

FILM NOIR

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I. THE CINEMA OF UNCERTAINTY AND THE OPACITY OF INFORMATION FROM LOUIS FEUILLADE'S CRIME SERIALS TO FILM NOIR

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The more you see, the less you know.

The Man Who Wasn't There (Joel and Ethan Coen, 2001)

As we try to define the cinematic origins of, and influences on, film noir, we inevitably find ourselves faced with the bigger problem of defining noir itself. Following stories that take the divergent paths of hard-boiled detectives, police investigations and romantic deadly triangles, and traverse across urban cityscapes, suburban households and remote wastelands, we realise the 'centre' of noir cannot be located. Critics have argued equally persuasively on behalf of German Expressionism or Poetic Realism as the true progenitor of the genre, but here I want to argue that the path to finding the antecedents to noir lies not in mapping out specific visual motifs or narrative elements, such as the 'rain-slicked highway', high-contrast lighting or even the 'hard-boiled detective', since each of these components is frustratingly variable from film to film. Rather, we are better off approaching noir from the question of its epistemological and ideological missions, which are much more consistent across the many films we identify as noir, despite the dissimilar styles, narrative lines and character types we are likely to cross in our investigation.

If we start with the kind of knowledge produced and the status of evidence, especially the role of visual evidence in defining what we know in noir, then I would argue that Louis Feuillade's crime films in the silent era are a productive venue to explore as the genre's predecessor. These films, as I have argued elsewhere, offer neither a strategy of 'showing' nor one of 'telling', but rather

a third path in film history, one preoccupied with the limits of knowledge, the 'cinema of uncertainty'.¹ As Allan Sekula notes in his seminal essay, 'The Traffic in Photographs', the photographic image has long been at the centre of the crisis of bourgeois culture, which simultaneously claims that the world is a collection of visible, 'knowable and possessable objects' but also maintains that the creative artist/spirit can transcend and transform the alienating machine of science/rationality and its economic handmaiden, capitalism.² While the photographic image and most of narrative cinema have worked to erase this crisis through a reification of the truth of appearances, Feuillade's crime films operate right at the centre of the crisis and destabilise this belief. As such, these films operate as a form of counter-cinema, but one where we might assume its later historical markers only lead through non-narrative or avant-garde paths. Here, I will argue that what makes noir both 'recognisable' as a genre and also so erratic in terms of markers of the 'genre' is that the form cannot be reduced to a series of narrative or stylistic traits, but rather must be explored in terms of the relationship of key formal elements – space, character, narrative – to evidence and knowledge. Examined in this way, noir then becomes a continuation of the 'cinema of uncertainty' but existing within, or perhaps rather existing 'underground', Classical Hollywood film.

A TROUBLED REALISTIC AESTHETIC – SPACE

While many have argued for the influence of German Expressionism on noir style or a consistency of 'visual motifs' that utilise many of these dramatic stylistic elements, in looking across the range of films that are typically labelled as noir, the visual style is a bit more complicated and diverse.³ Ginette Vincendeau acknowledges the significance of Expressionism on the genre, but reminds us about the international collaboration and hybrid styles throughout national cinemas that shaped both French and Hollywood films.⁴ Vincendeau points to noir's strong realist tradition and, considering its attention to urban space and the shadowy elements surrounding characters, links the genre to aesthetic and thematic components found in 1930s poetic realism.⁵ Marc Vernet goes a step further, expressing considerable scepticism about the Expressionist connection, seeing the low-key and dramatic lighting in noir as consistent with Hollywood film traditions as early as DeMille and Griffith in the 1910s as well as common in an array of international contexts.⁶ James Naremore also doubts the Expressionist heritage and sees little stylistic consistency in noir, tracing the visual patterns more to a cultural style (or series of 'fashions', from lighting to design).⁷

Like the above authors, I too think the Expressionist sensibility is overstated in the critical literature on noir and following Naremore's point as inspiration I would offer another 'visual pattern' that accounts for our 'recognition' of noir,

which is that the 'essence' of noir is more abstract, an epistemological condition which is: what we see is rarely what we know. Noir is closely connected to a visual 'style' of uncertainty and in this sense is following a cinematic trajectory directly from Feuillade. There is not a particular device consistently employed as much as a series of visual strategies utilised to construct what we might label a 'troubled realist aesthetic'. Feuillade achieves uncertainty through a variety of mechanisms: the long take, deep space, bright and even lighting, and extreme depth of field put in combination with edits for 'clues' or shock and placed in settings that resonate with (mis)information. There are shadowy moments and presences throughout the Feuillade crime films, but these are made more forceful by their context to a world that seems fairly mundane – much like we will see later in noir.

In *Fantômas à l'ombre de la guillotine* (1913), the film opens with Princess Danidoff robbed by an unknown character shortly after returning to her hotel room late one night. She crosses over a shadowy area to enter the hotel but once inside the space and upstairs in her room all is open and brightly lit. The scene in her room is remarkable for the deep space and extreme depth of field so that we, like the Princess, have a sense of security in the place. As Danidoff goes off screen briefly, suddenly from behind a side curtain Fantômas emerges and then just as quickly hides again as she re-enters. Fantômas swiftly returns and robs the Princess of her money and jewels, a seeming polite gentleman thief who gives her a calling card when she inquires who he is. The card, shown through a close-up via a cut-in from a medium long shot, is blank (his criminal name will magically appear on the card later). As Fantômas exits, more false or conflicting information emerges on his identity. The now unreliable gentleman at first bows, then relays a menacing gesture of violence, walking her to the back of the deep frame where he kisses her farewell on her hand before viciously pushing her away. As the police inspector Juve enters Danidoff's room to investigate the crime, he retraces the criminal path through the deep space, giving us detail via a shot of extreme depth of field and in a long take such that the hazardous space now appears safe and clear. Of course the irony is that the room appeared this way right before the robbery.

Juve confronts a similar visual field as he goes to investigate the next mystery, the disappearance of Lord Beltham. The Beltham home is presented in deep space with extreme depth of field, and nothing seems obscured. Juve quickly sees another man's hat in the room and through another cut-in from medium long shot to extreme close-up, we have the information that another man (with the initial G) is visiting Lady Beltham. The hat belongs to a character named Gurn (really Fantômas, just offscreen) who is responsible for the murder of Lady Beltham's husband. In both cases, Danidoff and Beltham, Juve gains what he thinks is valuable information from his search of the open and clear space, filled with detail. But what has he learned precisely? In each case,

these are phantom identities as the first identity card has so aptly relayed and there is nothing in one instance to link one crime to the other. Juve does indeed capture the criminal but that only occurs accidentally, as in tracking Gurn he finds Lord Beltham's body and also discovers, unexpectedly while at the murder site, Fantômas's card; there is no direct and rational line that connects these two events, rather a card with magical ink. Moreover, the larger message of the film is brought home to us as the capture and punishment of Fantômas is short-lived when the criminal exchanges his place in prison with an actor, who is almost executed through a misrecognition; thus the identity of Fantômas is perpetually unstable and unrecognisable throughout the series.

David Bordwell has a detailed analysis of how Feuillade's careful staging and choreography manipulate the relay of information, providing an elaborate hide and seek for the viewer.⁸ This is undoubtedly true, but what I want to underline with Feuillade's aesthetic, and by extension noir's, is that we know disproportionately little given how much visual 'clarity' we seem to have, especially with regard to matters of identity, an element that carries over into noir. By comparison to Feuillade, consider Kathie in *Out of the Past* (1947), who appears to be a tragic victim of domestic violence as the evidence piles up that her boyfriend, Whit, is a thug who has caused her flight. Jeff, a detective sent to retrieve Kathie, promptly falls for her and they both run away from Whit and his henchman. Jeff and Kathie are in blissful co-habitation when suddenly Jeff's former partner, Fisher, turns up to blackmail them, threatening to reveal their location to Whit. A brawl between Jeff and Fisher ensues, when suddenly, unnecessarily and quite shockingly, Kathie shoots the partner. Nothing we know of Kathie up to that moment prepares us for the shooting (or even for a gun in her hand), but from this point the story relays a series of duplicitous acts from the heretofore innocent victim and romantic lead.

Or similarly, Brigid O'Shaughnessy, in *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), tells a series of conflicting stories until finally in a shocking ending we finally hear her confess – a surprise that is further magnified by the revelation that the detective, Sam Spade, has been equally duplicitous throughout the film. In both of these films, there is a gap between what we know and expect from the chain of narrative events and then what suddenly transpires, and with this opening or breach in the story, a shock, or disruption of order occurs. In addition, the visual style in both these films is realistic with mostly high key lighting and few shadows to obscure our view of events – nothing seems to be hidden from us, and yet...⁹

The setting of criminal activity in Feuillade's crime films, and that of film noir, provides further clues as to what may be at stake. In both cases, we imagine the urban zone as the centre from which all trouble collects and emanates, a product of the rise of the metropolis and the technological and cultural upheavals of late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century modernity. Ed

Dimendberg's fine examination of noir and the city space reminds us of the complex and ambivalent responses to the evolving urban space we see in these films, from a cohesive but alienating core to a dispersive and sprawling wasteland.¹⁰ Moreover, Dimendberg's study points out the diversity of the noir landscape beyond the urban core that we often associate with the genre. As James Naremore notes, perhaps most overlooked in this discussion is the abstract relation between the city and border or 'marginal' spaces, a setting for exploring liminal zones across an array of social and cultural categories: race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class.¹¹

It is precisely these troubled zones at the margins of our experience of daily life that Feuillade – and noir – attempt to map out for us, physically charting this for us as a geographical problem. In short order, these 'zones of anxiety' morph from an external to an internal dilemma, initiated from a crisis of vision, but landing at a crisis of self. In *Juve contre Fantômas* (1913), Juve has tracked the criminal to the wine warehouses of Bercy. As he sees a figure in the distance, Juve begins shooting and the person he has spotted returns fire. Both individuals keep firing and pursuing the other until they are face to face and are at the precipice of shooting in close quarters, when they suddenly recognise each other. Juve and his friend and fellow crime fighter, the journalist Fandor, have almost shot each other before they each exclaim: 'Juve, I thought you were Fantômas!' 'Me too, Fandor, I thought you were Fantômas!' They have little time to celebrate before Fantômas and his gang pop up from behind the wine barrels with guns blazing before setting the area on fire. Juve and Fandor escape but only to be trapped in a fiery explosion triggered by Fantômas with their fate unknown at the conclusion of the episode. The next episode, *Le Mort qui tue* (1913), picks up this problem of vision and recognition, as I will explain shortly.

THE OPACITY OF INFORMATION – CHARACTER

One area of uncertainty recurrent from Feuillade serials to Hollywood noir resides within the motivation and identity of characters. While there is some critical back and forth over whether noir is better understood through the male lead (for example, the doomed romantic sap, the hard-boiled detective, the underachieving drifter) or the 'femme fatale', what is more useful is to explore the clarity of the lens through which we see the key characters. In noir, as in Feuillade's crime films, our understanding of what drives the characters and the boundaries of their moral universe is often obscure, and even more frequently deceptive. Neither *amour fou*, sheer greed, nor bloodthirsty homicidal tendencies quite serve as adequate explanations for the crimes that play out on screen; rather we are faced with deciphering if random events, inexplicable stupidity or hidden motivations are in play given what we see transpire does not fit into rational behaviour or indeed logical consequences of actions.

Perhaps the most classic example from noir we might refer to here is Walter Neff in *Double Indemnity* (1944). As Neff notes in his well-known over-narration detailing his crime spree in the opening of the film: 'Yes, I killed him. I killed him for money and for a woman. I didn't get the money, and I didn't get the woman'. At first glance, this does seem to counter directly my dismissal of the love and financial angles as primary character motivations. However, a closer look at Neff's likely romantic and financial gain, and his knowledge of this as a probability, are almost from the beginning of the film fairly remote. As soon as Neff realises that Phyllis Dietrichson's flirtation is motivated more by a desire to find a co-conspirator for her murder insurance plot against her husband, he recoils and points out the certain futility of the crime. In short order, he changes his mind, starts an adulterous affair with the obviously deceitful Phyllis, comes up with the hare-brained death-by-train 'accident' for Mr Dietrichson and then immediately declares a moratorium on any meetings for the couple outside of the grocery store. The surface motivations for Neff's actions of sex and money are undermined by the absolute unlikelihood that these goals can be achieved – as Neff himself predicted from the beginning.¹²

A similar phenomenon appears to be at play in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946), whereby Frank Chambers repeatedly sets himself up for disaster with little to no payoff. Whether taking the grill cook/handyman job at the opening of the film even after finding out his lust is inconveniently directed at the boss's wife or returning to the diner after the trial with little hope of financial gain or romantic interest from Cora, Frank seems only to be courting failure. Or, let us consider Al Roberts in *Detour* (1945), where a litany of obviously bad choices are on display from the time of Haskell's death to Vera's demise. Even the hard-boiled detective Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon* seems to team up with Brigid O'Shaughnessy, romantically and in pursuit of the elusive bird, despite Brigid's recurrent and obvious lies, which Spade himself mocks along with the phantom nature of the object and its reward. In each of these instances, and in many other noir scenarios, the lead characters seem to defy logic with their choices – these are not just ill-fated and poor, but are also strikingly irrational decisions.

Contrast this with Jean Gabin's characters in poetic realist films such as Jacques Lantier in *La Bête humaine* (1938) or François from *Le Jour se lève* (1939), which are often seen as cinematic antecedents to noir. In both cases, Jacques' and François's motivations are very clear, their dire circumstances have been shaped by a romantic if at times misguided vision. These characters are in love, and we understand the intensity of their feelings through the context and depth of their stories, and while fate might not have been kind to either, these characters arrived at their choices with a consistency and logic missing from their noir male counterparts.

Le Jour se lève is a useful counterpoint since it appears to have many of the harbingers of noir, the use of dramatic shadows, a non-linear, flashback structure and, of course, the doomed lead character. But we listen in as François carries out his internal monologue throughout the film; the story is organised as his mournful memories during an extended stand-off with police. François's voice and memory are pathways into his subjectivity and quite distinct from the often heard external voiceover of noir that conveys objective information (*The Naked City*, 1948) or recounts a story or series of events to another person (as in the case of Neff to Keyes in *Double Indemnity* or in other noir voiceovers such as *Murder, My Sweet* (1944) and *The Lady from Shanghai*). The audio situates François's subjectivity in the foreground, which is repeatedly visualised with dramatic shadows that highlight the character's eyes and underline his emotions and humanity. François is not an abstraction but an individual and as his on-off lover, Clara, notes: 'He's not a criminal, he's an ordinary man'. The specificity of the man and his circumstances conveyed through the detail of his story and through the visualisation of him and his surroundings turn this into an existential crisis. It is no accident that François repeatedly returns to the room's mirror to study himself and finally concludes: 'François, he does not exist any more'. But this commentary is pointing to a loss and change in status, brought on by the impossible continuation of his love affair with Françoise. Unlike noir, the moral centre holds in *Le Jour se lève* and in many other poetic realist films. It is a clarity regarding values that is repeated in terms of information and knowledge. Unlike noir, with poetic realism we are not confused where we stand or in what we know.

Such character depth is not unusual for narrative filmmaking and has been key to the Hollywood classical tradition from the time of D. W. Griffith. Indeed, Dudley Andrew has noted the crucial impact of Griffith's *Broken Blossoms* (1919) on French film more generally and on poetic realism specifically.¹³ Like the Griffith film, objects, settings, lighting and gesture all take on heightened significance toward an understanding of a character's subjective state, a sensibility that poetic realist filmmaker Jean Grémillon singled out as enabling the audience to 'feel intensely the presence of a living thought, of a human heart'.¹⁴ For noir and for Feuillade, we could not be further from this 'presence' and uniquely disconnected from the human heart and mind.

The operative term that one might use to describe the void of motivation in the noir characters might well be 'loser' – a particularly apt piece of slang once we look more closely at the opacity and irrationality of their actions. If we look at the occupations of some of the key characters from noir, we notice an important continuity of 'failure'. Neff in *Double Indemnity* turns down the 'desk job' that promises less but surely assures a more steady income than his sales gig, not to mention the opportunity to work his way up the managerial class. Frank Chambers has likely hit a career peak with his grill cook/handy-

man employment. Sam Spade, while self-employed, makes it clear he cannot be bought and income beyond that required for his office's maintenance and spartan lifestyle does not seem a priority. Michael in *The Lady from Shanghai* and Al Roberts in *Detour* both have skills but, like Frank Chambers, are underemployed and essentially 'drifters' during the stories we follow. Even Jeff in *Out of the Past* is a former gumshoe, now small business owner, but never seems to work or even manage the books of his gas station located in the back of beyond.

Here again, the useful point of contrast is Gabin's poetic realist characters, who are specifically defined as working class in terms not just of atmosphere, the simple unglamorous settings of daily life, but of the detail of their work. We see Gabin/François at work in the dusty spaces of the factory where the sand destroys his lungs in *Le Jour se lève*. Or we see Jacques' face and clothes covered in grime from the coal that fuels the train he drives in *La Bête humaine*, and he breaks to eat a spare dinner from canned goods with his fellow railroad workers. Gabin's characters are not only clearly working class, they are defiantly so, taking an often explicit tack against the ruling sector.

The noir characters are markedly different from their poetic realist counterparts, and in case after case we see examples of figures who are outside the economic and political system or not aligned on either side of the vested interests. Neither workers nor managers nor owners, the men of noir are at best entrepreneurs, at worst apathetic and lazy, but in the main they stand outside the capitalist system as neither wilful participants nor ideological critics of the hegemonic system of exchange. Walter Neff's resistance to the office job offer by Keyes as well as his plot with Phyllis to defraud his employer speaks to this outsider status. Moreover, his vociferous insistence against the 'promotion' locates Neff as someone completely uninterested in 'moving up' in respectability, stability or career possibilities within the firm. Indeed, the very murder/fraud plot itself as noted above seems less inclined for romance and fortune than for an opportunity to see if he can defeat Keyes's rigorous logical analysis of insurance claims and thereby con the system.

The opacity of the noir male lead characters follows closely along the path set out for them by an equally opaque figure, visually and subjectively, Feuillade's paramount crime villain, Fantômas. A master of disguise, Fantômas is most recognisable by his black bodysuit and mask, which cast a shadowy presence across the five films that detail his exploits. But nothing is stable in Fantômas from his appearance, aliases or occupations, and even his calling cards of 'identity' begin as blanks that then fade in with his name (*Fantômas à l'ombre de la guillotine*). Prosthetic arms and trap doors repeatedly prevent the master criminal's certain police capture, and misrecognition enables his escape from the guillotine and almost generates an innocent man's state execution. But for Fantômas even the supposedly telltale costume of

the bodysuit is a false sign, and *Fantômas contre Fantômas* features not one but three black-clad figures in an undecipherable chase sequence. Fantômas is everywhere and nowhere so that at one point, the police inspector Juve is reduced to grasping at his imagined phantom of the criminal, whose ghostly presence appears in his office and mocks the detective's failed efforts to capture him (*Fantômas à l'ombre de la guillotine*). A later episode, *Fantômas contre Fantômas*, finds Fantômas's identity so murky that any sign is latched upon as authentic which, unfortunately for a time, 'unmasks' Juve as the real criminal through a telltale scar on his arm (a scar that was in effect impossible to attain since he was locked in a cell away from a party where the injury occurred).

Any occupation taken up by the mastermind is simply a passing pretence for another criminal act, with the cover persona usually being one of bourgeois respectability and order; he poses at different points in the series as a doctor, judge, banker and even as an American private detective (Tom Bob). At first glance, his motivations seem in the main financially driven, but the ruthless calculation, bloodthirsty elements and intricate plotting against a consistent segment of society – the well-to-do and titled – place his acts as spectacular rejections of the ruling financial, legal and social order. Moreover, like Walter Neff, his noir successor, the driving mechanism for his actions appears to be less about the money than about the pleasure of the crime and the con itself. At one point in *Le Mort qui tue*, Fantômas, in disguise as a banker for a high-society engagement party, stops to smirk over the body of a woman he has just drugged and robbed in her boudoir. Given the crowd downstairs anticipating the quick return of one of the betrothed to the celebration, Fantômas's lingering pleasure over his accomplishment is particularly bold and speaks to the disdain he holds both for the law and for the social order.

Like the men of noir that he precedes, Fantômas is an outsider and essentially a loner. Unlike in the novel, in the film series he has no family or friends, and all relationships seem to be fleeting and instrumental. Joséphine, his criminal cohort and likely paramour in *Juve contre Fantômas*, turns over information on his whereabouts to the police inspector at the first sign of pressure (and Fantômas, in turn, quickly escapes). Even Lady Beltham, who does seem under the spell of Gurn/Fantômas, given her role in hiding him and in facilitating his exploits (including possibly murdering her husband), is hardly a soulmate. When she balks at participating in an extortion set-up (and likely murder), Fantômas reminds her he can kill her any time he wants (*Le Mort qui tue*). But all have only a utilitarian relationship to the criminal; his 'moral universe' is obscure at best and lacking even the minimal 'honour among thieves' code. In *Fantômas contre Fantômas*, posing as the detective Tom Bob he leads the police to his own gang so that he can keep all the stolen loot for himself. He has stalled the gang's payoff while disguised yet again as Fantômas's middle

man, Père Moche, who explains to the criminal's cohorts that the mastermind will arrive soon with their cut of the goods.

Fantômas's shifting physical presence, ongoing exchange of identities and obscure motivation renders him an ambiguous character, but it is the series' larger assault on visual evidence which leaves the character unknowable and, more troublingly, leaves our ground for certainty destabilised. *Le Mort qui tue* offers an exemplary instance of this process. In at times painstaking documentary detail, the film shows the failures of a scientific method predicated on the reliability of visible and physical evidence, particularly as it is relayed, archived and measured through the photographic image. The irony, or perhaps the larger philosophical point, is made through an aesthetic that on the surface might be characterised as realistic: deep space, extreme depth of field, even lighting (with dramatic exceptions) and brightly lit outdoor location shooting. Yet despite such ostensive visual clarity, nothing is recognisable, nothing is foreseeable and nothing is as it appears; it is a contradiction that allows Fantômas to hide in plain sight throughout the five films in the series.

In *Le Mort qui tue* the problem of recognition is compounded by our faith in the visible. Jacques Dollon is an artist who is framed for a murder solely through appearance. He is chloroformed by Fantômas and while he is unconscious a young woman who has been murdered is left in the room with him. A note of invitation from the artist to the woman to visit him, and her placement in the room are all that is required for the police to lead to Dollon's arrest and most significantly his entry into the police scientific archive. For almost two minutes of screen time we watch the measurements and imprints of Dollon being taken in the Police Scientifique area, with the fingerprinting segment taking up a full minute of time, mostly in close-up. The data collection from Dollon quickly appears inconsequential when Dollon turns up murdered in his cell. But in short order another crime is committed, this time a robbery of Princess Danidoff at her engagement party featuring *le tout Paris*. The Princess is chloroformed and an expensive necklace stolen, with the robber leaving one large and clearly visible fingerprint on her neck. We are led through another meticulous onscreen session of criminal documentation, this time directed to the photography of the human trace left on the victim's neck. When the investigation returns to the police lab the verdict is clear – this is without a doubt the dead man's imprint found in the photograph taken from the crime scene, a scenario made even more troubling by the earlier information that Dollon's body had vanished. The ghostly criminal appears to strike again as Danidoff's fiancé, Thomery, is strangled (with the police chief's scarf no less) and again Dollon's impossible fingerprints are found at the scene. Ultimately, the resale of Thomery's stolen stock shares by Fantômas, now posing as the banker Nanteuil, leads Juve to the criminal and a brutal revelation. Fantômas had skinned Dollon's hands and wears the skin as gloves over his own hands

– hence the ‘deceptive’ fingerprints at the crime scenes. If this seems an unlikely possibility, the sequence presents us with a close-up of Dollon’s skin peeled back from Nanteuil’s hand by Juve – a gruesome ‘unmasking’ of the deception. Juve proclaims the re-establishment of the legal and rational order of things by noting to Nanteuil that his disguise is now exposed and states: ‘*C’en est fini Fantômas*’. No sooner does Juve make his pronouncement than two hidden doors behind the criminal open and Fantômas slips through before they quickly close, leaving Juve and Fandor to curse ‘*L’Insaisissable*’.

Fantômas is never successfully punished in the five films in the series, although he is frequently trapped, arrested and even imprisoned on multiple occasions. In the last film, *Le Faux magistrat*, Fantômas is released not once but twice. In the first instance, Juve – in disguise – aids his escape from a Belgian prison in order to bring the criminal to justice in France. Fantômas does return to France, this time taking on the identity of a judge he has murdered, and as the police and Juve close in once more for an arrest, he signs his own warrant of release from prison (his last act as the *faux* judge).

In none of these films do we see any emotion from Fantômas, with the exception perhaps of a sneer – he does genuinely seem to enjoy his work. However, the deception of the criminal is mainly one of physical disguise and identity theft, and there is almost no need for Fantômas to sell his multiple characters through lengthy discussions or theatrical tactics. His absence of any recognisable personality aids in his transformation solely through visual details.

As the series ends, his one recurrent visual marker, the black bodysuit, is transferred to a new series and now a different set of villains, the criminal gang, *Les Vampires* (1915–16). Interestingly, while multiple members of the gang take on this costume, the attire becomes affixed in cinema history with a female character, Irma Vep, and the silent-era star, Musidora, although the actress only wore the outfit in this one film series and indeed only for about fifteen minutes of screen time. As Monica Dall’Asta points out, Musidora’s bodysuit was quite distinct from that of her male predecessor, being made of silk, thus revealing more of the body, highlighting the transgressive modern woman and marking the criminal body distinctly as difference.¹⁵ The oblique transfer of the bodysuit to its iconic new site takes place at a prescient locale, the theatre. Here, the intrepid crime journalist Philippe Guérande is watching his fiancée, Marfa, clothed in the *maillot de soie*, perform in a ballet ripped from the lurid headlines entitled *Les Vampires*. The sensational topic for the ballet is overlaid with an equally scandalous dance as Marfa suggestively and in a threatening manner circles the body of a sleeping woman. As Marfa closes in on her victim, she suddenly collapses and dies on stage (due to her poisoning by a Dr Nox, the leader of the Vampire gang). With that, Marfa’s presence is effectively wiped from the narrative, but the indelible image of the black bodysuit is now marked and aligned with the female body and with performance.

Tellingly, our only return to Marfa's character occurs in a later episode as Irma sees a photograph of Philippe's fiancée and her response suggests a moment of shocked (self-)recognition; at that moment the transfer of the bodysuit as Irma's visual motif is solidified.

When we are formally introduced to Irma Vep, our lead female villain, in the third episode of the series, *Le Cryptogramme rouge*, she is, like Marfa, performing onstage, but in this case at a working-class cabaret. Irma Vep (her name an anagram for 'vampire') is a crucial component of the series, not simply due to her alluring attire but also as she becomes the most consistent face – and body – of the Vampire gang as the designated (male) leaders come and go repeatedly throughout the ten films. She has a succession of boyfriends, mostly the gang's leaders, and no real or discernible attachment to any of them. In the one case where there does seem to be passion, Irma's romantic relationship with the gang's rival, Juan-José Moréno, is explained by his talent for hypnotism, but even here Moréno quite quickly comes under *Irma's* spell.

If Irma has picked up the visual mantle of criminality from Fantômas, she alters the profile somewhat and not only on the basis of gender. Like Fantômas, Irma Vep takes on a number of identities, but here, unlike with her predecessor, disguise is not crucial to her persona. Even when Irma cross-dresses, the salient point is that she is almost always easily recognisable by those in pursuit. Most of her 'disguises' are more appropriately labelled as 'costume changes' for a variety of roles, and unlike Fantômas's detachment, we often get to see an array of clearly performed emotions in the series. Frequently, Vep's duplicitous roles are portrayed as the deferent household servant or servile clerical worker (such as Philippe's maid in *Le Cryptogramme rouge*, the bank secretary in *Le Spectre*, the switchboard operator in *Satanas*), which serve as a front and counterpoint to her ruthless crimes (from robbery to murder). Her actions are quite brutal, as evidenced in *Le Spectre*, where she demonstrates 'the proper use of a hatpin' by killing the bank courier, M. Metadier. None of her responses match Fantômas's occasional glee, but her only emotions come through her performed roles with little to no insight into the character's inner thoughts, and general workmanlike detachment accompanies her activities.

By the end of the series, it is clear that Irma Vep is more than our visual cue for criminality; she is the ethical focal point of the series. While Philippe is the male lead in pursuit of the gang and the putative hero, alongside his comic sidekick Mazamette, he, like Juve, repeatedly fails in his effort to corral the gang and as a journalist is only tangentially related to the law through his parallel investigations and periodic alliances. His representation of the social order fares no better with regard to his representation of heterosexual bourgeois order. His romances are bland and mainly off screen, moving quickly into boring domestic life with his marriage to Jane. Jane appears with no narrative set-up or backstory in the next to last film in the series, *L'Homme des*

poisons. We have no sense of Jane and Philippe's life together, and her nondescript character seems only to serve one truly useful function, which is to kill Irma at the end of the series; this act was more of a reaction to opportunity than down to any particular skill or strength of her character. Jane's shooting of Irma serves as an alert that the true force of evil has been eliminated from the film and the moral order restored, signified not just by her return to her home with Philippe, but by Mazamette's whirlwind romance and marriage of Jane's maid, Augustine. Thus not only has Irma Vep been killed, but her unorthodox and serial romances in the series have been replaced by the closing shot of not one but two couples embracing (the Guérandes and the Mazamettes).

As Maggie Cheung, in character as herself, comments in *Irma Vep*, Olivier Assayas's 1996 homage to the icon and poetic cinema: 'She has no morals ... is that a problem?' Cheung's dialogue points to the centrality of Irma Vep to Feuillade's representation of evil in his series, and also the marginal, outsider or disruptive status of Vep with regard to the ruling order. Cheung has been tapped in the film as the logical successor to Musidora and the best performer to incarnate Irma Vep since she is a non-Western star from a Hong Kong cinema driven more by action and aesthetics than linear, rational order as designed and relayed in Hollywood cinema.

Irma Vep and Musidora – the two are inseparable – evoke strikingly the ethos of Feuillade's films and in his next serial, *Judex* (1917), the filmmaker converts Irma into the character Diana Monti, an explicit central figure of illegal and immoral behaviour and driving force in the narrative. While *Judex*, the lead male character of vigilante justice, is also a key factor, after his opening gambit of 'poisoning' and then kidnapping the disreputable banker Favraux (the concoction he drinks simulates death), his actions are mainly reactive to Diana's ongoing crime wave.

Diana as a character at times seems more attuned to Fantômas's persona, not with regard to disguise and identity, but rather in terms of her cold-blooded and calculated approach to mayhem and romantic alliances. Unlike Irma she does not drift from one sexual intrigue to another, but rather she carefully selects as lovers men who might be valuable to her objectives. Heterosexual desire seems far removed from her calculus, and her flirtations from Favraux to Cocantin (the comical private detective) and the hapless Moralés are all instrumental considerations. Like Fantômas, money is an ostensive motivation, but the schemes she organises around financial gain are noteworthy for the relentless cruelty that exceeds necessity. A case in point is the repeated kidnappings and attempted murder of Favraux's daughter, Jacqueline, with whom *Judex* is in love. As Jacqueline has given away her fortune upon learning of her father's transgressions with his poisoning 'death', it is not completely clear what Diana gains from these acts, beyond her excessive revenge for Favraux's death (whom she was planning to marry, again solely for financial reward).

Similarly to Fantômas, Diana has no love for the ruling classes and her targeting of Favraux and Jacqueline at times suggests class warfare, given she was the household nanny to *le petit Jean*. However, her role as nanny was simply an assumed identity or performance to gain access to the banker; we have no sense of Diana as we did with Irma Vep of a consistent alignment of roles that are working class.

Due to a similar blankness of character history, motivation, identity or emotion, Diana follows closely in the opaque shadows of Fantômas, Vep and the men of noir. The character of Diana refines Vep from the silent-era 'vamp' aligned almost exclusively with sexual disorder to a more profoundly disturbing femme fatale who destabilises all she touches across an array of social, cultural and economic categories, in large measure due to her essential autonomy (unlike Irma who is an active agent, but part of a gang). As the father of the bandit Moralés notes: 'Here's my son that a wicked woman [Diana Monti] has pushed to the abyss'. The narrative engine is primarily Diana in *Judex* and the trio of Irma/Diana/Musidora seems to circulate endlessly in Feuillade's films and then in noir through the femme fatale. Feuillade himself points to the significance of Diana in an extra-textual reference in the scenario for *La Nouvelle mission de Judex* when he claims that his new villain in the series, the Baronne d'Arpémont, is a worthy successor of Monti.¹⁶

Daughters of Diana Monti – Noir's Femme Fatale

In film noir, the femme fatale rarely fits one personality profile, but like her noir male counterparts her motivations are equally obscure and opaque. Barbara Stanwyck seems to have perfected this role especially, and her performances across a variety of films – noir and otherwise – are characterised by a certain ambiguity of intent with an emphasis on the performative component of her character. That is to say, her character is not performing an act in some theatrical sense, but rather any given character 'identity' and 'behaviour' are appropriated specifically for the circumstance, as ultimately there is no 'true' essence or person behind this 'performance'. In *Baby Face* (1933), *Double Indemnity* (1944) and *The Strange Loves of Martha Ivers* (1946), Stanwyck portrays a succession of such characters, whose primary motivation seems financial, but the sheer repetition of ruthless actions outdistance monetary reward or social success. To put this another way, money is simply an excuse or justification for her crimes, with the true driving mechanism of the crime, like her male counterpart in the genre, being the disengagement or alienation from a system of bourgeois heterosexuality.

Stanwyck's Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity* is perhaps the quintessential exemplar here and a direct descendant of Diana Monti. Dietrichson takes on and casts off men casually and quickly as needed for the circumstances; from



Figure 1.1 Diana Monti and Moralés arrange their kidnapping, *Judex*.

her husband to Neff to Nino Zachetti, she is as ruthlessly instrumentalist as Monti and Fantômas in her relationships. In her final showdown with Neff she admits it was all a ruse, and that there was absolutely nothing to their romance or her own core being 'No, I never loved you, Walter, not you or anybody else. I am rotten to the heart. I used you just as you said'.

If Phyllis represents the femme fatale as cold calculation and instrumentalism, then Vera in *Detour* spectacularly inhabits a similar terrain. Unlike Phyllis's detachment and performative qualities, Vera's utilitarian ethos is vocalised in increasingly strident registers. However, like Phyllis – and her Feuillade predecessors – there is no achievable financial goal but simply an ongoing loop of accumulation and consumption as her plans for Al and the Haskell payout quickly expand from selling the dead man's car to taking over his identity and inheritance. But Vera is the antithesis of the rapacious capitalist as her objective is not an ever-expanding empire, but rather an unlimited ability to spend. The excessive and catastrophic nature of her desire is signalled for us not only by her vocalisation but also by the tubercular cough that periodically intercedes into her relentless commentary to Al.

Vera may well be transparent in her immediate desires and goals, but her character is no less opaque. We know little to nothing about her past, besides her fight with Haskell, and her objectives, hopes, future plans or intended destination are completely unknown. She is attached to Al's trajectory from the moment she enters the car as a hitchhiker. In addition, for all the intensity of her vocal register, the emotional depth of her character is almost non-existent, especially since we get no insight or backstory to explain her manner.

Less high-pitched but equally ruthless is Elsa Bannister (Rita Hayworth) in *The Lady from Shanghai*. Elsa represents a different variant of the femme



Figure 1.2 Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck) as Diana Monti's direct descendant, *Double Indemnity*.

fatale, whereby now the 'opaque' quality is rather one consistent disguise that masks her true intent with romantic possibility. In this case, we are unable to see through her lie or 'true identity' until the last funhouse sequence. We believe she cares for Michael as she expresses repeated concern for his well-being and looks out for the trick or frame-up from her jealous husband. The scene at the aquarium visualises the density of the disguise for us; when she and Michael meet, they both drift in and out of darkness and half light, but tellingly, as she says, 'yes, my beloved, my beloved fool' and seals Michael's fate with a kiss, the camera keeps her solidly in the frame. Her duplicitous nature is revealed in the funhouse sequence in a dramatic expressionist visualisation of Elsa as a character located in multiple places; there is not 'one' person before us but many, cast in shadows and layered on the screen. Her personality has now dramatically changed and the romantic tone has been exchanged for a voice worthy of Phyllis Dietrichson, but even here she manages an affectless and unconvincing 'I love you' to Michael as he recounts her criminal acts.

Kathie (Jane Greer) in *Out of the Past* may well be Elsa's double, for duplicity disguised through romance. Like Elsa, Kathie moves quickly and astonishingly from a perceived 'victim' of domestic violence to a woman capable of murder with her shooting of Fisher. The shock of that event is equalled in force by a later moment in the film when we see her casually enter into a domestic breakfast scene, where the thuggish Whit has summoned Jeff for some unfinished business. Throughout the film, Kathie shifts from the role of victim to that of culprit with little hesitation, remorse or explanation. Like almost all of our noir leads, Kathie provides little insight into her 'true' motivations, beyond self-interest.

While most of the femme fatale characters are emotionally detached or place an ambiguous layer of romance over what ultimately turns out to be a cold, calculating personality, Brigid O'Shaughnessy's representation of the character in *The Maltese Falcon* perfects Phyllis Dietrichson's performative strategies. What is unusual about Brigid's actions, or more clearly, 'acts', is that they are repeatedly called out as a performance by the detective Sam Spade: 'Oh that, we didn't exactly believe your story, Miss umm, what is your name? Wonderly or LeBlanc?'; 'You won't need much of anybody's help, you're good. It's chiefly your eyes, I think, and that throb you get in your voice when you say things like, be generous Mr. Spade'. Brigid's convoluted and far-fetched stories (of her sister or relationship with the film's trio of thugs), alongside her physical mannerisms of nervous laughter and shifting eyes, transmit a message that is highly unreliable, and Astor's performance presents a highly nuanced display of these physical tics. Brigid, like other femmes fatales, but also her Feuillade forerunners, seems to take on and dispense with alliances with remarkable speed, the falcon itself being her only 'stable' relationship, which of course we learn is a false one. Moreover, O'Shaughnessy's facility with performance is contagious. Spade himself takes on a number of explicit performances throughout the film, including the angry negotiator (with Gutman) and the 'lover' willing to wait out Brigid's return from Tehachapi.

CHASING THE PHANTOM: THE RECURSIVE STORY STRUCTURE

The opacity of character and the lack of clear motivation and connection to internal states, emotions or subjectivity facilitate the repetition of the noir elements of uncertainty across diverse story lines and styles, hence the wide-ranging nature of the 'genre' and in part why we see noir as such disputed terrain, both in terms of what appropriately fits into the category or indeed whether or not the genre in fact exists. Our ability to 'recognise' the genre is actually a troubling of our facility for recognition, a disorientation that occurs outside of a dream state and often within a clearly defined and unencumbered visual field. The shadows of noir are the least of our problems with regard to knowledge, rather we are thrown into a world without a logic or a point of access (or point of view) to an alternative logic.

For Thomas Schatz, the disorientation in noir is linked to a non-linear story structure, often utilising a flashback or dual-time structure, whereby the fatality of events can be emphasised and an enigma explored.¹⁷ While flashbacks are a typical device employed in noir, non-linearity is perhaps most intriguingly played out in noir through the repetition of unlikely events that often move tangentially from the originally stated story line. In *Detour*, Al Roberts starts off on a cross-country hitchhiking trip to LA to reunite with his girlfriend, Sue, but is sidetracked by the accidental death of the car's driver,

Charles Haskell. Roberts gets closer and closer to LA (and does finally arrive) but further and further from connecting with Sue as he picks up a hitchhiker, Vera, who had earlier ridden with Haskell. It is Vera's 'accidental' death that doubles Al's fear and guilt (believing he will be labelled the murderer in both cases), and restarts his hitchhiking, this time to points unknown. *The Postman Always Rings Twice* has a similar structure; an adulterous couple, Cora and Frank, decide to murder the woman's aging and miserly husband and, having failed once, manage to kill him in a staged car accident. The couple defeat the murder rap and a fractious post-trial period, but at the moment of their romantic reconciliation, Cora and Frank are in another car accident, this time unintended, whereby Cora is killed and Frank given a death sentence for her murder.

In *The Maltese Falcon* the repetition takes the form of a series of hostile and at times violent encounters between Sam Spade, Brigid O'Shaughnessy, Joel Cairo, Wilmer Cook and Caspar Gutman as the group in various and shifting alliances pursue the treasured black bird. Complicating their chase of the bird is the police and Sam's pursuit of those responsible for the murders of Miles Archer (Sam's detective agency partner) and Brigid's unseen accomplice, Floyd Thursby. Further entangling the story is the relationship between Spade and O'Shaughnessy that begins with a series of lies by Brigid, which are dutifully noted by Spade before he agrees to help her. Their 'romance' is a series of lies and performances from both sides, until the climactic finish when Spade forces her confession, or rather narrative clarification, before 'sending her over'.

These repetitive forms, multilevel chases and shifting alliances are all standard fare in the Feuillade crime films. In *Fantômas contre Fantômas*, a high-society masquerade ball features not one but three black-clad phantoms on site, Fandor (Juve's journalistic ally), a policeman and the criminal, Fantômas. Comically, two of the trio bump into each other while dancing and take off in pursuit with the third following close behind, with the audience having no clue as to who is who in the chase. Finally, one of the men is killed and another wounded, leaving a severe mark on his arm. We learn with the unmasking of the other two, Fandor and the policeman (who was the murder victim), that logically the wounded man must be Fantômas. The police, whose suspicions of Juve as the real Fantômas have led to his incarceration, decide to visit the inspector in his prison cell, where they discover a scar identical to the wounded man's injury. Juve is ultimately freed but the duplicity and false identities continue, with Fantômas amusingly taking on the role of a detective, Tom Bob, and Juve taking on the role of the criminal mastermind as he tries to entrap the villain's gang, at one point declaring to them: '*Je suis Fantômas*'. Fantômas, for his part, has no real alliances and, as noted earlier, feels no qualms about double-crossing his fellow gang members.

A similar structure is found in *Les Vampires*, where rival gangs stealing and chasing each other mirror Philippe and the police's pursuit of the gang. The vampire gang uses their real estate agency to set up a robbery of an 'innocent' client, but their initial break-in to his rented space reveals he is a fellow thief, Moréno. Moréno returns the favour by robbing the gang twice as well as kidnapping Irma Vep, with whom he then falls in love; they start a new alliance, which is ultimately folded back into the vampire gang.

Kidnappings and attendant rescues are crucial repetitive structures in the later Feuillade crime serials, *Judex*, *La Nouvelle mission de Judex* and *Tih Minh* (1919), and these often take place with little or obscure narrative motivation in place. With a few exceptions, notably when Judex abducts the banker Favraux, most of the kidnappings have less to do with direct financial gain than a disruption of heterosexual romance with the rescue of the female beloved – sometimes unconscious, sometimes amnesiac – played over again and again in the serials.

These repetitive patterns in Feuillade and noir are crucial markers of the cinema of uncertainty and serve as a key connection between the French filmmaker's silent-era serials and a block of Hollywood 'crime' films. In both instances, the films begin with a putative classical initiation of events, a crime to solve, a kidnapping, a murder, but unlike most detective stories, there is no necessary unravelling of 'facts' towards a logical resolution. Rather, what we have is a repetitive spiral of often unlikely, irrational events as in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* or *Detour* that ends in death or the unknowable void (such as the ghostly police car that 'somewhere' 'some day' picks up Al). Walter Neff documents this pattern well in his last conversation with Phyllis right before they shoot each other: 'You got me to take care of your husband for you, then you get Zachetti to take care of Lola, maybe take care of me too, then somebody else would come along to take care of Zachetti for you'.

The purpose of this repetition is twofold, which in the first instance and at its most obvious is to propose a random and chaotic rather than a linear, rational and teleological world-view (for example, 'good always triumphs', or even 'crime always pays'). The second purpose is what I have labelled the cinema of uncertainty's 'recursive function', that is, the repetition leads to simpler versions of itself, or rather to an abstraction of a form. In the case of Feuillade, the recurrent kidnappings, rescues and multi-layered pursuits point us towards the chase function in the text. This chase function points to the unreliability and instability of the legal/illegal divide.¹⁸ In noir, the seeming 'death spiral' noted above is not about the inevitable fate for wrongdoing (or the censoring hand of Hollywood's 'Hays Code'), but the literal 'fade to black' of everything we might know – from a lover to a spouse, to the law, or even to a logical event. That is, the rational world that we have been promised from our visual culture to the social and economic order cannot be found; neither capitalism, bour-

geois sentiment, heterosexuality nor monogamy provides any consistency of motivation or logical order. In this way, noir pushes the Feuillade crime films to their logical conclusion, whereby 'the more you see, the less you know'.¹⁹ Hence, our 'recognition' of the dramatic dark shadows across the noir landscape is enabled by the mnemonic trace of the black bodysuit in Feuillade's crime films and the cinema of uncertainty.

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NOTES

1. For more on the 'cinema of uncertainty', see Vicki Callahan, 'The evidence and uncertainty of silent film in *Histoire(s) du cinéma*', in Michael Temple and James S. Williams (eds), *The Cinema Alone: Essays on the Work of Jean-Luc Godard 1985–2000* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2000), pp. 141–57 as well as Vicki Callahan, *Zones of Anxiety: Movement, Musidora, and the Crime Serials of Louis Feuillade* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2005).
2. Allan Sekula, 'The traffic in photographs', *Art Journal* 41(1) (Photography and the Scholar/Critic, spring 1981), 15.
3. For discussion of the German Expressionist influence on noir and 'visual motifs' that closely align with this aesthetic, see Paul Schrader, 'Notes on film noir' and Janey Place and Lowell Peterson, 'Some visual motifs of film noir', in Alain Silver and James Ursini (eds), *The Film Noir Reader* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1996); Vincent Brook, *Driven to Darkness: Jewish Émigré Directors and the Rise of Film Noir* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009). While Brook notes the international and specifically French cinema connection to noir, he traces these back to German directors bringing the Expressionist aesthetic with them to France and then to Hollywood. Also Place and Peterson do not label the style as Expressionist as such but point to visual motifs of low-key lighting and oblique angles that are typically associated with the early German aesthetic.
4. Ginette Vincendeau, 'Noir is also a French word', in Ian Cameron (ed.), *The Book of Film Noir* (New York: Continuum, 1992).
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 49–57.
6. Marc Vernet, 'Film noir on the edge of doom', in Joan Copjec (ed.), *Shades of Noir* (London: Verso, 1993), pp. 8–12.
7. James Naremore, *More than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), pp. 167–8.
8. David Bordwell, *Figures Traced in Light: On Cinematic Staging* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 43–81.
9. For more on the different ways the 'cinema of uncertainty' deploys strategies of 'shock' in Feuillade, see Callahan, *Zones of Anxiety*, pp. 8, 26–7, 77. For more on the topic in more extended context see also Callahan, 'Evidence and uncertainty'.

10. Edward Dimendberg, *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).
11. Naremore, *More than Night*, pp. 220–5.
12. A quite different approach and conclusion, but a related argument concerning Keyes' representation of rationalist logic and the threat that this offers to Neff, can be found in Joan Copjec's excellent essay, 'The phenomenal nonphenomenal: Private space in *film noir*', in Copjec (ed.), *Shades of Noir*, pp. 167–97.
13. Dudley Andrew, *Mists of Regret* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 36.
14. Jean Grémillon, as quoted in *ibid.*, p. 38.
15. Monica Dall'Asta, 'Pearl the swift one', in Marina Dahlquist (ed.), *Exporting Perilous Pauline: Pearl White and the Serial Film Craze* (Urbana, IL: Illinois University Press, 2013), pp. 75–9.
16. Louis Feuillade, see the original scenario for *La Nouvelle mission de Judex* (prologue) at the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal.
17. Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking and the Studio System* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1981), pp. 116–30.
18. Callahan, *Zones of Anxiety*, pp. 10–11.
19. Joel and Ethan Coen's *The Man Who Wasn't There* (2001) serves as the site of this quotation as well as an updating on noir as the 'cinema of uncertainty'. The film features a character, Freddy Riedenschneider, who delivers a mini-lecture on Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle as he plots out a trial defence as illogical as Walter Neff's murder scheme in *Double Indemnity*.