Homosexuality and Film Noir

by Richard Dyer

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Some of the first widely available images of homosexuality in our time
were those provided by the American film noir. Given the dearth of
alternative images, it is reasonable to suppose that these had an
important influence on both public ideas about homosexuality and
damagingly gay self-images. I know that as I grew up realizing I was
gay, I used to identify with characters like Waldo in LAURA or Jo in A
WALK ON THE WILD SIDE; they concretized and reinforced for me the
negative feelings about myself that I'd picked up elsewhere in the
culture. I know from work within the gay movement how widespread
these images still are among gays and non-gays alike. It is important
then to understand these images as one aspect of the armory of gay
oppression and indeed of sexual oppression generally. How gays are
represented is always part and parcel of the sexual ideology (1) of a
culture and, as I hope my examination of film noir shows, indicates the
complex, ambiguous ways in which heterosexual women and men are
thought and felt about in that culture.

These images are found way beyond the film noir proper, in the thriller
in general and in the representation of gays in all kinds of films. THE
KILLING OF SISTER GEORGE, for instance, in the theater a comedy,
became heavily noir in the film version, especially in the final seduction
scene. And even films trying to be liberal towards gays, such as ADVISE
AND CONSENT or THE DETECTIVE, when searching for a mode of
representing gays and the gay life style end up by drawing largely on the
mode set by film noir.

To understand what these images mean, we have to look at their
formation within the film noir, which constitutes their most determinant
context. Although much of the imagery can be traced back to elements
outside film noir in literature and certain reaches of the gay subculture, it
acquired its crucial meaning from the way it was inflected in the film noir
— the role of gays in the films' plot structures, their association with
aspects of the films' "world," and their characteristically noir filmic
treatment. The form this article takes then is first an attempt to define
delineate the film noir, followed by a discussion of the role of
gayness within it.

WHAT IS FILM NOIR?

There is quite a lot of disagreement about film noir, both over what kind
of phenomenon it is (a genre? a mood? a style? a cycle?) and over what
films are to be included in it. Paul Schrader's desire in his useful article
to term it a "mood" is understandable, thereby emphasizing its affective
quality and acknowledging how much "looser" it is as a film kind than the
Western, the gangster thriller or the backstage musical. (2) Yet if its
characteristic mood or feel is what is most important about it, this is
nonetheless a highly specific quality and not just some generalized
pessimism or Angst which one can find in an enormous range of films.
Moreover, a mood is not something that is poured over a film or injected
into it but is carried by identifiable aesthetic features. It seems to me that
there are such features at the levels of structure, iconography and visual
style that recur from film noir to film noir and thereby identify it as a
What does make film noir different from most other film genres is its history. As a continuous run of films, it lasted only from 1941 (THE MALTESE FALCON) to 1955 (KISS ME DEADLY). Elements of its generic features can of course be traced back to earlier films or film types (e.g., Warner Brothers’ gangster films, German expressionism, French poetic realism, etc.), but it is the specific conjunction of all the aesthetic features that characterizes the genre as a genre. After 1955 there have been films that have worked within the noir conventions — stragglers like A WALK ON THE WILD SIDE, reworkings like P.J. (British title: A NEW FACE IN HELL) and GUNN, self-conscious nostalgia/parody films like CHINATOWN, THE LONG GOODBYE and FAREWELL MY LOVELY. I have included the later films in my discussion of the role of gayness in film noir, partly because they make explicit what had to be implicit or marginal in the earlier films. However, in this section I have restricted discussion to the main period, since exactly what counts from later periods is controversial. (I have, in fact, tested all the later examples referred to subsequently against the model derived from the main period, but you’ll have to take my word for it that they do fit; it took up too much space to lay out all the evidence here).

Let me now suggest the generic aesthetic features of film noir in terms of structure, iconography and visual style.

STRUCTURE

The basic structure of film noir is like a labyrinth with the hero as the thread running through it. He starts out on a quest — to solve a mystery (Spade, Marlowe, Dana Andrews in LAURA, Bogart in DEAD RECKONING) or else to find work (DETOUR), settle down (KISS OF DEATH), commit murder (THE POSTMAN ALWAYS RINGS TWICE, DOUBLE INDEMNITY), become a great boxer (BODY AND SOUL). Yet the road that he chooses, or is chosen for him, does not lead directly. Think of the standard detective story of Conan Doyle or Agatha Christie in which every incident contributes to the hero detectives understanding of the crime and is used in the final scene to demonstrate the guilty party (cf. Finney/Poirot in MURDER ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS). This is quite different from film noir. Here, whole episodes that seem to be furthering the quest turn out to have been a waste of time and energy. For instance, in STRANGERS ON A TRAIN (1951), Guy is going to tell Bruno's father what a psychopathic son he's got, down corridors, up stairs, past dog, dead of night — only to find himself talking to Bruno. Or, in FAREWELL MY LOVELY (1945), what appears to be an unconnected path (Moose's search for Wanda) turns out to be a key to the mystery, while Spades visit to Jules Amthor, where he is drugged, has to fight his way through cobwebs in front of his eyes, and then through the doors and corridors of the house, tells him very little (and takes up a lot of screen time). The detour may in fact take him away from the quest altogether; most notably in DETOUR, Al is so far deflected from his trek across America in search of work that he never gets back to it. And of course sometimes the whole film can be seen to have been a pointless quest, as is the case with THE MALTESE FALCON.

The labyrinth can come out as repetition with the hero going over the same ground several times. For instance, in FEAR IN THE NIGHT (1947), the murder is repeated as waking dream, uncanny recall and under fake (or is it?) hypnosis; or POSTMAN (1945), is entirely structured around a series of repetitions (two attempts to run away, two attempts to kill Nick, two trials for murder, the echo by the lake, the title) as well as characterized by characters' endlessly returning to the same place (no matter how often they leave the place, Cora and Frank are forced to come back to the cafe).

The labyrinth is sometimes reflected in the geography of individual
incidents — as in NIAGARA (1953), with the complex of walkways and stairs at the foot of the falls, and later around the clock tower as Monroe tries to flee Cotton; the mirror maze in FEAR IN THE NIGHT and THE LADY FROM SHANGHAI; or the nightclub in GILDA, where mirrors turn out to be doors, and walls turn out to be windows.

The menace of the labyrinth is often heightened by the film's failure to fulfill two of the dominant expectations we have of film stories — that mysteries will be solved and that the heterosexual couple will get it together. It is not that mysteries go entirely unsolved, but the presentation often makes it feel as if they do. The detective's explanation à la Holmes or Poirot is often so breathless as to be incomprehensible, as in FAREWELL MY LOVELY and THE BIG SLEEP. Ambiguity often lingers over the complicity of a central figure, as with Dix in IN A LONELY PLACE (1950) and the many femmes fatales of the form. In the case of KISS ME DEADLY (1955), we don't really know what the explosion is that Hammer's opening the box unleashes. Is it a bomb? It's not really big enough for the A-bomb. Hammer's involvement with the box comes through women. Is it perhaps mythically, misogynistically, Pandora's box? That would perhaps be a satisfactory metaphorical end to the film but hardly a material solution to the mystery.

The settling down of the heterosexual couple is often denied us. Spade sends Brigit to the chair in THE MALTESE FALCON (1941); Laurel refuses Dix even though she knows he's technically innocent in IN A LONELY PLACE; Phyllis and Walter shoot each other in DOUBLE INDEMNITY (1944). The separation or destruction of a couple early on in the film may be final, as in THE BIG HEAT and DETOUR. Alternatively, the heterosexual resolution often appears to be the required ending tacked on to couplings that would seem recipes for marital disaster, especially those between Johnny and Gilda, McPherson and Laura.

Further noir feeling is induced by the use of flashback, voice-over and dream structures. These may have two effects. First, they may cast into doubt the status-as-truth of the events presented. Much of the power of the cinema resides in the belief in seeing-as-believing. Although easily exposed as fraudulent theoretically, the realism/naturalism of the cinema is best not ignored as an -ism holding considerable sway over how we see films in the ordinary way of things. Because of it, until film noir the flashback was generally treated as simply the truth, no matter how introduced (as memory, confession, verbal explanation, etc.) When in the modern story in INTOLERANCE, in the trial scene, Robert Harron tells the court that he gave the murder weapon back to the gang boss before the murder was committed, the film presents this as a very brief flashback. Here there is no question of treating this testimony as evidence in the way a jury should, sifting it for lies or the distortions of memory. Rather the film assures us that this is what happened.

However, with film noir, where flashback is often extensively used, uncertainties begin to creep in. There are discontinuities between overlapping versions shown in flashback of what happened in CROSSFIRE (1947); dreams are presented with the logic of reality in THE WOMAN IN THE WINDOW (1944), or turn out to have been reality (FEAR IN THE NIGHT); while realities are presented with the strangeness (Gloria Grahame and ménage in CROSSFIRE) or the erotic intensity (OUT OF THE PAST, 1947) of a dream. Moreover, the highly emotional context of the telling may cast doubt on the reliability of the version of the story told. Thus we have a confession during a thunderstorm in DEAD RECKONING (1947), or a wounded man careening through streets in a car and then pouring it all out into a recorder in DOUBLE INDEMNITY. There is by no means a wholesale reversal of the Griffith-style flashback convention in film noir, but it does mark a partial departure from it which, in the context of the certainty over pictorial truthfulness prevalent in Hollywood, feels disconcerting.
Flashbacks, voices-over and dream structures may be the means of suggesting that the progress through the labyrinth is the working out of a fated or fatal pattern. The end is known to the voice-over from the beginning even if not always to us, and all the events can be seen as leading inevitably, inexorably and gratuitously to that end. The voice-over may spell this out, as in DETOUR (1945), or it may simply imply it by picking on the significant moments that pointed downhill (POSTMAN). The nature of fate is sometimes explicitly examined in film noir, usually in the form of a character with uncontrollable (“Freudian”) impulses within him/her, as in IN A LONELY PLACE, LADY OF DECEIT, STRANGER ON THE THIRD FLOOR and ON DANGEROUS GROUND. But these are films without flashbacks or voices-over, and they make fatality to a degree comprehensible even if leaving it frighteningly uncontrollable. The flashback, on the other hand, is both vaguer as to the nature of destiny and fate and is more frightening. It gives the aesthetic structure of predestination without any ontological backup to make it comprehensible.

ICONOGRAPHY

The concept "iconography," drawn from the work of art historian Erwin Panofsky, has proved particularly generative for work on film genre, as for instance in Ed Buscombe's "The Idea of Genre" (on the Western) and Cohn McArthur's Underworld USA. It may be defined as the study of the set of images (objects, people, settings), sounds and music shared by a run of films that marks them off as a genre. Icons are the cues that immediately indicate to us, "This is a Western/science fiction/kung fu/etc. film." In the case of the Western or the gangster film, this iconographic set is very tight, precise and restricted, but there is nothing like that for film noir. However, if we use iconography in a slightly broader sense to refer to types of setting and star, there are some characteristic features.

SETTINGS. These are at the two extremes of the city and the rural desert. In the former, film noir takes over many of the meanings associated with city iconography in the gangster film, as evoked by Robert Warshow and Colin McArthur — desolation, brutality, threat, and alienation as caught in images of pavements glistening with rain, ill-lit streets, dingy bars and grubby rooming-houses. An important noir inflection of this set of images is the increased importance of the luxurious mansions and night clubs. In the gangster film, these symbolize the pinnacle of the protagonist's rise to temporary power, but in film noir, they become the permanent environment of the hero's employers (not only those of the private eyes but also of employers in, for instance, GILDA, OUT OF THE PAST, and SUNSET BOULEVARD). The identification of luxury and a certain sort of good taste (seen in baroque art, exotic plants) with decadence and evil is central to film noir.

As for films noir set in the country, the country is as desolate in its way as the city landscapes. Long deserted dusty roads are the countryside of POSTMAN and DETOUR, and the Western PURSUED (1947), generally regarded as part film noir, uses the barest and most fruitless Western scenery imaginable.

Settings tend to be in the public world rather than domestic. For the hero, a basic domestic ritual like eating is transferred from family to public eating place. Indeed, the lunch counter comes close to being one of the true icons of the form (as in POSTMAN, THE KILLERS (1946), THE STRANGER ON THE THIRD FLOOR, and OUT OF THE PAST). Crucial personal encounters take place not in the home but, say, in a train (STRANGERS ON A TRAIN), in a supermarket (DOUBLE INDEMNITY) or in a seedy cafe (Mexican sequence of OUT OF THE PAST).

In this way the hero is denied an environment of safety, coziness, or rootedness. If such an atmosphere is evoked at all, it serves to sharpen the depiction of the noir world by being under threat from the latter
(KISS OF DEATH) or actually destroyed by it (THE BIG HEAT). There is some play on this in IN A LONELY PLACE, with its telling images of the unmade bed before Laurel moves in, her bringing Dix coffee and the scene in the kitchen where he attacks the grapefruit with the serrated knife that he has through ignorance straightened out, thus linking lack of domesticity and violent impulse. More usually, when homes are shown, they are the homes of the villains and moreover are "abnormal" — they belong to single (i.e., "incomplete") people as in LAURA, or childless couples as in GILDA or POSTMAN, or, of course, gays as in ROPE. That these homes are abnormal is iconographically expressed once again in a style of luxury quite different from the cozy normality of the "ordinary family home."

STARS.

It is not so much specific stars (though there are Bogart, Mitchum, Lake, Graham) as certain types of star which characterize film noir. The appearance of women in film noir has been felicitously described by Cohn McArthur as having "startlingly unreal sensuality." It is above all in the faces that this quality is produced.

Make-up and coiffure are used in a way that draws attention to their own artifice while at the same time they create surfaces of considerable tactile impact and draw attention to aspects of the head, such as the mouth and hair, which are particularly associated with eroticism in our time. The long faces of Lauren Bacall, Veronica Lake and Lizbeth Scott are emphasized by waves of hair hanging down around them; the hair is groomed and lit lustrously, it flows in "natural" curves that have yet somehow obviously been coiffed; the foundation make-up makes the face very pale while the lips are heavy and dark. To this combination of artifice and sensuality is frequently added the use of luxurious clothes made of highly tactile, yet man-made fibers, and of course furs are often used to identify women with savage nature.

For the heroes, it is the imagery of hard-boiledness that prevails — with unpressed suits, ties loosened at the neck, low drawn hats and unshaven faces. This bespeaks the heroes' lack of concern about their appearance and also indicates, social conventions being what they are, that these men are not married.

VISUAL STYLE

To discuss the influence of German Expressionism on film noir (chiaroscuro lighting, unbalanced composition, skewed camera angles) is a standard part of film noir analysis, most notably in an article by J.A. Place and L.S. Peterson. Although the full extent of the Expressionist visual repertoire is only discernible in a minority of films (STRANGER ON THE THIRD FLOOR, THE KILLERS, FAREWELL MY LOVELY), in a modified version the use of shadow and unbalanced composition does characterize film noir. For a fuller exploration of this, see the Place and Peterson article.

GAYS IN FILM NOIR

How are gays represented in film noir, and what are they doing in it? To see the iconography of gayness in film noir, let me straight away list some relevant characters and the iconographic features that label them gay:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FILM</th>
<th>CHARACTER</th>
<th>TRAITS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IN A LONELY PLACE.</td>
<td>Martha</td>
<td>big-boned, hair drawn back,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>aggressive, hard voice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REBECCA.</td>
<td>Mrs. Danvers</td>
<td>severe, hair drawn back, hard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>voice.</td>
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Female Characters
A WALK ON THE WILD SIDE. Jo — tailored suits, shortish hair, overall military precision of dress

TONY ROME. Irene — fat, shortish hair, loud voiced

FAREWELL MY LOVELY ('76). Frances Amthor — fat, shortish hair, loud voiced

**Male Characters**

THE MALTESE FALCON. Cairo — fastidious dress, crimped hair, perfume

STRANGERS ON A TRAIN. Bruno — fastidious dress, manicured nails

LAURA. Waldo — fastidious dress, love of art, bitchy wit

FAREWELL MY LOVELY ('45). Lindsay — fastidious dress, knowledge of clothes, jewelry, perfume

FAREWELL MY LOVELY ('76). Lindsay — same; see book.

BRUTE FORCE. Cpt. Munsey — fastidious dress, love of art, music

THE BIG SLEEP. General Sternwood — hothouse atmosphere (this is most tenuous example)

P.J. Quel — gaudy clothes, fussy hairstyle

Apart from these, one other film has of course to be mentioned — ROPE. The only reason I have not included it is that I have not seen it. Yet it is clearly the film noir in which gay characters are most explicit and central. I have to hope that my not having seen it does not invalidate everything I have to say in this article. Mention may also briefly be made of CROSSFIRE. The book on which that was based had a gay man rather than a Jew as victim, but as the film is also a social message film, this had to be changed: Hollywood's liberalism could only stretch so far.

Several initial points may be made about the list above. First, it is clearly only in a minority of films noir that gay characters appear (I doubt if I have missed more than two or three), yet their absence from all other types of film and the caution with which even film noir had to introduce them suggests that they do nonetheless constitute a defining feature of film noir taken as a whole. Second, it will be noted how the iconography of male and female gays contrasts with that of straight men and women in film noir, not to the extent of cross-dressing, but in terms of glamorous and sensual as opposed to rough and severe for women, and carelessness as opposed to fastidiousness for men. Third, the iconography was not of course developed for film noir alone but has its roots in gay literature and lifestyles (here distorted and denigrated). It is noticeable that the lesbian iconography is less elaborated and precise than that for gay men (because lesbian culture has had greater difficulty in developing under the double oppression of gayness and femaleness). Fourth, what is significant about the iconography is that it is not explicitly sexual. Gays are thus defined by everything but the very thing that makes us different.

What are these gay characters doing in film noir? In the first instance, they are a further amplification of images of sexual "decadence" and "perversion" prevalent in the form:

**Trait** ............................................. **Film/s**

Nymphomania — THE BIG SLEEP

Pornography — THE BIG SLEEP

Old man + young woman — FAREWELL MY LOVELY, POSTMAN,
GILDA, NIAGARA, WOMAN IN THE WINDOW, P.J.

Old woman + young man — LAURA, SUNSET BOULEVARD, P.J.

Sado-masochism — PURSUED, THE BIG HEAT, BRUTE FORCE,
ROPE OF SAND, STRANGERS ON A TRAIN, KISS ME DEADLY

Incest — PURSUED

Transvestism — GUNN (I have not included this character as gay as
there is no indication that he is, in fact, homosexual.)

This in turn relates to the central image of sexuality in the films — the
demme fatale.

These images are all related first iconographically. Nearly all form part of
the luxury milieu. Waldo in LAURA is the epitome of this. The opening
tracking shot of the film round a room full of neatly arranged, over-fussy
objets d'art immediately places the milieu, and his subsequently
revealed obsession with clothes, wines, gossip and the arts confirms it.
His witty heartlessness is first rammed home in his line, "I should be
sincerely sorry to see my neighbors' children devoured by wolves," a line
which calls attention to his childlessness and hence sexual
"unnaturalness." Similarly we see or judge Quel (overdressed in shiny
Kaftan tops) as housekeeper to Orbison's mistress, the nightclub in
GILDA, the hothouse opening of THE BIG SLEEP, the penthouse
apartment in ROPE.

The association of gayness and the luxury milieu works differently for
the lesbian characters. In most cases, they are shown as working in this
setting, as housekeeper (Mrs. Danvers), masseuse (Martha), or owner-
manager (Jo Frances). This means that the milieu less clearly defines
their character. It is determined by their employers in the first two cases,
while Jo and Frances as brothel keepers are supplying an ambiance
defined by the wants of men. This emphasis on lesbians as working
women always carries strong elements of tyranny and violence, of
servants to mistresses (Mrs. Danvers, Martha), of madames to their
girls. This tyranny then shades into the characters' feelings of attraction
to the woman in question (with the exception, so far as we know, of Mrs.
Danvers and Rebecca). The equation of lesbian love with tyranny is
also the strongest impression we get from the scene between Irene and
Georgia in the caravan in TONY ROME (1967) and between George
and Childie in THE KILLING OF SISTER GEORGE. The tyrannical form
of employer/employee relationships which is established by the place of
the lesbian relationship in the world of the classic film noir thus carries
over into films where the lesbian characters are supposed to be each
others' social equal.

The gay men and the femmes fatales share the same decor
iconographically. The reason for this is spelled out in LAURA. Women
can be legitimately identified with luxury, with obsessions with beauty
and appearance — Laura herself is the epitome of all that is alluring in
such a world. Men who are associated with it, however, be they gay
(Waldo) or gigolos (Shelby), are weak, villainous or depraved (or all
three). Hence, the touchstone of male normality in LAURA, McPherson
(Dana Andrews), is very much an outsider to the milieu and largely
repelled by it except insofar as he is attracted to its feminine
representative, Laura. The ideological pairing of male homosexuality
with luxury and decadence (with connotations of impotence and sterility)
is of a piece with the acceptable linking of women with luxury (women
as expensive things to win and keep, women as bearers of their
husbands' wealth) and decadence (women as beings without sexuality
save for the presence of men). The feeling that gay men are like women
yet not women produces the "perverse" tone of this mode of
iconographic representation.

In terms of narrative structure, the gay characters when not actually
villains (Cairo, Bruno, Waldo) frequently constitute one of the blind
alleys of the labyrinth, lengthening the process of solving the mystery or threatening the heterosexual union. Examples of the former process are in TONY ROME (Rome learns nothing from tracking down and cross-examining Georgia and Irene); FAREWELL MY LOVELY (1945 — all Lindsay does is lead Marlowe to being a murder suspect; 1976 – the sequence in Jules Amthor’s house — see above — becomes the sequence in Frances Amthor’s brothel). In P.J., Quel is specifically there to send P.J. in one direction while he thinks he’s going in the other, and the visit to the seedy “Gay Caballero” in search of promised information yields P.J. nothing but a beating. Examples of threatening a heterosexual union occur in IN A LONELY PLACE, where Martha sows seeds of doubt in Laurel’s mind. Narratively, the scene in which Martha appears is placed between the scene in the night club where Laurel and Dix feel they are under surveillance and the scene in which Sylvia blurts out that Laurel has seen the police again without telling Dix. This chain of scenes seems to suggest Martha is a link in the chain of the couple’s gradual separation). 1962’s WALK ON THE WILD SIDE has Jo keep Hally and Dove apart. In LAURA Waldo always acts to keep McPherson and Laura, and indeed Laura and all her men, apart and ultimately emerges as the villain.

In STRANGERS ON A TRAIN ironically Bruno’s murdering Miriam to make Guy free to marry Anne actually makes it more difficult for them to marry because of the suspicion of murder hanging over Guy. In the case of the last mentioned film, there is a particularly close fit between the labyrinth structure and homosexuality. Guy’s visit to Bruno’s parents’ house accomplishes neither its overt purpose (the murder) nor its covert purpose (warning Bruno’s father). But since Bruno has set this up and since Guy finds himself talking to Bruno, who is waiting for Guy in bed in pajamas, may we not, as Gerald Peary has suggested to me, read this as a blind alley actually constructed in the hope of homosexual seduction?

In most instances, gays function as both villains and frustrations of the heterosexual development, as do the femmes fatales. This in fact seems to be central to film noir. One has only to compare the standard police film, in which family/sex life is always seen in opposition to or as a respite from the hero’s job to see how distinctive is film noir’s intertwining of the job (nailing the villain) and sex (getting it together with the woman).

Our society distinguishes with some anxiety the public world of work from the private world of family, affection and sexuality on the assumption that the instrumental purposes of work (getting things done, making money, acting efficiently) would be undermined by too much emotional or sexual byplay. Film noir, however, tends to collapse these two worlds into each other. The hero’s work becomes sexual — McPherson falls in love with the woman whose “death” he is investigating; looking after Gilda becomes Johnny’s job; a brothel (A WALK ON THE WILD SIDE) is actually a place of sexual labor; and Joe in SUNSET BOULEVARD (1950) is employed virtually as a stud. The women are involved in the plot not just as a “love-interest” but as agents and enemies — Brigid uses her charms to trick Spade and to attempt to acquire the Falcon; Cora suffuses the cafe with sexuality in POSTMAN. Similarly, gay men introduce a permanent sexual potential into the world of work. They are unsettling to the puritan (non-sexual) safety of the instrumental world. The work of intellectual discussion in ROPE is undermined by the actual sexual realization a few hours before the film begins of what they are supposedly only talking about. Quel appraises P.J.’s body before employing him, spies on him and Maureen dancing together, chats him up at the dance in Haiti, invites him to a gay club to give him information (actually to have him beaten up).

In other words, the film endlessly introduces a sexual current into what should be straightforward moments of employment, surveillance and investigation. Lesbians provide a further turn of the screw. As women with jobs (not just roles as wives, mothers or lovers) they enter the
instrumental world, but because they are women they can also act in concert with other women, thus effectively blocking the hero in both the instrumental and the sexual spheres. Examples are the closed encounter of Rome with Georgia and Irene, the sense of two women ganging up on a man in IN A LONELY PLACE and REBECCA, and the triumph of Jo's world, the brothel, over Dove's love and career.

The sexuality of film noir is also distinctive in that it does not require an initiative on the part of the hero to activate it. The gays' sexuality is developed before the coming of the hero, while the femmes fatales are often notable for their taking the initiative in and expressing of their sexuality (e.g., Cora, Gilda, Lauren Bacall in THE BIG SLEEP). However, their sexual independence from the hero is undercut by the principle that no sexual satisfaction is possible away from the hero. The femme fatale (like the nymphomaniac) is an image of frustration, alive with sexual desire that cannot be satisfied. This is often expressed by her being attached to an older man or an indifferent gang boss. Such an image is amplified in the gay characters by the culturally widespread notion (reinforced by the non-sexuality of the gay iconography) that gays are intensely physical beings who cannot do anything physically and hence vibrate with frustrated twisted sexual energy. This is most true of lesbian characters. The introduction of Martha as a masseuse handling Laurel's flesh is the most physical yet non-sexual (in the genital sense) image in the film. As Martha tells Laurel to leave Dix, the shot from below suggests the intense physicality and frustration of the being whose sexuality attempts to operate independently of the hero.

Similarly we have the shot of Jo in A WALK ON THE WILD SIDE with her back to the camera and the squared-up shoulders of her perfectly tailored suit physically present against the light of the window. She is saying, "Sometimes I've waited years for what I've wanted," while stretched languorously across the bed in a lace housecoat is what she really wants, Hally. (Later Jo is made to utter a supposedly gay credo, setting its sights against eroticism: "Can any man love a woman for herself, give her the beauty of life without the reek of lust?") Inflections of the images are also realized in male gay characters. Waldo expresses his eroticism in idealizing Laura, no more sleeping with or loving her than he does any of his other objets d'art; Lindsay in FAREWELL MY LOVELY is physically alive by virtue of an interest in perfumes and women's clothes; Munsey in BRUTE FORCE (and presumably Paul Henreid in ROPE OF FLESH) expresses his gayness through a sadistic beating.

Sexuality independent of the hero is shown to be neurotic, frustrated, and sour; yet it also means that the hero's own sexuality goes unchallenged. Approached by a faggot, or a femme fatale, the hero has the whole moral force of Hollywood and Western culture and male chauvinism to fall back on in order to refuse the offer. But in this way, his own sexual adequacy is not tested. It is of course to be assumed — film noir does not call the potency of male sexuality into question. Yet there hovers around it an implication of male uncertainty about sexuality. Here the gay characters start to serve a different function from that of the femmes fatales.

Several films noirs feature soldiers who have just left, or are about to leave the service (DEAD RECKONING, CROSSFIRE, THE BLUE DALIA). These films were made at the period when men were returning from active service, sometimes several years after living with women. The all-male group often seems the norm in noir films, not only those just mentioned but also in BRUTE FORCE, THE BIG HEAT (here Debbie is excluded from the gambling scene), or the men's club of THE WOMAN IN THE WINDOW. The intense relationship of two men is also common as in DEAD RECKONING (Bogart: "He was laughing, tough and lonesome." To Scott: "I loved him more than you"), THE BIG COMBO (Bettini cries when Fante is killed by dynamite, "Don't leave me, Fante," and turns stool pigeon), DOUBLE INDEMNITY (Walter and Keys). This is not confined to film noir obviously. It is true of Westerns,
Howard Hawks’ films, or even, according to Leslie Fiedler, the whole of American literature. (8)

But perhaps the potential homosexuality of all-male groups and male-male relationships is much nearer the surface in both the image of armed service and prison life and in the experience of it, too. In this context, the gay characters serve as an example of sick male-male relationships (that is, sexual ones) over against healthy (non-sexual) ones. Lest we imagine Gallagher “loves” Joe in BRUTE FORCE, we have Munsey to remind us what a perverted male-male relationship is like. Lest we imagine Spade’s suspicion of Brigit is itself suspicious, we have Cairo and Gutman to remind us of how far Spade is removed from that sort of thing.

**GILDA**

GILDA has a different emphasis. Here the hero (Glenn Ford/Johnny) does have a close relationship with another man (Charles Farrel/Ballen) which is implicitly homosexual, and this does cast doubts on his reaction to the femme fatale (Rita Hayworth/Gilda) and indeed upon the actual “fatal” quality of the latter. The gayness of the Johnny/Ballen relationship is implicit yet definitely enough etched in, even without use of the gay iconography. There is dialogue about the three of us (Johnny, Ballen, and Ballen’s cane) who will never be split up by anything or anyone. Exchanged glances are held longer than glances between non-sexual partners normally are. Ballen “picks up” Johnny for no apparent reason — altruism is not presented as one of his characteristics, and Johnny has no observable talent apart from being pretty. Perhaps I may be forgiven for quoting dubious evidence here, one of the first lines in the film where Johnny says to Ballen, “You must lead a gay life.” Later, even Gilda emphasizes the parallels between herself and Johnny as Ballen’s pick-ups. (9)

When Gilda turns up as Ballen’s wife, Johnny’s reaction can be read as straight jealousy. But the film also provides another reason, which in turn provides a (naïve) explanation for his relationship with Ballen — namely, they are an old affair that somehow went sour. This is why he resents Gilda, but it might also be “why” he is in a gay relationship, that she has put him off women.

Two points amplify this interpretation. First of all, we have to be careful not to assess Gilda's characterization by today's standards — perhaps in 1946 her really quite mild promiscuity was shocking. The advertising for GILDA played her up as a bad woman, and Hayworth had made a notable appearance as a femme fatale in BLOOD AND SAND (1941). Yet her image outside of GILDA (1946) is also close to that developed later by Monroe — innocent sexuality or woman as the Life Force. Certainly it is something like this that she embodies in the musicals and her dancing (with its Latin-ness that is carefree but not vulgarly sensual) and perhaps in ONLY ANGELS HAVE WINGS (1939). There seems to be at least as much carry over of this innocent sexuality as of the femme fatale of film noir in the film's first shot of her, which in a close-up catches her on a movement, head up, throwing back her hair from across her face, looking and smiling straight past the camera.

Then again, she is given the song, “Put the Blame on Mame,” to sing quietly in the deserted nightclub to the sympathetic and philosophical men's room attendant. Here, the scene depicts her friendship with a man who repeatedly stresses his distance from and contempt for the luxury milieu of the nightclub, with the quiet reflectiveness of the setting and her delivery of the song (as she accompanies herself on a guitar), and of course the words of the song which admittedly ambiguously criticize the way that men always put the blame on women's sexuality for natural disasters. All these imply that Gilda is far from fatal and that there is something “pathological” in Johnny's soon violent response to her. (However, as the song suggests, his “pathology” may be a typical response.)
The second amplification of this interpretation occurs after the apparent death of Ballen in the exploding airplane. Johnny and Gilda marry, but it is clear that the marriage is not consummated. The labyrinthine structures of the film have hitherto concentrated on Ballen, the mirror-maze effects of the night club, and the impenetrability of his secret (tungsten) sadomasochism in heterosexual relationships. These structures hover around this sense of violence and have already been hinted at in the image of Gilda with a whip at the Mardi Gras ball and in the character of Ballen, with his phallic knife/cane, his thin-lipped, scarred face, and his references to the excitement of cruelty and "other strong emotions." What GILDA seems to point to is something that most films noir try to keep at bay — that all sexuality or all male sexuality is sick. Where most films noir evoke sick sexuality everywhere except in the hero, GILDA has him caught between gayness, in no way presented positively, and sadomasochism.

Of the films noir I have seen, only GILDA questions the adequacy of male sexuality. Such a questioning is perhaps implicit in others — with McPherson's obsession with the "dead" Laura, for instance, or the dark sadistic side of Dix in IN A LONELY PLACE (though the sexuality of this is not explored). But usually male sexual adequacy is ensured because the hero's adequacy is taken as read but not demonstrated. Heroes just are sexually adequate unless we are told to the contrary. And to deflect any doubts that linger, we have such unambiguously sick images of frustration and maliciousness as the femmes fatales, nymphos, queers and dykes.

Notes:

1. There is not one simple sexual ideology in a culture. There is struggle between different ideologies, rooted in different material circumstances (male-female, straight-gay, etc.). There is contradiction between these ideologies and within them.

2. Paul Schrader, "Notes on Film Noir," Film Comment, 8:1 (Spring 72).


7. There are accounts of ROPE in Higham and Greenberg's Hollywood in the Forties and in Movie Reader.


9. There is external evidence to suggest that the gayness of the Ballen/Johnny relationship was deliberate. For instance, in his article on Rita Hayworth in Focus on Film, No. 10 (Summer 72), John Kobal refers to an interview with Glenn Ford in which Ford says, "Of course, we knew their relationship was homosexual."
set in motion with the rash murder by teenaged Martha Ivers of her rich bitch of an aunt. Walter, the son of Martha’s tutor, saw it go
down but doesn’t say anything, and the two blame the incident on an intruder, who is convicted and hanged (whoops). Noir was
never confined to the movies. A many-authored Zeitgeist, it was a modernizing agent and a fashion statement, adding a proto-hipster
sheen of self-consciousness to everything it touched. Between the Great Depression and the start of the Cold War, Hollywood went
noir, reflecting the worldly, weary, wised-up undercurrent of midcentury America. The author explores the genre’s origins, its look,
its politics, and its geography, and shows how noir’s poignant cynicism took hold and why it remains embedded in the national
psyche today.