Chiaroscuro Alleys, Psychological No-Way-Outs and Urban Space in Classic Film Noir

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Abstract

The post-war American noir films were influenced by a variety of filmmaking styles, contents and forms, generating from different countries. The films used all these influences to create a cinematic world filled with crime, darkness and despair. The spaces in which the stories unfolded reflected the inner world of characters and foreshadowed the horrible things that were to happen. The alleyway in this sense is a key location for noir films because it is the symbolic space in which the somber climax of the films unfolds.

The use of the alleyway has been examined in exemplary noir films through a formal textual analysis. The analysis has demonstrated that the alleyways are spaces that are used to realize dark deeds; far from the eyes of the public, poor souls are wiped out, their desolate existences ending in the dark cities where they lived alienated lives.

keywords: *film noir, alleyways, chiaroscuro lighting, urban space*

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Résumé

Ruelles clairs obscurs, impasses psychologiques et espaces urbains dans les films noirs classiques

Les styles, contenus et formes des films noirs produits aux Etats Unis après la Deuxième Guerre Mondiale ont été influencés par des vagues de cinémas venant de plusieurs pays du monde, y puisant pour créer des mondes cinématiques remplis de crimes, d'obscurités et désespoirs, installant leurs narrations dans des espaces constituants une réflexion du monde intérieur des caractères qui préfigurent des horreurs latentes; faisant ainsi des ruelles sombres des locations clefs, théâtres des scènes climaciques.

L'analyse de l'utilisation de ces ruelles sombres, par le prisme de films noirs exemplaires, montre qu'elles y existent pour être le lieu d'actes sombres, où loin des regards, dans ces villes qui les happent, les pauvres âmes, perdues dans leurs vies de désolation seront à jamais exterminées.

mots-clés : *film noir, ruelles, clair-obscur, espace urbain*

Öz

Klasik Kara Filmde Gölgeli Geçitler, Psikolojik Çıkmazlar ve Kentsel Mekanlar

İkinci Dünya Savaşı sonrası Amerika'da yapılan kara filmler; tarz, içerik ve biçim bakımından farklı ülkelerden etkilenmiştir. Bu etkilenme sonucu kara filmler; suç, karanlık ve çaresizliğin hükmettiği sinemasal evrenler yaratmışlardır. Hikayelerin gerçekleştiği mekanlar, karakterlerin iç dünyasını yansıtmakta ve başlarına gelecek olan korkunç olaylara işaret etmektedirler. Karanlık geçitler, bu bağlamda, kara filmler için anahtar mekan işlevini görmekte ve bu türe ait filmlerin karamsar doruk noktalarına sembolik ev sahipliği yapmaktadırlar.

Bu çalışmada kara filmlerde karanlık geçitlerin kullanımı, örnek filmler üzerinden, içerik analizi yöntemi ile incelenmiştir. Bu inceleme sonucunda karanlık geçitlerin, film öyküsünde anlatılan karanlık işlerin simgesel temsili olduğu gözlemlenmiştir. İnsanların gözlerinden uzak, zavallı ruhları yutan şehirlerdeki ıssız hayatların sonlandırıldığı bu karanlık geçitler, kara filmlerde yansıtılmak istenen hissiyat bağlamında oldukça önemli bir yerde durmakta ve bu mekanlarda geçen sahneler filmin aktarmak istediği duygunun özünü barındırmaktadırlar.

anahtar kelimeler: *kara film, geçit, ışık gölge, kentsel mekan*

Introduction

Many films make use of the dark alleyway as a space for deviant action. It is a sinister location, where actions not permissible in the public domain can unwind and reveal the true darkness within any given metropolitan city. Historically speaking, a cinema that was a true vehicle in the deconstruction of city space as dark, menacing and sinister was the classic American film noir. In these films, the city was no longer a mere backdrop to the story unfolding, but became a character in its own right, reaching out beyond the frame towards the audience and "blinding our attention with its variance and movement or stunning our oneiric sensibility with its dark throbbing pulse." (Pomerance, 2013, p. 406).

Defining Film Noir: History and Influences

Roughly designated as the period from the early 1940s to the late 1950s, Film Noir is a term coined by French critic Nino Frank in 1946. He labeled the films as such due to the significant change in tone in the American films post-WW II. The term can be considered as a "sister term" (Duncan, 2006, p. 16) to Série Noire; the name given to the American hard-boiled novels published by Gallimard in France, starting in August 1945. These books include publications by Raymond Chandler, Horace McCoy, W. R. Burnett, Dashiell Hammett and were detective or gangster stories, as well as psycho thrillers.

Frank's initial term stayed amongst French critical circles for a long time. Duncan (2006) notes *Panorama du Film Noir Américain* (1955) by Raymond Borde & Etienne Chaumeton as an important early source. For the English-speaking world, the term spread much later, when a survey was conducted in 1968 as a chapter on Hollywood in the 1940s by Charles Higham & Joel Greenberg. Another attempt was by Raymond Durgnat in 1970, when he tried to define the categories of Noir in his article *Paint It Black: The Family Tree of Film Noir* published in *Cinema*. Furthermore, Paul Schrader's on *Notes on Film Noir* is worth consideration as another approach to the definition of Film Noir.

The change in tone that prompted Nino Frank to use the term Film Noir was not only reflected in the plots of the films. The visual style of the films was influenced by a combination of different cinematic strands from the previous decade: the German Expressionists; the French Poetic Realists; Hollywood Gangsters; Tough Guy writers (Duncan, 2006, p. 16). The chiaroscuro lighting, where pools of shadow "attack" the poor souls who dare venture through them is typical of the German Expressionist cinema of the 1920s and 1930s. The exemplary film is no doubt *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1919), where "its surreal settings and caricatured people, the emphasis on graphic design, weird angles, montage, forced perspective and other technical innovations was to play a major part in the formation of Film Noir" (Duncan, 2006,

p.17). These elements were tools to reflect the psychology of the characters, their inner world, and were used to analyze their actions.

Directors that were to be renowned in film noir such as Fritz Lang, Billy Wilder, Robert Siodmak, Fred Zinnemann and Edgar G. Ulmer, came from Europe and escaped to Hollywood due to the political upheavals caused by Adolf Hitler. Duncan points out that it has to be acknowledged that these directors went to Hollywood via France, where the themes and settings of film noir can be seen in the films of the Poetic Realists of the 1930s. Some French directors soon followed.[1]

Like Noir, the term Poetic Realism was first applied to literary works, namely those of Emile Zola and Francis Carco. In cinema, it was first used by André Bazin and referred to films that had a fatalist point of view but a lyrical style. They reflected the helplessness felt by the people at the time, and ended with the death or the disillusionment of the characters, the working-class individual, often portrayed by the principle protagonist of the time, Jean Gabin.

Another source of influence on Noir were the Gangster Films of the 1930s Depression-era America. Gangster activity often made it to the front pages of the news during that time and, although sinister and dangerous, was attractive to the public due to their "money, power, clothes, status symbols, and women" (Duncan, 2006, p.16). Soon, they became the center of interest of Hollywood producers; *Little Ceasar* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1930), *The Public Enemy* (William A. Wellman, 1931) and *Scarface* (Howard Hawks, 1932) being some of the most popular examples of the Gangster on the big screen. Of course, these films did not glorify the Gangster; on the contrary, these films were moralist tales of how money and power corrupt people, ironically in a time where there was a lack of money in America due to the Great Depression.

Although film noir is influenced by the 1930's social atmosphere, the urban life of the 1940s and 1950s in and of themselves do not resonate in the films. What does resonate is a mindset that has continued to prevail in society that deeply changed the outlook of the American people. According to historian Leo Gurko:

> Optimism in its native form disappeared and was replaced for a time by an equally naïve pessimism… Existence, we now realized, was no longer the simple thing it had appeared to be at the turn of the century but a difficult,

1 Alfred Hitchcock is also one of the directors who made his way to Hollywood in 1939; so it is not surprising that these French, German and British filmmakers brought to Hollywood their influences to make up what would be known as Film Noir: *La Chienne* (Jean Renoir, 1931); *Scarlet Street* (Fritz Lang, 1946); *La Bête Humaine* (Jean Renoir, 1938); *Human Desire* (Fritz Lang, 1954); *Pépé Le Moko* (Julien Duvivier, 1936); *Algiers* (John Cromwell, 1938); *Le Jour Se Lève* (Marcel Carné, 1939); *The Long Night* (Anatole Litvak, 1947); *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Tay Garnett, 1946); *The Thirteenth Letter* (Otto Preminger, 1950).

> tortuous, often painful process. A dawning awareness of the tragedy of life and of the necessity for struggle in the perpetual effort to master it now began to filter into the unconsciousness of the American people (1953, p. 279).

Indeed, Raymond Chandler also points out to this fact stating that the postwar climate was responsible for feeding and not breeding the 'smell of fear':

> Their characters lived in a world gone wrong, a world in which, long before the atom bomb, civilization had created the machinery for its own destruction and was learning to use it with all the moronic delight of a gangster trying out his first machine-gun. The law was something to be manipulated for profit and power. The streets were dark with something more than night. (as cited in Krutnik, 1997, p. 87)

Film noir itself can be used to designate several different aspects of the films: while for some it is synonymous with genre itself, others (Schatz, 1997 and Luhr, 1996) consider the term to designate a certain style of film with certain aesthetic qualities that repeat themselves. Indeed, as traced, Noir's visual style and tone are influenced by a variety of waves coming from Europe in the 1930s. So, as Bordwell and Staiger (1985) point out, while the genre itself was new, the style was not. As a matter of fact, William Park (2011) states that the style of Noir soon became so ubiquitous that it was used in almost all films coming out of Hollywood in the 1940s and 1950s. Thus, deciding what Noir is, becomes a complicated process of definition many have tried to break down and rationally organize and understand. Janey Place and Lowell Paterson (1996) wrote a long list of components for Noir, commencing by the most striking characteristic: chiaroscuro. They followed the list with the inclusion of dream montages and strange camera angles in third place, while Naremore (2008) states that many Noir cameramen could also achieve the expected effect by more conventional means, such as Nicholas Musuraca's camera work for *Out of the Past* (Jacques Tourneur, 1947).

Visual Style: The City Spaces

Nonetheless, for all writing on Noir, what is common consensus is the underlining of some form of chiaroscuro as the dominant motif that takes full advantages of the aesthetic possibilities of black and white film. This form of lighting aesthetically created a new image of the city onscreen, not seen in previous Hollywood films. Light and shadow allowed for mood to come through, where the audience sensed the desolate urban spaces, deeply affected by alienation, isolation, a dangerous space where all kinds of moral indecencies were free to happen.

The world in which the story unfolded was one of insecurity and harsh realities. This worldview was translated into the filmic space, where the settings within the films reinforced the harsh world depicted. Space in film noir created an

experience of anxiety and fear where no one was safe from the operations of the dark forces within them. One just needed to look at the titles of noir films to see the significance of spaces and places and the mark they left on the characters: *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950), *Scarlet Street* (Fritz Lang, 1950), *Naked City* (Jules Dassin, 1948), *Street of Chance* (Jack Hively, 1942), *Dangerous Passage* (William Berke, 1944) and *Nightmare Alley* (Edmund Goulding, 1947).

As Paul Schrader (1972) writes in *Notes on Film Noir*,

> oblique and vertical lines are preferred to horizontal. Obliquity adheres to the choreography of the city, and is in direct opposition to the horizontal American tradition of Griffith and Ford. Oblique lines tend to splinter a screen, making it restless and unstable…No character can speak authoritatively from a space which is being continually cut into ribbons of light (p. 4).

Indeed, as Robert Sklar also brings attention to, one of the main recurring themes in all Noir is the notion of "people trapped" (as cited in Pomerance, 2013, p. 406). Thus, when the city is portrayed in such a manner, the trapped condition becomes impossible not to notice and feel. As a matter of fact, film noir fixates upon the psychic manifestations of the reasons as to why the modern city has become so "unliveable", as opposed to the social forces that have led to such an environment.

City and Character

According to Dickos (2002), the urban spaces create a sense of being simultaneously lost and at home for the characters, turning it into an existential experience; "a quest to locate the self lost in a world of clutter, distraction and noise" (p. 63), exemplified in the characters June Goth in *Deadline at Dawn* (Harold Clurman, 1946), Joe Morse in *Force of Evil* (Abraham Polonsky, 1948), Skip McCoy in *Pickup on South Street* (Samuel Fuller, 1953), and Johnny Kelly in *City That Never Sleeps* (John H. Auer, 1953).

Moreover, in contrast to the big city, characterized as a "moral and sexual cesspool" (Hirsch, 1981, p. 79), 'small town America' also appears in noir films. They are given as a counterpoint to the city that has destroyed its characters. Often, the film's doomed heroes escape to these small towns to start anew; however, their past is never far behind and comes chasing for them in these idyllic spots. The inescapability of the past is highlighted by the fact that many of the films make use of the flashback, suggesting that something horrible has already happened and there is no way around it. Thus, they have no choice but to confront the past, and return to the very city that has led to their demise. *Out of the Past* is an example of such films where a character is pulled out of a small town to face his past deeds. The small town is characterized by idyllic images of the countryside, reminiscent of and typified in John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1949), displayed grandiosely as the backdrop of the opening credits, like a series

of post cards. But this dreamlike state does not last for long. Moreover, these doomed characters coming to the small town disrupt the order of things, and make the 'locals' feel rather uncomfortable. In the case of *Out of the Past,* Jeff Bailey dates a local girl, Ann. However, no one trusts Jeff, who is characterized as "mysterious" and "secret". In accordance, Ann's relationship with her parents is strained by her choice to be with him. Another example is the film *The Killers* (Robert Siodmak, 1946) where the character of "The Swede" also tries to run away from his past deeds and escapes to a small town; however, the tone of the film is much more somber in that The Swede has given up and he has stopped trying to escape his inevitable end. He lies in his motel room, his face darkened, reactionless in the face of the two hit men who have come to take him out.

Early noir films made in the 1940s had studio-created spaces and thus had a more enclosed and narrow imagery. This led to the impression of "less full" cities and provided ideal settings for stories of entrapment and obsession where the world closed in on the protagonist (Hirsch, 1981, p. 15). Furthermore, these films are characterized more by the interiors, such as luxurious homes, jazz clubs and roadside diners.

Though studio-created spaces continued to appear in noir films, the mis-en-scène of the city changed on occasion where on location shootings started to become more widespread. After WW II, the need to film real people in the real world in order to achieve credibility became a necessity (Ford, 1994, p. 124). As a matter of fact, in her essay *Lounge Time: Postwar Crises and the Chronotope of Film Noir,* Vivian Sobshack (1998) notes that real locations utilized by people in post-WW II America were brought to the screen, and thus this created a shared space between the audience and the films of the time (p. 149). The use of locations in the films are direct translations of real locales grounded in the social context of the people of the time. Furthermore, according to Chandler, who penned an essay on the scope of those novels, the city was a concept that dominated the stories, as they portrayed:

> a world in which gangsters can rule nations and almost rule cities, in which hotels and apartment houses and celebrated restaurants are owned by men who made their money out of brothels, […]; a world where a judge with a cellar full of bootleg liquor can send a man to jail for having a pint in his pocket, where the mayor of your town may have condoned murder as an instrument of money-making, where no man can walk down a dark street […]; a world where you may witness a hold-up in broad daylight and see who did it, but you will fade quickly back into the crowd rather than tell anyone, because the hold-up men may have friends with long guns, or the police may not like your testimony […]. (as cited in Krutnik, 1997, p. 88)

The biggest influence for the transition to on-location shooting was Italian Neorealism, where location shooting allowed for "rawer and more immediate representation of the miseries" (Dickos, 2002, p. 187). It was clear that real

cities were just as effective in creating the nightmarish mood as the studio-created spaces were. Furthermore, the real city space gave film noir a more documentary-like feel, where the tight frames widened and allowed for more movement within the shots. This shift illustrated a change in the stories as well, where psychological thrillers made room for films depicting the social world and its realities. The setting became more primary in generating mood, a fact also underlined by Paul Schrader (1972), where he suggests that when a city (the environment) is given more emphasis than the protagonist, it creates a fatalistic and hopeless mood (p. 5). It is in these films that the dark corners of the metropolitan come to swallow the characters inhabiting the world of Noir. The city seems to betray its inhabitants, signaling that there is no way out from the reality-turned-nightmare.

City Spaces: The Alleyway in 'Night and the City' and 'Killer's Kiss'

The alleyway as a location for dark deeds to occur then is the epitome of city life's reality turned into nightmare. The alleyway makes an appearance in many noir films and often signals a climactic moment where either a major criminal deed takes places or a murder occurs. An alleyway can be located right behind the busy hustle and bustle of a city center, where actions needed to be hidden from the public eye can take place. What can be hiding in an alleyway is unknowable and accordingly, wandering into one is often a bad idea, especially if it is depicted in a dark and enclosed manner. After all, what occurs there is beyond the margins of rationality and being in the wrong location at the wrong time can only lead to demise. Alain Silver (1999) eloquently argues that in these "noir corridors", one comes face to face with "the loss of meaning, the end of representation, madness itself" (p. 127). It is easy to find your way into an alley; however, exiting it is not always guaranteed.

The use of the alleyway in the post-war noir films becomes clear through the examples of two films: Jules Dassin's 1950 production *Night and the City* and Stanley Kubrick's 1955 film *Killer's Kiss.* The former is set in London, whereas the latter is set in New York City. Both films were shot on-location where the city is employed not just as a mere backdrop; rather, the cityscapes are as important as the characters. The city betrays characters, preventing them from escaping the dark clench of the underworld inhabiting it. Both films make use of the alleyway in order to allow for the operation of dark activities.

In 1948, Jules Dassin made *Naked* City, a film set in New York City. It is an aesthetically significant film in the field of film noir influenced by Italian Neorealism. Unprecedented in Hollywood in terms of the use of almost all existing locations, it still was not what Jules Dassin had hoped to achieve, where the political aspect of the film was de-emphasized by the exclusion of several scenes by the production studio Universal Pictures. Within the next couple of

years, Dassin would be blacklisted and forced to flee from the United States.[2] It is his next film, completed in 1950, which was able to deliver the bleak imagery and pessimistic tone he had hoped for, for *Naked City*.

Night and the City is the story of Harry Fabian; an ambitious conman wanting to 'make it' in the underworld by taking advantage of particular circumstances, and yet, getting it all wrong. He frequently takes money from his girlfriend Mary Bristol for his ambitious plans that never work out. Both he and Mary work at the Silver Fox, a club owned by Phil Nosseros and his wife Helen. Mary works as a singer and Harry finds unsuspected customers for the club. One day, he encounters the most famous Greco-Roman wrestler in the world, Gregorious. Gregorious is the father of Kristo, the man who controls professional wrestling in the whole of London. Harry believes that he can take that control over from Kristo by using his father Gregorious. In order to fulfill his dream he borrows money both from Phil and Helen who both give him the money for their own purposes. Gregorious, however, gets accidentally killed by The Strangler, one of Kristo's wrestlers. Kristo blames Harry for his father's death and starts pursuing him all over London with his underworld men. Harry unable to find shelter anywhere ends up at one of Thames docks. Mary finds him there but he asks her to denounce him to Kristo and collect the reward money for his head. Kristo and The Strangler find Harry at the docks, The Strangler kills Harry and throws his body in the river. The police arrive and arrest The Strangler.

While the film is set in London, this is not postcard London, its monumental and historic sights highlighted. The cinematographer Max Greene knew the city inside out and was able to take the camera to places that would reflect a post-war London; a bit desolate, carrying wartime wounds yet still strong despite the terror it has just recently undergone and survived. It is strong, yes, but it is also anonymous, and does not allow much opportunity for survival. At least not for Harry, who is running at the beginning of the film, through what Nicholas Christopher (1997) sees as "a particularly odious labyrinth" (p. 77), until he can run no more, and gives up to face his innate powerlessness in the face of his sealed fate at the end of the film. But the very fact that he is at least trying can be explained as a historical consequence; according to Dickos (2002); "the criminality and passion driving many Noir characters stem from the premise that the insecurity of existence promises little in rectitude, and so pursuing one's obsession becomes acceptable, and even desirable, in the face of an unclear future" (p. 63). Like many a Noir character, Harry comes to the big city for money, success and freedom and yet will only find death at the end. As Dickos (2002) notes:

2 Dassin, like many directors in Hollywood, was a target of the anti-communist witch-hunt that began in the McCarthy era. After finishing the shooting of *Night and the City*, Dassin was not even allowed on the lot of the studio he was in contract with. His Hollywood career abruptly ended and he had to leave for Europe.

> Harry Fabian, the unregenerate schemer, comes to us as an unctuous and energetic self-promoter, and he leaves us as a man who is tired of running from those he has wronged and has accepted that his life is of little value to anyone and that the charity of his death must be his own (p. 80).

Harry pursues his irrational get-rich-fast schemes with the hopes of becoming a "somebody", even though everything suggests that the odds are against him and his journey will end in defeat. Despite the warnings of Mary, Harry is a believer, but bit-by-bit the story destroys his spirit and he eventually has to face facts. The moment comes when he takes refuge in Figler's shack, who promises him he will be safe there. Then Figler receives a phone call; the close up of Harry's face as he turns towards the camera shows us his worried expression. He walks towards Figler and asks him "how much are you selling me for?" Harry is then once again back on the run, unfortunately for him, not for too long. In a city with countless dark corners, and alleyways, there is nowhere for Harry to hide. In Hirsch's (1981) words, London in *Night and the City* is "oozing with slime and enshrouded with fog, becomes a maze of crooked alleyways, narrow, cobbled streets and waterfront dens; a place of pestilential enclosure" (p. 17). As a matter of fact, the whole underworld in which Harry's life unfolds is one big long alleyway; all the streets are narrow, but they are inhabited by the "underdogs" of society, doing whatever they can to survive. They are not afraid of the alleyways. On the contrary, it is home for them. It is all they know. Harry too is at home there, as he passes along, addressing those on his route.

It is difficult not to feel sorry for Harry because despite everything he is a hopeless optimist; he believes, until he is betrayed by Figler, that things will work out for him. There is something 'good' about Harry, which is signaled at the beginning of the film; as he is running across London, escaping someone purchasing him, he stops to pick up the flower that falls out of his jacket pocket. This moment suggests that there is something more to him than obsession with money and fame, a side to him that Mary too sees; "essentially genteel and sweet" (Pomerance, 2013, p. 413) but is helpless to bring out in the face of the harsh reality of his life. As a matter of fact, the film is littered with moments of betrayal, and clearly in the underworld of London, one can only trust oneself.

Night and the City is a perfect combination of neorealist and expressionist influences, "transforming the real city into moody echoes of claustrophobic studio-created urban landscapes" (Hirsch, 1981, p. 67). The film includes the social aspects of the reality of the city life, elementary to neorealism, while also reflecting psychological entrapment through expressionist lighting. Indeed Dassin and Greene shoot Harry through extreme high and low angles in order to highlight the deliriousness of the unfolding events and the growing fear settling within Harry as he realizes how expendable his life is. Pomerance (2013) notes an interesting aspect of the film, related to the use of lighting and which is present in almost all of the shots of the film. He calls it a holy light or a carnal one,

typically produced through the use of focused arc lamps that give a cold and cutting illumination. He suggests that this light creates a surveilling presence, flooding the faces of the characters. This light can be considered as the City itself, or Fate, not related to the events unfolding but more related to the sordid world in which they unfold (p. 414).

In his book on the depiction of the American city in film noir, Christopher (1997) states that "every American city is always a tale of two cities: the surface city, orderly and functional, imbued with customs and routine, and its shadow, the nether city: rife with darker impulses and forbidden currents, a world of violence and chaos" (p. 36). It is this second type of city in which the story of Kubrick's *Killer's Kiss* unfolds. *Killer's Kiss* includes moments in the city not directly related to the narrative flow, simply to add to the atmosphere of the city life. New York is no doubt given a lead role in this film, participating in the action, rumbling with danger and enticement. As a matter of fact, the film received mostly negative reviews, but the depiction of New York in the 1950s is one side of the film, which most critics agree is the most enjoyable part of the film (Decker, 2007, p. 86). As Edward Dimendberg (2004) observes: "Perhaps the most remarkable feature of Kubrick's film is its extensive representation of public spaces, at once a depiction of the urban realm as violent and alienating yet potentially open to different appropriations" (p. 136).

The influence of Italian Neorealism can clearly be seen: from the real travelers at the Pennsylvania station, to the real sound recordings of people chattering and traffic chaos, *Killer's Kiss* is almost a documentary portrait of New York atmosphere of the time. While the film is filled with these real instances unfolding naturally, on the other hand, the film portrays New York at night as the ultimate domain of the unreal; it becomes a phantom zone of eternal play and perpetual unease. Mutability is the key characteristic of New York at night, a realm transformed by the absence of illumination. Anything is possible, nothing is forbidden, all of it is just steps away from your door (Dixon, 2007).

Killer's Kiss begins in New York Penn Station, where Davey, a boxer at the end of his career, remembers the last few days of his life. From hereon, the film is told in flashback. While Davey is preparing for a fight in his apartment room, he gazes upon Gloria, an attractive taxi dancer, through the airshaft; a characteristic of the city which, according to Manon (2008) destroys all possibility of privacy. Gloria works in Vinnie Rapallo's club Pleasure Land and he treats her as if she is his property. Davey and Gloria officially meet when he saves her from one of Vinnie's attacks. They soon fall in love and decide to leave New York City to go to Davey's uncle farm near Seattle. However, before they leave they have to pick up their last paychecks; Gloria from Vinnie and Davey from his manager Albert. Vinnie sends two guys to beat up Davey but they mistake Albert for Davey and kill him instead in an alley. When Davey goes back to his apartment building he sees the police. They have assumed that he killed his manager and are looking

for him. Meanwhile Vinnie, once he realizes that his men have killed the wrong guy, kidnaps Gloria. Davey goes back to the club to rescue Gloria. He follows Vinnie, takes him hostage and forces him to lead him to Gloria. He manages to untie Gloria but a struggle and a climactic chase begins between Davey and Vinnie, which leads to the most famous scene of the film in a warehouse full of disembodied mannequins. Davey kills Vinnie and believing that he had lost Gloria goes to the train station to take the train for Seattle. At this point in the film, the flashback is over. Gloria shows up the last minute and they leave together for the West Coast.

Like earlier noir films, here too the idyllic small town is a place that is sought out. Typically in the American Noir, the city life is contrasted with the idyllic and settled nature of the small town. City life represents a space where strangers collide, identities are masked, performance dominates interaction. (as cited in Pomerance, 2013, p. 408). The 'simple life' of the small town is looked upon with a sense of nostalgia, reminders of it scattered throughout the lives of the characters. Photographs of 'family' surround the mirror in Davey's apartment; there is a series of shots of each photograph at the beginning of the film as Davey examines his eyebrow wound. Later on, after Davey loses a boxing game, he is home alone and the telephone rings; his Uncle George is on the line and urging him to come home to the country, to which he has not been in two years. Gloria too has a doll at the top of her bedpost, a reminder of her childhood years, albeit her memories of childhood are not as wholesome as those of Davey's. They find each other, fall in love and decide to run away from the city together. But before doing that, they have 'business' to attend to. As they go about tying loose ends, a mix up occurs, at which point the alleyway comes into play.

The use of the alley in the film is for a murder. Albert, Davey's manager, is mistaken for Davey by Vinnie's men. The scene uses back lighting, so we cannot see the faces of anyone just their silhouettes as they back Albert up in the alleyway. Albert stumbles and falls, loses his hat as the two men advance towards him rapidly. He is confused and does not understand what is going on, rightfully so. The tall walls of the alleyway dwarf the men proceeding along it. Albert assumes the men are after his money, that it is some sort of petty robbery, which would not be atypical in a city such as New York. As they walk deeper and deeper into the alley, the shadows of the men appear on the walls, following them as they walk towards a dead end. Vinnie's men do not flinch; they advance robotically as Albert desperately tries to find a way out, in vain. He is frantic, knocking, tapping on whatever he can find, but with no response from the other side. This scene is shot from the exterior of the alleyway, at a safe distance. The camera watches as Albert is cornered; it does not wander in or take on someone's point of view. Rather the camera is like a passerby, who might see what is going on, but would not dare to venture in, for fear for their own lives. Albert vanishes from the shot. Then, there is a cut to a medium close-up, to emphasize the lack of escape. There are doors behind Albert, but

they are tightly bolted, and no matter how hard he bangs on them, they do not open, only slightly budge, as if to tease him. The camera pans as Albert moves; he finally stops, with nowhere to go, horizontal shadows covering up his whole body. The scene cuts to Davey and Gloria, who safely meet in front of the nightclub. They are waiting for Albert, who is nowhere to be seen of course. At this point, the film cuts back to the shot from the entrance of the alleyway, from which Vinnie's men emerge; Albert, indeed, is not there. He is left behind, in the depths of the alleyway, not even visible to the camera. The men leave no trace behind, as they return to hide Albert's hat that was lying in the visual field of the camera, and thus of any passerby. Albert's murder is not directly shown to the audience; but the buildup in the alleyway suggests that the murder itself was rather brutal. Furthermore, Albert's innocence and wrongful termination adds an air of eeriness and menace, suggesting that no one is safe and is readily exposed to danger in the big city.

The ending of *Killer's Kiss* is unusual for a film noir, mainly because the characters manage to find their way out of the darkness. Davey and Gloria reunite at the train station, despite Gloria's earlier betrayal. Davey is one of the few who succeeds (even though the audience never actually sees him and Gloria board the train) in managing to find his way out. Most film noir characters cannot consider themselves to be so lucky, as has been demonstrated for Harry in *Night and the City.*

Conclusion

Why are Noir cities portrayed in such a negative light? Why are the cities menacing and pervasive? Imogen Sara Smith (2011) suggests that it is because cities are cut off from the sources of their sustenance; that is nature. They devour what they cannot produce (p. 20). This logic would also explain why the small town of Noir is considered and portrayed in a more 'authentic' manner than the urban jungle. Dimendberg (2004) states that film noir "poses the challenge of defining modernism within the Classical Hollywood cinema" (p. 17). In a time where film productions adhered to well-established codes, the noir film could not be comfortably located within this spectrum of filmmaking. More importantly however, it is noteworthy to recognize the time period in which Noir appeared and the social reality of the people of the time. A world almost brought to destruction by a war encapsulating evils was naturally reflected in the arts. It can thus be said that the city in film noir is a version – sometimes stylized and sometimes right out of the rubbles – of a world that has undergone a traumatic experience, and whose outlook regarding the future that awaits it is uncertain.

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