THE INAUGURAL DR. SAUL AND DOROTHY KIT FILM NOIR FESTIVAL

THE STUFF THAT DREAMS ARE MADE OF
PARIS 1946 AND AMERICAN FILM NOIR

Dr. Saul and Dorothy Kit Film Noir Festival
March 21–25, 2018
“It was during the summer of 1946 that the French public experienced the revelation of a new kind of American film.” Thus begins Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton’s Panorama du film noir américain (1955), the first book ever written about a type of film that, in America, still had no name: film noir. This festival—the first in a ten-year series devoted to noir’s legacy—returns us to that moment of revelation just over 70 years ago.

The inaugural Dr. Saul and Dorothy Kit Film Noir Festival presents eight films that screened in Paris that season and inspired the label “film noir.”

The story of that christening is familiar to film history. With the war over and a backlog of wartime Hollywood films playing in Parisian movie theaters, French audiences immediately perceived a break from the style and genres of 1930s American cinema. In an August 1946 essay “Un nouveau genre ‘policier’: L’aventure criminelle,” critic Nino Frank spoke of a new generation of filmmakers, led by John Huston and Billy Wilder, who rejected the humanism of directors like John Ford and Frank Capra to explore “criminal psychology” and the “dynamism of violent death” in films like The Maltese Falcon (1941) and Double Indemnity (1944). Jean-Pierre Chartier made similar observations three months later in his essay “Les Américains aussi font des films noirs.” Chartier expressed surprise that Hollywood censors were now allowing the “pessimism and disgust toward humanity” of “films noirs” like Murder, My Sweet (1944).

This was not the first time that French critics had used the term “noir” to describe films. Before the war, right-wing critics employed the phrase as a pejorative to condemn the perceived amoralism of French poetic realist films like Marcel Carné’s Quai des brumes (1937) and Jean Renoir’s La Bête humaine (1938). What occurs in 1946, then, is both an extension of the term to American films (hence the title of Chartier’s essay: “Americans Also Make Films Noirs”) and a gradual slackening of the term’s initially negative connotations. No less than their poetic realist precursors, the American noirs were marked by a tone of moral fatalism, but now this began to draw critical praise as “oneiric, strange, erotic, ambivalent, and cruel,” to quote Panorama. The term noir was also in play during this period in the “Série noire” series of crime novels that Gallimard began publishing in 1945. These included translations of a new wave of English-language crime writers inspired by the American “hardboiled” school of detective fiction.
What, though, of the American films labeled noir by French film critics? The Hollywood pictures that played in Paris indeed testify to the strong influence of hardboiled fiction: James M. Cain (Double Indemnity), Dashiell Hammett (The Maltese Falcon), Cornell Woolrich (Phantom Lady), and Raymond Chandler (Murder, My Sweet) all received adaptations of their work, and Chandler further worked on the script for Double Indemnity. But noir was not coined solely in the image of the male gumshoe, and a closer look at the films that season reveals other trajectories that have been suppressed in more contemporary accounts of noir. No less conspicuous, for example, was a “noir-adjacent” series of what Borde and Chaumeton categorized as “crime films in period costume”—Gaslight (1944), The Lodger (1944), and The Suspect (1944)—all set in a fogbound Victorian London and which testify to noir’s relation to the Gothic. And what of the unexpected prominence of German émigré director Robert Siodmak, with two of his films on Parisian screens in 1946—Phantom Lady (1944) and The Suspect—and two more to come the following spring: The Spiral Staircase (1946) and The Killers (1946)? In returning to the moment of French critics’ “invention” of film noir, the inaugural Kit Noir Festival begins a rethinking of this most protean of film categories that subsequent iterations of the festival will continue.

Most films in the series are screened on 35mm at the Katharina Otto-Bernstein Screening Room. The capsule film summaries that follow are translated from French publications from the postwar period, where available.

**TICKET INFO**

Tickets: $12 General Admission / $10 Seniors (65 and older) / $8 Students

Packages: $40 for four films / $75 for all eight films

Advance ticket sales available online only

Day-of screening ticket sales available on-site, pending availability

For more information, contact filmnoir@columbia.edu.

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**WEDNESDAY, MARCH 21**

7:30 PM

THE ORIGINS OF FILM NOIR

KEYNOTE LECTURE BY JAMES NAREMORE,

INDIANA UNIVERSITY

THE LANTERN, LENFEST CENTER FOR THE ARTS

Welcome by Dean Carol Becker, Columbia University School of the Arts

Welcome by Gordon Kit, Columbia College ’76

Festival introduction by Rob King, Film and Media Studies

James Naremore will discuss the notorious problem of defining film noir, showing that it’s both an important cinematic legacy and an idea we’ve projected onto the past. The French originated the idea of American film noir in the decade after World War II, for reasons specific to their own culture; but popular memory of the films—often partial and inaccurate—has also been shaped by Hollywood itself, especially in the 1970s and ’80s. The meaning of the term has changed over time, and many generalizations about it are incorrect. Even so, Hollywood’s dark films of the 1940s have lost none of their fascination and remain a national treasure.

This event will be followed by a reception in The Lantern.
The immediate source of film noir is obviously the hard-boiled detective novel of American or English origin. Dashiell Hammett, whose earliest writings go back to around 1925, is both the creator of this new American literary current and an author whose talent largely transcends the framework of the genre (as does Georges Simenon in French). The latent homosexuality of his characters has almost always disappeared when their adventures have been transferred to the screen (*The Glass Key*). But then the fact that the first great film noir is precisely *The Maltese Falcon*, adapted from one of his finest tales, underlines Dashiell Hammett’s importance. […]

It must be said that the first few [noir] movies are not the product of original screenplays. From 1941 to 1945 the series is not yet a constituted genre, with its rules and stereotypes, its professional writers or its public: over a period of four years the titles are few. It may be assumed, then, that Hollywood producers have proceeded as usual. A new kind of detective novel began having a certain success, so they tried to adapt the same themes to the screen. This they did with extreme prudence, however. […] Backing was extremely limited: a mere handful of low-budget films was the result.

*The Maltese Falcon* suffers from this lack of means: there are a lot of apartment scenes, few characters, no extras, a dearth of technical innovation. A star is called in, Humphrey Bogart, who appears to be over the hill (but who will in fact carve out a new career in the series), and a director, John Huston, whose first film this is. […]

In short, there is at first, and for seemingly financial reasons, a total submission of the cinema to literature.

—Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton, *Panorama du film noir américain, 1941-1953*

"Her kiss makes him kill." Thus, in the middle of a bloodstain, do the posters sum up the argument of Billy Wilder’s *Double Indemnity*. The formula would also suit *Murder, My Sweet*, by Edward Dmytryk, and it applies too to *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, which is currently a great success in the United States. One can understand why the Hays Office had for years banned the cinematic adaptation of the two James M. Cain novels from which *Double Indemnity* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* derive. What is less understandable, from the point of view of this virtuous censorship, is that this prohibition has now been lifted, for it is hard to imagine how one could go further in pessimism and contempt for humanity.

No doubt the conventions of the detective story play their part: one must have a corpse, after all, and murder will always be immoral. Still, with a sympathetic detective and a good proportion of innocents, trust in human nature could still be rewarded. In *Double Indemnity*, however, as in *Murder, My Sweet*, all the characters are more or less ignoble. Even though a pure young girl shows up in each to leave hope for the next generation, the female characters in these films are particularly terrible. […]

There was once talk of a French school of film noir, but *Port of Shadows* or *Hôtel du nord* at least had some hints of resistance: love passed there as the mirage of a better world; an implicit social claim opened the door to hope; and, if the characters were desperate, they nonetheless aroused our pity or sympathy. Nothing of the sort here: these characters are deranged monsters and criminals that nothing excuses and whose actions imply that the only source for the fatality of evil is in themselves.

A few years before the war, American cinema had launched a new formula: the costume drama situated between 1830 and 1910. This was the fashion for the “period film.” […] The years 1944–45 witnessed the conjunction of this style with the noir series. A twofold explanation for this could easily be found: the noir atmosphere signified renewal for the period film model, and the faded charm of the setting provided an alibi for film noir. […]

In 1944 John Brahm made, in The Lodger [a remake of the 1927 Alfred Hitchcock picture], an engaging film in which atmosphere was created by the lighting, by the London background of highly sinister furnished rooms, by the pallid face of a killer with limpid eyes, Laird Cregar, by a judicious use of water and the river, and by immense discretion in the violence. We weren’t present at Jack the Ripper’s murders. They were suggested. But then that woman’s expression at the approach of the killer, that body quaking with fear, were more gripping than the killing itself.

—Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton,
Panorama du film noir américain, 1941–1953

It was with some surprise, a few years back, that older Parisians learned the recipe for light comedy from Hollywood. It is with the same surprise that we now learn from the same American filmmakers how to apply an intellectual approach to so-called commercial filmmaking and the possibility of an “interior” treatment of a subject. […]

In preference to other productions, Laura probably counts more in support of this theory than examples from the works of Orson Welles or Preston Sturges, because the intellectualism of these is obvious, by virtue of the very way in which they choose and treat their stories. But Laura is a simple detective story. […]

Leave it to others to establish whether the crime novel is becoming a new form of the novel tout court, and whether it will be thanks to cinema, rather than the pen of a Bernanos or a Huxley, that crime fiction will acquire its titles of nobility. We simply start from the fact that Hollywood writers and directors have chosen this most popular literary genre as the vehicle for a minor cinematographic and intellectual revolution.

—Jacques Doniol-Valcroze and Amable Jameson,
“Laura by Otto Preminger,” La Revue du cinéma, November 1946
In 1972, the young screenwriter and soon-to-be-director Paul Schrader published “Notes on Film Noir” in Film Comment. Among the most influential essays on the topic in the English language, Schrader’s piece helped establish noir on the agenda of American film scholarship and criticism. In conversation with Film and Media Studies professor Annette Insdorf, Schrader today returns to that essay to consider noir’s relevance to the New Hollywood of the 1970s and its continued legacy into the present.

Like many new American films, Double Indemnity and Murder, My Sweet are told in the first person. [...] The narrator of Murder, My Sweet is a private detective. He is thrown into a dark story of which he knows neither the ins nor the outs. The obscurity of the film’s plot is intentional, as is the imbroglio into which the spectator is plunged. Murder, My Sweet is not an ordinary detective film that reveals, in sequence, the facts of a clearly stated problem: its script is not a riddle intended to exercise the viewer’s intelligence; it does not aim to intrigue but to create an atmosphere of terror. Because we do not understand, we feel threatened by unknown dangers. Murder, My Sweet really deserves the name of “thriller”: the first-person narration is used to give the viewer the delicious thrill of fear. This tendency is pushed very far. The policeman is knocked out several times during the film and each time the screen tries to suggest the victim’s impressions; this gives us swirling shapes that remind us of the quest for “pure cinema” and the reconstruction of nightmare and visual disturbance in the style of the old avant-garde.

—Jean-Pierre Chartier,
“The Americans Also Make Films Noirs,”
La Revue du cinéma, November 1946
SUNDAY, MARCH 25

1:00 PM
THE SUSPECT
THE KATHARINA OTTO-BERNSTEIN SCREENING ROOM, LENFEST CENTER FOR THE ARTS

1944 / 85 min / b/w
Cast: Charles Laughton, Ella Raines, Rosalind Ivan
Paris release: Aug. 21, 1946
Adapted from: This Way Out (1939) by James Ronald
35mm print courtesy of Universal Pictures

The interesting early titles from Robert Siodmak’s American career would have to be related to the noir period style. In Europe, the skillful touch of this German director had long been known. To him we owed a number of realist films (Autour d’une enquête in 1931 and Tumultes in 1932), various comedies, one of the first films of implicit psychoanalysis (Pièges, in 1939), and, above all, a psychological drama of great acuity (Mollenard, in 1938). With their customary contempt for European directors, Hollywood producers first of all bestowed on Siodmak subjects that were unworthy of him. He signed that awesome potboiler, Cobra Woman. Another early film, Phantom Lady (1944), was a brilliant thriller with clever lighting. It bore the acid charm of its heroine, Ella Raines, and contained five ear-splitting minutes of jazz. Nevertheless, it’s the noirified period style that helped Siodmak make a name for himself, first with The Suspect (1944), the story of a double crime, again with a London atmosphere, haunted here by a murderer, played by Charles Laughton, with a good-natured way to him. [Then] a year later, The Spiral Staircase made the most of a story about criminal madness in a period setting. […] Siodmak’s reputation was henceforth secure.

—Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton, Panorama du film noir américain, 1941–1953

3:00 PM

3:30 PM
PHANTOM LADY
THE KATHARINA OTTO-BERNSTEIN SCREENING ROOM, LENFEST CENTER FOR THE ARTS

1944 / 87 min / b/w
Dir. Robert Siodmak / Scr. Bernard C. Schoenfeld
Cast: Alan Curtis, Ella Raines, Franchot Tone
Adapted from: Phantom Lady (1942) by Cornell Woolrich under pseudonym William Irish
35mm print courtesy of Universal Pictures

The screening of Phantom Lady will be followed by a lecture by Thomas Elsaesser, Film and Media Studies: “Film Noir as the Long Shadow of Weimar Germany: Robert Siodmak’s Phantom Lady.”

The connection between German expressionist cinema, Hollywood’s German émigré directors, and American film noir has become one of the most common assumptions in film history. Taking the career of one of these émigrés—the one most closely identified with film noir, Robert Siodmak—as an example, Elsaesser will show how this assumption of “influence” relies not only on a problematic notion of history, but—in the case of Siodmak’s possibly most successful film noir, Phantom Lady—also throws into confusion the idea of authorial intentionality, as well as causality and chronology. In short, Elsaesser will put Phantom Lady at the center of a phantom (film noir) history.
7:00 PM
SCARLET STREET
THE KATHARINA OTTO-BERNSTEIN SCREENING ROOM, LENFEST CENTER FOR THE ARTS

1945 / 102 min / b/w
Dir. Fritz Lang / Scr. Dudley Nichols
Cast: Edward G. Robinson, Joan Bennett, Dan Duryea
Adapted from: La Chienne (1930) by Georges de la Fouchardière
Paris release: Jan. 29, 1947
35mm print courtesy of the Library of Congress

Fritz Lang has never, during the course of his American career, been a director of the strange. A specialist, just before the war, in well-crafted social drama (Fury, You Only Live Once), he was and still is extremely foreign to the new atmosphere. […] [Scarlet Street] is a remake of the Renoir movie La Chienne, which had blazed the trail in 1931 for French realism. Never uninteresting, although more might have been expected of its creator, the work is mainly memorable for its fascinating orchestration of remorse. The murderer of a woman who’d rejected him, Edward G. Robinson wanders through the town, haunted by the voice of his victim, who endlessly repeats the name of the man she loved and who Robinson has just let be condemned in his place. Censorship has been at work and we haven’t seen the best scene: the killer, perched on a post carrying electric cables, listening with delight to the buzzing of the current that’s going to electrocute the innocent love. We’ve been deprived of an exemplary sequence here.

—Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton, Panorama du film noir américain, 1941–1953

SUGGESTED READING


Vincent Brook, Driven to Darkness: Jewish Émigré Directors and the Rise of Film Noir (Rutgers University Press, 2009)

Thomas Elsaesser, Weimar Cinema and After: Germany’s Historical Imaginary (Routledge, 2000)


Charles O’Brien, “Film Noir in France: Before the Liberation,” iris 21 (Spring 1996): 7-20

Paul Schrader, “Notes on Film Noir,” Film Comment 8.1 (Spring 1972): 8-13
ABOUT THE SPEAKERS

THOMAS ELSAESSER

Thomas Elsaesser is Professor Emeritus at the Department of Media and Culture of the University of Amsterdam. He has authored and edited some 20 volumes on film history, film theory, media archaeology, and new media and installation art. Among his recent books are *Film Theory: An Introduction through the Senses* (2nd ed., 2015) and *Film History as Media Archaeology* (2016). He has just completed a book on *European Cinema and Continental Philosophy: Film as Thought Experiment* (2018). And he is also writer-director of the film *The Sun Island*, which premiered at the Kassel Documentary Festival last year. Since 2013 he has taught part-time at Columbia University.

ANNETTE INSDORF


ROB KING

Rob King is a film historian with interests in American genre cinema, popular culture, and social history. Much of his work has been on comedy. His award-winning *The Fun Factory: The Keystone Film Company and the Emergence of Mass Culture* (University of California Press, 2009) examined the role Keystone’s filmmakers played in developing new styles of slapstick comedy for moviegoers of the 1910s. His recent follow-up, *Hokum! The Early Sound Slapstick Short and Depression-Era Mass Culture* (University of California Press, 2017), challenges the received wisdom that sound destroyed the slapstick tradition. He is also working as co-editor of the Oxford University Press’s *Oxford Handbook of Early Cinema*, which is scheduled for publication in 2019.

JAMES NAREMORE


PAUL SCHRADER

Paul Schrader is a celebrated American screenwriter, filmmaker, and film critic. He is most notably known as the screenwriter on four of Martin Scorsese’s films: *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Raging Bull* (1980), *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), and *Bringing Out the Dead* (1999). Schrader has also directed several films, including *Blue Collar* (1978), *American Gigolo* (1980), *Affliction* (1997), and *The Canyons* (2013). As a film critic, he has written for the *Los Angeles Free Press* and *Film Comment* and published the book *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* in 1972. That same year he also wrote the seminal article “Notes on Film Noir” for *Film Comment*. His latest film is *First Reformed* (2017).

ABOUT DR. SAUL AND DOROTHY KIT

Born and raised in the early 1920s in the New York Metropolitan area, Dr. Saul Kit (Passaic, New Jersey) and Dorothy Anken Kit (Jackson Heights, Queens) were lovers of literature, theater, and film. Dorothy, an interior decorator, wrote poetry and plays in her leisure time and had a strong artistic bent, which included creating needlepoint designs based on famous works of art as well as her own original patterns, many of which were commissioned by her friends. A GI Bill undergraduate at the University of California, Berkeley, Saul went on to receive his PhD in Biochemistry from Berkeley, the location of the birth of their oldest child Sally (Syracuse, Class of ’71). Saul carried out his post-doctoral studies at the University of Chicago, where his first son, Malon (Columbia School of Engineering, Class of ’73), was born. Suffering from the bitter cold winters of Chicago, Saul subsequently moved the family to the warmest place he could find a job, Houston, Texas, where his second son, Gordon (Columbia College, Class of ’76) was born. Saul’s extraordinary 35-year scientific career included
important discoveries in cancer, virology, and vaccine research. He was Chief of the section of Nucleoprotein Metabolism in the Department of Biochemistry at M.D. Anderson Hospital, and later Professor and Head of the Division of Biochemical Virology at Baylor College of Medicine, both in Houston. Saul was a recipient of numerous research grants from various government and private organizations, including the National Institutes of Health, National Science Foundation, and The American Cancer Society. In recognition of over 25 years of service, he received a Research Career Award from the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. In 1987, Saul, along with his son Malon, were honored with the Distinguished Inventor of the Year Award for developing the world's first genetically engineered vaccine to be licensed by the US government. Saul and Malon were granted numerous United States and international patents for their pioneering vaccine inventions, aided by their patent attorney son/brother, Gordon. Gordon's generous gift to Columbia funds the Film Noir Festival in honor of his parents.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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