The Evolution of the Crime Film

Claude Chabrol (1955)

I. In Memoriam

Success creates fashion, which defines genre. At the height of popularity for the crime novel between the two world wars there was a correspondent event in American films–poorly imitated by many others–the creation of a genre which quickly lapsed, as often happens, into mediocrity and low-budget versions. The earliest examples, taken from the successful fiction of S.S. Van Dine and Earl Derr Biggers, were a smattering of movies which were, if not admirable, at least compelling and well turned out like the celebrated *Canary Murder Case*, unforgettable for a reason not directly related to this discussion.[1] The immense success of these movies gave merchandisers the bright idea of an endless array of inexpensive knock-offs cheaply packaged by Smith, Jones...or Dupont, in which Charlie Chan, Perry Mason, Philo Vance and Ellery Queen returned periodically in new adventures, usually putting on the same face (that of Warner Oland, Warren Williams, or other character actors), all in order, it would seem, to give their not-terribly-demanding viewers an experience akin to following the Sunday funnies.

There was a similar occurrence with gangster films, which were born from the complex social, economic, and political alliances of the 1930s. Certainly the early examples were masterpieces; they were drawn from the exploits of the Prohibition era's celebrated Italian bootleggers and, as they say, "ripped from today's headlines." But those quickly became yesterday's headlines and were gone as a source of inspiration. The knock-offs, which are never embarrassed by their own low quality, then had the field to themselves.

Curiously, although they were already running out of steam in 1935, there are practically no examples of either genre before 1929. The attempts to adapt the novels of Dashiell Hammett had no results other that to bring the protagonists of *The Thin Man* to the screen in a series of films which persisted through increasingly fatigued, forlorn, and flat examples until near the end of the War. Accordingly the status of the crime genre–of all the crime genres–was hardly promising in 1940. The straight-forward mystery novel was stumbling and becoming untranslatable into movies. Prohibition had long since been repealed by the proponents of strong drink and the persistence of organized crime had not been

Above, giving "the hard-boiled genre acclaimed status," Roy Earle (Humphrey Bogart) menaces Babe (Alan Curtis) as Red (Arthur Kennedy) and Marie (Ida Lupino) look on in *High Sierra*.

generally perceived. The related movies were becoming sinister cop stories effectively restricted to small budgets and even smaller talent.

Then an abrupt rediscovery of Dashiell Hammett, the appearance of the first Chandlers and favorable social atmosphere suddenly gave the hard-boiled genre acclaimed status[2] and opened the doors of the studios to receive it. The popularity of these films from Raoul Walsh's *High Sierra* and Huston's *Maltese Falcon* continued to grow until 1948. The concept of the movement underwent important modifications: they were still mining a rich vein based on the preestablished plot lines, but the new works were nonetheless different from each other due, in the best instances, to their tone or style; and if the same character appeared in several movies, it was merely by chance or on account of similar literary sources: no one but a fool would mistake the Marlowe of *Murder, My Sweet* for the one in *Lady in the Lake*. Many of these releases were of exceptional quality, often much better than one would expect from their directors (I'm thinking of Dmytryk, Hathaway, and Daves). In this regard, there are two reasons: these films were drawn from the work of talented writers, specialists in the genre such as Chandler, Burnett, Jay Dratler or Leo Rosten;[3] and the filmmakers had perfected a standard style, extremely suitable and rich in visual effects, which was just right for a type of film in which refinement acted as a counterpoint.

As fate would have it, this movement carried within itself the seeds of its own destruction. Based on shocking and surprising the viewer, it could offer even the most imaginative of screenwriters and the most diligent directors, a limited num-

ber of dramatic situations, which, after a few repetitions, could no longer achieve either shock or surprise. If the *noir* crime films–and with them, the novels–held on for eight years, it was thanks to two qualities which began as external elements: suspense[4] and documentary reality. These elements were, once again, snares. Suspense introduced a new, extremely hazardous mood, the achievement of which was appropriate to only a few situations and which concealed the problem without resolving it. As for documentary reality, its multitude of possibilities were muzzled by the nature of the genre, which soon rendered it dull and monotonous. Thus trapped in a generic prison of its own construction, in searching for a way out, the crime film could do nothing but hit its head against a wall like a frenzied fool. The gratuitous use of subjective camera such as that of Robert Montgomery in *Lady in the Lake*, the inappropriate shift to period in Sam Wood's *Ivy*, the sophomoric and distorted surrealism of Robery Florey in his tale of an amnesiac [*The Crooked Way*], all this resounded like a knell. One day, Ben Hecht, to put an end to it, hacked out, from a very bad novel by Eleazar Lipsky, a remarkable script that included to the nth degree all the archetypes of the crime genre. And as if to underscore the strengths and the weaknesses of such an enterprise, *Kiss of Death* was directed by a capable technician with a trace of individuality, Henry Hathaway (who turned out of one of the finest examples of the genre in the first half of *Dark Corner*); and *Kiss of Death* was a swan song for a formula, for a recipe, for a mother lode which exploded in one's face with a few rich nuggets but soon played out.

2. Noblissima Visione

The crime film is no longer, nor by the way is there still a crime novel. The source is dried up, and renewing it is impossible. What's left, now that it has run its course? In the wake of all the other genres that made up the best of the American

Below, studio film directed "by a capable technician," Nick (Victor Mature) and Nettie (Coleen Gray) in *Kiss of Death*.

cinema of yesteryear, the crime film, while in itself gone, remains a marvelous concept.

Inside civilized society–of which Valéry took the measure–successes, popular styles, genres are all mortal. What remains are the works, which may be good or bad but are the sincere expression of the ideas and preoccupations of their authors. In the matter before us, another historical panorama reveals itself and offers for our review *Lady of the Pavements* [Griffith, 1929], *Underworld* [Von Sternberg, 1927], *Scarface* [Hawks, 1932], a wide, mournful, and protracted long shot, until at last a few films from today predict the crime film of tomorrow.

It is out of the question for these films to renew a genre by widening its scope or intellectualizing it in some manner. It is, effectively, out of the question to renew anything but simply to express oneself by mediating any misguided mythologizing. Are not the best criteria of a work's authenticity most often its complete ingenuousness and its perfect spontaneity? Is it forbidden after considering the ably constructed *Dark Passage* with its cunning use of the camera in the opening sequences and its wry, surrealistic ending, to prefer the barely decipherable plot, the freshness and wit of *Out of the Past* directed by Jacques Tourneur from an awkward but perfectly earnest script by Geoffrey Homes [Daniel Mainwaring]? By what virtue, one can ask, is this latter film more sincere than the other? By virtue of its very awkwardness! The perfect sublimation of a genre usually comes down to its complete submission to this: to make a crime film, what's required is that it be conceived as such and no more; or, otherwise stated, that it be made from the components of a crime film. The genre demands a certain inspiration, which it hems in with its strict rules. So what is needed, one must concede, is the uncommon talent to be true to one's self while in the embrace of this rather odd enter-

Below, "so simple and so subtle that its first expression is incomprehensible": Marlowe (Humphrey Bogart, right) rescues Vivian Sternwood (Lauren Bacall) from a mugger in *The Big Sleep*.

prise (that's the wonder of *The Big Sleep*); or at least an inspiration, an aspiration, a world view in communion with the rules of the genre (exemplified by another miracle, *Laura*; and as well, from a certain point of view, by the cases of Lang and Hitchcock).

Certainly the superiority of *The Big Sleep* proves the case of function over form for which writers and directors strive. The central intrigue of this film is a model of the crime film equation with three variables (the blackmailer, the killer, the avenger) so simple and so subtle that its first expression is incomprehensible. In truth, nothing could be easier to follow, in its second rendering, than this film's line of inquiry. The only difference between the viewer and Bogart as Marlowe is that the character understands and picks up clues from the first. It would seem that this film resembles others of its type only in the measure by which it dominates them but that its deepest roots and strongest ties relate back to the total output of director Howard Hawks. It's no accident that the private detective in this instance is more perceptive and more competent than we are, and, more palpably than elsewhere, is confronted by the brutal strength of his antagonists. *The Big Sleep* is closer to *Scarface*, to *The Thing*, and even to *Monkey Business* than to Robert Montgomery's *Lady in the Lake*. One must also admit that in this instance function subordinates creation–that it markedly displaces it once and for all, because the "Hawksian" model of the hard-boiled film could never be reconstructed without creating in its turn a sterile and flaccid knock-off.

Matters present themselves somewhat differently in the case of Otto Preminger's *Laura*: here the element of pure crime drama is completely subsumed by the preselected narrative style which markedly transmutes it. The novel of Vera Caspary, from which the film is taken, is a crime fiction of the classic sort, or more precisely neo-classic, that is to say based on a less stereotyped and realistic story. In any case, it's a perfect example of a formula worn down to the bone. It's on the character plane that the distinct features of the film take off, as the writers (Preminger and Jay Dratler) push them to their logical extremes and thus create personas intrinsically attractive to the viewer, so that the course of events in which they are caught up seems to be the *only* one possible. Here things happen as if these people had existed before the crime (given that the opposite is usually true), as if they themselves were creating the intrigue, were transposing it to a place where no one dreamed of being. To underscore this effect, Preminger devised an original narrative progression (which incidentally gives his film a significant historical importance): long sequences shot with a dolly that accompanies the movements of the key characters in various scenes, in such a way that these figures are *trapped* in the frame (usually a medium close shot or an American plan [medium shot from head to ankle]) and must watch their surroundings mutate and alter according to their actions. We have demonstrated here that a crime story, done well and with depth, can simultaneously be a matter of style and conviction. Vera Caspary wrote a crime novel, Preminger shot a character piece that

Above, "figures are *trapped* in the frame (usually a medium close shot or an American plan)": Waldo Lydecker (Clifton Webb) is confronted by Det. Mark McPherson (Dana Andrews) while Shelby Carpenter (Vincent Price) looks on in *Laura*.

remains nonetheless an atypical work, because its success relies on a pre-existing mystery that fits well enough with the director's style, or, more exactly, compels the director to integrate his vision into a given crime story. Here again the filmmaker takes the first step and adapts himself to the genre. And is the result, which we find admirably done, worth infinitely more than the principal of self-expression, of which we get but a half measure?

Meanwhile we can easily understand how these films were decisive stages in the peaceful struggle for the liberation of the genre and the destruction of its formulas: if deficient as prototypes they were catalysts. Accordingly we can perceive a group of films that were daring, at times falling short, but mostly remarkable, and in all cases earnest and personal, for which the crime theme was but a pretext or a means but, in any case, not an objective, I would quickly cite Welles' *Lady from Shanghai*, Nick Ray's *On Dangerous Ground* and *In A Lonely Place*,[5] Joseph Losey's *The Prowler*, Preminger's *Where the Sidewalk Ends* and *Whirlpool*, and assorted other titles which made the crime film worthy of accolades, movies which would not adhere to absurd guidelines or arbitrary classifications. On the surface we can surely see little in common between *Lady from Shanghai* and *In a Lonely Place*. For what they have in common in their very difference, is the striking honesty, face to face with their own visions, of Welles and Nicholas Ray. Rewards don't come from mining a vein but from prospecting to find it.

I can see an objection here: all the films mentioned–and they were specifically selected–derive their most obvious merit from pulling the wings off the genre; they hang from it by the slenderest of threads, which has nothing to do with their

best qualities. It is not a bit dishonest to fortell the future of the crime film from this, from the very diminution of the criminal elements in these films, because, to push this thing forward to its paradoxical conclusion, could one not easily conceive an ideal evolution in which this element is purely and simply eliminated?

In truth, what may seem a diminution is, in reality, development. All these filmmakers have one thing in common: they no longer consider the crime or all the other criminal appurtenances as dramatic situations leading to variations that are more or less adroit, but see them from an ontological (in the case of Ray, Losey, or Dassin) or metaphysical (in the case of Welles, Lang, and Hitchcock) point of view.

It may be a valid approach to focus on one theme, as Proust tried to do with time or [Marcel] Jouhandeau with homosexuality. In the realm of motion pictures, this can be accomplished through the actual direction of the film, as is the case with Preminger, or through the refinement of the script in anticipation of a certain direction (Hitchcock and Welles). It can also be accomplished, if I dare say, in an autonomous fashion, in the pure refinement of the script. And, as written description is the easiest, I will take my example from this last category.

Consider Robert Wise's *Born to Kill*, which came and went without much notice. Here is an instance of the script itself embodying the value and complete originality. The flaw in the armor is in fact the direction, technically beyond reproach and occasionally powerful but, alas, terribly ordinary and typical of the genre, which the aim of the film should have been precisely to avoid being, if not to grind the genre's remains under its heel. The script is a faithful adaptation–even if the times require it to be a bit simplistic–of a novelist named James Gunn. This

Below, more trapped figures in Preminger's *Whirlpool*.

young man wrote his book as "an exercise for a creative writing class." The curriculum gave him the initial impulse; but in the next moment he pared away the useless elements and then was exceptionally astute in selecting, as the framework of his narrative, two well-worn themes from a dying genre: a woman more monstrous than a male monster (*Deadlier than the Male* is the original title, *Tender Female* is the French title) and an old woman who becomes an amateur detective to avenge a murdered friend. These are stereotypes which he literally blows up in front of our eyes. By the mediation of a freely developed plot and an absolutely extraordinary tone, pushing each scene towards a violent, ironic, and macabre paroxysm, he succeeds in giving all these elements an unexpected dimension, a poetic depth, and, at the same, in validating his chosen themes, because they alone are capable of driving the characters to their own ends, they alone are capable of distilling their essences, they alone are capable of justifying the tone, the style, and the subject matter. Ignorant to a fault, Wise did not know how to–or simply could not–take the reins, and *Born to Kill* could not quite live up to its potential as either a complete masterpiece or as a manifesto.

Whatever it may be, spanning successes and failures, this evolution is undeniable; and no one, I think, would pine for *The Thin Man* or *Murder, My Sweet* of yesteryear while watching today's *In A Lonely Place* or *The Prowler*. For those who remain unconvinced by the strength of my argument, I've kept an ace up my sleeve. Here it is, the crime film of tomorrow, free from all restraints and its own roots, illuminating with its powerful vision the unspeakable abyss. To make it harder, they chose the worst material imaginable, the most pitiful and sickening product of a genre fallen into putrefaction: a novel by Mickey Spillane. From a crushed, discolored, and chewed-up sow's ear, Robert Aldrich and A.I. Bezzerides[6] have violently and sure-handedly fashioned a silk purse embellished with elaborate and fanciful patterns. In *Kiss Me Deadly* the usual aspects of the crime film aren't even on screen, but merely lurks in the undercurrent for the unenlightened. It's about something more profound and unveils alluring images of Death, Fear, Love, and Horror. Still all the elements are there: the tough detective with a familiar name, atomic age gangsters with glass jaws, cops, beauties in bathing suits, and a bleached blonde killer. Who would not recognize them, who would be embarassed not to recognize them, unmasked, their measure taken, these sinister acquaintances from the past?

Crisis in the genre, proclaims the straightforward observer! As if the genre was not what its authors made it!

Translated from the French by Alain Silver and Christiane Silver

Notes

1. It's called Louise Brooks.

2. Although the genre had existed for some time, its recognized source was the pulp magazine *Black Mask* which published the first short stories of Chandler, Hammett, Cornell Woolrich, and Raoul Whitfield. Moreover, *The Maltese Falcon* and *the Glass Key* had already been made into very low budget movies around 1933.
3. Editors' Note: W.R. Burnett, novelist and screenwriter (*The Asphalt Jungle, Beast of the City, High Sierra, I Died A Thousand Times, Nobody Lives Forever, The Racket, This Gun for Hire*); Jay Dratler, screenwriter (*Call Northside 777, The Dark Corner, Laura, Pitfall*); Leo Rosten, screenwriter (*The Dark Corner, Sleep My Love, Where Danger Lives*).
4. It is very difficult to define clearly the boundaries of the "suspense" film and those of the "thriller." In a literary context, the former is closer to William Irish [Cornell Woolrich], and the latter to Chandler. In actuality they have always been intermingled.
5. It appears that Ray chose to adapt some of the most highly regarded writers in the genre. *On Dangerous Ground* is taken from a good novel by Gerald Butler, ***Mad with Much Heart***. As for *In a Lonely Place*, it is very, very loosely drawn from an excellent work by Dorothy B. Hughes (to whom we owe the story for *Ride the Pink Horse*) also entitled ***In a Lonely Place***.
6. Bezzerides is one current Hollywood's best screenwriters: breaking in with the adaptation of his novel ***Thieves' Market*** for Jules Dassin (*Thieves' Highway*). He has since been screenwriter and adapter on *Beneath the Twelve Mile Reef, On Dangerous Ground*, and other solidly crafted films rich in original ideas. The character of "Nick" in *Kiss Me Deadly* is a typical Bezzerides creation... One can get an idea of the physical aspect of this fascinating personality in the beginning of *On Dangerous Ground*: he's the second tempter of Robert Ryan (who wants to bribe him).

Below, "a bleached blonde killer" with a shiny gun, Lily Carver (Gaby Rodgers) in *Kiss Me Deadly*.