

Shaking Down LA Cool: Hopping Up Neo-Noir

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I don't think this power was entirely a matter of violence ... It certainly was not a matter of fine writing ... Nor was it because of any great originality ... Possibly it was the smell of fear which these stories managed to generate. Their characters lived in a world gone wrong, a world in which, long before the atom bomb, civilization had created the machinery for its own destruction, and was learning to use it with all the moronic delight of a gangster trying out his first machine gun. The law was something to be manipulated for profit and power. The streets were dark with something more than night. The mystery story grew hard and cynical about motive and character, but it was not cynical about the effects it tried to produce. (Raymond Chandler, *The Simple Art of Murder*)

Mass-Market nostalgia gets you hopped up for a past that never existed. Hagiography sanctifies shuck-and-jive politicians and reinvents their expedient gesture as moments of great moral weight. Our continuing narrative *line* is blurred past truth and hindsight. Only a reckless verisimilitude can set that line straight. The real Trinity of Camelot was Look Good, Kick Ass, Get Laid. (James Ellroy, *American Tabloid*)

What is at stake in visions such as Raymond Chandler's and James Ellroy's is the possibility of disfiguring the visible space of domination. This roguish acumen consists of an ability to visualize the cynicism of a world gone wrong, where emotional and social hypocrisies are strictly off the record, on the Q.T. and very hush-hush, where the Law no longer represents a value judgment but a pure will to dominate; and moral gestures — disengaging Good from Evil, Right from Wrong, West from East, or democracy from terrorism — function as political actions whose significance does not emanate from essential moral and ideological categories, but hinge on realignments or shifts in power. In other words, pulp exposes the scandal of power that covers its own tracks in Truth for the masses. The objective of pulp shakedown are not to reinforce mass-media moral imperatives, but to short-circuit massive networks of power and profit that are ensconced in discourses of duplicity — manipulation, outright lying, working an angle, under the guise of Good. Consequently, shakedown artists who finger those individuals or institutions that receive the payoff for cultural investments in moral gestures, expose themselves to political categorization, or rather political co-optation. Traditionally the acts of debunking, demystifying, and disavowing have been attributed to the Left. However, at the same time the pulp genre can be interpreted as a vehicle for



social criticism when used by ‘fellow traveler’ writers like Dashell Hammett and Graham Greene, directors such as Orsen Welles, Abraham Polonsky, and Nicholas Ray, it can also be associated with ‘fanatical right-wingers’ such as Mickey Spillane and Sam Wood, who as David Reid and Janyne Walker point out, ‘invited the House on Un-American Activities Committee to investigate the movies.’¹ Yet not all compartmentalizations of pulp writers and filmmakers are so clear: while Raymond Chandler has often been described as a ‘social realist’ and a drunken debunker, he has also been interpreted as an apolitical, cultural nihilist, who is, as Fredric Jameson writes, ‘the least politically correct of all our modern writers, faithfully giv[ing] vent to every thing racist, sexist, homophobic, and otherwise socially resentful and reactionary in the American collective unconscious.’² Similarly, James Ellroy has been labeled a mad dog right-winger, who, as Mike Davis puts it, ‘risks extinguishing the genre’s [social and political] tensions, and inevitably its [critical] power,’ but at the same time Ellroy still manages to uncover the ‘actual [im]moral texture of the Reagan–Bush era.’³ Such discrepancies in interpretation point to the fact that pulp fiction often avoids easy moralisms of both the Right and the Left, thereby not only resisting facile political classifications — *boostering, debunking, slipping* into the utopia of progressive politics or the dystopia of cultural nihilism — but exposing intellectual and academic modes that are deployed to police pulp culture. That is, many critical, cultural and even artistic interpretations (whether filmic adaptations, critical or literary analysis) of pulp are also ones that attempt to repress its more radical implications. What makes pulp truly roguish is that it draws attention to cultural criticism’s own *war of position/repression*.

The 'effects' of 'politically incorrect' rogue visions such as these, therefore, do not strive toward some transcendent Truth, nor the nostalgic flip-side (mourning lost Truth), but continually take aim at what they see as counterfeit models of morality, history, and political ideology. They target the machinery of cynicism, which promotes cultural blindness towards certain notions and practices that have themselves become nearly ubiquitous — the violence of justice, truth and right that suppresses and represses in the name of containment and deterrence. Second-rate bupkis counter-attractions, spectacular distractions, consumer seductions, patriotic hallucinations work to recreate not just the mask of a moral fabric, but the mythos of universal right (of Manifest Destiny, NATO, NAFTA, MAI, MAD, Marshall Plans and Laws), which inscribe this fictional truth in the seemingly rational and transparent rhetoric of triumphalism, what Roland Barthes calls the 'inescapable triumph of stupidity.' This tyranny of stupidity spills out into to all televisual, filmic, political and intellectual productions designed to, as Marshall McLuhan would say, 'cool' down the 'hot' voodoo or bad juju of pulp paranoia. Yet, I cannot help but question what gets mixed up in messages such as McLuhan's. He tells us that because techno-complex media is too hot (unreadable), it must be cooled down into generalized (readable) cultural reproductions, so as to placate populations that might otherwise question the instrumentality of the media. Thus, the media (moving at warp speed) operates like a conspiracy: it pulls the strings behind all cultural meanings. Yet it extends itself to culture like an invisible prosthetic limb, withdrawing from the visible (i.e., the cultural scene/screen), erasing its own instrumental role, thereby transmitting only what appears to be perfunctory forms of cultural 'expression.' Culture therefore devolves into a special effect. If the media is indeed the message, why then should we chill on mere side-effects or trip out on McLuhan's own come-ons — the 'cool' stupidity of progressive global networks, groovy multiculturalism and neo-liberal technological idolatry? You dig?

It only seems *logical* that Angelinos, Americanos and all those who tune in to 'global' networks would 'embrace' visions of paranoia, corruption, and social contamination, when faced with the growing dystopia of American (Hollywood) politics: Yahoo Yankee renegades whose idea of national security *leaks* into international policing, financing private armies on drug money, dirty deals in Angola, Laos, Vietnam, Chile, Nicaragua ...; white-washing, White-water, Watergate, Irangate, Contra-gate with patriot games, bushwhacking under the guise of whim-factors; humanitarian bombings that sanctify push button mass murderers; dumping up and down Nancy Reagan's ventriloquist act, Dan Quayle's history of *happy campers*, and Al Gore's EEKological *gentility*; libidos under (of) the gun of corporate media, Monica Mania, the mantra of OJ Simpson ('If the glove doesn't fit you must acquit'); world wide Monopoly games, Reaganomics, the ergonomics of cut-throat capitalism, the list is endless. Although *mediated* through television — the instrument of what Pier Paolo Pasolini called, *real fascism* — the muckraking of such scandals has raised the stakes on pulp paranoia. In the last decade mass-market nostalgia has hopped-up pulp fiction, film, art and criticism itself. Yet, this massive retro-fashioning of pulp participates in the reproduction of what Jean Baudrillard calls 'scandal

effects,' instead of what Ellroy terms 'demon dogging' cultural imperialism. What distinguishes noir from its retro-fashioning is not chronology, but the difference between pushing social issues to critical mass and copping an attitude. Neo-noir often endorses corporate media's project of containment, which entails grossly simplifying/stupefying, sidetracking (wagging the dog) and blindsiding (smear-campaigning) complex issues. This dark fashion or special effect simulates artificial oppositions — it repeats conventional binarisms — which as Baudrillard points out, 'always pay homage to the law, by concealing that there is no difference between the facts and their denunciation.'⁴ Within this system, scandal is purely theatrical, and neo-pulp simply sells the image of bad-ass playboys at all local theaters, newsstands, clothing stores, and university departments as well. The real scandal is that the commercialization of pulp vindicates the very forms of cultural containment pulp menaces. In other words, bad-ass paraphernalia are sold as 'safe' products (*Men in Black*, *Dykes on Bikes*), which in turn services the status quo by re-enforcing moral convictions (Good or the vengeance of the victim wins over Evil) that promote an immoral economy: 'Capital doesn't give a damn about the idea of the [moral] contract which is imputed to it — it is a monstrous unprincipled undertaking, nothing more' (*Simulations*, p. 29). Here we might want to think about the objective of LA-based photographer Catherine Opie self-portraits: do they represent the transgressive subculture of butch women, drag queens and S&M, or do they commercialize/cash in on the image of lesbian fetish culture?

Much of this massive resurgence of pulp in popular culture and cultural theory serves to accelerate speculations (fantasies) on finitude: ranging from filmic representations of post-apocalyptic apocalypses, which have been signaled by multiple natural and unnatural disasters, to endless readings of the bankruptcy of humanity, theoretical dystopias such as the end of history, the end of Man, the ghosts of Marx, and finally to black market economies where we exchange gifts of death, and try to collect on bad debts (in, of course, bad faith). As if inspired by Nietzsche's untimely pronouncement, 'the world is going badly, the wasteland grows,' numerous televisual, filmic, historical, and critical texts attempt to contain this spreading of waste by disengaging from it, or triumphing over it, that is, installing it in a narrative of finitude. Instead of reading noir as the history of cultural lemmings caught in an infinite (non-ending), yet finite (binary) transcendental mode, I would like to explore less hygienically sealed culture productions that destabilize the acts of reading, criticizing and art making, causing them to crossover lines, recklessly contaminating pop with unpopular culture. That is, I practice pulp as a means of disfiguring disciplinary practices by betraying conventional productions of history, literary, media and film studies that are themselves attempts at finitude — attempts made by artists, filmmakers and academics to preserve discipline, to disengage the high from the low, the human from the machine or replicant.

More than what the theorists of the *nouvelle vague* called *noir*, what Jean Baudrillard calls a 'cool apocalypse,' or Mike Davis the 'glamour of decay,' this 'something' that is 'more than night' links the lumpen world of pimping, pushing and prostitution to proletariat rogue cops, petty extortionists, hit men,

lower middle class private dicks, fatalistic housewives, embezzlers, swank mobsters, high class murderers, arms dealers, media moguls, and, of course, politicians. It is a subrosa network of contamination from the gutter to the stars; the seepage as Baudrillard argues, of Disneyland into Los Angeles, and Los Angeles into the global economy. Yet beyond post-apocalyptic intellectual theme-parks of Baudrillard's Disneyland and the American desert, Davis' LA Disasterville, which continually hop up, cool down, and capitalize on the mirage of false attractions, while repeatedly crying over the desert of broken dreams, there is still an endless war of position. My interest is precisely in this 'reckless verisimilitude' of Ellroy, Chandler, Lynch and others that debunks mythological front men, self-righteous or higher men, and simultaneously recognizes its own power as what Nietzsche calls the power of falseness. As Nietzsche points out, 'everything which is good and beautiful depends upon illusion: truth kills, indeed kills itself insofar it realizes its own foundation in error.'⁵ Thus, all art or critical truth must also be self-destructive. The effect of reckless verisimilitude or rupture, therefore, is one of affirming its own expendability in the process of providing a poignant critique.⁶ It is for this reason that Chandler and Ellroy enframe moments of great moral weight in the language of shuck-and-jive, and the *mise-en-scene* of gangsteristic moronic delights. Here's to them.

It's the De- in the Bunk

At the same time countless cultural critics continue to shroud their readings of 'noir' in the language of uncertainty and betrayal — debating as to whether it can be labeled a genre, a style, a mode of circuitous critical discourse, or purely an expression of cultural nihilism — many of these very same critics can't help but try to reproduce it as a corpse. That is, they want to contain, tame, control and patrol it by plugging it into prepackaged theoretical paradigms, e.g., psychoanalytic rebop (the death of Daddy-O), the vicarious deducing of *post-factum* detectives/historians, fashion conscious formalists shopping for Sunshine and Noir, neuroromancer liberalism (groovy guys with guns), down-beat/beaten down noir Marxism ('This is the end my only friend the end'), and conservative reactionary white-out/black-out (falling down/shooting up white & black male rage). Although the spectrum of pulp debunkers spans the gamut from academic to scandalrag criticism, recent scholarly works point to the comeback of the preferred mode of interpreting noir, psychoanalysis (Slavoj Zizek, Joan Copjec, Mary Ann Doane, Elizabeth Cowie, *et al.*). What interests me in this return to the discourse of Daddy-O (papa Freud and Lacan) is that it is often coupled with a prophecy of *doom* — a narrative of failure, failed desires, failed communities, and dysfunctional families. Thus, it is necessary to cast a shadow of a doubt on analyses that speak in the name of progress, 'truth,' 'cure,' or 'overcoming' traumas, yet lead to the guilty knowledge of sexual desires, then of social desires, and finally constitute desire as a desire for repression, not to mention the fact that they essentialize Absence, Lack, Laws of Castration, Big Others, Big Evils, and Death Drives. Such psychoanalytical readings clearly engage in what Paul Virilio calls 'playing the fatal game of

negativity' (*Politics of the Very Worst*, p. 37). For Virilio this is a game of switch and bait where 'progress' comes with heavy consequences. Roughly, very roughly, psycho-A reads all mysteries as veiled (failed) Oedipal searches for self wherein the detective (analysand) searches for clues to the human mystery (where did we come from?, what is life about?); s/he comes to the analyst who hands out a couple readymade clues that lead to ancient/infantile crimes, hoping all the while that the detective will be Taboozled — caught up in an incestual desire, and even if it is only a metaphor, must submit to the LAW of castration if s/he wants to keep his/her metaphoric penis; but inevitably this will produce anxiety and anger that cannot be acted out against the Law (lest we want to lose that precious th(D)ing-itself). So, the disgruntled detective must internalize/repress, and talk it out with his/her shrink who tells him/her we are all fucked, and once s/he realizes this s/he is cured. Which has become more hardboiled — more 'cynical about motive and character' — pulp or its critics?

Despite the plethora of visions and revisions of noir, academic front man Slavoj Žižek argues that both noir and its critics 'need some fresh blood.' That is, on the one hand, the (in)visible universe of noir, in order to persevere, must become more vampirelike by infusing itself with the blood of other genres such as science fiction (and here Žižek gives the example of Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*) and occult-supernatural (Alan Parker's *Angel Heart*). On the other hand, critical discourse on noir needs to resign from its own moribund attempts to translate its fascination with film noir into 'positive theoretical accomplishments [whether stylistic, allegorical, anagogic, or moral,] since [they] somehow are inherently hindered, doomed to fail.'⁷ Similarly, Fred Pfeil reads this failure on the part of film criticism to affirm positive conclusions as part of the fallacy of commercial film. He asks: 'how can any capital intensive work, such as film, produced for a mass audience be Progressive?'⁸ Or as Raymond Chandler puts it: 'just get a little behind on your payments and you will find out how idealistic our publishers and writers are ... There are no vital and significant forms of art, there is only art and precious little of that' ('Writers in Hollywood', p. 979). Yet, while Pfeil questions the ability to produce radical or even progressive effects through an industry culturally determined by 'capital and patriarchy' and Chandler denounces the 'social and emotional hypocrisy,' or 'intellectual pretentiousness' of 'trained seals,' Žižek attempts to stand above both the failure of film and its criticism. He essentially aligns himself with the seals by positioning himself as an analyst, a connoisseur, rather than a critic who gets his/her hands dirty with ideology and politics.

This comparison of the analyst to critic can be seen in his privileging 'The Sherlock Holmes Way' over 'The Philip Marlowe Way.' That is, he segregates the disengaged 'charm' of the aristocratic detective from the hardboiled private eye who not only becomes embroiled in the chaos and corruption of the case he has been asked to solve, but compromises his own subjectivity.⁹ Furthermore, as Joan Copjec points out 'the detective, is not, as is commonly believed, on the side of metalanguage, of the reparation of the signifiers default. He is, instead, on the side of the failure of metalanguage, he represents the always



open possibility of one signifier more' (*Shades of Noir*, p. 177). In other words, the hardboiled detective threatens the order of things by searching for clues that do not constitute a sense of depth or hidden meaning, but point to the fragility of meaning, identity, and even metaphysics. Thus, it is no surprise that Zizek chooses Holmes as a model from which he can refigure the analyst, ultimately redefining the role of the meta-critic as disinterested 'exterior observer,' rather than a cynical-romantic wiseguy like Marlowe. In accord with numerous other film critics who equate the detective to the analyst, Zizek implicitly suggests that while Holmes performs the function of the analyst, Marlowe works through the symptom, yet he also becomes part of it. Here Zizek presumes, or at least stacks the deck so, that the analyst cannot be played for a sucker, i.e., s/he cannot be lured into the game of the patient (the *femme fatale* or any victim of circumstance).

Although Zizek argues that noir films produced during the most restrictive years of the Hayes code censorship were far more radical or transgressive than those made after the period of the 1930s through 1950s, he defines the ideal detective/analyst as the 19th-century gentleman who is never caught in the act. Rather than simply resonate some puritanical diatribe about the effects of explicit cinema, such theoretical hierarchies infer that the more explicit the film the more likely we are to rub up against the 'real of our desire,' and therefore 'destroy its aura,' 'make the thing ridiculous,' and disintegrate the 'phantasmatic support of our relationship to reality.'¹⁰ For Zizek all this rubbing means that 'public symbolic space has lost its innocence [and] narrativization, integration into the symbolic order, into the big Other, opens up a mortal threat, far from leading to any kind of reconciliation' (*Enjoy Your Symptom*, p. 152). Yet

instead of reading these exposés on twisted passions as the loss of some natural wholeness (Lacanian Other, or Freudian Oceanic Feeling), what is uncovered, as Ellroy puts it, is that 'America was never innocent. We popped our cherry on the boat over, and looked back with no regrets' (*American Tabloid*, p. 3). Zizek is still playing off an innocence that literary authors and film directors have already factored into their work. By bringing every Ding (the Real, the traumatic, the falsity of the symbolic, and the illusory image of seduction) to the surface, pulp problematizes the act of criticism and interpretation: who needs the analyst when every power play and every trauma is easily readable? Thus, the mass-market nostalgia for noir that slips over in to nostalgia for lost innocence leads James Naremore to argue that film noir is a paradox, 'it is both an important cinematic legacy and an idea we have projected onto the past' (*More than Night*, p. 12). But what has been projected in the name of psychoanalytic theory is a series of hierarchies, stratifications of good art, good criticism, and good detecting.

Such distinctions allow Zizek to posit that it is the critic (Marlowe) rather than the film that lacks a progressive or radical 'potential,' since it is the critic who projects conventional fantasies onto film, thereby inscribing film criticism in a prescriptive, if not ideological, discourse. This leads to an obvious problem: who is to say where art/film/literature stops being a form of interpretation and one of pure expression (whether of symptoms, Big Others or Reality), or more importantly, how can one even claim such purity? Indeed, such meta-critical readings leave only a small aperture for criticism, one that reaffirms the logic of 'failure' — art is criticism (an expression of a traumatic symptoms) and criticism 'misrecognizes' that it is itself part of this 'symptom'/trauma. Thus, only meta-critics, i.e., only the good doctor, can judge 'objectively.' Accordingly, Zizek suggests that 'second-rate' ideologically invested arguments such as: **feminism** that interpret the *femme fatale* as a sign of women's emancipation, further accentuating the crisis of male identity in an age of economic uncertainty (Mary Ann Doane, Judith Mayne, Vivian Sobchek) create 'false senses of empowerment for women'; **liberal humanism** that read film noir as an analogy of the corruption of the American megalopolis (Dennis Porter, Dana Polan, Mike Davis), and **historical allegories** that focus on noir's ability to reflect the social impact of the Depression, WWII, the Red Scare and Hollywood Blacklisting (James Naremore, Frank Krutnik, Woody Haut) 'produce' what Dean MacCannell calls 'a sense of loss of something that was never possessed, something that never was' (i.e., a backward-looking nostalgia for politics); and even ideological divested arguments such as **formalist readings** that point to noir as an assemblage of visual and narrative effects (Fredric Jameson, George Sadoul, Lotte Eisner) are a cliché-ridden set of parasitic discourses.¹¹ These theoretical/ideological 'fantasies' about film and its meaning are blind to the 'inherent impasse' built into noir, namely, its inability to signify anything other than the instability of a paranoid subjectivity. Yet, because the paranoid subjects of pulp recognize their own contradictory physics — the oscillation between subversion of social investments (constraints) and the self-perpetuating re-enforcement of paranoia — they generate an allegiance to no one thing, belief or idea. Rather they promote infinite

mutability and unpredictability, of even one's own action. A few examples come to mind. (1) The ethical faltering of Chandler's detective protagonist, Philip Marlowe, a man without attachments, who claims that 'proof [itself] is a relative thing.'¹² Unlike the stately Sherlock Holmes, Marlowe gets caught up in the game where he loses sight of ethical perspective, yet this allows him to question the order of things rather than to just put them back in their proper place. (2) The kaleidoscopic of inimical alliances that befall Ellroy's bad cops on account of their being coerced or rather blackmailed once their violent passions, obsessions and ticks, are unearthed — that is, Ellroy weaves a wild but intricate web of conspiracy where cops often become double agents for competing forces of organized crime, politicians, and capitalists. It is never quite clear who is playing what game, only that everyone is always playing an angle. And (3) the films of David Lynch, which Naremore describes as 'surrealist inspired, mixing black, deadpan humor with horror; disorienting the audience [by] never giving them an explanation for bizarre events and fetishizing everyday life; making a series of California living rooms and anonymous roadways seem truly uncanny.'¹³

While I agree with Zizek that some of these conventional paradigms that attempt to territorialize pulp fictions neither invigorate critical understandings of pulp nor do they buttress their own impoverished ideologies, I find that Zizek's own twist of the knife on noir operates on an ass-backwards logic: the very critical categories (aesthetic, historical or ideological) he dismisses as staid serve as the point of departure for his theoretical crusades. He obsessively returns to the most overused and overdetermined discourses on noir; those of class consciousness, of the *femme fatale* as the sign of radical evil, and the analytical apparatus of Lacanian theory, privileging metaphysical readings over genre theory, historicism, close reading and deconstruction. Moreover, Zizek's readings of noir, both classical (*The Maltese Falcon*, *Dial M for Murder*) and hybrid (*Blade Runner*, *Angel Heart*, *The Lost Highway*) offer little more than traditional psychoanalytic rehash — the crisis of male subjectivity, male masochism, feminine sadism, which invoke the Laws of desire and repression. In fact, many such hip renewals of psychoanalysis via, or should I say qua, Lacan turn the 'noir universe' into just another expression of Thanatos, the death drive, or the 'Law of failure.' Naturally, for Zizek noir marks the death of the Big Other, and hence, the failure of the Law and its symbolic order, the crisis of desire, reality, and repression. Pulp paranoia is thereby read by Zizek as 'symptom' pointing to the 'abyss of the subject.'¹⁴ Rather than read paranoia as caught between a 'line of flight' (a desire to transgress, subvert or break through) and a return to social determinations, Zizek (like many other readers of noir) attempts to impose the psychoanalytic paragon on his readings — squeezing narratives in to archetypal structures, i.e., the triangular formation of mommy-daddy-me. Zizek has translated a paranoia of the system into the hysteria for the symptom. In the words of Deleuze and Guattari, he 'invests in the formation of central sovereignty; overinvests it by making it the final eternal cause for all the other social forms of history' (*Anti-Oedipus*, p. 277).

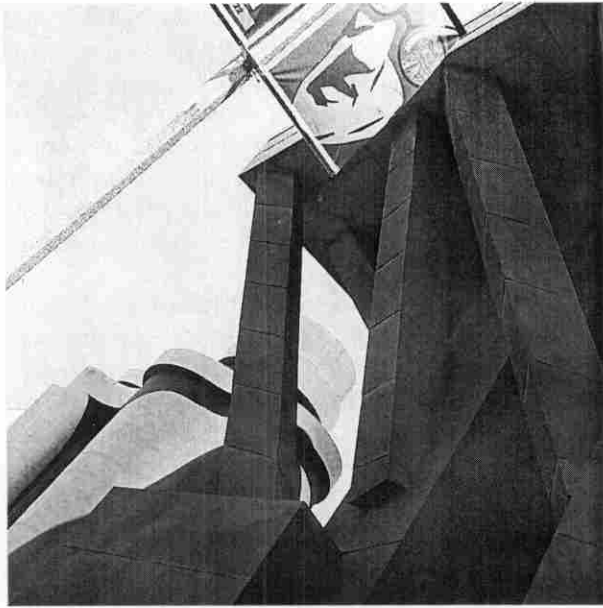
As a result, Zizek ends up lauding what would otherwise be read as psychotic characteristics: for example, he argues that the character Frank

(a rapist and extortionist) in David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*, like Dick Laurent (a pornographer and mobster) in Lynch's *Lost Highway*, represents 'a desperate therapeutic attempt to prevent the woman [and thus the 'proper order of things'] from sliding into the abyss of absolute depression' (*The Metastasis of Enjoyment*, p. 121). These exaggeratedly violent male characters are transformed into tragic father-figures who make a 'serious attempt to uphold symbolic [patriarchal] authority.' So, what makes this theory of FAILURE so interesting? Not its regressive sin-sational mass-market appeal to symbolic orders, nor its macho-maimed putting the blame on the *femme* (whether her sexual aggressivity or unwillingness to stand in for the Big Other), but that it emblemizes a trend in noir criticism, e.g., it delivers the message of an all out cultural collapse — the failure of the revolution, history, politics, art, the state, seduction, sex.

This 'epidemic of failure' is not contained within the discourse of psycho-A, nor pulp proper; it slips into other enemy analytical models and diverse disciplines, ultimately representing more generalized, mass-mediated, necrophiliac tendencies. Rather than reading noir and some of the problems it presents, current cultural analyses have started to appropriate neo-noir characteristics — designer nihilism, knee-jerk politics, almost a sort of academic shotgun justice. Taking their cue from Adorno's and Horkheimer's famous reading of the Los Angeles' 'cultural industry' (noir included) as the harbinger of a negative dialectic, may such doctors of doom transform noir from a form of cultural expression or criticism to a prophetic way of seeing everything as painted black. For instance, Mike Davis takes refuge from what he calls Los Angeles' 'deadly propensities' (its 'suffering a crisis of identity,' its intellectual barrenness) in 'dystopian politics' and the 'imagination of disaster'; Jean Baudrillard proclaims 'this country is without hope' (it's an endless desert of violence and indifference); Jacques Derrida tells us via Shakespeare 'time is out of joint, O cursed spite that ever I was born to set it right,' calling on the 'impossible' spectres of Justice to vindicate the victims of history; while in attempt to install noir into the monument of high Modernism — seeing a touch of noir in *The Heart of Darkness*, the Dostoyevskian nightmare of the soul, 'The Wasteland,' and the poetry of Baudelaire — critics like Fredric Jameson and James Naremore turn noir into the basic banality of the 'dark side'; finally Marc Vernet tells us that film noir 'does not belong to the history of cinema, it belongs as a nomion to the history of film criticism'; that is, it is a 'collector's idea that can only be found in books.' These Nihilist Knights bury the project of criticism in the name of nostalgic cultural crusades for revolution, high art, symbolic laws, justice and revenge.

This begs a few questions as to what has really failed here: am I to believe that Mother Nature is taking it out on LA for being too unnatural (puffed-up and plastic)? Is the big clock winding down and ticking off the spectres of Marx? Does every clue lead back to a primordial, impossible and unrectifiable crime? In other words, were we just born bad (natural born killers)? Can we finally kill off Chandler and Ellroy by canonizing them? How come these guys are getting away with murder?

One of the few boys bad (good) enough to address this slaughter of critical



thinking is Sande Cohen, who argues that 'in the name of a cultural ideal, the scholar displaces questions of politics and epistemics onto questions of "taste" and connoisseurship, the rhetoric of scholarship is unyielding in offering judgments by which rival discourses are discredited by misrepresentation giving itself the signifiers of authority.'¹⁵ This boils down to what Cohen calls scholarly writing's 'reinvention of cultural historiography [by] making hierarchies (of time, telos), ideals, judgments of taste, political filiation, ... senses of urgency, slowdown, disruption, and equilibrium, in other words, codes of fashion' (*Passive Nihilism*, p. 3). What is, therefore, suspect about this group of 'passive nihilists' is that they position the language of scholarship as untouchable, assuming for themselves the role of meta-critics/connoisseurs of noir and negativity. This is a practice of disengagement that masks its own violence, its own desire for purity, truth and moral righteousness at the expense of critical thinking. Do they really think they can exploit the sleaze potential of noir without getting their hands dirty? Because pulp fiction seduces, entices and implicates its consumers in corruption, dirty deeds, deals, politics and sex, it debunks the logic of disengagement as itself an act of bad faith — an intellectual retrofitting designed to recuperate (narrate or historicize) a 'pure' or legitimate scholastic subject. It's time to crack the scam of scholarship under the weight of its own emptiness.

If they say they never loved you, you know they are a liar ...

At the same time, LA remains the epicenter of film noir, it continues to be the favorite dumping site for academia, pop, and the arty-farty criticism crowd. While it might 'take a whole lot of light to make a city,' it takes a lot less to

wash it out into platitudes.¹⁶ Often the hype of name-calling and mud-slinging camouflages the more lubricious questions: why has the city itself been treated as a subject — transformed into Mickey Mouse for some and 'Moochie' Mouse for others (Ellroy), a city of angels, a city of endless night, a one night stand ... ? By the same token, how can a city become a subject of non-subjectivity — a spiritual or cultural void? How many times have Angelinos had to listen to New Yorkers and Euro-jetsetters tell us that LA is an empty screen onto which they can project their hidden sexual fantasies, or that LA has no center, no history, no culture, no identity?

In the catalogue for the recent retrospective art exhibition 'Sunshine and Noir: Art in L.A. 1960–1997,' Russell Ferguson implies that art, culture, social criticism and even noir have been imported to LA when he writes: 'It has always been sunny in California, but noir came from Berlin, via the talents of émigrés such as Fritz Lang, Robert Siodmak and Billy Wilder. It has never left.'¹⁷ Although noir films of the 1940s may have incorporated certain aspects of *Neue Sachlichkeit* and German Expressionist film styles, who's to say that German cinema of the 1920s and 1930s was not influenced by American pulp, comic strips, cityscapes, or even British fiction? For instance, Fritz Lang's most famous Expressionist film, *Metropolis*, is indeed a ripoff of H.G. Wells' *Time Machine*, which is itself a fantasy about the American city of the future. Yet this is not to say that LA, nor its critics, can lay claim to noir, but that the genealogy of noir is embroiled in multiple affects, exchanges, and appropriations. What distinguishes pulp from its critics is that pulp often points to our vulnerabilities, the fragility of ethics — as the Joker tells Batman in a 1930s comic strip, 'all it takes [all that separates us] is one bad day.' In contrast, cultural historians often attempt to buttress their own transparent (critical) market (moral) value via noir. Whereas protagonists of noir are more up front about their/our weaknesses, many critics can't see or won't cop to the role they are playing — bagman for capital investors. In other words, it has become the (art/film) historian's task to diagram the scam *post-factum*; to put a price-tag on the canvas of culture (art, film, criticism).

Even renowned hometown historian, Mike Davis, reads LA as a proverbial black hole that sucks in the 'true intellectual' only to 'waste,' 'prostitute,' 'trivialize,' and 'destroy' him. He writes: 'To move to Lotusland [Hollywood, which he has renamed in his new book, *Ecology of Fear* as Disasterville] is to sever connection with national reality, to lose historical and experiential footing, to surrender to critical distance and to submerge oneself in spectacle and fraud' (*City of Quartz*, p. 18). Davis exemplifies LA's ability to pickle, putrefy, pimp and imprison immigrant intellectuals through figures such as F. Scott Fitzgerald whom he argues was 'reduced to a drunken hack'; Nathaniel West 'who rushes to his own apocalypse'; William Faulkner who 'rewrites second-rate scripts'; Bertold Brecht who 'rages against the mutilation of his work'; and the Hollywood Ten (some of which I should add are native Angelinos) who are 'on their way to prison.' Hence, for Davis, noir becomes the dying breath of the doomed intellectual succumbing to the immanent fate of Hollywood — 'the city of seduction and defeat, the antipode to critical intelligence' (*City of Quartz*, p. 18).

It seems obvious here that Davis, like Ferguson, equates the lack of an intellectual community (suffering genius once removed) with intelligence. This implies a strategic move toward cynicism? The question is what type of 'social reality' (hysterical fantasy) permits Davis to transform drunken hacks into intellectual heroes or tragic victims of LA? Davis insinuates that even if you make it big in the Big Apple you will still end up down and out in Beverly Hills. Or as Cuervo Jones aptly puts it in *Escape From LA*: 'you may have escaped from New York, but this is LA vato, and we're here to show you that this fucking city can kill anybody.' Yet on the one hand, *Escape from LA* indulges in the pleasure of some over-the-top parody, treating both Left (as depicted by Cuervo Jones, a malevolent version of Che Guevera) and the Right (embodied in the President, a cross between a fascist and religious fanatic) as oppressive, power hungry and hypocritical. Besides providing a self-critical view of LA, the film's juxtaposition of the satirical image of LA as a decadent and wildly violent — where eight-year-olds participate in turf warfare, and Beverly Hills plastic surgery failures become body-snatchers — to the rest of the US — portrayed as a no-smoking, no-drinking, no-sex, politically, religiously and culturally intolerant police state — questions the motives and the dogma behind the perennial haters (critics) of LA. Davis, on the other hand, attempts to squeeze LA noir into the history of tragedy: he tries to force the burden of history (the infrastructure of leftist politics) on noir. In fact, he insists it is through this group of disgruntled noirs that 'Los Angeles understands its past' (*City of Quartz*, p. 36). That is, since LA 'lacks a scholarly municipal history,' noir fiction stands in for fact/reality. The plot gets a shade thinner here: where does Davis stand in relation to his material? Can there be a *terra ferma* of historical representation when imagery and attitude stand (in) for history? Ellroy hones in on what historians and cultural critics like Davis refuse to face when he argues that 'history is recorded by hacks who don't know the real secret shit. L.A. History is subterfuge and lies' ('Hollywood Shakedown', p. 130).

More (or less) than just getting mileage out of a wisecrack, the work of Davis obsessively laments the loss of leftist politics, and like many self-proclaimed leftists of the 20th century it leads down the shining path of immanent doom. That is, ensconced within discussions on noir such as Davis' are secret longings (nostalgia) for what has been re-imaged as radical politics. This type of longing leads him to picture LA history in terms of black and white categories: on the Right are the **Sunshiners**, comprised of a line-up of **Boosters** (the Arroyo set of speculators, land developers and promoters of the teens), **Sorcerers** (a mixture between scientists, religious freaks and Land Grabbers who fueled Cal Tech, JPL and LA Chamber of Commerce), and **Mercenaries** (downtown elite interested in investing in Urban renewal); and on the Left, Davis aligns the **Noirs** (noir filmmakers and pulp fiction writers) with **Debunkers** (union organizers and socialist-minded public critics of the 1920s and 1930s), **Exiles** (Frankfurt School intellectuals who immigrated to LA to escape nazism, i.e., persecution), and **Communards** (cultural guerrillas of the 1950s). No, this isn't some warped mortal combat episode, though it comes close in that it clearly defines what is good and evil. However, according to

Davis, the initial battle — between Right and Left, or capitalism and its contenders — has already been lost; what remains is the in-fighting amongst the Left(-overs). This struggle, as Davis articulates in *City of Quartz*, is between 'Gramsci and Blade Runner' — 'Gramscian optimism' and 'Frankfurtian pessimism.' By the time he writes *Ecology of Fear*, this battle between Gramsci and the Adorno/Horkheimer/Marcuse crowd is also over; Davis declares that we are 'Beyond Blade Runner' — beyond 'oppositional politics' and 'organic intellectuals.' Such statements suggest that the revolutionary optimism on the Left has collapsed into an apocalyptic force, a negative dialectic. Thus, following Adorno and Horkheimer, Davis salvages LA only as a necessary evil, a test case for the decline of our global political future.

If we follow the definition that Davis provides, the radical politics of noir become nothing more than an all-consuming 'contempt for depraved business culture' that manifests itself in a suicidal/sacrificial attempt to crack, what Adorno and Horkheimer call the 'mirror of capitalism's future.' In other words, because utopian politics are seen as impossible in an age of 'pure capital,' Davis churns politics into a practice of prophecy wherein he points to an apocalyptic finitude of LA — his 'stand-in for pure capitalism.' Even if the facts were padded to make the book a bit more marketable (please note the irony here), *The Ecology of Fear* converts the message of cultural nihilism present in *City of Quartz* to one of 'Biblical Disaster': floods, firestorms, earthquakes and riots. This transformation from a generic nihilist — the passive nihilism of finding nothing but debris in the 'junkyard of dreams' — to a prophetic disaster — a 'bring it on mentality,' to the tune of the old Youth Brigade song, 'sink California, tumble into the sea' — reveals a rising level of political and academic desperation. What makes such predictions so apocryphal is that they end up promoting/advertising a new type of LA attraction, offering not a road-map to the stars but gridlocking the cities of catastrophe: this is where the LA riots, the killing of Nicole Browne Simpson, the Northridge Earthquake, the Malibu fires, the '92 floods, the beating of Rodney King and Reginald Deny took place. Thus, rather than being boosted as the 'magic kingdom' of sunshine, patriotism and movie stars, LA is turned into a millennial theme-park replete with aliens, monsters, mobsters, towering infernos, volcanoes, earthquakes and pollution.

At the same time Davis grabs onto the force of negativity, he disowns his debt to the cultural products that present him with this dark vision by disassociating himself with noir and the disaster film. Rather than admit to his own glamorization of a somewhat malformed (i.e., 'clean') image of darkness, he repudiates pulp that does not promote the image of the 'pure,' conscientious, tragic hero, nor the practice of catharsis — a cleansing through shared guilt. While on the one hand, Davis points out that 'no other city seems to excite such a dark rapture' — a rapture in which Davis himself seems to participate, at least in terms of his critique of LA and its social politics (*Ecology of Fear*, p. 277). On the other hand, he argues that: 'There should be no doubt that the ritual sacrifice of Los Angeles, as rehearsed incessantly in pulp fiction and film, is part of a **malign syndrome**, whose celebrants include the darkest forces in American history.' One such example for Davis is that, in *Indepen-*



dence Day, a film that Bob Dole endorsed as a model of Hollywood patriotism, ... there is a comic undertone of 'good riddance' ... when the aliens turn [on] Los Angeles, [massacring] a caricatured mob of hippies, new agers, and gay men dancing in idiot ecstasy on a skyscraper roof to greet the extraterrestrials' (*Ecology of Fear*, p. 355).

Although Davis contradicts his own definition of noir — establishing it first as critical discourse of the Left, then accusing it of becoming a harpy of politically incorrect messages of the Right — such inconsistencies clarify the real stakes in the fight with/over LA noir: the policing of critical discourse. This act of territorializing criticality as property rights of the Left exposes its own stakes in what Gramsci called 'a war of position,' or what Jim Thompson would call 'getting on the grift.' As Thompson's book *The Grifters* demonstrates, grifting requires the forfeiture of all loyalties, personal integrity, familial and emotional bonds; it is a completely ruthless act that pits sons against mothers, mothers against sons, and lovers against each other. Moreover, grifting has no rules, only oneristic objectives: to rip off, counterfeit, double-cross, shag, swindle, or bamboozle one's mark. This endless positioning reduces all forms of culture to the bottom line, power, prestige and profit. As Cosmo Vitelli declares, in John Cassavetes' 1976 film *Killing of Chinese Bookie*: 'that jerk Karl Marx said religion was the opiate of the masses, but it's money, money is Jesus Christ.'

The problem with this game of angling, as Fred Pfeil points out, is that 'the whole notion of what Antonio Gramsci called a war of maneuver, of the deep structural and institutional changes, has come to seem to many once insurrectionary spirits to be inconceivably crackpot or even worse, a grisly ruse of the

very power it pretends to oppose ... A permanent war of position becomes literally the only game in town' ('Home Fires Burning', p. 228). As Davis, like many others before him, notes the disintegration of the radical or revolutionary subject — whether the working class, social movements, the vanguard, or the city itself — has left the Left holding the bag, baring the burden of history and championing the ghosts of Marx (dead, victims, failures, etc.). This tragic mode of self-identification, coupled with a cynicism toward any form of institutional power, has ironically shifted critical discourse from more practical applications to institutional ones. That is, the consequence of reducing Gramscian theory/practice to false optimism is that it, according to Davis, leaves academic critics/historians with no option other than to participate in a false opposition — a Baudrillardian simulation or noiresque theatricality of political and critical opposition.

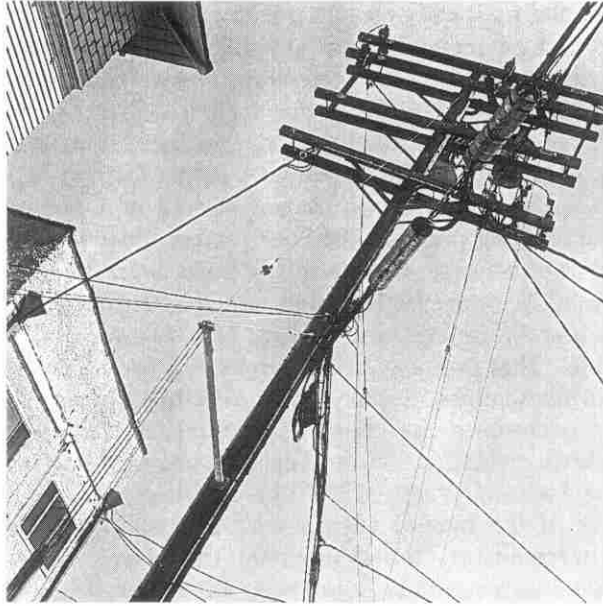
The noirs have already recognized this permanent war of position, yet rather than simply participate (put up stakes) they see positioning, as itself an artificial act, a parody of its own failure to contain or control the playing field. In other words, although this permanent war of position gives us the appearance of permanent action — forcing us all to take sides, where even not taking a side is read as taking a side — such actions have all the political and social significance of grifting off the popular culture industry or plugging into the mass-market hagiography of death. Just as there is no escape from LA, there is no escape from the game of name-calling. The real disaster here is the abandonment of critical thinking for a share in the politics of sound-bites, easy moralisms and bumper-stickers, which reduces power to the triumph of abbreviation, readability, stupidity, and yes, cliché. While media feeds tell us that the battle over the New World Order is one of access to information and control of networks that span or survey the globe, the information that we actually get on this superhighway has already been coded and prepackaged for instant consumption and immediate digestibility.

This isn't a sign that we are getting any smarter nor that we are becoming more noir, only that we are buying all the clichés because they make us feel more comfortable. In fact, Davis himself participates in this move toward a certain type of sunshine, albeit a midnight sun or a dawn of dead. In contrast, noir does not reinforce this need for stability, whether it be a stable political platform, moral position, an ethical stance, or even a stereotype. Instead pulp clarifies the stakes, and in the process pulls the plug on all the major advertising campaigns by implicating the product in the scandal of power and profit. In other words, it is impossible to divorce that bad-ass in a black turtleneck we have idealized from the a shitbird racist, sexist and homophobic who sells his/her integrity for a ounce of smack, whacks fall-guys for payola payoffs, fails an IQ test, or schmoozes with celebrities for kickbacks.

At the same time that we admire violent toughness we are not willing to think through some of the hardboiled problems that these images present. Even film and cultural critics who want to make political corrections often fall back on easy moralisms, accusing texts, films, and art of participating, if not promoting, the very problems they attempt to address. According to Deleuze, this type of criticism reduces ideas/problems to the form of error whereby 'the

dogmatic image [the politically correct image of the critic], for its part, recognizes only error as a possible misadventure of thought, and reduces everything to the form of error,' that is, false recognition, false evaluation of opposition, analogy, resemblance and identity.¹⁸ For instance, many critics have called Chandler a racist, sexist and a homophobe, and there is no doubt that Philip Marlowe is depicted as such, but if we take *Farewell My Lovely*, for example, we see a deep-seated structure of racism, sexism and homophobia that is unearthed in the opening pages of the book, where Moose Malloy kills a black man in a bar, but because it is a black man who is killed in a black neighborhood LAPD doesn't bother to investigate. Similarly in James Ellroy's *LA Confidential* and *White Jazz*, the slaying of a homosexual is labeled 'just another homicide.' That is to say, these books emphasize the subrosa politics which govern urban realities. Rather, than protecting and serving political and social ideals — promoting the image of *Pleasantville*, *Dragnet*, or *Leave it to Beaver* — these texts present more complex, images of LA and its (anti-) heroes. Take for instance Orsen Welles' 1959 film *Touch of Evil*, which provides a scathing critique of the biased, corrupt and excessively violent practices of American law enforcement. Yet, at the same time Hank Quinlan (played by Welles) is depicted as a reptilian figure who not only railroads his suspect by planting evidence on him/her, but also protects his own image via slander, frame-jobs, blackmail and murder; he is presented as a hardboiled detective who can sniff out a suspect by intuition. Quinlan, with his *perfect* arrest record, stands for vigilante justice. On the other hand, Quinlan's nemesis, Mike Vargas (played by Charlton Heston), stands for protocol and justice not in a practical but ideal sense. Hence, Vargas is the embodiment of the impotence of justice (its standing for ideals, yet its inability to carry them out), while Quinlan is the embodiment of the hypocrisy of the law that acts violently and corruptly against violence and corruption. The problem is that Quinlan can detect who is playing what angle, while Vargas has to compromise his reputation, as well as his country's, the safety and love of his wife, for his obsession with Justice and Right. The fact that Welles cast Heston (who had just played the part of Moses in *The Ten Commandments*) for the part of a Mexican (albeit a high ranking official) adds another iconic twist to the film: while the film reproduces cultural and racial stereotypes, its parodic performance of such clichéd representations makes them uncomfortable, if not self-effacing. Heston's gringo Spanish is satirized when one of the Grandi boys (Mexican-American drug cartel) who clearly understands Spanish, asks Vargas, 'Can't you speak English?' Welles' casting of Armenian (Akim Taminoff, who plays Uncle Joe Grandi), German (Marlene Dietrich, who plays a gypsy madam) and American (Heston) actors to 'play' 'ethnic roles' unmasks another type of darkness: that of whitening out or making-up cultural images, identities and differences as a form of caricature and cliché. Yet, instead of reinforcing ethnic stereotyping these ludicrous depictions of ethnicity call the 'dream factory' into question by visualizing Hollywood's inability to 'capture' cultural and ethnic differences.

Yet, the cultural overdose on cliché is apparent in even the highest of cultural circles. For example, in his introduction to the recent history/retrospective of LA art, 'Sunshine and Noir: Art in L.A. 1960-1997,' Lars Nittve



describes LA via a series of buzz words — ‘megalopolis, exopolis, cosmopolis, heteropolis’ — hip quips — ‘silicon implants, going surface, sun-baked culture, artificial oasis, theme-park city’ — finally raising what he (re)calls the ‘perennial question’ about LA, that is, how do we represent it? — ‘As utopia or dystopia? Sunshine or Noir? Helltown or Eden?’ This last list of alternative readings Nittve has, of course, lifted from Mike Davis and Jean Baudrillard. Yet, while Nittve repeats Davis’ and Baudrillard’s claim that noir brings the swindle of sunshine to light, he does not insist that the plastic passions of LA, the superficial yet, smug smile of immunity and advertising is noir — a sinister subrosa scam that conceals the private sector selling off transparency and nullity as culture. As a curator for a prestigious European Museum, Nittve’s repetition of this gesture (collapsing white and black) is less transparently polemic, and more clandestinely political. Indeed, any criticism of clients, potential buyers, donors, or patrons of the arts, must be handled delicately: you will not find any attacks on the Chandlers or the Gettys as you would, for instance, in the writings of Davis and Baudrillard. Rather, Nittve tells us that ‘Los Angeles is the capital of visibility ... [where] the clichés are piled on top of one another. And there’s nothing false about them.’ What is he really telling us: LA is a conscious parody of itself? This means to make art in LA is at best, to engage in caricature, to go surface, or ‘envision the void.’ As if to remind the artist/reader, if you want to make it anywhere, you have to make it here (New York), *New York Times* art reviewer Amei Wallach is quick to point out the real subtext is the preservation of cultural institutions. Wallach, not so subtly, hints that the bottom line is to protect the investments in the New York/The Empire State art scene, which has been since the 1950s ‘the center of American art.’

Hence, the question is not one of black or white, Hell or Eden, natural or artificial, but one of projecting an acceptable image. If we are to look at the some recent retrospectives of LA art and their reviews, the question becomes quite clear: what role do LA artists have to play in relation to the New York or the Euro-International art scene in order to become sellable — do they have to play the bubble-headed bimbo to East Coast or Euro prosaic priggishness, or the mucho-macho man to their weak-kneed and smooth-skinned intellectualism, act up or out, strike a pose or wax mysterious?

Why then is LA still a magnetic field for what Ellroy describes as those who 'want to assume a desired identity and make attitude count for a thousand times its hometown value ... [for those who] come to L.A. to be somebody else and envy the few who make money at it and blow [them] off as losers?' Ellroy reasons: 'You can blame your fall and retreat on the city that magnetized you and duck the issue of your own failure, ... it is a built-in escape clause L.A. rejects can cite without the appearance of unseemly self-pity.'¹⁹ At the same time these 'haters,' in the words of Ed Wood Jr., 'with their big mouths and their small ideologies,' continue to circumscribe LA in some of the most cliché-ridden visions, they cling onto the image of LA as the screen/*mise-en-scene* for their own dark fantasies about the past and the future (*Hollywood Rat Race*, pp. 91–92). This is what I would call loving to hate, rather than what Zizek calls hating to love.

Photographs: Kriss Ravetto

Notes

1. Reid, D. and J.L. Walker (1993) 'Strange Pursuit: Cornell Woolrich and the Abandoned City of the Forties', in J. Copjec (ed.) *Shades of Noir*, London: Verso, p. 57. The wording itself seems suspect, dividing the 'good, socially conscious noir' from the bad 'fanatical noir films.' While I in no way support the red-baiting of Wood, Spillane, or even Chester Himes, I find it equally dubious to champion the work of the Left as clearly critical, less sexist, homophobic, or politically correct. What makes pulp or noir interesting is its exposing deep-seeded moral ambiguities, which do not return to political or moral proselytizing, beyond what the Hayes code demanded.
2. Jameson, F. (1993) 'The Synoptic Chandler', in *Shades of Noir*, p. 37. While Jameson's project is less accusatory, i.e., not directly a project of policing Chandler, than a project of attaching Chandler's work to high modernism, this inclusion of Chandler's work in the canon of modernism also functions as an act of cleansing — while Chandler's sexism, homophobia, and racism are read as cultural and historical symptoms, his work is relegated to the history of aesthetics instead of bad politics.
3. Davis, M. (1990) *City of Quartz*, London: Verso, p. 45. Here Davis takes the standard line of desensitization to violence leads to 'the supersaturation of corruption that fails any longer to outrage or even interest [the public].' Yet as Woody Haut argues in *Neon-Noir: Contemporary American Crime Fiction* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1999, p. 151) that 'to say that Ellroy's onslaught

destroys the genre's tensions is to misread how the genre and the culture have changed. While the belief that at Ellroy's supersaturation of corruption fails to outrage or interest the reader is akin to saying that the publication of the Pentagon Papers or the images sent back from Vietnam merely numbed Americans regarding the war ... If nothing else, Ellroy, for all his noir deviancies, confronts the Reagan-Bush era head on.' In addition, Haut points out that, even if Ellroy has labeled himself a right-winger, 'he writes about Hollywood witch hunts from what could be called a left-wing perspective' (p. 9).

4. Baudrillard, J. (1983) *Simulations*, P. Foss, P. Patton and P. Beitchman (trans.), New York: Semotext[e], p. 26.
5. *Philosophy and Truth*, p. 92. For an analysis of Nietzsche's use of tropes and his language of persuasion, see Paul de Man's (1979) *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*, New Haven: Yale University Press, Chapters 4-6.
6. See Woody Haut's *Neon Noir* where he argues that noir appeals 'to all ideologies simultaneously, [yet] corporate publishing absorbs contradictions, while encouraging — though never at the expense of profit — the depoliticalisation of that which it produces. Regardless of volume, format and price, neon noir fiction threatens to become as expendable as its pulp culture predecessors. Yet this has a positive aspect; for noir fiction, existing within a historical and cultural context, rarely pretends to be anything other than what it is: expendable product whose appeal extends no further than replication and critique.' While I agree with the notion of expandability, I think the appeal goes beyond the confines of the political and economic context; it truly is a critical appeal.
7. In his 1992 book *Enjoy Your Symptom*, Slavoj Žižek asserts that within pop culture there are only two 'phenomena' that 'exert an everlasting power of fascination "postmodern" theory: Hitchcock and film noir.' While analyses of the cinema of Hitchcock, according to Žižek, has unleashed a plethora of interesting critical readings (psychoanalytic, hermeneutic, deconstructivist, feminist, religious, semiotic), the analysis of film noir remains determined by clinched discourses of formalism, feminism, new historicism, and existentialism (1992, p. 149). Žižek divides postmodern readings of noir into four categories: (1) literal, a formal reading of noir as a product of German Expressionism, with chiaroscuro lighting, use of voice-over and flashback, a style of reading that he attributes to Fredric Jameson's *Political Unconscious*; (2) allegorical readings that equate the hardboiled detective and *femme fatale* to sociopolitical conditions and the subsequent corruption of the American megalopolis, and the social impact of WWII; (3) anagogic interpretations that attach themselves to existing resemblances — *femme fatales* to empowerment of women and the instability of male identity — collective historical experience, and disintegrative impact of WWII; and (4) moral readings that express an existential vision of noir — dialectics of freedom and fate (p. 187, note 2).
8. Pfeil, F. (1993) 'Home Fires Burning: Family Noir', in *Shades of Noir*, p. 228. Pfeil continues to argue: 'how far can a work go and still be produced and

- distributed within a system whose various structures are overdetermined by capitalism and patriarchy (not to mention racism and homophobia).'
9. See Zizek's discussion of Holmes and Marlowe in *Looking Awry* (New York: October Books, 1991, pp. 48–66).
 10. In March of 1999 Zizek spoke at UCLA in a conference on Lacan. He argued that in neo-noir all power is seen as perverse, hence all *femme fatales* are stripped of their seduction; they are instead 'vulgar bitches who destroy the aura of the real.' Thus, rather than alluding to sex, they aggressively fuck their 'victims', play them for suckers, and recognize that they are commodifying themselves. This direct sexual aggression, according to Zizek, destroys the image of fantasy, because it brings the 'disavowed fantasy to light.' Similarly in *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997, p. 176) he writes: 'our key point is that it is also the same in reality, with so-called "real sex": it also needs some phantasmic screen — as we have already seen, any contact with a "real" flesh-and-blood other, any sexual pleasure that we find in touching another human being, is not something evident but something inherently traumatic, and can be sustained only in so far as the other enters the subject's fantasy-frame.'
 11. MacCannell, D. (1993) 'Democracy's Turn: On Homeless Noir', in *Shades of Noir*, p. 280.
 12. Chandler, R. (1978) *Farewell My Lovely*, London: Penguin, p. 243.
 13. Naremore, J. (1998) *More Than Night*, Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 274.
 14. Zizek places the subject of noir in what Jacques Lacan's *l'entre-deux-morts* (the in-between-two-deaths). He writes: 'the noir universe is characterized by a radical split, a structural imbalance, as to the possibility of narrativization, the integration of the subject's position into the field of the big Other, the narrativization of his fate, becomes possible only when the subject is in a sense already dead, although still alive' (*Enjoy Your Symptom*, p. 151).
 15. Cohen, S. (1998) *Passive Nihilism*, New York: Saint Martin's Press, p. 191.
 16. *The Blue Dahlia*, 1946, Directed by Fritz Lang and written by Raymond Chandler.
 17. Ferguson, R. (1997) 'The Sound of Ripping Canvas', in H.S. Hansen (ed.) L. Nittve and H. Crenzien (curators) *Sunshine and Noir: Art in L.A. 1960–1997*, Louisiana, Humlebaek, Denmark: Interprint, p. 212. Furthermore, by tracing the roots of noir to the light and dark of Germany in the inter-war period Ferguson insinuates that darkness should be equated with political abominations such as nazism, and lightness with the political correctness of the emigrates. That is, the real beacons of critical light are those who expose the heart of darkness.
 18. Deleuze, G. *Difference & Repetition*, P. Patton (trans.) New York: University of Columbia Press, p. 149.
 19. Ellroy, J. (1999) 'Bad Boys in Tinseltown', in *Crime Wave*, New York: Vintage Books, p. 261.

