

Lights Out in the Wasteland: The TV Noir

Depicting a dangerous, irrational place in which the individual has little or no control over his fate.

By Allen Glover and David Bushman

Film noir refers to a group of films produced in Hollywood during and after World War II and unified by visual and thematic representations of a dark, unstable world. Heavily stylized, yet bleakly cynical, pictures like “Double Indemnity” (1944), “Detour” (1945), and “Out of the Past” (1947) ushered in a new cinema of criminality and transgression, disillusionment and alienation, that reflected the flipside of the American dream—and, despite the sunny optimism of the postwar years, only grew darker and more fatalistic.

As a movement, lasting roughly from 1941 to 1958, classic film noir was perpetrated by a circle of writers, directors and craftsmen who melded the artifice and heightened theatricality of German expressionism with a plethora of other influences, including the hard-boiled fiction of dime novels and pulp magazines, poetic realism, existentialism and Freudian psychology, Depression-

era gangster tales, the lonely urban views of Edward Hopper and Reginald Marsh, Weegee’s tabloid photographs of human wreckage, cinematographic developments like faster film stock and shorter lenses, and a wartime austerity that encouraged innovation.

On television, the noir ethos is identified not so much by stylistic considerations (although there are exceptions), but by such elements as tone, atmosphere, narrative patterns, recurring motifs, and character archetypes. In its earliest incarnations, TV noir evolved simultaneously with film noir, drawing from many of the same roots while also taking inspiration from the thrillers, mysteries, and crime melodramas of radio. One of the earliest crossovers was *Crime Photographer* (1945), which followed a character concocted by George Harmon Coxe for the pages of *Black Mask* magazine: two-fisted lensman Flashgun Casey. Alongside such other pulp creations as Dashiell Hammett’s

Sam Spade, Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe, and Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer, Casey was one of the prototypes for the noir seeker-hero. As befitting his line of work, he inhabited the hours between sunset and sunrise, seeking to render the strange, violent carnival of the night in terms of clarity and accessibility. This lonely journey through a darkness both literal and figurative is the defining narrative of the TV noir.

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As befitting its origins, the TV noir tableau is a dangerous, irrational place in which the individual has little or no control over his fate. Beginning in the late 1940s, the source of much of this apprehensiveness was the Cold War, in particular the twin anxieties of the Red Scare and the A-bomb, which not only charged television with a political urgency—as evidenced in the J. Edgar Hoover-sanctioned espionage drama *I Led Three Lives* (1953-56)—but introduced an aura of impending menace to everyday life. Rod Serling's *The Twilight Zone* (1959-64), which put forth a pantheon of citizens forced to question their own realities, was one of many shows to provide an oblique filtering of the zeitgeist. Paranoia, queasiness, a dislocated sense of self—these are common states of being for the inhabitant of the TV noir.

Unlike its cinematic counterpart, TV noir cannot be said to have had a classic

period of programming. Rather, it is best characterized as a mosaic progressively updated to reflect shifts in the social and cultural fabric. Regardless of genre, its inhabitants roam a milieu where truth shades into lie, righteousness into brutality, stability into confusion. The unceasing corruptive influence of a society rotting from within is well served by television's lack of closure; the episodic nature of prime-time drama only

reinforces the notion that the messiness of the world continues, unabated, week in and week out. Societal order is, at best, a myth, for the protections instilled by its institutions, its courts and precincts, banks

and churches, have either diminished or become displaced. Identity and familial security are fluid, transitory notions. In the diorama of the TV noir, nothing is what it seems.

**Watching the Detectives:
The Private Eye**

The hard-boiled private eye is one of noir's enduring character archetypes. Television, more so than cinema, had paraded forth legions of these knights errant, men who observe their own code of honor in a quest for the truth. Initially, many of them—*Man Against Crime* (1949-56), *Martin Kane, Private Eye* (1949-54), *Charlie Wild, Private Detective* (1950-52)—were listless refugees from radio. Blake Edwards's *Richard Diamond, Private Detective* (1957-60), starring David Janssen, was the first to successfully apply the visual iconography of noir to the form. Its terrain is outlined

in the title sequence, in which Diamond walks down an empty city street, alone, shrouded in blackness, and pauses to strike a match, at last illuminating his preternaturally weary face.

Craig Stevens, the dapper dick of another Edwards creation, *Peter Gunn* (1958-61), is the embodiment of the Playboy man—hip and handsome—but his heart is as cold as a morgue slab. His detachment is a necessary armor against the treachery he encounters on his travels through an underworld teeming with lowlifes and oddballs. The ivory-tickling gumshoe of *Staccato* (1959-60) displays a similar blend of self-sufficiency and toughness, but John Cassavetes, who starred in and frequently directed the show, went to great lengths to downplay the heroic qualities of his character, proclaiming “I want to not solve crimes too.” Both programs share the same highly charged *mise-en-scène* of smoky nightclubs, jazzy inflections, canted angles, and chiaroscuro lighting, but *Gunn* veers from the traditional asceticism of the noir detective by granting its hero a lavish lifestyle funded by trouble.

In Don Siegel’s remake of Robert Siodmak’s “The Killers” (1964), the investigators *are* trouble: a pair of philosophizing assassins (Lee Marvin and Clu Gulagher) so unnerved by the passivity of the man (Cassavetes, again) whose life they’ve just extinguished that they launch an inquest into his past. Naturally, what they learn is that he was undone by a woman, the duplicitous arm candy (Angie Dickinson) of a white-collar gangster (Ronald Reagan). In flip-flopping the narrative thrust from victim to perpetrator, Siegel’s version signals an acute reversal of values, while its harsh palette and garishly surreal process shots only heighten the absurdity of the

universe its characters inhabit. Although conceived for television (as the inaugural entry in Universal’s Project 120 series), “The Killers” was deemed inappropriate for broadcast in the wake of Kennedy’s assassination and shunted off to the drive-in circuit.

With *Harry O* (1974-76) and *The Rockford Files* (1974-80), the young, virile knights of the atomic age are replaced with rumpled, middle-aged shamuses sapped of their verve by the upheavals of the intervening years. Harry (David Janssen), who bears the malaise of the world in his creased mug, carries a slug in his back from his days on the force and is forever restoring an old boat, tellingly named *The Answer*. Having once escaped death, he is now killing time. The burden of the past also haunts Rockford (James Garner), who spent five years in the pen for a crime he did not commit. Although codified by honor, his existence, like Harry O’s, is one of rootlessness and alienation: a perpetual circulation through a landscape of hot dog stands, all-night coffee shops, discount drug stores, strip clubs, and shabby theaters.

Given the otherworldliness of the night, it is no surprise that other detective-seeker programs delved into the realm of the supernatural, such as *Kolchak: The Night Stalker* (1972-75), which followed an investigate reporter (Darren McGavin) with a knack for pulling unlikely truths, like werewolves and zombies, from unmitigated darkness, and *Angel* (1999-2004), which featured the ultimate creature of the night: the vampire as private eye. A supremely tortured soul, *Angel* (David Boreanaz) prowls the streets of Los Angeles, righting the wrongs he encounters in hopes of gaining redemption. *Angel* battles all types of demons, emotional and material,

but his ultimate torment is Darla, the femme fatale whose infectious fangs have forever locked him in the night world.

Strangers in a Strange Land: The Hunted and the Haunted

One of the preoccupations of noir is the existential dilemma, or search for the self, which is typically manifested in the narrative of the outsider. Most often, this figure is a victim either of fate (*The Fugitive*, *Run for Your Life*) or trauma (*The Loner*, *The X-Files*). Created, as was *Run for Your Life*, by former pulp writer Roy Huggins, *The Fugitive* (1963-67) was one of television's more potent exercises in fatalistic alienation. Unjustly accused of

killing his wife, Richard Kimball (David Janssen) is on the lam from the police after narrowly escaping execution. Shorn of identity, consumed with shame over his inability to save his wife, and pursued by the relentless Lt. Gerard (Barry Morse), he exists in a heightened state of anxiety and fear. He is the quintessential noir protagonist: hunted and haunted.

Fittingly, Kimball's journey through the carnivalesque night world comes to an end in an abandoned amusement park, where his path finally converges with that of the mysterious one-armed man he saw darting into the shadows outside of his home the night of the murder. Unlike Kimball, who finds salvation, Paul Bryan

(Ben Gazzara) of *Run for Your Life* (1965-68) faces an irrevocable death sentence. Diagnosed with a mysterious illness, he has been given two years to live. Suddenly cognizant of his own mortality, he seeks not to avoid death but to affirm his existence. In "The Killing Season," Bryan, a lawyer, has second thoughts about the conviction of a man he sent to death row and mounts an effort to have the execution stayed. By the time he has gleaned a confession from the actual murderer, it



Gillian Anderson (left) as Agent Dana Scully and David Duchovny as Agent Fox Mulder in FOX's *The X-Files*.

is too late—the death sentence has been carried out, just as it must ultimately be against Bryan himself. In the TV noir, there are no guarantees of justice, only a predetermined measure of guilt and punishment.

In Rod Serling's western *The Loner* (1965-66), William Colton (Lloyd Bridges), like so many protagonists of classic film noir, is emotionally poisoned by his experiences in war. Given his condition, his connections with others are fleeting; incapable of settling down, or maintaining a meaningful relationship, he is doomed to a restless, searching existence—much like Fox Mulder (David Duchovny), the FBI Agent at the center of *The X-Files* (1994-2002). Traumatized by the childhood experience of witnessing his sister abducted by extraterrestrials, Mulder criss-crosses the country in hopes of finding empirical evidence of a government conspiracy to disguise, and possibly facilitate, the invasion of earth by hostile alien forces. Although given a partner, the skeptic Dana Scully (Gillian Anderson), he alienates himself from her, as well as his superiors, with his unwavering belief in the unbelievable. Ridiculed (and

marked for death) by the very government he serves, Mulder navigates a lonely road through a landscape of inexplicable darkness, all the while asserting that “The Truth is Out There.”

Just the Facts: The Docu-Noir

The co-opting of documentary technique marked an alternative strand of noir that traced its lineage, in film, back to Louis de Rochemont's “The House on 92nd Street” (1945), and on television, to Jack Webb's police procedural *Dragnet* (1952-59). By incorporating a low-key tone, accurate police jargon, and explicit demarcations of time and place (“It was Saturday, April 9th ... we were working the day watch out



Jack Webb (right), as Sgt. Joe Friday, the popular star of NBC-TV's *Dragnet* series with Frank Smith, played by Ben Alexander.

of the Intelligence Division...”), *Dragnet* strove to apply verisimilitude to the form. Webb, a staunch conservative, had no use for noir’s moral relativity—every episode affirms the sanctity of the justice system—and yet his creation unmistakably limns a milieu every bit as dark and brutal as that depicted in “He Walked by Night,” the 1949 film noir that served as his primary inspiration.

The Los Angeles through which Webb’s strangely somnambulist Sgt. Joe Friday makes his beat is tawdry and violent, full of seedy apartment units, boarding houses, coffee shops and bars. The victims, witnesses, and perps who pass through this world are lonely, disenfranchised, unfulfilled; they have five-o’clock shadows, wear cheap clothes and sweat profusely, regardless of whether they’re hiding anything or not (most are). The sheer banality of the places and people in *Dragnet* evokes a sense of baroque perversion entirely at place in the noir vernacular, such as the 1952 episode “The Big Cast,” which finds Lee Marvin, as a psychopath, sedately recounting his deeds of murder in between bites of a veggie burger at his favorite health-food restaurant.

A documentary-like approach is also utilized in *Naked City* (1958–63), a spin-off from Jules Dassin’s “The Naked City” (1948). Largely filmed in the sordid sections of New York captured so vividly by the photographer Weegee, it explores the roots of crime by focusing not only on the police, but also the criminals, who often turn out to be ordinary, decent folks driven to break the law out of economic or social desperation. As with *Dragnet*, the cycle of crime is unceasing—there are, after all, “eight million stories in the naked city”—resulting in a continuous reconfiguration of the same

fundamentally untrustworthy universe. Another naturalistic noir from the period is Robert Altman’s “Once Upon a Savage Night” (1964), which splits its narrative between a serial killer (Robert Ridgley) terrorizing Chicago and the besieged police captain (Phillip Abbot) on his trail. Shot entirely on location, at night, by ace cameraman Ellis “Bud” Thackery, it was the first production to use Kodak’s new high-speed Ektachrome stock.

The vérité-noir *Homicide: Life on the Street* (1993–1999) prided itself on a muted palette, a disdain for glitz, and a visceral approach to the realities of containing crime in the city. Moreover it was bold enough to leave the fatal rape of a young girl in its premiere episode forever unsolved and, later, to have one of its cops joke about racking up overtime while probing the murder of a tourist in front of her children. When the distraught husband complains, squad commander Al Giardello (Yaphet Kotto) counters that death in Baltimore is a daily occurrence, and that the cop isn’t “going to feel what you feel. None of us are. ... You need him to solve your murder, not grieve.” The flawed cops of this bleak reality emerged from the Hill Street Blues/ Steven Bochco tradition, as did such descendants as *The Shield*’s vicious Vic Mackey; *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*’s disturbing Gil Grissom; and *The Wire*’s boozy Jimmy McNulty.

While all of these shows depict harsh, dissolute worlds, *The Wire* (2002–present) created by David Simon, who also wrote the book upon which *Homicide* is based, is a particularly powerful exploration of human anomie in contemporary times, harsh and cynical in its uncompromising portrayal of a callous, corrupt establishment. The series’ inner-city Baltimore is a maelstrom of indifferent

cops, self-aggrandizing politicians, charismatic drug lords, and swarms of young people tragically unequipped or unwilling to escape this vise of destruction. The city as a sprawling necropolis is further established in Michael Mann's *Robbery Homicide Division* (2002), in which a roving camera stalks an elite LAPD detective (Tom Sizemore) whose fearsome, cunning methods signify both an acute understanding of the night world and a deep affinity with its ways.

Crisis of Identity: A Mann's World

Conceived by Anthony Yerkovich, and overseen by Mann, *Miami Vice* (1984-89) offered a deeply cynical response to the excesses of the go-go Reagan years. Sonny Crockett (Don Johnson) and Ricardo Tubbs (Philip Michael Thompson) are two undercover detectives who lead lives of masquerade enacted to make their passage through the night world all the more convincing. Having forsaken the "light" world of family, stability, and normality, they exist in a moral twilight. Crockett, in particular, is constantly in danger of disappearing into his shadow self, a coke-crazed kingpin named Sonny Burnett. "It'd be nice if one part of my life was real," he says (as Burnett) in a bid to gain the companionship of a woman he's met—who, in true noir fashion, is a femme fatale already plotting his death.

Despite the persistent sunshine, a perpetual sense of hopelessness hangs over the decaying deco landscape of *Miami Vice*. Crockett and Tubbs encounter corruption at every level, even within their own ranks, and are regularly accused of being "on the take" themselves. The drug lords they seek to put away aren't just mindless cocaine cowboys, but ambitious practitioners of free enterprise armed with uncanny business acumen

and the ruthlessness of Wall Street raiders. In "Prodigal Son," the detectives follow the powder trail all the way to a Manhattan skyscraper, where they are greeted as interlopers by a sickly banking tycoon who warns them of meddling in "our Latin American brother's major cash crops." At a time when the president's wife was admonishing the nation's children to "Just Say No," the notion that corporate America was fostering the influx of drugs amounted to a radical inversion of good and evil.

A similar perversion of values marked Mann's brooding underworld serial *Crime Story* (1986-88), which depicted its crimebusters as active participants in the breakdown of societal harmony. Lt. Torello (Dennis Farina) may represent the law, but he certainly does not bring about any order. Unfettered by Miranda rights, he operates with a vengeance, regularly pummeling suspects, coercing witnesses, and perjuring himself. "When this is all over," he tells a gangster, "I will find the thing you love the most and I will kill it." Obsessive, intrinsically prone to violence, Torello is the good guy by default. On the other hand, his nemesis, Ray Luca (Anthony Denison), is presented as a poor kid from the patch whose attainment of wealth and power embodies the American ideal of success by any means necessary. Like Tony Soprano, Luca has a turbulent inner life, and his feelings of emptiness and betrayal, his marital woes and employee failings, all render him in sympathetic terms that belie his villainy.

The influence of Mann is evidenced in a number of other shows whose morally ambiguous heroes tread the line between lawlessness and law enforcement. In *Wiseguy* (1987-90), Vinnie Terranova (Ken Wahl) is an undercover agent for the FBI who invariably experiences feelings



(l. to r.) Peggy Lipton, Dana Ashbroch and Mädchen Amick in *Twin Peaks*.

of guilt after betraying criminals with whom he has forged intense relationships. In one story arc, Vinnie and mob boss Sonny Steelgrave (Ray Sharkey) are locked alone inside a country club, where their confrontation harkens the unraveling of a dysfunctionally married couple. “I want you to know, there’s a lot about who you are that I feel close to,” Vinnie tells Sonny, who, rather than face prison, electrocutes himself—but not before confessing, “I loved you, man.” Vinnie’s dual existence and fierce emotional connection to the sociopaths he pursues signify a conflicted, but utterly noir, conception of his role in society.

The Corruptive Influence

By the 1990s, noir had become a

brand, serving not only as a potent marketing tool, but as a cultural touchstone. The mournful *EZ Streets* (1996-97) was one of many shows to make conspicuous reference to the noir lexicon. Set in a rotting, crime-infested urban jungle rife with corruption and sadistic behavior, it follows the trifurcate narrative of a tainted cop, a charismatic hoodlum, and a vulnerable parolee caught between the lures of light and dark. It opens with one of the more disturbing fade-ins in television history: in the wee hours of the morning, on a desolate wharf, a half-dozen policemen fish an oil drum out of the sea. As they pry open the lid, a crimson-red puddle seeps out over their shoes: inside, some

poor soul has met a tortured end. In this grisly, despairing, neo-noir world, death begins the day.

Twin Peaks (1990-91), the warped creation of David Lynch and Mark Frost, offered a feral inversion of the urban noir. Often described as a “noir soap,” it begins with a series of shots depicting an idyllic town in the Pacific Northwest—a montage that culminates with the discovery of the hometown prom queen washed up on a lakeshore, her naked body wrapped in plastic. Summoned to assist the local sheriff, FBI Agent Cooper (Kyle MacLachlan) enters a place where, as he reports to his trusty pocket recorder Diane, the Douglas firs are “full of secrets.” Indeed, as Cooper soon learns, the impulses of the festering city have not

only taken root in this idyllic corner of America, they have quietly blossomed into a full-blown orgy of murder, drugs, pornography, and lust.

The suggestion that the corruptive influence of the city was imbedded within the heartland was a potent one. Equally stringent was the manner in which the question of who killed Laura Palmer was resolved—not with a token restoration of moral order, but with the revelation that it was the innocuously named BOB, an evil spirit capable of infesting anyone's soul. The darkness lies within all us. We are all partners in crime: dark, deceitful, depraved. Crises of identity, collective guilt, the darkness lurking beneath the deceptively placid veneer of society—the

ingredients of noir continue to haunt the television landscape, from the teen sleuth show *Veronica Mars* (2004-present), in which the heroine probes an inverted suburban paradise seething with debauchery and decadence, to the paranoid post-9/11 thriller *24* (2001-present), where corruption and betrayal reach all the way to the highest seats of power, to the unvarnished Western *Deadwood* (2004-present), with its implicit suggestion that the cornerstones upon which the nation was built are bathed in blood, murder and vice. The history of TV noir is a genealogy of the medium, encompassing every genre and form of programming where nothing is as it seems.

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