

## 6. *The Dark Mirror: Sex, Dreams, and Psychoanalysis*

In late 1924, as his fame was rapidly spreading from Europe to the United States, Sigmund Freud received two interesting offers from two unlikely sources on this side of the Atlantic. The first was from the powerful publisher of the *Chicago Tribune*, Colonel Robert McCormick, with regard to the sensational murder trial of Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb, two wealthy young men who had killed a friend, apparently in an attempt to commit the perfect crime (a plot Hitchcock would appropriate in *Rope* two decades later). McCormick sent Freud a telegram offering him \$25,000 "or anything he name" to come to Chicago and psychoanalyze the two defendants and then publish his findings in the *Tribune*. Knowing that Freud was in ill health, the publisher added that he would be happy to charter the doctor a transatlantic steamer. Freud declined the offer.

Several months later, the Hollywood producer Samuel Goldwyn, another man accustomed to having people jump when he called, offered Freud, whom he called "the greatest love specialist in the world," \$100,000—an enormous sum in those days—to "commercialize his study [of psychoanalysis] and write a story for the screen, or come to America and help in a 'drive' on the hearts of the nation." En route to Europe at the time, Goldwyn requested an interview with Freud. And as recounted by Freud's biographer, Peter Gay, Goldwyn then remarked that "'there is nothing really so entertaining as a really great love story' and who better equipped to write, or advise on, such a story than Freud? 'Scenario writers, directors and actors,' Goldwyn thought, 'can learn much by a really deep study of everyday life. How much more forceful will be their creations if they

know how to express genuine emotional motivation and suppressed desires?" Freud declined the interview with a one-sentence letter: "I do not intend to see Mr. Goldwyn." Or as the *New York Times* headline of January 24, 1925, reported it: FREUD REBUFFS GOLDWYN./VIENNESE PSYCHOANALYST IS NOT INTERESTED IN MOTION PICTURE OFFER.

A pity. Love stories aside, Freud might have singlehandedly hastened the film noir era by a generation. In fact, it was just after his death in 1938, at the outset of the war, that many of Freud's major concepts were beginning to wash up into the American consciousness, especially, as one would expect, in metropolitan centers. The popularity of Freudianism and the onset of the film noir era correspond exactly. The intense European interest in his writings—the seminal theories of the unconscious, of dreams, sexuality and humor, dark and otherwise—was part of the intellectual baggage the Austrian and German expatriate directors brought to this country when, like Freud, they fled the Nazis on the eve of the war. After the war, and its dislocations and traumas, it is not surprising that film noir should turn out to be the most psychologically oriented of all film genres, with enormous appeal for that very reason. As James Greenberg wrote in the *New York Times* in May 1994, "Film noirs were movies about adults, made for adults who had just been through a war." It is axiomatic that in film noir the city of dreams and the city of reality merge, with an effect that is not harmonious but disjunctive.

"Almost from its earliest emergence," Mumford writes, "the city brought with it the expectation of intensified struggle within: a thousand little wars fought in the marketplace, the law courts, the ball games, or the arenas. To exert power in every form was the essence of civilization: the city found a score of ways of expressing struggle, aggression, domination, conquest—and servitude." And it is no wonder that psychoanalysis, dreams, and sexual interplay in all its varieties take on such a prominent role in the noir city. The labyrinths of dreams and sexual fantasy overlap, interconnect, and merge in each individual within the greater labyrinth of the physical city—which itself is a catalyst of dreams and fantasies.

Sexual mores changed dramatically in the United States after the war. From a purely social perspective, we see that huge numbers of women had entered the urban workplace during the war, and even

late in the Depression, to labor side by side with men. With the return of G.I.s to fractured marriages and romances gone sour, and the influx of single men and women from rural areas, the familiar grid of interpersonal relationships—and notions of romance and sexuality themselves—were turned upside down. The faster, more freewheeling social scene, and a less restrictive, lurid nightlife—radiating around those tremendously popular nightclubs and casinos—rapidly took root. Many returning servicemen, after living for years in combat zones, exclusively in the company of other men, continued to seek a sexual outlet in the only place it had been available to them during the war: among prostitutes. Along with a postwar reaction to the straight-laced, Depression-dampened sexual habits of the 1930s, among vets and non-vets, this helped account for the vast increase in the population of prostitutes nationwide, and for the explosion of so-called illicit sex in every large American city.

Thus in film noir, just as the numerous female executives, journalists, and doctors reflect changes in the legitimate workplace, so does the large number of prostitutes—streetwalkers, call girls, and party girls—reflect the fast-evolving sexual underworld after 1945. Often these women are depicted as exploited victims (*Pickup on South Street*, *Party Girl*, *The Big Heat*), other times as predatory (*The Glass Web*, *Scarlet Street*, *Pushover*), but their constant presence lifts them from the marginal roles, heavily sanitized or camouflaged, which they played in prewar films to a position of some prominence in the urban social fabric as depicted in film noir. Here as elsewhere, in chronicling the subterranean reality, film noir subverts the surface reality. For the first time in American film, Americans' sexual preoccupations, obsessions, and perversions are explicitly dealt with. Film noir is filled with sexual exotica and issues of deviation and fetishism. Love triangles on a highly charged erotic and psychological level, sexual obsession (even—often—to the point of violence), and deep sexual conflicts, confusions, and rifts comprise the most dominant constellations in the noir universe. Promiscuity, priapism, impotence, bisexuality, and homosexuality appear on the big screen with varying degrees of camouflage at first, and then later with broader, more realistic strokes. The now routine (and tiresome) inside stories or "exposés" in contemporary films and television dealing with escort services, wife-swapping, incest, high school

prostitution rings, and so on, are direct offshoots of those first unvarnished, and far more eclectic, glimpses of the sexual underworld in the noir city.

Today, more than half of all American marriages end in divorce. In cities, the percentage is even higher. Adultery, multiple marriages, out-of-wedlock births (among not just the poor but the middle- and upper-middle classes), and the number of couples, both straight and gay, cohabiting (socially, in many circles, this was still a no-no in 1960, much less 1945) have all increased astronomically since the war, as has teenage—and now pre-teenage—sexual activity. With this greater license, the accompanying cultural changes have at times been seismic. And again, in film, these postwar shifts were first depicted not in the arid domestic dramas and repressed comedies (Doris Day et al.) of the times, but in film noir.

The Marxist critic Sylvia Harvey writes, "In the world of film noir both men and women seek sexual satisfaction *outside* of marriage." Seldom permitted the more socially comfortable, and far safer, pursuit of a discreet affair, noir lovers are required—by inexorable fate, moral law (film noir is unequivocally the most morally driven of all American film genres), lack of hypocrisy, and sheer destructiveness—to carry out, as Harvey says, "the violent destruction of the marriage bonds." "Paradoxically," she goes on, "the destruction of the sanctity of marriage, most notable in *Double Indemnity*, results in placing the relationship of the lovers under such strain, so beyond the boundaries of conventional moral law, that the relationship becomes an impossibility, and transforms itself into the locus of mutual destruction. In *Double Indemnity* the act of killing the husband serves as the supreme act of violence against family life. . . . It is perhaps most clear in this movie that the expression of sexuality and the institution of marriage are at odds with one another, and that both pleasure and death lie outside the safe circle of family relations."

The issues of sexual deviation and fetishism, seldom dealt with in American cinema before 1944, are presented with startling frankness in film noir, often as outgrowths of overcrowded, overpressurized, ultimately decadent urban environments. Among the countless examples of formerly taboo subjects, treated head on in many films noirs, there is foot fetishism in *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, lipstick fetishism in *White the City Sleeps*, pedophilia (the miscreant

is the city's foremost child philanthropist) in *The Naked Kiss*, and drugs, pornography, and ritualistic murder in *The Big Sleep*.

At the same time, the films display a ceaseless fascination with murder and betrayal, frequently in tandem with sexual obsession or inversion. If the depictions of psychosexual material are veiled, the veil is a transparent one that distorts the unreality of the censored elements back closer to reality. Because of the censorship imposed by the Hays Office, which stifled even indirect representation of physical love and sex to the point where the byplay around cigarettes between male and female characters (proffering, tapping, lighting, blowing, stroking, extinguishing) served as a stand-in for sexual activity, and the lingering kiss came to be emblematic of sexual intercourse (accomplished in the vast, timeless realm between the cutaway and the next scene), noir directors after the war found in the concepts and catch-phrases of psychoanalysis and psychiatry other essential reference points through which audiences could trace the necessary (and necessarily omitted) connections to emotional and sexual behavior.

In sexual and social matters, it cannot be emphasized enough, noir is first and foremost a subversive form, galaxies removed from the usual cinematic concerns of marriage, conventional romance, love as elixir, and even "acceptable," ultimately redemptive, depictions of infidelity and divorce. To rah-rah wartime films that glorified the gal back home in the kitchen and the guy overseas in the trenches ("family-values" films, the political hucksters would call them today), film noir responds with the desperately manipulated, and in turn manipulating, postwar woman and the scarred and twisted returning G.I. who become enmeshed in the incendiary emotional terrain of the big city. It is a city of increasingly shallow roots, a stopping ground for an ever-shifting, barely settling population of human tumbleweeds. A city the stolid, repressed, blue-collar families, entrenched for generations before the war in ethnically divided neighborhoods and enclaves, desert for the expansiveness, physical safety, and cultural sterility of the suburbs. (It is the more alienated members of these families who gravitate back to the noir universe of the inner city.)

So the city is no longer American society's melting pot, but its cauldron, where high art and low-brow entertainment, opulence and

penury, sanctioned white-collar crime and the dirty knife-in-the-alley variety, and every other human contrast imaginable all simmer—and sometimes boil over—in the same black, phantasmagoric broth. The suburbs may be spiritually barren, but they are also reassuringly static to their denizens, a place apparently not subject to tremors from the tumultuous currents underlying the city. They are a kind of limbo in which nothing changes, unless the change is initiated in, or spills over from, the nearby city. This remains true today, of course, when the many varieties of violent urban crime have made their way to the suburbs, victimizing the very people who fled the city for fear of them.

The illicit noir couple, volatile and frankly sexual, operate far from the orbit of conventional morality. They begin as rebels and end up as outlaws. If and when, like the young gunslinging couple in *Gun Crazy*, they attempt to circle backward, toward home and family (in this case, it happens, in those very suburbs), they quickly discover that they are no longer welcome. Discover, too, that they have been seen first as an irritant, then an “infection,” and finally as the manifestation of a terrible disruption in the fabric of family life. So they find themselves, not romantically alone together and footloose as they once longed to be—escaping the suffocation of that same family structure—but coldly isolated and trapped. And when it sinks in that it’s for keeps, that they’re truly doomed, unable to escape even one another, they explode even farther into limbo—not just outlaws, but outcasts. Inevitably they wander into a wilderness which we know they will never leave. Sometimes this is a remote and forsaken corner of the urban wasteland: an abandoned factory, a condemned building, a tenement basement, a boxcar, a piece of cold ground beneath a bridge; or it can be part of the natural wilderness outside the city: a desert (*Split-Second*), mountains (*High Sierra*), or the swamp at the end of *Gun Crazy*. At the dead center of a deadened emotional landscape they find themselves hunted, utterly depersonalized, and they die violent deaths. In these films—*They Live By Night*, *Raw Deal*, *Out of the Past*, *Detour*, *Double Indemnity*, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, and dozens of others—sex is not just hot stuff, but literally dynamite. We know the moment the two lovers meet that they are the catalyst of their own destruction, lighting a

long zigzag fuse which will chart their abbreviated, but seemingly interminable, journey into the night.

*Gun Crazy* is notable for its overt sexuality, its highly charged (and stylized) eroticism of violence. From its example spring an enormous number of films noirs with young couples in the fast lane on the short road to oblivion, a score of notable *hommages noirs* by French New Wave directors, such as *Breathless* and *Pierrat Le Fou* (Godard) and *Shoot the Piano Player* (Truffaut), in addition to the countless American films, *Ballads*, *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Vanishing Point*, *Wild at Heart*, that are bleak but straight-ahead road movies rather than films noirs. The inextricable relationship of sex and violence in his work—mirroring their dark nexus at the heart of American culture—and the finely calibrated, ever-ranifying effects of his characters’ violence and sexuality on the world around them make the creator of *Gun Crazy*, Joseph H. Lewis, one of our most important postwar directors. For Lewis, America, and everything that big word encompasses, boils down to Sex and Violence. Imitated widely, warmly admired by the likes of Billy Wilder and Otto Preminger, Lewis was a free-wheeling, tough-talking, and meticulous director whose stature—as both a craftsman and psychological innovator—has grown with time. He cut his teeth churning out low-budget quickies for small studios: war movies, horror flicks, singing Westerns, serials, and several Bowerly Boys pictures. His first critically acclaimed work was a tightly constructed film noir (centering around the classic noir themes of identity, amnesia, and madness) he made for Columbia Pictures, *My Name Is Julia Ross*, in 1945.

In *Gun Crazy*, a film which was to make him a cult figure, Lewis presents us with a pair of improbably and wildly memorable lovers. Bart, played by John Dall, is a reform school graduate (sent up for robbing a gun store) and army vet (a sharpshooter, of course) who is obsessed with guns. The only toys he wants as a kid are firearms; when he hits adolescence, it’s not girly magazines, but *Guns and Ammo* that he hides in his sock drawer. Laurie, played by Peggy Cummins, is the female sharpshooter in a carnival. She’s as worldly and hard-edged as Bart is naive; in this film, it’s the young man who plays the ingenue. Sex and guns are Laurie’s weapons; when we meet her, she is trading the carnival owner sex for a higher salary