

ICLICE 2015 34 Alan Brayne

## Homosexual Men in Classic Film Noir

Alan Brayne  
Writing Centre MIT/SUTD  
Boston, Massachusetts USA/Singapore  
alanbrayne@yahoo.co.uk

### ABSTRACT

Restricted by a Production Code that stipulated there was to be no mention whatsoever of “sex perversion”, representations of homosexual men in classic film noir were bound to be elliptical. This does not mean, however, that there were no homosexual characters in the noir films from 1941-1958. But they had to be suggested rather than directly shown, and signalled to the audience through various codes. A common stereotype was that of the “sissy” who was simultaneously ridiculous (because he had traits which were supposed to belong to a woman) and unsettling (because, unlike the male protagonists, he understood women and womanly things). Homosexual pairings, meanwhile, were often depicted in terms of faux father-son relationships, in which the older man seduced, dominated and controlled the younger. When the two men were of roughly similar age, aspects of this father/son relationship remained, but one man (usually the more outré/debauched/queer) was seen as a corrupting influence, leading the other into immoral behaviour. These characters performed two main functions in classic noir. First, they added exoticism, danger, and an air of moral depravity, decadence and evil. Second, they served as a contrast to the normative masculinity of the hero, especially the hard-boiled detective, and, like the femme fatale, acted as a threat to this masculinity.

### Introduction

The years between 1941 and 1958 are frequently cited as the period of classic film noir (Schrader, 1972; Naremore, 1998). These were also years (at least until 1954) when the Production Code operated under the draconian regime of Joseph Breen. One of the things that was strictly prohibited by this Code was “any inference” of “sex perversion” (Kaszas, 2014), which included homosexuality (a prohibition officially rescinded in 1962 following pressure from the film director, Otto Preminger) (Phillips, 2000). Although the iron grip of the Code began to loosen slightly as the 1950s progressed, especially after Breen stepped down in 1954, Joseph McCarthy was active during this time against both Hollywood in the “Red Scare” and homosexuals in the “Lavender Scare” (Russo, 1987). In addition, The House UnAmerican Activities Committee (HUAC) started investigating Hollywood actors, writers and directors for communist sympathies from 1947 onwards, leading to the blacklisting of the Hollywood Ten (Georgakas, 1992). All of this meant there was no opportunity to introduce characters in classic film noir who were openly identified as homosexual, and film directors had to resort to various semiotic ruses in order to include them. This led to a reliance on stereotypes, particularly those of the effeminate sissy and the psychotic queer. In addition, lack of public awareness of homosexuality, allied to the evasions demanded by censorship, often created confusion and contradiction within the works.

### Character Type: The Effeminate Homosexual Man

The restrictions of the Production Code meant that a series of objects traditionally associated with women came to serve as signifiers of male homosexuality. Perfume was one. In *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), Sam Spade's secretary hands Spade a business card from a male visitor, Spade sniffs the card, and the secretary then identifies the fragrance as "gardenia". A brief exchange of mocking looks confirms, for both characters and audience, that the visitor (Joe Cairo) is a homosexual. In a very similar scene in *Murder My Sweet* (1944), the lift attendant tells Marlowe that he has a visitor in his office, and offers the information that "He smells real nice". Another character later describes this man (Lindsay Marriott) as one of the "beautiful young men who use rose water". In *Laura* (1944), bottles of lotions and fragrances bedeck the dressing table of the homosexual aesthete, Waldo Lydecker.

Clothes and accoutrements also play an essential role as homosexual signifiers. In contrast to the crumpled suits and ubiquitous trench coats of the masculine leads, the effeminate homosexual man is always immaculately dressed and groomed. Cairo wears a bowtie and white gloves, has shiny hair permed in tight curls, keeps a scented handkerchief in his wallet, and carries a cane. His first complaint after being punched by Spade is, "Look what you did to my shirt." Marriott has a camel hair coat, an elaborately folded scarf, and a fastidiously maintained pencil moustache. Lydecker wears tailored jackets and expensive suits, and boasts of the fame of "Waldo Lydecker's walking stick and carnation". Bruno in *Strangers on a Train* (1951) boasts a range of dapper ties, a personalized tie clip and a selection of bespoke jackets and suits in public, while at home he lounges around in an ornately patterned silk dressing gown and pajamas. All five men wear handkerchiefs meticulously folded in their breast pockets.

Knowledge and love of art is another frequent signifier. At the beginning of *Laura*, the camera slowly pans through Lydecker's apartment, which feels more like a museum than a place to live, with vases and ornaments behind glass cases, traditional paintings on the walls, and an antique clock. The fastidious Lydecker writes with a goose quill and "hates pens". He is an expert on art – before the film begins, he has already disposed of one rival for Laura's loyalty by writing a scathing review of the man's paintings in his newspaper column. The perfumed Marriott in *Murder My Sweet* is said to have "fancied himself a sculptor". In *The Maltese Falcon*, both of the male characters (Joe Cairo and Kasper Gutman) who are searching for the "black bird" are homosexual, and their obsessive interest seems driven as much by aesthetics as by money.

An interest and skill in "feminine" pursuits is another key signifier. Lydecker brags that he has created Laura's image, personally choosing her hairstyle and clothes. A character says of Marriott, "Women liked him around – he was interested in clothes and jewelry". This leads to a further characteristic traditionally ascribed to women – narcissism. Lydecker's dressing room is full of mirrors and he later says, "In my case, self-absorption is completely justified. I haven't discovered any other subject quite so worthy of my attention."

Finally, the effeminate male homosexual is a physical weakling and a coward. Spade knocks Cairo out with almost no effort. At a later point, Cairo and the femme fatale, Brigid O'Shaughnessy, are left alone in Spade's office and Cairo needs to shout for help and be rescued from her during a physical altercation between them. When Marriott asks Marlowe to accompany him to a blackmail pay-out, Marlowe asks if he wants him there to "hold his hand". Nor do these characters show emotional strength, for they are unable to control their emotions. Once the "black bird" is shown to be a fake, Cairo breaks into loud sobs and collapses into a chair. After discovering that Laura is still alive, Lydecker faints.

He pop pills for what seems like some kind of nervous condition, as does Cairo (although in his case these could also possibly be peppermints to sweeten his breath).

### **Contradictions in the Effeminate Homosexual Role**

The depiction of the effeminate male homosexual in classic film noir seems clear and simple. Weak, vain, artistic, fashionable, effete, overly emotional – this is a stereotype very much alive today, which most people would instantly recognize. Indeed, the character of the “sissy” had been a feature of several pre-Code movies, usually for comic effect, (Russo, 1987) and films noirs, unable to directly raise the topic of homosexuality, relied heavily on public awareness of this stereotype to signal its presence.

However, in noir this effeminate stereotype is more complicated than first appears, since characters who are clearly signaled as homosexual often also seek some sort of romantic attachment with women. Thus, Marriott is painted as a gigolo, one of those “pretty guys who take you dancing”, who earns his living from blackmailing rich women he has compromised. In *Laura*, Lydecker is portrayed as a rival to the detective hero, McPherson, for Laura’s love. There is also a second rival who shares many of the traits of Lydecker – Shelby Carpenter, who is engaged to become Laura’s husband (at this point Laura begins to look suspiciously like a fag hag!). Carpenter is a spoilt young man who bears many of the signs of the effeminate homosexual male; in one scene of waspish bitchery between the two, Lydecker calls him “a male beauty in distress”. Carpenter dresses immaculately, is weak, witty and narcissistic – (“I can afford a blemish on my character, but not on my clothes”) – and shares Marriott’s talent for using his looks and charm to exploit women.

This ostensible contradiction of a male homosexual who pursues women is probably instrumental. The figures of the effeminate aesthete and the perfumed gigolo allowed noir to simultaneously portray and deny homosexual characters. In order to circumvent the strictures of the Production Code, film-makers had to be able to deny that they were portraying homosexuals. One possible way of doing this was to point out that these characters were trying to win the love of the women in the film. In the 1940s, audiences also seemed less likely to assume that people who were dating were having a sexual relationship, so they may not have viewed sexual services as part of Marriott’s and Carpenter’s role. There is certainly no indication of sexual desire on the part of these men for the women they pursue. Lydecker’s horror of sexual contact is made clear when he says to Laura about her attachment to McPherson, “I hope you’ll never regret what promises to be a disgustingly earthy relationship”, and he denigrates McPherson as “muscular and handsome, in a cheap sort of way”. Characters who are signified as homosexual are thus simultaneously de-sexed, and rendered safe.

Yet, although the writers of films noirs needed to keep one eye on the Production Code, they still managed to slip in a few quick, but unequivocal, indicators that these characters were sexually interested in other men. For example, at one point in *The Maltese Falcon*, Cairo and Brigid O’Shaughnessy, are squabbling about Gutman’s “gunsel” – slang for a young thug who served as the passive partner of an older criminal (merriam-webster.com). She says, “You might be able to get around him, Joel, as you did the one in Istanbul”. Joel replies, “you mean the one you couldn’t get to ...” before she slaps him on the face. It didn’t take much imagination on the part of the audience to figure out why Joel could “get around” the young man while O’Shaughnessy couldn’t, nor what the young man refused to do with her.

### Tough Guys/Psychos and Faux Father/Son Relationships

A strong relationship between two men forms an important component of many classic Hollywood films in various genres. The relationship between Keyes and Neff in *Double Indemnity* (1944), for instance, is almost the only glimpse of warmth in an icy movie. Early in the movie, and again at the very end, Neff says to Keyes “I love you too.”, and when Neff explains that “The guy you were looking for was too close. Right across the desk from you.”, Keyes replies “Closer than that, Walter.” This is not to suggest homosexual attraction between the men (although the motif of the lighting of cigars and cigarettes between them that runs through the film – an act which is often charged with sexual meaning in classic films (Harmetz, 1992) – is at least intriguing). It seems far more sensible, though, to view their love as homosocial, with Keyes acting as a kind of surrogate father to the younger man. And, although he fails to rescue Neff from disaster, he is portrayed as a good role model who would have led his “son” to a decent future if only the younger man had heeded his advice.

In films where this love is depicted as *homosexual* rather than homosocial, though, the paternal role model becomes totally negative. This can be seen in the relationship between the older villain, Gutman, and his younger thug, Wilmer, in *The Maltese Falcon*. On three occasions in the film, Spade refers to Wilmer as Gutman’s “gunsel”: Yiddish slang for the younger passive partner of an older man. (Indeed, the sexual nature of the relationship was much clearer in the 1931 version of the film, and even more so in the original novel.) “Gunsel” probably got past the Censor in 1941 on the assumption that it was related in some way to “gun”, whereas, according to etymonline.com, the word came from the German for “gosling” and was definitely sexual in connotation. Gutman’s “fondness” for Wilmer, however, does not prevent the older man from setting the boy up as the fall guy near the end of the movie. Although he says that he feels towards Wilmer “just exactly as if he were [his] own son”, he later states “If you lose a son, it’s possible to get another one. There’s only one Maltese Falcon.”

The older man in the faux father/son relationship is sometimes depicted as bisexual. There is an example of this in *The Big Sleep* (1946), from the novel by Raymond Chandler, between a bisexual older criminal, Geiger, and his young gunsel, Carol Lundgren (the ambiguous first name seems significant). In the novel, Chandler does not mince words: he likens Geiger to Caesar (“a husband to women and a wife to men”), and calls him a “queen” and “fag”, while his young protégé is dismissed as a “pansy” (Wolfe, 1985). Produced under the threat of the Production Code, however, the film is circumspect about this to the point where it becomes difficult to follow the plot and understand why Lundgren seeks revenge for Geiger’s death. Homosexuality becomes almost invisible, except for knowing members of the audience who could decode the customary signifiers that also feature in movies like *Laura* and *Strangers on a Train*: Geiger’s “overdecorated residence ... all beaded curtains and sculptured vases ... the florid silk dressing gown” (Phillips, 2000, p.61).

The gunsel is not in any way effeminate: he is psychotically male. Wilmer, for example, is desperate to prove himself a tough guy and a hoodlum. This leads to a vastly different semiotics from that of the sissy: Wilmer’s insolent, snarling body language and trench coat, or Lundgren’s leather jacket. However, because of the gunsel’s homosexuality, the everyday physical threat of the violent thug becomes allied to an existential threat to the hero’s masculinity. The response on the part of the detective hero is an aggression that feels tinged with alarm. As Morris (2002) astutely points out, one of the few points in *The Maltese Falcon* at which Spade’s tough, sardonic facade threatens to crack results from Wilmer’s constant stalking of him. He tells Wilmer, “Keep your paws off me”, and warns Gutman to stop “that gunsel” from following him around: “I’ll kill him

if you don't, I'll kill him." The gunsels' psychotic violence becomes linked to his sexuality and because of this he is a greater threat to the heterosexual hero than the routine hitman or thug.

This linking of psychosis and homosexuality is depicted very clearly in *The Glass Key* (1942), in which the hoodlum, Jeff, beats up the handsome hero, Ed Beaumont, whilst calling him "sweetheart", "sweetie pie", "baby", and "cuddles". Jeff touches – even paws – Beaumont in a way that is rare between two men in noir and suggests repressed sexual desire. He asks "What do you suppose gives me such a boost out of slugging you?", but remains blind to the obvious answer: latent homosexual urges. In addition, Dyer (1977, 1998) makes a plausible case for repressed homosexuality in Captain Munsey, the vicious prison warden who enjoys beating prisoners while listening to classical music in *Brute Force* (1947).

Violence is a key element in *Gilda* (1946), which includes a faux father-son relationship between Ballin Mundson and Johnny Farrell. At the start of the film, Johnny is rescued by Ballin from a mugger. It is night in a shady part of town. In the conversation that follows, Johnny suggests that Ballin "must lead a gay life", a word that was already commonly used in homosexual patois, according to Dyer (2002), and then asks "What are you doing in a neighbourhood like this?" The obvious answer, at least for more knowing members of the audience, is that Ballin is cruising for "rough trade" (Kaszas, 2014). The two men then make several references to the phallic cane with built-in knife which Ballin has used to rescue Johnny and which he terms his "little friend" (a phrase which is also slang for both a penis and a gun, according to [urbandictionary.com](http://urbandictionary.com)).

After they light cigarettes, amid eye contact that is held a fraction too long in a way that Hollywood film often uses to signal sexual attraction between heterosexual couples (Wolfe, 1985), Ballin invites Johnny to his casino. In the casino, Johnny offers to work for Ballin, but his words are heavy with suggestion: "You've no idea how faithful and obedient I can be – for a nice salary." Ballin replies that "This I must be sure of. There is no woman anywhere." The two men agree that gambling and women don't mix, before Johnny officially begins work for Ballin.

So is Johnny essentially a rent boy, providing sex purely for money? After all, Ballin later makes clear, "I bought her [Gilda] Johnny, just as I bought you." Yet Johnny's hustling seems unusually passionate, judging by his language: "I was born last night when you met me in that alley". When Ballin returns to the casino after a long absence, there is a scene on the stairs when Johnny looks at him with the intensity of a lover rather than the emotional distance of an employee. But Ballin has brought Gilda back home as his wife, and when he tells Johnny that he is "mad about her", Johnny clearly finds this hard to take. In one voice-over that is particularly resonant with sexual sub-text, Johnny imagines Ballin and Gilda together: "I wanted to go back up in that room and hit her. What scared me was, I wanted to hit him, too. I wanted to go back and see them together with me not watching. I wanted to know."

There seems little doubt that Ballin and Johnny have some kind of sexual relationship: the actor Glenn Ford is reported as stating that both he and George Macready (Ballin) were well aware that the characters they were playing were homosexual (Russo, 1987). And yet both men also have an intense relationship with Gilda – Johnny as her lover in the past, and Ballin as her husband in the present. This makes *Gilda* perhaps the most intriguing of all films noirs in psychosexual terms: the triangle between the three characters bears, as one of the other characters in the movie says, "the most curious love-hate pattern". One thing Ballin and Johnny do seem to share is a sadistic pleasure in hurting and humiliating Gilda. The movie is a study in hatred and, in particular, misogyny: a theme that is endemic to film noir, according to Jacques Siclier (1996). The stereotype of

the psychotic homosexual is used as a way to show this misogyny, and Ballin, the older evil queer, (who describes women at one point as “funny little creatures” that he “[doesn’t] know much about”), will never shed this hostility and ignorance. In comparison, his younger protégé, Johnny, “can still be “redeemed” for his sins” (Kaszas, 2014) by leaving with Gilda in the final moments of the film, apparently en route to the happy ending of heterosexual marriage.

### **Homosexual Relationships: Young Men of Similar Ages**

Although the similarity in age introduces greater equality into these relationships, elements of the father-son dyad remain, as does the figure of the psychotic male. One of the two men tends to dominate the other, or seduces him into immoral behavior, in a similar way to that in which the “father” corrupts the faux son. This is usually the young man who is marked as fully “queer”, and therefore more evil.

These dynamics operate between Guy and Bruno in Hitchcock’s *Strangers on a Train*, although there is no question of a sexual relationship between them. Indeed, their personalities and sexualities are contrasted with each other throughout the film. Even their names – Guy as typical American and Bruno as foreign Other (taken from the novel on which the movie is based) – serve as unambiguous signifiers. Bruno is a brilliant dilettante with artistic leanings; Guy is a successful sportsman (tennis player) with a rather bland personality (this was a change on Hitchcock’s part; in the novel Guy is an architect). Bruno dresses fastidiously and often rather flashily; Guy’s dress sense is neat, conventional and dull. The opening shots of the movie show them boarding a train, but the audience sees only their feet: Bruno is wearing spats, whereas Guy has sensible leather shoes. Hitchcock even goes so far as to differentiate them in their choice of nightclothes: Bruno’s ornate and patterned silk dressing gown in contrast to Guy’s old-fashioned bathrobe and babyish striped pajamas.

Throughout the movie Bruno is depicted as would-be seducer. On the most obvious level, this is his attempt to implicate Guy in his plan for “criss-cross” murders, but Hitchcock’s subtlety as a director means that he manages to also suggest subliminal sexual seduction, most notably in the opening scene where the two men meet for the first time and the later scene when Bruno sits up in bed and waits for Guy to arrive in his room. Indeed, in the version of the film made for release in Britain, the opening scene contains dialogue – removed in America because of the Production Code – which reveals Bruno’s homosexuality much more explicitly ((Phillips, 2000, p.214). It is arguably this sexual subtext, rather than the open invitation to murder, which audiences in 1951 found the truly disturbing aspect of the movie.

Certainly, much of the film’s fascination seems to stem from a sense that part of Guy is subconsciously responsive to the seduction at the levels of both murder and sex. When the men meet on the train, it is Guy’s foot that accidentally hits Bruno’s under the table (Hitchcock making a joke on “playing footsie”), although strangely it is Bruno who apologizes. In the scene where Guy finds out that Miriam has been murdered, he slips behind a gate next to Bruno, so that the audience sees them together behind the iron bars, conspirators in murder, but potentially also in behavior that was as shocking as murder at the time. It can even be argued that Hitchcock slyly includes a sartorial signifier of Guy’s sexual indeterminacy: whereas Bruno always has a handkerchief perched in his breast pocket, Guy is sometimes shown with, sometimes without. Only once in the movie does Guy really lose control, and that is when Bruno tells him, “But Guy, I like you.” Guy’s immediate, instinctive reaction is to punch Bruno, but almost at once he is straightening his bow tie like a mother or a lover making up after a tiff.

Another Hitchcock film, *Rope* (1948), would be denied entry to the noir canon by some purist critics since it is in Technicolor, but its content is pure noir, based on the true story of two homosexuals, Leopold and Loeb, who murdered a teenage boy. In the movie these become wealthy Harvard student-aesthetes, Brandon Shaw and Philip Morgan, who live together in a glamorous, stylish apartment and whose homosexuality is coded through the usual signifiers of immaculate dress, love of art, and perfume (a female character tells Brandon that “he smells dreamy” on arriving at their party). The link between homosexuality and moral decay is mined to the full in a film that explores and condemns the populist interpretation of Nietzsche’s *ubermensch* as a being who transcends the normal dictates of morality, even to the point of having the right to commit murder.

Brandon and Philip are contrasted in a similar way to Bruno and Guy, with the former seducing and corrupting the latter, who tells him, “You frighten me. You always have. Part of your charm, I suppose”. Brandon is portrayed as a monster of manipulation, insincerity and egomania, his surface charm concealing a total lack of concern for other human beings – the homosexual as psychotic. His protégé, Philip, is much more sensitive – suggested by his silky piano playing – and comes close to breaking down under the pressure of what they have done. When this happens, Brandon takes control, ordering Philip around and even slapping his face to bring him back to his senses. Once more a homosexual relationship is defined by an imbalance of power between a dominant evil seducer and a vacillating, weak-willed seduced.

In films noirs, as we have seen, there is often an “ideological pairing of male homosexuality with luxury and decadence” (Dyer, 1977). A rare contrast to this is supplied by Fante and Mingo, two homosexual hoods who act as hitmen in *The Big Combo* (1955). Since they are thuggish rather than effeminate, their sexuality needs to be signified differently: by showing that they share a room, and by brief moments of physical contact (a hand on the back of the neck, a light touch on the upper arm) that would not take place between two such thugs. The father-son aspect remains, however. Fante takes charge at all times, sharing out the money that they earn and warning Mingo at one point not to drink too much. Mingo, as the younger, weaker character, also shows far more emotional attachment than Fante. In the end, as Fante lies dying, Mingo begs, “Don’t leave me, Fante.” But despite this moment of tenderness and commitment, both men elsewhere show a psychotic disregard for other people, feeling no regret about gunning down innocent victims as part of their work.

### **Significance and Function of Homosexuality in Noir**

Social attitudes towards homosexuality have changed so radically over the past sixty years that it becomes essential to try to place ourselves in a very different world when we study classic film noir. There are certainly no *gay* characters in the modern sense since the post-Stonewall self-identity was not an option at the time. On the contrary, during the period of classic film noir, homosexuality was either hidden from sight or reviled and persecuted. Positive public images simply did not exist, and a blanket of silence kept the topic concealed from public view.

Yet homosexuality made a semi-veiled appearance in several films noirs. Its first, obvious function was to add to the atmosphere of exoticism, and particularly of perversity and evil. Noir offered a glimpse into a dangerous and immoral world that was alien to most Americans. Both the effeminate sissy and the evil psychotic could be placed in front of the camera to enhance this mood of danger and difference.

One key theme of classic film noir was transgression: stepping beyond or breaking out from socially acceptable norms and limits. This was often expressed geographically, with Mexico a particular favourite; for example, *Out of the Past* (1947), *Kansas City*

*Confidential* (1952), and *Touch of Evil* (1958). The Other could also exist *within*, however, especially during the years of anti-communist hysteria. Small-town America and the newly built suburbs were safe but dull, and noir offered a cinematic escape from this dullness into the frightening urban reality of big, anonymous cities. The characters in these cities needed to reflect this air of menace and moral ambiguity, and to live outside traditional ethical norms. One quick way to achieve this was to impute homosexuality.

Sometimes this was not relevant to the plot. The fact that Joe Cairo is clearly coded as homosexual in *The Maltese Falcon*, and that Gutman's young hitman in the same film is referred to three times as a "gunsel", or that Lindsay Marriott (and probably also a second character, Jules Anthon) in *Murder My Sweet* were effeminate homosexuals, has no direct consequence in the stories; it serves mostly to add spice and fascination by emphasizing the perversity of the world of grotesques on show.

This penchant for human exotica, though, was more than just opportunistic exploitation for their shock value. The effeminate homosexual man also served as a foil to the masculinity of the male protagonist, helping to establish the latter's toughness and normality through a process of contrast. The noirs that feature the clearest examples of the effeminate homosexual male (*The Maltese Falcon*, *Murder My Sweet*, *Laura*) are those that also feature a hard-bitten detective (Spade, Marlowe, McPherson), closest to the traditional tough guy of Hollywood films. Once the central male characters of later noir become more fractured and passive, there is less need for the swish of the sissy as contrast.

On one level, these films are dismissive of the effeminate homosexual figure. In *The Maltese Falcon*, Cairo gets slapped in a scuffle with Brigid O'Shaughnessy, before Spade tells him that "When you're slapped, you'll take it and like it". Spade also humiliates the gunsel, Wilmer, on several occasions by taking his gun from him with ease. Meanwhile, Marlowe in *Murder My Sweet* responds to a threat of "a swift punch on the nose" from Marriott with a withering "I tremble at the thought of such violence". The effeminate homosexual man is not a creature to be taken very seriously.

On a deeper level, though, he is, because he is part of a general insidious threat to the masculinity of the hero. As Dyer argues, these characters disturb and undermine the straight male protagonist because "the aesthetic gives them an access to women that excludes and threatens the normal male" (1998, p.124). This trope of the straight male under attack exists in embryonic form in one of the very first films noirs, *The Maltese Falcon*. The fact that the three villains chasing the statue of the falcon are a femme fatale, an effeminate homosexual, and an older man who employs a gunsel suggests a kind of unnatural alliance of perverts against the "normal" masculinity of the hero. The conflict is more openly expressed in *Laura*, with its contrast between the educated aesthete, Lydecker, and the gumshoe detective, McPherson. The effeminate homosexual serves to deepen noir's threat to traditional gender roles, and functions as part of a larger, more general challenge to the normative masculine role.

On other occasions, as in *Rope* or *Gilda*, homosexuality is essential to the film because it is offered as a kind of explanation for the presence of evil. Here it becomes part of a general feeling of malaise and decadence, an atmosphere of moral turpitude in which ethical standards have collapsed. In these films it is the psychotic homosexual rather than the effeminate aesthete who represents the key threat. Unlike the innocuous sissy, he revels in a type of hyper-masculinity: either the intellectually justified superiority of Brandon Shaw, the sado-masochistic misogyny of Ballin Mundson, or the thuggish brutality of the various gunsels.



### Conclusion

For the generations who have grown up after Stonewall, it can be difficult at times to relate to, or make sense of, the homosexual in classic film noir, or even to be sure that he really exists. Since film-makers needed to be so circumspect, much analysis relies on semiotic readings of fleeting gestures – a look in the eye of a character or the briefest touch on the arm. In addition, the automatic coupling of homosexuality with evil and moral perversion is now the preserve of the homophobe: society is no longer shocked by a man with a perfumed handkerchief or two men who are lovers, and audiences may no longer make an automatic assumption that a homosexual character is morally suspect.

As a product of its time, film noir tends to be rather confused about homosexuality. It draws on two stereotypes – the effeminate aesthete and the psychotic thug – which pull in opposite directions. It depicts homosexuality as evil and dangerous and seductive, and yet the effeminate male is ridiculous and represents no serious sexual threat because he is essentially sexless. Arguably, this confusion often made for better art – the psychological complexities of movies like *Strangers on a Train* and *Gilda*. At other times – as in *The Big Sleep* – it came close to making the plots of some of the movies unfathomable.

### References

- Dyer, R. (1977). Homosexuality and film noir. *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 16, 18-21.
- Dyer, R. (1998). Postscript: Queers and women in film noir. In E. Ann Kaplan (Ed.), *Women in film noir* (pp. 123-129). London: British Film Institute Publishing.
- Dyer, R. (2002). *The culture of queers*. London: Routledge.
- Georgakas, D. (1992). Hollywood blacklist. In M.J. Buhle, P. Buhle, & Georgakas, D. (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of the American left*. Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Gunsel. (n.d.) Retrieved from <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=gunsel>
- Gunsel. (n.d.) In *Merriam-Webster's online dictionary*. Retrieved from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gunsel>
- Harmetz, A. (1992). Film history is written in smoke. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://nytimes.com/1992/11/08/movies/film-history-is-written-in-smoke.html>
- Kaszas, R. (2014). Film noir and the homoerotic subtext in *Gilda*. *Americana E-journal of American Studies in Hungary*, vol X, 1, Spring 2014. Retrieved from <http://americanajournal.hu/vol10no1/kaszas>
- Little friend. (n.d.) Retrieved from <http://define.php?term=little+friend>
- Morris, G. (2002). Film noir. Retrieved from <http://www.glbtc.com>
- Naremore, J. (1998). *More than night: Film noir in its contexts*. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Phillips, G.D. (2000). *Creatures of darkness: Raymond Chandler, detective fiction and film noir*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky.
- Russo, V. (1987). *The celluloid closet: Homosexuality in the movies*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Schrader, P. (1972). Notes on film noir. *Film Comment*, 8, 1, 8-13.
- Siclier, J. (1996). Misogyny in film noir. In R. Barton Palmer (Ed.), *Perspectives on film noir* (pp. 66-75). New York: G.K. Hall & Co.
- Wolfe, P. (1985) *Something more than night: The case of Raymond Chandler*. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press.

### Films

- The Big Combo*. (1955). Harmon, S. (Producer), & Lewis, J.H. (Director). United States: Allied Artists.
- The Big Sleep*. (1946). Hawks, H. (Producer), & Hawks, H. (Director). United States: Warner Bros.
- Brute Force*. (1947). Hellinger, M. (Producer), & Dassin, J. (Director). United States: Universal Pictures.

- Double Indemnity*. (1944). Siström, J. & DeSylva, B. (Producers), & Wilder, B. (Director). United States: Paramount.
- Gilda*. (1946). Van Upp, V. (Producer), & Vidor, C. (Director). United States: Columbia Pictures.
- The Glass Key*. (1942). Kohlmar, F. & DeSylva, B.G. (Producers), & Heisler, S. (Director). United States: Paramount.
- Kansas City Confidential*. (1952). Small, E. (Producer), & Karlson, P. (Director). United States: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.
- Laura*, (1944). Preminger, O. (Producer), & Preminger, O. (Director). United States: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox.
- The Maltese Falcon*, (1941). Wallis, H.B. (Producer), & Huston, J. (Director). United States: Warner Bros.
- Murder My Sweet*, (1944). Scott, A. (Producer), & Dmytryk, E. (Director). United States: RKO Pictures.
- Out of the Past*, (1947). Duff, W. (Producer), & Tourneur, J. (Director). United States: RKO Radio Pictures.
- Rope*. (1948). Hitchcock, A. & Bernstein, S. (Producers), & Hitchcock, A. (Director). United States: Warner Bros.
- Strangers on a Train*. (1951). Hitchcock, A. (Producer), & Hitchcock, A. (Director). United States: Warner Bros.
- Touch of Evil*, (1958). Zugsmith, A. (Producer), & Welles, O. (Director). United States: Universal-International.