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NOIR AT PLAY

Even though films noirs have always been among my favorite kinds of movies, I never taught a course in noir until a few years ago because I could not imagine what twenty-year-olds might find appealing about black-and-white films over half a century old that presented a world so unremittingly bleak. Now I'm glad I've taken the plunge because my students have taught me a great deal about noir and my own fondness for noir. Perhaps their single most important lesson has been their laughter, over and over again, at films that are not supposed to be funny.

Some of this laughter, of course, indicates nothing more interesting than the films' age. Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton report the "general outburst of laughter" that greeted "Marlowe's third blackout" in the Toulouse Cine Club's 1953 screening of *Murder, My Sweet* (1944), which spectacularly failed to capture "the state of tension and malaise that the critics had been unanimous in describing seven years before" (143). As even the most hardboiled films slip into the past, their tabloid urgency inevitably becomes hedged with a sense of nostalgic ritual for audiences that cannot help but see their tensions as quaintly, even anthropologically, dated. My students often greet the thirty times in *Double Indemnity* Fred MacMurray calls Barbara Stanwyck "baby" with a cascade of rising giggles. Men's taste for addressing women by epithets has not dimmed since 1944 – think of the variety of piquant epithets contemporary rappers use for their women – but the choice of "baby" has dated so dramatically that my students find it ridiculous. On the whole, however, their laughter isn't directed at aspects of the films that are intended to be serious but are now impossible to take seriously. Instead, their reactions have made me realize that even though thematic descriptions of noir make the films sound tragic and despairing, something always keeps them from being depressing to watch.

From its beginnings, commentary on noir has minimized this something because it has been so concerned to emphasize the thematic seriousness of the films. Robert Warshow establishes this strain when he describes the gangster film, thinking surely of film noir as well, as a stinging rebuke to the "cheerful view of life" to which American public culture is committed: "the final meaning of the city [in these films] is anonymity and death" (127, 132). Borde and Chaumeton continue along these lines when they trace noir's roots to hardboiled fiction, Freudian psychoanalysis, French surrealism, German Expressionism, and the Hollywood triumvirate of gangster films, horror films, and detective films (15–26). Paul Schrader, contending that "*film noir* is more interested in style than theme," describes its world as disillusioned, cynical, corrupt, fatalistic, hopeless – altogether "an acute downer" (63, 54).

As a result, our received wisdom about noir, which emphasizes the gloomy side of its cynicism, is incomplete. Thematically speaking, Jack Shadoian is right on the money when he describes the final scene of *The Killers* (1946): "Masquerading as a 'light' scene, a pablum envoi of sorts, this final sequence sustains the film's cynicism down to the last twist. [The insurance investigator] Reardon's boss, bright and cheerful, his faith in the principle of life insurance justified and reinforced, commends a weary, yawning Reardon for a job well done...[But] Nothing has any significance. After all the smoke has cleared, it's back to work on Monday" (102).

Yet my students are much more receptive to the humor Shadoian dismisses so easily, from the mock solemnity of Donald MacBride's tone in estimating the minuscule likely effect of Edmond O'Brien's dogged detective work on the Atlantic Casualty Company's rate for 1947 to O'Brien's transparently unconvincing attempt at modesty ("it's the job") to his double-take when he's offered "a good rest" that amounts to the weekend off and the broad grin he flashes as he turns from leaving the office to indicate that he's in on the joke and it's fine with him. They are more sensitive to another aspect of the film Shadoian identifies: "Life is that kind of game, with both sides sticking to a set of rules there is no way of changing. The game is often vicious and costly. Between moves, a resigned, defensive, disenchanted humor lets the players take it all in stride" (103). Foster Hirsch agrees that in noir, "a mordant humor seeps through even the darkest moments of the action" (5). And James Naremore, noting that John Huston's film adaptation of *The Maltese Falcon* is "strikingly witty, especially at the level of performance," characterizes its wit in liminal terms I'll return to shortly: "the film is just stylized enough to represent the private-eye story as a male myth rather than a slice of life" (61).

Unlike Shadoian and Hirsch, who emphasize the existential despair that underlies these violent, treacherous games, my students are more likely to see a conventional humor overlaid on an equally conventional cynicism. They do not find the scene, or *The Killers* generally, funny, but they do find it playful. This may seem an

odd reaction because even though the heroes and heroines of noir spend a great deal of time playing games, these games are subverted in several ways. The poker game in *The Killers* provides the pretext for the fatal quarrel between Burt Lancaster and Albert Dekker. The shooting match in *Gun Crazy* (1950) unites John Dall and Peggy Cummins in a fatal *folie à deux*. The horse race that provides the central metaphor for the overdetermined lives of the small-time crooks in *The Killing* (1956) is disrupted when the favorite is shot to provide a distraction from the racetrack heist. The daily numbers everyone plays in *Force of Evil* (1948) are run by gangsters, some of whom fix the game in order to bankrupt a rival faction. The boxing matches in *Body and Soul* (1947), *The Set-Up* (1949), and *The Harder They Fall* (1956) are rigged by crime lords whom boxers defy at their peril. Even more dangerous are the cat-and-mouse games of flirtation and masquerade in *Double Indemnity*, *The Big Sleep* (1946), and *Criss Cross* (1949). Games like boxing or card-playing or horse-racing or flirting that ought to provide healthy exercise, competition, or diversion are constantly corrupted by greed for the money at stake, determination to rig the game, or both. As Borde and Chaumeton put it: "The fair fight gives way to the settling of scores, to the working over, to the cold-blooded execution" (9). The result is that although many games are played in films noirs, the players never seem to have a good time.

Even so, noir is radically playful – if not for its characters, then certainly for its audience. Quite apart from farcical noirs like *The Big Steal* (1948), noirs interrupted by the maniacal laughter of psycho killers like *Kiss of Death* (1947), noirs that ensnare comical people like the clueless husband and his boss Casey Adams and Don Wilson play in *Niagara* (1953) or the hapless pair of goons in *The Big Sleep*, and parodies like *Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid* (1982), noir is playful all the way down to the depths of its dark heart. Its playfulness is not a counterpoint to its seriousness. It is not even a technique chosen to intensify its seriousness. It is even more intrinsic, more essential, than its seriousness. And it leaves its mark everywhere.

Its most obvious mark is on noir dialogue. Beneath its veneer of realism, the language of noir's tough guys and girls is alternately poetic in *Force of Evil*, clownishly philosophical in *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), and crammed with wisecracks in *Out of the Past* (1947), whose hero and heroine and the criminals who surround them all seem equally incapable of giving a straight answer to a straight question, or even of asking a straight question. Diner owner Mary Field sets the tone early on when customer Paul Valentine asks her to tell him something and she replies, "You don't look as if I could." When Valentine gets worked up over newspaper reports that Jane Greer has shot his boss Kirk Douglas, Douglas calmly advises him, "Smoke a cigarette." As Robert Mitchum falls in love with Greer over a roulette table, she asks him, "Is there a way to win?" and he responds, "There's a way to lose more slowly." The badinage continues to their final scene, when she tells him, "I think we deserve a break," and he coolly replies, "We deserve each other." Convoluted

as the plot of *Out of the Past* is, it often seems mainly a backdrop for the torrent of epigrams the characters use to prove that they are tough and jaundiced and playful. Even *Double Indemnity*, one of the grimmest of all noirs, makes room for Mac-Murray and Stanwyck's bravura exchange about flirting and speeding, Edward G. Robinson's litany of poisons and ways to commit suicide, and the mordant reference MacMurray picks up from Robinson to the streetcar the conspirators cannot get off before the cemetery. Nor do these moments provide breaks from the film's fatalism; they just make it clear that even the characters' most apparently innocent remarks, like Stanwyck's "hope I've got my face on straight," are invariably double-edged.

Scarcely less playful than noir dialogue is noir structure. The preference for extended flashbacks that noir inherits from *Citizen Kane* (1941) leads to the convoluted multiple flashbacks of *Laura* (1944), *Mildred Pierce* (1945), and *The Killers* and the even more baroque structure of *The Killing*, whose inveterate shifts of time and perspective, framed by the horse race the film begins over and over again, annihilate any sense of a meaningful present or individual agency. Even *The Woman in the Window* (1944), which might seem no more playful than *Double Indemnity*, rescues its hero from certain doom by reframing his entire story as a dream. All the major structural innovations of noir stem from the obsession with dramatic irony, feeding the audience information that is withheld from the characters. The flashbacks of *Double Indemnity*, *Murder, My Sweet*, *Detour* (1945), *Out of the Past*, and *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), helpfully framed by first-person narrators, allow the heroes to point out exactly where they went wrong ("how could I have known that murder can sometimes smell like honeysuckle?") or how dumb they were ("the poor dope – he always wanted a pool"). The result is to invite filmgoers to a double-consciousness of the heroes' actions as they seem both *sub specie aetis* and *sub specie aeternitatis*. The final scene of *Blood Simple* (1984) reveals the connection between playfulness and the seriousness of such dramatic irony when Frances McDormand, having just shot crooked detective M. Emmet Walsh to death mistakenly thinking that he's her dead husband because she has no idea her husband ever hired Walsh to follow her, screams in terrified exultation, "I'm not afraid of you, Marty!" and the laughing detective replies with his dying breath, "Well, ma'am, if I see him, I'll sure give him the message."

Many noirs are based on overtly playful literary sources. The opening paragraph of *The Big Sleep* (1939) immediately reveals Philip Marlowe's playful sense of the most appropriate way to introduce himself:

> It was about eleven o'clock in the morning, mid October, with the sun not shining and a look of hard wet rain in the clearness of the foothills. I was wearing my powder-blue suit, with dark blue shirt, tie and display handkerchief, black brogues, black wool socks with dark blue clocks on them. I was neat, clean, shaved and sober, and I didn't care who knew it. I was everything the well-dressed private detective ought to be. I was calling on four million dollars. (589)

By the end of the story Marlowe has become more darkly reflective – "What did it matter where you lay once you were dead?... You were dead, you were sleeping the big sleep, you were not bothered by things like that" (763–64) – without ever letting up on the wisecracks, even though his plot, as mind-bogglingly complex as that of *Out of the Past*, has become even more of a playful throwaway in the film adaptation than in Raymond Chandler's novel, which at least took the trouble to explain exactly who killed the Sternwood chauffeur.

Cornell Woolrich, whose fiction spawned more noirs than that of any other novelist, can be playful even at his most nightmarish. *The Bride Wore Black* (1940) is constructed as a series of cat-and-mouse games between the avenging Julie Killeen and the men she holds responsible for her bridegroom's death. *Rendezvous in Black* (1948) uses a similar structure to show Johnny Marr's growing ingenuity in killing the loved ones of the men who accidentally killed his fiancée on the anniversary of her death despite the men's increasingly determined and well-informed attempts to protect them. *Phantom Lady* (1942), originally published under the byline William Irish, introduces its playful opening sentences – "The night was young, and so was he. But the night was sweet, and he was sour" – with the balefully playful chapter heading: "The Hundred and Fiftieth Day Before the Execution" (1).

Many films noirs, however, intensify the playfulness of their source material or replace their self-seriousness with a more playful tone, partly because movies, unlike novels, are designed to be watched by large groups of people whose amusement can be contagious, partly because Hollywood adaptations, recognizing this difference, typically broaden rather than refine their sources. None of the dialogue I quoted earlier from *Out of the Past* has any basis in the film's source novel, Geoffrey Homes's *Build My Gallows High* (1946). As Jeff Schwager has demonstrated, uncredited screenwriter Frank Fenton "was responsible for the bulk of the film's best dialogue," from Kirk Douglas's throwaway characterization of his chief henchman, "Joe couldn't find a prayer in the bible," to Mitchum's response to Greer's choked "I don't want to die" – practically the only time in the film she shows any fear – "Neither do I, baby, but if I have to, I'm going to die last" (16). Because noir's playfulness is eminently compatible with earnestness, lack of humor is no obstacle to noir at play. The humorlessness in Ben Ames Williams's novel *Leave Her to Heaven* (1944) did not prevent 20th Century Fox from playing with the screen images of its virginal leading lady Gene Tierney, whose dazzling close-ups and Technicolor wardrobe make her femme fatale appear larger and more intense than life, and her ineffectual consort Cornel Wilde, associated as usual with the music of Chopin, whom he had played in *A Song to Remember* earlier that year. The film's tendency toward self-conscious mythologizing and monumentality, which makes every character and gesture and musical cue from the film's portentous opening scene to its soft-focus finale feel more vivid and expressive, more *itself*, than it

could possibly be in real life, is only one aspect of noir's most widely remarked stylistic signature, the expressionistic visuals that tell the audience much more about the characters' world and their feelings than such variously obtuse, inarticulate, and deceptive characters could ever reveal about themselves.

So firmly do noir's dialogue, narrative structure, and visual stylization establish its playfulness that even the limitations it places on its characters' freedom come across as playful. Most of the first half of *Dark Passage* (1948) and virtually all of *Lady in the Lake* (1946) are restricted to shots from the hero's optical point of view. The effect may be oppressive, but like the long takes in Hitchcock's contemporaneous *Rope* (1948), it is clearly a playfully self-imposed exercise in technique. The game of cat and mouse Charles McGraw plays in protecting his snarling witness Marie Windsor in *The Narrow Margin* (1952) only intensifies when they board the train to Los Angeles, committing themselves to a series of tightly enclosed spaces besieged by murderous gangsters. The claustrophobia of *D.O.A.* (1950), in which Edmond O'Brien has only forty-eight hours to find the man who slipped him a fatal dose of radium poisoning, is temporal rather than spatial, but it is equally playful for viewers who perceive that O'Brien's success is as certain as his death. *The Set-Up*, in staging its seventy-minute story in a seventy-minute movie set largely in a boxing arena its hero cannot escape, combines spatial and temporal claustrophobia in a way that is both grim and playful.

More widely noted is noir's play with the gender dualities of masculinity and femininity, which it confounds by conflating hyperfemininity with transgressive masculinity, so that its femmes fatales become dangerous usurpers of masculine power to precisely the degree that their femininity is emphasized and fetishized. The obvious example is Peggy Cummins, whose sharpshooter in *Gun Crazy* (1950), originally titled *Deadly Is the Female*, is introduced by the carnival barker who is keeping her as "so appealing, so dangerous, so lovely to look at!" But Gene Tierney, who refuses to keep servants in *Leave Her to Heaven* because she wants to do all the cooking and cleaning for her bridegroom herself, turns out to be just as dangerously transgressive. The more demurely feminine Tierney acts, the more fatal the consequences, even though her attacks are strikingly passive-aggressive (encouraging her husband's inconvenient young brother to swim too far and then declining to save him from drowning), suicidal (feeding herself arsenic so that she can implicate the sister she is jealous of in her death), or both (throwing herself down a flight of stairs to kill her unborn child). Noirs fear women who covet men's power, but their greatest fears are reserved for women who seek male power by exploiting their own femininity.

The reverse is equally true, for sometimes, as Detective Burgess says of Carol Richman in *Phantom Lady*, a woman is "[t]he best man of us all" (217). Pausing before entering the Sternwood mansion for the first time, Philip Marlowe sees

a broad stained-glass panel showing a knight in dark armor rescuing a lady who was tied to a tree and didn't have any clothes on but some very long and convenient hair. The knight had pushed the vizor of his helmet back to be sociable, and he was fiddling with the knots on the ropes that tied the lady to the tree and not getting anywhere. I stood there and thought that if I lived in the house, I would sooner or later have to climb up there and help him. (Chandler 589)

Marlowe naturally identifies himself with the armored knight rescuing the lady. When he finally tracks down Eddie Mars's wife to a house in the foothills outside Realito, however, he assumes the role of the lady instead, "trussed like a turkey ready for the oven" (733), and has to be rescued by someone who will cut the ropes – in Chandler's novel by Mrs. Mars, whose silver wig covers "hair that was clipped short all over, like a boy's" (736); in Howard Hawks's film by Lauren Bacall, who's been alternating insolent wisecracks and kisses with him through the whole film, in distinct contrast to her kid sister Martha Vickers, who throws herself at men and then shoots them when they don't respond. All three of these women thoroughly confound the gender roles conventionally assigned to men and women, Vickers by fetishizing her own infantile girlishness in a way that both provokes and conceals her tendency to sociopathic violence, Bacall and Mrs. Mars by shouldering more manly burdens than the detective-in-distress they rescue. In revealing that apparently dualistic gender roles are mutable and fluid because they are performed rather than given, they show the serious possibilities of playing with gender by playing at being a man or woman.

By now I have used *playing* to cover so many different aspects of noir that I should explain just what I am using the term to mean. Roger Caillois has defined game-playing as an activity that is essentially free, separate from the activities surrounding it, uncertain, unproductive, governed by rules, and make-believe (9–10). Bernard Suits defines it more briefly as the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles (41). A vital feature of game-playing is that it is utterly gratuitous. Not even Antonius Blok needs to play games; they are always superfluous. Playful writers like Dickens, who is noted for the fertility of his invention, are often marked by the mastery of what George Orwell has called *the unnecessary detail* (59) that brings many of his stories and situations to comic life precisely because it is extra. And one last feature of game-playing is its desire to live in an indefinitely extended present and its consequent resistance to closure. Children who finish a game of stickball or Monopoly are likely to start another so that they return to the endless zone of play, and Mardi Gras ends only because it must, not because anyone wants it to.

Gratuitous and potentially endless play is not, of course, limited to playing games. One may play a role or play with a convention or an expectation. Festival, as Mikhail Bakhtin and C.L. Barber remind us, is playful. So is comedy, of course, along with wisecracks and bantering dialogue and cynical self-awareness and the use of obviously stylized narrative structures or performances or *mise-en-scène*.

Play is both optional and pleasurable. Even the desperate heroes of *The Killers* and *Gun Crazy* choose from their very limited options to play the games that will lead to their death. Play is not restricted to human beings, as any cat owner can attest, but play requires enough agency to enter into an alternate world in which things modeled on real-world counterparts can be recognized as either different, as in the coldly amoral universe of *Double Indemnity*, or more themselves than in the real world, as in the outsized tableaux of *Leave Her to Heaven* or the witty performances Naremore finds in *The Maltese Falcon*.

Players stand both inside and outside the world in which they play. They recognize its arbitrariness and limitations but accept it conditionally anyway. This conditional acceptance, in fact, is crucial, for play is hypothetical. It dissolves the *what* of the world we think we know into the *what if* of another world. As a result, playfulness is threatening to anyone whose comfort requires certitude, stability, and a single predictable tone. Hence Borde and Chaumeton's unmistakably fraught articulation of noir's keynote: "the state of tension created in the spectators by the disappearance of their psychological bearings" (13). At the same time, it creates a world players willingly enter despite, indeed because of, its obvious artifice, instability, and dependence on hypotheses rather than certainties. Although we may well feel at home in this world, we never simply inhabit it because we are always aware that it has been constructed for our pleasure. Fiction is essentially playful. So are performance and theatricality. That's why we call *King Lear* a tragic play.

The playfulness of noir suggests that another vital locus for play is genre. Film genres allow moviegoers to stand both inside and outside the movies they watch in several playful ways. We can recognize that each new genre release is the same as all the others but different. As Linda Hutcheon has said of adaptations, genre films feed our desire for "repetition without replication" (7) by playing with the conventions that enable them. Noir's preference for long flashbacks and voiceover narration often extends this double awareness to fictional heroes who feel as if they're both inside and outside the story of their lives. Robert Mitchum expresses this feeling memorably when he tells his friend the cab driver in *Out of the Past*, "I think I'm in a frame" – a feeling informed fans of noir are invited to share, albeit at somewhat lower stakes.

The close identifications we often form with the doomed heroes of noir are never so close that we forget that they are doomed. We see them as both variously empathetic individuals and genre types, characters who are as easy to identify as they are to identify with. The resulting dialectic of intimacy and detachment, which I have elsewhere identified with remakes and Hutcheon with adaptations, is so indispensable to all genres that Rick Altman has described it as a "split subjectivity characteristic of genre spectatorship" (146). Many films are disconcertingly playful not merely because they combine incongruous features of different genres, but because they reveal and redouble a radical ambivalence toward their foundational

subjects. As William Paul writes of the return of the monster in gross-out horror films, "we see in the monstrous an anarchic force that is worth celebrating as much as it is worth fearing, something we want to embrace and pull away from at the same time." These films' "resistance to closure," Paul observes, produces "an art of ambivalence and, with it, the promise of ceaseless festivity" (418–19). The dialectic of immersion and detachment, of belief and skepticism, of empathy and analysis, of identifying with and identifying, is at the very core of noir, and indeed of every genre.

Or it would be if genres had a core. What they have instead is a generational lack of self-identity borne of the foundational tendency of genres to establish themselves by playing with their own rules from their very beginnings. This tendency is nowhere better illustrated than in the seminal noir novel, Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*. Although there had been earlier novels about hardboiled detectives, including two by Hammett himself, the opening paragraph of *The Maltese Falcon*, like the opening paragraph of *The Big Sleep*, addresses itself directly to a still earlier genre:

> Samuel Spade's jaw was long and bony, his chin a jutting v under the more flexible v of his mouth. His nostrils curved back to make another, smaller v. His yellow-grey eyes were horizontal. The v *motif* was picked up again by thickish brows rising outward from twin creases above a hooked nose, and his pale brown hair grew down – from high flat temples – in a point on his forehead. He looked rather pleasantly like a blond satan. (391)

Apart from establishing that Spade looks nothing like Humphrey Bogart or any of the other actors who have played him, this passage seems considerably more earnest than Chandler's corresponding introduction of Marlowe. Yet it is just as playful in its own way. The emphasis on physical detail, apparently minutely observed, conveys practically nothing about Spade, not even a powerful image. The description, in fact, is less memorable for its physical particulars – always a red herring Hammett uses to indicate that he's not showing us what Spade is thinking – than for its rhythm, its use of epithets, and the thematic unity its programmatic iconography imposes on the hero, who looks rather pleasantly like a blond satan.

This last phrase, of course, is a poke in the eye to the so-called Golden Age detective fiction of Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, and S.S. Van Dine. Not only does Hammett serve notice that his interest in physical detail will be very different from theirs, theme-driven rather than clue-driven, but he announces from the beginning his inversion of the Golden Age detective story's moral order, which enshrined the detective as sage, teacher, and guide. Yet Spade isn't merely satanic; he looks rather pleasantly like satan, and a blond satan at that. Within a single paragraph Hammett has gone far to indicate the complex legacy his hero inherits from detective heroes like Hercule Poirot, Lord Peter Wimsey, and Philo Vance, a fictional sleuth Hammett particularly despised. In addition, he establishes Spade as

different even from himself, as pleasantly likely to depart from generic norms as to conform to them.

The Maltese Falcon's assault on the received generic norms of the detective novel will continue from this opening paragraph to the final scene between Spade and Brigid O'Shaughnessy, when Spade will fulfill some of these norms admirably while violating others in the most egregious way. If the attack has the predictable effect of establishing new norms Hammett and his followers can play with and against, that's perfectly normal. It's exactly how genres mutate, for, as Altman has persuasively argued, genre is "not the permanent *product* of a singular origin, but the temporary *by-product* of an ongoing *process*" (54). Genres begin life by playing with the rules of earlier games and develop by playing with their own.

In short, noir is playful for the same reason that all genres are playful: because that's the nature of every genre, whose members, like Norman Bates's mother, are never quite themselves. Play with its own identity – the insistence that each new entry is different despite being the same – is what makes a genre a genre. The only reason commentators haven't more frequently noted this generic playfulness in musicals, romances, and slapstick comedies is that play seems so much a part of these genres' thematic material that it passes invisible as a strategy for constituting the genre.

This sense of playfulness lies scarcely below the surface of a surprising number of Hollywood genres. Anyone who thinks about Westerns, which might not seem especially playful at first, will realize that they operate precisely by treating a historical narrative of settlement and violent, often genocidal conflict playfully, typically by converting the constant threat of violence into a series of manageably violent games, mostly limited to two players at a time. A perfect example is the climatic shootout, which transforms the general threat of violence into a ritual whose precise and unalterable rules, which can readily be traced to the aristocratic European code of duello, have no historical precedent in the settling of the American West.

Many other genres – war films, biopics, documentaries, avant-garde films – seem much less playful. Yet each of them regularly finds room for some sort of play with its enabling norms, from the knowingly playful way the biopic treats its hero's resistance to the fate the audience is certain awaits him to the avant-garde film's frontal assault on the norms of generic cinema that somehow manages to create new generic norms recognizable enough to allow us to identify films as avant-garde. The playfulness essential to the operation of genre becomes most noticeable as a return of the repressed in those genres which logically ought to be most determined to banish it: the gangster film, the thriller, the horror film, the film noir.

By now I've made such sweeping claims for play that you may wonder it's congruent with entertainment as such. I wouldn't go quite as far as that. It is not that different people are entertained by different experiences – some children like to set

fires and torture animals, and others would rather go to the movies – because fire-bugs and torturers of animals often regard what they are doing as just another mode of play. But other impulses are just as important in the manufacture of mass enter-tainment – for instance, the myths of energy, abundance, intensity, transparency, and community that Richard Dyer identifies in "Entertainment and Utopia" (21–22), or the Aristotelian myth that life is meaningful and that dramatic action is a privileged way to unlock its meaning. Although it is not the only ingredient, however, playful-ness is an indispensable ingredient in any recipe for the replication of commercially successful formulas; it's what allows filmmakers to turn an experiment or a happy accident into a formula. Genre theory needs to take playfulness more seriously. As scholars of gender studies whose field has been immeasurably enriched by the hypothesis that gender is performed rather than given could tell them, the play's the thing – and that goes whether the play is *Hamlet* or *D.O.A*.

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ZABAWA W *NOIR*

Streszczenie

Niezależnie od przedstawiania ponurego świata, w którym przemoc, zdrada i morderstwo są codziennością, film *noir* jest w zasadzie gatunkiem dowcipnym. Klasyczne filmy czarne są przesycone rywalizacją i słownymi sparingami między bohaterami, nielinearną strukturą narracji i wysoce dramatyczną ironią, intensywnie stylizowaną wizualnością, narzuconymi sobie ograniczeniami czasu i przestrzeni oraz stałą, żartobliwą renegocjacją gatunkowych dualności. Zapraszając widza do zajęcia pozycji raz wewnątrz, innym razem na zewnątrz swojego świata, poprzez kombinację bliskich identyfikacji i rozpoznanie reguł konwencji, film *noir* kreuje dialektykę immersji i dystansu. Jego radykalna ambiwalencja w stosunku zarówno do tematu, jak i publiczności sugeruje, że sednem gatunku, którego każdy element jest i nie jest sobą, jest żartobliwość.

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