Abstract
Film noir is central to understanding the formulations of post-war American identity and its relationship to citizenship. This essay examines a number of ways by which films noir use the Enlightenment's conception of light to explore post-war subjectivity. Noir protagonists reflect an existential awareness of the impossibility of their own enlightenment and, by extension, of ever realizing the American Dream. As placeholders for American citizens, they enact Hollywood's fleeting, imperfect realization that the ideal of a universal unitary subject taking his or her rightful place in the sun would, for most, never come to pass.

This essay argues that light in post WW II American films noir is not only an aesthetic feature but a thematic and ideological one as well. These films use Enlightenment conceptions of light to explore post-war subjectivity in ambivalent and contradictory ways. I proceed from an understanding of film noir as an historical movement and argue that noir protagonists in such films as Double Indemnity (Wilder, 1944), Mildred Pierce (Curtiz, 1945), The Dark Corner (Hathaway, 1946), D.O.A. (Maté, 1950), The Big Heat (Lang, 1953) and The Big Combo (Lewis, 1955) reflect an existential, often despairing, awareness of the impossibility of their own enlightenment and, by extension, of ever realizing the American Dream. This journal issue focuses on media interrogation of the construction of identity within and beyond national boundaries, and the cycle of films now identified as film noir is central to understanding the formulations of post-war American identity and its relationship to the meaning of citizenship. For late 1940s and early 1950s audiences, noir protagonists—however personally to blame for lack of enlightenment they may be depicted as being within any one film’s diegesis—update the
Nietzschean tragic hero: a suffering and reluctantly cosmopolitan figure cast into a dark world of eternal recurrence and from whose performance geographically uprooted and socially buffeted audiences might derive a modicum of ambivalent pleasure through identification. Audiences have the opportunity to sympathize with noir’s failed protagonists and so called femmes fatales because, in terms of the structure of order, disorder, order that organizes the narrative of so many of these films, during the “disordered” middle section—when the powers of the State, the law and the Father are most under question and attack—protagonists enact certain qualities of oppositional, often unexpressed, politics of audience members.

The success of classical Hollywood narrative cinema relies on audience identification with an onscreen character or characters. Yet while audiences may experience sympathy with post-war noir protagonists, as David Hume understood, sympathy allows us to understand that “there but for the grace of god go I” even as it also contains within itself the understanding that it is not, in fact, I who actually stand there in the place of the other. Sympathy, then, (including that felt by audiences for onscreen characters) is always contingent and partial. As Hume argues in A Treatise of Human Nature, sympathy that exists only in the present is not intrinsically moral if it does not also extend into the future. While there is no necessary requirement that audience members do so, at that point near the end of the film when noir narratives move to reestablish order and punish the transgressions of the so-called femme fatale or aberrant protagonist, audience members are asked by these films to shift their identification away from the tragic protagonist to one more aligned with the interests of the Father or the State. While audience members may sympathize with protagonists as individuals overwhelmed by “fate,” or an unfortunate past they cannot escape, when order returns to the screen and the protagonist is punished, his or her individual quality of tragic and “disordered” heroism cedes to something akin to a failed citizenship worthy
of State punishment. Further, *films noir* frequently promote the value of reconfiguring the meaning of individual identity away from the idea of the productive citizen and toward one of the consumer as the centerpiece around which the new post-war economy of consumption will revolve. Yet *noir* protagonists, understood as placeholders for American citizen-spectators, also enact an ambivalent, imperfect Hollywood realization that somewhat confounds this ideal of consumption: while the enlightenment idea of a universal unitary subject taking his or her place in the sun achieved cultural influence through daily rituals and belief systems, for many Americans, the idea’s promise would never come to pass.

In *Sources of the Self*, philosopher Charles Taylor argues that the early modern bourgeois individual was expected, as an act of reason and self improvement, to cultivate an inner light that would complement and extend divine illumination radiating from on high. Seekers of enlightenment, therefore, were anticipated and positioned as laboring to find their own inner lights. A.M. Karimi has suggested that *noir* protagonists “are the negation of the American Dream” (cited in Martin 148). While a number of *noir* protagonists, such as the title character in *Mildred Pierce*, do seek to better themselves materially, *films noir* also frequently depict their protagonists’ despairing recognition of the difficulty—if not impossibility—of achieving modernity’s implicitly cosmopolitan promise that an individual, through dint of hard work, education and reason, can develop a politically robust subjectivity illuminated by enlightenment ideals. These films, therefore, question the underpinnings of European enlightenment discourse even as they remain suffused by this discourse and its individuating, populist American adaptation, the American Dream. Henry Commager argues that it is America that realized the Enlightenment first imagined in Europe. Yet the “disordered” middle acts of *films noir* also depict the shortcomings of the utopian ideals undergirding enlightenment theory of the progressive
perfectibility of human nature, a theory that fails to account adequately for the competitive, unequal social relations within which individuals find themselves and within which any individual path to “enlightenment” must be negotiated and “traveled.” The noir critique, however, is only partial: the films’ narratives are often suffused with a sense that their protagonists are inadequate citizens due to their inner, personal failure to polish their inner lights and adequately reflect enlightenment ideals.

Films noir characters’ belief in the American Dream allows them to see their desires for material gain as directly connected to acquiring greater agency and social status. More often than not, however, fate thwarts noir characters from achieving this status. Often they perish—the body count can be very high in these films. Or if they do not perish neither do they triumph; most often they merely survive through strategies of accommodation and making do. American capitalism’s vulgarization of enlightenment ideals, encapsulated in the American Dream, whereby individuals who are both lucky and clever may get to “grab the brass ring,” provides an inadequate set of social tools for dispelling what these films frequently suggest is a “natural” darkness on the part of their protagonists. This vilifying suggestion is indebted, in part, to their seeming failure to conform to cultural myths beholden to Jeffersonian theories. As discussed by Leo Marx, Jefferson links the purifying qualities of the American natural landscape to the “naturally” superior character of American citizenship. Failure to achieve such illumination, then, “naturally” confirms one’s fate as the alien other in “our” midst and likely in need of punishment. If the tragic hero can’t get the capital then he or she can have capital punishment instead.

In various ways, then, the films noir discussed below portray the irony at the center of enlightenment philosophy: Protestantism, enlightenment and capitalism all contribute to the development of individualistic thinking, yet enlightenment philosophy deflects consideration that
it itself gestates within an economic system that confers on a select few the cultural capital and material privilege to pursue self-improvement. Their success is then taken as denoting them as naturally adequate to the task of philosophizing about the utopian potential for individual perfectability and to hold the unsuccessful as moral failures unworthy of ongoing sympathy and the assistance it may connote. *Noir* protagonists expose yet also participate in this irony of discourse and ideologized misrecognition. Frequently, *noir* critique remains implicit or partial as the individuals routinely are punished for their personal failure to know. In the films I examine the truth is not obvious, light is in short supply, and the focus on detection and the dead ends to which it often leads concords with the enlightenment argument that humans, in almost photomechanical fashion, discover the truth bit by bit, if at all, through empirical observation, analysis and reason. Equally, however, tragic heroes may suppress the truth, or desire it suppressed for them, by recourse to the dark and the boundaries to knowledge it presents.

In following sections I further discuss how, as a hybrid strategy of coping and resistance, post war *noir* protagonists take on an attitude of “reluctant cosmopolitanism.” These toughened protagonists, adrift in a world they do not fully understand yet also freighted with cultural baggage they understand all too well, remain constrained by their circumstances and “dark” pasts even as they seek the transcendent status promised by the American Dream. I link this inherently tough variation on cosmopolitan performance to the ways by which forms of light are distinguished as either *lumen* (natural sunlight) or *lux* (the reflected light of material culture as well as artificial illumination). In *noir*, *lumen* and *lux* frequently serve as metaphors for enlightenment, the possibility or presence of love, or their absence, and in the final section of this essay I examine the self-defeating strategy on view in many American *films noir* wherein toughness as a performance stands in for the tragic inability to love given protagonists’
acceptance that, at least in part, it is their own fault that they fail to shine from within.

Reluctant Cosmopolitans

The word cosmopolitan is from the Greek, originating perhaps with the cynic Diogenes. When asked where he was from, Diogenes uttered *kosmopolites*, “I am cosmopolitan,” meaning without country, society, or place (Borgmann 131). Whatever the level of Diogenes’s detachment, the idea of cosmopolitanism has continued to evoke an image of the world citizen. For mid-Victorians cosmopolitanism “was almost synonymous with humanism and progress” (Oshagan 194). However, to be fully cosmopolitan, that is, to be enlightened and with the power to act as an independent agent, is a privileged, elite position. Whatever Diogenes’ intended (dis)associations, cosmopolitanism’s connotations of urban sophistication reflect a modern privileging of assumed links between cities and civilization in contrast to the presumed yoking of locality to cultivation. The acontextual theories of human perfectibility upon which enlightenment philosophy relies presuppose that each fully formed subjective individual can be cosmopolitan, and while cosmopolitan status does not guarantee enlightenment, all enlightened people are cosmopolitan. Bruce Robbins has argued the value of renovating the idea of cosmopolitanism and then applying it to contemporary geopolitical, globally networked social dynamics that render aspects of the boundary between local and global increasingly permeable. Robbins argues that “cosmos” originally referred to *adornment*—as in cosmetics—and was only later extended metaphorically to refer to “the world” (176). In the sense that cosmetics refers to an adorned arrangement or *ordering of the surface*, cosmopolitanism organizes a concern for what is visible, for ornamentation, but it also suggests a “rising to the top.” Cosmopolitanism seeks the top, the world view (the urban *noir* penthouse comes to mind) but, like a cosmetic, in its application and
adherence it never takes leave of the body or the culture that it simultaneously adorns, masks, and appears to alter. The idea of cosmopolitanism, therefore, is profoundly ambivalent. While cosmopolitanism’s quality of adornment and masking may imply the capacity for a self-alienation ironically coupled to performance of the self, the placeless aspect of cosmopolitanism also resists the qualities of locality favored by Thomas Jefferson which, while anchoring lived experience, also threaten aspects of individual freedom through their potentially repressive enforcement, maintenance and repair of dominant cultural norms.

*Noir* protagonists such as the psychically itinerant Frank Bigelow in *D.O.A.* or the uprooted Debby Marsh in *The Big Heat* are reluctant cosmopolitans. These toughened men and women enter the post-war mise-en-scene just as America takes on the mantle of a reluctantly global cosmopolitanism. *Noir* develops not in isolation from other cultural trends but as a historical movement that is part of the period’s structure of feeling expressed, in part, through its various cultural productions. Rapid social change and geographic displacement parallel a diffuse nostalgia for pre-war isolationism so as to mitigate awareness of the horrors of Nazi Germany, Iwo Jima and Hiroshima; fear of “displaced persons” arriving stateside as refugees; as well as the Marshall Plan and Pax Americana’s cultural and geopolitical entanglements. By necessity, an incipient American cosmopolitan awareness of the world’s complexity and the changing meaning of geopolitical and social boundaries takes shape during this period—a seeming loss of innocence thrust upon a citizenry offered little choice but to accept the new state of affairs. *Noir*, then, is also a reflection on these changes enacted for audiences hoping for an economic rebound after a generation of depression and war.

In the post-war *noir* world rootlessness is not balanced by the material and status privileges that attend a fuller cosmopolitanism. Rootedness—long habitation in one
locality—implies “being at home in an unself-conscious way” (Tuan 4), yet gaining command over one’s subjectivity demands a perfect reason theoretically detached from locality, for locality keeps one rooted in place and in the supposedly narrow particularisms high modernism believed it to organize and reproduce. To be fully rooted, then, is the antithesis of cosmopolitanism and enlightenment. Tough noir protagonists, recently urbanized or returned from the war, are rootless; however, this has not brought them cosmopolitan advantage. The performance of toughness in noir—a masking of the self and a strategy frequently depicted as making do—is cosmopolitan in its surficial quality of ornamentation; toughness, therefore, is a defensive armor against the world through which the donning of a tough mask-as-identity functions as a kind of amulet or, in the anthropological understanding of the term, a fetish performance to buffer oneself against the difficulties of achieving self improvement due to unequal access to economic opportunities. Noir protagonists engage in toughness regardless of the potential difficulties in seeing things clearly that the donning of this mask may entail. Further, noir cosmopolitan status is almost always white and most often male. For example, with the exceptions of No Way Out (Mankiewicz, 1950) and Odds Against Tomorrow (Wise, 1959) black protagonists are absent. And while depictions of rootless white women are common, their gendered access to cosmopolitan status proceeds differently from men and often depends on their use of men. The Big Heat’s Debbie Marsh, asked by principal protagonist and good cop on the brink, Dave Bannion (Glenn Ford), why she endures the corrupt luxe that accompanies her kept status as gangster Vince Stone’s (Lee Marvin) woman, invokes her ongoing struggle to grasp the adornments that are the markers of arriviste status: “I’ve been rich and I’ve been poor and believe me rich is better.”

Yet by the Archimedean logic of enlightenment, toughness is also a self-defeating strategy, blocking one from further enlightenment in a cycle that may be conceptualized as “the
eternal return of the same” where toughness must be constantly performed, a self-imposed boundary only transcended at the price of a loss of identity status. For it is precisely when one is thwarted from gaining greater agency, or when one experiences the denial of one’s subjectivity at the hands of the more powerful, that one thinks about donning a mask. Here, something akin to Sartrean existentialism’s claim that “what I am is for me to decide” is perversely operationalized in the ongoing context of social inequality. As the Ancient Greeks understood, donning a mask permits looking into the face of horror or tragedy to obtain a glimpse of the real that would otherwise be impossible. And noir offerings frequently suggest that the toughness-as-mask persona is how protagonists can best “make do” even as the resulting spiral of alienation works to confirm that enlightenment, along with any mutual recognition among subjects for which it might allow, remains largely a dream—a potent symbol they are unable to actualize.

If the mask connotes cynical knowledge joined to a cosmopolitan quality of detachment, the noir protagonist, like the cosmopolitan, is frequently a traveler on the byway of urban technological culture. Yet the rootlessness of noir protagonists—Al and Vera in Detour (Ulmer, 1945), Johnny and Gilda in Gilda (Vidor, 1946), Morgan in He Walked by Night (Werker, 1949), Frank Bigelow in D.O.A., Laurie Starr and Bart Tare in Gun Crazy/Deadly Is the Female (Lewis, 1949), Charles Tatum and Lorraine Minosa in Ace in the Hole/The Big Carnival (Wilder, 1951)—while reflecting their potential to grab the brass ring to the extent that they do, speaks equally if not more so to their lack of sufficient cultural moorings and hence also to their disposability even unto death. The safety net of class privilege is unavailable to the majority of these individuals, and while a noir such as Force of Evil (Polonsky, 1948) critiques power’s articulation to corruption as unhinging the lives of working people, a film such as Gun Crazy, in which the characters refuse to “stay at home,” depicts rootlessness as a transgression to be
punished. Indeed both thematics are often deployed in the same film.

The *noir* protagonist’s rootlessness is related to his or her awareness not only of the world’s complex injustices but also of a personal inability to alter these realities. The American Dream’s application of enlightenment thought to “opportunity” and “achievement” suggests that by dint of hard work, a modicum of education, “natural” intelligence *and luck*, people may achieve a measure of self advancement and prosperity. Each American is raised within this hybrid ideology of enlightenment utilitarianism, fatalism, social darwinism, and aspects of Calvinist and Puritan belief systems about the self, the meaning of personal gain, and the supposed abiding competitive advantage available to Americans and newcomers hoping to become citizens alike by virtue of their residency in the United States. From knowledge without power, however—awareness without the ability to achieve the Dream’s promise—flow cynicism, alienation, and bitterness: the toughness so frequently characteristic of *noir* protagonists faced with dark, bitter, immutable truths.

The American Dream coexists with a Platonic value system which privileges reason over emotion. Apollo trumps Dionysus. As the story goes, this focus on reason, coupled to an emphasis on “self improvement,” allows for the gestation of a political subjectivity that thinks for itself and decides what it will be. However, *noir* protagonists realize that equal access to enlightenment is an absurd premise. In *Double Indemnity*, a poorly illuminated Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) and Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck) problematize the naturalized axis of capitalism, enlightenment, and Platonic belief. They are aware of the ideology this axis organizes and at times seem to buy into its promise. Yet the film’s narrative reveals their growing comprehension that they will never fully grasp the brass ring, the circular logic of which equates more money to more status, greater cosmopolitanism, and therefore more enlightenment and
happiness. And unlike, for example, screwball comedies such as *The Lady Eve* (Sturges, 1941) or *Ball of Fire* (Hawks, 1941), where movement up the social ladder equates to personal success, if a *noir* character moves from low to high cultural status, he or she often remains unchanged, discovering that life at the top is as rotten as it is at the bottom. In addition to Dietrichson, such a fate awaits Johnny Farrell (Glenn Ford) and Gilda (Rita Hayworth) in *Gilda*, and also Leonora Eames (Barbara Bel Geddes), who, in *Caught* (Ophüls, 1949), finds her marriage to deranged tycoon Smith Ohlrig (Robert Ryan) a cross between a snake pit and a velvet cage. In a world where life at the top is no better than below, and where upward mobility offers little chance of cosmopolitan enlightenment, the progress myth appears dethroned. Yet not quite. For while the American Dream posits luck, or fate, as a component of individual success, and while an existentialist acknowledgment of the world’s absurdity admits a place for fate in enlightened discourse, the *noir* world indicates how modern notions of subjectivity nevertheless are deployed to reject the explanatory power of fate (frequently suggested in these films as equal to gender and class position) in favor of instrumental notions of personal failings. This displacement leads to the constellation of class- and gender-ridden “blame the victim” strategies on view within *noir*.

Although a film such as *Laura* (Preminger, 1944) critiques the cosmopolitan elite and the politics of consumption and “good taste,” women of lower socio-economic status such as Vera (Ann Savage) in *Detour*, Laurie Starr (Peggy Cummins) in *Gun Crazy* and Sherry Peatty (Marie Windsor) in *The Killing* (Kubrick, 1956) all crave entry into that class; they desire the luxury that surrounds Laura Hunt (Gene Tierney) and mentor, Waldo Lydecker (Clifton Webb). Though often reduced by the films to the status of “double crossing dames,” a more productive understanding of these women, whether positioned as *femmes fatales* or not, lies in viewing their performances as seeking, at the margins of contemporary gendered expectations, the full measure
of enlightened subjectivity that attends to cosmopolitan status implicitly gendered as male. And it is frequently women who carry this message, for their greater ability on screen to speak or talk back allows them to upbraid the tough guys around them in terms that reproduce a dominant assessment that such men are personal failures who end up as losers due to their insufficient subjectivity and a related failure to “profit from opportunities.” These tough women, then, operating within a patriarchal political economy, rehearse its expectations of masculinity and success. Nevertheless, films such as Detour, Gun Crazy and The Killing (in which the women who strive to go from low to high all die) still convey something of the polyvalent contexts within which character and environment intersect, anticipating Michel de Certeau’s observation that “[e]ach individual is a locus in which an incoherent (and often contradictory) plurality of . . . relational determinations interact” (xi). Several noirs also imply that “natural” beauty is a power flowing from the above-mentioned good luck—hence the “beautiful” Lauras, Johnnys and Gildas escape the body bag. It follows that, within the misogynist logic of The Big Heat, the errant Debbie Marsh, also denoted as beautiful, must be disfigured—rendered a broken ornament by the patriarchy—so that she then can be killed.

Enlightenment ideology, and the communication of ideas in a public sphere upon which it depends, posits a society of freely communicating, self-contained individuals. The success of capitalism likewise requires putting into practice this conception of the discrete individual—one that need not contradict the interpersonal dynamics of sympathy. As Norbert Elias noted more than 60 years ago, while mutual recognition is necessary, the modern sense that we are also each psychospatially apart from one another is equally necessary for the production of competitive advantage and the division of labor in the world of work and, by extension, the world of pleasure, desire and individuated consumption. And as Kant, that earlier cosmopolitan, noted about the
relationship among success, understanding, and competition among individuals, “[w]e must look to . . . providence . . . for a successful outcome which will first affect the whole and then the individual parts. . . . The whole is too great for men to encompass . . . especially since their schemes conflict with one another to such an extent that they could hardly reach agreement of their own free will” (Reiss 90). Within a world where seeing is believing, therefore, from the situated vantage point from which my subjectivity proceeds, how can I decide if there is not enough light to see? And if I don toughness’ mask, how will I manage adequate mutual recognition (or even a Humean quality of sympathy) of others?

The film Double Indemnity depicts its protagonists’ stark recognition that more money equals more subjectivity (an issue of considerable interest to audience members having similar desires). No fugitive from the work ethic, Neff declines the status of an office job, along with its connotations of organization man, preferring the greater independence of field sales. Like other classic noir protagonists, however, Neff is also an iconic placeholder for what cannot yet be narrated directly; he does not yet possess the ability to fully accept his already polyvalent subjectivity—an acceptance that would have allowed him the breathing space of the “rooted cosmopolitan.” Writing about the idea of rooted cosmopolitanism, Bruce Robbins notes that “not enough imagination has gone into the different modalities of situatedness-in-displacement.” (173). Neff has one foot on the ground (of work) and one in the imaginative realm (of sexual desire). But, as a placeholder, he has not yet achieved an ability to see himself in a more favorable light through articulating the commonalities between these positions. I am not suggesting that a rooted cosmopolitan approach constitutes a reformist agenda for working people, whether as salesmen or housewives, to deal with the contradictions of American capitalism and patriarchy. Rather, its depiction might have offered audiences a two-fold way for imagining a future freer
from the belief that fate and past indiscretions *always already* taint desire—freer from a sense of being trapped in a set of life circumstances organized around the dynamic of “eternal return of the same.” Neff, like others, responds to this sense of circular fate with toughness, an absurdly logical performance, the last act of which is death.

Though the film also reveals Neff’s character as that of a likeable everyman, *Double Indemnity* also links Neff’s implicitly plural subjectivity to the sociopath. Further, the film indicates that a complex interplay of polyvalent subjectivity (what the current jargon of corporate globalization appropriates with the term “flexible” identity) is not, in 1944, yet conceived as dovetailing productively with the interests of the state and a Fordist economy. The polyvalency of audiences allows for a complexity of narratological “effects,” including a range of readings from dominant to oppositional to askance. If *Double Indemnity* initially allows its audiences a cathartic identification with Neff as a manifestation of the tragic hero doing the best he can in a world over which he has little control, the film finally suggests that socio-economic problems are traceable to individuals’ “insufficiently illuminated” life strategies regardless of their positions within social hierarchies. Structurally, therefore, while a resistant toughness may be symptomatic of one’s failure to adequately grab the brass ring, such films often punish tough strategy by existential alienation and despair, imprisonment, or death. As a response to their protagonists’ inability to realize their vague desires for something better or somewhere else, films such as *Double Indemnity* ask audiences to focus on the fate of tainted pasts. *Noir* toughness, then, is frequently an eviscerated critique. While “disorder,” social critique, and the anarchic play of desire do inform the centers of these films, the order (or preferred reading) reimposed during the final reel encourages audience members to consider that toughness is an inadequate, aberrant (though ironically understandable) *personal* response to a world in which it is safest to not question the
status of one’s own enlightenment. The dynamic by which audience members may “blame the victim” they earlier identified with as the tragic hero exemplifies Hume’s understanding that sympathy, if remaining rooted only in the present and not extended toward the other in the future, need not be moral. At the moment when Neff’s punishment for his transgressions is nigh audiences are asked to shift their sympathies from a stance inherently critical of capitalist organizational structures to one more in line with the interests of the Father (Neff’s boss, Barton Keyes), the corporation, and the State. If audience members do so, they also take on a different kind of moral polyvalency—to recall at the moment of the tragic hero’s punishment that it is safest to suppress any understanding that State sponsored capitalism might be inimical to their interests in order to avoid a “fate” similar to that just witnessed on screen. To the degree, then, that spectators consent to re-identify with the Father and the State, they gain a kind of quisling pleasure that also confirms their sense of reluctantly cosmopolitan citizenship. They do so, moreover, only by reigning in and partially denying the possibility that their own individuality need not always be subservient to dominant values.

The post-war period witnesses the emergence of an economic model connecting identity with consumption. The act of consumption increasingly is linked to the production of one’s individual identity as a shiny commodity without a past. The past, whether tainted by fated indiscretion or polished by nostalgia, occupies a less and less central role in the new consumer economy than in an earlier pre-war economy predicated on an understanding of personal identity as productive, responsible, and continuous in time. An identity too firmly linked to a past, like an outmoded commodity, becomes superfluous, and films such as *Double Indemnity*, *Laura*, and *Sorry, Wrong Number* (Litvak, 1948), with their fatalistic emphasis on past mistakes coupled to a fascination with the complexities of characters’ motivation, are on the pivot point marking this
The European enlightenment and its American counterpart promote the ideal of a liberated, self-contained individual, and capitalism depends upon her or his steady supply. American capitalism hews to a Benthamite pursuit of happiness equated to money, with both tied to progress. While Neff is capable of imagining further enlightenment, his increasingly adversarial relationships with Dietrichson and his boss, Barton Keyes (Edward G. Robinson), suggest his parallel ability to imagine a regressive material future ever more concording with the competitive, individuating social darwinist structure of feeling under which he labors and tries to love. As protagonists, Neff and Dietrichson enact the contradictory ideals they implicitly find incoherent but which the film never allows them to fully critique. Hence the film never allows audiences a glimpse of what, other than money, these characters really seek. The response in the face of this paralyzing illogic is toughness; in *Double Indemnity* mutual recognition between the doomed lovers leads to their mutual execution; the outcome of their tainted love and adventure reveals to each that, for the other, the mask, like a machine, is all that remains.

Dietrichson and Neff fail to achieve a rooted cosmopolitanism, which might have allowed their acceptance of plural loyalties and multiple identities and thereby might have suggested to them how something like a making peace with others could be imagined or achieved. Such a harmonization of difference is never easy and requires synthesizing realist and utopian conceptions of the self and a future. But in avoiding narrow particularism, as well as the disembodied form of cosmopolitanism practiced by Laura’s Lydecker (an art with high cultural capital but not fully of this world), a middle way that allows individuals such as Dietrichson and Neff to imagine themselves as citizens might have been open to them, in theory and in actuality.
**Tough Lux**

If *noir* toughness suggests the impossibility of fully actualizing the American Dream, the films through which tough characters circulate also trade in technologies and philosophies of light productively understood in tandem with their depictions of reluctant cosmopolitans. Hans Blumenberg notes that Augustine understood humans as a light lit by light and introduced a dialectic between god’s light and the reflected light of culture (43). For Augustine, *lumen* is the objective, inexhaustible, intelligible and divinely created radiance passing through and illuminating space; *lux* is *lumen*’s earthly reflection but also our physiological experience of light and our capacity to receive it. The human, then, is a light also lit by light. *Lux*, I would add, is also the root of *lux*ury, and in its association with the earth and reflection *lux* haunts Plato’s cave where the illusion (of culture) is misrecognised as the real (ideal light). Privileging the platonic ideal, for Augustine, everything created on this planet is secondary. Modern capitalism, however, has worked to invert this ideal and to reposition the commodity form as divine illumination itself. One outcome of this is to render “natural” illumination secondary to *lux* and its cultural offerings; within this context of how ideas of light and illumination are culturally deployed *noir* can be understood as a focus on the unequal distribution of *lux* and its power.⁸

While spectators may imagine how post-war *noir* characters may once have been god’s children in the light, *lumen*—natural light—is frequently absent from their adult worlds. Within the dark, urban and frequently interior places these films depict, it is the reflected light of *lux* that counts. The resulting sharp filmic contrasts between dark and light—one of *film noir*’s defining technological and aesthetic characteristics—suggest the quality of an individual’s subjectivity and social position within political economies and cultural hierarchies. Enlightenment expectations about polishing one’s inner light depend on an extant access to divine light—to fully becoming a
light lit by light. *Noir*, however, suggests that not only do protagonists find natural light in short supply, but that such a shortage, frequently depicted as a personal failing or experienced as a personal lack, further contributes to an unequal access to culture’s reflected light. *Noir* proposes that all are not equally capable of cultivating an inner light, an invidious proposal based on assuming the natural order of social inequities based on class, gender, and fate.

It is also the case, however, that Hollywood *noirs* span a range of ideological positions from left to right, and frequently promote discrepant political philosophies within the same film. Considered in toto, *noir* is able to mount political critique, depicting in films such as *Brute Force* (Dassin, 1947), *The Big Heat, Force of Evil, The Racket* (Cromwell, 1951), and *The Big Combo* an endemic structure of political and economic corruption that climbs from the bottom to the top rung of the socio-economic ladder. At the same time, however, this critique is counterbalanced by other films with similar themes but which depict their protagonists as personally failing to attain sufficient *lumen* or *lux*. Films in this second strata include *Sorry, Wrong Number, Caught, Born to Kill* (Wise, 1947), and *Criss Cross* (Siodmak, 1949). Several *noirs* achieve a further refinement of Hollywood’s Janus-like stance toward critique through distinguishing culpability according to a narrative taxonomy that works to establish identification between audiences and principal stars while encouraging a more ambivalent reading of supporting characters. A film such as *Sudden Fear* (Miller, 1952), for example, allows lead character Myra Hudson (Joan Crawford) to plot revenge masked as self defense while husband Lester Blaine (Jack Palance), and his accomplice and lover, Irene Neves (Gloria Grahame), must pay for their deviousness with their lives. The film positions these characters, who seek to move from low to high social status, as incapable of transcending the dim world of reflected illumination from which they issue; they are denied the material *lux* they seek through acquiring the money underpinning the naturalized, luminary status
of society playwright and heiress Hudson.

At times noir offerings also position science and its technologies of light or lux as producers of truth. The truth-seeking high intensity police light illuminating the suspect and the screen is a standard trope. Yet this truth’s empirical production often has an ironic outcome. In *Kiss Me Deadly* (Aldrich, 1955), it is “the great whatzit,” the mysterious and deadly nuclear light inside the black box (Image 1).

In the final scene from *The Big Combo*, one strongly emphasizing the contrasting play of light and dark, a belatedly toughened Susan Cowell (Jean Wallace) repudiates her Mafiosi lover, Mr. Brown (Richard Conte), by taking control of a searchlight to illuminate and reject him as well as by her defiant reply to his demand for darkness: “*I want* to be seen.” Cowell’s actions and words indicate that a desperate resort to lighting technology can signal a draining away or a loss of inner light equal to the loss of humanity itself. Yet, in taking control of the searchlight, the formerly elite Cowell, who seeks to shed her status as Brown’s kept ornament, regains her
cosmopolitan status and independent agency through engagement with this technology of lux (Image 2).

In D.O.A., it is luminous poison that kills Frank Bigelow. In the scene in which Bigelow discovers he has been murdered, a doctor presents him with evidence he has imbibed iridium or luminous poison (Image 3). The glowing test tube radiates not just any light but the purest lux, a form only visible in the dark. The poison, a technology of science, is lumen’s earthly reflection though culture, and it is deadly. Ironically, as a film, D.O.A. itself, with its world of shadowy illusions, both filmic and dashed, is also a technology of lux, or lumen’s earthly, hence sensual and therefore “faulty” cultural reflection.
Toughness in *noir* films reflects protagonists’ keen awareness of their subordinate class position and their interest in pursuing the benefits that flow from *lux* even as they grasp that knowledge on its own cannot guarantee cultural status or material benefit. Their subjectivities, depicted as unstable, suggest that identity is always in flux with respect to one’s environment. Yet because tough protagonists typically lack access to power that would match their awareness of the world as a dark place, they also lack access to the truth; hence the emphasis on low-brow detection and paranoia in a film such as *Kiss Me Deadly*, in which Mike Hammer’s *lux* comes face-to-face with science’s own explosive version in the form of nuclear fission.

Protagonists such as Mike Hammer, Al Roberts in *Detour*, and Frank Bigelow in *D.O.A.* are trapped in a fierce light of western power and capitalism. Consider the existential despair of Roberts’ nightmare coast-to-coast road trip, Bigelow’s toughness after discovering he has been murdered by parties unknown, or the callow violence attending Hammer’s naïve pursuit of money at the possible cost of millions of lives. Each character’s toughness, articulated to his low social
standing, performs the belief that he does not shine from within, or at least not in socially
approved ways. Consequently, the films imply they each prefer, or gravitate toward, the dark.
Embittered, these men do not speak a fully formed subjectivity available to the illuminati; even as
their interpellation within capitalist logic promotes a self-acceptance that they are without lux. In
*The Dark Corner*, Brad Galt tries to extinguish the romantic interest of Kathleen (Lucille Ball)
with the following lines: “Listen. If you don’t want to lose that stardust look in your eyes, get
going while the door’s still open. You stick around here and you’ll get grafters, shysters, two-bit
thugs and maybe worse . . . maybe me.” *In Double Indemnity*, Dietrichson and Neff tell each
other they are “no good” and “rotten,” yet by whose lights are they rotten? Rotten because they
do not possess the luxury they covet? Rotten because the film’s preferred reading judges them as
having insufficient inner light and therefore not “naturally” deserving the luxury they crave?
These questions point in the same direction: Phyllis and Walter are frustrated by their inability to
achieve something other than what they have; that is to say, they seek an enlightenment based on
natural *lumen* and cultural *lux*. In the end their mutual execution and the chiaroscuro lighting that
marks the shadowy scene within which this takes place suggest that, their inner lights growing
dimmer, they lack even the modicum of illumination necessary to have perceived the reality
effect of their dark corner (*Image 4*).
D.O.A. marks the playing out of residual fears of Nazi atomic power and the beginning of noir’s peculiar participation in cold war paranoia. And in Kiss Me Deadly, director Robert Aldrich, anticipating Peter Sloterdijk’s observation in Critique of Cynical Reason that “the bomb” culminates the cynicism central to the enlightenment project, critiques the will to power to which he articulates both pulp author Mickey Spillane and nuclear technology. Both films show that enlightenment may lead to death if one eschews illumination in the pursuit of lux for its own sake—whether this eschewal takes place at the scale of Mike Hammer’s postmodern venality, where, anticipating Lyotard, money is his only value, or at the global scale of competing post-war super powers. In D.O.A., legerdemain tricks Bigelow into imbibing luminous poison in a dark nightclub, and after receiving his diagnosis of death in a doctor’s darkened chamber, he sprints through the sun-drenched San Francisco streets, finally coming to his senses when he looks up and opens his eyes fully to the sun’s light. As he does so viewers are presented with the value of life: the mise en scene places Bigelow beside a newsstand festooned with copies of Life magazine. Bigelow becomes the solitary seeker at this point, one who has transcended darkness
and his own limited lux and entered into lumen’s powerful and dazzling natural sphere (Image 5).
And out of this dazzlement flows his subsequent resolve and newfound toughness. Bigelow, finally a light lit by light, suggests how toughness, in specific moral circumstances, can merge with a final act of desperate and brilliant illumination. Bigelow deploys his illumination retributively against those who tricked him into swallowing poison, yet, in a manner similar to Susan Cowell’s embrace of the searchlight in The Big Combo, his toughness has originated in swallowing (literally interiorizing) the lux of science. Bigelow’s toughness, moreover, helps him see that the bourgeois existence to which he can never return, structured around his love for fiancé Paula Gibson (Pamela Britton), was sound.
Under the rubric of post-war, patriarchal morality, the prevaricating Bigelow must perish because he cannot commit to Gibson, choosing instead to vacation solo in San Francisco, on the prowl for life which the film codes as lust. Bigelow is punished for deviating from petit bourgeois sexual morality, for his flight from a resurgent “father knows best” and its attendant repressive duties. Because lux is culturally produced, however, it is always overdetermined. Its outcomes may be scientific—the luminous poison Bigelow imbibes—or moral—the patriarchal and heteronormative socio-economic production and maintenance of “father knows best.” *D.O.A.* works to suggest that any anarchic, life-affirming tendencies positioned as inimical to capitalist production, yet still underlying a “mass individual” such as Bigelow-the-small-businessman, are amenable to policing through social technologies such as *D.O.A.* itself. Like *Double Indemnity*, *D.O.A.* was produced in the context of a Fordism not yet structured to exploit fully the possibilities of a consumer economy predicated on stimulating and responding to the contradictory desires attending the kind of nascent multiple subjectivity formation Bigelow represents. Viewed today, *D.O.A.* marries commentaries on the amoral dynamics underpinning lux’s unequal distribution and a desire for freedom in the face of Fordist strategies of class accommodation to a separate suggestion that Bigelow’s fractured subjectivity—as with Walter Neff’s, part of the identity reformation that post-war economic restructuring will require—cannot, as of yet, fully articulate to capital’s bottom line.

In *The Big Heat*, Debby Marsh examines her mirrored reflection in four separate scenes, actions critics have linked to narcissism. Within the framework I offer here, however, the possibility is that it is not misrecognition she seeks but confirmation of her lux. Indeed, Marsh starts out as lux incarnate. She lives in a luxurious penthouse, lives to shop, and enjoys the nightlife of the city. Marsh is the ornament or the deluxe product that marks, articulates and
reflects both lux and male cosmopolitan status. In director Fritz Lang’s world, a decadent culture’s limited capacity to achieve illuminated enlightenment degrades to the luxurious spaces of penthouse, mansion, nightclub. The nightclub, as Vivian Sobchak notes, is the chronotope of noir. It is also lux incarnate, the mirror world of night. It is the place wherein—interiorizing the logic of Augustine’s theory—one is reflected and reflects in and by the thousand little points of tabletop lamp light and lime light. Plato’s cave redux, the nightclub, like the commodity, is where lux seems divine, its mirroring and spectacular artificial light rendering it a luminous space. Hence it is perfectly logical that the nightclub is where D.O.A.’s Bigelow, still a consuming tourist at this point in the film, ingests the luminous poison that leads to his death.
In *The Big Heat*, Debby Marsh exemplifies the relationship between self identity and *lux*. Toughened by life, yet seeking opportunity, and equating self improvement with access to luxury, she seeks confirmation of her cultural enlightenment in the mirror. After she is disfigured by the boiling coffee Vince Stone throws in her face, however, she no longer seeks the mirror and its associations with adornment and masking. Rather, like Bigelow, she becomes enlightened, albeit in a mode of cynical toughness. She has developed her own light within to such an extent that she no longer seeks its confirmation in a mirror. And she uses her toughness—greater than Dave Bannion’s—to act as an avenging angel, doing for her male counterpart what early 1950s morality will not allow the film to depict him doing. At issue here is the film’s concern with *lux*; we can not, the film suggests, whether a good cop or kept woman, shine very brightly. *The Big Heat*, therefore, makes a rather tough suggestion that updates and refuses utopian enlightenment beliefs about human perfectibility: more often than not fate determines that *lux* is the only kind of “light” that most modern subjects are likely to get. This cyclical pattern precludes illumination, leaving subjects to avail themselves of what *lux* they find around them if they are to “improve” in any way. *Noir*, then, is also a spatial metaphor for *lux*’s limited capacity to shed light on the subject.

A final example, *Mildred Pierce*, also illustrates well *lux*’s limited capacity. By the film’s middle point, divorced single mother Pierce (Joan Crawford), driven by her status obsessed and money hungry daughter, Veda (Ann Blyth), and her own ambition to better herself through hard work and its promise of material gain, has achieved all the markers of the American Dream—a successful business, shiny cars, luxurious homes, and lover Monte Beragon (Zachary Scott)—that come with it. Spectators soon learn, however, that a fall from the top can be swift and that luxury masks the corrupt venality of Pierce’s swindling lover and murdering daughter. In the film’s final
scene, set at dawn in a police interrogation room, after Pierce abandons the lie she has told to protect her daughter from prosecution, a detective raises the window blinds. *Lumen* floods the chamber and viewers comprehend that Pierce will succeed in regaining control of her life and moving beyond the limited world of *lux*. As she leaves police headquarters she approaches a light-filled archway through which she must pass and be bathed in the rising sun’s light. In the final shot, “The End” appears on the screen and spectators are witnesses to a writing over and banishment of the *noir* world by *lumen*.
**Tough Love, Tough Guise**

Kathleen: “You’re stubborn and impulsive and you think you’re tough. You’ve got some blind spots too.”
Brad: “Yeah? Name one.”
Kathleen: “Sentiment about women for instance. You’re afraid of emotion. You keep your heart in a sealed safe.”

*The Dark Corner*

Toughness is a fatalistic answer to modernity’s impossible demand to fully know one’s self—to generate sufficient light, both “inner” and technological, in a situation where the dark is a natural state. And this defensive posturing articulates to the difficulty or near impossibility of intimacy.

As *The Dark Corner*’s Kathleen implies, toughness is a *persona* in the word’s older meaning of a mask or an exterior one dons; and hence my earlier suggestion that toughness is related to the cosmetic ornamentation of a pure cosmopolitanism. But such armoring deflects consideration of tough guys’ unverifiable “inner” emotional “states”—performing toughness seemingly shields their fragility from the view of others and from themselves to the point that it limits their ability to achieve intimacy and full subjectivity. Because these protagonists are often incapable of giving adequate voice to their desires the mask may be all that remains.

In a homosocial world this defensive strategy appears a safe one in terms of the crisis of intimacy to which this toughness points, an observation resonant with Deborah Thomas’ assessment of the often-noted fragility of *noir* males in terms of the social construction of masculinity and masculinity’s blocked emotions. These blocked emotions, I suggest, link to the hegemonized expectation that we can all be fully enlightened subjects as well as to the inequitably distributed material and status rewards promised by the American Dream upon realization of this subjectivity. This is a patriarchal promise made largely to male breadwinners. *Noir* depicts the production of male toughness as an outcome of a patriarchal class system in which some non-powerful, non-elite white men can, like Saint Paul, “see through a glass, darkly.” The toughness that issues from the resulting alienation, moreover, confirms for such men, and
others who do not see past the performance, that tough guys cannot find the switch to turn on their love light. The noir male’s crisis of intimacy connects to this feeling of low wattage, a metaphor of powerlessness with knowledge without access to power. Subjectivity so organized suggests the extent to which these characters have accepted the ideology that the different scales of power, lux and subjectivity operate in tandem. Yet because tough guys doubt their inner light, tough performances can also be read as a quasi-ethical refusal of intimacy. Some tough guys don’t believe that they are able to take it on, or if they do take it on, they do so only as obsession. The instability or semi-autonomy of American work conditions and labor practices—Galt framed by a corrupt competitor, Bannion’s curtailment of privilege by the corrupt representatives of the State, the treasonous death of small businessman Bigelow—produces awareness of the erosion of one’s always already precarious subjectivity. After all, the fully enlightened subject is idealized as never on retainer. Within an earlier context, full independence was a liberating Jeffersonian message to citizen yeomen believing themselves connected to the purifying quality of the American landscape, but when such early modern ideals are reconfigured within post-war urban American contexts, what may once have been a utopian program for imagining social change degenerates into a regressive way of thinking about one’s place in the world. Toughness is one absurdly logical response, even in the face of love, death and mourning.

Donning a tough persona, or performing it obsessively so that it becomes the self, compensates for having internalized the belief that one has failed for not being fully in the know. Yet this remains a critical factor in understanding why these films achieved any degree of contemporary popularity or why they enjoy renewed appeal. This is why Walter Neff and Phyllis Dietrichson can be acknowledged if not finally loved by audiences because their experiences convey the quotidian reality of ambivalent and fractured subjectivity—the discrepant, reluctant
cosmopolitanism by which most Americans live their lives. These characters act out an excess of the armoring that spectator-citizens also take on or construct as part of making do. *Noir* protagonists enact our contradictory experiences of fragmentation of identity, eternal return of the same, and resulting confusion and pain.

Tough *noirs* are a protective stance: an ironic cultural technology of *lux* fetishistically deployed against fate and the incipiently violent world of which we each form a part. Within the convention of order, disorder, and return to order, *Double Indemnity*, *D.O.A.*, *The Big Heat*, and *In A Lonely Place* (Ray, 1950) posit loneliness as the normal way. Love ruptures this loneliness as a kind of disorder, but as Dave Bannion’s fate at the end of *The Big Heat* or that of survivors Dixon Steele (Humphrey Bogart) and Laurel Gray (Gloria Grahame) in the existential *In A Lonely Place* each suggest, it is to repression and isolation one inevitably returns. Therefore, the films offer an instruction in contradiction: Be tough in this dimly lit world, try to decide what you are, but conform or suffer the consequences. These characters “strike a pose.” Yet the resulting performances are less about the existential ideal that “what I am is for me to decide” than they are commodity-identities revealing that the absurd price of toughness is loss of intimacy compensated through the off-chance that contingency might favor the dimly-lit subject with good news.

If *noir* toughness depicts a Hollywood recognition of an individual’s relative powerlessness, then the protagonists discussed here judge themselves less as “other” or “askance positionalities” than as “lesser” beings; they frequently are depicted as seeing themselves as rotten or losers or both. The protagonists are often out of step with elites and the values of post-war mass culture, and at their best a number of these films question the socio-political contexts within which individual political realization is unequally organized. This remains a critical intervention largely absent in current Hollywood film. And yet, while the disorderliness in these
films opens a critique of American capitalism as enlightenment progress, by the films’ end protagonists often have become culpable monsters and audience members are left with a general comment on individual participation within “the human condition.”

In 1954, Robert Warshow observed that the gangster in American film “appeals to that side of all of us which refuses to believe in the ‘normal’ possibilities of happiness and achievement; the gangster is the ‘no’ to that great American ‘yes’ which is stamped so big over our official culture and yet has so little to do with the way we really feel about our lives” (454). Films noir at times operate similarly; they depict toughness at the core of American life, and enlightenment at the crossroads of fiction and non-fiction. Yet while closure is never complete, and audiences buy into narratives in a multiplicity of ways, the use of enlightenment tropes of illumination or the lack thereof instruct that “a little knowledge is a dangerous thing,” and work to reauthorize, within lux’s realm of popular culture, the voice of the father, the dollar sign, and the power of the state—all tough customers with whom post-war Hollywood made common cause.

Image Captions

Image 1. In the film’s penultimate scene, Lily Carver (Gaby Rodgers), has just killed her accomplice, believing this will allow her to have all money from the sale of their ill-gotten gains. Pandora-like, Carver lifts the lid of the stolen black box to see what treasures it contains. Previously poorly illuminated, her search for the truth leads to her death. Here she is consumed in flames by the technological lux of nuclear fission her forbidden action ignites.

Image 2. The Big Combo, Copyright Allied Artists, 1955.


Image 4. The look on Phyllis Dietrichson’s face as he holds her in his arms and shoots her. Double Indemnity, Copyright Paramount Pictures, 1945.

Image 5. Having learned he has been fatally poisoned, Bigelow stands beside a newsstand selling
Life magazine. As he gazes upward the camera takes his subject position and spectators join him in staring into lumen and its transformative power. D.O.A., Copyright United Artists, 1950.

Image 6. Debby March, cosmopolitan ornament, confirms her lux through the mirror. The Big Heat, Copyright Columbia Pictures, 1953


Notes

1. While many films noir deploy the relationship between light and subjectivity in ways that I discuss in this essay, I develop arguments around such films as Double Indemnity, D.O.A., The Big Combo, Kiss Me Deadly, and The Big Heat in part because they remain in video and DVD distribution and therefore are known to current audiences. Hopefully, readers may have seen at least one of these films and therefore have the opportunity of relating my arguments to their own viewing experiences.

2. Andrea Martin observes that the term femme fatale achieved definition when film theory remained male dominated and still grappling with how to position central female characters, including not only women who kill but also, for example, Laura and Gilda who pose no real threat to the lives of the men with whom they interact (206).

3. As a concept, Raymond Williams' term “structure of feeling” articulates a discursive structure underlying the shared values of a particular group, class or society. Such a structure sutures ideology to a collective cultural sensibility (63-64).

4. For a reading of noir as a racialized chronotope, see Julian Murphet 22-35.

5. I note the considerable history of this gendered observation. Similar phrases were authored earlier by Mae West, Sophie Tucker and Gertrude Stein.

6. For an inspired discussion of Laura’s status in the shift from a producer to a consumer economy, see Robert J. Corber 55-78.

7. While much has been written within film studies about the aesthetic use of light in film noir my emphasis is on the ways that noir can be seen as a theoretical, at times critical, depiction of philosophical conceptions of light. Jean-Pierre Geuen is also interested in the relationship between critical theory and lighting; he devotes a chapter (“Lighting”) to this relationship, with particular emphasis on Martin Heidegger’s discussion of Lichtung, concealment, and revelation.

8. See John Alton, director of photography for The Big Combo, for a detailed account of the use of lighting technologies in black and white film.
Works Cited


