Jonathan AUERBACH

DARK BORDERS

Film Noir and American Citizenship

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Contents

Illustrations vii
Acknowledgments ix

Introduction THE UN-AMERICANNESS OF FILM NOIR 1
One GESTAPO IN AMERICA 27
Confessions of a Nazi Spy and *Stranger on the Third Floor*
Two WHITE-COLLAR MURDER 57
Double Indemnity
Three CUBA, GANGSTERS, VETS, AND OTHER OUTCASTS OF THE ISLANDS 91
The Chase and *Key Largo*
Four NORTH FROM MEXICO 123
Border Incident, Hold Back the Dawn, Secret beyond the Door, and *Out of the Past*
Five BAD BOY PATRIOTS 155
This Gun for Hire, Ride the Pink Horse, and *Pickup on South Street*
Postscript DARKNESS VISIBLE 185

Notes 205
Bibliography 245
Index 261

Illustrations

1 Nazi propaganda spreads across the United States, from *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* 32

2 The terror of nonbelonging, from *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* 38

3 Meng the informer, from *Stranger on the Third Floor* 47

4 Fascist American justice, from *Stranger on the Third Floor* 49

5 "I'll not go back!": Deportation panic in *Stranger on the Third Floor* 54

6 Neff and Gorlopis under the sway of Keyes, from *Double Indemnity* 62

7 Oedipal visual schematics in *Double Indemnity* 70

8 The machinery of fate, from *Double Indemnity* 81

9 The look of death: The husband's murder, from *Double Indemnity* 87

10 The look of death: Neff watching Keyes watching, from *Double Indemnity* 88

11 The exiled gangster's watery return, from *Key Largo* 102

12 The ur-American framed by Bogart and Bacall, from *Key Largo* 103

13 Blood and soil in the Valle de Muerte, from *Border Incident* 132

14 A "friend to all braceros," from *Border Incident* 137

15–17 Death by U.S. agribusiness, from *Border Incident* 141
18 Korean War poster, from *Pickup on South Street* 173
19 Negotiating matters of scale, from *Pickup on South Street* 175
20 Rushing subway as reeling celluloid, from *Pickup on South Street* 175
21–22 Stylized artifice from start to finish, from *Gun Crazy* 191
23 A regime of visibility: Robert Aldrich grasps French Hollywood cinephilia 194
24 Turning noir on its head, from *Touch of Evil* 203

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INTRODUCTION

The Un-Americanness of Film Noir

Reporting to the FBI in late 1947 about subversive activity in Hollywood, "Confidential Informant T-10" expressed the hope that Congress "by statute" would declare American communists "a foreign-inspired conspiracy" rather than "a legal party." Collectively criminalized, communist membership could then become a definitive "indication of disloyalty," T-10 reasoned, that would in turn sanction the "cleansing of their own household."[1] As the recently elected president of the Screen Actors Guild, T-10 (aka Ronald Reagan) was in a good position to appreciate how messy such a domestic purging would be without the convenient force of law to detect and then rid the "household" (both the film community and the homeland at large) of undesirable elements.

Responding to a danger felt from within, Reagan, along with many other Americans at midcentury, sought to purify the republic by imagining a group of fellow citizens as illegitimate outsiders who warranted, awkwardly, some sort of expulsion or detention. At once an epistemological crisis (how to know the enemy?) and a moral one (what should be done?), this perceived emergency in internal security severely tested American citizenship during the 1940s and 1950s. These two decades also coincided with the development of American film noir, a cycle of moody, dark crime thrillers filled with bitterness, confusion, and doubt. Not ostensibly concerned with national politics, many of these movies in style and tone dramatized feelings of alienation—a profound sense of dispossession corresponding closely to the Cold War's redefinition of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, as I show in this study.

An obvious link between external and internal threats, the Communist Party of America (CPUSA) was the logical focus of T-10's attention, even though the CPUSA was never directly outlawed despite the private urging of Reagan and so many others. A few months before his report, the guild president had appeared in public before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC, a very different audience than the FBI) to give a far more upbeat assessment: "I do not believe the Communists have ever at any time been able to use the motion-picture screen as a sounding board for their philosophy or ideology."[2] Yet Reagan in effect got his more secret wish through a series of security measures (laws, directives, and policies) enacted initially in the late 1930s in response to impending global conflict and more rapidly imposed during and soon after the Second World War.

To consider simply the single year of the informer Reagan's confidential memo, arguably the defining moment of the Cold War, 1947 marked the Truman Doctrine proclaiming the intention of the United States to defend against Soviet incursion around the globe (March 12); the creation of the loyalty oath program for federal employees (March 21); the proposal of the Marshall Plan for rehabilitating Western Europe (June); the Taft-Hartley Act aimed to root out communist leadership in labor unions (June 18); the *Foreign Affairs* publication of George F. Kennan's influential containment thesis, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct" (July); the signing of the National Security Act, designed to administer and oversee a national system of military intelligence and surveillance, both foreign and domestic (July 26); the HUAC investigations of directors and screenwriters (October 27–30); the Waldorf Statement, in which Hollywood studios began voluntarily blacklisting their own (November 25); and the attorney general's issuing of an official list of subversive organizations (December 4).

Hundreds of books and articles have been written about the home front during the Cold War, including plenty focusing on HUAC's probing of the so-called Hollywood Ten.[3] Yet for all the attention paid to the stylized rituals of naming names, guilt by association, and the heavy consequences for the accused, it seems to me that the irrational intensity of anticommunist fervor in the late 1940s and early 1950s remains something of a mystery. After all, Reagan had reassured HUAC in 1947 that the primary medium for mass culture in the United States, the Hollywood screen, remained immune to communist ideology, so that his desire to prosecute these ideologues for their beliefs seems rather curious. What did Reagan fear if no longer just fear itself (to paraphrase Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal aphorism)? In what sense, exactly, did the communists jeopardize security? How to draw the line between criminal disloyalty and other kinds of legitimate dissent, or the line between subversive thought and treasonous behavior? Was mere membership in an organization a matter of ideas or action? Was communism simply a political belief or "a way of life," as the FBI director J. Edgar Hoover insisted in his own HUAC testimony?[4] Such questions revolved around social and psychological thresholds between the inner and the outer—what was inside the law as opposed to outside it, what was permissible to think but not to do. The anxiety driving this concern over uncertain boundaries attached itself centrally to issues of national belonging: who and what counted as American. The question thus became how to distinguish between foreign instigation and domestic agency, how to tell friend from foe, and, in the absence of clear markers of difference, how to uncover and deal with sedition at home. As Reagan's memo suggests, worries over delineating borders seemed more pressing than the menace of any serious "fifth column" domestic subversion itself.[5]

To address this curiosity, we might begin by pairing two concepts that seem to come from different realms (politics and aesthetics), but that in my analysis turn out to function identically: *un-American* and *uncanny*. While the first word came into play at the end of the nineteenth century, it started to pervade security debates in the mid-1930s, when war loomed in Europe and when it was given institutional status by a congressional committee (HUAC) that continued to exercise significant influence through the 1950s; the second term is one of the main ways that film noir has come to be critically identified—a certain cluster of uneasy feelings rather than a fixed cinematic genre with well-demarcated themes and features. If the affective dimension of political discourse during this period often tends to be overlooked, then conversely the substantive politics at the core of noir's mood of disquiet similarly tends to be underestimated in depth and detail.[6] Bringing these two notions together, locating the uncanny in the un-American, helps us appreciate how these crime films crucially helped shape and respond to a crisis calling into question how citizens and government construed the limits of their homeland.

While at first glance *un-American* may seem analogous to adjectives like *unpatriotic* or *uncharitable* that simply denote the absence of a particular positive attribute, in fact the term worked in far stranger ways, recently prompting one scholar to call it in passing, a bit hyperbolically, "one of the most remarkable words in the twentieth century."[7] Rather than classifying ontologically a type of person or trait, *un-American* functioned strictly by negation, a canceling out or reversing of a more nebulous set of ideals.[8] The prefix *un-* is so strange because it, unlike *anti-*, cannot signify any specific grounds for difference: to be *un-American* is not simply to be hostile toward or positioned against American values from some identifiable alternative perspective, but rather to somehow embody the very opposite of "America." Yet what exactly constitutes America's opposite? Preparing the way for the Manichaean mind-set that dominated postwar politics, the "un" in HUAC created a seamless totality with no terms to mediate between its stark polarities. These poles were at once mutually exclusive and bound together by a single quality or condition (consider the adjectival pairs happy/unhappy, friendly/unfriendly, for instance). But unlike the seemingly similar prefix *non-*, *un-* did not even work by a logic of exclusion to fix legal categories of nationality (as in the term *non-Americans*). The key is that *un-American* mostly made sense only when applied *to* Americans, so that by 1959 the former president Harry Truman was emboldened to pronounce HUAC itself "the most un-American thing in the country today."[9] In a telling circularity, Truman found it un-American for Americans to label other Americans un-American.

Coupled with the word *activities*, *un-American* became an even more curious construction. "What is meant by un-American activities?" asked the representative Dewey Johnson of Minnesota when a resolution for establishing the committee came before the House in April 1937.[10] The question was a good one. As I have suggested, *un-American* is centrally a matter of values and beliefs. To investigate thought comes perilously close to violating cherished principles of free speech; therefore ideas had to be tethered to unlawful action such as sabotage or espionage to warrant prosecution, even though there were lots of laws already on the books to prosecute such crimes, including the high crime of wartime treason as defined in the Constitution. But as a catchall concept that could be applied to a variety of perceived dangers from within, *un-Americanness* demanded probing and surveillance that superseded traditional police work. As I discuss in chapter 1, even before the founding of HUAC, FDR in 1936 issued a secret directive to the FBI's Hoover that allowed him to systematically undertake intelligence gathering aimed at tracing any links between radicalism at home and foreign agents working for international communist and fascist movements. On September 6, 1939, a week after Hitler invaded Poland, FDR issued another FBI directive in connection with a declared national emergency that permitted Hoover to substantially broaden the scope of investigation to include a wide range of "subversive activities" not previously part of the bureau's mission. A crucial category of criminality was expanded to reach beyond behavior into the realm of ideas—a potential for political thought control that film noir would register with paranoia from its inception.[11]

To put it another way, the United States during this period was a rather uncanny place. Here I invoke Freud's well-known essay "The Uncanny" (1919, in the direct aftermath of the First World War). While this essay has sometimes been applied to discussions of citizenship, it is not generally discussed specifically in relation to the Cold War and in conjunction with the closely aligned term *un-American*.[12] Freud's analysis proves especially helpful for connecting matters of affect experienced on an intimate level with large-scale political questions about national belonging. Beginning, uncharacteristically, with an extended linguistic analysis of the German adjectives *heimlich* and *unheimlich* (homely/unhomely), Freud argues that the ostensible opposition between the familiar and the unfamiliar conveyed by this pair in fact reveals a single "core of feeling": that the uncanny, far from deriving from "intellectual uncertainty" about the unknown, rather emerges from a kind of reversal, a doubling or return of the familiar that has been repressed as such. In common German usage, Freud notes, the word *heimlich* can mean both "intimate, friendly, comfortable" as well as "something concealed, secret." The adjective thus takes on the connotations of *unheimlich* without the need for the prefix *un-*: "*Heimliche* [*sic*] is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimliche* [*sic*]. *Unheimliche* is in some way or other a sub-species of *heimliche*."[13]

Although Freud does not explicitly amplify his discussion of the prefix *un-* (which he calls "the token of repression") to consider the nation-state, his emphasis on the concept of home certainly makes such an analysis available, as a number of his examples indicate: "Is it still *heimliche* to you in your country where strangers are felling your woods?" and "Freedom is the whispered watchword of *heimliche* conspirators and the loud battle-cry of professional revolutionaries."[14] While it might be argued that whether the home is comfortable or a place of concealment simply depends on whether it is viewed from within or without, the question of perspective is precisely what remains so unstable. The uncanny in this regard is primarily a matter of trespassing or boundary crossing, where inside and outside grow confused as (presumed) foreigners enter domestic space and, conversely, the home reveals dark secrets hidden within. To feel that your home is strange, or more precisely, to feel like a stranger in your own house—this is the peculiar condition of citizenship intensified by wartime security measures, as well as a primary emotion driving many films noirs of the 1940s and 1950s. Cinema scholars frequently link noir to existential alienation, abstractly or philosophically considered, but such alienation needs to be more precisely grounded in specific historical and cultural fears about enemy aliens lurking within.

Beyond the obvious anxieties created by these (in)security measures, especially the inability to decide between American and un-American, I would make two related points. First, what from the perspective of international relations looks like a dramatically shifting set of allies and foes before the war, during the war, and soon after the war, from the viewpoint of the home front seems a remarkably consistent set of developments, regardless of the specific external threat (Germany, Japan, or the Soviet Union). In other words, from roughly 1939 (FDR's directive to the FBI) to at least 1954 (passage of the Loss of Citizenship Act and the Senate's censure of Joseph McCarthy in December), the United States found itself in a single continuous state of emergency prompted by global conflict: impending, hot, and cold. In this admittedly idiosyncratic definition, the "Cold War" in the United States actually begins during the late 1930s, with the rise of an intelligence apparatus that effectively put the country on a permanent wartime basis. It is impossible to explain the intensity of anticommunism after the war without taking into account the serious anxiety many Americans felt about enemy infiltration well before their country entered the war.[15] Second, beyond secret directives, congressional committees, and national legislation aimed at catching fifth-column infiltrators, this state of exception or emergency had powerful consequences for ordinary citizens because, as I have been suggesting, the very nature of American citizenship was being transformed.

Or perhaps citizenship in the abstract was being protected *against* change. Culminating more than a decade's succession of security measures, Dwight D. Eisenhower's Loss of Citizenship law (1954), enacted when membership in the CPUSA had already dwindled to negligible numbers, simply made explicit what earlier sedition and registration acts implied—that certain persons (un-Americans) were no longer welcome in the country, despite either having undergone the legal process of naturalization or possessing a presumed "constitutional birthright" as native born.[16] But whether emphasis falls on the state (rights and contract) or on the nation (consent and community)—that is, whether we view citizenship from the perspective of the law or as a more psychological matter of belonging—for denationalization to take place, U.S. citizenship could be terminated (as opposed to being voluntarily given up by the individual) only on relatively narrow, sometimes overlapping grounds: by a breech of allegiance, as a form of punishment, or as a deemed threat to public order.

As Alexander Aleinikoff has noted in his valuable review of theories about the loss of U.S. citizenship, in 1940 Congress began adding several new grounds for denationalization, not simply divided allegiance (e.g., serving in the armed forces of another country), but now, in a more penal nature, for actions such as trying to overthrow the government. As Aleinikoff remarks, these cold war provisions (as I would call them) "were excepted from the general rule that denationalization took effect only after the citizen had taken up residence abroad [and therefore] permitted the denationalization of citizens who may not have acquired citizenship elsewhere."[17] Such preemptive legislation now meant "that citizenship could be terminated against the will of the citizen," thereby raising the specter of involuntary statelessness. This leads Aleinikoff further to notice "something quite peculiar about our constitutional doctrine": that "Congress has *no* power to remove citizenship and virtually *plenary* power to deport aliens." In this regard, efforts to criminalize native-born CPUSA members, as Reagan proposed, by treating them as disloyal agents of a foreign (Soviet) conspiracy, at once aimed to preserve but also betrayed the idealized notion of citizenship as an abstract universal. Dismissing the rights perspective as "internally incoherent," concluding "consent takes us no place" and that "contract and communitarian theory cannot rule out state power to terminate citizenship against the will of the individual," Aleinikoff is left to insist, a bit feebly and glumly, that denationalization only "be based on conduct, not belief"—precisely the sort of distinction that Freud's uncanny and FDR's emergency security measures tended to blur.[18]

Exception is what gives Aleinikoff's legal theorizing such fits. In his examination of the rule of exception that increasingly has become the norm, indeed the foundation, of state power in the twentieth century, the political philosopher Giorgio Agamben more recently has analyzed a series of paradoxes about "this no-man's land between public law and political fact," which he reads spatially as kind of "a dispute over its proper *locus*," since "what must be inscribed within the law is essentially exterior to it."[19] Following Carl Schmitt, he describes "the topological structure of the state of exception" as "*Being-outside, and yet belonging*" because "the sovereign, who decides on the exception, is, in truth, logically defined in his being by the exception."[20] One consequence of this aporia between inside and outside, Agamben asserts, quoting Schmitt, is that "the state continues to exist, while law recedes."[21] And yet if we redirect our attention from the state or the sovereign to the nation, from the exercise of power to more affective qualities centered on the governed, we might reverse Agamben's topology: for those compelled to operate under such proclaimed emergencies, the feeling is *being inside, and yet not belonging*. This is the "zone of anomie" that Agamben attributes to states of exception but does not closely consider in relation to citizens themselves.

We can better grasp what it felt like to live under such a state of exception by looking closely at how various border confusions between inside and outside emerged in a group of gloomy American movies that French intellectuals soon after the Second World War dubbed "film noir." It is the aim of the present book to show how the psychological and social effects of wartime internal national security corresponded in particular ways to central features of these movies. Because Hollywood studios at the time did not label these films as such, contrary to the ways in which they categorized and promoted their other product lines like westerns or musicals, the term *film noir* still occasions discussion among cinema scholars, with some straining to classify films as "noir" according to a predetermined array of attributes, while others argue that the very concept is suspect and of limited value as a critical construct imposed well after the fact in the United States. According to these skeptics, a kind of tedious repetition sets in when familiar tropes are invoked over and over to define noir: rainy streets, low-key chiaroscuro lighting, hard-boiled dialogue, desperate criminals, femme fatales, moral angst, betrayal, and so on. But it seems to me that the skeptics threaten to become perhaps just as predictable in their own disavowals that challenge the conceptual coherence of noir; what is most striking, in fact, is the way that both sides replay the very same sorts of anxieties about constructing and patrolling thresholds that are central to the postwar period itself. In other words, current doubts about the legitimacy of "noir" as an analytic category closely resemble, indeed largely follow from, cold war worries about how to identify and locate "Americans." One boundary dispute (over the ontological stability or purity of a kind of cinema) bears directly on another (over uncanny citizenship) and therefore needs to be examined with some care and precision.[22]

Marc Vernet, one of the most subtle of these skeptics (perhaps by virtue of his own status as a French intellectual) begins his dismantling of the concept, for example, by wryly mocking noir as a convenient "object of beauty" because "it is neatly contained in a perfect decade (1945–1955), because it is simultaneously defined by its matter (black and white) and by its content (the crime story), because it is strange (see its relation to German expressionism and to psychoanalysis) . . . because there is always an unknown film to be added to the list . . . because it is a great example of cooperation—the Americans made it and then the French invented it—," and on he continues with clichéd reason after reason, which he then proceeds to deconstruct in the rest of his essay by showing how these commonplaces about style, theme, and periodization do not stand up to close scrutiny: the fine grain of film history that he masterfully displays by invoking counterexample after counterexample. If these other films exhibit noir features but predate the cycle and/or clearly belong to other genres, then the category "noir" loses all shape and clarity, becoming little more than an "eminently lost object," Vernet eloquently concludes: "Lost for never having been given a satisfactory definition, lost for having ended in 1955, lost for representing the 1930s in a modern form."[23]

In a more systematic vein, Steve Neale similarly casts suspicion on noir's status as a cinematic genre, arguing that even if critics fairly agree on a basic canon, the criteria to delineate this corpus of films is so imprecise as to be "doomed, in the end, to incoherence."[24] Yet the approach of another contemporary theorist on film genre, Rick Altman, offers a more capacious framework that calls into question Neale's own reifying and somewhat rigid logic. Throughout his *Film/Genre,* Altman invokes the spatial metaphor of borders so frequently that it should come as no surprise when he closes his penetrating analysis with an intriguing and ambitious comparison between genres and nations. For Altman, genres and nations are not given entities with fixed qualities, but rather discursive formations or practices that depend on complex ongoing negotiations among various stakeholders or communities. In this sense his idea of a border is less a clear line of demarcation than the process by which nations and genres continually undergo recreation and reimagination.[25]

Altman's suggestive analogy between genres and nations helps us pinpoint the bee in Vernet's and Neale's bonnets. In contesting the conventional parameters of noir, both Vernet and Neale install and endorse another pair of related binaries that remain unquestioned in their own arguments—the sharp separation between countries, and the equally sharp separation between image and text, that is, between making films and talking about them. Vernet asserts this most bluntly when challenging periodization: "The dates that have been agreed upon are thus ones that concern French critical reception and not American production." Rather than seriously entertain the possibility that noir emerged from transatlantic crossings or translations (literally a "carrying over") between Europe and the United States (what he jokingly derides as "cooperation"), Vernet assumes that Hollywood is one thing, Paris another, and never the twain shall meet. This dismissal is quite curious, because elsewhere in his essay he gives a rather detailed and nuanced account of postwar French politics that helps explain why certain intellectuals were so attracted to these films. Perhaps even more astonishing is Vernet's disparagement of the date 1945 as marking the start of noir because the Second World War was "not a cinematographic event," as if cinema had its own inner workings sealed off from world affairs, when in fact Hollywood and the U.S. government were arguably more closely aligned during this war than during any other period in U.S. history.[26] Later Vernet returns to that same telling adjective, approving another scholar's hypothesis about noir and the rise of television because this explanation at least had the advantage of being "internal to the cinematographic institution." Here again a barrier between the internal and the external is erected to protect cinema and the cinematic image from contamination by supposedly outside nuisances (like global conflict).[27]

Neale's understanding of genre is similarly constrained by his conceiving of the concept primarily as a function of cinema institutions; while he does allow for "audience expectations and textual norms," his resonant notion of "inter-textual relay" tends to be limited to studio publicity, promotion, and film reviews, as if other sorts of discourse mattered little. Hence his impatience with the imprecision of various attempts to define noir by broad historical generalizations. Neale's approach is symptomatic of a much larger turn in academic film studies during the past decade away from high theory (a specialty of the French, after all, that might seem to have exhausted itself) toward looking past the screen to consider cinema's various commercial operations and practices: economics, pedagogy, exhibition, distribution, reception, censorship, star studies, and so on.[28] It is beyond the scope of this study to interrogate this trend, but despite its considerable appeal and value, it seems to me that this model risks cutting off movies from the world at large by treating cinema as self-enclosed and self-motivated. While my intention in *Dark Borders* is not to reiterate the same tired tropes about noir, neither is it to cancel out the concept entirely; as the punning title of this book suggests, my aim is to ask new questions about a body of films whose problematic hybridity—a lack of clear generic demarcation—I will take as a virtue in helping us appreciate the uncanniness of midcentury America.

In contrast to Vernet's effort to keep the motion picture primary and pristine, Jacques Rancière has more recently given us a better way to think about the relation between images and words. Rancière seeks to fuse aesthetics and politics not by way of psychoanalytic theory (say, Freud's uncanny), but rather by conceiving of artistic representation as arising from what he calls a "regime of visibility," a "conceptual space of articulation between these ways of making and forms of visibility and intelligibility determining the way in which they can be viewed and conceived." Instead of assuming the priority of the image at the expense of critical discourse about it, typically seen as parasitic and supplementary at best, Rancière argues that a "new regime of visibility" can "make a new pictorial practice possible."[29] In this regard, noir is not a "lost object," as Vernet would have it, but a *found* one that Parisian intellectuals brought to light after the war. And so we can take seriously the Frenchness of film noir (another sort of un-Americanness). The sudden impact on the French of previously unavailable Hollywood crime thrillers, blacked out during wartime Occupation, dramatically illustrates how a regime of visibility emerges thanks to this interplay or articulation between images and critical discourse. It might be argued that critics like Nino Frank and Jean-Pierre Chartier in 1946, and Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton in 1955, were no Goncourt brothers, whose nineteenth-century writing on Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin's paintings Rancière cites as an example. But the fact is that these Frenchmen did make visible what Americans themselves did or could not see for themselves.

The "noir" these French found in American movies gets even more interesting once we appreciate how the term in 1946 was not a completely new coinage but taken from the Série Noire, a series of paperback thrillers published by Gallimard, mostly translations of hard-boiled American fiction. That series, in turn, borrowed its name from *romans noirs,* the generic French term for Gothic or mystery novels, mainly eighteenth-century British fiction. Beyond texts, we can add that Chartier, in his article titled "The Americans Are Making Dark Films *Too*" (emphasis added) of November 1946, alludes to "discussion of a French school of film noir," for which he gives examples from a pair of Marcel Carné movies from 1938.[30] While these promiscuous manifestations of noir might support Vernet's and Neale's suspicions that the term is too loose to be very helpful, I would argue that it speaks to the potency of the adjective as a cultural signifier crossing and crisscrossing nations and media (verbal and visual). To be more exact, surrounding or chronologically sandwiching these films of the 1940s, we have a variety of texts and images—detective fiction, primarily American in translation, from the 1920s and 1930s; earlier Gothic novels; French poetic realism; and postwar French criticism making heady claims for the significance of these wartime American movies, claims that eventually make their way back to U.S. directors and screenwriters like Robert Aldrich (in the 1950s) and Paul Schrader (in the 1970s). We can add to this circulation or reciprocity between words and images (and between cultures) a third influential medium, radio, that helped shape and was in turned shaped by the hard-boiled dialogue of the prewar crime stories of writers like James M. Cain and Raymond Chandler, who were subsequently enlisted by Hollywood to import some of that dialogue into movies.

From a theoretical perspective, this verbal, visual, and aural intermediality allowing noir to become recognizable at midcentury squares nicely with Rancière's redefining of the concept of a representational medium as a regime or articulation of practices, rather than as constituted by any intrinsic materiality or ontology. From a historical perspective, such intermediality harkens back to the late-nineteenth century emergence of the moving picture, which was initially conceived and invented as an audiovisual multimedia spectacle drawing on a range of precursors and which only later developed into having cinematographic institutions and forms seemingly its own.[31] Again, it is beyond the scope of this study to contemplate how Rancière's arguments against media-specific analysis will influence "the future of the image," as one of his recent collections of essays is titled. But if we begin, along these lines, to unsettle conventional divisions between words and images, between film commentary and film production (itself already discursive and transnational, I would insist); if we probe rather than try to protect the porous boundaries between countries and cultures (cosmopolitan Berlin, Los Angeles, Paris); if we suspend debate about whether something qualifies as a cinema genre or not, even as that "something" still continues to elicit commentary and intense interest, then we can appreciate how the dark borders of noir might warrant renewed close consideration.

For me that consideration centers on affect. To return to Vernet and Neale for a moment, it is revealing, and somewhat surprising given their distaste for imprecision, that both scholars begrudgingly come nearest to accepting a definition of noir in relation to what appears as its most nebulous attribute, that of carrying a distinctive mood or sensibility linked to the emotional vulnerability of its main characters. In the midst of his relentless excoriation of the concept, Neale pauses to grant that narrative techniques such as flashback and voice-over have "considerable merit" as a characterization of noir, insofar as these formal techniques foreground "reliability, duplicity and deception." Such enigmas of narration underscore how noir movies frequently emphasize subjectivity and interiority, a "sustained focus on the thoughts and feelings of at least one major character," as Neale puts it.[32] In related fashion, Vernet reverses himself on the question of periodization, contrasting, rather than comparing, earlier comic film versions of Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* in the 1930s against John Huston's wartime remake of 1941—a *locus classicus* for most film noir scholars—to admit that the latter's "domination of serious tone" accounts for the movie's classification as noir, rather than "actual plot structure or photography."[33]

Despite their overall skepticism, Neale and Vernet on this matter of affect echo the initial French response to these films, particularly the first full-length account of noir, *Panorama de film noir américain (1941–1953)* published by Borde and Chaumeton in 1955, the same year that the movie *Kiss Me Deadly* was released, a fact not entirely lost on Americans themselves, as I have already suggested: the following year the film director Aldrich was photographed on a studio set holding a copy of the book.[34] In their seminal study, Borde and Chaumeton make two basic claims about film noir—that these movies are essentially about crime and that they are strange, what they term *insolite,* along with having four other related traits: being oneiric, erotic, ambivalent, and cruel. Rather than define noir by any detailed narrative content or visual style, Borde and Chaumeton identify this cycle of movies by a predominant mood akin, if not identical, to Freud's notion of *unheimlich*. They close their definitional chapter as follows: "It is easy to come to a conclusion: the moral ambivalence, criminal violence, and contradictory complexity of the situations and motives all combine to give the public a shared feeling of anguish or insecurity, which is the identifying sign of film noir at this time. All the works in this series exhibit a consistency of an emotional sort; *namely, the state of tension created in the spectators by the disappearance of their psychological bearings.* The vocation of film noir has been to create *a specific sense of malaise.*"[35]

While Borde and Chaumeton tend to locate this alienation or insecurity in the spectator, I would argue that such a consistent emotional core or sensibility constitutes the prevailing tenor of these films themselves, whose characters, settings, compositional design, cinematography, and plots carry precise affective attributes. Taking seriously the way that a text can embody a specific tone, long dismissed by formalists as a subjective and insufficiently rigorous critical concept, Sianne Ngai has analyzed a set of "ugly feelings" such as envy and anxiety that, unlike the grander passions of anger or hate, tend to attenuate individual agency and make it difficult to take action.[36] Although as befitting the popular depiction of crime, characters in noir narratives do indeed act, the tone of many of these films works against the grain of mainstream Hollywood expectation to dwell in far less familiar territory of a more psychological, abnormal, and neurotic nature, as Borde and Chaumeton suggest.

Clearly American noir was not the only kind of film to register the uncanny. Gothic romance, horror films, and science fiction from the 1930s through the 1950s all come to mind as frequently entailing a return of the repressed.[37] But rarely do these other genres dramatize the sort of ugly feelings we find in noir—paranoia, jealousy, gall, and, most prominently, a curious type of dispossession or resentment that bears on historically specific confusions about national belonging.

To propose cold war citizenship as the overarching cultural framework for this study, I want to emphasize, is not to fall into the trap of assuming that film noir functioned unequivocally as a "dark mirror" expressing a "national mood" or monolithic zeitgeist, as many traditional advocates automatically assert. Other compelling tags for the American 1940s and 1950s have included the "age of anxiety" and the "age of doubt."[38] Cautioning against such a naïve reflection model, Richard Maltby, in perhaps the single best article on the subject, shows how these claims for a simple ideological correspondence between text and context are circular, a mutually reinforcing circuit of evidence and assertion based on metaphor and coincidence that matches films and facts at will. This partial selection process allows scholars to see what they want to see. Maltby appreciates that the United States and Hollywood were simply too complex and multifaceted to be so reduced to a single zeitgeist. But curiously his essay does end up, in somewhat conflicted fashion (akin to Vernet's essay), taking seriously what he had earlier in his argument rejected as a totalizing explanation: that postwar America found itself in a period of intense maladjustment, with Maltby's focus shifting from traumatized vets returning from the war to equally troubled American intellectuals disillusioned by the darker aspects of cold war culture, especially the rise in political intolerance.[39]

So despite the best efforts of these various academic skeptics to retire noir, the concept remains powerfully haunting, undead, like a specter that will not stay in the grave. Instead of worrying if noir is a genre, a style, or a sensibility, perhaps we should wonder if the critical concept functions more like a ghost, a vampire, or a zombie. James Naremore takes a commonsense attitude toward this stubborn persistence, recognizing film noir as a "discursive construct" (elsewhere he more harshly pronounces it a "mythology"), while going on to suggest how as such it "has heuristic value, mobilizing specific themes that are worth further consideration."[40] Here I would agree, but with a different set of themes in mind. For Naremore, film noir is culturally important because it brilliantly melds high European modernism (especially surrealism and existentialism) with hard-boiled American pulp. While I am indebted to his cosmopolitan approach, giving the French credit where credit is due, his notion of noir as transgeneric or intertextual is fairly limited to aesthetic matters (literature, art history, film, and philosophy). Instead, by concentrating on feelings, I develop and expand noir's heuristic potential in two related directions. As an emergent regime of visibility, film noir lets us see (literally) a key affective dimension of the Cold War, which I have described as a state of exception.[41] And by contextualizing noir in relation to uncanny and uncertain citizenship at midcentury, a ground for intense anxiety, insecurity, and resentment, I also hope to change the way we think about these films themselves.[42]

Because it eludes clear-cut generic definitions, film noir inevitably becomes something of a problem when it comes to selecting exemplary movies for analysis, with a tendency for scholars to pick films that simply confirm their various theses about noir. Edward Dimendberg, for instance, spends a lot of attention on the police procedural *The Naked City* (1948) because it so graphically illustrates his arguments about urban space and modernity, while hardly mentioning another well-known Mark Hellinger production made two years earlier, *The Killers* (1946).[43] Vivian Sobchack, on the other hand, bypasses *The Naked City,* presumably because it depicts family life and children (whom she claims are mostly missing from noir), to focus on *The Killers,* whose settings—diners, nightclubs, and seedy boarding houses—demonstrate her contention that noir's material premises (her pun intended) serve as surrogates for an absent home.[44] So we have two very fine cinema scholars both interested in the question of space (urban and domestic, respectively) picking different films to match their very different but not mutually exclusive conclusions about noir.

What needs to be acknowledged more openly is that such choices are less essential than pragmatic, driven primarily by what we already want to make of these crime narratives. Facing the same circularity, I have selected a body of films that center on thresholds and border crossing: from a fear that enemy (Nazi) spies, informers, strangers, and brainwashers have wormed their way into the country and refuse to leave, to a resentful salesman trying to get away with murder to spite his company, to the geopolitics of Cuba and Mexico in relation to the United States, to a series of films responding to the pressures of civic duty and patriotism more broadly. Having looked closely at hundreds of dark movies made during the 1940s and 1950s, I have selected roughly a dozen to analyze in depth, some very well known, such as *Double Indemnity* (1944), *Out of the Past* (1947), *Key Largo* (1948), and *Pickup on South Street* (1953), and others less familiar but no less illuminating for testing the foundations of citizenship, such as *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940), *The Chase* (1946), and *Ride the Pink Horse* (1947). In my effort to get at the curious liminality or un-Americanness of these films, I trust that their range of plot, character, and setting, combined with their consistency of tone, will absolve me from the charge of capricious or arbitrary selection for the sake of a single-minded thesis. Although I pay attention to the justly celebrated look(s) of noir, my focus will be on the visceral rather than its visual aspects.[45]

To help understand this domain of feeling, I have relied on Freud's notion of the uncanny, although my readings are more political than psychoanalytically inclined.[46] Here I join a number of other cinema scholars interested in the politics of noir, most of whom tend to offer relatively transparent narrative and character analyses without much attention to the significance of affect.[47] In this view, often drawing on HUAC's investigation of the Hollywood Ten as background and starting point, the political orientation of any given film can be determined by its overt treatment of themes of law and order, so that a police procedural that ostensibly enforces the law and celebrates institutional authority is a conservative or "right-wing" noir, whereas one in which the law is represented more critically is "left-wing" or progressive. But as I have already suggested, the relation between crime and law is far too unstable in noir to sustain this sort of convenient distinction, which by so focusing on manifest content neglects the emotional undercurrents running through these films.

A brief example may be useful. In 1939 Milton Krims coscripted Warner's *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (directed by Anatole Litvak), Hollywood's first direct attack on Hitler that was banned in Germany, Japan, Italy, Poland, Holland, Norway, and Sweden (see chapter 1). Three years later, working in a similar patriotic antifascist vein, Albert Maltz coscripted the crime thriller *This Gun for Hire* (1942), which dramatizes how a disturbed hit man prevents an aging American industrialist from selling military secrets to the Japanese (see chapter 5). Soon after the war Krims wrote the screenplay for the first major Hollywood anticommunist movie, *The Iron Curtain* (1948), while Maltz around the same time refused to name names for HUAC, was blacklisted as un-American, and jailed for contempt of Congress. How to account for such a drastic difference in the fates of Krims and Maltz? While it might seem that Krims suddenly grew more conservative after the war when Maltz held steadfast to his progressive principles, I would argue otherwise: that both writers in penning their wartime tales of international espionage unleashed the same set of strong emotions—the grave concern or hysteria that the most secure social structures in the United States were being undermined by an alien enemy dwelling in the country's midst. This excess of worry lingered well past any particular danger to which it might have been linked: psychic war surplus we might call it. While Krims could effortlessly redirect and reascribe those still powerful suspicions to a new object of anxiety (Soviet spies in North America), Maltz could and did not, and therefore was made to pay for his past. In terms of the subsequent trajectories of their lives, I do not mean to diminish the difference between Maltz, who ended up in jail, and Krims, who continued to enjoy a successful career. But without the advantage of hindsight, the movies that these writers scripted may have more in common at the level of affect than labels like *conservative* and *progressive* might allow.

In so emphasizing details of studio production and reception, retrospectively telling the story of Hollywood as a relatively autonomous set of institutional practices, historians of American cinema may overlook how these films themselves engage confusing and sometimes incongruous "structures of feeling."[48] Presuming that political positions can be clearly sourced, articulated, and summarized, this approach to cinema history,