Film Noir Fascination: Outside History, but Historically So

by Oliver Harris

Abstract: Film noir is a recognized object of historical fascination, but the structures of fascination internal to the films have yet to be analyzed and theorized historically. The work of Maurice Blanchot and Walter Benjamin helps locate the moral and political force of noir as it relates to cinema spectatorship and historical experience as defined by the fascinating image.

For a quarter of a century, the one thing that united critics of that notoriously disputed field known as film noir was their endlessly repeated insistence that noir is *fascinating*. Yet this insistence remained entirely paradoxical. For while noir's critical history began effectively at the same moment that cinematic fascination became central to psychoanalytic film theory—the mid-1970s—when noir was called "fascinating," the term itself passed with no more theoretical definition than in its empty, everyday use. Equally, there was no effort within the noir field to rethink fascination, either by expanding its range of cultural and philosophical references or by giving it historical specificity. As a result, fascination in noir has been at once massively overexposed and almost completely overlooked, as if playing out the very blindness at the heart of vision that defines its effect.[1]

Consider Michael Walker's essay "*The Big Sleep*: Howard Hawks and Film Noir." For Walker, *The Big Sleep* was "a film about Hollywood" to which critics return "as if to an unsolved mystery, a seemingly inexhaustible source of fascination." Walker claimed that "Hawks was fascinated" by Raymond Chandler's novel, characterized the film's world "as one of fascination," and concluded that, motivated by repressed desire, Marlowe "becomes fascinated" by Geiger's house, "returning obsessively" "to explore it further." But the term "fascination" recurs without psychoanalytic definition or historical depth, and Walker neither deals directly with the meaning of film's fascination for Hollywood spectatorship in 1946 nor distinguishes this from its meaning for contemporary criticism. Walker's closing claim—that "his essay has been an attempt to show what it is about *The Big Sleep* that is so fascinating"—belongs to another project altogether.[2]

Walker's essay is revealing too because it returned to the same critical "mystery" and the same four varieties of fascination Annette Kuhn named in an earlier

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article on the same film.[3] If the first major phase of film noir criticism is repetitious with respect to fascination, we can now recognize the emergence of a second critical phase. Whereas the first remained locked in self-conscious disputes about definition, this second phase starts from an admission that the field is a "conceptual black hole"[4] and from an agreement to identify noir as a critical and cultural fantasy. This phase therefore takes the next logical introspective turn: reflexive concern with the very meaning of noir's projected identity and enduring appeal, in other words, its power to fascinate. "What must be explained," as Elizabeth Cowie puts it, "is the continuing fascination with this fantasy long after the historical period that is supposed to justify it."[5] For Winfried Fluck, explanations are still wanted precisely because almost all critical studies "are marred by what has motivated them: the open fascination with the object of study that gives many of these discussions an unmistakable identificatory note."[6] This seems an entirely reasonable way to understand what Frank Krutnik called the "noir mystique" and its seductive power to generate "a resistance to the imperatives of history."[7]

My point of departure is the very impasse implied by the above comments, one made fully explicit in Slavoj Žižek's claim that "what fascinates us is precisely a certain gaze, the gaze of the 'other,' of the hypothetical, mythic spectator from the '40s who was supposedly still able to identify immediately with the universe of *film noir*."[8] Now, while the empirical reality of noir's original audience may be lost to us, Žižek's "mythic spectator" who bears the credulous gaze is, as we shall see, already internal to a certain range of noir film and already imbued with nostalgia, embodying a spectatorial naiveté already in the process of being lost for the films' historical audience.[9] In short, the nostalgic melancholy for a lost past inspired in us by film noir has to reckon with these films' historical reception via their own internal logic.

We might conclude that what noir criticism has failed to reckon with is noir cinema's own engagement with fascination. How the movies themselves understand fascination historically has remained obscure, while fascination in noir has much to do with the obscurity and obscuring, the loss of history itself. Logically enough, our "objective" critical distance is also already inscribed reflexively within certain noir films, but with a twist that is crucial to their affective appeal: when the dispassionate analytical eye triumphs over a gaze distorted by desire, it *feels* like a defeat, suggesting that what must be recovered is in fact precisely the naïve affinity, the apparently uncritical and unhistorical "identificatory" note, suggested by Walker's "unsolved mystery." Inscribed in the structure of such films, in other words, is this very relation between cinematic fascination and hermeneutic or historical activity, which means that interpretive criticism is forced to confront the noir paradox that blindness within vision itself makes possible a kind of vision in blindness.

This is not to deny the imperatives of history, since research can demonstrate how particular conditions of production in the postwar period—from commercial demands to institutional censorship—imposed a determining matrix of contradictions. Rather, it is to say that the historical operation of fascination within certain noir films is structured around a paradoxical relation between material referent and psychic reality: what at first appears as a simple internal contradiction between fact and fantasy, typically embodied by the central character(s) in the split between

knowledge and belief, breaks down; and as it does so, it opens up what Tom Conley calls the "median area, between spectators' fantasies and the facts of the film."[10]

If we accept that noir is itself a fantasy, that it not only lacks a single or essential nature but is a construction that exists in excess of its material base, then we can also identify the precise status and appeal of those films that foreground fascination and so dramatize—whether or not they successfully solicit—a fantasmatic investment; neither representative nor exceptional, they appear as a *mise en abyme* of the field. In this sense, *The Big Sleep* is a "film about Hollywood" not only because its narrative can be made into an allegory of its production and reception, but because its obscure coding of desire bears witness to cinema's historically conditioned displacement of history. In the case of another *film fascinant* from 1946, Robert Siodmak's *The Killers*, if we turn to those looks and objects of the look that have, despite a mass of critical attention, remained blind spots for criticism, we can begin to recognize how fascination relates cinema spectatorship to historical experience circa 1946 precisely by *visualizing obscurity*.

In Theory. Ackbar Abbas observes that "when fascination is involved in cultural and political theory, it is most often disparaged as a state of illusion and passivity, characterized by the loss or suspension of the critical faculties."[11] It is in this sense, as the sign of ideological mystification, that psychoanalytic film theory sought to resist the insidious seductions of cinematic pleasure. Cinema itself meanwhile witnessed and participated in a basic historical shift in the understanding of fascination completed in the last hundred years. For the concept has moved from denoting a particular transitive power—a force possessed and exercised by certain persons, bearers of the mesmerizing or evil eye—to a generalized intransitive condition. In this historical development, 1946 is a significant year not just for the all-time-high Hollywood attendance figures, as the zenith of cinematic fascination, or the publication of Bertram Lewin's influential thesis of the cinematic "dream screen"[12] but for being the year Theodor Adorno wrote his most direct assault on "will-less fascination."[13] Adorno's account of how modernity converts everything into "the *doppelgänger* of a model," the "new" becoming a "compulsive return of the old, not unlike that in traumatic neuroses," reads, as we shall see, like a response to what was the key year in noir's development according to contemporary reviewers and film historians alike.[14] And of course 1946 was the very year the French gave noir its name.

Adorno in effect looks ahead to Guy Debord's society of the spectacle, to Jean Baudrillard's seductive world of the simulacra, and, more specifically, to Fredric Jameson's introduction to *Signatures of the Visible*. Jameson begins: "The visual is *essentially* pornographic, which is to say that it has its end in rapt, mindless fascination."[15] Jameson's approach logically follows that of Christian Metz, for whom cinephilia must be turned against itself. Jameson goes on to declare that all his film analysis "resembles Freud's mainly in the way in which, when successful, it liquidates the experiences in question and dissolves them without a trace: *I find I have no desire to see again a movie about which I have written well.*" For Jameson, the compulsion to repeat now disappears along with the original experience and he is free at last, or at least free to move on to the next movie.

Jameson's project to reassert critical agency, his will to make sense out of sensual affect, to terminate desire by grasping meaning and symbolic mastery—this is the clear, rational response and precise counter to the account given by France's great philosopher of fascination, Maurice Blanchot. For Blanchot, fascination is "the gaze of the incessant and interminable," an indecisive moment that reigns in what he calls "time's absence": "It makes what is ungraspable inescapable; it never lets me cease reaching what I cannot attain. And that which I cannot take, I must take up again, never to let go."[16] It is no coincidence that Blanchot's account is so repetitious in its phrasing and of such opaque intellectual brilliance as to exercise its own form of fascination, because, as a condition of radical perplexity, to be fascinated suspends the possibility of seizing experience and refuses decisive knowledge. Like criticism, narrative that deals with fascination is forced therefore into either repetition or negation.

To clarify these moves—from criticism to the gaze to narrative—we have to bear with Blanchot in his obscurity; as Roger Laporte suggests, it is a mistake "to believe that this obscurity can and must purely and simply be dissipated, that day must succeed the Night."[17] Like noir, Blanchot's philosophy is fundamentally nocturnal: it pursues knowledge that lies behind the truth of the visible and beyond narrative telling, a knowledge that is a kind of nothingness, a negativity, death itself.

Blanchot's philosophy of the invisible and unsayable might resemble rapt, mindless mystification until we reckon with what he calls "the disaster." Like the fascinated gaze, the experience of the disaster reigns in "time's absence": "'Already' or 'always already' marks the disaster, which is outside history, but historically so."[18] The structural affinity with fascination is important because Blanchot's disaster is otherwise known as trauma. Here too we find a radical disturbance of memory, reference, and narrative, because "time stops at the moment of trauma."[19] As a kind of hole in knowledge or blind spot in visibility, the trauma can be represented only negatively, like Lacan's unsymbolized "real of desire," and inferred by its repetitious effects. Finally, we may glimpse the structural symmetry of trauma with fascination through Serge Leclaire's commentary on Freud: "If it is difficult to conceptually grasp the death drive, at least we have in anxiety the experience of being grasped by its force."[20]

So too fascination names an obscure attraction, an experience we can capture only in the process of being captivated. What comes to us only forcibly renders an essential passivity, which in turn haunts all our activity—to grasp, to master—as disavowal. And so, when Blanchot states, "What no one can grasp is the inescapable,"[21] I see a possible rejoinder to Jameson. For if grasping means escaping, then demystification might be less reasonable than premature, or even symptomatic. I take this to be what Blanchot means by saying that the time of disaster, and by extension of fascination, lies "outside history, but historically so"—a definition that comes very close to Walter Benjamin's notion of historicity, in which there always remains a traumatic, unhistorical gap or stasis that resists the false narrative continuum of History.

Benjamin proposed that the past is articulated historically through the urgent and evanescent experience of fragments and traces, "as an image which flashes up

at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again."[22] The opacity and cryptic ambivalence of the fascinating image brings narrative to a halt, marking a point of temporal resistance. In so doing, this frozen moment also marks the timeless space "outside history," the gap that the meaningful narrative of history is produced in order to fill. To put this another way, the "temptation to explain, even to demystify," may, as Geoffrey Hartman suggests, "itself be an effect of traumatic dissociation, a compulsive, belated effort to master the split between experience and knowledge by asserting *in theory* the convergence of a phenomenal cause (see-able) and a trauma (not see-able, or else 'piercing' the eyes)."[23] Of course, the above is all "in theory" too, which is where noir comes into its own as the material and historically specific realization of such a nocturnal vision.

At first glance, noir might be assimilated into the psychoanalytic paradigm of historical trauma already established by Kaja Silverman. Analyzing a number of films made in the same era, between 1944 and 1947, Silverman argued that they were symptomatic representations of a larger historical crisis that "is always both absent and unrepresentable."[24] For Silverman, history and trauma are structurally identical, because each tears a "hole in the fabric of the dominant fiction," while the unhistorical gap around which history circles is, in Freud's terms, the death drive or, in Lacan's, the Real. Silverman's task was therefore to reconcile a general structural necessity with the historically particular object of inquiry. As Žižek has succinctly put it, the linear narrative of historicism can be defined as "historicity *minus* the unhistorical kernel of the Real." In the case of noir, however, a fully Lacanian reading would undo the short circuit identified by Žižek himself: "The will to put into words the obvious fascination with film noir, to translate it into positive theoretical accomplishments, seems somehow inherently hindered, doomed to fail."[25] To preserve the specificity of noir effects, and to keep faith with the structural short circuit of meaning necessary to fascination, requires a limited and local use of theory, *especially* where one might seem to offer a perfect fit; this is the case with Lacan, who I treat in the less systematic vein of Blanchot and Benjamin in order to advance an exploratory rather than an exegetical approach.

Our Dream Girl. With its recurrent visual, narrative, plot, and character motifs, the field of noir forms a nightmare that comes back both within individual films and, far worse for Jameson's ambition, keeps coming back across dozens of them, interminably. The effect is rendered most forcibly in the case of Fritz Lang's paired movies, *The Woman in the Window* (1944) and *Scarlet Street* (1945), in which multiple duplications in both the cast and the scenarios induce a kind of vertigo of déja vu, cross-reference, and pure confusion. Whenever I watch one, I find myself half-watching the other.[26] The effect is uncanny in Freud's strict sense of a "constant recurrence of the same thing," reminding us of our inner "compulsion to repeat."[27]

A cinema of anxious fixations, noir, we now recognize, is a symptomatic disturbance of classical Hollywood's American narrative, and critics have not been slow to give such pathological readings historical specificity: the traumatic "real" that cannot be named and that determines all that follows as an endless round of repetitions, or, to jump from Lacan to Jameson, the "political unconscious" of noir can

be identified as World War II and its immediate effects. These effects have in turn been identified most emphatically, almost exclusively, with sexual and social anxieties particular to postwar America, embodied in the primary locus of fascination in noir: the femme fatale.

The famed "fascination and destructiveness" of the femme fatale is, however, always enigmatic, and the power she wields is typically far in excess of her material presence.[28] One way of understanding this paradox is to say that the femme fatale functions neither literally nor allegorically[29] but synecdochically within noir cinema, *as a screen*: as both herself and the bearer of a projected image. Now we can begin to recognize how noir negotiates between two versions of fascination: as the inherent property of a certain object, eliciting the gaze, or as relational and fantasmatic, projected by certain subjects. So instead of renaming her the *femme fascinant*, the essence of *film fascinant*, let us say that in noir both woman and film are invested with the power of fascination by the *homme fasciné*. For there is almost always one—and only one—for whom fascination with the femme as image proves fatal. And, like all exceptions, his task, like hers, is double: to break *and therefore* uphold the reassuring rule, about femmes, films, and fatality. The scenario of Lang's *The Woman in the Window* is especially clear in this respect. Three friends—a district attorney, an old doctor, and a professor of psychology—all fantasize about the painting of their "dream girl," but only the expert on Freud falls for his fantasy. The synecdochic function of the femme fatale is clear: she embodies one type of cinematic experience, a certain relation to the image, an exception to the rule.

In line with Mary Ann Doane's reading of the femme fatale as a doubly traumatizing "figure of fascination," in that she articulates not only a threat to male subjectivity but to a system of signification based on faith in the image,[30] my case would be this: certain noir narratives became cinematically self-reflexive and made visible a moral or political preoccupation with film's power of fascination, in relation to the demands of negotiating fascination historically in the sphere of desire and death. For example, to narrate the dangers of improper desire, Lang's film must differentiate two orders of looking in terms of distance from the image. Unlike his two friends, Professor Wanley comes too close to the window; in a sense, he passes through it at the moment when the painting's "original" appears on his side of the glass. This other world of the image quickly ceases to be enchanting and turns terrifying—and then, having taken poison to end the nightmare, Wanley, to our surprise, wakes up from what we took to be reality.

Of this shock ending—which Lang imposed precisely to make visible the logic of Hollywood censorship, imposing its reassuring rule—Žižek says, "The message of the film is not consoling, not: 'it was only a dream, in reality I am a normal man like others and not a murderer!' but rather: *in our unconscious, in the real of our desire, we are all murderers*."[31] However, the ending functions, first, to implicate the film viewer in the dream within the film. Does not Wanley, waking up in his armchair, suddenly recall the spectator seated in the cinema? We might recall too the crucial shot sequence in which the window became both mirror and screen—but we can recall it only as a reminder of what we have forgotten. We experience Wanley's waking as a cheat or a shock because, like him, we too have passed through

the window: *in our unconscious, we are all naïve spectators*. Or as Christian Metz put it, with the scenario of "the sleeping dreamer" in mind, there remains a credulous viewer "still seated *beneath* the incredulous one, or in his heart."[32]

Second, to enter fully into the image world is to lose both the "real" world retroactively posited by the film's frame *and* the space of fantasy. What is left, since the woman in the window is no more a feared-but-fascinating femme fatale than Professor Wanley is a Doctor Jekyll, is, precisely, nothing. The darker truth, beyond the pleasure principle, is that far from wanting prohibited adventures and being punished for them, poor Wanley wants nothing more than to die. To retain Žižek's Lacanian terms while reversing his conclusion, the message of this particular film and of noir at large is that *in the real of our desire, we are all suicidal*.

The Ghost of an Eternal Vision. A nocturnal claustrophobia fills the field of vision, resolving into two figures inside a car at night, seen in tight close-up from behind. The shot dissolves to an empty street, waiting for action as the titles only now begin to roll: *Ernest Hemingway's The Killers*.

Many films called noir begin with shots of cars and roads, and from *Out of the Past* (Jacques Tourneur, 1947) to *Kiss Me, Deadly* (Robert Aldrich, 1955), noir films make disconcertingly self-reflexive use of these images. But no opening achieves the unsettling effect of *The Killers*, which from the first frame transforms the dark, closed-in space of the car into that of the cinema theater—and vice-versa. It might be lost to TV viewers, but for contemporary audiences this initial darkened view from the back seat must have mimicked and rendered sinister the familiar view immediately between them and the screen, the two figures up front reproducing the silhouetted backs and heads in the row ahead. Fixed in their seats, it is as though they were quite literally being taken on a death drive into the nocturnal film world of *The Killers*.

Perhaps the best way to grasp the prereflective response induced by such emphatic visualization of spectatorship is through a phenomenology of moviegoing. Although other theorists have given attention to a greater range of corporeal responses to film,[33] Linda Singer captures well the paradoxical pleasures of fixed confinement in a darkened auditorium: "Seeing is the doing we are there to do, and it is really all we can do under the circumstances."[34] Under the circumstances, indeed. At the outset of *The Killers*, placed in the back seat, all we can do is go along, impotent accomplices, silent witnesses. Singer continues: "The luminous character of the screen projections against the background of the darkened room draws the eyes to the screen with the force of ocular attraction. . . . It is difficult, under such circumstances, to resist the movement by which the eyes return to the screen and remain there, horrified, but nonetheless fascinated." Singer might be describing the haunting climax to *The Killers'* first narrative movement, a climax just as visually self-reflexive as the point of entry, and set in another dark and deadly space.

The crucial sequence lasts just five minutes, from Nick Adams racing to warn Ole "Swede" Andreson of death's imminent arrival, to Swede's body lying in a police morgue. Against the background of Miklos Rozsa's frantic chords on the soundtrack, the camera pans across Swede lying on his bed, shrouded in darkness,

his body so still we wonder, Is he *already* dead? Then a sudden shift in tempo, as Nick bursts through the door and, his body motionless and his face still hidden, we hear Swede's voice reciting his lines, like the talking dead: "There ain't anything to do." Nick exits in stunned confusion, leaving Swede waiting to be shot, his eyes fixed on the door, with the killers outside it readying their guns.

This sequence in Swede's room lasts for only thirty seconds, but Lancaster's extraordinary immobility makes it feel unbearably long. All he does is watch and wait, as must we. Time stops, and our own gaze is brought to a standstill; freezing the very logic of moving pictures, such an immobile image becomes intolerable when surcharged by Siodmak's editing. Alternating with shots of the killers outside, the camera cuts from Swede's face in close-up, through two identical medium shots, back to the same close-up, ending with a repeated shot/reverse shot that cuts from his staring eyes to the door and back to his fixed, staring eyes. Our acute discomfort as spectators of Swede's last moments is unsurprising, caught as we are in the look *at* and *of* the camera: forced to internalize both looks, we find our curiosity to see returned to us as both sadistic and masochistic complicity.

The key point about this extraordinarily disturbing moment—raised to a higher power on the big screen in a theater—is simple: in his long, absolute paralysis of absorbed vision, staring blankly out of the darkness, Swede does not resemble a cinematic spectator in a general sense, as the ideal viewer of apparatus theory, or even the variable viewer of empirical criticism. On the contrary, he specifically and somatically resembles *us*: in a cruel mimetic circuit, Swede mirrors back the very look on our own faces that *his* look has produced. The dread in this identification is redoubled by the reverse-field cross-cutting, which fulfills its psychic logic of the mirror while appropriating our gaze to enforce a shocking spectatorial position. Staring at Swede, we see ourselves looking. Staring at the door, we *are* Swede; the door also takes the place of a mirror, and to our horror, this mirror is *empty*. Siodmak takes one function of the shot/reverse-shot system—to remind us of ourselves—and renders it uncanny, as the blank space of the door not only reflects our disavowed presence as spectators but simultaneously screens our own existential absence. *We are not there* ceases to be our alibi and, in Siodmak's precise alliance of plot, theme, and editing, becomes our secret terror.

Swede's paralyzed look and its mirroring is surely cinema's most intense visualization of Blanchot's gaze of interminable fascination, "a dead gaze, a gaze become the ghost of an eternal vision," that belongs to the man who "enters the nocturnal realm of fascination wherein he dies in a passion bereft of will."[35] Long after the stroboscopic flash of gunfire, with its emphatically cinematic flicker, this image of the last look haunts the film.

Repeat viewings might bear out this analysis and make us wonder why a mass of criticism has slighted the scene. But already we sense that any reading is fated to miss the point, which is that the force of the experience is so disconcerting, so inescapable but ungraspable, that it exposes the very *demand* for explanation. Indeed, this is the enigma that drives the plot of *The Killers* and determines its overt project, which is, precisely, exorcism: to explain, to narrate, and so finally to forget the uncanny sight of the hypnotized look, and with it the fatal force of fascination.

Figure 1. Swede (Burt Lancaster) stares death in the face in Robert Siodmak's *The Killers* (1946). Universal Studios.

Bachelor Machine. The camera cuts to a close-up of the dead man's shoes, displayed in the local police station along with a box of personal effects. Into these shoes steps the insurance investigator, Reardon (Edmund O'Brien). Following Jack Shadoian's exemplary analysis, later critics like Frank Krutnik and Michael Walker have written well about the film's complex structure of investigation; they demonstrate Reardon's double activity of hermeneutic resolution—eradicating the enigma—and patriarchal redemption—restoring a denuded masculinity—both of which redress Swede's *amour fou* for Kitty Collins.[36] To these activities I would add another that complicates both: Reardon's role as Swede's dream or meta-cinematic "double."

Like every critic, Krutnik and Walker identify Swede's surrender to death as the motivating enigma in *The Killers*. What they all forget is that the spectator's engagement does not coincide with Reardon's but exceeds it. The point is that Reardon has not seen what we have seen, or rather have been forced to see, as in a mirror: Swede's long, haunting gaze into the abyss of fascination. Forgetting this distinction, criticism of the film overlooks the spectator's temptation to overlook it. The blind spot in Reardon's motivation, this hole in his knowledge, is crucial, enabling him to misrecognize Swede's death as no more than a complex case of murder; the film signally fails to motivate Reardon's obsessive activity as a response to Swede's radical passivity.[37] Since the film denies Swede a chance to fill the narrative hole, the task of historical recovery passes to Reardon.[38] Driving him on, we are tempted to accept his resolutions, as if they could explain Swede's unbearable

gaze, or the meaning of his cryptic confession to Nick: "I did something wrong—once." The long, emphatic silence, which breaks his sentence between words, opens onto still another intolerable emptiness.

Picking through the box of effects, Reardon opens an envelope and, speaking his first words in the film, declares, "This is what I'm looking for." "This," however, is an insurance policy—not what *we* are looking for. Then Reardon opens a second envelope, literally and symbolically an *other* envelope, out of which he pulls a large silk handkerchief. Throughout the scene, we see him twisting it in an unconscious caress and understand that it disturbs Reardon's power of recognition: "Souvenir, I guess," suggests the police chief; "Yeah, could be," replies Reardon, sounding hesitant. Since the material can be grasped but not its meaning, since its visual motifs of one large harp encircled by a dozen shamrocks are clearly displayed but literally unreadable, the silk handkerchief joins the cryptic sentence in relating to Swede's abyssal look. We have now a triad of key terms, as one enigma stands in for the other. What's more, this triad of enigmatic signifiers *returns* throughout the film—the handkerchief no less than six times.

Questioned by Reardon in the Green Cat Café, Kitty will say of Swede, "He was always looking at me, and it doesn't sound like very much, but he always carried a handkerchief I had given him." What it *sounds* like she is describing is a fetish token—the sign of Swede's fascination. However, since we see *Reardon* always carrying the handkerchief, a crucial transference has taken place. The object Reardon holds *holds him*, hence his hesitation at the word "souvenir." He reads the handkerchief as Swede's private keepsake, but in his unconscious it signifies disavowed knowledge and so appears *uncanny* to Reardon: the strange that is secretly familiar. In Lacanian terms, Swede is Reardon's Other, and the handkerchief, as the *objet petit a*, represents that which is lacking—or, rather, lackingness itself: wanting to fill the dead man's shoes, but not be in them, Reardon must repress recognition of, and secret desire for, their *emptiness*.

Reardon's conscious project is to recover Swede's history by deciphering the rebus, and a flood of action duly follows: *cherchez la femme fatale*, and the answer is Kitty, end of story. Demanding the stability and legibility of the sign, resolving the mysterious into the calculable, and denying (sexual) difference, Reardon is both the film's bachelor and its "bachelor machine." But if Reardon's task is to master desire and fix knowledge, and if this fantasy aligns him with the cinema apparatus or institution, we have to reckon with his curious relation to the visible.

Paradoxically, the eleven flashbacks narrated to Reardon effectively make him blind to the bulk of the film. Yet his inability to see what we see poses no problems for his investigation; the trick of cinema converts his ear into an eye. This failure of synchronization is one of *The Killers*' most intriguing structures, and it plays out the radical splitting of sight and sound that marks the first appearance of Swede's face and voice. Dividing what cinematic convention would have us unify, this noncoincidence exposes a doubleness or duplicity in the medium itself, one that is explored throughout noir in disjunctions within voice-over and flashback structures. Here, Reardon is held at a deliberate distance from the screened world, so that talk mediates vision, interpretation is kept apart

from spectating, and meaning is divorced from affect. It is through this distance that Reardon appears able to eradicate the enigma, narrate (the "dumb") Swede's story, redeem his emasculation, and restore the possibility of "proper" sight. That is, his distance from the image counters "the impossibility of not seeing" that Blanchot calls the "dead gaze," from which Swede suffers.[39] This moment of arrested vision, of passion for the image, of suicidal abjection, is the definitive instance of what Reardon has not seen.

Since the sight of seeing nothing, of looking into nothingness, is taboo in a culture that privileges the visual and sublimates death, the very survival of Reardon's world depends on his not seeing and refusing to recognize this intolerable void in vision.

A Date to Go to the Movies. In Walker's terms, what Swede did wrong, "once," is "the Oedipal crime: sexual possession of the father-figure's woman," in this case Kitty, who belongs to Big Jim Colfax.[40] True enough. More interesting, *The Killers* offers another specifically meta-cinematic answer. Swede's old girlfriend Lilly prefaces her flashback narration: "Ole and I had a date to go to the movies—at least I thought that was where we were going." Swede's seduction into the world of crime and desire, his rendezvous with fate and fascination, takes place in Colfax's hotel suite, all because he breaks a date to go to the cinema. In 1946, Hollywood's peak year, the moral of the incident would not have been lost on the film's audience; by definition, all the couples in the theater had kept *their* dates at the movies.

Swede and Lilly's fateful missed movie date presumes an experience defined against what takes its place—that is, a safe spectatorial relationship, one in which the cinema-going couple shares the same space as spectators, shares the same secure distance from the image, and exits together. The cinema, then, is the proper place for the dream, because it keeps the dream in its place. It offers safe fascination, like safe sex, an encounter in which passion can be enjoyed at one remove and with no consequences. Moralizing on behalf of the institution as a regulatory site for surplus erotic fantasy, the film offers a clear message: Swede should have gone to the movies! But this reading will not do. For in Colfax's suite, Swede relates to Kitty as spectator to image: he only has eyes for her, so that the room becomes a kind of cinema for Swede. It is as if he *had* kept his date but passed through the screen to encounter his fantasmatic image of a woman, animated like Alice's painting in the window in Lang's movie or, even more precisely (given the resemblance of their dark cross-strap dresses), like the uncanny portrait in Otto Preminger's *Laura* (1944).

Here we see Lilly watching Swede as he stares at Kitty while she sings to a piano accompaniment, and in watching an audience watch an audience watching a performance, we are forced into an uneasy awareness of our own vision: we may share Swede's physical paralysis but surely we do not share his visual intoxication, one that repeats his earlier "dead gaze" and retrospectively accounts for it. What the scene plays out is a representation of the terminally naïve spectator, who forgets both that he *is* a spectator and the nice girl beside him, and falls for the image

Figure 2. Lilly (Virginia Christine) watches Swede (Burt Lancaster) as he stares at Kitty (Ava Gardner) while she sings in *The Killers*. Universal Studios.

on screen. Now the upshot is not "go to the movies!" but "watch how you watch the movies!" It is a question of spectatorial attitude.

In a detailed account of this scene—albeit one that misses the dimension of cinematic self-referentiality—Krutnik rightly observes that "Swede gazes in fascination" while the "look of the camera is at no time equated with Swede's own look."[41] In other words, the mise-en-scène seems to posit a knowing male viewer, able to see through Kitty and to observe, with irony, Swede's gullibility, his position as Metz's "credulous viewer." And yet, under Siodmak's direction, the presence of Lancaster and Gardner is so utterly captivating that this staging of desire makes the sight of fascination *itself* fascinating: far from remaining a detached observer, I keep seeing my own gaze, mirrored back to me.[42]

The difference in the spectatorial roles played by Swede and Reardon is clearest from the wounds that mark them. The body of the *homme fasciné* ends "near tore in half," proof that contact with the image is lethal.[43] The other body will come to bear a tiny scar behind the left ear. Duplicating Swede's life as a dream double, virtually disembodied so that he feels next to nothing, Reardon has barely been touched. The strategically placed scar is his token of reality; it stands as proof of the dream but only within a larger proof of the real. At the end, Reardon is therefore able to leave with a smile and a wave and to keep going; keep going, that is, to the cinema, because, like Fredric Jameson, Reardon has made sense out of the sensual and liquidated the experience.

If Reardon's task is to restore the active gaze, on behalf of a cinema freed of fascination, then his rendezvous with Kitty is logical: before going to the Green Cat Café, he arranges to meet her *outside* a movie theater.[44] In the café, Reardon proves that the *femme* is not *fatale*, and the two killers return to walk into Reardon's trap. Only on a literal level does this scene restage the first. As in the ending to *The Woman in the Window*, a retroactive displacement occurs, as if to say that the image is not really deadly and death is not really death, for when the killers call, they can be tricked and the tables can be turned. In the film's imaginative economy, then, what happens in the café converts the past into a bad dream, a dark film. But if Reardon is the "dream boy" his secretary calls him, this is because it is his *own* dream death that he avenges.[45] Or rather, even worse, what Swede embodies is Reardon's *own death drive*: this is the noir nightmare, not a killer inside the unconscious self but the suicide inside.

No wonder then that the Law and the Light are synchronized to dispel the nocturnal. In Kitty's final scene, she is escorted into her own dark mansion by the police and presented to Reardon: "This your woman?" At this moment, someone flicks a switch and the darkness lifts, as if the house lights have gone up. What follows is Kitty's "exposure," as her spell dissolves and all she can do is repeat her pathetic claims to innocence, watched only by those who have no belief. The shot fades to Reardon, back in the insurance office. Exit, waving and smiling. Again echoing *The Woman in the Window*, this "facetiously happy ending"[46]—here, less likely Siodmak's choice than that of producer Mark Hellinger—only enlarges the darkness of disavowal: by openly encouraging us to forget, the ending forces us to remember this very forgetting. Or, as Reynold Humphries says of Lang's film, we must "be allowed safely to ignore the lessons of what we have seen or lived through," at least until the next time we watch it.[47]

Outside History, but Historically So. In the Green Cat, Kitty claims that Reardon now has "the whole story," when of course it remains full of holes, both hermeneutic and historical. Most obviously, there is a blank space at the heart of *The Killers* that spans the years from 1940 to 1946, and it would be simple enough to contrive relevant wartime readings. More important is the raising of the stakes on Reardon's narrative reconstruction of the past. For if the film's historicity is marked by this central structuring absence, then it in turn renders historical the triad of enigmas Reardon must demystify: the missing referent to "something wrong—once" that leaves a hole in Swede's speech; the emptiness into which he looks; and the handkerchief whose meaning remains obscure. The point, however, would be lost if we "put history back" into these several holes, as if they figured a merely censored presence. Just as the film's multiple flashbacks preserve a Benjaminian notion of historicity—to borrow from Žižek, we might view them as "a series of ultimately failed attempts to deal with the same 'unhistorical' traumatic kernel"[48]—so too, *The Killers* gives us no explicit cues or contexts for the triad of enigmas. On the contrary, the point at which we encounter each absence is for the viewer *outside* any particular or general history. This is the reason Swede's dead gaze, which brings narrative to a halt that feels like death, can function as an empty screen onto which private and

public horrors may be projected. The rest of the film, governed by Reardon, seeks to delimit that affective experience precisely by narrating the "missing" history and explaining the "cause" of Swede's death.

Unless we are to accept Reardon's point of view, we must return to what we alone have seen. As an image, Swede's look into the abyss may be passed over by society's representation of itself, but it stays as a potential within its cultural unconscious. Fascination is not necessarily mystification, for in its obscurity, the fascinating image resists the tendency of reason to explain the world, so reasonably it explains the world *away*. To recall Hartman, when the drive to see explanations becomes an effect of trauma, then, à la Walter Benjamin, historical knowledge does not require "the rigorous, objective contemplative gaze"[49] but demands first a recognition of our blindness. This, then, is the film's secret, as opposed to its overt project: to resist exorcism of the enigma.

Where Reardon constructs a causal narrative that makes of history a road to salvation, Swede may be seen to have viewed history directly and, like those who look upon the face of the Medusa, to have been turned to stone. His fixed stare resembles nothing so much as Benjamin's famous "Angel of History," whose face is "fixedly contemplating" the past.[50] Even so, traumatic historical sight is visualized for us in *The Killers* by Swede's last look, and this in turn is displaced onto the handkerchief as the image turned tactile. If it constitutes what Freud called a "screen memory"—in Laura Mulvey's gloss, "literally a screen against traumatic memory"[51]—then the handkerchief takes this role absolutely literally: when Reardon holds it up for display, the material not only fills the screen but physically resembles one. As a metonym for the cinema, as well as for Kitty, the handkerchief returns our own fascination and is indeed a "souvenir," both a remainder and a reminder of death and desire.

In explaining away the handkerchief that bears the look, Reardon not only protects himself from the death drive but condemns Swede to historical death, to eternal amnesia. It is the sense of loss itself that is lost, and there would be no one left to remember him and what he has seen, if not us. Reardon's inability to mourn, which stands in for a national failure in the aftermath of war, is, finally, a fate far worse than Swede's melancholic refusal to do so.

If bringing Blanchot and Benjamin together has enabled us to rethink fascination, to see in it a knowledge "outside history, but historically so," then what conclusions can we draw about *The Killers*, about film noir, and about the historical workings of cinematic fascination? One approach is to identify a specific noir category in which the nexus fascination-history-trauma operates reflexively. *Gilda* (Charles Vidor), again from that vintage year 1946, is, for example, built explicitly around a structuring absence of the traumatic past and a precise alliance of obscured personal and national histories, while the fascination of watching and the question of belief in the image are constantly evoked. Together with the direct cues given in voice-over ("By the way, about that time the war ended") and in dialogue ("I was beginning to think you were an amnesia victim"), it is this combination of features that invites us to give political and moral meaning to the historical role of cinema. This nexus is especially recurrent in noirs of the immediate postwar period and crosses the full range of genre and production categories.

In the case of *Detour* (Edgar G. Ulmer, 1945), the invocation of Hollywood cinema's complicity is emphasized by the voice-over's open challenge to the audience's capacity for belief ("You're going to tell me you don't believe me!") and its desire to forget ("Did you ever want to cut away a piece of your memory and blot it out? You can't, you know!"). Variations on the theme connect such different films as *The Spiral Staircase* (Siodmak, 1946), a Gothic tale of trauma that begins with an extraordinary scene juxtaposing audience fascination and a brutal murder; *Out of the Past* (Tourneur, 1947), often paired with *The Killers* for the lethal return of the past and the fascinating allure of its femme fatale, and *Dark Passage* (Delmer Daves, 1947), in which the sight of acute male lack coincides with a radical restriction in camera point of view. Significantly, none of these films names the war, but then the point of interest does not necessarily rest on the obscured referent of history itself but on the very process of historical displacement that allows such different films to continue to "work" in broadly similar ways. However, the manifest heterogeneity of noir effects, which has made definition so intractable, insists on the dangers of seeking to generalize.

It is always tempting, and often an academic obligation, to translate an instance into a type, but *The Killers* makes the case not for theoretical generalization but for more particular research, and if we observe the film's *specific* effects, then, rather than conclude, something should call us back. There is so much more to say about *The Killers*, but this "something" is to be found exactly in what remains, in the obscure and the unaccountable, that which lacking meaning we overlook.

As *The Killers*' essential clue, the handkerchief invites interpretation. To Shadoian, it is "the symbol of Swede's dreams"; for Walker, its motifs are "Freudian"; for Deborah Lazaroff Alpi, they symbolize "chance, superstition, fate."[52] But the handkerchief is also the film's essential *enigma*, and as such it communicates seductively by materializing an opaque residue of affect that exceeds any determinate meaning. This paradox is dramatized by Reardon, whose objective conclusion—the handkerchief is simply the key to the plot—reductively interprets away the subjective affect that motivated his quest in the first place. For when he first shows the handkerchief to Kenyon, his insurance company boss, Reardon presents it precisely as an enigma: "Did you ever try to remember something, like somebody's name, have it on the tip of your tongue almost, then, just as you're about to say it, lose it? . . . Well, that's the way it is with me and this green handkerchief." Although Reardon blinds himself to the truth, his real interest is not the man or the story behind the handkerchief but the bit of material itself, the always-elusive object of fascination. That the objective, critical eye is doomed to miss this dimension is suggested by the most enigmatic quality of the handkerchief, which is the entirely unrecognized enigma of its very appearance.

Earlier, I described the handkerchief as featuring one large harp encircled by a dozen shamrocks. But Krutnik sees it as "a green silk handkerchief . . . covered in golden harps," as does Tom Conley, along with most other critics of this much-analyzed film.[53] In different ways, neither of these descriptions is right, and both evidence a form of blindness within vision. The one time the handkerchief is displayed, what we see is a black and white image featuring a single harp surrounded

Figure 3. The "green handkerchief covered in golden harps." Universal Studios.

by twelve shamrocks. However, if you watch very carefully and freeze the video or DVD frame, for a split second two smaller harps (and two more shamrocks) do become partially visible in corners of the handkerchief.[54] If my account is therefore wrong, so too is the other, and this is because of the *source* of its information—which is not close observation of visual detail. Rather, in giving harps in the plural, as in specifying the colors and overlooking all the shamrocks, the critics' descriptions "see" both more and less than they have seen by faithfully repeating the description within the film itself (a "green handkerchief decorated with golden harps"), which Reardon repeats twice and is given once in the newspaper report of the payroll heist that is his key evidence. Significantly, the report of the heist is filmed in a documentary style and told in a voice-off that resembles a "voice-of-God" narration. Therefore, that word and image are out of sync here—which they are in other ways, too[55]—is shocking, since this subverts the one flashback that has a claim to objectivity.

This contradiction between what we see and how it is described is absolutely critical, for overlooking it is the basis of all of Reardon's action. Which are we to believe: our eyes or our ears? With Reardon, we are tempted to cede authority to what we are told in *The Killers* over what we have seen, and this disavowal implies a statement about both cinematic fascination and historical testimony.

The film's subtlety turns precisely on overlooking the blindingly obvious. For Swede, the handkerchief represents Kitty via its traditional Irish motifs.[56] His other legacy, life insurance, goes to Queenie, to insist on the Irish connection even beyond the grave, so that, like letters, the contents of both Swede's envelopes reach

their specifically Irish beneficiaries. Reardon's boss makes this point by default, when he insists that "they sell these by the thousand every St. Patrick's Day." Kitty Collins is Irish American, as was Ava Gardner—but so too is James Reardon, as was Edmund O'Brien. What Reardon is reminded of, what he tells his boss remains on the "tip of his tongue," is his *own name*.

If the handkerchief is uncanny, an unhomely souvenir because it signifies a forgotten homeland, then Reardon's disavowal of the foreign origins he shares with the femme fatale ups the ante of the historical lesson in *The Killers* by rendering its *non*-American dimension. Ethnic or national origins are everywhere in this film, but they pass unnoticed—we never think of "Swede" as Swedish, or his friend Lubinsky as Semitic and Polish—and this structuring absence of ties to the European mother country is underwritten by the history of Siodmak himself. Indeed, not only was he a German Jew (whose family came from Poland), like so many other noir directors, but Siodmak erased his origins and claimed American birth specifically to secure his Hollywood career, a career that covered the very blank years that mark the wartime historicity of *The Killers*. While much has been made of noir's debts to German Expressionist filmmaking, Siodmak's case suggests also the importance of the émigré experience itself, the extreme sense of loss that must go with personal trauma framed within global tragedy, each displaced ruthlessly by the "professional" demands of Hollywood.[57] Not that we need to project the director's biography onto the film in order to grasp Reardon's error, to see how his investigation into Swede's past coincides with the repression of Reardon's own history and enables him to maintain an ethical distance between them. Swede embodies a historical displacement and existential homelessness in the world, an estrangement to which Reardon cannot relate because he refuses the "foreign" in himself. The film's vision is now clear, and for Americans uncomfortably admonitory: in his refusal of self-knowledge, Reardon, as a historian and a spectator, sacrifices the vital human dimensions of affect and reciprocity.

Wrong—Once. *The Killers* makes a number of such "mistakes," which its obvious attention to detail should motivate. For the precise verbal counterpart to the key visual contradiction, we must turn finally to the scene with the coroner, as Nick, feeling sick, and Reardon, feeling nothing whatsoever, stand over Swede's cadaver:

> REARDON: Once I did something wrong.
> CORONER: Uh?
> REARDON: Those were his last words to Nick here. I wonder what he meant: "Once I did something wrong."

Reardon and the coroner's brief exchange is dense with denial, error, omission, and inversion, all of which the repetition of the key line three times in four minutes of screen time should oblige us to recognize. These are not even Swede's last words (actually, the compassionate and repeated "Thanks for coming"), while Reardon transforms the line he does speak. The words are all there, but the last word—"once"—has now become the first, and the long, empty hiatus, the enigmatic nothing that remains unspeakable, has now vanished. In their subtlety, the

changes are a model of false historical recording. Reardon's historical and hermeneutic activity can produce the referent and the meaning of "once" but not, by definition, of the "—" that exists outside history and language and so disrupts the reassuring linearity, unity, and closure of narrative.[58] Like Hemingway's original story, grounded in trauma and modeling his "iceberg" aesthetic, Siodmak's film does not mention the war that was its immediate context. It remains unsayable, because the catastrophe has not ceased to happen and so can no more be remembered than forgotten.

The fact that so many critics—with the exception of Shadoian[59]—have overlooked the contradiction entirely is deeply ironic but does not prove its insignificance. Far from it. For what *The Killers* implies is that, under such circumstances, memory *ought* to make mistakes. Nick's error in reporting Swede's words testifies to their traumatic effect on him, and of what he has witnessed with his own eyes. In contrast, Reardon repeats the line to clarify that he is not speaking for himself, to deny that *he* has done anything wrong. This is why the film indicts us should we identify with Reardon, because his conversion of the mute opacity of Swede's fate into transparent meaning substitutes for an ethical reaction, an affective response. This functions for me as an appeal to restore the naïve affinity of the spectator seized by the phenomenal surface, a credulous spectator still seated beneath the critic, or in my heart.

The inadequacy of Reardon's narrative accounting, and of his insurance against nothingness, can only return us to Swede's look into the abyss. This is our reminder that Reardon's faith in the objective gaze, able to illuminate the obscure past and see a future free of fascination, able to turn night into day, is blind to its own blindness, which is moral and political amnesia. The film has forced us to contemplate an extraordinary reversal: that it is Swede, the *homme fasciné*, blinded by faith, who can see a truth that Reardon, the detached viewer, cannot. The noir genius of *The Killers*, therefore, is to mirror back the appeal that we not forget what must be forgotten in order to go on living, and to do so through an image that is quite properly *unforgettable*. If we see this as one of Benjamin's images of the past "threatening to disappear at each present moment which does not recognize itself as the one intended in it,"[60] then, like the handkerchief contained in Swede's other envelope, it is a letter "outside history, but historically so," because it is addressed to whoever possesses or is possessed by it. Perhaps unsurprisingly, I find that I have every desire to see again a movie whose historical lesson in cinematic fascination is not yet over.

Notes

I would like to thank Richard Godden and Ian MacFadyen for reading drafts of this article; Jack Shadoian and Reynold Humphries for their support; and Matthew West for screening an original print of *The Killers*.

1. For a rare, direct engagement with fascination in noir, see Denise Warren, "Out of the Past: Semiotic Configurations of the Femme Fatale in Film Noir," *Interdisciplinary Journal for Germanic Linguistics and Semiotic Analysis* 2 (1997): 221–55. For the best theorized and most interesting reading of fascination in cinema but not in

noir, see Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

2. Michael Walker, "*The Big Sleep*: Howard Hawks and Film Noir," in Ian Cameron, ed., *The Movie Book of Film Noir* (London: Studio Vista, 1992), 191, 196, 197, 197–98, 198, 202.
3. Annette Kuhn, *The Power of the Image* (London: Routledge, 1985), 78.
4. Thomas Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany's Historical Imaginary* (London: Routledge, 2000), 424. On the problems of definition and the nature of the canon, see Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward, eds., *Film Noir: An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style* (New York: Overlook Press, 1992), 372–85.
5. Elizabeth Cowie, "Film Noir and Women," in Joan Copjec, ed., *Shades of Noir: A Reader* (London: Verso, 1993), 123. James Naremore argues that "our contemporary fascination with noir may well entail a sort of *Nachtragichkeit*, or a method of dealing with the present by imagining a primal scene," Naremore, *More than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 4. In a similar vein, Elsaesser observes that "film noir seems to afford, thanks to its combined appeal to narcissism, nostalgia and negativity, a last look at the cinema itself, before it disappears." Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After*, 442.
6. Winfried Fluck, "Crime, Guilt, and Subjectivity in *Film Noir*," *Amerikanstudien/American Studies* 46, no. 3 (2001): 380.
7. Frank Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity* (London: Routledge, 1991), 28.
8. Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 112.
9. This is also one reason that the films dated so quickly; in 1992 Žižek noted that *Murder My Sweet* (1944) could "provoke laughter today," but Naremore noted that as long ago as 1953 "people laughed" at a rerun of the same film and already saw it as a "parody of the genre." See Žižek, *Looking Awry*, 112, and Naremore, *More than Night*, 21.
10. Tom Conley, *Film Hieroglyphs: Ruptures in Classical Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), ix.
11. Ackbar Abbas, "On Fascination: Walter Benjamin's Images," *New German Critique* 48 (1989): 50.
12. See Bertram Lewin, "Sleep, the Mouth, and the Dream Screen," *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 15 (1946): 419–34.
13. Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1978), 238, 235, 236.
14. Thomas Schatz quotes a 1947 review of *The Killers* that begins: "Whoever went to the movies with any regularity during 1946 was caught in the midst of Hollywood's profound postwar affection for morbid drama." Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* (New York: Random House, 1981), 111.
15. Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (London: Routledge, 1992), 1, 2–3; emphasis added.
16. Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 25, 31.
17. Roger Laporte, "Maurice Blanchot Today," in Carolyn Bailey Gill, ed., *Maurice Blanchot: The Demand of Writing* (London: Routledge, 1996), 31.
18. Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 40.

19. Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (London: Pandora Press, 1992), 37.
20. Serge Leclaire, cited in Richard Boothby, *Death and Desire: Psychoanalytic Theory in Lacan's Return to Freud* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 145.
21. Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 259.
22. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (1955, reprint; London: Fontana Press, 1973), 257.
23. Geoffrey Hartman, "On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies," *New Literary History* 26 (1995): 545.
24. Kaja Silverman, "Historical Trauma and Male Subjectivity," in E. Ann Kaplan, ed., *Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 117, 116. See also Silverman's *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 1992). Silverman's approach to traumatic history follows Lacan, as, in more complex and subtle ways, does the work of Žižek; but of course there is a large historiography of trauma that offers potentially useful alternative approaches.
25. Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (London: Routledge, 1992), 81, 155.
26. In *The Woman in the Window*, Joan Bennett plays the phantasmic animation of a portrait for Edward G. Robinson, leading him to commit a murder for which Dan Duryea is blamed. In *Scarlet Street*, Bennett sits for a portrait painted *by* Robinson, only to usurp his career by posing as the real artist, again leading him to commit a murder for which Duryea is again blamed.
27. Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *Art and Literature*, trans. James Strachey (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Pelican, 1985), 356, 361.
28. Christine Gledhill, "*Klute* 1: A Contemporary Film Noir and Feminist Criticism," in Kaplan, *Women in Film Noir*, 27. In the case of *The Killers*, the inverse ratio of the femme fatale's material presence to her power is truly spectacular: Ava Gardner's Kitty Collins is on screen for a mere fifteen minutes (out of 105), and only half of this is with Burt Lancaster's Swede.
29. See Julian Murphet, "Film Noir and the Racial Unconscious," *Screen* 39, no. 1 (spring 1998): 22–35. Murphet's case for racializing the term "noir" requires that its women "not be read as 'women' in any literal sense" (27).
30. Mary Anne Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 2.
31. Žižek, *Looking Awry*, 16.
32. Christian Metz, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Signifier*, trans. Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster, and Alfred Guzzetti (London: Macmillan, 1982), 73, 72.
33. See in particular Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).
34. Linda Singer, "Eye/Mind/Screen: Toward a Phenomenology of Cinematic Scopophilia," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 12, no. 3 (summer 1990): 54.
35. Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 32, 105.
36. See Jack Shadoian, *Dreams and Dead Ends: The American Gangster/Crime Film*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), and Michael Walker, "Robert Siodmak," in Cameron, *The Movie Book of Film Noir*, 110–51.
37. This crucial point can be clarified by reference to Don Siegel's 1964 remake of *The Killers*, in which the victim's inexplicable and shocking passivity does become the explicit motor for the narrative, since it is the assassins themselves who are moved to

undertake the quest. As Charlie (Lee Marvin) says: "I gotta find out what makes a man decide not to run. Why all of a sudden, he'd rather die."

38. This is why *The Killers* is so superior to Siodmak's *Criss-Cross* (1949), in which Burt Lancaster returns to narrate his own tale, and so tells us *too much*.
39. Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 32.
40. Walker, "Robert Siodmak," in Cameron, *The Movie Book of Film Noir*, 132. Of course, if Colfax is Big Jim, then James Reardon must be Little Jim.
41. Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street*, 117.
42. Siodmak's direction is fully explicit about how the image fascinates, principally through the extraordinary two-shot that frames the faces of Swede and Kitty together. He stands behind her, gazing hopelessly; she looks away, smiling enigmatically. Both faces are turned toward the spectator. This shot dramatizes seduction as *recognition*: alluring as she is, what Swede sees in Kitty precedes her appearance, indicating his fateful return to a primal fantasy, projected onto her like a screen.
43. "Touch me and you won't *live* 'til morning," Kitty warns Colfax. "I'm poison," she tells Swede, before their only on-screen embrace.
44. In its precision, the reference does more than remind movie viewers of their location in a theater. The film showing, *Claude's Wife*, plays on Dorothy Arzner's *Craig's Wife*, a film with a thematic significance (warning against materialistic marriages; the poster's illustration closely resembles Kitty) and a historical one (in dating from 1936, it returns us to the era of Swede and Lily's broken date at the movies; this is the film they should have seen).
45. Indeed this is a narrative Edmund O'Brien would act out literally in *D.O.A.* (1950), a film that, even more explicitly than *The Killers*, is based on Siodmak's *The Man Who Sought His Own Murderer* (1931).
46. Deborah Lazaroff Alpi, *Robert Siodmak* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1998), 329.
47. Reynold Humphries, *Fritz Lang: Genre and Representation in His American Films* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 135.
48. Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* 81.
49. Marcus Bullock, "The Rose of Babylon: Walter Benjamin, Film Theory, and the Technology of Memory," *MLN* 103, no. 5 (1988): 1105.
50. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 259.
51. Laura Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity* (London: BFI, 1996), 73.
52. Shadoian, *Dreams and Dead Ends*, 84; Walker, "Robert Siodmak," in Cameron, *The Movie Book of Film Noir*, 129; and Alpi, *Robert Siodmak*, 326.
53. Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street*, 118, and Conley, *Film Hieroglyphs*, 155. The implications of this error for criticism appear most revealingly in Conley's analysis, precisely because his brilliantly ingenious reading of the film's hieroglyphic "secret forms," its encoded inscriptions of history, demonstrates a misapplied brilliance. The secret of *The Killers* does not require deconstruction of microscopic, arcane details but recognition of the blindingly obvious. When he sees the film's flashback narrative "casting a spell on everyone who is tempted to 'figure out' the enigma" (166), Conley forgets to include *himself*.
54. Thanks to Dave Pembrey, an undergraduate in my film noir course, for this observation, and, for other insights into fascination and desire, Iona Ludlow.
55. To underscore the point, the misdescription of the handkerchief is doubled by the misdescription of the security guard, who we are told is shot in the groin—an arresting detail—but who we see quite clearly being shot in the shoulder.
56. As Mary Helen Thuente has pointed out to me, even though this is not the traditional Irish "angel harp," the design shows the figure of a woman on one side, so underscoring the connection to Kitty.

57. Jonathan Munby has particularly useful material on émigré directors, as well as an incisive analysis of *The Killers*. See Munby, *Public Enemies, Public Heroes: Screening the Gangster from "Little Caesar" to "Touch of Evil"* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999), 186–220.
58. This crucial intermittence corresponds to what Benjamin theorized as *Jetztzeit*, "nowtime": a caesura, or unreadable space that immobilizes time by interrupting language with "that which is not of it." See Aris Fioretos, "Contraction (Benjamin, Reading, History)," *MLN* 110, no. 3 (1995): 563.
59. Shadoian, *Dreams and Dead Ends:* "It is unlikely such minute detailing is accidental" (100).
60. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 257.

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