception of two very brief non-dialogue parts the cast is entirely male. The group is lead by Joe Cabot (Lawrence Tierney), and his son Nice Guy Eddie (Chris Penn). The two assemble a collection of 'gangsters' to pull off a diamond heist. Each of the crew is given a colour-code name. Two are introduced as old friends of Joe and Nice Guy Eddie – Larry aka Mr. White (Harvey Keitel) and Vic Vega (brother of *Pulp Fiction*'s Vincent)<sup>2</sup> aka Mr. Blonde (Michael Madsen). Freddy aka Mr. Orange<sup>3</sup> (Tim Roth), is an undercover police officer who infiltrates the group. Mr. Pink (Steve Buscemi), Mr. Blue (Eddie Bunker), and Mr. Brown (Quentin Tarantino), complete the 'Dogs', a term I will henceforth use to refer to the team of assembled gangsters. Two other characters feature significantly, one is Holdaway (Randy Brooks), a colleague of Freddy. The other is Marvin Nash (Kirk Baltz), the young uniformed police officer tortured by Mr. Blonde.

The film opens with the Dogs having breakfast at a diner, conversing about Madonna and the value of tipping. This is not the chronological beginning of the story however. We later find that Joe Cabot has assembled these characters to carry out a diamond heist. But the police are waiting at the scene of the crime, the planned heist goes awry and the Dogs – predominantly – escape amidst a shoot out. They rendezvous at a warehouse where they try to figure out what went wrong, believing they

---

<sup>2</sup> This is only one of numerous character relations throughout Tarantino's films. Brooker and Brooker (93) list a range of such character relations – although I believe some have more tentative connections than others.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout the text Tim Roth's character will predominantly be referred to as Mr. Orange. However, at times his character is specifically played as Freddy, the police officer – not Mr. Orange, the undercover cop as gangster. When the character is specifically being played as Freddy, this name will be used in place of Mr. Orange (This division may of course be seen as a reflection of the *noir* male's divided nature).

have been set-up. Mr. Orange, shot in the stomach following the heist, spends his time at the warehouse adding to an ever increasing pool of blood around him. While at the warehouse the larger picture unfolds with flashback sequences; we receive basic backgrounds on Larry, Vic Vega, and the heist planning; we learn that Mr. Blue and Mr. Brown are dead; and we learn that Mr. Orange is a police officer and they *have* been set-up. At the warehouse, during the torturing of a young police officer, Mr. Blonde is shot by Mr. Orange. Joe Cabot eventually finds his way to the warehouse and points out Mr. Orange as the informer. Mr. White steps to Mr. Orange's defense and in a three way Mexican stand-off, Joe, Nice Guy Eddie, and Mr. White are all shot. Before dying Mr. White hears Mr. Orange confess and the tormented Mr. White shoots Mr. Orange as police officers enter the warehouse. Mr. White is then shot, again and finally, by the police. After the Mexican stand-off, Mr. Pink leaves the warehouse with the diamonds – he is presumably apprehended or possibly shot by the police outside. Except maybe Mr. Pink, all the Dogs die.

Additional fabula/syuzhet detail will be revealed as it is relevant to particular discussions.

### ***The Killing – A Day at the Races***

As with *Reservoir Dogs* it will be useful to have some background on *The Killing*, a comparative *film noir* for *Reservoir Dogs*.

Based on the Lionel White novel, *Clean Break*, *The Killing* was Stanley Kubrick's sixth film,<sup>4</sup> but the first which he was proud to have his name on. (Walker, A. 19) Like *Reservoir Dogs* it tells the story of a heist, with an ensemble team, which goes wrong. Like *Reservoir Dogs* the characters (mostly) die. Like *Reservoir Dogs* it has a multi-layered chronological structure. Like *Reservoir Dogs* it is a significant artwork in the tradition of *noir/gangster-heist* films.

*The Killing* stars Sterling Hayden as Johnny Clay, ex-convict orchestrator of the heist – which is the robbery of a racetrack. Clay brings together a collection of men who, for their own reasons, feel the benefit of the heist outweighs the risk. Mike

---

<sup>4</sup> Kubrick's first works were short films however, not features.

O'Reilly (Joe Sawyer) is a track bartender, George Peatty (Elisha Cook Jr.) is a track cashier, and Randy Kennan (Ted de Corsia) is a crooked cop with a large gambling debt. These four men are joined by Marvin Unger (Jay C. Flippen), and two hired hands who perform specific functions in the heist for a straight fee – Nikki Arane (Timothy Carey) a gun-loving psychopath, and Maurice Oboukhoff (Kola Kwariani) a wrestler. With his assembled team Johnny Clay enacts an elaborate, but effective, plan to steal a days takings from the track. Kubrick introduces each of the characters and their motives individually, establishing in particular the relationship between George Peatty and his wife Sherry (Marie Windsor). Sherry is the film's femme fatale, a manipulative and unloving wife who coaxes information from the belittled George so as to re-steal the money after the heist, with her lover Val (Vince Edwards).

In presenting the heist the films chronology fragments into parallel lines along which we view the robbery fully, and in detail, from different characters' points of view – with each new character perspective we return to an earlier chronological point. Eventually we have a complete picture of each character's role and where this role synchronizes with the other characters. It is an effective presentation. Johnny and Mike, the bartender, combine to get a gun and disguise into a locker in the staff area at the track. As the seventh race lines up – the race selected for the timing of the heist – Maurice starts a fight with Mike before taking on numerous track guards, creating a diversion so Johnny can slip through to the staff area. At the same time Nikki Arane shoots the race favourite, the horse Red Lightning. His actions are a further diversion and hold-up a decision on the race outcome – keeping the gamblers away from the betting windows and ensuring activity around the cash-handling area is minimized. Johnny dons the disguise – a clown mask – and with the gun enters the cashiers office, demanding that a large bag be filled with money. Leaving the office, Johnny throws the bag out a window to the police officer, Randy Kennan, waiting outside to transfer the bag to his squad car. Randy leaves the track with the cash, dropping it at a rented motel room for Johnny to pick-up later. Nikki Arane's task is successfully completed, but he is shot dead by a track guard while attempting to leave.

The other participants rendezvous later at Marvin's apartment and wait for Johnny to arrive with the heist takings. George's character, similar to Mr. Pink in

*Reservoir Dogs* at the warehouse rendezvous, is agitated about maybe being double-crossed. Instead of the expected Johnny, Val and a friend arrive to take the cash. After a shoot-out, all but George are dead. Badly wounded he staggers home to confront Sherry – whom he correctly identifies as responsible for this turn of events. He shoots her before dying himself. Johnny had arrived in time to see the wounded George stagger to his car. As agreed, should anything go wrong, he immediately leaves the scene with the intention of dividing the money at a later date. He transfers the cash to a rickety suitcase and meets his girlfriend, Fay (Colleen Gray) at the airport. Desperately wanting to take the suitcase as hand luggage, Johnny reluctantly agrees to regulations and the case is checked in. Outside with Johnny and Fay, we watch the suitcase being taken to the plane – precariously perched on the very top of the baggage trailer. In an instant, a small dog wriggles from its owner and yaps across the tarmac, the luggage tractor swerves and the suitcase of money plunges from its lofty position and crashes open by the plane. In a scene reminiscent of the gold dust in *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948)<sup>5</sup> the stolen notes flutter everywhere and away in the whirlwinds generated by the planes turning propellers. In shocked disbelief Fay hurries Johnny out of the airport, only to be approached by two FBI agents while they hopelessly attempt to hail a taxi. Johnny resolutely turns to accept his fate, muttering, “What’s the difference?”.

### ***Backgrounds and the Origins of Reservoir Dogs***

An important part of *film noir* is the background of the films. The background is therefore an appropriate place to begin an examination of the *noir* influence on *Reservoir Dogs*. As indicated in the discussion of backgrounds in the earlier chapter concerning neoformalism specifically, there are three types to be examined; other artworks; the everyday world; and an understanding of the distinction between artistic and practical usage of the medium. The following discussion will focus on the first two of these background forms.

---

<sup>5</sup> Both Phillips and Ottoson make this connection. However, in *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* the irony of the misfortune is recognised by the characters, who unlike Johnny Clay, manage to laugh.

One of the most notable backgrounds for *film noir*, as discussed in the previous chapter, is the pulp fiction of authors such as Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, and others. These original pulp writers, and contemporary writers who we can reasonably consider to have developed out of this tradition, have had a strong influence on Quentin Tarantino. The evidence is in his films – one, after all, is even titled *Pulp Fiction*.

In a radio interview with Quentin Cooper, Tarantino talked about the most influential of the hard-boiled pulps,

‘*Black Mask* magazine was a magazine devoted basically to pulp stories, you know, detectives and crime stories and most of the authors, you know, hard-boiled authors (who) have become associated with pulp fiction started off, before they started writing novels, writing short stories for *Black Mask* magazine. Almost every one of Raymond Chandler’s novels was first written as a short story that he later expanded into novels, and mostly for *Black Mask* magazine and *Detective Digest*, or you know, other magazines like it. But *Black Mask* was like, the most famous one.’

The comments highlight Tarantino’s familiarity with the pulps, and he has even been described as the ‘new point man on pulp’. (Dargis, ‘Pulp Instincts’ 6) Quentin Tarantino had an early interaction with the pulp fiction he has become most enamoured with when, at the age of fifteen, he unsuccessfully attempted to shop-lift a copy of Elmore Leonard’s *The Switch*. Afterwards he returned to the store and purchased the book. (Bernard 40) While not among the original writers of the hard-boiled fiction which spawned a large part of *film noir*, Leonard is a contemporary writer whose work follows in the style of the past pulps. As noted in the previous chapter, Leonard shows an understanding of the pulp world. Critiquing the book *Danger is my Business* – a history of the pulp magazines – Elmore Leonard stated, “*Danger is my Business* takes me back forty years to my beginnings. Thank God for the pulps!” (Server, on front cover) Quentin’s fondness for this contemporary pulp fiction is further evidenced by Miramax buying him the rights to four Elmore Leonard novels *Killshot*, *Bandits*, *Rum*

*Punch*, and *Freaky*. (Bernard 265) And, as was mentioned in the previous chapter, *Rum Punch* has been made into Tarantino's third directed feature, *Jackie Brown*. Finally, while discussing the film *Pulp Fiction*, Tarantino has stated, 'My stuff so far has definitely fallen into what I consider pulp fiction. I think *Reservoir Dogs* fits in that, *True Romance* fits in that. I always associate lurid crime fiction with pulp.' (Dargis, 'Pulp Instincts' 10)

While the literary fiction of the 'pulp' is one background which both the work of Quentin Tarantino and *film noir* share, another is other films – often classical genre stories that Tarantino refers to as 'old chestnuts'. (Tarantino, 'On 'Pulp Fiction'' 10)

Tarantino is widely recognized as a filmmaker transformed from a film fanatic with an encyclopedic knowledge of film. One article describes him as a 'bona fide film geek', before quoting him, 'Any time I saw a deficit in my education when it came to film, I always wanted to fill it.' (Spillman D3)

Michael Madsen has described Tarantino as, 'a walking human bibliography of old movies and characters.' (Bernard 170) Samuel L. Jackson has described him as a 'film sponge', (Spillman D3; Bernard 207) and the younger Quentin had no shortage of opportunities to absorb. With one of his stepfathers, a typical Friday consisted of going to a three, six, eight, and a midnight film screening. (Bernard 30)

I think it would be inaccurate to concur with the opinion that Tarantino is a film encyclopedia. But general consensus suggests that his knowledge of film is extensive, and he does not mind drawing on this knowledge when making his own films, 'I steal from every single movie ever made... I love it – if my work has anything it's that I'm taking this from this and that from that and mixing them together.' (ibid., 207)

I don't believe Tarantino has stolen 'from every single movie ever made', but certain contributions to his films would appear to come from a variety of miscellaneous sources, more further afield than three films *Reservoir Dogs* has been linked to, *The Killing*, the Ringo Lam film, *City on Fire* (1987), and *The Taking of Pelham 123* (1974). For example, the quotable words of Lawrence Tierney's Joe Cabot, "Okay ramblers, let's get to rambling." (Tarantino, *Reservoir Dogs* 11), are spoken word for word in a 1957 Elvis Presley film, *Loving You* (1957).<sup>6</sup> Something Tarantino, whose

---

<sup>6</sup> This, I was intrigued to find while watching the film.

first real acting job as an Elvis impersonator on *The Golden Girls*, would clearly know.<sup>7</sup> (Bernard 167)

A genre which both Tarantino, *Reservoir Dogs*, and *noir* share in drawing from, is the crime film. The difficulty of classifying *film noir* in relation to genre was raised in the previous chapter. Regardless of whether *film noir* is considered a genre, or a sub-genre of other crime films is not an issue here. What is much less debatable, and worth noting, is that the *noir* film has developed, in part, from (if not out of) the earlier crime films. The crime film is equally influential to *Reservoir Dogs*. Tarantino does not believe his films are *noir*, in response to *Pulp Fiction* he states, 'It's not *noir*. I don't do neo-*noir*. I see *Pulp Fiction* as closer to modern-day crime fiction.' (Tarantino, 'On "Pulp Fiction"' 10) The comment, 'I don't do neo-*noir*' suggests that he would apply this statement to *Reservoir Dogs* also. I think Tarantino's denial of *noir* may be based on an interpretation of it as a historically confined cycle, or a genre which is completely distinct from the crime film. This limiting misinterpretation is evidenced in his description of *Reservoir Dogs* as his *The Killing*, 'I was kinda like sorta saying, 'This is gonna be my *The Killing*.' (Bernard 179) Yet *The Killing* is generally excepted as *film noir*. Also, as was noted in the previous chapter, Tarantino's work fits comfortably into, at least, B. Ruby Rich's definition of *neo noir*.

Generally speaking, Tarantino works within the Classical Hollywood system, it is the basis of all Hollywood fare. However, like *film noir* Tarantino challenges some of our viewing conventions and pushes some of our classical expectations to excesses reminiscent of the hard-boiled tradition. This challenging of expectations will be further discussed later in the chapter, but here we can note that for both Tarantino and *noir*, a leaping point for such challenges is the B film.

As noted in the previous chapter, the B film offered the early architects of *film noir* style the playground in which to develop their films without financial risk. For Quentin Tarantino the B film was a staple diet – he has been described as a 'B-movie junkie'. (Bernard, on back cover) His films contain references to not only B films, but

---

<sup>7</sup> Tarantino apparently played Elvis as a young man (indicating a fondness for the image as presented through Elvis' films), while the others auditioning for the part played Elvis in his 'Vegas' years, as Tarantino put it, after Elvis had sold out.

what we might consider as B culture generally. Other than to note this B movie/culture influence, I will leave continued discussion of this to the next section of this chapter.

The artworks of pulp fiction, the crime film, and the B movie, are not the only backgrounds that *Reservoir Dogs* shares with *film noir*. We can also draw similarities from a second type of background – the real world. In this area we can turn our attention more specifically toward the *noir* male.

In the previous chapter we looked at where the *noir* male came from – citing the influences of wartime and post-war upheaval. A question we can ask is whether or not we can draw any contemporary comparison to match these forties individuals with the nineties males who have represented, and been represented in, the strong reappearance of *noir* styled films over the first half of the nineties decade particularly – films such as *Red Rock West* (1992), *The Last Seduction* (1994), and *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1995) to name three. What in our society provides for the same anxieties and paranoia that our parents or grandparents felt in the forties and fifties? This contemporary focus is not to suggest that *noir* has been on the shelf since the late fifties until more recent years. Not at all, various films have been gifted the *noir* label in the interim period. But *noir* has continued to rear its presence in short bursts like the seventies succession including, *The Long Goodbye*, *Chinatown*, and *Farewell My Lovely* (1975), and the early nineties saw *noir* enjoy another critical renaissance.

This is not intended to be a historical or sociological study, but here are some ideas. The period preceding the birth of *film noir* saw war and social upheaval. Power and money were being sought out by gangsters during prohibition; it was the first sexual revolution of the century with flappers liberating women on the social scene; and gender roles were being widely questioned as women filled traditional male roles through the war period.

In the eighties, power and money were again keywords as big business and the stock market boomed; another sexual revolution, and the Vietnam War had preceded this, from the late sixties and through the early seventies; and gender roles were being scrutinized as women were becoming increasingly prominent forces in the new socially dominant class – the business person. As we entered the eighties, sexual roles and sexuality had a new focus with greater openness for homosexuality, and a wake-up call

for the sexually liberated generation of the seventies with the emergence and awareness of HIV and AIDS. Leighton Grist adds racial tension, the rise of counter-culture and Watergate to the list of social influences of the time. ('Moving Targets and Black Widows' 270) B. Ruby Rich offers later socially significant events which sparked the environment in which *noir* could again flourish,

'Flash forward to the 90s... there are the angry militiamen of Waco and Oklahoma City. Instead of McCarthy, there's Newt. Instead of xenophobia – well, xenophobia. The end of the Cold War seems to have thrown the US into as much of a dither as its beginnings, old ideological formations are once again destined for the junk heap, and faith has gone missing. Whenever nobody can be trusted, society may disintegrate, but *noir* can flourish.' (8)

Certainly in the late eighties and nineties the male might have been justified in the anxiety he felt over his role in society – just as the original *noir* male had. As Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Margaret Thatcher held one of the most prominent and powerful roles any woman ever had. Her example was mirrored in business as the previous paragraph notes. If we look at the cinema, *Working Girl* (1988) springs to mind as an example of the attitudes that women were adopting. I am by no means suggesting that by the end of the eighties, or even now, women had achieved rightful equality with men in the professional environment. But, women were certainly on their way with more success than before. In response to this, the man's role was being questioned. Again, looking at cinema we find films in the early eighties like *Mr. Mom* (1983), and as the eighties progressed, *Three Men and a Baby* (1987), where males find themselves in domestic situations which they not only adapt to, but blossom in. Words like 'house-husband' became part of the vocabulary, and by the nineties the notion that the man would stay at home while the woman went out to work were not only reasonably entertained, but reality. Susan Jeffords notes this change and she locates the 'big switch' between the eighties and the new, more domesticated male, in 1991, (Jeffords 197) immediately prior to *Reservoir Dogs*.

The effect of the Vietnam War on the American psyche can not be underrated if we are to believe the media of the seventies and eighties with films like *The Deerhunter* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *First Blood* (1982), *Platoon* (1986), and others. On television the war was represented in shows such as *China Beach*, and through the Vietnam Veteran past of the male characters in shows like *Magnum PI*, *Knight Rider*, and *The A-Team*, again, among others. The Korean War never sparked the same interest in the American mindset – as viewed through its media. But, the Vietnam War, an active war from 1964 to 1973, created the environment of masculine alienation which, as can be seen from the original cycle of *film noir*, is a necessary prerequisite for the *noir* male. The male from the first cycle of *film noir* was alienated by returning to a world where the women left on the home front had taken on traditional masculine roles in order to keep the country working. This was coupled with the strong sense of deviation that the male felt, finding the rules by which he had lived through the war, the acceptance of killing and the relatively free sexual activity, to be unacceptable in the post-war context. The Vietnam War offered at least the same level of alienation to the returning soldier. For the Vietnam War veteran – the common soldier – the world that he returned to alienated him by refusing to appreciate the thankless role they had been required by their Government to play. The expectation of the returning soldier, an expectation formed from past experience and the plethora of war movies particularly about World War Two, was not fulfilled for the Vietnam soldier. The march on Washington DC on April 15, 1967 was a clear image of anti-war sentiment. The reasons for this sentiment are not for this thesis to explore or answer – but the fact that for the first time the realities of the war were nakedly displayed to the public via television is one source of ill-feeling. Events like the May 1970, Kent State incident (or massacre), where four Kent State University students in Ohio were killed, and others wounded, by National Guard troops in a State Governor ordered response to an anti-war protest, was another reason for distrust of the war and all those involved. Regardless of the reason why, the alienation of the returning Vietnam veteran was well explored in film in the late seventies and eighties. These Vietnam film releases ensured that the sense of masculine alienation and shared angst could be adopted by younger males (the market for this media in the early eighties) who could apply the emotions that were

represented to their own place in a society where their masculinity alone did not afford them the clear advantages it once had. In other domains of United States society (issues too large to discuss here) such as crime, homelessness, and racial tensions, the space for alienation was also generous.

If conflict, anxiety, and social alienation are prerequisites for the *noir* male, then the eighties and nineties can be seen to have offered opportunities mirroring the thirties and forties.

### ***The Dominant and Popular Culture in Reservoir Dogs***

It doesn't seem unfair to suggest that pulp fiction wallowed in its lack of literary status. The pulps were without pretence, they were fiction for the masses. Pulp fiction was a part of the popular culture of its time. Lee Server compares their place in society to that latterly held by comic books and television. (9) The *film noir* protagonist which grew out of this fiction was, equally, a street level popular culture product. There was no high art ideal being touted in *film noir*. Popular culture with an emphasis strong on street credentials was part of *film noir*, and as we shall see, this is the dominant feature of *Reservoir Dogs*.

The *noir* male comes from the ordinary stock of humankind. His lack of personal distinction is part of what makes him distinct among characters. Although the *noir* male is not necessarily defined by a particular social class, his language, his manners, and his attitude are generally 'common'. In *The Big Sleep* (1946), Humphrey Bogart as Marlowe says to Vivian (Lauren Bacall), 'I don't mind if you don't like my manners. I don't like 'em myself. They're pretty bad. I grieve over 'em on long winter evenings.' For the *noir* male, his education is generally from the streets – from experience, not books. It is this type of popular culture (*noir*) male that Quentin Tarantino brings to a pop culture influenced film.

Peter Biskind, writing about Quentin Tarantino, and *Reservoir Dogs* specifically, in *Premiere* magazine, noted, 'the formula was familiar, but the mischievous conflation of literary and lurid, high-cult and low-cult, was not.' (Biskind, 'An Auteur is Born' 96) The comment is interesting in that there is no suggestion of

what is really literary in *Reservoir Dogs*, except maybe for the influence of the pulps and authors such as Elmore Leonard. Only if we take the argument that the pulps have been instilled in more recent decades with some critical respectability might we call them literature with any connotation of 'high-cult' status. This would allow it (and also Tarantino's pulp-inspired script) to constitute both literature and lurid subject at the same time.

The low cult/low art contribution is easier to identify. Tarantino has infused his characters in *Reservoir Dogs* with a street sense and toughness, represented in their language and attitude. The characteristics fit equally well with the *noir* male. In *Murder My Sweet* (1944), Marlowe states, 'Okay, Marlowe, I said to myself, you're a tough guy.' And in *Reservoir Dogs* we hear the conversation,

Mr. White: 'Who's a tough guy, c'mon, who's a tough guy.'

Mr. Orange: 'I'm a tough guy, Larry.'<sup>8</sup>

But, the toughness of the *noir* male can be broken (and often is by the femme fatale). Brannom, in *The Asphalt Jungle* states, 'You big boys, what've you got? Front, nothing but front. And when that slips...' In *Reservoir Dogs*, Mr. Blonde interrupts a confrontation between Mr. White and Mr. Pink as they're pointing their guns at each other, 'You kids don't play so rough. Somebody's gonna start crying.'

The popular culture influence on the *noir* male extends in *Reservoir Dogs* to their habits and taste. They eat fast food, and they consume action movies and pop music, for example, Mr. Blonde enters the rendezvous drinking a fast food coke and after a show of testosterone, comments to Mr. White, 'You're a big Lee Marvin fan, aren't you? Me too.' (Tarantino, *Reservoir Dogs* 44)

The pervasive pop culture references that Quentin Tarantino brings to *Reservoir Dogs*, and which support the notion of streetwise popular culture *noir* protagonists, is part of Tarantino's world. It is a suitable suggestion that *Reservoir Dogs* owes this streetwise style, not so much to any tough-guy street experiences of Tarantino, but to the popular pulp culture with which Tarantino educated himself. He is an unashamed

---

<sup>8</sup> This dialogue is in the film only, not Tarantino's original script.

devourer of pop culture and it is impossible to imagine from all that can be learned of Tarantino, that he would disagree with Susan Sontag's statement that there is, 'a good taste of bad taste', and that, 'The discovery of the good taste of bad taste can be very liberating.' (Klinger 134)

Tarantino's films are riddled with references to what in *noir* terms might be described as lurid or base, what we might also call low-cult, 'bad taste', exploitation cinema (notably blaxploitation) of the seventies decade (clearly the most formative decade for Tarantino's relationship with pop culture – covering his years, from age seven to seventeen).

In *Reservoir Dogs* the characters mention icons such as John Holmes, and discuss Pam Grier and her roles. Nice Guy Eddie compares a female to Christie Love, "Member that TV show *Get Christie Love?* She was a black female cop. She always used to say, "You're under arrest, sugar."" (Tarantino, *Reservoir Dogs* 86) In the discussion of who played the character, Christie Love, Pam Grier is mentioned. Mr. Pink replies, 'No, it wasn't Pam Grier, Pam Grier was the other one. Pam Grier made the movies. *Christie Love* was like a Pam Grier TV show, without Pam Grier.' (ibid.) In *Jackie Brown* Tarantino casts Pam Grier in the title role. *Reservoir Dogs* features a seventies pop radio station, K-Billy's super sounds of the seventies, references to *The Fantastic Four* cartoon characters, and a Silver Surfer poster which is prominently placed in Freddy/Mr. Orange's apartment – a reference not only to the pop cartoon character, but arguably to Richard Gere and the film *Breathless* (1983), in which the Silver Surfer features strongly as Gere's characters icon. This in turn could be regarded as a reference to the Jean-Luc Godard film, *A Bout de Souffle* (1960), the film of which *Breathless* is a remake. With Godard being a favourite director of Tarantino, this is a connection, albeit vague, Tarantino would most probably entertain.

Tarantino makes the most of his pop culture sensitivities in the restaurant scene in *Pulp Fiction* where John Travolta and Uma Thurman's characters are served by various pop culture icons, such as Marilyn Monroe, James Dean and Buddy Holly. The menu of the restaurant, *Jackrabbit Slim's* contains dishes such as a Douglas Sirk steak – available 'burnt to a crisp, or bloody as hell'. While eating they are surrounded by pop movie posters like *Attack of the 50-foot Woman* (1958).

These pop culture references are a dominating influence in his films and they are ingrained in the tone of his films. By pervading the films of Quentin Tarantino, these pop references reflect the popular (low) culture world that defines the popular pulp world of the *noir* male. It is an environment in which the *noir* male is comfortable, and it is an environment which supports the *noir* male.

### **Blood on the Walls – Defamiliarization and Challenging the Spectator**

We have noted that for the formalists, art exists to recover the sensation of life, to make the stone *stony*. Art exists to restore our perceptions' keenness; to take our habitual and automatic responses to everyday stimuli and raise them to a conscious level. Victor Shklovsky sees this as the purpose of art and he sees art achieving this by making objects 'unfamiliar', by 'making strange' the once familiar, the habitual.

In practice, and especially in the consumer conscious Hollywood cinema, art can be seen to ignore this ideal. Genre films utilize, and rely on, their familiarity with films that have preceded them. Classical Hollywood cinema relies on the audiences automatic response to – and acceptance of – many cinematic conventions, in order to successfully present it's product.

Having said this, the cinema would not survive if it consistently manufactured identical material and throughout cinema history often the most influential and successful (albeit sometimes retrospectively) films have been those which have challenged their contemporary conventions and produced a less familiar work.

Producing a less familiar work does not necessarily mean producing a film that is full of new ideas. As mentioned above, Quentin Tarantino has acknowledged that he has stolen from every single movie ever made. An exaggeration certainly, but Thompson suggests in *Breaking the Glass Armor* that,

'most meanings that are used in films will of necessity be existing ones. Truly new ideas rarely appear in philosophy or economics or the natural sciences, and we can hardly expect great artists to be great and original thinkers as well...

Rather, artists usually deal with existing ideas and make them seem new through defamiliarization.’ (13)

As was noted in the first chapter, defamiliarization is to some extent, In the eye of the spectator and Quentin Tarantino, like the neoformalist theoretician, is very aware of the spectator. Neoformalism suggests that there are four levels, or processes, where we interact with the film medium. These are listed and discussed in the earlier chapter. The two levels which are most interesting to this discussion and *Reservoir Dogs* are the preconscious and conscious activities.

If we go back over previous discussion of *film noir* in this work, then we have a picture of *noir* as, among other things, a somewhat experimental film style which utilized its low budget (and corresponding low risk) to push certain Hollywood cinematic boundaries. Two such fields of experimentation being the visual style, such as the lighting and framing of shots, and the use of time. In the spectators preconscious activity, the spectator draws automatically on knowledge learned from past experience to construct the devices which the film presents into a cohesive and coherent whole. If a spectator is presented with devices which do not comfortably gel with past experience of cinematic devices (devices which are unfamiliar, or defamiliarized), then the spectator is forced to process the information they are presented with, on a conscious level. *Noir* likes its techniques – it is a self-conscious style. It employs techniques which are disorientating to the spectator, such as the jumbled use of time, techniques which force the spectator to a conscious level of interaction. *Noir* does not abandon the spectator to such a purely conscious experience, the classical Hollywood cinema remains an anchor. But *noir* and the films of Tarantino also, regularly defamiliarize devices and take normally preconscious viewer responses to the conscious level.

In *Reservoir Dogs* Tarantino uses particularly long takes, and shoots scenes from angles which would not normally be contemplated in mainstream Hollywood fare. Shots such as Mr. White and Mr. Pink talking in a side room at the rendezvous, a long shot down a hallway, which is repeated in the opening scenes of *Pulp Fiction* as Jules and Vincent discuss foot massages in an apartment building. Another unusual shot repeated in both *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction* is the shot of the gangsters in each

film opening a car boot, shot looking out from the boot. By using these shots, Tarantino takes us from the disassociated perspective we are more familiar with, and involves us in the film. This is not to say we are more engaged with the narrative, but we do become more aware of our perspective. By putting his characters at the end of a hallway, we cease to take our perspective for granted and become more aware of our position as voyeurs of the action, we become aware of the private nature of the conversation we are listening to.

Violence is a notable part of *Reservoir Dogs*. The film is not riddled with violence like, for example, a *Die Hard* (1988), or a *Terminator* (1984) film. But the level of violence in many Hollywood action films is often unrecognized due to an acceptance of a certain level, and tone, of violence in these types of film. What *Reservoir Dogs* does to the spectator is wrench the violence from any level of preconscious passive reception, and slam it firmly against our conscious awareness. He makes a clear distinction between the ‘cartoon violence’ of most films and real life violence,

‘In *Reservoir Dogs*, I want it to hurt... it makes it harder not to watch... Real violence is a couple laughing one minute and the next minute there is blood on the walls.’ (Bernard 210) ‘People go on about Tim Roth bleeding to death in ‘*Reservoir Dogs*’, but that’s the reality. If someone is shot in the stomach, that’s how they die. Put them in one spot in a room and they’re going to have a pool growing around them.’ (Tarantino ‘On Pulp Fiction: As Told to Manohla Dargis’ 19)

Tarantino’s direction of the scene in which Mr. Blonde tortures the police officer is reminiscent of another Kubrick film besides *The Killing*. The disconcerting juxtaposition of music, which the assailant actively participates in, with violence, is a device seen in *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), when a rape and assault are juxtaposed with the singing of the song ‘Singin’ in the Rain’.<sup>9</sup> By presenting the violence in this way, by not softening it, Tarantino successfully defamiliarizes cinema violence. A

---

<sup>9</sup> Hilferty makes this connection. But, I believe it comes readily to the mind of any viewer of both films.

defamiliarizing characteristic which could be assumed to be have been held by the classical *noirs* on their original releases.

Tarantino is clearly very aware of his representation of violence, and he appears genuinely in tune with viewer reaction,

‘When you’re doing violence in movies, there’s going to be a lot of people who aren’t going to like it, because it’s a mountain they can’t climb. And they’re not *jerks*. They’re just not into that. And they don’t *have* to be into it. There’s other things that they can see. If you *can* climb that mountain, then I’m going to give you something to climb.’ (Tarantino, *Reservoir Dogs* xv; *True Romance* ix)

### ***Device and the Fragmenting of Time***

Devices in *Reservoir Dogs* have a number of functions that mirror those of *film noir*. However, I will limit this discussion to one device, the functioning of time.

The chronology in *Reservoir Dogs* is one of its most distinctive features. It is also one of its more recognizable similarities with *The Killing*. In the earlier chapter concerning *film noir* we looked at the function of the skewed chronology which is often, though not necessarily, a feature of *film noir*. Foster Hirsch’s comments were noted, that the recurrent use of jumbled time sequences support the characterizations in their crookedness and deviousness, and that motivation in *noir* is often circuitous and confusing – like the handling of time. (74-75)

More specifically, Robert Sklar’s differentiation between ‘real’ and ‘remembered’ time, which he discusses in relation to *Double Indemnity*, (309) can be applied to the way time works in *Reservoir Dogs*. His comments that the unusual juxtaposition of the temporalities allows the spectator a premonition of both what will occur, and what has occurred, could stand unaltered as an accurate description of the temporal activity in *Reservoir Dogs*. Through a mental reordering of the juxtaposition of the temporal lines in *Reservoir Dogs* we are able to construct a, more or less, cohesive series of events. In neoformalist terms we view the *syuzhet* – the plot as it is arranged and presented in the film, which in *Reservoir Dogs* is loaded with examples of

roughened form (devices making perception less easy), and while viewing the syuzhet we slowly construct the fabula – the chronologically ordered story. In *Reservoir Dogs* we can never be one hundred percent sure of the accuracy of the chronology which we construct. The film has very few bound motifs (those actions which are necessary for the overall forward progression of the narrative), it has a simple fabula. Rather, *Reservoir Dogs* is loaded with free motifs (those actions which delay the fundamental narrative progression). This, with the skewed chronology, makes the formation of the neoformalist staircase construction less than straightforward – it is not a staircase we could comfortably walk up. But this is a feature of *noir*. It is true of *The Killing*, despite Kubrick's film allowing us to more easily construct a straightforward chronological sequence.

Because devices can become so familiar that they lose any defamiliarizing quality they may have had, they can be up-dated by changes to the device, but which leave the function the same – such devices being functional equivalents. The flashback, for example, is a familiar device – not necessarily provoking an automatized response in all its uses – but a familiar device nevertheless. The use of chronological structuring in *Reservoir Dogs* takes this device and defamiliarizes it by mixing temporal lines to such an extent that complete and accurate chronological sequencing is almost impossible – taking us well beyond the scope of usual flashback scenes, extending the film's use of roughened form at the same time.

The film has a circular structure which absorbs the action inside it. After the initial credits we see a bloodied Mr. Orange writhing on the back seat of a car driven by Mr. White. The events immediately prior to this are not depicted until the final stages of the film.

We enter the film at an unspecified time, but I believe we can place this scene on the morning of the heist – the characters are all in the uniform (black suit and tie) which they wear throughout the film's post-heist setting. In other clearly pre-heist scenes the characters wear non-uniform clothing. From this pre-heist breakfast we jump to Mr. White and a profusely bleeding Mr. Orange in a car heading to the post-heist rendezvous. This would appear to be the 'present' time setting of the feature from which all other scenes' temporal lines dislocate. Only the 'Mr. Orange' story, the

longest of the divergent temporal lines (and by no means seamless in its own temporal structure), converges tidily with the main temporal line when it connects with the opening post-credits scene. This connection made, the syuzhet nevertheless jumps forward to the point to which the main temporal line has progressed.

Taking the post-heist warehouse rendezvous scenes as the film's present temporal line, there are four distinct flashback sequences. Each of these flashback scenes return, more or less, to their point of departure from the warehouse and the film's 'present' chronological setting. The first of the flashbacks is the presentation of Mr. Pink's escape from the heist gone wrong, where we see him running down a crowded street while police officers chase him. The second flashback takes us to an earlier (but otherwise unspecified) chronological time, where we are introduced to Mr. White in Joe Cabot's office where Joe invites Mr. White to participate in the heist. The third flashback introduces Mr. Blonde. This flashback is the same in structure as the scene with Mr. White, introducing Mr. Blonde in Joe's office and enlisting him for the heist job. The two scenes establish the relationships between Joe and Eddie, with Mr. White and Mr. Blonde. The fourth flashback, which gives us the background of Mr. Orange, is the most significant of the four. Not only are we given background on Mr. Orange, but we are shown brief stages in the planning of the heist, and the fate of Mr. Orange, Mr. White, and Mr. Brown immediately after the heist. The temporal structure of this break from the warehouse setting, is the film's most confused and disjointed, as well as the most interesting. The most curious temporal phase is the flashback within flashback (leading to a scene with no temporal reality at all), relating of the 'commode story'.

As was noted in the previous chapter, the commode story's collection of scenes within a scene can be compared with the dream sequence in *Stranger on the Third Floor*. Both of these scenes are integrated into their film's reality, but both present fictions within that reality. The scene (or sequence of scenes) begins with Mr. Orange, as Freddy the cop, talking to a colleague, Holdaway, in a café. Holdaway is advising Freddy on his working relationship with Joe Cabot and the other gangsters. Holdaway asks Freddy if he used the 'commode story'. From the café, the scene cuts back in time to an urban rooftop where Freddy is advised by Holdaway to relate a humorous anecdote about a drug situation in order to aid his integration with the gangsters. Next,

the scene jumps forward in time to Freddy's apartment where, learning the lines from the script provided by his colleague, Freddy begins to relate the anecdote. The scene then jumps forward again to Freddy on a makeshift outdoor stage where, in front of Holdaway, he is continuing the anecdote without missing a sentence between location or temporal changes – however, now Freddy is speaking the lines freely, like somebody doing a last rehearsal. The scene jumps forward again to a bar where Freddy is now continuing the story in front of Joe, Nice Guy Eddie, and Mr. White. At this point, Freddy is relating the story comfortably, as if it is his own. Freddy gets to a point in the story where he relates needing to use the toilet. At this point the story breaks away from any temporal reality within the film as we see Freddy enter a 'fictional' bathroom, while in voice-over he continues the story. In the bathroom Freddy encounters four police officers talking, and a police dog – Freddy has a bag of marijuana. He slowly approaches the officers, and his voice-over narration is replaced by the strange representation of the 'fictional' Freddy continuing the anecdote in the bathroom, speaking in front of the officers. The scene takes a final twist as it comes alive completely. Freddy ceases the narration of the story and the officers begin talking, playing out the remainder of Freddy's humorous anecdote as fully represented reality. After the conclusion of the anecdote the scene cuts back to the bar where Freddy's story is clearly well received by the others. Finally, we cut back to Freddy and Holdaway in the café, at the temporal point where the 'commode story' began.

The function of the commode story reflects the function of chronological devices in previous *film noirs*; it reflects the division, confusion and paranoia of the *noir* male. These associations with the *noir* male will be elaborated on in the following section. The collection of changing locations can also be seen to reflect the development of Mr. Orange/Freddy as a *noir* male character – a development from a police officer to a transgressing gangster-related persona. In the commode story, within the continuity of the story, we watch Freddy develop from police officer, to role-player, to gangster associate, and finally to an act of (albeit imaginary) transgression as he enters the role of the drug-carrying criminal completely by playing the scene out as on-screen action. The return to the original café scene with Holdaway after this story is told, mirrors the redemption that Mr. Orange goes through in the real action of the film

when, having fully integrated himself with the criminals to the extent of having killed an innocent driver, he first kills Mr. Blonde and then confesses his true 'cop' identity to Mr. White. The transgressive development of Mr. Orange as a *noir* male will be discussed further in the following section.

Reflecting on transtextual motivation and chronology in *Reservoir Dogs*, we have already mentioned the similarity of jumbled time sequences with *noir* generally. I want to note the similarity with *The Killing* though, specifically. In Kubrick's film, through the representation of the heist itself, the chronological structure runs on parallel temporal lines. As the heist at the racetrack is carried out we follow one character at a time, viewing the heist from their perspective before turning back chronologically and reviewing the heist from another perspective. Eventually, after the heist we revert back to a single temporal line having been able to construct a very complete picture of the robbery and the roles of the gangsters involved. The way in which individual characters are distinguished by distinct temporal lines within the chronological structure is a device repeated in *Reservoir Dogs*. The device is further pronounced in *Reservoir Dogs* by the use of title screens introducing the characters of Mr. White, Mr. Blonde, and Mr. Orange.

Gene D. Phillips notes that the complex chronological order in *The Killing* is an element of *film noir*, and that it reflects a sense of hopelessness and disorientation. (29) Part of the disorientation of both *The Killing* and *Reservoir Dogs* is the feeling that once the characters have transgressed against the law, or another system of authority, the possibility of re-orientation within the temporal structure, and symbolically with normal society, is beyond their control. For example, in *The Killing*, once the characters have committed to the heist and the heist plans are enacted, the temporal lines split and do not converge again until the characters meet at the rendezvous where they will be killed. The converging of the temporal lines, the symbolic attempt at re-orientation within legitimate society, therefore corresponds with the meeting of their fates. In *Reservoir Dogs* this is most pronounced with the character of Mr. Orange. The chronological break from the warehouse to the temporal phase in the film which presents the background of Mr. Orange, contains the most disorientating temporal structure within the film (the commode story). As was just mentioned, and as will be discussed further

below, the commode anecdote offers a representation of the development of Mr. Orange's character as a transgressive *noir* male. Chronologically, as we might construct the fabula of *Reservoir Dogs*, the transgression of Mr. Orange which is largely presented through the flashback sequence, occurs prior to the rendezvous (at the warehouse), at which point, like the characters in *The Killing*, Mr. Orange has committed to his transgression. However, the transgression becomes most pronounced (we become fully aware of it) in the flashback. With the convergence of the chronological structure into a single temporal line back at the warehouse after this, and the arrival of the other Dogs to find Mr. Orange has shot Mr. Blonde, Mr. Orange meets his fate. Like *The Killing*, a re-orientation into normal or legitimate society, indicated by the suturing of the chronological structure, is beyond Mr. Orange's control. With the uniting of the temporal lines, comes the penalty for the transgression. As we will see in the following section, Mr. Orange does achieve a level of redemption, however this does not change his actual physical fate and he is still killed.

### ***Meaning and the Noir Male's Transgression***

*I'm a cop. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry.*

**Mr. Orange** (Tarantino, *Reservoir Dogs* 109)

As discussed, meaning is one of a film's devices. There are two types of denotative meaning, referential and explicit, and two types of connotative meaning, implicit and symptomatic. Referential meanings in *Reservoir Dogs* and *The Killing* are really very similar, acknowledging that their contemporary settings means references to period are 35 years apart. We are aware that both films are about criminal activities. We recognize the planning of criminal activity and the transgressing of laws. We understand the settings through references that denote the city, and being behind closed doors for the sake of privacy. Referential meanings are the least interesting theoretically, in that they simply involve recognition of references which we accept as reality based. Explicit meanings, though open to argument as to what one person reads compared with another, are more interesting.

On the level of explicit meaning, we can look to see if there are similarities between *Reservoir Dogs* and *The Killing*. One idea which both films share is that crime does not pay. In both films the transgressive characters are predominantly killed, a typical feature of *film noir*, and one which explicitly suggests that the act of transgressing against society does not pay. *Film noir* films share other explicit meanings which link them as *noirs*. Although non-*noir* films can have various aspects of these meanings also, it is the combination of these meanings which is common amongst *noir*. Some of these are features which denote the city is a dangerous place; sexually charged female influences, a femme fatale, cannot be trusted; paranoia is a reasonable emotion because someone probably is double-crossing you. Both *The Killing* and *Reservoir Dogs* have these meanings, with one exception. *Reservoir Dogs* does not explicitly state the femme fatale – *Reservoir Dogs* does not have any significant female characters. Nevertheless, *Reservoir Dogs* does share most of these explicit meanings with *film noir* and I will argue that the role of the femme fatale can be implicitly read into *Reservoir Dogs*.

The second level of meaning – connotative, is much more difficult to judge. What a viewer of the forties or fifties may have thought is not necessarily the reading that a viewer in the nineties might make. Reading both from a contemporary perspective however, we can find certain similarities. *Film noir* films are not subtle, most meanings are relatively explicit. I would suggest that *Reservoir Dogs* has meaning which while not explicitly stated as it is in most *film noir*, is implicit and in line with *film noirs* explicit meaning. For example, *film noir* makes explicit references regarding the relationship of the *noir* male and the femme fatale. As noted in the previous chapter relating specifically to *film noir*, the femme fatale's role has aspects which we can relate to from *Reservoir Dogs*. For one, she is a transgressive temptation for the *noir* male – the relationship is one where a dangerous and thinly held trust (if held at all), is a shaky bond (rarely is there any mutual love). She is also deadly – the transgressive relationship, once entered into, rarely has a happy ending.

Despite the lack of a female femme fatale (and her associated female-specific iconography) in *Reservoir Dogs*, we can still see these relationships at work. The fact that the core relationship roles are being fulfilled ensures that the *noir* male

characteristics of the male characters in *Reservoir Dogs*, as they relate to a femme fatale, are met despite the absence of the traditional female character.

The relationship of the femme fatale and the *noir* male can be found in two characters in particular, Mr. Orange and Mr. White. During the film Mr. Orange and Mr. White form a particular bond. Like the *noir* male and the femme fatale, the issue of trust is important. The two characters are presented as professional criminals who are introduced, and known to each other, only by their colour-coded names. The reason is to prevent them, or the other colour-coded gangsters, from providing useful information about each other to the police should any of them be caught. The gangsters are also forbidden to share other personal information. This edict is made by Joe Cabot, the leader and organizing influence. However, Mr. Orange and Mr. White develop the dangerous, and eventually fatal, trust of a *noir* male and a femme fatale. Like the *noir* male to the femme fatale, we can suggest that Mr. Orange the cop, is drawn to Mr. White the seasoned gangster. Taking the relationship between them, from a professional to a personal level, causes Mr. Orange to transgress against his responsibilities as a police officer and against the authority of the law. This transgression becomes fatal when, while escaping the failed heist, Mr. Orange is shot by a female driver whose car they are attempting to hijack. Mr. Orange instinctively shoots back, and kills the woman. Mr. Orange's reaction to his killing of the woman – shown through a facial close-up – indicates that he is shocked at his action. More than any other facial shot in the film, the expression Tim Roth, as Mr. Orange, presents here is representative of the *noir* actor's look, epitomizing internal division and angst. He knows that his close involvement with Mr. White has caused him to transgress against the law he is otherwise bound to hold. As was mentioned above, the development of this relationship is mirrored in the development of Freddy in the commode story. In the ordered chronology of the fabula, Freddy begins in the film as a police officer, just as he does in the commode story sequence. By going undercover, Freddy assumes the role of Mr. Orange, an experienced gangster. In the commode story, Freddy becomes a role-player as he rehearses the anecdote. By developing the genuine friendship with Mr. White, Freddy as Mr. Orange becomes an associate of the gangster group, more intimate than his role within the law demands. In the commode story this is mirrored by

Freddy's friendship with the gangsters as he relates the anecdote for them. When his relationship with Mr. White causes Mr. Orange to transgress as we have noted above, this is mirrored in the commode story by Freddy's assumption of the transgressive gangster persona when he plays out the role in the anecdote as reality.

The *noir* male's act of transgression, through company with the femme fatale is central to the relationship these characters have. This transgression is readable in *Reservoir Dogs*.

This *noir* male/femme fatale-modeled transgressive relationship between Mr. Orange and Mr. White can also be reversed, with Mr. White taking the role of the transgressive male. For Mr. Orange, the authority against which he transgresses is the law, for Mr. White the authority is Joe Cabot and the gangster's own codes of practice. By accepting the friendship with Mr. Orange, and in particular by revealing his name, Mr. White transgresses against Joe's rules for the conduct of the Dogs. Throughout the film, further interaction between these two characters supports the bond they have, a bond which presents characteristics of a couple relationship. Mr. Orange says, 'Larry, I'm so scared, would you please hold me.' (Tarantino, *Reservoir Dogs* 16), and Mr. White does, gently combing Mr. Orange's hair while he cradles him. Mr. White later defends Mr. Orange against Mr. Pink, who suggests that maybe Mr. Orange is the 'rat' they have among them, 'That kid in there is dying from a fuckin' bullet that I saw him take. So don't be calling him a rat.' (ibid., 28) The aggressive protection that Mr. White offers for Mr. Orange is testament to the strength of their relationship. Mr. Pink responds, 'Look asshole, I'm right! Somebody's a fuckin' rat. How many times do I hafta say it before it sinks in your skull.' (ibid.) Mr. Pink's rebuke of Mr. White's protective position indicates that Mr. White has let the relationship with Mr. Orange interfere with his judgement and caused him to transgress against the professionalism demanded of him by his fellow Dogs

The relationship of transgression between these two characters, for each others sake, leads ultimately to their deaths. The final and fatal transgression for Mr. White is against Joe Cabot, when Mr. White threatens the life of Joe Cabot, to protect Mr. Orange. In an exchange at the end of the film, Joe singles out Mr. Orange as working with the cops. Mr. White responds, 'Joe, trust me on this, you've made a mistake. He's

a good kid... I know this man, and he wouldn't do that.' (ibid., 105) When Joe ignores Mr. White's pleas and points his gun at Mr. Orange, Mr. White directs his gun at Joe and tells him, 'Joe, if you kill that man, you die next.' (ibid., 107) This transgression against authority, in the form of Joe, and against gangster code – a defining part of Mr. White's masculine identity as a gangster – costs him his life as Joe Shoots Mr. Orange, Mr. White shoots Joe, and Mr. White is shot by Nice Guy Eddie who has drawn his gun in protection of his father.

As is the case in many *film noirs*, the *noir* male finds some redemption of his masculine identity at the films conclusion, although it doesn't necessarily save his life. Harvey Keitel suggests, 'Mr. Orange, who represents the law, has to seek redemption for carrying out what the law demands of him.' (Thompson, D. 25) It is true that Mr. Orange represents the law, and it is true that Mr. Orange has to seek redemption. But Mr. Orange does not need to seek redemption for carrying out what the law demands of him, but for transgressing beyond what the law demands of him – for developing a real relationship with Mr. White. Earlier, in the absence of the other Dogs, Mr. Orange temporarily saves the tortured young police officer by killing Mr. Blonde and this action helps restore Mr. Orange to a place within the law. But it's in his dying moments when Mr. Orange confesses to Mr. White (much as Walter Neff confesses to Keyes, in *Double Indemnity*) that he is a police officer, that Mr. Orange finally places himself back within the law and somewhat restores his masculine identity as an officer of the law. His post-confession restoration to a position within the law, is evidenced by his finally being shot (as a cop, by a gangster) by an agonized Mr. White. As was mentioned earlier, this redemption and (at least partial) restoration is mirrored in the commode story sequence where, having fully assumed the role of a gangster by acting out the anecdote as reality, Freddy completes the story and the scene reverts back to the café where he is once again the police officer. For Mr. White, the shooting of Mr. Orange is a rejection of his transgressive relationship with his former friend, and an acknowledgement of Mr. Orange's position within the law. Finally, this shooting of Mr. Orange as a police officer serves as an attempt by Mr. White at redemption and reversal of his own transgressive actions against his system of authority as a professional gangster. By carrying out the action, and in turn being shot by other police

arriving on the scene, Mr. White does restore some part of his masculine identity as a gangster.

A final point concerning the female-role influence on Mr. Orange as a *noir* figure, is his relationship with Holdaway, his police officer colleague. While Mr. White affects Mr. Orange as a femme fatale might, Holdaway can be compared with *noirs* other female – the domestic woman. While Holdaway does not represent the small-town middle American wholesomeness of the traditional domestic woman, he does offer an alternative figure to Mr. White and a voice against transgression. In the café as Freddy and Holdaway are discussing the criminal reference Freddy received which helped set him up with Joe Cabot, Freddy says of the reference, Long Beach Mike, ‘Do right by him, he’s a good guy. I wouldn’t be inside if it wasn’t for him.’ (Tarantino, *Reservoir Dogs* 69) To which Holdaway firmly responds, ‘Long Beach Mike isn’t your amigo, he’s a fuckin’ scumbag. The piece of shit is selling out his real amigos, that’s how much of a good fuckin’ guy he is.’ (ibid.) Holdaway makes no illusion of which side of the law Freddy should be on, and what his perspective on the gangsters should be. At the same time Freddy indicates his inclination for accepting criminals as positive associates, which will lead to his transgression with Mr. White. Like the *noir* male rejecting the domestic woman for the femme fatale, Freddy rejects Holdaway’s assessment of the criminal fraternity and soon enters into his fatal relationship with Mr. White.

The example of the *noir* male’s transgression aided by the femme fatale-like relationship further supports the recognition of the *noir* male in the characters of *Reservoir Dogs*. Another indication is the urban setting of the film, and the Dogs interaction with their environment.

### ***Meaning and the City***

We have already noted an explicit meaning in *film noir*, of the city as a dangerous place. But there are implicit meanings relating to the city also. It was discussed in the previous chapter that the city in *noir* is distinguished by its bleakness and isolation and the way in which the hero finds himself uneasy in this environment,

and aware of himself as an outsider. We can find these traits implied in *Reservoir Dogs* by looking at the way in which the characters relate to the film's urban locations. The film is predominantly set in the warehouse rendezvous, a bleak and relatively dark environment. Within this environment the characters are often physically isolated in the sense that they maintain a large zone of personal space. Often when the characters do close this space it is provoked by conflict, which further marks the characters as isolated individuals rather than a group. Such conflict includes Mr. Pink and Mr. White arguing; Mr. Blonde's entrance and argument with Mr. White; the introduction of the young police officer to the warehouse and his initial assault; and the arrival of Joe Cabot at the warehouse and the killings that follow (the observation is a generalization and there are exceptions, such as Mr. White and Mr. Orange's arrival at the warehouse). The way the positions of the characters are framed by Tarantino, wide and long shots which often set characters deep within the frame, further implies the sense of isolation.

Mr. Orange, as a key *noir* figure in the film, maintains the most consistent isolation within the rendezvous space as he lies near a corner bleeding from his gunshot wound. In this position Mr. Orange is almost a literal presentation of Foster Hirsch's definition of the *noir* actor as a figure which does not claim the screen, but rather remains a figure in the *noir* landscape. As soon as we learn that he is an undercover police officer, Mr. Orange also appears as a conspicuous outsider in the environment, and the previously implied sense of isolation becomes more explicit as we recognize the physical isolation reflecting on his character as the isolated cop amongst the gangsters. The sense of isolation is then increasingly pronounced once, having shot Mr. Blonde, he is left alone with the tortured young police officer. This increasing isolation and appearance as an outsider reaches its peak when, on the return of the other Dogs, all suspicion falls on him until his cover is finally and fatally exposed to all the characters. During this last part of the film, the physical positioning of the Dogs is closer, but the physical isolation of Mr. Orange is maintained by his location on the ground and the pool of blood that surrounds him. In the commode story, Mr. Orange/Freddy's isolation is highlighted by his positioning as the only reality in the entirely fictional environment of the scene's bathroom. His reality in the fictional setting is emphasized when he continues to relate the story while standing face to face with the fictional police officers.

The 'reality' of Freddy is not maintained, as he melts into the fiction and acts out the remainder of the anecdote, but his isolation is maintained by his positioning in the anecdote as a criminal, and therefore on the other side of the law from the police officers. This physically presented and explicitly represented isolation within the film's environment further highlights Freddy/Mr. Orange's strong *noir* characterization within the film.

### ***Meaning – Theme and Mood***

*Every nerve ending, all of my senses, the blood in my veins, everything I had was screaming, 'Take off, man, just take off, get the fuck outta there!' Panic hit me like a bucket of water. First there was the shock of it – BAM, right in the face! Then I'm just stanin' there drenched in panic.*

**Freddy/Mr. Orange** (Tarantino, *Reservoir Dogs* 76)

In the previous chapter the recurring themes of *noir* were considered with reference to *film noirs* varied storylines. While a common form of the *noir* story can be constructed, it cannot be accurately representative of all *film noir*, and it is theme which is the more common thread. Frank Krutnik's comments were noted that fatalism, despair and paranoia, along with the combination of violence, death and sexuality are a combination which can be found in most *film noirs*. We could also add anxiety to the list.

Jonathan Buchsbaum, quoting from Place and Peterson's *Film Comment* article, concurs with, and adds to, the list when considering mood, 'the characteristic *film noir* moods of claustrophobia, paranoia, despair, and nihilism constitute a world view.' (89) If we consider this in relation to explicit and implied, and even symptomatic meaning in *Reservoir Dogs*, and as it relates to the male characters, we found some supportive evidence that *Reservoir Dogs* shares these themes and *noir* world view.

Looking back at the discussion on the transgressive relationship between Mr. Orange and Mr. White, we have an example of the fatalism which is part of the defining nature of both *film noir*, and the *noir* male. The retrospective inevitability of the

outcome of their transgression is *noirs* fatalistic theme at work in *Reservoir Dogs*. In *The Killing*, it is the transgression of George Peatty when he gives Sherry information which leads to her planning to re-steal the money taken from the track, that is fatal. The most detailed planning of Johnny Clay cannot counter this fatalistic process (response to the transgression) from working through to its conclusion. The unavoidable fatal conclusion is the same consequence for transgression in *Reservoir Dogs*. Talking about the Mexican standoff Tarantino says, 'I never saw the Mexican standoff taken to what I consider to be the logical conclusion, which is when everyone fucking shoots everybody else because there is no where else to go.' (Rochlin 80) This inevitable conclusion to the Mexican standoff, and which is portrayed at the conclusion of *Reservoir Dogs*, can be seen as symbolic of the inevitable outcome of the transgressive action once taken.

Returning to the environment of *Reservoir Dogs*, we find implied examples of claustrophobia. A majority of the action takes place in enclosed spaces with an association of fear. The rendezvous, a darkly enclosed (though not exactly small) space is continuously filled with fear and anxiety. Mr. Pink maybe exhibits the greatest anxiety of the Dogs (to be discussed shortly), and both Mr. Orange (naturally) and Mr. White are fearful of Mr. Orange's death – with an added anxiety for Mr. White over the fear that they have been set up, and for Mr. Orange over the fear that his cover will be exposed. One of the strongest examples of fear associated with this enclosed space, is the torture of the young police officer. The scene provokes not only fear from the police officer, but anxiety in the viewer also. The implication of fear and the enclosed space is strengthened by the counter-point offered when Mr. Blonde goes outside the warehouse to get petrol from the back of his car. When he commences his torture of the police officer, Mr. Blonde tunes a radio and begins listening to Stealer's Wheel's 'Stuck in the Middle with You'. The music is a prominent feature in the scene, with Mr. Blonde dancing to the music as he taunts and tortures the cop. However, when Mr. Blonde leaves the dark enclosed space of the warehouse the music fades away behind the closed warehouse door, and Mr. Blonde walks to his car in quiet, bright sunshine. The relative serenity outside the warehouse, also offers the viewer a relieving break from the intensity of the action indoors. This disparity between the inside and the outside strengthens the implied association of fear with the enclosed space of the

warehouse, which in turn strengthens the implication of claustrophobia within the film.<sup>10</sup>

Mr. Pink offers a good example of paranoia in *Reservoir Dogs*. On his arrival at the rendezvous Mr. Pink makes his fears about the trustworthiness of his fellow Dogs clear. That his suspicion that they have been set-up is correct, does not undermine the fact his suspicion and tension are exaggerated to a paranoid extent, especially once he learns that Mr. White has divulged his name to Mr. Orange. In a confrontation with Mr. White, the highly agitated Mr. Pink responds,

‘I didn’t create this situation, I’m just dealin’ with it. You’re actin’ like a first-year fuckin’ thief. I’m actin’ like a professional. They get him, they can get you, they get you, they get closer to me, and that can’t happen... I didn’t tell him my name. I didn’t tell him where I was from. I didn’t tell him what I knew better than to tell him. Fuck, fifteen minutes ago, you almost told me your name.’ (Tarantino, *Reservoir Dogs* 41)

The commode story with Mr. Orange also represents paranoia as the drug carrying Freddy relates his fear at finding the police talking in the bathroom,

“The German Shepherd starts barkin’. He’s barkin’ at me. I mean it’s obvious he’s barkin’ at me... And all those sheriffs are lookin’ at me and they know. They can smell it. As sure as that fuckin’ dog can, they can smell it on me.” (ibid., 76)

In the scene, Freddy elaborates on his sense of fear and panic, but unlike the fear of Mr. Pink noted above, Freddy’s fear is unrealized (much as the reality of the situation is unrealized) and the police continue with their conversation.

It was noted in the previous chapter, that one source of anxiety for the *noir* male is passive homosexuality, and that in response to this anxiety over passive homosexuality the *noir* male acts out aggressively. Robert Hilferty supports the reading

---

<sup>10</sup> Claustrophobic feeling is also evident in the filming of individual shots, such as the young police officers point-of-view shot from inside the car boot, or the 360 degree pan around Mr. Orange in the bathroom during the ‘commode story’. Both of which present a sense of enclosure.

of a homosexual subtext with numerous examples which support this *noir* male characteristic of aggression in the face of the homoerotic. Hilferty's examples seem quite justifiably cited, such as the play-fighting between Vic Vega and Nice Guy Eddie in the office of Joe Cabot, (79) where Nice Guy Eddie announces, 'Daddy, did ya see that?... Guy got me on the ground, tried to fuck me.' (Tarantino, *Reservoir Dogs* 50) This is followed by more banter between the two focusing on homosexual sexual activity and aggressive homophobic retorts, 'Eddie, you keep talkin' like a bitch, I'm gonna slap you like a bitch.' (ibid., 51) Hilferty also focuses on the relationship between Mr. White and Mr. Orange, summarizing that the, 'rituals of male bonding are as homoerotic as they are homophobic.' (81) While Mr. White does not act out aggressively toward Mr. Orange, any aggression produced over anxiety about their relationship can be seen to be projected onto his relationship with other characters, such as his conflict with both Mr. Pink and Mr. Blonde. The existence of homoerotic bonding in the relationship of Mr. Orange and Mr. White also supports the transgressive male/femme fatale roles that were discussed earlier, by accounting for the element of sexual attraction which is a strong aspect of the *noir* male and femme fatales traditional relationship. Leighton Grist notes that, 'The presence of homoerotic suggestion is relatively common in *noir*.' (Grist, 'Out of the Past' 212) This makes the reading of the homosexual subtext in conjunction with *noir* male anxiety, consistent with the presence of the *noir* male in *Reservoir Dogs*.

Nihilism, another component in Place and Peterson's framework of *noir*'s world view, is explicit in *Reservoir Dogs*, predominantly in Mr. Blonde's torturing of the police officer.<sup>11</sup> Nihilism is not only evident in the act, but most particularly in Mr. Blonde's justification (or lack of it), 'I don't really care about what you know or don't know. I'm gonna torture you for a while regardless. Not to get information, but because torturing a cop amuses me.' (Tarantino, *Reservoir Dogs* 61) On a symptomatic level, we might suggest that *Reservoir Dogs* nihilism is a reflection of nihilistic attitudes in contemporary American society generally.

---

<sup>11</sup> Mr. Blonde exhibits traits of Foster Hirsch's 'psychopath', as defined in Hirsch's types of *noir* male, outlined in the previous chapter.

These moods which Place and Peterson consider to form a *film noir* world view can all be reflected in the *noir* male as he interacts with his environment and the other characters. A relationship which has already been argued for, concerning other characteristics of *film noir*. As such, the formation of these moods in *Reservoir Dogs*, through the characters' relationships with their environment and each other, supports the *noir*-ness of the characters.

### Conclusion

The social environment in which *Reservoir Dogs* was created is consistent with the general climate of anxiety, social alienation and conflict which gave birth to the original *film noir*. Quentin Tarantino's appropriation of popular, 'low' culture is compatible with the pulp world from which the *noir* male originates.

In an environment suitable for the *noir* male, we have been able to apply the characteristics of this *noir* protagonist to the characters of *Reservoir Dogs*, to their surroundings, and to their relationships. Supported by the complementary components of *film noir*, which back-up the *noir* male characterization, this application of the *noir* male's attributes has revealed such traits as the paranoia, isolation, the anxiety, and the transgressive nature of the *noir* male, operating in Tarantino's film.

Based on the functioning of the character and nature of *film noir* and its protagonist in *Reservoir Dogs*, we can confidently reach the conclusion that the *noir* male is constructed in the film.

**VI.**

**Conclusion**

*There's nothing you can say, I've heard it all before.*

**Mr. Blonde** (Tarantino, *Reservoir Dogs* 61)

The principal purpose of this thesis has been to show that the *noir* male is constructed in Quentin Tarantino's film. A secondary function has been to demonstrate that the characteristics of *film noir* generally exist in *Reservoir Dogs*, in so much as to support the *noir* male's characterization, and to provide the environment which is consistent with the *noir* male's existence in the film. It has not been the purpose of this thesis to prove, or even specifically suggest that *Reservoir Dogs* is itself a *film noir*. Though if the reader feels this is inferred by the discussion, then the reader is at liberty to draw this conclusion.

In the earlier discussion of *film noir* the various elements which are most consistently considered to constitute this type of film were individually examined. The intent of the examination being to create a picture of what it is that composes the *noir* male and the environment that supports him, so as to apply this to *Reservoir Dogs*, and serve the function noted above.

It was noted that the various elements which constitute *film noir*, each contribute to the characterization of the *noir* male. For example, Michael Walker's comments that the expressionist visual style of *film noir* represents the idea that the external world is an expression of the inner world of the characters, and that it creates a mood which is bleak, fatalistic and claustrophobic – elements which reflect on the characters' lives in the film. Regarding the urban environment of *film noir*, it was noted that this physical location is seen as a place lacking 'civilization', and as a bleak and isolating place which reflects on those that live within it. The jumbled and confusing chronology of many *noirs* was recognized by Foster Hirsch as supportive of the characterizations of *film noir*, indicating by its confusion a lack of cohesion, or a division, in the *noir* male's character. When considering the themes and mood of *noir*, we could note fatalism, nihilism, and in particular paranoia and anxiety. A final, but important, supporting character influence on the *noir* male is the *femme fatale*. Acting as a motivating force for the protagonist's transgression, the *femme fatale*'s deadly influence

is usually irresistible to the *noir* male. All of these individual components of *film noir* reflect on the *noir* male character. With each ingredient added to the mix, our representation of the *noir* male character is strengthened. Without examining each of the constituent parts our characterization would have been incomplete.

After building a profile of the *noir* male and his *film noir* environment, it was possible to apply this profile to *Reservoir Dogs*, and most importantly to the film's characters. Through this process the *noir* male in the film could be revealed. A starting point was to consider the social origins of the original *noir* male, and then look to contemporary society for comparative social influences. By looking at certain influential events and conditions, it is possible to acknowledge the existence of the climate of conflict and social alienation which, as evidenced by the classical *film noirs*, nurtures the *noir* male. By next considering the influence of popular culture and 'low' art forms, it was possible to position the *noir* male in a cultural context, in addition to the social context. These more general references to *film noir* and the *noir* male character signify in *Reservoir Dogs*, the presence of the supporting environment for the *noir* male character.

Having established a basis that is consistent with *film noir* and the *noir* male, it was possible to deal more specifically with the characters of *Reservoir Dogs*, and the *noir* male as a character in *Reservoir Dogs*. In the discussion of *Reservoir Dogs* we can recognize that a composite of the *noir* male character is created by the characters, in conjunction with other supporting and correlative attributes in the film.

Through a discussion of the chronological structure in *Reservoir Dogs*, we see a reflection of the developing fragmentation (or division) of the characters, in particular Mr. Orange. As was noted in reference to the temporally skewed commode story, the development of Mr. Orange as a transgressive character (a development which also marks his character as divided between the law and transgression) is mirrored by the scenes structure. The transgressive nature of the *noir* male was expanded upon in a discussion of the relationship of Mr. Orange and Mr. White – a relationship in which the characterization of the femme fatale is represented. Through the *noir* male/femme fatale patterned relationship, both Mr. Orange and Mr. White transgress against their system of authority and law. In both cases this is fatal, but the relationship is also

marked by the final bid for redemption, as Mr. Orange reveals his identity as a police officer to Mr. White, and Mr. White acknowledges his position as a gangster by shooting Mr. Orange after this confession.

The influence of the urban setting, and the characteristics associated with theme and mood, support the characterization of the *noir* male as enacted in *Reservoir Dogs*. By acknowledging the position of the Dogs in their environment we are able to see them as outsiders who are isolated, both within the physical location and from each other. The characters display the *noir* male moods of paranoia, anxiety, and nihilism. They display paranoia and anxiety about being set-up, and being caught by the police. For Mr. Orange the fear is about being caught as the police. Additionally, anxiety over loyalty to unwritten codes and to the law; and anxiety over transgression; and over death, permeates the atmosphere of the film. Mr. Blonde in particular represents a nihilistic outlook. Finally, throughout the film, the progression of events moves with an inevitability which is consistent with the fatalistic development of the *noir* story, and the *noir* male.

To sum this up, by consolidating the discussion and arguments developed in this thesis, we can draw the conclusion that the characters of Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs*, supported by the structure, relationships, and environment of the film, form a composite representation of the *film noir* protagonist – the *noir* male.

# **Bibliography**

## BOOKS

Andrew, Dudley. *Concepts in Film Theory*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1984.

Andrew, J. Dudley. *The Major Film Theories: An Introduction*. London: Oxford University Press, 1976.

Belton, John. *American Cinema/American Culture*. New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1994.

Bernard, Jami. *Quentin Tarantino: The Man and His Movies*. London: HarperCollinsPublishers, 1995.

Bordwell, David. *On the History of Film Style*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997.

Bordwell, David. *Narration in the Fiction Film*. Madison, Wisconsin, USA: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985.

Browne, Nick (editor). *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1998.

Buss, Robin. *French Film Noir*. London: Marion Boyars, 1994.

Bywater, Tim, and Sobchack, Thomas. *An Introduction to Film Criticism: Major Critical Approaches to Narrative Film*. New York: Longman, 1989.

Cameron, Ian (editor). *The Movie Book of Film Noir*. London: Studio Vista, 1992.

Carroll, Noël. *Mystifying Movies: Fads and Fallacies in Contemporary Film Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.

Clarens, Carlos. *Crime Movies: From Griffith to the Godfather and Beyond*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1980.

Cohan, Steven, and Hark, Ina Rae (editors). *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*. London: Routledge, 1993.

Cook, Pam (editor). *The Cinema Book*. London: British Film Institute, 1985.

Copjec, Joan (editor). *Shades of Noir: A Reader*. London: Verso, 1993.

Crowther, Bruce. *Film Noir: Reflections in a Dark Mirror*. London: Virgin Books, 1990.

Dick, Bernard F. *Anatomy of Film*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990.

Giannetti, Louis. *Understanding Movies*. 6<sup>th</sup> Edition. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, USA: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1993.

Hirsch, Foster. *The Dark Side of the Screen: Film Noir*. New York: Da Capo Press, Inc., 1981.

Kaplan, E. Ann (editor). *Psychoanalysis and Cinema*. USA: Routledge, American Film Institute, 1990.

Kaplan, E. Ann (editor). *Women in Film Noir*. London: British Film Institute (BFI), 1978.

Kirkham, Pat, and Thumim, Janet (editors). *You Tarzan: Masculinity, Movies and Men*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993.

Klinger, Barbara. *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture and the Films of Douglas Sirk*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.

Krutnik, Frank. *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity*. London: Routledge, 1991.

Maltby, Richard, and Craven, Ian. *Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1995.

Mast, Gerald, et al. *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. 4<sup>th</sup> Edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Nelson, Thomas Allen. *Kubrick: Inside a Film Artist's Maze*. Bloomington, Indiana, USA: Indiana University Press, 1982.

Ottoson, Robert. *A Reference Guide to the American Film Noir: 1940-1958*. Metuchen, New Jersey, USA: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1981.

Phillips, Gene D. *Stanley Kubrick: A Film Odyssey*. New York: Big Apple Film Series/Popular Library, 1975.

Selby, Spencer. *Dark City: The Film Noir*. USA: McFarland, 1984.

Seldon, Raman, and Widdowson, Peter. *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. USA: The University Press of Kentucky, 1993.

Server, Lee. *Danger is my Business: An Illustrated History of the Fabulous Pulp Magazines: 1896-1953*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1993.

- Silver, Alain, and Ward, Elizabeth (editors). *Film Noir*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1979.
- Sklar, Robert. *Film: An International History of the Medium*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1993.
- Tarantino, Quentin. *Pulp Fiction*. London: Faber and Faber, 1994.
- Tarantino, Quentin. *Reservoir Dogs*. London: Faber and Faber, 1994.
- Tarantino, Quentin. *True Romance*. London: Faber and Faber, 1995.
- Thompson, Kristin. *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis*. Princeton, New Jersey, USA: Princeton University Press, 1988.
- Thompson, Kristin. *Eisenstein's Ivan the Terrible: A Neoformalist Analysis*. Princeton, New Jersey, USA: Princeton University Press, 1981.
- Thompson, Kristin, and Bordwell, David. *Film History: An Introduction*. New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1994.
- Walker, Alexander. *Stanley Kubrick Directs*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1971.
- Walker, John (editor). *Halliwel's Filmgoers Companion*. 10<sup>th</sup> Edition. London: HarperCollinsPublishers, 1993.
- Walker, John (editor). *Halliwel's Film Guide*. 11<sup>th</sup> Edition. London: HarperCollinsPublishers, 1995.

## ARTICLES

Altman, Rick. "Reusable Packaging: Generic Products and the Recycling Process" *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*. Editor. Nick Browne. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1998.

Atkinson, Mike. "Genuine B Noir." *Sight and Sound* Nov. 1993, Vol. 3 Issue 11: 28-29.

Bauer, Erik. "The Mouth and the Method." Quentin Tarantino Interview – Jackie Brown. *Sight and Sound* March 1998, Vol. 8 Issue 3: 7-9.

Biskind, Peter. "An Auteur is Born." *Premiere* Nov. 1994: 95-102.

Biskind, Peter. "'They Live By Night' By Daylight." *Sight and Sound* Autumn 1976, Vol. 45 No. 4: 218-222.

Booth, Cathy. "Three of a Kind." *Time* July 12, 1999, Vol. 154 No. 2: 54-55.

Brooker, Peter, and Brooker, Will. "Pulpmoernism: Tarantino's Affirmative Action." *Postmodern After-Images: A Reader in Film, Television and Video*. Editors. Peter Brooker, and Will Brooker. London: Arnold, 1997. 89-100.

Bruzzi, Stella. "Jackie Brown." *Sight and Sound* April 1998, Vol. 8 Issue 4: 39-40.

Bruzzi, Stella. "Style and the Hood." *Sight and Sound* Nov. 1995: 26-27.

Buchsbaum, Jonathan. "Tame Wolves and Phoney Claims: Paranoia and Film Noir." *The Movie Book of Film Noir*. Editor. Ian Cameron. London: Studio Vista, 1992. 88-97.

Caputo, Raffaele. "Reservoir Dogs: Steve Buscemi Interviewed." *Cinema Papers* August 1993, No. 94: 28-32.

Cawelti, John G. "*Chinatown* and Generic Transformation in Recent American Films." *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. 4<sup>th</sup> Edition. Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen, Leo Braudy. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. 498-511.

Conomos, John. "True Romance." *Cinema Papers* April 1994, No. 97/98: 54-55.

Cook, Pam. "Masculinity in Crisis?" *Screen* 23:3-4, Sept./Oct. 1982: 39-46.

Dargis, Manohla. "Dark Side of the Dream." *Sight and Sound* August 1996: 16-18.

Dargis, Manohla. "Pulp Instincts." *Sight and Sound* May 1994, Vol. 4 Issue 5: 6-9.

Darke, Chris. "Inside the Light." *Sight and Sound* April 1996, Vol. 6 Issue 4: 18-20.

Darke, Chris. "The Kubrick Connection." *Sight and Sound* Nov. 1995: 22-25.

Eagle, Herb. "*Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*, David Bordwell." Review. *Wide Angle* Vol. 12 No. 3, July 1990: 118-123.

Eichenbaum, Boris. "The Theory of the 'Formal Method'." Translated and Introduced by Lee T. Lemon, and Marion J. Reis. *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*. Lincoln, Nebraska, USA: University of Nebraska Press, 1965.

Eisenstein, Sergei. "*From Film Form: The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram/A Dialectic Approach to Film Form*." *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. 4<sup>th</sup> Edition. Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen, Leo Braudy. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. 127-154.

Evans, Peter William. "Double Indemnity (or Bringing Up Baby)." *The Movie Book of Film Noir*. Editor. Ian Cameron. London: Studio Vista, 1992. 165-173.

Gallafent, Edward. "Echo Park: Film Noir in the 'Seventies.'" *The Movie Book of Film Noir*. Editor. Ian Cameron. London: Studio Vista, 1992. 254-266.

Grant, Michael. "Kristin Thompson, *Breaking the Glass Armor*." Review Article. *Screen* 31:3, Autumn 1990: 341-345.

Grist, Leighton. "Moving Targets and Black Widows: Film Noir in Modern Hollywood." *The Movie Book of Film Noir*. Editor. Ian Cameron. London: Studio Vista, 1992. 267-285.

Grist, Leighton. "Out of the Past a.k.a. Build My Gallows High." *The Movie Book of Film Noir*. Editor. Ian Cameron. London: Studio Vista, 1992. 203-212.

Harris, Lowell. "*Shades of Noir*, Joan Copjec, ed." Review. *Film Quarterly* Vol. 48 No. 1, Fall 1994: 57-58.

Higham, Charles. "Cast a Cold Eye: The Films of Billy Wilder." *Sight and Sound* Spring 1963, Vol. 32 No. 2: 83-87, 103.

Hilferty, Robert. "Reservoir Dogs." *Cineaste* Vol. XIX No. 4: 79-81.

Jacobs, Lee. "The B Film and the Problem of Cultural Distinction." *Screen* 33:1, Spring 1992: 1-13.

Jeffords, Susan. "The Big Switch: Hollywood Masculinity in the Nineties." *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*. Editors. Jim Collins, Hilary Radner, and Ava Preacher Collins. New York: Routledge, 1993. 196.

Jenkins, Steve. "James M Cain and Film Noir: A Reply to Frank Krutnik." *Screen* 23:5, Nov./Dec. 1982: 80-82.

Keeffe, Barrie. "Haunting Friday." *Sight and Sound* August 1996: 20-21.

Kerr, Paul. "Murky Waters." Review. 'Joan Copjec, *Shades of Noir*.' *Sight and Sound* April 1994. Vol. 4 Issue 4: 33.

Kracauer, Siegfried. "From Caligari to Hitler: The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari." *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. 4<sup>th</sup> Edition. Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen, Leo Braudy. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. 21-33.

KRT. "Romantic, Cynical, Stubborn: Bogart a Legend 40 Years On." *The Dominion* Tuesday, Jan. 7, 1997.

Krutnik, Frank. "Desire, Transgression and James M Cain." *Screen* 23:1, May/June 1982: 31-44.

Lipman, Amanda. "Pulp Fiction." *Sight and Sound* Nov. 1994, Vol. 4 Issue 11: 50-51.

Lyons, Donald. "Genre and Caste in Cableland." *Film Comment* Sept.-Oct. 1994: 2-7.

Matthews, Peter. "Blind Date." *Sight and Sound* Oct. 1998, Vol. 8 Issue 10: 9-12.

Matthews, Peter. "Not-So-Tough Guys." Review. 'Frank Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity*.' *Sight and Sound* Nov. 1991, Vol. 1 Issue 7.

Mayer, Geoff. "A Return to Form – Russian Formalism and Contemporary Film Practice." *Metro Magazine* No. 93, Autumn 1993: 18-29.

McDonald, Lawrence. "Noir and the City: An Interview with Robyn Stacey." *Illusions* Issue 17, Spring 1991: 27-31.

McKinney, Devin. "Violence: The Strong and the Weak." *Film Quarterly* Vol. 46 No. 4, Summer 1993: 16-22.

Nachbar, Jack. "Film Noir." *Handbook of American Film Genres*. Editor. Wes D. Gehring. New York: Greenwood Press, 1988. 65-80.

Neale, Steve. "Masculinity as Spectacle: Reflections on Men and Mainstream Cinema." *Screen* 24:6, Nov./Dec. 1983: 2-16.

Newman, Kim. "Reservoir Dogs." *Sight and Sound* Jan. 1993, Vol. 3 Issue 1: 51-52.

Nowell-Smith, Geoffrey. "David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*." Review. *Screen* 34:3, Autumn 1993: 293-298.

Osteen, Mark. "The Big Secret: *Film Noir* and Nuclear Fear." *Journal of Popular Film and Television* Vol. 22 No. 2, Summer 1994: 79-90.

Pfeil, Fred. "Home Fires Burning: Family *Noir* in *Blue Velvet* and *Terminator 2*." *Shades of Noir: A Reader*. Editor. Joan Copjec. London: Verso, 1993. 227-260.

Place, J.A. and Peterson, L.S. "The Visual Style of Film Noir." *Film Comment* January/February 1974.

Place, Janey. "Women in *Film Noir*." *Women in Film Noir*. Editor. E. Ann Kaplan. London: British Film Institute (BFI), 1978.

Perkins, V. F. "From Film as Film: Form and Discipline." *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. 4<sup>th</sup> Edition. Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen, Leo Braudy. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. 52-58.

Phillips, Mike. "Chic and Beyond." *Sight and Sound* August 1996. 25-27.

Porfirio, Robert G. "No Way Out: Existential Motifs in the Film Noir" *Sight and Sound* Autumn 1976, Vol. 45, No. 4: 212-217.

Rich, B. Ruby. "Dumb Lugs and Femme Fatales" *Sight and Sound* Nov. 1995. 6-10.

Rochlin, Margy. "20 Questions Interview: Quentin Tarantino." *Australian Playboy* February 1995: 78-81.

Schickel, Richard. "All Eyes on Them." *Time* July 12, 1999, Vol. 154 No. 2: 48-52.

Shklovsky, Victor. "Art as Technique." Translated and Introduced by Lee T. Lemon, and Marion J. Reis. *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*. Lincoln, Nebraska, USA: University of Nebraska Press, 1965.

Sinclair, Iain. "Smart Guys." *Sight and Sound* August 1996. 22-24.

Sobchack, Vivian. "Lounge Time: *Postwar Crises and the Chronotope of Film Noir*." *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*. Editor. Nick Browne. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1998. 129-167.

Spillman, Susan. "Hollywood's Newest Wonderboy No Fiction." *Sunday Star-Times*. Feb. 5 1995: D3.

Tarantino, Quentin. "A Rare Sorrow." *Sight and Sound* Feb. 1993, Vol. 3 Issue 2: 32-33.

Tarantino, Quentin. "On 'Pulp Fiction.'" *Sight and Sound* May 1994, Vol.4 Issue 5: 10.

Tarantino, Quentin. "On Pulp Fiction: as told to Manohla Dargis." *Sight and Sound* Nov. 1994, Vol. 4 Issue 11: 16-19.

Tarrago, Paul. "Red Rock West." *Sight and Sound* July 1993, Vol. 3 Issue 7: 49-50.

Taubin, Amy. "The Men's Room." *Sight and Sound* Dec. 1992, Vol. 2 Issue 8: 2-4.

Thomas, Deborah. "How Hollywood Deals With The Deviant Male." *The Movie Book of Film Noir*. Editor. Ian Cameron. London: Studio Vista, 1992. 59-70.

Thomas, Deborah. "Psychoanalysis and Film Noir." *The Movie Book of Film Noir*. Editor. Ian Cameron. London: Studio Vista, 1992. 71-87.

Thompson, David. "Harvey Keitel Staying Power." An Interview. *Sight and Sound* Jan. 1993, Vol. 3 Issue 1: 22-25.

Vernet, Marc. "Film Noir On the Edge of Doom." *Shades of Noir: A Reader*. Editor. Joan Copjec. London: Verso, 1993. 1-31. Translated by J. Swenson.

Vernet, Marc. "The Filmic Transaction: On the Openings of Film Noirs." *Wide Angle* 5, Vol. 3:59-63, 1983: 2-9. Translated by David Rodowick.

Walker, Michael. "Film Noir: Introduction." *The Movie Book of Film Noir*. Editor. Ian Cameron. London: Studio Vista, 1992. 8-38.

Whalen, Tom. "Film Noir: Killer Style." *Literature/Film Quarterly* Vol. 23 No. 1 1995: 2-5.

Williamson, Lyn. "Ice-Cool Thrill of The Last Seduction." *The Evening Post* Saturday, 22 October, 1994: 13.

### FILMS, TELEVISION, and SOUND RECORDINGS

*The Asphalt Jungle* Dir. John Huston. USA. MGM 1950.

*The Big Sleep* Dir. Howard Hawks. USA. Warner 1946.

*Double Indemnity* Dir. Billy Wilder. USA. Paramount 1944.

*Gun Crazy* Dir. Joseph H. Lewis. USA. Universal-International 1950.

*Jackie Brown* Dir. Quentin Tarantino. USA. Miramax 1997.

*The Killing* Dir. Stanley Kubrick. USA. UA/Harris-Kubrick 1956.

*The Last Movie: Stanley Kubrick and "Eyes Wide Shut"*. Documentary. Channel Four Television (UK), Autumn 1999.

*The Last Seduction* Dir. John Dahl. USA. ITC 1994.

*Natural Born Killers* Dir. Oliver Stone. USA. Warner/Regency 1994.

*Out of the Past aka Build My Gallows High* Dir. Jacques Tourneur. USA. RKO 1947.

*Pulp Fiction* Dir. Quentin Tarantino. USA. Buena Vista/Miramax/A Band Apart/Jersey 1994.

*Quentin Cooper Interview with Quentin Tarantino.* Radio Interview. Art World Wide Program (NZ), 1994.

*Red Rock West* Dir. John Dahl. USA. Rank/Red Rock 1992.

*Reservoir Dogs* Dir. Quentin Tarantino. USA. Rank/Live America/Dog Eat Dog 1992.

*Rififi* Dir. Jules Dassin. France. Indus/Pathé/Prima 1955.

*The Stranger on the Third Floor* Dir. Boris Ingster. USA. RKO 1940.

*True Romance* Dir. Tony Scott. USA. Warner/Morgan Creek 1993.