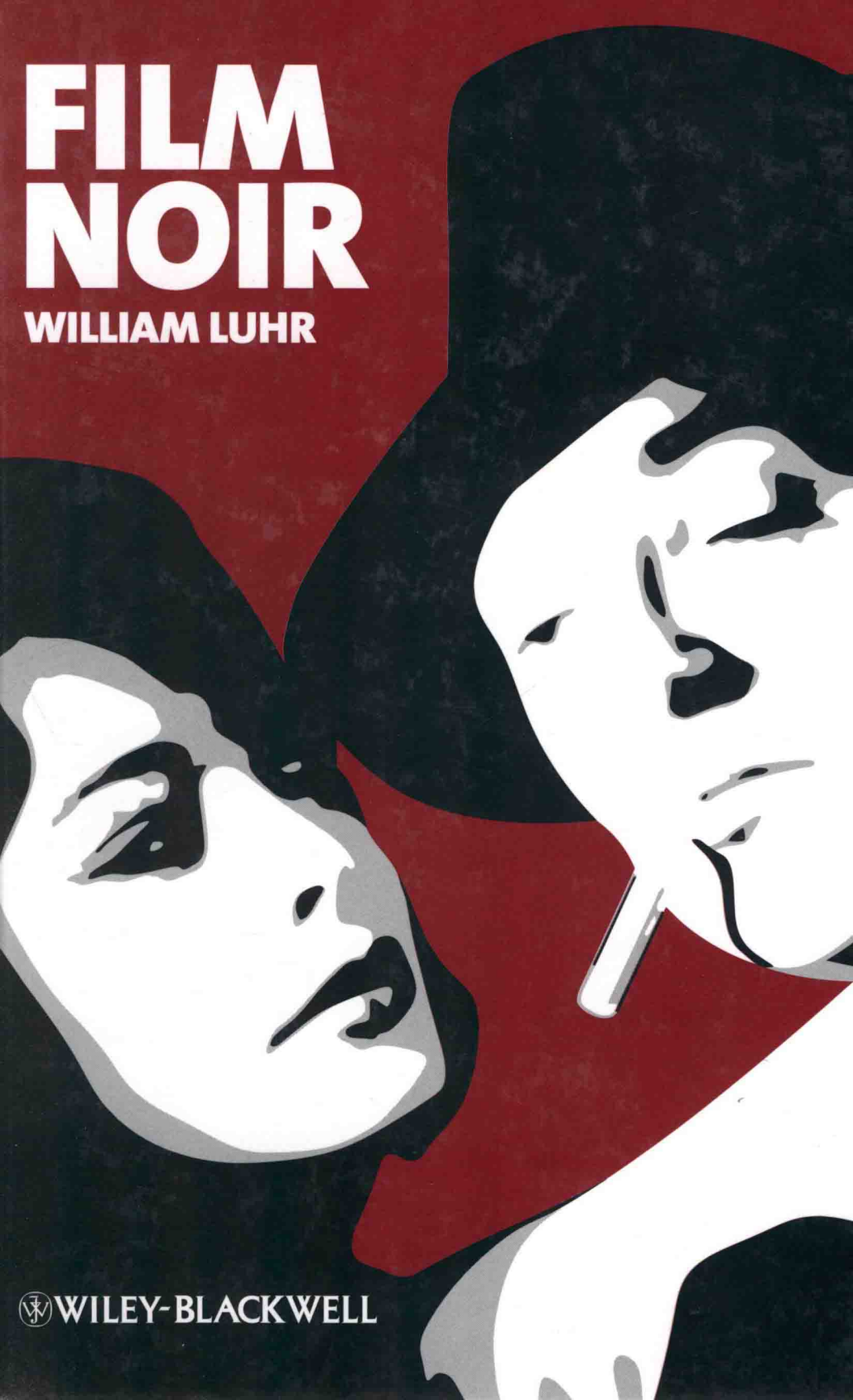
FILM NOIR

WILLIAM LUHR



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Praise for *Film Noir*

"William Luhr is the intrepid sleuth of cinema studies, tracking down *film noir* under all the aliases – classic *noir*, pre-*noir*, neo-*noir* – that its infinite variety has produced. Writing with energy, clarity, and verve, Luhr explodes narrow conceptions of *noir* as conclusively as the Great Whatsit blew up postwar innocence in *Kiss Me Deadly*. Carry a copy of this timely, spirited book in your trenchcoat. It is a boon for film scholars, general readers, and movie buffs alike."

David Sterritt, Chairman, National Society of Film Critics

"Informed by a rich body of previous scholarship, conceptually sophisticated, yet written with grace and clarity, *Film Noir* by William Luhr provides an ideal introduction for students and fans to the dark corner of American culture represented by these gloriously perverse crime films."

Jerry W. Carlson, PhD, The City College & Graduate Center, CUNY

"William Luhr, who knows all the many questions raised by *film noir*, supplies lucid, elegant, provocative answers. His knowledge is deep, his comments far-ranging. This is an essential addition to the vast literature on the genre."

Charles Affron, New York University

"Writing with broad expertise and deep sensibility, Professor Luhr heightens our nostalgic delight in *noir* films while also pointing to the lost spectatorial experience of *film noir's* once present tenseness."

Chris Straayer, New York University Department of Cinema Studies

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For Peter Lehman,
Who knows the darkness,
But has kept the music playing

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INTRODUCTION

The ominous silhouette of a man on crutches approaching the camera that appears under the opening credits of *Double Indemnity* (1944) provides a prototypical image for *film noir* (Plate 1). Something is wrong – with the man's legs, with the man, with what will follow these credits – and the grim orchestral music accompanying the image reinforces this impression. The silhouette applies not to a single character but to three men in the film: one a murderer, one his victim, and the third an innocent man set up to take the blame for the crime. All three are drawn into this ugly vortex by the same seductive woman who exploits them and orchestrates their doom. The dark silhouette also menaces the viewer's space – it comes at us, it somehow involves us in whatever is to happen, and whatever it is won't be nice. Something is wrong.

This image appeared at the dawn of *film noir*, before the term was even coined. *Double Indemnity* establishes one, but only one, paradigm for the genre. It concerns an adulterous couple who murder the woman's husband for insurance money; in doing so, they generate their own doom. Everybody loses. The story is told mostly in flashback by the guilty man at a point just after he killed his lover and was, himself, shot by her (Plate 2). This retrospective storytelling strategy, heavily reliant on voice-over narration, was innovative at this time and shapes the viewer's response to the film's events in three significant ways. First, it presents

Film Noir, First Edition. William Luhr.

PLATE 1 *Double Indemnity* – credits: Silhouette of a man on crutches approaching the viewer. © 1944 Paramount Pictures, INC.

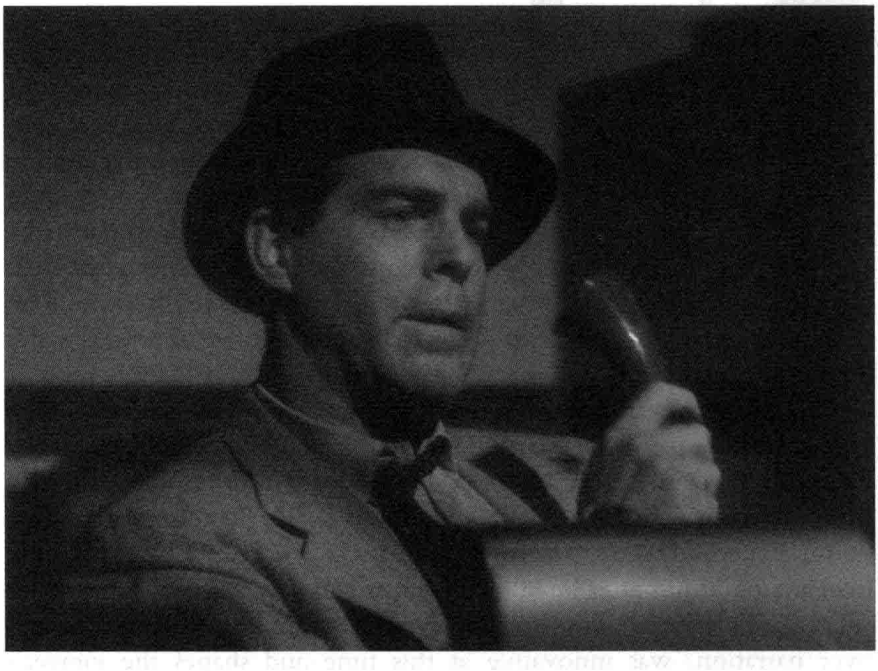

PLATE 2 *Double Indemnity*: Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) speaking into a dictaphone. © 1944 Paramount Pictures, INC.

the story not from an "objective" perspective but rather from its narrator's perspective, drawing us into his anxieties, moral failures, and feelings of entrapment. It makes our main point of identification not someone who conformed to contemporary Hollywood moral codes but rather someone who violated them. This eliminated traditional viewer security in presumptively identifying with the main characters. Even if such characters in traditional movies were doomed – as when, for example, *A Tale of Two Cities* (1935) ended with Sydney Carton going to the guillotine – those movies presented that doom as heroic and uplifting. But the doom of many characters in *film noir* is neither noble nor uplifting, and viewer empathy with such characters can be destabilizing.

This leads to disorienting situations such as one in *Double Indemnity* when the couple, having just murdered the woman's husband, prepare to flee the crime scene in her car. She turns the key but the car will not start. The two look tensely at one another since this simple, unexpected problem could lead to imminent discovery. She tries again and fails again, increasing the tension between them, as well as in the viewer. The scene is shot and edited in such a way as to draw us into their anxiety, to encourage us to want the car to start. Consequently, after having just witnessed the couple murder the woman's husband and then drag his body onto railway tracks to be mangled, we are suddenly maneuvered into fearing that these cold-blooded murderers might not succeed with their grisly crime. The investment of much *film noir* in an individual rather than "objective" point of view shifts the viewer away from the position of moral security that earlier Hollywood films tended to offer and disconcertingly toward sympathy for the devil.

A second effect of the retrospective narration is to undermine suspense concerning the story's outcome. As the film progresses, we watch not to see what will happen but rather to see what has already happened. We know from the outset that the couple's scheme (which comprises most of the film's storyline) is doomed because the guilty narrator reveals that it has already failed. However high the couple's hopes rise during the flashback story, we know all along that those hopes are fruitless (Plate 3). Traditional crime/mystery films had centered upon the solver of the crime, the one who acts to rectify the wrong done to society; they had not centered upon the person who committed that wrong. Such films generally moved their narrative in a forward direction, starting with the crime or its discovery and progressing to the detective's solution of the case, with the viewer uncertain as to the outcome until the conclusion; this film, to the contrary, moves us backwards, over what has already happened. This strategy does not seek to engage us either with the puzzle of figuring out "whodunit" (as with traditional murder mysteries) or with wondering whether or not

PLATE 3 *Double Indemnity*: Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck) enticing Walter into murder. © 1944 Paramount Pictures, INC.

the criminal will succeed (as with "caper" films); we already know the answers to those questions. Instead, the film entices us into voyeuristically dwelling upon the ugly specifics of the way in which these two people ruin their lives and those of others. We are watching what has already gone wrong.

A useful analogue to the viewer's position in such films is that of a reader of a tabloid newspaper. A cliché about "whodunit" mysteries is that the ending should not be revealed lest the reader lose all interest in the story. After all, why read on if you know the outcome? *Double Indemnity* and much of *film noir* operate on different premises. In a tabloid the headline and the opening sentence serve to grab the reader's attention but, at the same time, eliminate suspense. "Man Murders Lover and Her Husband, Confesses and Loses All!" And yet tabloid readers avidly read on, not to see how the story turns out, which they already know, but rather to voyeuristically learn more about the sordid details of the case.

A third effect of the narrational strategy is to infuse the narrator's dark mood into all that we see. He is in physical and psychological pain, grimly aware that he is probably dying and certainly ruined because of the failed activities he describes, and we are largely confined within his point of view. His voice-over narration runs throughout the film and becomes

particularly disturbing during scenes that depict his younger self preparing for and committing his crimes. His somber, present-tense, narrating self provides a stark contrast to his earlier, optimistic self, and that contrast destabilizes everything we see and hear. Further darkening his perspective is the fact that he is confessing his crimes to his mentor and boss, a friend he respects and has betrayed. He exists in an almost post-mortem zone, without hope or a viable future.

This narrative strategy underscores the centrality of point of view structures to *film noir*. Film after film concentrates upon the doomed plight of an individual as presented from that individual's perspective, so we get not *the* story but, rather, that person's perception of the story. This shift away from presumptions of pure objectivity was not unique to *film noir*; it was widespread and part of the cultural ferment of the times. It appears in presumptively factually based biographical films like *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (1942), which presents George M. Cohan's life primarily through his retrospective description of it, and even documentaries. Frank Capra's seven *Why We Fight* films (1942–5), for example, while constructed primarily of documentary-style footage, made no attempt to conceal their propagandistic agendas. Although they present their images as having the status of "reality," those images are clearly organized to support the films' points of view. The increase in flashback sequences in Hollywood films of this time underscores the growing interest in exploring individual points of view. A wartime drama like *Passage to Marseilles* (1944) is famous for having flashbacks within flashbacks, something virtually unthinkable in Hollywood film a decade earlier. Furthermore, this shift away from presumptions of objectivity appears in many modernist art forms, from fiction and poetry to painting and sculpture, and modernism provided the dominant cultural context for *film noir*.

Much of *film noir* invites us to experience its stories from the inside out. Many films underscore their narrator's subjectivity with the soundtrack presence of that person's voice interwoven with scenes dramatizing events in that story; the subjectivity is further underscored by Expressionistic visuals evoking the narrator's nightmares, feelings of entrapment, and hallucinations. This focus upon interiority, particularly upon that of doomed people struggling to contain their own escalating panic, often foregrounds distortions of perception as well as states of paralyzing despair. This accounts for the preponderance of nightmares and of hallucinations in *film noir* and for the particular value that Freudian theory had not only in the conceptualizing of many of the films but also for the ongoing study of the genre.

In the *Double Indemnity* credits, the silhouette ominously approaching the camera resembles something from a nightmare. Its relentless