the cinematic flâneur

manifestations of modernity
in the male protagonist of
1940s film noir

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Abstract

The hardboiled hero is recognised as a central trope in the film noir cycle, and particularly in the ‘classic’ noir texts produced in Hollywood in the 1940s. Like the films themselves, this protagonist has largely been understood as an allegorical embodiment of a bleak post-World War Two mood of anxiety and disillusionment. Theorists have consistently attributed his pessimism, alienation, paranoia and fatalism to the concurrent American cultural climate. With its themes of murder, illicit desire, betrayal, obsession and moral dissolution, the noir canon also proves conducive to psychoanalytic interpretation. By oedipalising the noir hero and the cinematic text in which he is embedded, this approach at best has produced exemplary noir criticism, but at worst a tendency to universalise his trajectory.

This thesis proposes a complementary and newly historicised critical paradigm with which to interpret the noir hero. Such an exegesis encompasses a number of social, aesthetic, demographic and political forces reaching back to the nineteenth century. This will reveal the centrality of modernity in shaping the noir hero’s ontology. The noir hero will also be connected to the flâneur, a figure who embodied the changes of modernity and who emerged in the mid-nineteenth century as both an historical entity and a critical metaphor for the new subject. As a rehistoricised approach will reveal, this nineteenth century—or classic—flâneur provides a potent template for the noir hero.

Several modalities of the noir protagonist will be interrogated to elucidate their modernist dimensions. These include his perambulatory impulses, his ability to navigate the metropolis (both figuratively and literally) and his observations therein. Steeped in cynicism and irony, his wisecracking, deadpan voice is historically determined. It can be genealogically connected to the emergence of other modern voices in a number of art forms including pulp fiction, comic strips and the tabloid press. Finally, the noir hero’s desire for the evil and destructive femme fatale is analogous to that experienced by the nineteenth century subject who encountered the disturbing and highly visible new woman and prostitute of the metropolis. The modernist tenets of ephemerality, scopophilia and artifice are axiomatic to a flâneuristic obsession with the destructive temptress.
Methodologically, this thesis necessarily embraces archival data and historical material. It also draws heavily from the seminal writings of cultural philosophers Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer and Georg Simmel, and from the œuvres of proto-modernists such as Charles Baudelaire, Émile Zola and Guy de Maupassant. All sought to investigate and capture the essence of living in the modern world.

Analysis of the celebrated Double Indemnity (Billy Wilder, 1944, USA) forms the foundation of this project, with other contemporaneous films noirs cited when relevant. In addition to illuminating Double Indemnity’s protagonist, Walter Neff, as a modern subject or cinematic flâneur, this thesis proposes a new interpretative model which can be used examine the entire 1940s film noir canon in order to fully understand the forces of modernity governing its features.
Declaration of Authorship

This is to certify that:

(i) This thesis comprises only my original work,

(ii) Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used,

(iii) This thesis does not exceed 100,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices.

Signature: Date:

.............................................  .............................................

Petra Désirée Nolan
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Chapter 1  Introduction

1.1 Double Indemnity — paradigmatic noir text

The film’s first image is a city street, shot at night and drenched in darkness. A few streetlamps do little to illuminate the scene. In the foreground, to the left of the frame, stands a fluorescent sign reading ‘LA Railway Corp. Maintenance Dept.,’ next to which a couple of workers (only indistinctly visible) perform maintenance work. The musical score of émigré composer Miklós Rózsa,1 carried over from the title sequence yet with a slightly more manic tenor, lends a foreboding air as a car moves erratically towards the camera. After a few more shots in which the errant vehicle drives through a stop sign and narrowly avoids colliding with a truck, it pulls up outside a deserted office building and a man clad in a hat and overcoat emerges. Shoulders hunched, he moves determinedly towards the door where he is received by the night porter, who recognises him as Walter Neff and transports him via elevator to his workplace. Entering the headquarters of The Pacific All-Risk Insurance Company, Neff stops walking and stands on a balcony just off-frame as the camera tilts down to reveal rows of empty desks on the lower floor. This cuts to a spatially distorted long-shot, filmed from below, of Neff skulking furtively along the balcony and into an office, his shadow cast expressionistically on the wall.

The above is a fitting sequence with which to open Double Indemnity, Billy Wilder’s celebrated 1944 film noir that documents the downfall of thirty-five year old insurance salesman, Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray). Whilst introducing typical noir

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1 Renowned for the darkness of his compositions, Rózsa was afforded total creative freedom in scoring Double Indemnity. Upon initially hearing the soundtrack, Paramount’s executive musical director, Louis Lipstone, was apparently displeased with the music’s discordance, complaining that it sounded like it came from The Battle of Russia (a 1943 documentary directed by Frank Capra and Anatole Litvak, from the Why We Fight series) (Rózsa 1989, p. 142).

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motifs (the automobile, the rain-drenched and deserted nocturnal urban streets) and
using an expressionistic visual style (chiaroscuro and extreme camera angles), this
sequence immediately establishes Neff as a hardboiled hero. The dangerous veering of
the vehicle metaphorises his doomed trajectory, whilst the familiar iconography (hat,
overcoat, grim demeanour) indicates his urban status. The film’s opening also aligns
the spectator’s point of view with that of the protagonist when, moments later, Neff
starts to relate his story into a dictaphone, drawing the viewer into a tale of obsession,
murder and betrayal. In keeping with film noir convention, Double Indemnity’s
voiceover emanates from its male protagonist and tells of his moral dissolution and
mortal demise, in which the femme fatale plays a central role.

Whilst leading an ostensibly ordered existence, Neff harbours dark and
unrealised desires. ‘In this business you can’t sleep for trying to figure out the tricks
they could pull on you,’ Neff explains in his voiceover confession, inviting audience
collusion:

… you’re like the guy behind the roulette wheel, watching the
customers to make sure they don’t crook the house. And then one
night, you get to thinking how you could crook the house yourself.
And do it smart.

Dropping into the Dietrichson’s home one afternoon to renew some automobile
insurance policies, Neff is greeted by the alluring Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara
Stanwyck), who first appears posing seductively at the top of her staircase. Having
come inside from sunbathing on the roof, Phyllis is clad only in a towel. Neff is
immediately spellbound and impatient to see her again, ‘close.’ In this instant, the
deadly obsession for the fatal woman, an imperative of the noir hero, is ignited. The
typical noir fusion of eroticism and criminality is also immediately apparent: Phyllis is
married and thus designated as ‘off-limits,’ so Neff’s desire is from the outset an illicit
one.

Phyllis orchestrates another meeting where she attempts to seduce Neff
whilst enquiring about the possibility of purchasing accident insurance without her
husband’s knowledge. Suspecting her intentions, Neff quits his flirtatious double

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2 Most classic films noirs feature the narrative device of the male voiceover to tell the story. Anthony Mann’s Raw Deal (1948) is a rare exception, contravening convention by having a female character narrate the voiceover.
entendres and departs. Unable to dispel the image of Phyllis, however, he remains
anguished until she arrives, unannounced, at his apartment later that evening. The two
declare their love for each other in a sequence edited to indicate a temporal ellipsis,
connoting the consummation of their relationship. Neff then agrees to assist in
murdering Phyllis’ husband, but explains that they must engineer it to appear as an
accident involving a train—a form of accidental death so rare that it attracts what is
known in the insurance business as a ‘double indemnity,’ with the beneficiary
receiving twice the standard payout.

Their plan is executed, Dietrichson (Tom Powers) is murdered and his body
left on the railway tracks. All goes awry, however, as their love sours and various
complications arise due to claims manager Barton Keyes’ (Edward G. Robinson)
intuition (his ‘little man inside’), stepdaughter Lola’s suspicions, and the growing
paranoia of the two lovers. In the film’s dramatic denouement, a showdown occurs
during which Phyllis and Neff shoot each other. She dies, but Neff drags himself to
the office to narrate his confession to boss and mentor Keyes. Finally, as daylight
breaks, Keyes appears and Neff faces a moment of truth. Although he tries to escape,
Neff dies before he can reach the elevator.

Produced for Paramount Studios, Double Indemnity is today perhaps the
most celebrated of all films noirs. Written in 1943 by Wilder in collaboration with
pulp fiction author Raymond Chandler, the screenplay for Double Indemnity was an
adaptation of the eponymous 1936 James M. Cain novel which was purportedly
inspired by a 1927 murder case in which a New York woman named Ruth Snyder and

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3 The implicit consummation is conveyed by a dissolve back to the ‘present’ moment of Neff’s
d dictation in the office, followed by a return to an anterior image of Neff and Phyllis sitting on
his sofa smoking cigarettes.

4 Wilder shot an alternative ending where Neff survived the shooting only to be sent to the gas
chamber. Despite the design and construction of a set which reputedly cost $150,000 and five
days shooting the sequence, Wilder ultimately declared the scene superfluous, explaining that
‘[t]he picture is over when [Keyes] tells [Neff], “you’ll never even make the elevator,” and he
tries and collapses’ (cited in Meyers 2000, p. xv). See also (Marling 1993; Brion 1991). The
film’s final cut won the approval of James M. Cain, from whose novel the film was adapted.
‘Wilder’s ending was much better than [mine],’ conceded Cain, ‘and his device for letting the
guy tell the story by taking out the office dictating machine—I would have done it if I had
her lover (a corset salesman) were convicted of murdering Snyder’s husband. Despite its ultimate canonisation, a cinematic adaptation of *Double Indemnity* was no easy task. Several major studios, including MGM (to whom Cain’s Hollywood agent had sent the manuscript), had expressed a strong and immediate interest in the project in the late 1930s. Censorship guidelines stipulated by the Hays Office, however, made producers wary, perhaps doubly so because Cain’s 1934 bestseller *The Postman Always Rings Twice* had also been vetoed by the censors. Indeed, after Paramount acquired the rights to *Double Indemnity* in 1943, the studio continued experiencing problems with the censorship office, with Joseph Breen declaring that the story needed to change radically in order to avoid violating the Production Code (Sikov 1998; Naremore 1998; Friedrich 1986).

The censors were not alone in their feelings of repulsion towards this morally bereft tale. Wilder’s regular co-writer at Paramount, the staunchly conservative Charlie Brackett, refused to have anything to do it. Actor George Raft declined the role of Neff after ingenuously asking where the ‘lapel bit’ was and being told it did not exist (Raft was referring to the formulaic expository and morally redemptive denouement where the badge is typically flashed and the protagonist is revealed to be a detective or a member of the FBI). Fred MacMurray, who had enjoyed success by playing a number of genial characters, was initially apprehensive (Phillips 2000). Stanwyck also voiced ambivalence about portraying a murderess after her many heroic roles in genre films. Nevertheless, MacMurray and Stanwyck agreed

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5 Snyder was sentenced to an electric chair execution, an event captured on film by a *Daily News* photographer (Sikov 1998). As F. Scott Fitzgerald recounts, the popular media gleefully reported all the sensational details of Snyder’s trial and sentence, with *Daily News* declaring that the murderess would ‘cook, and sizzle, AND FRY! In the electric chair’ [sic] (Fitzgerald 1945, p. 18). First used in 1890 in New York, the electric chair itself was an invention of modernity, and one in which gruesome and visceral spectacle converged with technological innovation (Kern 1983).

6 Formed in 1921, the Hays Office, or Hays Code (named after its inaugural President, Will Hays) was a self-regulatory body designed to control the content of Hollywood product. Following Joseph Breen’s appointment as head in 1934, the code was tightened up considerably, with all films censored at scriptwriting stage. Censorship guidelines succeeded in eradicating literal representations of sexuality in American cinema until the early 1960s, resulting in a far more coded and sublimated style. For further information on censorship and Hollywood’s political climate, see (Brownlow 1990; Butler 2002; Cepleur & Englund 1980).

7 Cinematically adapted twice in Europe—*Le Dernier Tournant* (Pierre Chenal, 1939, France) and Luchino Visconti’s *Ossessione* (1942)—*The Postman Always Rings Twice* was not produced in Hollywood until 1946, even though MGM had acquired the rights in 1934.
to star, and principal shooting commenced on 27 September 1943, wrapping on 24 November 1943.8

With its dark, moody visuals executed by cinematographer John Seitz and its themes of murder, lust and moral dissolution, *Double Indemnity* has been lauded in film scholarship as the quintessential noir text. The French cinéastes of the late 1940s and 1950s were much enamoured of Wilder’s masterpiece, while early Anglo-American commentators, Higham and Greenberg, saw it as a ‘film without a single trace of pity or love’ (Higham & Greenberg 1968, p. 28). In his seminal 1972 article, Schrader canonises *Double Indemnity* as the ‘best written and most characteristically noir of the period’ (Schrader 1972, p. 10). Despite the fact that it occurs neither at the beginning nor the end of the noir cycle, Schrader apotheosises *Double Indemnity* for its bleak portrait of an unheroic protagonist. Silver and Ward are dismissive of other Wilder films—*Sunset Boulevard* (1950, USA) is ‘flawed by sentimentality’ and *The Big Carnival* (also known as *Ace in the Hole*, 1951, USA) is too overtly cynical. Nevertheless, they celebrate *Double Indemnity* for its ‘perverse sense of humour’ (Silver & Ward 1992, p. 93). Prigozy notes that *Double Indemnity* has been elevated to landmark status (Prigozy 1984), Naremore sees it as the definitive noir text and one of the most influential films in Hollywood’s history (Naremore 1998), whilst Crowther believes it to be one of noir’s ‘unquestioned masterpieces’ (Crowther 1988, p. 133). *Double Indemnity* is listed in *Time Out* as one of the ‘top 100’ films of all time (Pym 2004), and Woody Allen proclaimed it the best film ever made (Crowe 1999). In the late 1950s, Wilder cited *Double Indemnity* as his finest effort (cited in Karimi 1976).9

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8 Produced for $980,000, *Double Indemnity* was critically acclaimed upon its release but failed to achieve huge box-office success (Naremore 1998).

9 Naturally, one can always locate voices of dissent. Whilst *Double Indemnity* has few detractors, Flinn and Schwager believed the apex of film noir excellence to be Jacques Tourneur’s *Out of the Past* (1947) (Flinn 1973a; Schwager 1991). Shadoian similarly fails to list *Double Indemnity* in his top fourteen films noirs, despite conceding that it is a ‘much admired, much quoted film [which] deserves all its plaudits’ (Shadoian 1977, p. 330). Although initially dismissive, Sarris recently extolled Billy Wilder, retrospectively recognising his genius (Sarris 1991).
1.2 The hardboiled noir hero

At the outset of his confession, Walter Neff explains how the appearance of femme fatale Phyllis Dietrichson and her explicitly voiced desire to dispense with her husband enabled him to realise his longstanding desire to rort the insurance system for his own material benefit. It was all tied up, Neff reveals, with something he had been thinking about for several years. In this section of the confession, Neff’s pain and anguish is palpable and is underscored by the fact that the dialogue is embedded within the diegesis; that is, delivered in a shot of Neff sitting in the office, rather than being inscribed (and distanced) as voiceover. The scenes where the spectator has access to the time and space of Neff’s dictation function as privileged moments, lending an urgency and immediacy to the sense of alienation and despair conveyed.

Solitary, deracinated and with no known family context, Neff epitomises the noir anti-hero. He is anguished and alienated. Residing alone in a small, ascetic city apartment, he wanders through tracts of urban and suburban space. His voice is tough and wisecracking. Becoming enthralled and irrevocably tainted by the destructive enchantress, Neff is inexorably set on a downward spiral. Most other noir heroes exhibit similar traits. Michael O’Hara, the itinerant protagonist of The Lady from Shanghai (Orson Welles, 1948, USA), drifts aimlessly whilst working in maritime jobs until ensnared by the beauteous Elsa Bannister. Frank Chambers, hero of The Postman Always Rings Twice (Tay Garnett, 1946, USA), has apparently meandered along the highways of California until he arrives fortuitously at the abode of femme fatale, Cora, and her older husband, Nick. The protagonist of Murder, My Sweet (Edward Dmytryk, 1944, USA), Philip Marlowe, is a wisecracking private investigator with a hardboiled persona, deadpan mode of speech and a resolute detachment from those with whom he consorts. In Out of the Past, Jeff Bailey (also known as Jeff Markham) aims to escape his urban, criminal identity by seeking refuge in a benign, bucolic community. In The Killers (Robert Siodmak, 1946, USA), anti-hero ‘the Swede’ is an unknown and unknowable man with several appellations. He, too, tries to resist the lure of the femme fatale and the city by installing himself in a small country town. Unable to evade his past, however, the Swede is murdered by hired assassins at the outset of the film, with the rest of the narrative offering an hermeneutically motivated multiple point of view exposition of what led to his murder.
Virtually all ‘classic’ American 1940s films noirs have at their core a modern, urban, hardboiled hero from whose consciousness the narrative emerges. Whether private investigators, insurance salesmen, criminals or peripatetic drifters, all noir protagonists are alienated, both metaphorically and literally. These heroes are characterised by a hardboiled mode of speech, a propensity for urban wandering, and by their fatal susceptibility to the charms of the destructive temptress. Whilst abundantly theorised, this noir hero and his constitutive modalities have yet to be fully understood in terms of their broader historical resonance.

1.2.1 Existing exegetic approaches

Making its first appearance in the late 1930s or early 1940s (depending upon whose chronology one chooses to accept), film noir is a cinematic phenomenon that has not only proved hugely popular by standards of mass culture, but has also been exhaustively analysed. Since the late 1940s, film noir has been a canon that has been consistently discussed in critical writings, resulting in the accumulation of a large body of work. Most critical writings on film noir fall within two discursive categories. Firstly, film noir has been extensively analysed using post-structuralist models such as Lacanian psychoanalysis (Krutnik 1991; Maxfield 1996; Johnston 1980; Place 1980; Walsh 1981; Copjec 1993a, 1993b). Running counter to this is a historicist sociological approach, which proposes film noir as a manifestation of a pervasive postwar mood of disillusionment and anxiety (Borde & Chaumeton 1955; Schrader 1971; Kemp 1986; Silver & Ward 1991; Palmer 1994; Rich 1995; Durgnat 1996). Theorists have pointed to the noir hero’s peripatetic urban existence, cynicism and bleak outlook as evidence of an alienation specifically pertaining to his historical location in the mid-twentieth century.

These interpretative approaches have proved highly informative and germane. The inevitable outcome of using formalised and prescriptive paradigms, however, is a limited understanding of the films and tropes in question. Significantly, broader socio-historical forces are frequently overlooked. The tenets of Lacanianism require that all interpersonal relationships and textual structures be understood in
transhistorical oedipal terms or else rendered symbolic in a way that elides cultural specificity. Similarly, post-structural feminist investigations often assume and implicitly normalise a static notion of patriarchy, without conceding historical forces which may have challenged, subverted or shaped the dominant order. Conversely, the historicist discourse (or what I would term the zeitgeist approach) offers an aetiological attribution that is too circumscribed.

This thesis complements these established models by proposing a methodology that allows for a rigorous socio-historical contextualisation. By exploring the social, cultural, political, demographic, ideological, intellectual, aesthetic and artistic developments occurring from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, this project will position the noir hero within a broader historical field. In doing this, the phenomenon of modernity will be revealed as the primary guiding force in the construction of the hardboiled hero and his femme fatale adversary.

The interpretative model formulated throughout this thesis will invoke the figure of the flâneur as both an historical figure (of the mid to late nineteenth century) and as a critical metaphor for the urban, alienated and mobile subject. I shall refer to this character as the ‘classic flâneur,’ indicating at once his prototypical status and the fact that in many ways he serves as the template for the noir hero. Qualification is also necessary. An interpretative model in which a diachronic investigation and a desire to offer socio-historical contextualisation is central, necessarily concedes that in the amorphous world of ‘history,’ any categorisation is arbitrary at best. Identities are constantly fluctuating, and the impulses guiding them are often contradictory and dialectic. Both the classic flâneur and the noir hero are fluid and decentred modern subjects who are governed by irrational desires. They are complex figures and frequently resist reductive categorisation.

Both characters celebrate and embody the modern world, whilst eschewing its more ‘shocking’ elements. Unable in many ways to cope with the onset of modernity, the classic flâneur looks back with longing towards a simpler time.

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10 Developed by Freud in 1897, the Oedipus complex was proposed as a universal phenomenon. ‘Every new arrival on this planet,’ declared Freud, ‘is faced by the task of mastering the Oedipus complex … anyone who fails to do so falls a victim to neurosis’ (cited in Thornton 1983, p. 260).
Similarly, the noir hero often yearns to loiter in the city’s deserted interstices, and to escape the urban maelstrom. That there are differences between the classic flâneur and the noir hero is indisputable, and these will be discussed throughout the thesis when relevant. Nonetheless, I will argue that, in many crucial ways, the noir hero and the classic flâneur are genealogically, ontologically and inextricably linked. Both figures are privileged tropes on which the flânerie of modernity is articulated, enacted and at times problematised. The methodology proposed by my thesis will elucidate the noir hero as a paradigmatically modern subject—or cinematic flâneur—in whom several key manifestations of modernity can be discerned, as enumerated below.

1.2.1.1 Navigating the metropolis — flânerie and film noir

The cinematic apparatus has been widely posited in film theory as the apotheosis of modernity’s need to engage with the new, the dynamic and the visual. A Benjaminian conception of cinema sees the camera as a sort of flâneur, or a tool by which the spectator can be transformed into a modern, mobile subject:

> Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go travelling (Benjamin 1968c, p. 236).

Kinetic thrill and mobility are themes central to both modernity and cinema. They are also key indices of the classic flâneur. Wandering through the grand nineteenth century metropolis, the flâneur delighted in perambulation. Like cinema’s kino-eye, the flâneur could ‘calmly and adventurously go travelling.’ It was through such constant propulsion that he partakes in the delights of the city, indulges his

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scopophilic and voyeuristic gaze, and lexicographically decodes and thus cognitively orders his surroundings.

In the noir canon, most protagonists exhibit similar flâneuristic features in terms of their mobility. *Double Indemnity*’s Walter Neff is a character for whom unimpeded movement is essential. As an insurance salesman, Neff is afforded the opportunity to negotiate the urban and suburban terrain with autonomy and ease. The automobile with which he executes his professional duties acts as a device that implements a specifically flâneuristic gaze. Locomotion shares much in common with the flânerie of cinema: it mobilises Neff’s vision (and that of the spectator), offers a spatio-temporal concatenation and transports the protagonist into a number of different socio-economic milieux, all of which he is able to ‘read with his insurance eyes’ whilst remaining a detached and impartial observer. Neff’s car acts as a demarcation point, so that he is at once immersed yet separate from his surroundings, which is consistent with the classic flâneur’s drive towards impartiality and detachment. In these respects, a modernist dialectic—celebration of mechanised speed, counterpoised by a more leisurely paced urban wandering in which flâneuristic discoveries can be made—is actualised in a character like Neff. Whilst Benjamin has at times suggested that the increased speed of modern life proved an anathema to the flâneur, sending him into the quieter arcades or back to his home hearth (Benjamin 1968a), I would argue that the automobile (itself a modern invention) was a central element of a latter-day flânerie. In keeping with the twentieth century tempo of rapidity, the new flâneur needed to motorise his wanderings. In a sense, the automobile offers a flâneuristic quasi-private space, thus creating time for reflection whilst traversing the city. In the vehicle, the noir protagonist ruminates and relates his story.

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12 Benjamin makes a distinction between a prototypical Baudelairean conception of the flâneur and a later incarnation: ‘There was the pedestrian who would let himself be jostled by the crowd,’ Benjamin elaborates, ‘but there was also the flâneur who demanded elbow room and was unwilling to forego the life of a gentleman of leisure’ (Benjamin 1968a, pp. 172-73). Benjamin seems to favour a slower pace which was, he observes, fetishised for a brief time in 1839 by the popular practice of taking tortoises for strolls through the Parisian arcades (Benjamin 1999). Benjamin lamented Paris’ Haussmannisation, a project of modernisation that he believed to precipitate the demise of flânerie. Rather, true flânerie flourished, argued Benjamin, in the arcades or on the ferries that leisurely crossed the Seine (Benjamin 1999; 1973e).
Outside the automobile, the noir hero’s occupation of the urban landscape signals him as a modern figure. With the absence of a normalising family context, Neff’s existence as a single male permits him to loiter and wander in city spaces in an independent manner. His chosen leisure activities, such as bowling or dining at an outdoor drive-through restaurant, also establish him as a flâneur, since his engagement with these spaces is at once distanced and needy. Neff’s solitariness is akin to that of the classic flâneur, who oscillates between an urge to connect with the objects of his desire (the modern woman, the crowd, the metropolis) and a need to remain detached. At times the noir hero plunges into the urban maelstrom; but often he resists the lure of the crowd, opting to lurk in the deserted interstices of the city’s underworld. Whatever the case, the noir hero has an overwhelming urge to occupy the urban landscape. Like the classic flâneur and most noir heroes, Neff’s life is largely enacted in a public arena. The office, the automobile and the city become his ‘living quarters.’

Neff’s refusal to be integrated into the capitalist order, which has typically been seen as further evidence of his status as an alienated postwar subject, needs also to be re-examined. In fact, Neff’s iconoclastic rejection of the corporate and consumer society allows him to remain the perpetual outsider. It has been noted that the classic flâneur aestheticises his alienation and marginality. Similarly, the noir hero celebrates his marginalisation, since it permits him to remain separate and lexicographically to decode the city. Like the classic flâneur, Neff’s solitary existence allows him to occupy the urban and suburban terrain without risking subsumption by the crowd. A state of terminal isolation also allows him to evade detection whilst perpetrating his criminal deeds. That Double Indemnity presents a chronically atomised modern urban landscape inhabited by disparate individuals who fail to establish any enduring connections is further evidence of the film’s overall engagement with the flânerie of modernity. Refusing any communion, the hardboiled hero stands alone.

13 Nicholls points out that the modern male subject actually experiences melancholia as empowering (Nicholls 2004). The flâneur’s aestheticisation of his disenfranchisement has also been noted by Asselin in his discussions on the photographs of Charles Gagnon (Asselin 1999).
The Cinematic Flâneur

Chapter One—Introduction

The more pleasurable aspects of this flâneuristic existence must also be acknowledged. Neff has learned the ‘rules of the game’ through his insurance work and can thus play the city and the system. Like the classic flâneur who assesses the city’s wares, Neff is adept at interpreting those he encounters in his professional and personal life. Perhaps more overtly utilitarian in his approach than his nineteenth century predecessor, Neff no longer believes the city to be an enchanted place. Phyllis, however, offers the seductive possibility of re-enchanting the city and its suburbs. In a profane and desacralised world, this is one reason why the femme fatale holds such strong appeal. As with the classic flâneur, the noir hero’s engagement with the marketplace of modernity leads him to the city’s criminal elements, including its treacherous woman.\(^{14}\) Noir protagonists such as Neff can be understood as purveyors of modern life—drifting, aimless, isolated, alienated, decentred and morally ambiguous. Chapter Four will explore Neff’s characterisation in terms of his relationship with the urban and suburban landscape. This exegesis will encompass issues of mobility, locomotion, wandering, loitering, observation, detachment and evading detection within the city. His \textit{modus operandi} in relation to these issues will be compared to that of the classic flâneur in order to elucidate the similarities.

1.2.1.2 Neff as hardboiled hero — the new voice of modernity

As a defining characteristic of 1940s film noir, the narrative device of voiceover/flashback has been widely examined. Most of these investigations have centred on the voiceover’s formal properties, without a sustained analysis of the actual voice itself.\(^ {15} \) And yet noir’s hardboiled voice has many features that connect it to modernity, and as such it deserves closer socio-historical contextualisation.

The phenomenon of modernity transformed the social landscape and urgently called for a new linguistic order. A brutal, masculinised urban voice

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\(^{14}\) ‘Entering the marketplace to find a buyer for his insights and observations,’ writes Nicholls, ‘[the flâneur] becomes aligned to the criminal world’ (Nicholls 2004, p. 80).

\(^{15}\) See for instance Telotte’s study of film noir’s narrative patterns, which is primarily concerned with issues of enunciation and the structural properties of the voiceover (Telotte 1989). Turim, conversely, deploys a psychoanalytic model to examine voiceover, at times identifying interesting features that could be explored further in terms of their modernist resonance, including the relationship between voiceover and subjectivity, and the temporal inversion effected through its use (Turim 1989).
emerged, which was marked by the syntactical and grammatical idiosyncrasies of rapidfire delivery, neologisms, ellipses and terse structures. These properties can be seen as the linguistic equivalent of the shocks, jolts and perceptual changes wrought by modernity. As such, the noir voice is historically determined. It must also be noted that many film noir auteurs, including Wilder, were European émigrés from non-Anglophone backgrounds, and thus engaged with the English language from a specific standpoint. Double Indemnity’s co-scenarist, Raymond Chandler, also stood apart from the consumerism and materialism of Californian culture. This designation as ‘outsider’ or ‘stranger’ is a crucial index of the flâneur. Being an ‘exile’ undoubtedly contributed to Wilder and Chandler’s ability to remain distant (and flâneuristic) observers of American social mores, and to capture the modern, hardboiled vernacular in a heightened form.

It has been noted that modernity was a period in which the notion of the sign gained added prominence. The new epistemology of modernity, in which positivism was gradually eroded, certainly gave rise to anxieties over systems of signification, as reflected in a number of discourses. With the emergence of Saussurean linguistics, for instance, the chasm between signified and signifier, along with the ultimate arbitrariness of language systems, became glaringly apparent. Similarly, Freud’s dreamwork was predicated on the assumption that meaning was subtextualised. On a wider cultural level, signs also became far more unstable and polysemous, leading to systems of signification in which a variety of semiotic inversions became commonplace. Indeed, modern life seemed to demand a new voice in which meaning was embedded at a subtextual level.

In modern literature, the ubiquity of metaphor, allegory and other modes of symbolisation meant that objects were divested of their traditional semantic status. Such strategies informed the œuvre of Charles Baudelaire, and it has even been suggested that the title of his 1859 poem Le Cygne is itself a commentary on the modernist preoccupation with signification and commutation (hence the titular cygne

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16 See Appendix 1 for further biographical information on Wilder.
17 In his analysis of Goodfellas, Nicholls connects the cinematic flâneur to the figure of the outsider, visitor, foreigner or exile. ‘Just as the Scorsesean melancholic embraces loss, sacrifice and disempowerment,’ argues Nicholls, ‘he also embraces the status of stranger, which is to experience a voluntary … exile’ (Nicholls 2004, p. 112).
18 Viart argues that a renewed interest in the humanities at the fin-de-siècle was part of a cultural paradigm shift in which the sign gained new prominence (Viart 1995).
not only denotes a swan, but also connotes a sign—signe) (Terdiman 1993). In keeping with these modern linguistic patterns, noir’s hardboiled voice relies heavily upon symbolisation. It is through the use of metaphor, for instance, that Neff conveys any inflammatory and potentially traumatic subject matter. Furthermore, the themes metaphorised by Neff to communicate his desire and greed (mechanised transportation and gambling) are also significant for their modernist resonance. Consistent with modernity’s tendency towards semiotic inversions, the ‘true’ meaning of Neff’s speech (and that of his hardboiled counterparts) is frequently embedded at a subtextual level.

Cynicism has been defined as a principal feature of the modern subject (Sloterdijk 1987), and can also be connected to flânerie. Whilst allegory and metaphor effect a distance between sign and referent, cynicism (and the irony which frequently accompanies it) also allows the flâneur to maintain a distance. The affectation of cynicism and irony allow him to pleasurably experience the metropolis without being traumatised by its more overwhelming elements (notably, its femme fatale). In this respect, cynicism is a protective mechanism cultivated in response to the modern world. As a close analysis will reveal, the hardboiled noir hero’s voice is suffused with cynicism and irony, and as such is quintessentially modern.

Chapter Five will consider the question of voice in noir, whilst Appendix Three genealogically traces the emergence of the hardboiled voice in a number of art forms and media. These include comic strips, the penny press, tabloid press and the pulp detective fiction of the 1920s and 1930s. This exegesis and genealogical contextualisation will reveal the forces of modernity that shape the voice of the hardboiled hero.

1.2.1.3 A fatal proximity — femme fatale as new woman and modern prostitute

Phyllis Dietrichson, the blonde, brash and evil seductress of Double Indemnity, is paradigmatic of the classic noir femme fatale. From the moment Neff first sees her, he is mesmerised and his volition vastly compromised, as he confesses in his voiceover:

It was a hot afternoon and I can still remember the smell of honeysuckle all along that street. How could I have known that murder can sometimes smell like honeysuckle? Maybe you would have known, Keyes, the minute she mentioned accident insurance. But I didn’t. I felt like a million.
*Double Indemnity* has been described as ‘a labyrinth of sexual dominance, guilt, suspicion and sweaty duplicity’ (Pym 2004, p. 321). Complying with 1940s film noir convention, Neff’s attraction to the femme fatale is a central narrative element and as such has been widely discussed. As will be seen in Chapter Two’s literature review, film noir’s critical corpus frequently employs an oedipal framework to interpret this desire. In more historically anchored debates, the femme fatale is proposed as the embodiment of a postwar anxiety relating to changing gender roles. Elsewhere, the noir femme fatale is mythified and universalised by being connected to legendary articulations of destructive female power.

In recent cultural theory, the importance of the new woman of modernity has been amply noted. Defined by her ease at negotiating the city streets and their morally encoded interstices (cabarets, nightclubs, casinos), by the evident pleasure gained from engaging in new (often nocturnal) modes of entertainment, and by her status as consumer of fetishised commodity items, this modern woman clearly flouted the regulatory morality which restricted her pre-industrial predecessors. Throughout the nineteenth century, this unencumbered and emancipated urban woman was also connected to prostitution, itself a practice which underwent radical changes during the modern period. Baudelaire and Benjamin wrote extensively on the prostitute, as did novelists Émile Zola (1840-1902) and Guy de Maupassant (1850-1893). This highly visible modern prostitute was part of a new social sphere in which previously covert liaisons shifted into the urban streets. Boundaries blurred, and female presence on city streets, often felt to be *unheimlich* or uncanny (Gleber 1999), became synonymous with prostitution.

Scholarship centring on this modern woman, however, has not been adequately applied to film noir. As this thesis’ historical investigation will reveal, the

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19 Studies which apply the concept of the new woman to cinema include (Wager 1999) and (Petro 1989). Wager proposes film noir and Weimar cinema as sites where the new woman is represented. Rejecting the zeitgeist approach, Wager’s discussions point in interesting directions, particularly in their focus on female spectatorship, but require further development. Utilising a variety of archival resources, Petro expertly combines ethnographic enquiry with film analysis, but limits her study to Weimar cinema.

20 Drawing upon a Germanic cultural predilection for discovering weird phenomena in everyday objects, Freud’s notion of the uncanny involves a semiotic confusion whereby familiar objects become uncanny (*unheimlich*). The inherent paradox is that the *heimlich* (that which is agreeable and familiar) inverts to become *unheimlich* when it is uncovered, and it is frequently the woman’s body—primitively familiar—which becomes *unheimlich*, inciting fear and distaste (Freud 1985).
nineteenth century prototypes for the new woman and the modern prostitute provide a
template for cinematic representations of the femme fatale. Whilst the vamp of
1920s and 1930s Weimar cinema was portrayed as somewhat benign and possessing
childlike qualities—Lulu in Pandora’s Box (Die Büchse der Pandora, GW Pabst,
1928, Germany) is a prime example—by the 1940s she had become utterly
pathologised. A noir femme fatale such as Phyllis can thus be understood as the
cinematic apotheosis of the modern, urban woman who controls the emasculated,
impotent men with whom she consorts. Like her nineteenth century predecessors,
Phyllis is adept at utilising urban settings for her assignations. She covets all the city
has to offer, and arranges her trysts with Neff within the sanitised and depersonalised
setting of the supermarket in Los Feliz, where crucial information relating to the
murder plan can be furtively exchanged.

It is also noteworthy that many of noir’s femmes fatales are married to older,
more powerful men, whilst instigating affairs with younger lovers, the latter of whom
are invariably the film’s flâneurs/narrators. Much like the nineteenth century
cotette, the noir woman revels in the privilege of her socio-economic status whilst
seeking extra-marital dalliances. In this respect, femmes fatales such as Phyllis can be
seen as high-class prostitutes, transformed into commodity objects circulating in the
marketplace. Because of this, the femme fatale is highly desirable to the cinematic
flâneur, who (like his nineteenth century predecessor) is intoxicated and enchanted by
the consumerism of modernity.

The noir hero is simultaneously attracted to and repelled by this distant,
ephemeral and essentially unknowable figure whose perambulatory power within
urban spaces makes her elusive and impossible to conquer or comprehend fully. This
obsession needs to be addressed in terms of new social structures arising from
modernity. In fact, the noir hero’s fascination with the femme fatale is analogous to
that of the modern subject who encounters the new, commodified and highly visible
prostitute of the nineteenth century metropolis. It also approximates the flâneur’s

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21 The first use of the term femme fatale is unknown, although it appears in a letter written by
George Bernard Shaw in 1912 to denote a dangerously attractive woman: ‘Here I saw a femme
fatale, who is a fine figure of a woman’ (cited in Allen 1983, p. 5).
22 In addition to Double Indemnity, other 1940s films noirs complying with this model include
Gilda, The Lady from Shanghai, Murder, My Sweet and Out of the Past. The femmes fatales in
these films are all married to or associated with older, patriarchal figures, although they seek
excitement and gratification elsewhere.
sighting of the anonymous woman in the crowd, a paradigmatically modern experience which is poetised in Baudelaire’s celebrated *À une Passante* (1860) which deals with a momentary yet momentously significant glimpse of a beautiful stranger who is immediately thereafter submerged by the crowd.

In several crucial ways, Neff’s gaze towards Phyllis as she first descends the staircase echoes the flâneur’s experience of shock upon sighting the *passante*. Enthralled, Neff is compelled to pursue the object of his desire, despite his realisation that such proximity will spell his doom. That it is an anklet over which Neff obsesses is also significant. Although Phyllis’ movements are curtailed by marriage, her desire to rid herself of domesticity and embrace all the city can offer designates her as a modern woman. As such, the anklet metonymically symbolises her drive towards mobility. The *mode* in which the noir femme fatale is first presented is also indicative of a modern scopophilia. Neff’s first vision of Phyllis, or the appearance of the incandescent Cora in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, or the stylised entrance of *Out of the Past*’s beauteous Kathie are all highly cinematic and flâneuristic moments. The camera assumes the hero’s point of view, so that the femme fatale and her artificial accoutrements (Phyllis’ anklet or Cora’s lipstick case which drops and rolls across the floor towards Frank) can be voyeuristically assessed in fragments and thus fetishised by the hero and spectator alike.

It has been widely acknowledged that film noir engages with an ‘awry’ vision as opposed to the optical neutrality of classical cinema (Place & Peterson 1974; Zizek 1989). Whilst the visual qualities of noir, including its chiaroscuro and distorted angles, have often been noted, these are rarely explored in relation to their compliance with modernity’s new scopic regime. As Chapter Three will demonstrate, modernity was a period in which the homogeneity of Renaissance vision and the camera obscura’s scenographic visual field was forcefully challenged.23 Throughout the nineteenth century, vision was consistently problematised. Modernity proposed a more anamorphic way of seeing in which the flâneur’s experience of apprehending urban life meant that all was assessed in discrete and disjunctive fragments. In this

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23 For a more detailed discussion of the Renaissance mode of vision, see (Baxandall 1972).
context, film noir’s distorted mise-en-scène can be seen as a literalisation of the cinematic flâneur’s unstable and distracted gaze, particularly when his vision is directed towards the beautiful temptress.

The femme fatale’s venality and love of artifice are also qualities that align her with the discursively defined new woman. Much like the flâneur before him, the noir hero most ardently responds to the more artificial aspects of the femme fatale’s beauty. This complies with the synymisation of beauty and artifice that was to become increasingly prevalent in a number of discourses throughout the nineteenth century. Obsessive and transgressive, the noir hero’s desire is also characterised by a conflation of eroticism and death. In *Double Indemnity*, the parallel drawn by Neff between honeysuckle and murder suggests a gothic world in which relentless sunshine, lust, menace and foreboding converge. A sign usually denotatively and connotatively deployed in a positive sense (flowers) thus attains a status akin to that ascribed to nature in Baudelaire’s collection of poetry *Les Fleurs du Mal* (first published in 1857 and in an expanded version in 1861) in which traditional signifiers for ‘goodness’ are bestowed with new, allegorical meaning. This dimorphic conception of ‘love as perversion’ pervaded modernity, including Freud’s work and much literature and art. In many ways, it was to culminate in noir’s dystopian eroticism.

Chapter Six will trace the emergence of the new woman and will consider the discursive reformulation of the modern prostitute throughout the nineteenth century. Both figures can be seen as prototypes or templates for the articulation of the femme fatale. Chapter Six will also explore the noir hero’s response to this destructive temptress, in order to reveal the modernist dimensions of his desire.

1.3 Methodology and aim of this thesis

This thesis complements existing scholarship and aims to energise film noir’s critical corpus by proposing an alternative interpretative model which is diachronic in nature and in which socio-historical contextualisation is a central feature. Methodologically, this project calls for a synthesis of disparate strands of film and cultural theory. Modernity has been a central theme of much scholarship over the past few decades, and the seminal works of the cultural philosophers of modernity have been resurrected, applied and discussed with vigour. Film scholarship dealing with
modernity, however, has been largely confined to analyses of pre-classical cinema (what Gunning refers to as ‘the cinema of attractions’ [Gunning 1990; 1996]), the cinematic apparatus itself or else relatively marginalised cinematic styles such as avant-garde or surrealist cinema, all of which have been proposed as exemplary manifestations of modernity.

It is generally accepted that pre-classical cinema—or what Burch terms a ‘primitive mode of representation’ (Burch 1990)—was subject to a process of gradual embourgeoisement from about 1908 onwards, culminating in a classical style in which illusionism and narrative linearity replaced the pleasures of monstration and disjunction. Although some scholars have contested the hegemonic belief that modernity’s more destabilising elements were gradually and systematically effaced, there has been scant attention given to the connection between modernity and film noir.

In refocussing the debate and applying the theory of modernity to the noir canon, this thesis will elucidate the historical forces that shape the hardboiled hero and the femme fatale. With their detailed investigations into the male protagonist of film noir, theoretical models such as Lacanian psychoanalysis provide a springboard from which to embark upon this project. Similarly, the zeitgeist approach proves illuminating and instructive. There is little doubt that a culture of paranoia informed much of Hollywood’s product of the 1940s and 1950s, partly attributable to the political climate in America at that time. Throughout the 1940s, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover was not averse to investigating European émigrés who were working in Hollywood, many of whom (including Wilder) were known for their leftist sympathies. Wilder’s films were not overtly political, but were undoubtedly responding to the social and political conditions in which they were produced. Any historical investigation into mid-twentieth century Hollywood product must also

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24 Indeed, in cinematic apparatus theory it is somewhat teleologically assumed that film language would eventually aim to efface disjunctive elements, and would be ideologically deployed to replicate the perspectival homogeneity of Renaissance vision. See (Baudry 1974-1975).

25 Hansen, for instance, contends that classical cinema can be read as modernist (Hansen 1999).

26 Although Wilder’s activism was limited, his political leanings to the left were well-known. He also collaborated with Marlene Dietrich and Ernst Lubitsch to assist with the refugee crisis and liberate those incarcerated in concentration camps during the Second World War (Columbus 1986).
concede the existence of industrial influences such as censorship laws that led to the submersion of potentially inflammatory material, creating a more layered and allegorical text.

This thesis is indebted to the critical corpus. It seeks to complement and energise the existing debates. A broader historical contextualisation also redresses the tendency to see a simple and discrete genealogical connection between noir and its precursors (German expressionism, hardboiled detective fiction). Instead, all of these aesthetic movements, art forms and phenomena will be more firmly positioned within the matrix of modernity.

In order to elucidate the manifestations of modernity in the noir hero, several issues need to be considered. Firstly, the phenomenon of modernity must be given close consideration in terms of its historical development and its various dimensions and ramifications. Modernity is a polysemous term that acquires different nuance and meaning depending upon its critical context. For the purposes of this thesis, I have deployed ‘modernity’ to signify the socio-cultural changes occurring from the mid-nineteenth century to early twentieth century. There are several reasons for this. Most of the seminal cultural philosophers of modernity wrote during this time. Moreover, many of the social changes of modernity (industrialisation, urbanisation, consumer culture) that profoundly influence film noir and its hardboiled hero were intensified in this period. Chapter Three will endeavour to chart the changes of this period, whilst the remaining chapters will compare and apply these findings to the noir canon.

Secondly, the seminal writings of the canonised modernist philosophers and cultural theorists need to be applied to the noir hero in order to identify points of affinity and convergence. The œuvres of Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), Siegfried Kracauer (1889-1966), Georg Simmel (1858-1918) and Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) are of primary importance to this study. These works engaged with many aspects of modernité and la vie moderne, including the metropolis, the flâneur, the prostitute, commodity culture, the new woman and modernity’s spatio-temporal order. This thesis will cite other modernist writers where relevant, including Zola and Maupassant, both of whom portrayed quotidian life in late nineteenth century France.

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27 See Appendix 2 for further explication of these semantic differences.
Completed in 1880 and intended as a parable of the glamour, corruption, decadence and ultimate disintegration of the Second Empire in France, Zola’s Nana also portrays a titular heroine who, as a courtesan and libertarian, epitomises the modern woman, particularly in terms of her incitement of a flâneuristic mode of male obsession.

The interpretative model proposed by my thesis differs from existing ones in several crucial respects. By eschewing a traditional theoretical approach, it rejects narrow delimitation and thus allows a freer examination of the noir text, without needing to comply with a pre-existing and prescriptive paradigm. The scope of this thesis is at once broad and focused. Modernity is a vast phenomenon with far-reaching social, political and institutional implications. Given these dimensions, I have chosen to establish parameters in terms of both diegetic themes and selection of texts. This thesis will focus on the figure of the noir hero of classic 1940s film noir, with complementary analysis of the femme fatale and her relevance to his status as modern subject. Textual analysis will be primarily limited to Double Indemnity. Retaining this focus has several advantages. It avoids a pedantic and systematic cataloguing and qualification of films, a task which would be both time consuming and not necessarily exegetic, since there are any number of influencing factors leading to discrepancies, including auteurist preferences, different studio styles and so on. Double Indemnity not only contains all the requisite features of classic noir, but it is also a film that has been abundantly theorised and celebrated. For these reasons, it proves ideal for sustained analysis.

Other contemporaneous films will be cited and discussed where relevant. These include Murder, My Sweet,28 The Lady from Shanghai, Gilda (Charles Vidor, 1946, USA), The Killers, Laura (Otto Preminger, 1944, USA), The Postman Always Rings Twice and Phantom Lady (Robert Siodmak, 1944, USA). All were produced within the same decade, and whilst any classification based upon periodisation is arbitrary at best, their contemporaneity allows similarities to be discerned without recourse to lengthy and digressional qualifications about different stages in the development of film language. Furthermore, these films have been canonised as classic noir texts, and as such have been analysed using the same interpretative models.

28 Screen adaptation of Chandler’s 1940 novel Farewell, My Lovely. RKO changed the title to avoid the film being mistaken for a musical, particularly as Dick Powell, former singer, bandleader and star of many Warner Bros 1930s musicals, was cast in the role of Marlowe.
as have been applied to Double Indemnity. Finally, the 1940s was a fertile period for film noir production, resulting in what is generally considered to be the ‘purest’ cycle of the noir canon, so this decade seems the most apposite choice for analysis.29

Whilst there are many other film styles and genres in which a flâneuristic protagonist can be identified, this thesis will reveal the noir hero to be a privileged site on which the flânerie of modernity is enacted. As mentioned earlier, it must be acknowledged that there are disparities between a hero such as Neff and the classic mid-nineteenth century flâneur, the latter of whom issues from a leisured class in contrast to the hardboiled protagonist who is more emphatically proletarian. The classic flâneur was both attracted to and repelled by the object of his desire. Though desirous of contact, he usually shuns proximity, remaining instead a distant observer able to indulge his scopophilia whilst preserving his psychic unity. The modus operandi of the noir hero, however, is more careless and destructive, as the desire for the fatal woman/prostitute becomes explicitly sexualised. Neff disregards the traditional flâneuristic distance and allows Phyllis to ensnare him. Indeed, the collapsing of distance seems to be integral to the cinematic nature of flânerie, in which space and time are constantly conquered. And yet the perils of proximity are such, in the modern world, that the hero is necessarily doomed as a result of his close involvement with the seductress.

It is not my intention to offer a straightforward, syllogistic and unproblematic extrapolation—that is, that Neff is a profoundly modern hero, ergo all of noir’s tropes and protagonists can be presupposed as such without careful examination. In a slightly different context, Dimendberg has lamented the fact that a consideration of modernity in various art forms has often been restricted to discrete areas such as themes, narratives and topics. What is needed, he contends, is a consideration of the entire text, including its formal structures and semiotic

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29 Of the 108 films listed by Whitney in his noir filmography, eighty-three were produced between 1944 and 1950 (Whitney 1976). Qualitatively different to those of the classic 1940s cycle, the films noirs produced in the 1950s explicitly thematise anxieties associated with the atomic age, the fear of nuclear annihilation and the Cold War. As such they are more apposite texts for a historicist approach. Films such as Kiss Me Deadly (Robert Aldrich, 1955, USA), where the woman unleashes nuclear destruction on the world, are clearly open to a zeitgeist interpretation.
idiosyncrasies, in terms of their modern properties (Dimendberg 1997). In much the same way as Dimendberg describes, the interpretative model developed throughout this thesis proposes a methodology which can elsewhere be deployed to analyse all of the formal, thematic and ontological properties of select films in order to highlight their essentially modern nature. Such an interpretative model will hopefully pave the way for more historically informed debates on film noir, in which the profound influence of modernity can be more fully discerned.

Firstly, however, an overview of film noir’s critical corpus is necessary in order to uncover dominant trends and existing interpretative models.

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30 Dimendberg discusses the photographs of László Moholy-Nagy and the paintings of Fernand Léger.
Chapter 2  Film noir’s critical corpus — overview

Coined by the French cinéastes of the late 1940s and 1950s, the term ‘film noir’ was appropriated into an Anglo-American discourse in the late 1960s and valorised by theorists such as Schrader and Durgnat in the 1970s. As a theoretical rather than an industrial designation, it is perhaps fitting that film noir has such an extensive critical corpus devoted to its interpretation. Even a cursory overview of this corpus, however, reveals several elisions and overriding tendencies. Much energy, for instance, has been expended upon efforts to define what exactly constitutes film noir. Variously described as a mood, a cycle, a movement or a visual style (the general consensus is that noir is too amorphous a phenomenon, and too lacking in rigid and consistent conventions, to be termed a genre), film noir has provoked a seemingly

31 In mid-1946, five films came to the Parisian screens: The Maltese Falcon, Laura, Murder, My Sweet, Double Indemnity and Woman in the Window (Fritz Lang, 1944, USA). Cut off from much American cultural product during the war, the French cinéastes embraced this new ‘dark’ cinema with enthusiasm and began to theorise it in earnest. In an article published in 1946, Nino Frank was the first to officially use the term film noir (Frank 1999), although it is believed that it may have already been in wider usage, having been appropriated from the Série Noire, a series of French translations of American hardboiled crime fiction (Palmer 1996, p. 5). The first full-length study of film noir was French cinéastes Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton’s tome, Panorama du Film Noir Américain 1941-1953, published in Paris in 1955 (Borde & Chaumeton 1955). Cahiers du Cinéma was also a locus for discussion of film noir. Founded by Jacques Doniol-Valcroze, Lo Duca and André Bazin, its inaugural issue (dated April 1951 and dedicated to publisher Jean-Georges Auriol who had been killed in a motor accident) featured on its cover a still from Sunset Boulevard of Gloria Swanson, bathed in the spotlight.

32 Although Webster’s Dictionary lists the first English usage of ‘film noir’ as 1958 (Christopher 1997), it wasn’t until the late 1960s that an Anglo-American debate was inaugurated and the term was incorporated into a scholarly lexicon. Published in 1968, Charles Higham and Joel Greenberg’s Hollywood in the Forties provided the first critical and influential discussion on film noir, in its chapter entitled ‘Black Cinema’ (Higham & Greenberg 1968). Five years earlier, Higham had also written on Billy Wilder’s films (Higham 1963).

33 As Maltby points out, film noir is the only major category in American cinema that has been designated by critics rather than by the Hollywood filmmaking industry (Maltby 1984). Many film noir auteurs have in fact retrospectively criticised the term. In a discussion of his œuvre at the University of Southern California in 1975, Wilder claimed that ‘film noir’ was both a meaningless and misleading appellation, and that his only aim (and that of his contemporaries) had been to make good ‘thrillers’ (cited in Plouffe 1979, p. v).

34 Debates about film noir’s ontology frequently digress into tangential ruminations on what exactly constitutes the concept of ‘genre.’ See for instance (Palmer 1986; Orr, C 1997).
endless debate over its nature. As opined by many a theorist (Vernet 1993; Naremore 1998), attempts to ‘fix’ or semantically stabilise the notoriously polysemous term ‘film noir’ have resulted in a taxonomic but frustratingly inconclusive discourse, prone to slippages and inconsistencies and largely concerned with qualifying, validating or refuting existing assertions.

In less taxonomic investigations, attempts to define noir have focused upon identifying recurring tropes, topoi, motifs and visual properties. Theorists have noted the urban locations and the common themes of murder, alienation, deception, moral dissolution, doomed love and despair. The hardboiled protagonist has also been widely recognised as a central element of the noir text. Silver and Ward suggest that the alienated male protagonist is noir’s most consistent trope (Silver & Ward 1992), whilst Dyer believes that the question of masculinity is the main ‘problematic’ of the canon (Dyer 1980, p. 91).

A detailed examination of the critical corpus reveals two major yet divergent paradigms with which to analyse film noir and its hero. Firstly, there is a heavy reliance upon rigidly structured theoretical models, the most common of which is Lacanian psychoanalysis. Secondly, a sociological discourse assumes a narrowly historicist stance in which the noir hero and his illicit desire for the fatal woman are seen to encapsulate a number of historically specific postwar anxieties. As the following overview will demonstrate, both models have inherent limitations.

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35 See Durgnat’s iconoclastic 1970 study of film noir in which he posits a number of classificatory sub-headings (Durgnat 1996). Damico criticises Durgnat’s taxonomic approach for its reliance upon ‘unrigorous, deductive methodology and amorphous categorization’ (Damico 1978, p. 51), whilst Root sees it as ‘eccentric’ (Root 1985, p. 93).
2.1 Dominant interpretative models

2.1.1 Lacanian psychoanalysis and post-structuralist feminism

In 1924, Freud was approached by Samuel Goldwyn and offered the considerable sum of $100,000 to write a story for the screen in which psychoanalysis would be popularised. Expressing a wish to convene with Freud, Goldwyn received a terse response in which Freud simply stated ‘I do not intend to see Mr Goldwyn’ (Christopher 1997, pp. 187-88).

Despite Freud’s aversion to Hollywood and the commercialism it represented, psychoanalysis and cinema (and particularly film noir) are fields which can be critically and historically linked on several levels. Many film styles, including German expressionism, were explicitly influenced by psychoanalysis. However, it was during the 1940s, when the classic films noirs were being produced, that a populist brand of Freudianism was absorbed into the American cultural consciousness. In many ways, film noir is a privileged site on which psychoanalytic themes and tropes are cinematically portrayed. Noir also proves highly conducive to a psychoanalytic critique, given its themes, stylistic embellishments, temporally inverted narratives, visual properties (chiaroscuro, low-key lighting and distorted visual angles) and its propensity for symbol and allegory. Like the modern consciousness as conceived by Freud, noir’s ‘true’ meaning is usually subtextualised. Indeed, the allegorical and psychoanalytic nature of film noir was noted early, with French cinéastes Borde and Chaumeton believing its particular brand of eroticism to

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36. Director of Pandora's Box (1926) Pabst was greatly influenced by psychoanalysis, collaborating on the film Geheimnisse einer Seele (Secrets of a Soul) (GW Pabst, 1926, Germany) with Karl Abraham and Hanns Sachs, both of whom had been Freud’s assistants (Haltow 1992).

37. While Freud spent the final year of his life in London, most continental psychoanalysts who fled the Nazis relocated to America. The 1940s were the high point of assimilation of Freudian theory into American culture. From the 1950s, psychoanalytic thought became increasingly sociological in orientation.

38. In the 1930s, the dominant style of cinema lighting was ‘high-key’ which consisted of a contrast ratio of approximately 4:1 between the light value of the key lamp and filler. Harsh shadows were thus softened to create an ‘impression of reality.’ Film noir, conversely, deployed ‘low-key’ lighting, leaving sources harsh, undiffused and characterised by chiaroscuro. See (Place & Peterson 1974; Kerr 1979-1980).
be ‘latente, floue et polymorphe’ (latent, vague, unclear and polymorphous) and its displacement of incendiary material to be analogous to a Freudian notion of dream elaboration (Borde & Chaumeton 1955, p. 182). Moreover, the triadic structure discernible in most films noirs—in which the hardboiled hero is typically pitted against both the femme fatale and an older, more patriarchal male figure—clearly lends itself to an oedipal interpretation.

In contemporary theory, the psychoanalytic approach is best exemplified in Krutnik’s *In a Lonely Street*, an influential study in which film noir is seen to enact a crisis of masculinity (Krutnik 1991). Krutnik believes the noir canon to offer a ‘fascination with the process of resisting … the conventional oedipal closure of narrative, of suspending oedipal Law’ (Krutnik 1991, p. 131). In this configuration, masculine identity is split between two characters, with the alienated hero representing the ‘irrational’ side of the unconscious or the ‘Imaginary.’ His doppelgänger, usually a representative of authority—corporate or otherwise—symbolises the rational or ‘Symbolic’ register of human consciousness (Krutnik 1991, p. 114). Krutnik enthusiastically applies this model to *Double Indemnity*, understanding Neff’s trajectory as an assertion of his individual identity ‘in defiance of the castrating power of the law’ (Krutnik 1991, p. 137).

Other theorists using the psychoanalytic approach also believe the relationship between the two male characters of *Double Indemnity* to be of primary importance. Wilder’s film, Gallagher contends, concerns the ‘inherently exploitative nature of heterosexual relations,’ and proposes the homoeroticism between Neff and Keyes as an alternative (Gallagher 1987, p. 242). Hirsch would concur, arguing that the male friendship offers an ‘antidote to the poisonous sexuality’ which characterises Neff’s liaison with Phyllis (Hirsch 1981, p. 3).

Johnston’s study, albeit possessing a more feminist intent, similarly oedipalises *Double Indemnity*’s interpersonal structures, with Keyes as the idealised father for whom Neff has a repressed homosexual desire. ‘In order to resolve the positive Oedipus and gain access to the Symbolic,’ writes Johnston, ‘the boy has to accept the threat of castration from the father’ (Johnston 1980, p. 102). Neff’s journey, then, is one in which he initially struggles to free himself from patriarchal constraints, but finally acknowledges the inevitability of his destiny as a male subject within a phallocentric order.
Maxfield, whose discussions are focused on the fear generated by noir’s ‘fatal woman,’ believes the noir canon to be concerned with ‘male anxiety over emotional vulnerability’ and loss of centrality of self (Maxfield 1996, p. 2). In line with the stance of both Johnston and Krutnik, Maxfield asserts the imperative of the hero setting himself against all patriarchal figures. Neff’s involvement in Dietrichson’s murder, then, is a means by which he resolves his oedipal issues. For Walker, similarly, the noir hero descends into the underworld, a description suggesting a picaresque journey inherent to the (male) human condition. Although such a journey entails some risk, the perspicacity and incorruptibility of the intrepid hero ensure that he ultimately ‘emerge[s] safely’ (Walker 1992, p. 10).

Interpreting the noir hero within such prescriptive oedipal parameters is problematic on several levels. It implies a universal or transhistorical rite of passage that is assumed to be an overriding imperative of the male subject, impervious to socio-historical coordinates. Furthermore, such a model veers towards absolutism, and as such overlooks nuance. It elides, for instance, the more pleasurable aspects of the hardboiled hero’s engagement with the femme fatale and the modern world.

Much has also been written on the femme fatale using a Lacanian framework. Most of these investigations seem to implicitly ascribe primacy to the male protagonist’s rite of passage, with the seductress’ role being relegated to one of facilitation. The femme fatale is thus understood as an ahistorical and generalised catalyst through which the male subject activates his revolt against the patriarchal system. Maxfield’s work typifies this approach (Maxfield 1996), as does Harvey’s, the latter maintaining that Neff’s desire for Phyllis (which destroys the sanctity of marriage) symbolises his contestation of the ideological apparatus of patriarchy. As this is an unsustainable position, Neff must ultimately die (Harvey 1980).

Examples of this approach to the femme fatale are numerous. For Root, ‘Neff’s involvement with the world of women’ represents an attempt to remove himself from the patriarchal order metaphorised by the insurance system (Root 1985, p. 98). Similarly, for Krutnik, the ‘excess’ embodied by the femme fatale constitutes a transgression or a ‘site of disturbance,’ and it is for this reason that she must be annihilated (Krutnik 1982, p. 36). Cook sees the body of the femme fatale as semiotically over-invested with (as she puts it) ‘connotations of sexual excess’ (Cook 1980, p. 79), an untenable situation that therefore must be resolved through integrating the woman back into the phallic regime. Johnston likewise believes *Double*
Indemnity’s narrative structure, in which Phyllis dies and Lola survives, to be ideologically conservative, since it obviates any ruptures opened up throughout the film (Johnston 1980).

For Creed, the noir text investigates the woman, who is situated outside the law. It is only through her annihilation—or absorption into patriarchal culture through marriage or possession by a man—that the phallocentric integrity of the text can be maintained (Creed 1987). Place concurs with this stance, citing formal strategies in which the femme fatale’s impotence is visually conveyed, creating a text which implicitly perpetuates patriarchal power structures (Place 1980). Indeed, most psychoanalytic critiques charge that the femme fatale must be destroyed in order to maintain the status quo and restore order at the film’s conclusion. Whilst contributing significantly to a theorisation of the femme fatale and noir hero, these debates nonetheless jettison any considerations of socio-historical specificity.

The psychoanalytic interpretations of the male desire for the noir temptress are also marred by the same universalisation. Walsh asserts that the scopophilia engendered by Out of the Past’s Kathie Moffat (who, he contends, represents the plenitude of the Imaginary) is important insofar as it constitutes a castrating power (Walsh 1981), whilst Noble sees the femme fatale as the embodiment of an ‘unnatural phallic’ force (Noble 1998, p. 2). Rather than understanding the enraptured gaze of the noir hero towards this beautiful yet feared woman as an imperative of living in the modern metropolis in which all becomes spectacle and commodity, and in which the new woman becomes an urban prostitute, a psychoanalytic model posits such desire as a transhistorical male trait.

Copjec’s critique brings a slightly different inflection to the Lacanian model, proposing the femme fatale as the personification of jouissance (being), a creature who is diametrically opposed to the classical detective’s ratiocinatist drive which is deeply embedded within a Cartesian, rationalist logic (Copjec 1993a; 1993b). Copjec believes noir to effect an oedipalisation in which:

the old modern order of desire, ruled over by an oedipal father, has begun to be replaced by a new order of the drive, in which we no longer have recourse to the protections against jouissance that the oedipal father once offered (Copjec 1993b, p. 182).

In this paradigm, the femme fatale acts as a kind of double for the male protagonist, created in order to contain the excess or jouissance he at once desires and fears.
Perceiving an inscription of sexual difference between Keyes (who requires no women) and Neff (who cannot resist the fatal blonde), Copjec believes the noir hero’s attempts to ‘distance’ himself from women allegorise his efforts to maintain a dichotomy between logic and reason on the one hand, and irrational libidinal forces on the other (Copjec 1993b). This would accord with Doane’s arguments, which advance both jouissance and the femme fatale as sites where the register of knowledge separates from the register of discourse (Doane 1991). Whilst Doane and Copjec do provide some degree of historical contextualisation, their arguments do not engage in any sustained manner with modernity’s socio-cultural changes, many of which radically altered the dimensions of desire.

Cowie’s study of film noir is revisionist and somewhat polemical in that it aims to subvert what she sees as the theoretical hegemony of overstating the significance of the male protagonist (Cowie 1993). Instead, Cowie proposes a great deal of female agency in the film noir canon. Rather than connecting this female emancipation to nineteenth century precursors, Cowie uses a psychoanalytic framework that concentrates on what she terms the ‘psychical reality’ of the femme fatale (Cowie 1993, p. 125).

As Dayan explains, a Lacanian style of film analysis ascribes primacy to interpersonal connections, since the Symbolic order (the intermediate level of human reality through which nature is transformed into culture) is essentially an order concerning relationships (Dayan 1974). Given the triadic structures of most films noirs, it is understandable that a psychoanalytic model of interpretation has proven so tenacious and popular. As a paradigmatic noir text, Double Indemnity is indeed apposite for such a reading, with Neff representing the Imaginary whilst Keyes, with his mercantile and rational persona, signifies the world governed by patriarchal order. That Neff murders Dietrichson, whose corporate identity as an oil executive casts him as the ultimate representative of a capitalist economy, would further support such a deconstruction.

The relationship between noir’s male characters is undeniably important. Indeed, of Double Indemnity, Wilder stated that ‘[t]he idea was to write a love story between the two men and a sexual involvement with the woman’ (cited in Allyn 1978, p. 120). A reading that applies the immutable tenets of Lacanian psychoanalysis, however, can be often prescriptive and restrictive. Since the internal logic of the psychoanalytic doctrine tends to reject socio-historical specificity or nuance, such an
interpretative approach can easily overlook the key role played by modernity. An oedipal analysis of *Double Indemnity*, for instance, is unlikely consider Neff’s mobility as opposed to Keyes’ sedentary nature in terms of flânerie. Elsewhere, central concerns of modernity are highlighted in a psychoanalytic interpretation, yet approached from a transhistorical standpoint. Psychoanalytic readings of noir commonly identify the bifurcation of masculine identity between the two main male characters, and also recognise that individual characters are frequently rendered as ‘split’ subjects. Keyes must contend with his ‘little man inside’ which represents his intuition, whilst Neff grapples with a host of competing internal desires and conflicts. This ‘decentred’ subjectivity, which was proposed by Freud, is in fact axiomatic of the new metaphysics of modernity. As such, it needs to be analysed from within an *historical* as well as a theoretical context.

Imbricating with the popular psychoanalytic approach is a post-structuralist feminist discourse. This has also been widely applied to film noir. Primarily concerned with how the noir text complies (or not, as the case may be) with the patriarchal ideology that informs not only Hollywood’s product but also the cinematic apparatus in general, this mode of enquiry is strongly informed by Mulvey’s celebrated 1975 study of cinema spectatorship (Mulvey 1975). Often focussing on the purported masculinisation of the spectatorial gaze, this discourse tends to see film noir as phallocentric simply because the noir hero’s point of view is aligned with that of structures of voyeurism and control. In other words, because the story emanates from the male protagonist, supposedly consigning the female characters to visual objects of pleasure and desire (spectacles to be consumed by appropriating either a masculine gaze or a masochistic female one), then the text must necessarily be representative of the patriarchal order within which it is produced. Such a view does not take into account economic, cultural or social factors arising out of changes wrought by the urbanisation of desire.

39 See for instance Graham’s examination of the formal principles used to render *The Lady from Shanghai*’s protagonist Michael O’Hara as decentred (Graham 1981). Albano similarly proposes a co-existence of good and evil in O’Hara (Albano 1988).

40 Much feminist theory aims to recuperate and empower the femme fatale by proposing an alternative reading in which she is assigned agency, and in which her status as spectacle constitutes a monstrative rupture to classical cinema’s illusionism and as such an assault on patriarchal order. See (Kaplan 1980; 1983; McLean 1993; Dyer 1980; Stern 1974; Doane 1980; 1983; 1987; 1991).
Most of these studies aim to uncover or understand the immanent ‘meaning’ of the femme fatale. On a purely visual level, the world inhabited by the fatal woman of noir is characterised by chiaroscuro, distortion, low-key lighting and compositional fragmentation of her body. How real is she? Who is she? What, precisely, does she represent? How does she differ from more classical modes of representing woman? To what extent is she merely a projection of male desire? And what of the surface/interior dichotomy? The femme fatale is deliberately constructed as an enigma, and this innate, frustrating and tantalising elusiveness would seem to invite a hermeneutic quest. Indeed, many investigations focus upon her unintelligibility, her essential unknowability, and the fact that she is positioned on the limits of rational knowledge. Feminist film theory has typically concentrated, as Creed observes, on the fact that the woman is signified, by a patriarchal order, as ‘other’ and defined her by her sexuality (Creed 1987). It seems to be from this position (of female ‘otherness’) that most post-structuralist feminist investigations commence.

In these arguments, the femme fatale is typically proposed as an inscrutable epistemological gap or impasse. Of Elsa in *The Lady from Shanghai*, Graham declares that ‘[a]ll the dazzling surfaces that comprise this hallucinatory world compel our attention and then refuse to render their meaning’ (Graham 1981, p. 28). The fetishisation of the surface, contends Graham, renders Elsa as a site of ambiguity and disturbance. Doane’s study commences from a similar theoretical standpoint. Believing melodrama and film noir to be the two cinematic styles during the classical period in which a patriarchal representation of women is problematised (Doane 1983), Doane draws heavily from Mulvey’s work in her endeavour to understand the femme fatale. Doane insightfully offers a genealogy stretching back to Baudelaire, Gautier and pre-Raphaelite painters such as Rossetti, thus aligning the noir temptress with modernity, decadence and symbolism (Doane 1991). Ultimately, however, her argument remains polemic and rhetorical, rendering her work an excellent departure point rather than an exhaustive historical investigation in itself.

Psychoanalytic and post-structuralist feminist critiques at times point in provocative and interesting directions, yet often fail to transcend the inherent restrictions of their respective paradigms. Krutnik’s argument may veer towards considerations of film noir’s problematisation of the ‘controlling male voice’ (Krutnik 1982, p. 39), yet he does not raise questions relating to modernity’s decentred subjectivity. Similarly, Johnston’s discussions of the specularity induced by Phyllis
(particularly when she applies her lipstick in the mirror as Neff watches) are oedipalised and ahistorical. ‘[Neff] must investigate the woman further,’ Johnston declares, ‘and discover her guilty secret in his desire to test the Law’ (Johnston 1980, p. 104). Rather than approaching this new, artificially beautiful woman from an historical perspective, Johnston ultimately posits her as a ‘heterogeneity’ and a threat to the patriarchal order. Although she notes *Double Indemnity*’s thematic conflation of death and love, Johnston again sees this as a generalised issue (Johnston 1980). Other psychoanalytic critiques also raise points that could be further explicated in relation to modernity. Walsh, for instance, refers to the ‘worldweary’ tone of Jeff’s voiceover in *Out of the Past*. Rather than connecting this to modernity’s cynicism, however, Walsh oedipalises it so that it merely becomes a manifestation of Jeff’s self-disgust due to his (fatal) attraction to the Imaginary (Walsh 1981).

As will be demonstrated in the following section, the other dominant critical approach, in which film noir is seen to reflect postwar anxiety, also proves restrictive, although in different ways.

### 2.1.2 Sociological discourse — the zeitgeist approach

Film noir is black *for us*—that is, for the western and American public of the 1950s. It responds to a certain type of emotional resonance which is as specific to the time as it is to the place (Borde & Chaumeton 1955, p. 5).

The second major critical paradigm used to analyse film noir is sociological in nature, and in many ways antithetical to the largely ahistorical theoretical models enumerated above. In its aim to uncover specific social, cultural, political and historical influences which shape the noir text, this sociological model is heuristically similar to that proposed by this thesis. As an overview of this branch of the critical corpus will demonstrate, however, the historical attribution proposed is extremely narrow, so that noir’s themes, tropes and preoccupations are exclusively seen as direct reflections of a bleak, post-WWII mood of disillusionment. Those theorists who do succeed in

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41 ‘*Le film noir est noir pour nous*, c’est-à-dire pour le public occidental et Américain des années cinquante. Il répond à un certain type de resonance emotive aussi singulier dans le temps que dans l’espace.’ My translation. Italics theirs.
broadening the historical boundaries only do so to cite obvious precedents such as German expressionism⁴² and pulp fiction.⁴³

Narrow historicism (or the zeitgeist approach) has pervaded not only the critical writings on film noir, but also much film theory in general. Ironically, even early theorists who are valorised for their musings on modernity were known to adopt this tendency. Kracauer’s 1950s sociological inquiries into Hollywood are a case in point, with Kracauer arguing in a somewhat absolutist manner that all films are merely representative of the period in which they were produced (Kracauer 1950). Similarly, attempts to connect film noir to the exact historical moment of its production began early, with the French cinéastes inaugurating a psychosocially oriented debate in which America’s new dark cinema was symptomatic of a sick society characterised by despair, darkness, paranoia, anomie and the absence of any hope or redemption. Whilst discursively imbricating their discussions with elements of existentialism, surrealism and auteur theory,⁴⁴ the French cinéastes basically subscribed to a simplistic and delimited historicist model. ‘It’s hard to imagine story lines,’ wrote Chartier in 1946, ‘with a more pessimistic or disgusted point of view regarding human behaviour’ (Chartier 1999, p. 21). Noir’s dystopian worldview was seen as a direct result of the postwar climate, and this engagement with the contemporary esprit was generally praised by the cinéastes who valued its psychosocial honesty. Also in 1946, Frank valorised Double Indemnity, Murder, My Sweet and The Maltese Falcon (John Huston, 1941, USA) because they transgressed generic convention and were unprecedentedly ‘true to life.’ Frank praises the ‘third dimension’ of these films, by which he means a strong connection to verisimilitude, which for him is of metaphysical import (Frank 1999).

Like its Gallic counterparts, early Anglo-American criticism perceived a strong causal link between noir and the bleak mood of postwar America. Powdermaker, a celebrated proponent of a 1940s and 1950s anthropologically oriented discourse which analysed Hollywood from an institutional point of view, spoke of the increasing alienation and loneliness of modern life, and how this affected

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⁴⁴ In typical existentialist style, for instance, Borde and Chaumeton read Woman in the Window as an allegory of man’s struggle with his destiny (Borde & Chaumeton 1955).
the films being made (Powdermaker 1950). For Powdermaker, this alienation was a result of the trauma engendered by living through two world wars, leading to what she describes as a darker and more pessimistic style of filmmaking (Powdermaker 1950).

Greenberg, one of the first Anglo-American scholars to see film noir as a canon deserving of critical enquiry, also felt that its sensibility reflected a wartime and postwar spirit. Films noirs were, Greenberg attests, ‘movies about adults, made for adults who had just been through a war’ (cited in Christopher 1997, p. 188). Greenberg’s contemporaries shared a similar outlook. In 1947, Tyler declared ‘crime films’ (by which he means films noirs) to be a symbolic way of exorcising guilt felt by Americans due to their role in the death and destruction of war. Indeed, so committed to the zeitgeist stance is Tyler that he sees Double Indemnity as a parabolic enactment of the trauma of war. ‘Is not Neff,’ asks Tyler rhetorically and somewhat melodramatically,

a symbol of the average young man who is both bridegroom (the average husband) and murderer (the average soldier)? And is not [Keyes] ... the supreme ethical expert ... who will forgive him for his mundane failures and faults, especially that of killing, and who will provide, above all, the ethic for his future deeds? (Tyler 1971, pp. 236-37).

Numerous articles appeared in the late 1940s in which the cinematic representation of the ‘neurotic’ personality was considered. Houseman, for instance, was uneasy about the verisimilitude of the ‘tough’ crime thrillers of the period (again, films noirs), asserting that their protagonists ‘present a fairly accurate reflection of the neurotic personality’ of contemporary America (Houseman 1946, p. 161). At times, scholars such as Houseman drew an explicit connection between the cinematic ‘neurotic’ personality and the shell-shocked returning veterans.

For several decades, this type of narrow historicism remained largely unchallenged in noir’s critical corpus. Schrader’s article, published in Film Comment in 1972, is a seminal study of film noir (Schrader 1972). Although concentrating less on socio-historical coordinates and more on exploring noir’s textual features and aesthetic properties, Schrader nonetheless suggests that film noir was part of a larger

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45 See also (Fearing 1945; 1946a; 1946b; Houseman 1946).
resurgence of ‘realism’ in the cinema which was partially attributable to ‘the acute downer which hit the [United States]’ following the war (Schrader 1972, pp. 9-10).

For Silver and Ward, film noir is a wholly American style in which historically specific cultural preoccupations are enacted, effecting a mass catharsis. Like Rich, who believed that audiences ‘flocked to noir to pacify themselves with its equally tangled narratives and unreliable narrators’ (Rich 1995, p. 8), Silver and Ward propose a situation in which film noir functions as a coping mechanism and an expiatory strategy for a public traumatised by the recent memory of war (Silver & Ward 1992). Others believed that the postwar period allowed Hollywood to finally indulge its darker side and fully engage with social unrest after being compelled during the depression and war years to produce ideologically unproblematic material as a form of cultural ‘moral support’ (Everson 1987). Jameson argues that noir’s pessimistic tone was a response to the optimism of the preceding decade and a half of classical cinema (Jameson 1974), whilst Durgnat asserts that the emergence of a darker film style was only possible at the war’s conclusion once audiences were again more secure (Durgnat 1996).

For Palmer, film noir reflects a postwar cultural dissonance relating specifically to moral questions about the connection between being upright and being successful (Palmer 1994). It is from this assumption that he approaches the hero’s metaphysical and moral crises. Arthur believes the dystopianism of the noir landscape to engage with wartime trauma, albeit in a civilian setting (cited in Schon 1994). Elsewhere, Arthur contends that the alienating city landscape through which the noir hero moves represents a disintegrating postwar urban order (Arthur 1985). Flinn similarly sees noir as ‘a melodramatic reflection of a world gone mad’ (Flinn 1999, p. 35), again limiting the scope of his argument to a particular epoch. Similarly, Thomas cites the inversion of moral standards resulting from the disruptions of war (casual sexual behaviour, killing and closer male companionship) as influences for noir’s darker impulses. As she puts it, ‘[p]ostwar men had much to gain from returning to their previous secure position within society … but perhaps much to lose as well’ (Thomas 1992, p. 60). Kemp’s stance is even more forcefully zeitgeistig. He claims that noir reflects a mass cultural phenomenon of paranoid schizophrenia. This cultural trauma, Kemp claims, was engendered by a constellation of mid-twentieth century
historical coordinates including HUAC,\textsuperscript{46} the rise of individualism and an increasing sense of lack of community (Kemp 1986).

Because of the remarkable popularity of the zeitgeist framework (the above is only a small selection of examples), many 1940s films noirs have been interpreted as allegories of postwar trauma. Film noir’s narrative convolutions, visual qualities and doomed trajectories, alleges Shadoian, spoke to both the returning veteran as well as the traumatised civilian (Shadoian 1977). Walker perceives a parabolic quality to Out of the Past, where an inability to ‘return home’ is analogous to the returning veterans’ mixed feelings (Walker 1992), whilst Maltby’s analysis of the same film somewhat boldly posits its hardboiled hero as the allegorised ex-communist witness before HUAC:

\begin{quote}
A man with a shady past, trying to live a normal life as a well-adjusted American, is propelled by a combination of circumstance and conscience to justify his citizenship not on the basis of his present activities, but by accounting for his past dubious connections and allegiances with people and organizations working against the social order (Maltby 1984, p. 52).
\end{quote}

In his investigation into postwar masculinity, Corber proposes the noir hero as an allegorical site where conflicts regarding the American dream (promulgated from the late 1940s onwards) were enacted. The noir hero’s independence and entrepreneurialism marked him out in opposition to the prevailing ideology, Corber argues, whilst his stubborn solipsism and isolation could be experienced vicariously by male spectators who felt the ‘postwar shift from production to consumption as a threat to their masculinity’ (Corber 1997, pp. 28-29).

\begin{quote}
Both Double Indemnity and Neff have been likewise deconstructed as reflections of a mid-twentieth century American cultural sensibility. Orr believes Neff’s desire to cheat the system is due to his subjugation into an alienated labour force in an increasingly consumerised twentieth century society (Orr 2000). For Prigozy, Wilder’s film is a political commentary on the potential for social
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{46} Proposed in 1938 by USA Congressman Samuel Dickstein, HUAC’s (House Committee on Un-American Activities) congressional hearings into the communist influence in Hollywood took place in October 1947, leading to the imprisonment of the Hollywood Ten (eight writers and two directors, one of whom was Edward Dmytryk). A second hearing took place in 1951. See (Higham & Greenberg 1968; Karimi 1976; Cepair & Englund 1980). For a discussion on Hollywood’s blacklists, see (Naremore 1998; Buhle & Wagner 2001)
disintegration—even fascism—existing in America at a particular historical moment (Prigozy 1984).

The zeitgeist stance has also been extensively employed to analyse the femme fatale, who purportedly encapsulates a number of fears and anxieties regarding changing gender roles in the postwar cultural climate. Moving into new spheres of production and business during the war, women were afforded higher status and new professional and career opportunities. This empowerment threatened the phallic regime, theorists argued, necessitating a cinematic pathologisation of female strength.

Harvey, who privileges noir for its ability to reflect the period’s ‘ideological contradictions’ (Harvey 1980, p. 23), subscribes to this view. Noir’s fatal woman, Harvey argues, embodies the concurrent social changes in American society, with a mass influx of women into the labour markets as well as a change in the ideological and economic functions of the family unit (Harvey 1980). This reading of the femme fatale is reiterated by Rich (Rich 1995) and Schrader. Importantly for Schrader, the emancipated wartime woman also discovered an unprecedented sexual liberty and was thus able to indulge in affairs with more ease, leading to a highly sexualised cinematic representation (cited in Schon 1994).

Farber discusses the ‘bitch goddess,’ a feared yet desired creature with a lust for power and money. For Farber, this cinematic representation of the powerful woman reflects the postwar anxiety over female emancipation (Farber 1974). Hirsch agrees with this stance. Since the wartime woman was forced to assume new levels of assertiveness and independence, Hirsch insists, she ‘emerged on screen as a wicked, scheming creature, sexually potent and deadly to the male’ (Hirsch 1981, pp. 19-20). Cohen similarly understands the femme fatale to express the ‘trepidations of the returning GIs who, having been so long without women, had severe doubts as to their ability to relate to the mysterious opposite sex’ (Cohen 1974, p. 28).

Orr claims the noir femme fatale to be ‘a genuine threat, the postwar version of the new woman, officially some man’s woman but in reality noone’s, substituting desire for domesticity, narcissism for children, wealth for suffering’ (Orr 1993, p. 158), inferring that it was her refusal to be subjugated by patriarchally constructed social regulations which posed the largest threat and generated the most anxiety.

Place’s analysis examines the visual representation of the femme fatale, who as an omnipotent and fearful creature was conveyed in ‘empowering’ shot compositions (cited in Schon 1994). However, film noir has a ‘regressive ideological function’ in a
postwar context, argues Place, ultimately disarming the newfound female power and sexuality (Place 1980). These discussions do not offer a broader genealogy. Nor do they invoke the figure of the new woman for comparative analysis. Because of this, they fail to consider the fact that these levels of female liberty, emancipation, mobility and autonomy were also manifestly present in late nineteenth and early twentieth century modernity.

That the postwar period gave rise to a dark new vision is a persuasive argument. It is certainly tempting to allegorise Neff and other noir protagonists as archetypal twentieth century anti-heroes, existentially tortured, peripheralised by a consumer society, alienated by an uncaring capitalist workplace, traumatised by the enormity of war and emasculated by the emancipated wartime woman. Indeed, there is no doubt that a mood of bleak disillusionment and uncertainty did exist in this historical period, and that returning veterans felt displaced and may have had difficulty in acclimatising to an increasingly commodified culture in which gender roles had been radically altered. There are in fact a number of films noirs which explicitly thematise the veteran’s return, including *The Blue Dahlia* (George Marshall, 1946, USA), *47 Cornered* (Edward Dmytryk, 1945, USA) and *Dead Reckoning* (John Cromwell, 1947, USA).

It is important, however, to point to the shortcomings of the zeitgeist approach. Firstly, it assumes that Hollywood is a monolithic power, consistently and swiftly responsive to contemporary cultural preoccupations without reflecting wider socio-historical patterns. Secondly, it implicitly normalises a rigidly delimited notion of history as being characterised by discrete segments, none of which are ever contextualised into a larger temporal field. Not only does this elide the influence of nineteenth century modernity, but it also disregards upheavals in the more recent past, including the deeply embedded effects of the trauma of the First World War.

Although some theorists by the late 1970s were lamenting the fact that the zeitgeist assumption went largely unquestioned (Damico 1978; Maltby 1984), few were willing to forcefully challenge its hegemony. Maltby may problematise the

47 Screenplay by Raymond Chandler.
notion of a simplistic historicist attribution, yet his allegorical interpretation of *Out of the Past*, as outlined above, would seem implicitly to endorse a zeitgeist stance (Maltby 1984). Similarly, whilst Hirsch raises doubts about the theoretical integrity and sustainability of the zeitgeist discourse, he nonetheless claims that noir captures ‘the mood of the country during and after the war’ (Hirsch 1981, p. 17).

Elsewhere, interesting issues are raised within the parameters of the zeitgeist discourse. Rabinowitz’s study of ‘pulp’ sensibility is case in point. Noting that wartime women had abandoned their clerical and low-status domestic jobs to secure work in government and other prestigious spheres, Rabinowitz considers how these cultural changes impacted upon the cinematic representation of the femme fatale. Rabinowitz speaks of modern women living alone, moving freely through the metropolis and claiming urban space as their own. She discusses the fear generated by ‘nightclubs glittering with bejewelled women ... on the prowl, aggressively seeking money and sex in a new world of pleasure and commodities’ (Rabinowitz 2002, pp. 8-9). Rabinowitz also draws a parallel between the noir femme fatale and the single women portrayed in the photographs of Esther Bubley—women living transient, anonymous yet independent lives in boarding houses in Washington DC in the early 1940s. The juxtapositioning of Bubley’s images with stills from *Double Indemnity* and *Raw Deal* is highly convincing and thought provoking. Yet whilst Rabinowitz highlights themes relevant to modernity, her investigation remains resolutely restricted to a relatively short period (mainly the 1930s and 1940s) and is thus compromised, at least to some extent, by zeitgeist delimitation.

The issue of the femme fatale’s relationship to the urban phantasmagoria is also raised by Reid and Walker who, despite their ostensible aim of debunking the rigidity of the zeitgeist approach, see noir’s ubiquitous motifs such as the nightclub as representative of ‘everything that seemed phantasmal about the prosperity of the postwar forties’ (Reid & Walker 1993, p. 65). No consideration is given, then, to

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48 Maltby points out that many genre films produced by the Hollywood studio system in the 1940s were antithetical to a noir sensibility. In fact, the majority of box-office successes in the postwar years were rather traditional films, many of which were adapted from stage or literature (Maltby 1984). See also (Ray 1985).
socio-historical developments occurring from the mid-nineteenth century onwards which enabled women to occupy such urban sites with unprecedented mobility and freedom.

Harvey’s argument, which sees film noir as a subversive forum in which discontent over the reorganisation of the American economy is articulated, needs also to be further elaborated. Neff’s desire for Phyllis, argues Harvey, allegorises the attempts of the twentieth century ‘everyman’ to escape the narrow and suffocating confines of dehumanising labour and corporate identity (Harvey 1980). Whilst Harvey believes Phyllis to represent a ‘tempting means of escape from the boredom and frustration of a routinised and alienated existence’ (Harvey 1980, pp. 26-27), she links this only to the growth of large business in the twentieth century. A broader socio-historical contextualisation, however, would reveal alienation and estrangement to be mandatory features of the classic flâneur’s response to the urbanisation and industrialisation of modernity. Much nineteenth century literature portrays the new woman, prostitute or passante as an antidote to this flâneuristic alienation, as will be discussed further in Chapter Six.

Karimi’s study of film noir also raises issues that could be further extrapolated, such as noir’s relativisation of the moral values of good and evil (Karimi 1976). Karimi’s distinction between the traditional detective and hardboiled hero is particularly worthy of investigation in terms of the latter being aligned with modernity’s flânerie and epistemological instability:

… unlike the classical detective novel, the private eye is not a perfect reasoner solving the crime deductively and in a detached manner. Rather, he is a man of the city, an adventurer, fully involved in the problems he sets out to solve (Karimi 1976, p. 42).

And yet Karimi’s assumption that films noirs merely reflect the cultural preoccupations of the period in which they are produced precludes a broader interrogation of this new style of detective. Karimi’s description of a ‘man of the city, an adventurer’ clearly invites comparison with the classic flâneur, but he does not develop this idea further.

As early as 1952, one cinéaste was comparing Billy Wilder to Flaubert for his ability to capture the ‘spirit of the age’ (Myrsine 1988, p. 31). Since there is no way to quantify the extent to which America’s postwar climate influenced Wilder’s work (or indeed film noir in general), one can only assume that there was some degree
of confluence. And yet, as the above overview of the critical corpus has demonstrated, an assumption that the noir text is solely reflective of its contemporaneous cultural epoch is a limiting stance. It precludes a fuller and more diachronic understanding of the broader historical forces that shape film noir, its hardboiled hero and fatal woman.

### 2.1.3 Other critical tendencies — universalisation and mythification

Whilst myth is not generally employed for systematic post-structuralist textual analysis of film noir, there is nevertheless a pervasive tendency in much scholarship to read the noir hero and femme fatale as twentieth century articulations of fabled figures. Durgnat cites the Clytemnestra myth as one that informs noir’s structures (Durgnat 1974; 1996), whilst Luhr invokes the Greek tragedy of Sophocles for comparative purposes (Luhr 1982).

Recourse to mythical structures is particularly prevalent in studies of the temptress and the desire she elicits. These discourses typically position the femme fatale as an evil force of legendary status. As such, she is mythologised and connected to discourses on female potency dating back to antiquity, including the myths of Eve, Lilith (Satan’s consort), Salomé (Empress of necrophilic lust and sacrilegiously covetous of the head of Saint John the Baptist), Medusa, Lorelei and the sirens of classical legend. According to Palmer, *Murder, My Sweet* ‘blame[s] all evil on an Eve, a whore who does not know her proper place and wants to pose as an honest woman, disrupting family relationships and breaking the circuit of normal desire’ (Palmer 1994, p. 83). Crowther’s assessment of *Double Indemnity* subscribes to a similar moral absolutism:

49 Cook’s study of *Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, 1945, USA) is an exception, since it draws upon Bachofen’s mythical model of patriarchal and matriarchal social structures (Cook 1980).
... the icily malevolent Phyllis Dietrichson ... exploits her sexual allure to manipulate hapless Walter Neff ... However aware Walter may be of his impending downfall, he is unable to stop himself being sucked into a maelstrom of deceit and murder, at the bottom of which must lie his own death (Crowther 1988, p. 8).

Place is another scholar who suggests that female representation in the noir canon is determined by a structure of binary opposition, and moreover one which is based upon sexuality. ‘[T]he dark lady has access to it,’ asserts Place, but ‘the virgin does not’ (Place 1980, p. 35). Many of these readings owe a strong legacy to a Judeo-Christian theology of dualism, in which the moral absolutes of good or evil were conceptualised as dichotomous entities. According to this schema, the noir femme fatale is the treacherous woman who is defined by a pathological sexual voracity. As such, she is positioned relationally in a model that normalises the desires of the male victims who are usually innocent albeit led astray by their libidinous desires. The sexual and aberrant woman, conversely, is the incarnation of erotic evil.

Despite their sociological enquiry into postwar America, the French cinéastes often saw noir’s gender relations in these ahistorical terms. Writing in 1951, Pierre Duvillars saw the noir hero as ‘[t]rapped like a fly in the spider’s web,’ a hapless and helpless victim so denuded of power that he has no volition in his downward spiral into crime (Duvillars 1996, p. 30). In 1956, Siclier likewise believes Neff to be filled with remorse for his actions whilst his adversary, Phyllis, is pure ‘strength of will’ (Siclier 1996, pp. 69-70).

This tendency to mythify the noir hero and femme fatale continues in contemporary scholarship. Schwartz sees all 1940s noir heroes as essentially naïve victims of the evil woman (Schwartz 2001). In discussing the femme fatale and the

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50 Salomé was a popular figure for fin-de-siècle artists, writers and composers, with portrays by Flaubert, Moreau and Oscar Wilde. Adapted into German by Strauss and first performed in 1905, Wilde’s play Salomé was hugely scandalous at the time, yet rapidly gained international notoriety. Lorelei was a figure of German legend who threw herself into a river in despair over a faithless lover. Upon her death, she was transformed into a siren whose hypnotic song lured sailors to their death. Retrieved September 20, 1993 from Encyclopedia Mythica, http://www.pantheon.org/articles/l/lorelei.html. The sirens of Greek mythology (appearing in Homer’s Odyssey and in oral tradition) were half-bird and half-women creatures living on the island of Anthemöessa. Their song (which may or may not have been accompanied by musical instruments) was said to make men forget their spouses, children and homes. Hearing the song, sailors would attempt to swim towards the island and either drown or reach the island only to waste away on its shores (Stableford 1992; Walker c. 1983).
destruction she unleashes, Shadoian compares Kitty of *The Killers* to the legendary figure of Circe (Shadoian 1977). McArthur, who perceives an inherent misogyny in the way the noir woman almost always sexually enslaves the protagonist, nevertheless also subscribes to this mythification of the femme fatale. ‘The Circe figure quite often entices the hero by her song …’ asserts McArthur, ‘or by her dance … and she is usually played by actresses of startlingly sensual unreality’ (he includes Stanwyck in this category) (McArthur 1972, p. 46). Likewise for Hirsch, *Double Indemnity*’s Phyllis is a ‘castrating Eve’ and ‘a contemporary Circe luring unsuspecting men with her siren’s song’ (Hirsch 1981, p. 4). The noir hero, conversely, is an ‘eternally dazed man in a net, retaining an essential sweetness and innocence despite what happens to him’ (Hirsch 1981, pp. 159-60).

Selby reverts to Christian models of good and evil in order to understand *Double Indemnity*, using semantically laden terminology. Of Keyes’ ‘little man,’ Selby writes, ‘[w]henever his intuitive stomach acts up, he knows that there is evil at hand which must be caught and punished’ (Selby 1984, p. 15). For Selby, the moral terrain depicted in *Double Indemnity* is simplistically binarised, with Neff as the evil antithesis of Keyes, who is the guardian of the law. Kaplan’s argument is similar. Although she hints at the fact that the femme fatale’s power and liberty pose the greatest threat to the male protagonist, these features are interpreted using mythical prototypes:

> Man at once desires [the femme fatale] and fears her power over him. Drawing man away from his goal, her sexuality intervenes destructively in his life. Marked as evil because of her open sexuality, such a woman must be destroyed … (Kaplan 1983, p. 6).

Like many others, Kaplan seems to implicitly accept the notion of the ‘evil woman’ as an immutable and universalised category. Such dogged subscription to mythical structures not only ensures a terminally dehistoricised critical corpus, but it also results in absolutist analyses devoid of nuance or complexity.

Paradoxically, when broader historical precedents are sought, the noir hero is often further mythified by being connected to American discourses of national identity, in which an ethos of individualism and rugged masculinity a central element. Krutnik speaks of the noir protagonist’s need to conquer the ‘lawless’ world in order to ‘establish a regime of truth’ (Krutnik 1991, p. 83), whilst Crowther also invokes the myth of the American Frontier to conceptualise the noir trajectory as that of a ‘man
alone confronting the wilderness’ (Crowther 1988, p. 69). Plouffe similarly proposes a genealogical link between noir’s hardboiled protagonist and the ‘Adamic hero’ of American legend, a figure in which the frontier spirit and individualism play a central role (Plouffe 1979). Porter compares pulp fiction’s hardboiled protagonist to the ‘new American man,’ a mythological figure who was created during the revolutionary and early Republican eras and who was largely a rejection of the traditional British model (Porter 1981). Abbott likewise believes the pulp protagonist to hark back to the lone hero of American frontier myth, albeit recontextualised into the postwar period (Abbott 2000). Goulart’s stance is similar, as evidenced by his description of the hardboiled hero as an ‘urban cowboy’ (cited in Schon 1994).

The application of mythical structures is problematic on several levels. Firstly, in employing a Judeo-Christian or Lévi-Straussian notion of binary opposition or antithesis, it disavows nuance and inflection, thus ignoring the different registers of pleasure and trauma experienced by the hero as a result of his flâneuristic existence. Secondly, it fails to adequately accommodate socio-historical specificity. Finally, such a model of binary opposition, predicated as it is upon a belief in the values of absolutism and totality, is inimical to modernity’s epistemology of relativism.

All of the models discussed thus far have contributed to an extensive understanding of the film noir canon. And yet their respective limitations, also chronicled above, necessitate the formulation of a new paradigm in which social and historical forces are more thoroughly considered and forcefully applied. As the following section demonstrates, some innovative theorists have at times succeeded in introducing or incorporating the concept of modernity into their discussions on film noir, thus paving the way for the development of a rehistoricised model.

### 2.2 Modernity and film noir

The obvious and indisputable connections between film noir and modernity are such that they have not gone entirely unnoticed. Naremore is one theorist who seeks to explicitly investigate these points of convergence (Naremore 1991; 1995-1996; 1996; 51).

51 Structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss has claimed the basis of all mythology to be a binary opposition between elements: savagery and civilisation, ‘the raw and the cooked, the fresh and the decayed’ (Lévi-Strauss 1975, p. 1; 1963).
1998). Perceiving one of noir’s most important elements to be its fascination with
darkness or ‘otherness’ (Naremore 1995-1996), Naremore recognises noir’s legacy to
modernist literature and philosophy. In structural terms, he discerns an homology
between noir’s voiceover and other ‘deep’ narrative techniques of modernism,
including the revolutionary stream of consciousness style and the non-linearity
proposed by Nietzsche, Bergson and Freud (Naremore 1998).

Most of Naremore’s discussions are illuminating and invite further
consideration. In an incisive analysis of *Double Indemnity*, Naremore draws an
analogy between the sequences of Neff’s leisure (bowling) and a Benjaminian notion
of mechanical reproduction (Naremore 1998). Naremore also implicitly positions
Phyllis as a new woman by commenting upon her ‘cheaply manufactured, metallic
look’ (Naremore 1998, p. 89), and more generally noting the highly ‘eroticised and
dangerous’ nature of noir women (Naremore 1998, p. 45). And yet Naremore
explicitly invokes neither the new woman nor the prostitute of modernity in order to
explicate the historical dimensions of noir’s disturbing femme fatale. Naremore also
offers important observations about noir’s aesthetic properties. He believes *Double
Indemnity*, for instance, to showcase a UFA-esque commentary on ‘Fordist Amerika,’
or a Weimar sensibility in which the modern world is seen in dystopian terms
(Naremore 1998, pp. 44, 88). Clearly, the precursor to this sensibility is that cultivated
by the mid-nineteenth century flâneur, who regarded the inexorable encroachment of
industrialisation and urbanisation with a mixture of awe, excitement and horror.
Naremore’s discussions of noir’s dystopian worldview are thus provocative but could
be developed further by a more sustained socio-historical contextualisation
encompassing late nineteenth and early twentieth century modernity.

Telotte is another scholar whose work on film noir encompasses modernity
yet calls for a more comprehensive application of its theories and coordinates.
concentrates primarily on noir’s narrative patterns and raises some fascinating issues.
For Telotte, *Double Indemnity* is a film which problematises the discourse of truth
(Telotte 1989). Contemplating noir’s ‘persistently slippery’ discourse and discordant
voice (Telotte 1984, p. 110), Telotte’s arguments, which frequently deploy a
Foucauldian paradigm, veer towards issues of modernity’s linguistic order and
semiotic polysemy without explicitly tackling their historical dimensions.
Telotte’s assertions regarding noir’s storytelling devices also invite further investigation. *Double Indemnity*’s voiceover, argues Telotte, has a heuristic intent, since it is through his confession that Neff tries to make sense of past events. At the same time, however, the voiceover provides no easy resolution, and the noir hero ‘invariably finds himself possessed and determined by all manner of forces’ (Telotte 1989, pp. 40-41). Despite these astute observations, however, Telotte seems to retain an ultimate belief in a totalising reality, claiming that *Double Indemnity*’s dictaphone acts as a kind of ‘demarcation point’ separating the subjective recollections of Neff from the film’s point of view (what he calls the ‘filmic voice’), the latter of which is aligned with truth (Telotte 1989, p. 43). Telotte’s belief that Neff’s subjective confession is embedded within a greater field of objectivity jettisons any further considerations of the epistemological reconfigurations of modernity in which all was subjectivised.

Issues of epistemological instability and flâneuristic relativisation have in fact been acknowledged from the inception of film noir’s critical corpus, although these debates seem to have been peripheralised. The French cinéastes distinguished film noir from a more traditional mode of narration which saw a ‘crime’ or a ‘mystery’ presented, then solved, thus effecting moral restoration from within a neat and easily intelligible hermeneutic structure. Writing in the mid-1950s, Chabrol noted that criminality in noir is seen from an ontological or metaphysical point of view which problematises everything, thus failing to offer a clear moral perspective (Chabrol 1999).\(^{52}\) Borde and Chaumeton also pay tribute to modernity’s semiotic inversions when they note noir’s methods of eroticising and fetishising the femme fatale, which they compare to the Freudian paradigm of dream elaboration. In place of showing the prohibited reality, they explain, noir introduces elements which are neutral in appearance but which are imbued with additional meaning, operating associatively or symbolically (Borde & Chaumeton 1955).\(^{53}\)

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52 Porter makes a similar point about the pulp detective novel, likening its hermeneutic search to a ‘spreading stain,’ a configuration in which the original crime is not necessarily the most significant narrative item, but rather is one component in an unintelligible and amoral world. This differs from the ratiocinative drive and narrative unity of more ‘traditional’ detective stories (Porter 1981).

53 They cite the dance sequence in *Gilda* and the bobby soxer in *Asphalt Jungle* (John Huston, 1950, USA) as examples of subtextualisation of sexuality that results in a semiotically layered film (Borde & Chaumeton 1955).
Contemporary critics have continued to discern a fundamental ambiguity or polyvalency in the film noir canon. Vernet’s reference to noir’s ‘slippages’ of logic, for instance, could be further explored in terms of how they literalise an unstable, flâneuristic worldview (Vernet 1983). Jameson has also briefly cited the logic of modernism and how it underpins film noir’s semiotic inversions, where for instance the hero’s office represents more than its referent (Jameson 1993). What is needed, however, is a comprehensive interrogation of noir’s semiotic order where it can be fully contextualised in a broader historical field, so that its reliance upon commutation can be connected to nineteenth century precedents, and thus fully explicated as a uniquely modernist mode of communication.

Polan’s discussions provide an example of a zeitgeist discourse in which issues relating to modernity are raised and partially explored. The postwar period was, Polan asserts, a very decentring historical moment. Quoting Baudrillard, Polan notes that any social organisation in which consumer items are a central feature is fundamentally unstable. Argues Polan, there were other social changes—such as the alienation inherent in modern labour—that also contributed to the decentred nature of the subject (Polan 1983). These observations clearly invite further socio-historical contextualisation. The consumer society, industrialisation and decentred subjectivity to which Polan alludes are in fact key indices of modern life, and as such can be traced back to the nineteenth century.

Similarly, debates relating to the ontology and aetiology of the noir hero, most of which emphatically position him within a post-WWII context, could be expanded to encompass early modernity. Porfirio sees *Double Indemnity* as a film concerned with exploring the idea of ‘blind chance,’ and as such linked to existential philosophy which gained a foothold in America due to the mass trauma of World War II, the Depression and the fear of communism (Porfirio 1976). Silver and Ward read Neff’s behaviour as classically existential, concerned as it is with individual responsibility and choice: Neff must decide whether to get on the ‘streetcar’ and become involved in a criminal act (Silver & Ward 1992). If, however, the noir hero were positioned within a wider socio-historical field, his angst (existential and otherwise) would be better understood as a response to modernity. Moreover, although Neff recognises the danger inherent in embarking upon his liaison with Phyllis, he also concedes that ‘the hook was too strong.’ This deterministic tone seems antithetical to existential questions of choice and moral responsibility. A socio-
historical contextualisation, combined with an application of the theories of modernity, would highlight the modernist resonance of Neff’s dilemma. In the modern world, the flâneur’s trajectory is marked by essential illogicality combined with a distinct sense of doom.

Other writing centring on Neff’s attraction to Phyllis often proves compelling yet under-theorised. For instance, Gallagher comments that:

Phyllis is undoubtedly a valuable object, a desirable and seemingly possessable [sic] commodity. Her bleached blond hair, her flashy jewelry, her vulgarly provocative dress (and undress) all appeal to Walter (Gallagher 1987, p. 241).

Although Gallagher further observes that Neff’s pleasure derives from Phyllis’ ‘cheap surface allure,’ and is at once sexual and economic (Gallagher 1987, p. 241), these issues remain unexplored in terms of their cultural specificity. In fact, the ‘flashy’ jewellery to which Gallagher refers, and the fact that Phyllis’ attractiveness is utterly dependent upon embellishment, all accord with modern notions of female beauty. Like the new woman, Phyllis is herself a commodity circulating in the modern marketplace, and as such becomes aligned with the modern prostitute. As with her nineteenth century predecessor, Phyllis is enamoured of artifice and commerce. An historical contextualisation would better highlight these similarities.

Other scholars have examined the modernist resonance of noir’s urban landscape. Naremore cites the ubiquitous tropes and motifs of the metropolis—its metro stations, rail travel, cinemas and jazz—all of which are modern phenomena central to noir’s aesthetic. Naremore’s commentary on America’s complex and ambivalent relationship with this modern world could be further explored in relation to the ambivalence intrinsic to the flâneur’s sensibility (Naremore 1998). Christopher similarly recognises the significance in the noir canon of sites such as nightclubs and casinos, the latter of which functions in *Gilda* as ‘emblematic of the city in which it is located’ (Christopher 1997, p. 139). Similarly, Hirsch enumerates various recurring noir motifs including ‘nightclubs, hotels, tenements, police stations, offices, docks, corner luncheonettes and drug stores, factories, warehouses, crumbling mansions, boxing arenas, train stations, restaurants both shabby and luxurious’ (Hirsch 1981, p. 85). A detailed application of the writings and theories of modernity would more fully discern the affinities between this oft-cited noir iconography and that of the
carnivalesque, modern metropolis as described by Benjamin, Baudelaire, Gautier, Simmel and Zola.

The ‘abject’ female sexuality depicted in noir has been amply discussed, but mostly in relation to neo-noir. Wallace’s study of Bound (Wachowski Bros, 1996, USA) is a case in point (Wallace 2000). In a convincing argument, Wallace explores ways in which lesbianism is rendered visible, legible or else problematised in Bound. Such investigations into ‘abject’ female sexuality need to be applied to the femme fatale of classic 1940s noir, particularly in terms of her connection to the nineteenth century precedent of the new prostitute of modernity.

2.3 Critical corpus — conclusion

As the above examination of the critical corpus has demonstrated, film noir is an enduringly popular field for scholarship. Many incisive, germane and valuable observations have been made. Yet the reliance upon ahistorical theoretical models, or else circumscribed historical attributions, elides the importance of modernity as a guiding force in structuring the noir world and its hero. The debates enumerated throughout this chapter have been extremely important in contributing to an instructive critical corpus on film noir. What is now needed is a cross-disciplinary, historically inflected approach that moves beyond the parameters of the current debates. The following chapter provides an overview of the ascendance throughout the nineteenth century of the phenomenon of modernity. Here I will discuss the main characteristics of modernity and introduce the figure of the flâneur. It is this new subject of modernity who provides the template for the hero of 1940s film noir. The remaining chapters seek to incorporate and apply these findings to Double Indemnity and other contemporaneous films noirs. In doing this, the existing critical corpus will be systematically rehistoricised and thus reinvigorated.
Chapter 3  Modernity

3.1 International phenomenon and new social order

I’m beginning to feel the drunkenness that this agitated, tumultuous life plunges you into. With such a multitude of objects passing before my eyes, I’m getting dizzy. Of all the things that strike me, there is none that holds my heart, yet all of them together disturb my feelings, so that I forget what I am and who I belong to. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The New Eloise* (cited in Berman 1988, p. 18).

Modernity was a profoundly disorienting social phenomenon permeating virtually all aspects of intellectual pursuit, music, art, literature, ideology, science and quotidian life. Throughout the nineteenth century, Western culture saw a radical move towards urbanisation, technological innovation and new patterns of social interaction. The emerging industrial economic model shifted the employment base from rural primary production to urban factory and clerical work. With the mass movement of workers into expanding metropolitan centres, traditional agrarian patterns of cultural organisation were rapidly superseded. New social structures arose in urban areas in which anonymity and the crowd played a central role. Modernity also saw the growth of consumerism, the fetishisation of surface glamour and the promotion of cosmopolitan sophistication. Modes of transportation such as the railway and the automobile meant that modern life was lived at a far greater pace, with spatio-temporal perception being radically and irrevocably reconfigured.

These international demographic, experiential and psychosocial changes were synergistically connected to a new epistemological order. The Enlightenment principle of deductive empiricism was forcefully challenged and subverted, and was largely replaced by a pervasive sense of uncertainty. Scientific discoveries such as that of the cell (1838) and the x-ray (1895) engendered apprehensiveness over the issue of visibility, since they entailed a realisation that all could not be quantifiably
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apprehended by the human eye. The Renaissance doctrine of rationalism and the humanist ethos which had dominated Western thought for almost half a millennium was no longer adequate to explain the possibilities embodied in the new world.

The new epistemology of modernity is reflected in a number of disparate discourses. In scientific enquiry, Charles Darwin’s (1809-1882) theories were revolutionary. *Evolution of Man* (1852) and *On the Origin of Species* (1859) proposed conflict as a central factor in the natural world whilst giving rise to a new metaphor (the city as a jungle) with which to understand the perils of modern life. Einstein’s theory of relativity (1905) was similarly radical, since it dispensed with the previously edified Newtonian notion of an inherent fixity or absolutism in the physical world.

As developed by Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), structural linguistics was also significant for highlighting the inherent arbitrariness of language. Not only was a chasm posited between signified and signifier, but an acknowledgement of polyvalency meant that language was denuded of its traditional status of ‘authority,’ instead becoming a traumatic jumble of potentially meaningless signs. An anarchic sensibility became a formal principle in the arts and philosophy alike. Musical composers such as Stravinsky subverted classical musical structuration, instead experimenting with a freer treatment in which dissonance, arrhythmic patterning and non-functional harmonic principles gained prominence. Published in 1882, Friedrich Nietzsche’s (1844-1900) *Beyond Good and Evil* endorsed the concept of nihilism and constituted a total refutation of absolute Christian values and ideals. The stream of consciousness technique developed by modernist writers James Joyce and Virginia Woolf repudiated rectilinear time, instead instituting a new, impressionistic temporal order. German expressionism, cubism, surrealism and the Brechtian concept of estrangement (*der Verfremdungseffekt*) all similarly sought to articulate the sense of unease and alienation fostered by the new world order.

Of course, this was dialecticised with attempts to empirically record and thus order reality. Of particular significance was the invention of photography, with its irrefutably indexical status, in 1839. See (McQuire 1998).

Other musical composers likewise radicalised their works. The New Viennese School (including Schoenberg) and the expressionist movement (Berg, Webern) experimented with atonality. The impressionism of French composers Debussy and Ravel was based on non-functional harmonic principles, whilst Stravinsky’s early works (including *Petrushka*, 1910-1911) revolutionised concepts of rhythm and orchestration.

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The flourishing metropolis played a crucial role in the formation of the modern world. In England and Wales, the population increased from under seven million in 1750 to eighteen million a century later. A similar growth occurred in America, with a national population of four million in 1790 and over forty million by the 1870s (Cadbury 2003). It was the expansion of city centres, however, which had far-reaching implications. The British Census of 1851 revealed the unprecedented trend that over half the population resided in urban areas (Mazlish 1994) while Glasgow’s population increased fivefold from 1801 to 1861 (McQuire 1998). London was, by the 1880s, vastly overcrowded with a population of 900,000, a state of affairs contributing to unrest, poverty and crime, and generating much media consternation (Haggard 1993). In Europe, the most rapid urbanisation occurred in Germany where, between 1880 and 1913, the number of cities with populations over 100,000 increased from fourteen to forty-eight. Berlin’s population grew from 826,000 in 1871 to two million in 1905, by which time it was third in size only to London and Paris (McFarlane 1976).

America saw a similar influx of people into cities. At the beginning of 1847, New York had a population of 375,000; by 1860 it had risen to 600,000 (White & White 1962). In 1920, the United States of America was officially declared an urban nation (Israel 2003), and in 1930 there were twenty-seven American cities with more than a million inhabitants. The advent of the use of concrete and steel facilitated the construction of skyscrapers, transforming the built environment into a dazzling, futuristic vista. After a devastating 1871 fire razed the centre of Chicago (a city which at the time epitomised modernity), a new architectural landscape was constructed at a furious pace.

The growth of the metropolis proved fascinating for numerous philosophers and writers. For Benjamin, the city was a prerequisite for modernity. He proposed Paris as the ‘capital of the nineteenth century,’ in part due to its modernisation

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56 Hughes calls Chicago ‘a brawling, hog-gut city whose one rule of urban development was to grab the block and screw the neighbour’ (Hughes 1991, p. 172). Similarly, New York was appraised for its sheer scope, with le Corbusier comparing it to the tower of Babel: ‘[a] thousand feet of height, in stone, steel and glass, standing up in the magnificently blue sky’ (le Corbusier 1995, p. 99).
occurring under the auspices of Baron Haussmann. In 1903, Georg Simmel’s *The Metropolis and Mental Life* was published, in which urban life was seen to pose a grave threat to one’s psychic integrity, particularly due its ‘swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli’ (Simmel 1998, p. 52). Experientially, the chaotic nature of the city—with its crowds, constant spectacle and rapid tempo—engendered both panic and delight. The modern subject was obliged to adapt to a vastly reconfigured realm in which shock, anonymity, kinetic thrill and fragmentation were central principles.

In the political sphere, Marx and Engels mobilised the discontent arising in response to urbanisation, industrialisation and the growth of capitalism. Of the revolutions of 1848, Marx spoke metaphorically of ‘fractures,’ ‘fissures’ and an ‘abyss’ (cited in Berman 1988, pp. 19-20), suggesting a modern order in which rupture, chaos and social discord reigned. Fragmentation was also a necessary principle, for Marx, of repetitive and non-cathetic modern activity—such as that of the assembly line—in which the worker is divorced from the product of their labour.

The drive towards fragmentation described by Marx also informed new experiences of temporality, in which history was effaced and the moment was accorded primacy. Marinetti’s 1909 *Manifesto of Futurism* displays contempt for the stifling tradition of the past whilst espousing a radically new temporal order. For Marinetti, this temporality of instantaneity was inextricably linked to another tenet of modernity, that of the reification of speed. ‘Why should we look back,’ proselytised Marinetti,

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57 Baron Georgès Eugène Haussmann was appointed Prefect of the Seine in 1853 and commenced his modernisation of Paris in 1859 under the rule of Napoleon III. Ordering the ‘rationalisation’ of Paris, Haussmann abolished its maze of mediaeval, meandering lanes and replaced them with boulevards designed to facilitate rapid movement. This arterialisation created long, broad corridors that would ultimately enable the transport of troops and artillery against barricades and popular insurrections (Berman 1988). ‘Haussmann and his successors built a city,’ observes Kasinitz, ‘that was orderly, efficient and largely discontinuous with the past, except where that past could be taken out of context and reframed as a symbol or monument’ (Kasinitz 1995, p. 15). The effacement of history inherent in Haussmann’s crusade (which can be compared to other modernist projects—such as Marinetti’s *Manifesto of Futurism*—which aimed to destroy relics from the past) was partly the impetus for Benjamin’s reclamative and redemptive ‘dialectical vision,’ in which the past is immanent within present objects. For further discussion on the Haussmannisation of Paris, see (Nash 1993; Clark 1985).
For many, the new world order was chaotic, degenerate and apocalyptic. Hungarian physician Max Nordau’s celebrated 1883 work, *Degeneration*, conveys this sentiment. ‘We stand now in the midst of a severe mental epidemic; of a sort of black death of degeneration and hysteria,’ Nordau decreed, ‘and it is natural that we should ask anxiously on all sides: “What is to come next?”’ (Nordau 1998, p. 22). The future was uncertain.

In modernity’s new epistemological order, the notion of ‘the moment’ reigned, the commodity gained prominence and anxieties emerged over questions of authenticity. Objects were divested of their traditional significance, and all became ultimately reproducible, as evidenced in the growth of advertising, fashion and tourism. As Benjamin describes it, the mechanical reproduction of art entailed a loss of ‘aura,’ leading to objects that no longer carried ‘authority’ (Benjamin 1968c). New modes of entertainment and consumption arose, providing ample subject material for impressionist artists such as Manet, who repeatedly depicted barmaids, prostitutes and revellers (*Un Bar aux Folies-Bergère*, 1882, is exemplary). Amusement parks, fairgrounds, cabarets, nightclubs, arcades, the *tableaux vivants* of upper-class society, magic lanterns, photographic slide shows, Paris’ *cafés-concerts* and the

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58 Significantly, the Futurists were all young men, the oldest of whom was thirty. They felt it their calling and their duty to overthrow traditional structures in order to embrace the modern world.

59 Sennett points out that it is easy for a contemporary audience to look back on nineteenth century modernity from a teleological stance, since hindsight allows one to conceptualise the social changes of the period as part of a grand and inexorable plan towards present-day modernity. Yet for those experiencing the nineteenth century’s major upheavals of industrialisation and urbanisation, it seemed as if society were disintegrating in an alarming and nihilist fashion: ‘Parisians of the [nineteenth century] perceived urban growth in terms of metaphors of overturning, pulling apart, metaphors which expressed a strongly felt idea of the impermanence of the city and its ways of life’ (cited in Wechsler 1982, p. 8).

60 As depicted, for instance, in Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* (1905) when the beauteous heroine, Lily Bart, appears in a *tableau vivant*, much to the delight of her male suitors and other admirers who are thus transformed into spectators. The *tableau vivant* depended, Wharton explains in the novel, on an ‘adjustment of mental vision,’ in order that a ‘magic glimpse … of the boundary world between fact and imagination’ can be enjoyed (Wharton 1985, p. 133). For further discussion on *tableaux vivants*, see (Chapman 1996).
modern circus\textsuperscript{61} all celebrated spectacle and fetishised vision. The \textit{grands magasins} of European metropolitan centres showcased commodities in capacious windows that remained aglow well into the night.\textsuperscript{62} These shopping precincts were yet another element of modernity’s cult of leisure, which highlighted the joy of looking. Indeed, such commercialised spheres virtually demanded a flâneuristic, scopophilic and enraptured gaze. These spaces transformed the urban wilderness into what Benjamin and later Buck-Morss would term a ‘dreamworld,’ where all was elevated to spectacle (Buck-Morss 1995). In fact, by the 1860s, the Parisian media abounded with descriptions of the city in which the theme of visual instability dominated. Terms such as phantasmagoria,\textsuperscript{63} dream, dumbshow, mirage and masquerade all connoted spectacle but also, as historian Clark observes, suggested ‘visual untruth’ (Clark 1985, p. 66).

The glorification of commodity culture played a central role in this transformation of concretised space into a ‘dreamworld.’ In the \textit{Communist Manifesto} (1848), Marx describes the phantasmagoria resulting from industrialisation and commodification, and opines the amorphous nature of much in modernity, where ‘all that is solid melts into air’ (Marx & Engels 1967, p. 83). Certainly, the modern subject inhabited these carnivalesque spaces in a ‘dream-state’ induced by the unreality of the surroundings. For Benjamin, to experience the urban environment was akin to intoxication, and it has been pointed out that many of his deliberations on flânerie contain descriptions of ‘ivresse’ or drunkenness (Shields 1994). At the same time, much promise of excitement was embodied in the fabulous metropolis, and in many discourses, both quotidian and intellectual, the city was celebrated, becoming iconographically and metonymically symbolic of modernity itself.

All of these revolutionary changes demanded a new subject, and the development of psychoanalysis was crucial to the formulation of a modern conception

\textsuperscript{61} In April 1871, PT Barnum joined WC Coup and Dan Castello to create a three-acre circus in Brooklyn. Eventually more than one ring was added (circuses could boast up to three), so that distraction became a key ingredient of the entertainment experience (Charney 1998).

\textsuperscript{62} As Clark notes, these \textit{grands magasins de nouveautés} of fin-de-siècle Paris were dependent upon buying and selling at large, impersonal volumes, instituting a marketplace whose rhythms were vastly different to the erstwhile practice of trading with known merchants (Clark 1985).

\textsuperscript{63} The term phantasmagoria was used in England as early as 1802 to describe exhibitions of optical illusions produced by magic lanterns and other visual tricks (Buck-Morss 1992). Ultimately the term was politicised and deployed pejoratively by Marx.
of the self.\textsuperscript{64} Sigmund Freud’s (1856-1939) \textit{Screen Memories} and \textit{The Interpretation of Dreams (Die Traumdeutung)} were both published in 1900, followed by \textit{The Psychopathology of Everyday Life} (1901) and \textit{Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality} (1905). Insanity, considered in a pre-modern age to be bestowed upon select individuals by God, was suddenly medicalised, with many psychiatrists linking it to social factors. As insanity could apparently strike anyone, there was a terrifying sense of fortuity associated with it. To add to the metaphysical anxiety, Freud’s work on the unconscious forcefully rebutted the notion of a unified self, or a totalising Cartesian ‘I.’ Instead, his theories hypothesised the belief of multiple and often competing layers of consciousness, not all of which were accessible to the cognisant mind. Conceived of as a complex array of hidden desires and impulses, the modern subject was no longer considered a \textit{tabula rasa} upon which the ‘real world’ could be unproblematically imprinted. Reality was relativised and one’s own subjectivity was seen to inflect and thus (at least to some extent) to shape and ‘author’ the world it perceived. Moreover, this modern self was one in which irrational and destructive forces usually prevailed. As Robinson notes of Freud’s decentred subject, ‘the [modern] self is implicated in its own destiny; it carries within itself secret desires and unknown capacities that profoundly affect its history’ (Robinson 1993, p. 117).

Henri Bergson’s (1859-1941) theories on memory, as expounded in his 1896 \textit{Matter and Memory} (Bergson 1911), were hugely popular in the early part of the twentieth century. Bergson’s ideas were instrumental in theorising the new subject, whilst recasting history in subjective terms. That Bergson argued for different yet co-existing modes of temporality was a radical break from a theocentric view of the world, and was deemed sacrilegious by some.\textsuperscript{65} Bergson’s belief that time was partly a

\textsuperscript{64} Whilst the origins of this new, modern subject can arguably be traced back to the Renaissance, it was in the mid-nineteenth century that the ‘decentred’ modern subject was consolidated and theorised in earnest. For more genealogical information, see (Berman 1988; Calinescu 1987; Watson 2001) and Appendix 2 of this thesis. See also (Ellenberger 1970) who chronicles the direct precursors to Freud’s notion of the unconscious.

\textsuperscript{65} Bergson enjoyed success after the publication of \textit{Time and Free Will} (1889) and \textit{Matter and Memory} (1896). Yet it was his \textit{L’Evolution Créatrice (Creative Evolution)}, published in 1907, which established him as a major force in philosophy. His weekly lectures in Paris thereafter attracted huge audiences.
psychological construct was appropriated into a literary realm by Marcel Proust (1871-1922). Using the notion of mémoire involontaire, Proust developed a narrative style in which linearity was superseded by a dialectical notion of time in which past, present and future fused. By 1920-1921, Freud was espousing a direct correlation between memory and consciousness, again refuting traditional perceptions of time and history.\(^{66}\)

Benjamin also embraced this temporal reconfiguration. As noted by cultural historian Buci-Glucksmann, a Benjaminian concept of time is essentially dialectical and non-isochronal (Buci-Glucksmann 1994). The present is imbued with the past, and as such is historically charged, so that time becomes, for Benjamin, a ‘dream-web where the most ancient occurrences are attached to those of today’ (cited in Buck-Morss 1986, p. 106). Temporal units, moreover, were seen as variegated, inconsistent and idiosyncratic. Such radical propositions constituted a total rejection of a Renaissance rectilinear temporality, where events are systematically lodged on an imaginary continuum.

These features of the modern world were complemented by a new scopic regime that differed vastly from anything that came before.

### 3.2 The shock of the new — modernity’s scopic regime

I began to like New York, the racy, adventurous feel of it at night, and the satisfaction that the constant flicker of men and women and machines gives to the restless eye. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (Fitzgerald 1974, p. 58).

Throughout the nineteenth century and beyond, visual instability and mutability reigned. In the art world, the homogeneity of the Renaissance scenographic perspective was abandoned for more impressionistic and abstract representations of ‘reality,’ such as Salvador Dali’s surreal images or Joan Miró’s work in which objects were despatialised and appeared to be floating in a sort of ‘non-space.’ Picasso

\(^{66}\) Published at this time, Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* was to have a considerable influence on how modern philosophers sought to understand memory. See for instance (Benjamin 1968a).
claimed to ‘paint forms as I think them, not as I see them’ (cited in Hughes 1991, p. 32), whilst Kandinsky sought to overthrow traditional semiotic systems and institute a new visual language. Other modernist literature and art forms celebrated new modes of vision, many of which were panoptic and thus allowed the reader or viewer to consume the entire vista from a position of apparent omnipotence. Populist examples include the ‘bird’s-eye view’ found in the opening scene of Victor Hugo’s *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831), and Honoré Daumier’s lithograph of Nadar photographing Paris from a balloon (1862).

Visual manipulation was a fundamental feature of a number of nineteenth century *divertissements* based upon *trompe l’oeil* principles, including the kaleidoscope, stereoscope, kinetoscope (a peepshow viewing device), and the dioramas and panoramas of Louis-Jacques Mandré Daguerre. These forms of popular entertainment demanded new modes of spectatorship, often with multiple points of view. As such, they highlighted the apparent malleability of vision. At the same time, verisimilitude was celebrated with unprecedented fervour, with the popularisation of a number of leisure activities based upon gruesomely realistic spectacle. Parisian crowds of the fin-de-siècle, for instance, flocked to the morgue. Ostensibly motivated by civic duty (to assist in identifying the anonymous deceased), this recreational activity demonstrates the voracious public appetite for the grisly and abject. Schwartz aptly describes it as ‘public voyeurism—flânerie in the service of the state’ (Schwartz 1995, p. 299). Suddenly, vision and spectacle coalesced, and with the absence of a homogenising and totalising ‘reality,’ the emotional register of vision increased enormously.

The obsession with spectacle and the fetishisation of commodity objects was at all times counterpoised by an anxiety over the mutability of visual signifiers. With the dispensation of the *tabula rasa* model, vision became fraught with potential problems, and this perilous state of affairs was reflected in a number of discourses. Freud’s discussions on the uncanny focus to a large extent on the role played by vision and the fear of losing one’s eyes or eyesight, which he sees as displaced castration fear (Freud 1985). Like the ‘bird’s-eye view’ popular in nineteenth century literature,

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67 For further discussion of literary representations of the bird’s-eye view, see (Wechsler 1982). See also Huyssen’s work on modernity’s scopic regime and the ‘disturbances of vision’ in fin-de-siècle Vienna (Huyssen 1998).
Kracauer’s theory of the mass ornament is also noteworthy since it recognises modernity’s fetishisation of a mode of spatially distant vision which inaugurates a new, allegorised semiotic system. In Kracauer’s model, objects lose their traditional semantic status by virtue of their positioning within a larger context, often comprising visually repetitive elements. Kracauer cites ‘The Tiller Girls’ as exemplary. In this cabaret act, the constitutive elements—the individual performers—are subsumed or co-opted into a mass ornament whose symphonic movement effects ‘the exodus from lush organic splendour’ (Kracauer 1995c, p. 83).

Industrialisation and the growth of capitalism were other factors leading to the transformation of objects into spectacles, thus calling for a new gaze. For Debord, this was connected to wider cosmological concerns. In an era in which the notion of a totalising reality was being eroded, spectacle had a restorative role in redeeming the material world that threatened to disappear. The spectacle, claims Debord, ‘elevate[s] the human sense of sight’ to a level of immense importance (Debord 1995, p. 17). Certainly, the scopophilia of modernity had huge ramifications for the construction of a new, modern subject. No longer able to participate in an unproblematic visual and epistemological field, this subject became an alienated and solipsistic individual whose very subjectivity inflected or fashioned the reality he or she perceived. Not only was vision essentially impressionistic, but also the world it recorded was multifarious and often incomprehensible.

Whilst generating ‘moments of unease,’ all of these complex and often seemingly contradictory forces contributed to what Jay terms the ‘ocularcentricity’ of modernity (Jay 1992), in which vision gained enormous significance. This fetishisation of vision was complemented by a desire for a mobile gaze. By the fin-de-siècle, there was a pressing cultural need to supersede the redundant rigidity of the camera obscura and to pave the way for a ‘more mobile ... observer’ (Crary 1995, p. 33). The gaze of the modern observer subverted the hitherto hegemonic visual model in which a one-point perspective had dominated. Instead, the modern gaze, which is now understood to be specifically pre-cinematic, both cherished and demanded

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68 Crary speaks of the reconfiguration of visual representation from around 1820 onwards which created a new type of spectator—or what he describes as a modern observer (Crary 1990).
movement and distraction. Correspondingly, the new subject of the modern metropolis was one for whom the ‘constant flicker of men and women and machines’ gave satisfaction to the ‘restless eye,’ as Nick Carraway, the protagonist of Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby (first published in 1925 and excerpted above) explains. It was only within an urban context that the new subject could indulge such a ‘restless’ gaze. With modernity’s ‘corporealisation’ of vision, shock also became a central tenet. To perceive a desired object on ‘display’ in the metropolis was inherently, traumatically and transgressively shocking, particularly since all was apprehended in an instant and threatened to disappear. Throughout the nineteenth century, the new woman of modernity became reconceptualised as both prostitute and commodity, as will be discussed in Chapter Six. On display in the city yet often seemingly unattainable, she incited a particularly flâneuristic obsession.

All of these modern discourses and developments share a unifying feature: that is, they reflect the overriding influence of the new social order of modernity. In subverting the positivist materialism which had been the foundation of Western epistemology for several centuries, modernity was characterised by dialectical processes, by a reality (or a subject) with a number of antithetical ‘layers,’ and by a disquieting notion that things were not necessarily as they seem. This state of affairs gave rise to uncertainty, disillusionment and disenfranchisement. The locus of these changes was the flâneur, a figure who arose somewhere around the mid-nineteenth century, and whose representation (literary and otherwise) was to exert a key influence on modernist concepts of the hero or anti-hero of popular discourses, including those of pulp fiction and the cinema.

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69 Several theorists have considered the modern, mobile gaze, including (Friedberg 1995; Schwartz 1995; Crary 1990; Huysen 1998; Zizek 1989; Wechsler 1995).

70 In contrast to the decorporealisation inherent in the camera obscura model of vision, the modern observer acquired what Crary terms a ‘corporeal subjectivity’ in which their physical state and psychic disposition impacted upon their vision (Crary 1990, p. 69).
3.3 The flâneur — historical entity and critical metaphor

It is not given to every man to take a bath of multitude; enjoying a crowd is an art; and only he can relish a debauch of vitality at the expense of the human species, on whom, in his cradle, a fairy has bestowed the love of masks and masquerading, the hate of home, and the passion for roaming. *Crowds* (Baudelaire 1970c, p. 20). First published 1869.\(^{71}\)

3.3.1 Genealogy

In 1856, Marx spoke of a ‘new-fangled man … as much an invention of modern times as machinery itself’ (cited in Berman 1988, p. 104). This modern subject—or ‘flâneur’—features as a major trope in countless literary and philosophical writings of modernity, including the cultural theory of Benjamin and Kracauer and the poetry of Baudelaire. In recent times, the flâneur has been resurrected by many theorists, including Gunning, Hansen, Friedberg and Buck-Morss.\(^{72}\) With its voracious appetite for speed and spectacle, flânerie is also a defining characteristic of early cinema, including the ‘cinema of attractions,’ of which kinetic thrill and monstration are emblematic.

There is some contention as to the precise genesis of the flâneur. Ferguson situates his emergence in the early years of the nineteenth century, which is approximately forty years earlier than other theorists have proposed (Ferguson 1993; 1994a; 1994b). For Ferguson, French writer Honoré de Balzac exemplifies a pre-1848 flâneur (Ferguson 1994b). Gleber argues that nineteenth century travel diaries (such as the journals of Heinrich von Kleist) are prototypical flâneuristic texts in their fetishisation of the exotic city and their lexicographic engagement with the alien and marginalised aspects of the metropolis, such as the ‘corner stayers’ (*Eckensteher*), streetwalkers, privileged idle strollers and those lingering in the night. Gleber also proposes the bohemians of 1830s and 1840s Paris as precursors to the flâneur (Gleber 1999). Mazlish provides an even broader genealogy, claiming that the seeds of the

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\(^{71}\) The prose poems contained in *Le Spleen de Paris (Paris Spleen)* were mainly written between 1860 and 1865 and published posthumously in 1869, two years after Baudelaire’s death.

\(^{72}\) See also (Gleber 1999; Parsons 2000; Wilson 1992; Gilloch 1992; Ferguson 1993; 1994a; 1994b; Friedberg 1993; 1995; Shields 1994; Mazlish 1994; Frisby 1994; Morawski 1994).
flâneur reside in the eighteenth century ‘impartial spectator’ as conceived by Adam Smith (Mazlish 1994).

Although incipient traces can be found in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century literature, it is generally accepted that flânerie (at least as the term is used in contemporary cultural theory) emerged most forcefully in the context of mid-nineteenth century urban modernity. Certainly the flâneur, as he73 is conceptualised by Benjamin, only became possible due to the mass influx of people into urban centres. By the 1840s and 1850s, there is little doubt that the flâneur was a recognisable figure, appearing (though not always so-named) in Baudelaire’s œuvre, Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Man in the Crowd* (1840) (Poe 1998a), the physiologies of the 1840s and Louis Huart’s *Physiologie du Flâneur* (1841). In these literary works, the figure of the urban wanderer and observer was articulated and consolidated.

### 3.3.2 Typology

#### 3.3.2.1 Mobility and lexicography

Not to find one’s way in a city may well be uninteresting and banal. It requires ignorance—nothing more. But to lose oneself in a city—as one loses oneself in a forest—that calls for quite a different schooling. Then, signboards and streets names, passers-by, roofs, kiosks, or bars must speak to the wanderer like a cracking twig under his feet in the forest, like the startling call of a bittern in the distance, like the sudden stillness of a clearing with a lily standing erect at its center. Paris taught me this art of straying … Walter Benjamin (Benjamin 1978, pp. 8-9).

The flâneur strays. He negotiates an urban terrain in a state at once watchful and distracted, attentive and yet absorbed by his own ruminations and mental

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73 The flâneur is referred to throughout this thesis as ‘he’ for several reasons. Due to nineteenth century social conditions, the historical figure of the flâneur was indubitably a man. Friedberg describes him as a ‘male dandy who strolled the urban streets and arcades in the nineteenth century’ (Friedberg 1995, p. 62). Secondly, as a site of critical investigation and a metaphor for the modern subject, the flâneur was invariably assumed to be male. As my thesis is undertaking an examination of the noir hero in relation to manifestations of modernity, it is both expedient and logical to retain the original gender specification. Various scholars have argued for the existence of a female flâneur—a flâneuse—who, they contend, arose primarily due to the growth of consumerism in which women played a key role. For an inquiry into the possibility of a female flâneur, see (Pollock 1988; Wilson 1992; Wolff 1985; 1994; Buck-Morss 1986; Friedberg 1993; 1995; Parsons 2000; Gleber 1999).
peregrinations. With his ‘passion for roaming’ (Baudelaire 1970c, p. 20), the flâneur is both comforted and accosted by the vast array of stimuli, by the fragmentation inherent in public life, and by the throngs of anonymous pedestrians he encounters. Mobility is one of his defining features, and as is suggested in Benjamin’s quotation, above, the flâneur’s engagement with the city is one characterised by fortuity. In cultivating the ‘art of straying,’ the flâneur has the luxury of improvising his trajectory, and as such is constantly on the brink of new discoveries. In this respect, the flâneur can be compared to the gambler, who was another urban, modern figure who fascinated both Benjamin and Baudelaire. As Benjamin explains, the flâneur must live as an automaton … ‘who [has] completely liquidated [his] memories’ (Benjamin 1968a, p. 178). Like the gambler, the flâneur resides emphatically in the present moment, and thus endorses modernity’s new temporal order of instantaneity. Moreover, his perambulation allows urban life to be experienced as a game of chance.

Leisured, bourgeois yet atomised, the flâneur wanders distractedly through the grand cities of the nineteenth century (Paris, London, Chicago). Strolling through the metropolitan labyrinth and its interstices, the flâneur is constantly looking. As a result of the often unchartered (or at least ever-changing) terrain in which he finds himself, the flâneur’s hermeneutic endeavour is to ‘read’ the urban wilderness and its crowd. Not only is the flâneur deluged with all elements of the modern city, but he also lacks a programmatic formula with which to determine his own position therein. For this reason, his enterprise is essentially lexicographic, as he seeks to order and thus understand his vastly reconfigured environment. Franz Hessel, an acquaintance of Benjamin, calls the flâneur a ‘Lektüre der Strasse’—literally, a reader of the streets (Gleber 1999, p. ix). Benjamin’s ideas about constructing a physiognomy of the city, and of reading the metropolis as a cluster of signs, are also central: the flâneur is, above all else, an observer and recorder.

A certain detachment and impartiality is thus required at all times. After ‘mapping’ his surroundings, the flâneur returns to a protective environment (usually within the bourgeois milieu from which he issues) where he is able to diarise his

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74 Benjamin’s own engagement with the city was essentially lexicographic, with his personal history inscribed onto urban tracts of Berlin and other cities through which he wandered. ‘I have long … played with the idea of setting out the sphere of life—bios—graphically on a map …’ he explained (Benjamin 1978, p. 5).
findings. Although the flâneur is familiar with much of the city’s topography, he is equally adept at navigating new tracts, and thus is able to feel at home anywhere. Conversely, his terminal alienation means that even familiar surroundings often become uncanny, so that the ‘signboards and street names, passers-by, roofs, kiosks, or bars … speak to the wanderer,’ as Benjamin puts it (Benjamin 1978, pp. 8-9). Because of this, the flâneur requires a finely-tuned aptitude for semiotically decoding his surroundings. Rejecting a simplistic model of deductive empiricism, the flâneur adopts a more complex and frequently circuitous ‘archaeological’ approach. The world he inhabits is gothic, baroque, fragmented and infused with menace. Neither structured nor linear, the flâneur’s eternal quest for meaning is non-specific, falling back upon itself in endless circularity. The flâneur’s hermeneutic model, then, is antithetical to a Cartesian, ratiocinative ethos. As such, it is in keeping with the modern world it seeks to record and understand.

### 3.3.2.2 Shock and desire

The flâneur’s relationship to the city and its crowds is essentially a dialectical one where he at once desires and abhors immersion within the urban maelstrom. Suffering the alienation of the oppressive metropolis, he nonetheless delights in the perambulation (solitary yet connected) afforded by his anonymity. Despite his essentially public existence, the flâneur was an alienated figure, and his brief and fortuitous encounters with strangers were characterised by temporal ephemerality and marked by a sense of transience, loss and trauma, all of which combine to produce an acute and often unbearable sense of shock and alienation.

This experience is best encapsulated by Baudelaire’s canonised 1860 poem *À une Passante*, in which the narrator experiences excruciating alienation in response to a momentary sighting of a beauteous woman. The titular stranger’s appearance (and immediate disappearance) ignites an eternal obsession within the flâneur, who desires the city and all it has to offer, and particularly its new woman. In the modern world, one may momentarily glimpse the object of one’s desire in a crowd, only to lose it

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75 The flâneur’s essential status as a bourgeois subject has been noted by Ferguson (Ferguson 1994b). Nicholls similarly suggests that it is only the knowledge that the flâneur can return to the safety of the bourgeois realm that allows him to experience vicariously the city’s delights (Nicholls 2004, p. 77). The noir hero similarly retreats, but to the office rather than the home hearth, the latter having become a thoroughly disenchanted space.
almost immediately. The resultant shock became a nodal feature of the flâneur’s psyche, infusing all of his experiences, perceptions and cognition with a quintessentially modern form of melancholy and suffering. Of *À une Passante*, Benjamin describes the shock ‘with which an imperious desire suddenly overcomes a lonely man’ (Benjamin 1973e, p. 46), suggesting that it is the narrator’s essentially solitary and lonely state which renders him vulnerable to such traumatic shock.

Although at times unbearable, the flâneur’s shock was also transformative, since it contained the possibility of redemption. As discussed by Berman, modernity saw a shift of previously cloistered activities into the urban sphere. Love and erotic attraction were now played out in a highly public arena that, contends Berman, elevated the street to a site of ‘primal scene’ (Berman 1988). Made possible by this modern city, the sighting of the erotically forceful *passante* is akin to an epiphany for the flâneur, who must otherwise inhabit a desacralised world denuded of immanent meaning. In Baudelaire’s poem and other nineteenth century literature, it was frequently the possibility of *reciprocity* that ignited the flâneur’s ardour. As will be demonstrated more fully in Chapter Six, this sense of promise can be connected historically to the emergence of the new woman and modern prostitute, both of whom defiantly inhabited the public sphere and dared to return the gaze of their male admirers. This erotic configuration was only made possible by the urban crowd, which in many crucial ways is a necessary prerequisite for flânerie.

### 3.3.2.3 Crowds and repulsion

Crowds are only powerful for destruction. Their rule is always tantamount to a barbarian phase. *Gustave le Bon, 1895* (cited in Kolocotroni et al 1998, pp. 37-38).

On an unspecified day in the late 1880s in Saint Raphael on the French Riviera, Maupassant happened to be walking past a church at which he fortuitously caught sight of some newlyweds. Out of interest, he strained to see the spectacle, when suddenly, a terrible feeling overcame him: he felt that he had become ‘one of the crowd.’ ‘I at once experienced a curious and unbearable feeling of discomfort,’ wrote Maupassant in 1889,
Maupassant’s diarised account of his encounter with a crowd offers an insight into the experiential and metaphysical aspects of late nineteenth century life. Immersion in a crowd, or being overwhelmed by the ‘spirit of the mob,’ as Maupassant would have it, was a disturbing but often exhilarating experience. It threatened one’s safety and wellbeing and led to a frightening process of deindividuation. The discourse of crowd psychology which arose at the fin-de-siècle, including the work of right-wing le Bon, testifies to a strong anxiety over the urban crowd which was seen as an amorphous entity that was both culturally and politically threatening, with its attendant connotations of revolution, proletarian uprising and threats of insurgency or insurrection, particularly in France.

The flâneur’s engagement with crowd was in fact ambivalent: whilst he feared deindividuation, the crowd was also a ‘narcotic’ (Benjamin 1973e, p. 55) to which he was irresistibly drawn. As modern tropes, the crowd and the stranger are both central to an understanding of the flâneur, whose urban peregrinations are contingent upon moving through masses of unknown people. Most philosophers of modernity perceived the centrality of the crowd and its profusion of strangers. Simmel wrote about the concept of the urban ‘stranger’ (Simmel 1971b), Baudelaire’s flâneur is l’homme des foules (‘the man of the crowd’) (cited in Benjamin 1973e, p. 48), whilst for Benjamin, the flâneur ‘sought asylum’ within the crowd (Benjamin 1973a, p. 170). The flâneur and the city are symbiotically enmeshed in Benjamin’s philosophy, since he saw flânerie as utterly dependent upon the existence of urban interstices such as the Parisian arcades in which commodities were reified and celebrated.76

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76 Between 1799 and 1830, nineteen arcades were constructed in Paris, with another seven built in the ensuing twenty-five years (Frisby 1994).
The centrality of the metropolis in this interplay between flâneur and stranger cannot be underestimated. As outlined above, modernity was an epoch of unremitting urbanisation. Anonymity thus became a defining feature of quotidian life: overcrowding meant that walking down a city street entailed numerous and random encounters with strangers, in contrast to traditional agrarian social organisation, where individuals knew each other and were positioned relationally in a rigid hierarchy.

These pre-modern communities were marked by what Bauman terms a ‘dense sociability,’ a description that does not imply intimacy or spiritual harmony, but rather denotes a strongly defined semiotic system (Bauman 1991, pp. 61-62). Unlike the city, these societies were based upon a conceptual antinomy between ‘friend’ and ‘enemy.’ The few anomalous strangers who appeared were quickly assimilated into one of these categories. The modern metropolis offered the inverse of this, with a whole new concept of the ‘stranger.’ This stranger was not a minor aberration, but rather, he or she dominated the new social landscape, leading to what Bauman terms a ‘horror of indetermination’ (Bauman 1991, pp. 57-58). The stranger was also a preoccupation for Baudelaire, as evidenced in the eponymous poem excerpted below:

Tell me, enigmatical man, whom do you love best, your father, your mother, your sister or your brother?
I have neither father, nor mother, nor sister, nor brother.
Your friends?
Now you use a word whose meaning I have never known.
Your country?
I do not know in what latitude it lies …
Then, what do you love, extraordinary stranger?
I love the clouds … the clouds that pass … up there … up there …
the wonderful clouds!

The urban stranger was an essentially unknowable and threatening entity, both ‘extraordinary’ (insofar as his motivations cannot be discerned by the observer) and ‘enigmatical’ (he is impenetrable and resists the flâneur’s attempts to decode him). Defying classification, the inscrutable urban stranger arouses repulsion. Because of this, the crowd was for an anxiety-provoking and abject phenomenon. With its ability to render the familiar strange, the crowd could also evoke a sense of the uncanny, as noted by Freud of an 1885 visit to Paris:
The city and its inhabitants strike me as uncanny; the people seem to me to be of a different species from ourselves; I feel they are possessed of a thousand demons... I hear them yelling ‘À la lanterne,’ and ‘À bas’ this man and that... (cited in Barrows 1981, p. 7).

The populous nature of a large city like Paris, believed Freud, led to deindividuation but also created a sense of isolation for he who regarded it. Thus Freud is positioned in opposition to the amorphous mass of people, whom he describes as ‘a different species.’ In Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century, Benjamin notes a similar sense of uncanniness that descends upon the urban inhabitant as a result of the ‘inhuman’ nature of the metropolis asserting itself. The end result, explains Benjamin, is that ‘inhabitants of the city no longer feel at home’ (Benjamin 1999, p. 23). It is this sense of uncanniness, or the alien nature of the city, which is fundamental to the classic flâneur’s urban experience. This dystopian metropolis and its crowd necessitated the flâneur’s lexicographic skills in order to extract meaning and thus ameliorate the sense of estrangement, as Benjamin explains:

In times of terror ... everybody will be in a situation where he has to play detective. Strolling gives him the best prospects of doing so... If the flâneur is thus turned into an unwilling detective, it does him a lot of good socially, for it accredits his idleness. He only seems to be indolent, for behind this indolence there is the watchfulness of an observer who does not take his eyes off a miscreant (Benjamin 1973e, pp. 40-41).

This configuration, in which the lone flâneur is pitted against the masses, informs much modern literature and cultural philosophy. In Benjamin’s paradigm, the flâneur was not only an isolated individual, but also a watchful observer. Remaining separate from the ‘miscreants’ he encounters, the flâneur compulsively records their behaviour and is thus transformed into an ‘unwilling detective.’ In the above discussion of the flâneur, I have explored a number of his central characteristics. These include a passion for roaming through the metropolis, an inquisitive and ever-watchful eye, a desire to observe and record the passing crowd, and an air of detachment dialecticised with a longing to encounter the desirable woman.

The noir protagonist apotheosises the abovementioned traits of flânerie, many of which were inchoate in the classic flâneur. Neff for instance traverses the urban and suburban terrain with consummate ease. He resists the urge to join the throngs and instead stands alone. At the same time, however, his life is necessarily
enacted in a public sphere, as this allows him to mitigate his overwhelming anxiety regarding the femme fatale. Like the classic flâneur, Neff seeks out public spaces in which to loiter. Availing himself of the opportunity to increase his speed through use of motorised transport, Neff can indulge his flânerie with unprecedented rapidity, as will be explored in Chapter Four. The noir voiceover, furthermore, is a narrative stratagem allowing his adventures to be related subjectively. Neff’s use of the dictaphone is thus analogous to the classic flâneur’s diarisation. Like other noir heroes, Neff is above all an observer. He reads his surroundings with his ‘insurance eyes,’ and is adept at assessing the bourgeois and proletarian milieux alike.

Overwhelmed by the onslaught of modern life, the classic flâneur retired to his bourgeois home hearth. Similarly, the noir hero cultivates an air of detachment and retreats to the office to record his findings. Neff’s gaze also ontologically approximates that of the classic flâneur—it is enraptured, distracted and primarily directed towards the woman as prostitute or commodity. Neff’s engagement with the femme fatale, however, is more overtly sexualised, a transgression that proves to be his downfall. As will be seen throughout this thesis, the classic flâneur, and all his constitutive elements as enumerated above, was to provide a potent template for the noir hero.
3.4 Flâneurs and revolutionaries — modernity’s commentators

I had arrived in Riga to visit a woman friend. Her house, the town, the language were unfamiliar to me. Nobody was expecting me, no one knew me. For two hours I walked the streets in solitude. Never again have I seen them so. Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings* (Benjamin 1979, p. 68).

The seminal cultural philosophers of modernity were flâneurs themselves, often marginalised from their peers or hovering on the periphery of urban life with hermeneutic intent. Canonised modernists include Walter Benjamin, Charles Baudelaire and Georg Simmel, and their lives need to be examined in terms of flânerie. A fierce intellectual and self-confessed ‘melancholic’ (Sontag 1979, p. 8), Walter Benjamin was born in 1892 and committed suicide in 1940 on the French-Spanish border after complications arose in procuring visas whilst attempting to flee Nazi persecution.\(^77\) Benjamin was an outsider and an eternal flâneur whose journeys abroad led him to contemplate and ‘read’ Marseilles, Naples, Riga and Moscow, amongst other cities. His flâneuristic explorations flourished in anonymous and unfamiliar cities in which he could wander undetected.

In an increasingly secularised world, everyday life had become degraded.\(^78\) And yet Benjamin sought to illuminate the profane, and thus to redeem modern life by uncovering the true ‘reality’ encased in the city. In this, Benjamin was an iconoclast whose intellectual project was at once heuristic, idiosyncratic and revolutionary. With a philosophy strongly influenced by Marxist historical materialism, Benjamin believed the nineteenth century to be a ‘dreamworld’ from which the modern subject needed to awake.\(^79\) His investigations into modernity, then, had an overtly political intent. Moreover, his methodology and style were radically fragmentary, structurally mimicking the city’s tempo and the flâneur’s mode of perception. Benjamin’s corpus

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\(^{77}\) For further biographical information on Benjamin, refer to the introduction in *Reflections* (Benjamin 1978, pp. vii-xliii).

\(^{78}\) Intoned Benjamin, ‘[n]othing distinguishes the ancient from the modern man so much as the former’s absorption in a cosmic experience scarcely known to later periods’ (Benjamin 1979, p. 103).

\(^{79}\) See for instance Benjamin’s discussions on arcades, exhibitions and panoramas as residues of a ‘dreamworld’ (Benjamin 1978).
encompassed a number of diverse topics including fashion, drugs, the metropolis, the flâneur and the prostitute.

Benjamin’s style thus echoed modernity’s dialectical vision and ephemerality (subjects are assembled haphazardly and evaporate as suddenly as they appear).\textsuperscript{80} Passagen-Werk is exemplary in this respect. Carried out over a period of thirteen years, the project (which remained unfinished at the time of Benjamin’s death) centres on the Parisian arcades, a trope deployed metonymically by Benjamin in order to construct a cultural archaeology of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{81} In advocating a materialist physiognomy in which the city was assessed in discrete segments, Benjamin recognised the fragmentary impulses inherent in modernity, and applied these to his own work.

As one of the first nineteenth century commentators to lyricise \textit{la vie moderne}, Charles Baudelaire opted in his own life for a flâneuristic existence. Whilst born into an affluent milieu in 1821 (the year in which modernist writers Flaubert and Dostoevsky were also born), Baudelaire abandoned this privilege in favour of Parisian bohemianism. Prosecuted for obscenity,\textsuperscript{82} Baudelaire was pursued by creditors his entire life, often couldn’t afford to buy shoes. He died penniless in an asylum at the age of forty-six (Benjamin 1973c). Spending extravagantly, he rapidly dissipated his inheritance. Baudelaire fast acquired an identity as an itinerant figure in Paris, often

\textsuperscript{80} Arendt describes the flânerie of Benjamin’s cognitive processes: ‘like the flâneur in the city, [Benjamin] entrusted himself to chance as a guide on his intellectual journeys of exploration’ (Arendt 1968, p. 43).

\textsuperscript{81} Started in 1927 and originally intended as a newspaper article, Benjamin’s \textit{Arcades Project} quickly grew into the essay \textit{Paris Arcades: A Dialectical Fairyland}, and finally a book \textit{Paris, die Hauptstadt des XIX. Jahrhunderts (Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century)}. Benjamin worked sporadically on the project (to which he referred as \textit{Passagenarbeit} or simply \textit{Passagen}), stalling at one point for several years. Much theoretical conjecture exists as to whether Benjamin actually intended to transform the work into something more ‘complete,’ or whether its structure was itself a comment upon the dialectical and fragmentary nature of modernity. See translators’ foreword (Benjamin 1999, pp. x-xiv). In 1928, Benjamin wrote to his friend Scholem, discussing the obstacles the work faced and intimating that cohesiveness was perhaps unachievable. ‘There is still a lot missing … I will finish it in Paris, one way or another. And then I will have put to the test the extent to which it is possible to be “concrete” in the context of the philosophy of history’ (Benjamin 1994, pp. 332-34).

\textsuperscript{82} Upon the initial publication of \textit{Les Fleurs du Mal} in 1857, thirteen of its poems were arraigned for religious or public morality offences, with a court ordering six to be removed from the book on the grounds of obscenity. Although these six poems were republished in the 1866 Belgian collection \textit{Les Épaves (The Wreckage)}, it was not until 1949 that the official ban was revoked. Retrieved August 26, 2003 from http://www.empirezine.com/spotlight/bau/bau-bio.htm.
occupying a number of temporary abodes at the same time. During his lifetime, and particularly following the moral outrage generated by the publication of *Les Fleurs du Mal* in 1857, his name was considered synonymous with depravity and vice.

Capturing Parisian life from the 1840s to the 1860s, Baudelaire’s poetry explored the modernist themes of loneliness, chance encounters with strangers, transience and the decadence of city living, whilst inextricably linking these new social and psychosocial structures to notions of eroticism and decay. His writings provide an impressionistic account of modernity, reflecting his own experiences. Commencing his experimentation with hashish and opium in 1843, Baudelaire lyrically conjured the ‘dreamworld’ of the intoxicating phantasmagoria. Despite his poverty and difficulties, Baudelaire consistently celebrated the experience of living in a large, anonymous city: he disparaged the parochialism of Brussels, with its ‘unusable’ streets where strolling was impossible (cited in Benjamin 1973e, p. 50). The ultimate insult, for Baudelaire, was to refer to someone as *l’esprit belge* (a Belgian spirit) or, in other words, a provincial and unenlightened person (Baudelaire 1949, p. vii). Isherwood refers to Baudelaire as a ‘revolutionary, who despised the masses … [a] minority of one’ (Baudelaire 1949, p. vii). Despite Baudelaire’s ambivalence towards the crowd, it was only within the context of the metropolis that he felt life to be worthwhile. As Benjamin observed, ‘Baudelaire loved solitude but … wanted it in a crowd’ (Benjamin 1973e, p. 50).

Born in 1858, Georg Simmel was a philosopher of modernity who, like Baudelaire and Benjamin, wrote on diverse themes such as love, fashion, money and other ephemera of modern life. Structurally, Simmel’s canon is comparable to Benjamin’s insofar as it comprises a number of discrete fragments and is difficult to synthesise into a coherent theoretical stance or philosophical doctrine. For Simmel, a deference towards rigid methodology was akin to ‘fetishism.’ Instead, he favoured a decidedly anti-systematic approach (Frisby 1981). His writing darts between topics, is

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83 As biographer Levine notes, ‘[Simmel’s] method is to select some bounded, finite phenomenon from the world of flux; to examine the multiplicity of elements which compose it; and to ascertain the cause of their coherence by disclosing its form … The *results* of Simmelian inquiry are therefore a series of discrete analyses’ (Levine 1971, pp. xxxi-xxxii).
unashamedly solipsistic and contains, as noted by Levine, very little ascription (Levine 1971).84

In 1920, Kracauer, a student of Simmel’s, described his professor as ‘a guest, a wanderer,’ and someone who had ‘the capacity for association, the gift of seeing the connectedness and meaningful unification of arbitrary phenomena’ (cited in Frisby 1981, p. 7). Simmel’s sociological investigations were also concerned with the ‘moment’ of modernity. This focus led to a seemingly unsustainable paradigm in which the present was wrest from its larger historical context (Frisby 1985).

Simmel was prolific, producing over twenty books and two hundred articles (Levine 1971). His lectures drew the approbation of many students, one of whom described his professor’s improvisational and idiosyncratic approach: ‘Simmel’s delivery struck us as the struggle of an individual, lonely soul with truth, as “creative evolution” in the proper sense of this term …’ (Salz 1959, p. 235). The modern metropolis was a central theme in Simmel’s work, and he made an explicit connection between the growth of the modern metropolis and his own intellectual trajectory, stating that Berlin’s transformation into a large metropolis coincided with his ‘strongest and broadest development’ (cited in Frisby 1981, p. 19).

Despite proving to be influential, in many ways Simmel remained a flâneur consigned to the margins of academia. His career was spent as a Privatdozent (a non-stipendary lecturer) at Berlin University, although due to his unconventionality and perceived radicalism, combined with the prevailing anti-Semitism of the time, Simmel only attained a regular university post (the Chair of Philosophy) in the last four years of his life, and only at a marginal institution (The University of Strasbourg). Never averse to critiquing the existing hegemonic paradigms of intellectual thought, Simmel was frequently ostracised and alienated from his more orthodox academic colleagues.

There are many other instances of nineteenth century painters, writers, poets and philosophers describing their marginalisation, or else alluding to the unbearable ennui created by urban life. In this sense, they are flâneurs. Artist Edvard Munch (whose 1893 _The Scream_ conveys a sense of horror at the anonymity of city life) wrote of his own peripheral existence:

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84 Simmel’s entry in the 1890-91 _Jahrbuch_ is the only one without footnotes or citation of the work of his colleagues or predecessors (Levine 1971).
My whole life has been spent walking by the side of a bottomless chasm, jumping from stone to stone. Sometimes I try to leave my narrow path and join the swirling mainstream of life, but I always find myself drawn inexorably back towards the chasm’s edge, and there I shall walk until the day I finally fall into the abyss …

Without anxiety and illness I should have been like a ship without a rudder (cited in Hughes 1991, p. 281).

Munch’s inability to assimilate into society and his thirst for isolation, by his own account, merges with psychiatric disorder. Although he tries to ‘join the swirling mainstream,’ ultimately he is unable to do so. Other modernists similarly stood alone. Writer Théophile Gautier (1811-1872) flaunted his red waistcoat and leftist opinions in the precarious climate of 1830s Paris. Gautier’s prose, particularly in relation to the themes of love and sex, was deliberately defiant and transgressive (Allen 1983). In mock horror, Gautier gleefully and ironically described himself as ‘[a]pparently … the most enormously immoral personage to be found in Europe or elsewhere’ (Gautier n.d., p. x). Refusing to integrate into ‘respectable’ society, Gautier revelled in his role as outcast.

This flânerie persists into the twentieth century and can be seen in the lives of those associated with hardboiled literature and cinema. And yet in critical debates on flânerie, film directors, screenwriters and pulp novelists are rarely, if ever, mentioned. It is my contention that the social, cultural and economic factors that gave rise to flânerie also profoundly influenced a number of these figures. Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler and Billy Wilder all worked in the 1930s and 1940s and were profoundly influenced by modernity. Along with many of their peers, they could well be described as latter-day flâneurs. Moreover, given that many film noir auteurs were European émigrés (usually from non-Anglophone nations), it is not unlikely that they saw themselves, to some extent, as flâneuristic observers and commentators, detached from the American culture in which they eventually lived and worked.

Born in 1906 in rural Polish Galicia, Wilder fled the Nazis, lived in Paris for a year and arrived in America in 1934. Wilder’s father was professionally involved in the Viennese hospitality industry and the family had lived a peripatetic existence occupying a number of hotels. In his young adulthood, Wilder installed himself at the Hotel Kempinski in Berlin, followed by a ‘fleapit’ in Paris and finally the Chateau

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85 Refer to Appendix 1 for further biographical information on Wilder.
Marmont in Hollywood, where he roomed with émigré actor Peter Lorre (Crowe 1999; Sarris 1991). Wilder’s status as émigré and itinerant outsider undoubtedly contributed to his capacity for astute observation of American social mores. That most of Wilder’s family had perished in concentration camps also possibly intensified a flâneuristic sense of separation from the comparatively stable American culture in which he ultimately lived.

These factors perhaps enabled Wilder to engage with the hardboiled vernacular in an even more distanced and removed manner, resulting in an exaggerated style. In a 1986 interview, Wilder admitted, ‘I’ve been [in the United States] for fifty-plus years, but I still do not trust my hanging participles or where to put the verb’ (Columbus 1986, p. 24). Wilder possessed many other modern or flâneuristic traits. A fan of jazz, he was also an avid collector of art and bibelots, exhibiting what Benjamin would term a ‘collector’s passion’ for incidental and almost-overlooked objects (Benjamin 1968b, p. 60). Wilder also developed a number of idiosyncratic and flamboyant preferences, such as drinking nothing but red wine for two years (Zolotow 1987). As an aesthete, collector, iconoclast, cynic and cultural interloper, Wilder was in several crucial ways a latter-day flâneur.

Like many hardboiled writers, Raymond Chandler (1888-1959) was a complex and seemingly troubled character who struggled with alcoholism for most of his adult life. Born in Chicago but educated in England, Chandler arrived in California in 1919 with, as he puts it, ‘a beautiful wardrobe, a public school accent, no practical gifts for earning a living, and a contempt for the natives’ (Chandler 1995a, p. 1040). After working for several years as an executive in the oil industry, Chandler embarked upon a writing career and penned his first novel, The Big Sleep (1939), at the age of fifty-one. In 1950, Chandler described this somewhat impulsive change of professional direction:

86 For further biographical information on Chandler, see (Chandler 1997a).
Wandering up and down the Pacific Coast in an automobile, I began to read pulp magazines, because they were cheap enough to throw away and because I never had any taste at any time for the kind of thing which is known as women’s magazines. This was in the great days of the *Black Mask* (if I may call them great days) and it struck me that some of the writing was pretty forceful and honest, even though it had its crude aspect. I decided that this might be a good way to try to learn to write fiction and get paid a small amount of money at the same time. I spent five months over an 18,000 word novelette and sold it for $180 … (Chandler 1995a, pp. 1040-41).

Chandler’s meandering path ‘up and down the Pacific Coast’ is supremely flâneuristic. Like the cinematic flâneur, Chandler chooses the automobile as the mode of transport best suited to flâneuristic observation in the modern, American landscape. Whilst to some extent opportunistic and pragmatic, Chandler’s decision to commence writing appears to be spontaneous and almost fortuitous. This also accords with the classic flâneur’s *modus operandi*. Moreover, Chandler cultivated a distinctly English outlook and never quite acclimatised to the consumer culture of America’s west coast. His success in capturing the flavour of Californian life, then, could partly be attributed to his status as exile. Indeed, in voicing his admiration for Chandler’s writing, Wilder marveled that it was ‘peculiar that the only person who caught the Californian atmosphere in prose was an Englishman’ (cited in Phillips 2000, p. 170).

With his disputatious and intractable temperament, Chandler alienated many of his peers. Although he praised Hammett, he was consistently contemptuous of other hardboiled writers. He dismissed Cain’s work, for instance, as lacking in talent. Chandler was also very bitter towards Hollywood. Whilst the uneasy alliance between writers and the Hollywood studios employing them was well-known, Chandler’s explicit distaste for the commercial nature of the industry was unusually pronounced. He never assimilated into the filmmaking community and endured a belligerent relationship with Wilder during the writing of *Double Indemnity*’s screenplay.87 Chandler described the collaboration as an ‘agonizing experience [that] has probably shortened my life’ (Chandler 1997a, p. 135). His personal correspondence and published work is suffused with cynicism and acerbity, attributes which find their

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87 The animosity between the two men has been amply documented. Despite their uneasy alliance, Wilder was nonetheless impressed by Chandler’s gift for dialogue, conceding that ‘[n]obody writes a line better than Chandler’ (Columbus 1986, p. 25).
antecedents in the nineteenth century modern voice, as will be discussed in Chapter Five.

Chandler’s hardboiled protagonists were also invariably flâneurs. Shortly before his death in 1959, Chandler spoke of his hero Philip Marlowe as being eternally single, ‘in a lonely street, in lonely rooms, puzzled but never quite defeated’ (cited in Hiney 1997, p. 270), a description which suggests, despite its obvious invocation of ennui, something of a redemptive aspect to this solitary existence. Despite the unintelligibility of urban, modern life, Marlowe was, in the final analysis, ‘never quite defeated.’

Other pulp writers—as well as their fictional characters—were similarly marginalised figures. Frequently in debt, Dashiell Hammett (1894-1961) was renowned for his gambling, heavy drinking and fondness for prostitutes. Of Hammett, Nunnally Johnson once famously quipped, ‘[h]ere was a man who had no expectation of being alive much beyond Thursday … which is why he spent himself and his money with such recklessness’ (cited in Friedrich 1986, p. 78). Before his writing first appeared in Black Mask in 1922, Hammett had experienced the peripatetic and flâneuristic lifestyle of a private investigator. At the age of twenty-one, Hammett became an operative of Pinkerton’s National Detective Agency’s Baltimore office. Other pulp authors had previously enjoyed similarly modern occupations. James M. Cain (1892-1977) had worked as an insurance salesman, which was also a flâneuristic profession insofar as it facilitated a meandering trajectory.

Flânerie pervaded the philosophy, literature and art of modernity, as well as the lives of those who recorded it. Whether embraced or reviled, flânerie is incontestably modern. As a mode of existence, flânerie may have originated in the urban centres of nineteenth century Europe, but its influence can be seen wherever the modern subject encounters the social and cultural changes of modernity. Flânerie eventually found expression in the new popular culture, such as film noir and pulp fiction, where the protagonist enacted the flâneuristic rituals and codes of behaviour that were first described by recorders of nineteenth century modernity including Baudelaire, Benjamin and Simmel. The following chapter will investigate certain modalities of Walter Neff’s urban existence, such as his mobility, his penchant for observation and his solitariness, in order to elucidate their essentially modern nature.
Chapter 4  Navigating the metropolis — flânerie and film noir

Figure A: the poeticisation of mobility: twentieth century flânerie

4.1 Preface

The ominous music swells as the opening credits roll, inaugurating a sense of menace that will dominate the entire film. Aided by two crutches, his left leg dragging and impeding his progress, an unidentifiable man moves awkwardly but resolutely towards the camera. Dressed in a suit and hat, the figure is rendered as a silhouette and surrounded by a circle of light. The camera remains static whilst the sinister stranger looms ever larger as he inexorably approaches. Finally, the shadow’s darkness fills the entire frame, and the image dissolves into the first scene of *Double Indemnity*.

The visual heritage is clear: both the chiaroscuro and the motif of the shadow or doppelgänger are strongly evocative of German expressionist classics such as *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (*Das Kabinett des Dr Caligari*, Robert Wiene, 1919, Germany), *The Student of Prague* (*Der Student von Prag*, Stellan Rye, 1913, Germany) and *Nosferatu* (FW Murnau, 1922, Germany). As the narrative develops, the viewer retrospectively attributes to the figure the identity of Walter Neff. Yet it is curious that Wilder would select this particular image to open the film. In time, the spectator discovers that Neff *is* actually injured (mortally as it finally transpires), but from a gunshot wound to his shoulder. Indeed, Neff’s only association with a broken leg is that he was compelled to simulate one in order to impersonate Dietrichson as part of the murder plan devised in collaboration with Phyllis. *Double Indemnity*’s
opening image is thus problematic from a logical and narrative point of view. I would contend, however, that it introduces one of film noir’s main preoccupations—that of movement.

Martin Scorsese once remarked that it was impossible to think of film noir without bringing to mind the nocturnal image of a man running through the streets (cited in Schon 1994). Whilst the oneiric noir world frequently impels the hero towards rapid and desperate attempts to escape, an examination of the noir canon also reveals the prevalence of a more flâneuristically-paced perambulation. The noir hero frequently navigates his way through the urban landscape with a leisurely tempo, allowing him to observe and investigate. At other times, motorised transport affords a more rapid form of flânerie in which he can traverse greater distances, moving through a number of disparate milieux whilst remaining a dispassionate observer. Conversely, at certain moments, film noir conveys a sense of stasis, entrapment and isolation within the metropolis, in keeping with themes depicted in many other modernist art forms.

As discussed in Chapter Three, the modern subject (or flâneur) was essentially a mobilised one. Although it is generally acknowledged that the noir hero is an urban creature, his trajectory through the city is one aspect of his characterisation that has not been adequately theorised. And yet even a cursory overview of the noir canon reveals protagonists who are rarely sedentary. Out of the Past’s Jeff, whilst ensconced in an arcadian setting, is nevertheless positioned in contradistinction to the virtuous Ann, who laments her staid existence. ‘Every time I look at the sky,’ she sighs, ‘I think of all the places I’ve never been.’ When she questions Jeff about his travels, he grimly and enigmatically responds that he’s been to ‘one too many [places].’ Whilst his tone indicates a weary resignation, the film’s flashback sequence, in which Jeff travels to Acapulco in search of femme fatale Kathie, firmly positions this mobility as the more potent and exciting alternative. Ultimately, Jeff cannot resist the lure of Kathie, criminality and a life that is dynamic, precarious and marked by constant movement and change.

88 Edvard Munch’s The Scream (1893), today an iconic image, invokes the terror of anonymous city life and the immobility it produces. Edward Hopper’s images—the most famous of which is arguably Nighthawks (1942)—depict urban landscapes of desolate hotels, motels, trains, highways, restaurants, theatres, cinemas and offices peopled by immobilised, atomised and lonely individuals.
The Cinematic Flâneur

Chapter Four—Navigating the Metropolis

*The Lady from Shanghai*’s Irish protagonist, Michael O’Hara, is historically and culturally signified as itinerant. As a maritime worker, he takes on a variety of jobs and leads a nomadic and largely autonomous existence. His wanderings are aimless, and his trajectory is vastly altered as a result of a fortuitous meeting with femme fatale Elsa one evening in Central Park. Although O’Hara is to some extent ‘entrapped’ on the yacht on which much of the film’s action takes place, he is by no means servile or powerless. At all times he retains his identity as itinerant drifter and cinematic flâneur. The final scene—a long shot filmed from above in which O’Hara walks away from the camera, the fairground and the dead femme fatale—allows the hero to recommence his wanderings, thus reinstating his true flâneuristic nature and allowing a restoration of order.

Most hardboiled heroes exhibit a similar degree of autonomy and freedom in both their personal and professional lives. Conversely, many of noir’s villains (usually overtly patriarchal figures aligned with law and order) are restricted by physical disability. For Harvey, such impediments symbolise the husband’s impotence and the necessity of the femme fatale’s excursion from the family boundaries to find erotic love (Harvey 1980). These physical restrictions are also significant, however, since they imply an anti-flânerie in contrast to the hero’s mobility. *The Big Sleep*’s (Howard Hawks, 1944, USA) elderly General Sherwood, for instance, is frail and confined to a wheelchair. Indeed, Sherwood articulates the disparity between his own invalidism and the physical capacity of hardboiled Philip Marlowe during the first meeting between the two men. Sherwood in fact seems determined to point out the differences between their respective situations—noting that the greenhouse, where their meeting takes place, is ‘too hot … for any man who has blood in his veins,’ the implication being that Sherwood is well past his prime and thus exempt from this category. Whilst Sherwood’s life is confined to a milieu of decadence and stifling wealth (literalised by the greenhouse and its orchids with their ‘rotten sweetness of corruption,’ as he puts it), it is Marlowe who is able to move freely in and out of different spheres and thus remain unaffected by his surroundings. Young, virile and unencumbered, Marlowe is the antithesis of the older man who represents a more traditional order.

Mr Bannister in *The Lady from Shanghai* is crippled and walks with the aid of two walking sticks, with his limited movements being paroxysmal and spasmodic, implying pain. Apart from functioning as phallic symbols, the walking sticks distinguish him from the film’s flâneur, the peripatetic O’Hara. Similarly, *Gilda*’s
Ballen Mundsen utilises an omnipresent walking cane that conceals a lethal knife. The implication in both cases is one of sexual inadequacy. Other films noirs seem similarly preoccupied with the protagonist’s capacity for movement. Mark McPherson, the ‘all-American’ detective in *Laura*, has a ‘leg full of lead’ and a ‘silver shinbone.’ Sustained in the line of duty, McPherson’s injuries readily lend themselves to a psychoanalytic interpretation; indeed, Oedipus’ own name means ‘swollen foot.’ Whilst a Lacanian reading proves enlightening, I would suggest that McPherson’s somewhat droll admission of these injuries is equally significant because it reflects anxieties over his physical capabilities (or otherwise) and thus his ability to maintain his status as hardboiled hero/flâneur.

*Double Indemnity* complies with this pattern of diametrically opposing the hero to a more sedentary and patriarchal anti-flâneur. Mr Dietrichson’s movements are figuratively constrained by his familial and career responsibilities, whilst Neff is free to roam the city more or less as he pleases. Whilst Phyllis ascribes some mobility to her husband (‘oh, he doesn’t just sit behind a desk, he’s right down there with the drilling crews. It’s got me worried sick’), the fact that she is concerned about his safety indicates that she has little confidence in his ability to survive in a dynamic world. Dietrichson’s corporate identity as an oil executive also designates him as a sedentary character firmly entrenched within a bureaucracy. Within the diegesis, Dietrichson is only shown in ways that highlight the restrictiveness of his existence. During the meeting with Neff in which he signs the insurance papers, Dietrichson has returned home from work, is reclining on the sofa and apparently drinking heavily, and throws repeated barbed and sarcastic remarks towards his wife, denigrating her spending habits and the consumerism they represent (‘who needs a hat in California?’ he declares rhetorically and with marked invective). Unlike Neff, Dietrichson is bound by both industry and family to a position that dramatically restricts his movements and contributes to his apparent bitterness and dissatisfaction with life.

That Dietrichson breaks his leg is partly attributable to the exigencies of narration. The physical injury is expedient since it necessitates Dietrichson’s travel to Palo Alto by train rather than car, thus presenting Neff and Phyllis with an ideal set of circumstances, enabling them to implement a murder plan involving rail travel which will lead to a ‘double indemnity’ insurance payout. Dietrichson’s broken leg is also significant, however, since it actualises his figurative immobility. Despite his obvious enthusiasm for the college reunion to which he is travelling, the injury renders
Dietrichson vulnerable and dependent upon Phyllis’ assistance. Such a physical disability proves both emasculating and deadly.

Even *Double Indemnity*’s claims manager Barton Keyes is represented as relatively staid, with a quotidian routine in which his movements are circumscribed. As a longstanding bachelor, Keyes is more at liberty than Dietrichson to wander the city. Yet apart from the scene in which he visits Neff’s apartment, Keyes is firmly positioned within a corporate context. Indeed, when Neff declines the offer of a more prestigious position within the insurance company, Keyes’ response suggests that he views an office-bound job as the superior alternative:

> A desk job. Is that all you can see in it? Just a hard chair to park your pants on from nine to five, huh? … You don’t want to work with your brains. All you want to work with is your finger on a doorbell.

The limitations endured by both Dietrichson and Keyes are in stark contrast to Neff’s freedom to indulge in a dynamic and more exciting lifestyle.

Neither totally inert nor compelled to run to escape his fate, Neff moves with a particular tempo. A closer examination of his trajectory will elucidate Neff as a modern character whose peregrinations are highly flâneuristic. Whilst differences between the classic flâneur and his twentieth century cinematic counterpart are important and will be referred to where relevant, this chapter will highlight the fact that both figures navigate the metropolis in very similar ways. Defined by their cosmopolitan nature and extremely adept at traversing their respective urban terrains, they are at home within the city, familiar with its topography and relevant sites.89 Moreover, it is through their constant movement that they are able to lexicographically decode and comment upon their surroundings. Neff’s urban existence is characterised by a solitary detachment from the crowd, which is literalised in the desolate and deserted nature of much of Wilder’s mise-en-scène. Both the

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89 As Ferguson comments, ‘… the flâneur is obligated to have at his fingertips all the important addresses, the best dressmaker, the best hatmaker, the bankers, magicians, and doctors. The flâneur is a living guidebook’ (Ferguson 1994a, p. 31). This is not unlike the character of Waldo Lydecker in *Laura*, who has access to all the right addresses. Whilst it is outside the scope of this thesis to analyse *Laura* in this respect, it could be proposed that Preminger’s film splits flânerie between the two male protagonists—the effeminate and cosmopolitan Waldo Lydecker and the hardboiled and proletarian McPherson.
classic flâneur and the noir hero are practised at loitering. Their lifestyle is contingent upon occupying the urban wilderness, which they deploy in order to lose themselves, to mitigate their overwhelming desire for the new woman and to dispel the ennui resulting from modern life. The city is also used by both to obliterate their traces, evade detection and thus retain their autonomy.

Like the classic flâneur, the noir protagonist needs constantly to move, as the following investigation will demonstrate.

### 4.2 Perambulation

#### 4.2.1 Cinema, modernity and movement

From the very first, as though of right, human figures enter film, spilling out of the train, leaving the factory or the photographic congress, moving (Heath 1981, p. 38).

As Creed has noted, automobilism, cinema and psychoanalysis emerged at the same historical moment, around 1897. In one way or another, all of these phenomena respond to modernity’s reification of movement. Automotive transport allowed great distances to be conquered at high speed, whilst psychoanalysis enabled its subject to cognitively travel backwards into the recesses of memory and personal history. The formal properties of cinema, similarly, could radically manipulate time and space (Creed 1998). Indeed, historical and cultural research has indicated that it was the cinematic apparatus’ potential for dynamism that so enraptured its very first audiences. Gunning speaks of an ‘aesthetic of astonishment’ central to early film spectatorship, citing legendary accounts of the alleged terror provoked by a screening of *L’Arrivée d’un Train en Gare à la Ciotat* (Lumière Bros, 1895, France), during which spectators supposedly fled the Salon Indien of Paris’ Grand Café in fear of the oncoming train (Gunning 1995a). This response was ambivalent: terrified, yet desirous of the shock or astonishment offered by cinema. While Gunning is unable to locate documentation to verify these accounts (and thus remains sceptical about their exactitude), he nevertheless positions them as enduring myths which can be understood as figurative representations of a primal response to cinema’s kinaesthetic possibilities.
By the 1920s, moral arbiters were decrying what they saw as a ‘jazz of the screen’ (Freeburg 1923, p. 190), and calling for a reinstatement of more leisurely, pictorial modes of representation, as instanced in the following tirade:

The hysterical extravagance of the movies is … illustrated in the breathless speed which so often characterises every moving thing on screen. We feel that, at the end of the road, horses must expire from exhaustion and automobiles must catch fire from excessive friction … It is true that some of this breathlessness carries with it a certain thrill for the spectator, but that thrill is by no means to be classed as an aesthetic emotion. It has nothing of that abiding joy which comes from the consciousness of restrained energy in art (Freeburg 1923, pp. 189-90).

Freeburg’s denigration of the ‘hysterical extravagance of the movies’ is typical of a conservative backlash which demonstrates the enormous power exerted by the concept of ‘speed’ and the way in which cinema was able to engage with it. Despite these reactionary discourses, however, early audiences generally revelled in cinema’s dynamism, and a genre of actualities arose (retrospectively termed the ‘phantom-ride’ genre) in which a static camera was mobilised by being positioned atop a moving tram or other vehicle, so that images ‘rush forward to meet their viewers’ (Gunning 1995a, p. 121). The spectator of the phantom-ride film could be swept along, not only by the temporality intrinsic to the cinematic experience itself, but also within a dynamic diegesis created by a mobile camera.

In recent times, scholarship has considered these connections between fin-de-siècle cinema, modernity and movement. Hodsdon speaks of early cinema being decisively influenced by the revolution in public transport, which was part of a new conception of humankind traversing space at will (Hodsdon 1996). Transport, like the cinema, liberated the individual and facilitated a conquest of space, which could be consumed (‘swallowed up’) from a position of apparent omnipotence (Hodsdon 1996, pp. 44-45). Given these points of convergence, it is hardly surprising that the

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90 For discussions on early cinema’s celebration of movement and modernity, see the essays in (Elsaesser 1990), and Gunning's subsequent work (Gunning 1995a; 1995b; 1995c; 1996). Various studies have considered the synergy between modernity, cinema and mechanised transportation such as car and train travel. See (Hey 1983; Ling 1989; Schivelbusch 1980; Huntley 1969; Dimendberg 1995; Virilio 1998; Gunning 1995c). For an examination of how automobile travel has impacted upon American twentieth century cultural consciousness, Falconer’s doctoral dissertation analyses a number of texts to explore discourses surrounding the trope of the road, and to consider how the vehicle has been variously codified in different cinematic and literary genres (Falconer 1995).
cinematic apparatus embraced the theme of transportation so fervently. Train travel was captured not only by the Lumière brothers, but was also explicitly dramatised in films such as *The Great Train Robbery* (Edwin S Porter, 1903, USA) and Hitchcock’s *The Lady Vanishes* (1938, Great Britain), emphasising the centrality of locomotion to the modern subject.

Indeed, in all styles and genres, the cinematic camera could act as flâneur—it could be close or distant, it could spatio-temporally concatenate a number of disparate elements, or it could wander seemingly at leisure. Dziga Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* (*Chelovek s Kinoapparatom*) (1929, USSR) explicitly harnesses cinema’s kinetic possibilities, and its conflation of spectator/camera/flâneur is particularly interesting in terms of its fetishisation of a panoramic view of the city. In Vertov’s and countless other early films, the kino-eye could wander through the city and savour its varied delights.

In many ways, the cinematic apparatus offered a mechanism *par excellence* for the representation of one of modernity’s central tenets—that is, the growing appetite for acceleration and speed combined with a mobile gaze. As cinema’s language developed, certain strategies in which distance could be effaced (tracking, dolly shots, suture and various editing principles) became commonplace. In these and other respects, the cinema offered the apotheosis of the flâneuristic gaze. I would argue that the conquest of space offered by both motor travel and cinema facilitated a heightened (or, one could say, twentieth century) form of flânerie. Given the urban, modern nature of the hardboiled hero, it is hardly surprising that tropes of transportation prove to be so central in the noir canon.

*Double Indemnity* exemplifies a central tenet of latter-day flânerie: that is, the deployment of the automobile. Whilst the classic flâneur enjoyed a more leisurely paced ambulation, the twentieth century hero increasingly relied upon locomotion. The nineteenth century flâneur walked his turtle while ‘mourning the loss of gaslight and automobile-free streets’ (Nicholls 2004, p. 81). With the continued growth of the metropolis, however, a twentieth century flânerie was necessarily enacted on vast tracts of urban space, such as Los Angeles. In the noir canon, then, the hero-as-flâneur is lured into the car in order to undertake his wanderings. As an emblem of the modern landscape and a tool for this new mode of flânerie, the automobile occupies a privileged position in the noir canon and modernity alike.
4.2.2 Automobilism, speed and the fetishisation of a mobile gaze

We affirm that the world’s magnificence has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed. A racing car whose hood is adorned with great pipes, like serpents of explosive breath—a roaring car that seems to ride on grapeshot is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace. Marinetti, Manifesto of Futurism 1909 (Marinetti 1998, p. 251).

Cars, cars, fast, fast! One is seized, filled with enthusiasm, with joy … the joy of power. The simple and naïve pleasure of being in the midst of power, of strength. One participates in it … One believes in it. le Corbusier, 1924 (cited in Berman 1988, p. 166).

The automobile arrived in 1897, and the early years of the twentieth century saw a huge growth in vehicular travel. In 1900, there were approximately 3,000 cars in France, yet by 1913 this number had risen to 100,000, with at least ten journals relating to ‘automobilism’ appearing between 1896 and 1900 (Kern 1983). America was a world leader in the ascendance of the cult of automobilism. Whilst in 1922 only ten percent of citizens owned a vehicle (Klein & Olson 2000), by 1927 car ownership in America was higher than in any other nation, with one car for every five people (Ling 1989). By 1929, there were more cars in New York City alone than in all European nations combined (Christopher 1997).

The emergence of automobilism and other modes of mechanised transportation was a profound historical development generating both acclamation and anxiety. A number of discourses reflected an abiding fear of motorised speed and the disequilibrium it could engender. The 1860s, for instance, saw a proliferation of medical literature relating to ‘nervous disorders’ brought on by railway travel (Marcus 2000). Conversely, many modernists, including Marinetti and le Corbusier (quoted above), extolled the automobile’s capacity for speed, seeing it as the apex of technological innovation and a means by which a traditional engagement with time and space could forever be abolished. On a wider cultural level, locomotion was generally seen in positive terms, particularly since it emblematised much of what was celebrated in modernity. It allowed the modern subject to revel in kinetic thrill, to

91 Compared for instance to one car for every forty-four people in Great Britain in the same year (Ling 1989).
determine their itinerary, to indulge their distracted gaze, to remain relatively anonymous, and to engage with the landscape with a dialectic of absence and presence. With its ‘collapsing of previous experiences of space and time through speed’ (Gunning 1995c, p. 16), travel by car or rail was also metonymic of the new spatio-temporal order of modernity.

As cinema’s language developed, the automobile acquired a number of disparate symbolic meanings, often dependent upon generic context. The vehicle of the 1930s gangster film, argues McArthur, functioned as an index of the hero’s success (McArthur 1972). Cars were also a convenient narrative device in gangster films because they facilitated a quick getaway (Appel 1974). It was within a post-WWII climate, proposes Lyons, that the automobile became more emphatically associated with the masses, thus gaining new cinematic currency (Lyons 1991). The ubiquity of automobilism in the noir canon has been noted. In Appel’s assessment of The Big Sleep’s denouement, the car becomes a coffin, posing as a metaphor conflating movement, violence and death (Appel 1974). Hirsch believes noir automobiles to carry negative connotations of entrapment—‘they are tight, confined spaces from which there is no escape’ (Hirsch 1981). Lyons celebrates a ‘most beautiful use of roads’ at the beginning of Double Indemnity and Sunset Boulevard. ‘Both times we are racing down night-time LA streets, noses skimming the macadam. Both times the road leads to the death of the hero …’ writes Lyons (Lyons 1991, p. 3), also suggesting that automobilism is inextricably linked to the noir hero’s demise.

Outside of cinema, there is little doubt that the automobile quickly became associated with individualism, freedom and authoring one’s own trajectory. By the late 1940s, the picaresque journey of the iconoclast or social misfit was intricately connected to the car, as evidenced in Vladimir Nabokov’s Lolita (1955) and in the writings of the ‘beat generation,’ most notably Jack Kerouac’s On the Road (1957). An overview of 1940s film noir also reveals a particular codification of locomotion that strongly connects it to freedom and flânerie. The opening sequences of many classic films noirs involve city streets, vehicles or associated motifs.92 Sunset

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92 Elsaesser points out that Wilder’s directorial debut, Mauvaise Graine (France, 1933) depicts a young male character obsessed with cars, chases, pursuits and races. The film’s first image is ‘a freewheeling, hubcap view of Paris streets’ (Elsaesser 1984, p. 282). Vehicular travel—or the highway as metaphor—is also a common trope in neo-noir. See David Lynch’s Wild at Heart (1990), Lost Highway (1997) and Mulholland Drive (2001).
Boulevard opens on a shot of the gutter, on which the film’s title is inscribed. Wilder’s camera pans across the asphalt as the voiceover situates the action on Sunset Boulevard at daybreak. This is followed by a high-speed procession of police motorbikes and cars racing to the destination of Norma Desmond’s mansion, where the narrator’s corpse floats face-down in a swimming pool. The credits of Scarlet Street (Fritz Lang, 1945, USA) are superimposed over a street lamp, with the camera panning down to a signpost reading ‘Scarlet Street.’ The film’s first scene is a rain-drenched, nocturnal urban street, along which crowds move as a car pulls up to the curb in the background. The Lady from Shanghai’s credits are superimposed over a twilight harbour scene where a steamboat passes under the bridge, the city a silhouette in the near distance, bringing a narratively appropriate nautical inflection to the trope of transportation. After some initial shots establishing geographical location, the opening sequence of Dark Passage (Delmer Daves, 1947, USA) depicts a truck leaving San Quentin Prison, with the camera positioned on the moving vehicle, mobilising the spectator’s gaze in the manner of the ‘phantom-ride’ actualities of pre-classical cinema. The credit sequence of The Killers also positions the camera inside the vehicle, silhouetting the two men who are seated in the front. Filmed at night, with the lines of the highway providing scant illumination, the killers’ vehicle approaches a sign indicating their arrival at the idyllic and rural Brentwood. Out of the Past’s credits are also superimposed over a pastoral setting into which a car drives. The image then cuts to a medium close-up with the camera again positioned behind the driver as the vehicle moves through the landscape, finally arriving at Bailey’s garage. In both The Killers and Out of the Past, the arrival of the car signals impending danger and doom.

Double Indemnity’s opening sequence of a car driving erratically through a nocturnal city street (as described in this thesis’ introduction) also introduces the theme of locomotion at the film’s outset. The dangerous veering of the vehicle immediately connects motoring to a sense of lawlessness and desperation. Connotations of ‘getaway’ cars are evinced, since it seems clear that the driver is both out of control and trying to escape. In addition to these connections, I would suggest that the vehicle is central to the logic of Double Indemnity in several crucial ways.
4.2.3 Locomotion and Neff

Neff is entirely dependent upon the automobile for his livelihood. Dietrichson’s murder is carried out in the ‘privacy’ of the vehicle, with Phyllis heralding the moment of his murder by sounding the horn three times. At times of personal confusion and crisis, Neff escapes through use of the car, and is able to direct his movements with relative ease. The vehicle also allows Neff to take Lola out of the city and into the countryside, thus placating her and winning her affections. Cars are also significant for Lola because they move her away from the unhappiness of her family home. The corner of Vermont and Franklin Streets, her designated meeting spot with lover Nino Zacchetti, offers a metropolitan array of traffic, pedestrians and neon lights in contradistinction to the stifling and staid atmosphere of her bourgeois abode. Even Sam Gorlopis, the hapless truck driver who is berated in Keyes’ office and forced to sign a waiver on his insurance claim after Keyes suspects foul play, is inextricably linked to the motoring theme: ‘I ain’t so good,’ Gorlopis complains to Neff. ‘My truck burned down.’ Without his truck, not only is Gorlopis deprived of his livelihood, but he is also divested of his identity.

As a narrative device, automobilism is of central importance to *Double Indemnity* and ‘drives’ the plot in several crucial ways. One of the film’s most suspenseful sequences is when, having thrown Dietrichson’s body on the train tracks, Neff and Phyllis try to get away and the car stalls. According to actor MacMurray’s account of shooting this scene, Wilder kept saying, ‘make it longer, make it longer,’ until MacMurray finally yelled ‘for chrissake [sic], Billy, it’s not going to hold that long.’ Wilder got his way, however, and MacMurray afterwards conceded that ‘it held’ (Friedrich 1986, p. 164). A car engine failing to start is a typical suspense-creating strategy. This sequence also highlights the centrality of the motor vehicle in the preservation of Neff’s psychological and physical wellbeing. Neff’s fate, like that of the modern subject, is dependent upon the automobile. In order to remain mobile, the twentieth century flâneur must necessarily embrace the car.

*Double Indemnity* is also laden with terminology associated with transport and locomotion. Amongst the very first words uttered by Neff (in the elevator of the office building) are ‘let’s ride.’ By the 1940s, the motoring theme of modernity, it seems, had extensively infiltrated the hardboiled lexicon. When handing some papers to a female clerical worker at the insurance company, Neff says, ‘park these for me,
will you sweetheart?’ At one point when Keyes’ ravings become obtuse, Neff asks, ‘what are you driving at?’ Most importantly, the themes of criminality and lust are conveyed using phraseology associated with transportation. Neff initially introduces the phrase ‘straight down the line,’ which Phyllis first enunciates experimentally, as if trying it on for size (or ‘driving it around the block,’ as it were). Once she is accustomed to its resonance, Phyllis adopts the phrase with fervour, repeating it on several occasions in order to pacify Neff and ensure his continued compliance. Ultimately the phrase finds its ironic correlative in Keyes’ explanation about the futility of murder plans—where the ‘end of the line,’ for their perpetrators, is the graveyard.

There are also several socio-historical points of convergence between automobilism, modernity and films noirs such as Double Indemnity. Firstly, throughout the twentieth century, automobile insurance figured as one of the staple and most profitable sectors of the insurance industry (Mumford 1961), providing a thematic link between Neff’s use of the car and his professional identity as an insurance salesman. Secondly, many of noir’s antagonists, such as Dietrichson or The Big Sleep’s General Sternwood, are associated with the oil industry (Dietrichson is an oil executive whereas Sternwood owns a company). Paradoxically, these anti-flâneurs help create and fuel the motor industry from which Neff and other cinematic flâneurs benefit. Finally, the emergence of automobilism was seen in some fin-de-siècle discourses as socially disruptive and morally questionable. In this respect, the automobile is a significant feature of the noir landscape not only in terms of the latter-day flânerie of the male protagonist, but also in relation to the increased mobility (and wantonness) of the femme fatale.

The advent of the motor vehicle was in fact part of the greater social revolution of gender relationships in which erotic liaisons were enacted in public or quasi-public spaces. Middle-class suitors had formerly called upon young women in the parlours of their family homes, but the automobile transformed dating rituals, providing an escape from parental supervision. In the early 1920s, the American Public Health Service Director, Dr Wenger, warned that the suppression of urban red-light districts had resulted in a situation in some cities where ‘[t]he automobile has
replaced the room of the prostitute’ (cited in Ling 1989, p. 22). The automobile, prostitution and a liberated female sexuality were seen by some as connected phenomena.

Appropriately, then, motoring metaphors are utilised throughout Double Indemnity to convey Neff’s sexual attraction to Phyllis. During their first meeting, a playful banter ensues in which their desire is barely sublimated. This section of dialogue is highly relevant and warrants a full quotation:

Neff I wish you’d tell me what’s engraved on that anklet.
Phyllis (coyly) Just my name.
Neff As, for instance?
Phyllis Phyllis.
Neff Phyllis. I think I like that.
Phyllis But you’re not sure?
Neff I’d have to drive it around the block a couple of times.
Phyllis Mr Neff, why don’t you drop by tomorrow evening about eight-thirty? He’ll be in then.
Neff Who?
Phyllis My husband. You were anxious to talk to him, weren’t you?
Neff Yeah I was, but I’m sorta getting over the idea, if you know what I mean.
Phyllis There’s a speed limit in this state, Mr Neff. Forty-five miles an hour.
Neff How fast was I going, officer?
Phyllis I’d say around ninety.
Neff Suppose you get down off your motorcycle and give me a ticket.
Phyllis Suppose I let you off with a warning this time.
Neff Suppose it doesn’t take.
Phyllis Suppose I have to whack you over the knuckles.
Neff Suppose I bust out crying and put my head on your shoulders.
Phyllis Suppose you try putting it on my husband’s shoulder.
Neff That tears it.

Phyllis’ obvious complicity indicates that she is more than happy to ‘play the game’ and to vicariously experience the euphoria of automobilism. Specifically, it is motorised transport’s potential for speed and lawlessness which proves so irresistible,

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93 For further investigations into the automobile’s role in the twentieth century’s reconfiguration of gender relations, see (Ling 1989; Scharff 1991; Sanford 1983).
and which so aptly metaphorises Neff’s illicit desire. It is significant, then, that Phyllis invokes figures of institutional and patriarchal order (police, husband) to ‘halt’ his flirtatious double entendres. Phyllis’ invocation of these figures, however, is facetious—clearly, she colludes with Neff. For both, an association with mobility is one that suggests transgression and a disregard for law and order.

Neff’s car also serves a metaphysical purpose, and he clearly revels in the freedom it affords him. Like the classic flâneur who aims to stand apart from the crowd, Neff and other noir heroes retain their autonomy and independence through use of the automobile. When Keyes offers Neff the promotion to a more prestigious administrative position, Neff declines, explaining that ‘I don’t want to be nailed to a desk.’ Keyes attempts to persuade him, citing the higher status and the fact that the job ‘takes brains and integrity … it’s the hottest job in the business.’ So impassioned is Keyes that he resorts to anthropomorphic analogy in order to rhapsodise about the position and elevate it to almost saintly proportions:

To me, a claims man is a surgeon, and that desk is an operating table, and those pencils are scalpels and bone chisel. And those papers are not just forms and statistics and claims for compensation. They’re alive, they’re packed with drama, with twisted hopes and crooked dreams. A claims man, Walter, is a doctor and a bloodhound and a cop and a judge and a jury and a father confessor, all in one.

Neff, however, appears not the slightest bit tempted. When Keyes denigrates the role of salesman as a ‘peddler, a glad-hander, a back-slapper,’ Neff responds that ‘nobody’s too good to be a salesman.’

Freedom to move unimpeded is essential to the classic flâneur and is an elemental feature of Neff. It sets him apart from both Keyes and Dietrichson, and seems to be one of the main reasons why he resists the temptations of administrative or managerial posts that would confer higher social status, privilege and power. Significantly, such sedentary and circumscribed roles were also seen by Baudelaire as both uninspiring and antithetical to flânerie. A bureaucrat or official was, decried Baudelaire, ‘never a man of distinction. They are persons without personality, unoriginal, born for office, that is, for domestic service to the public’ (Baudelaire
The Cinematic Flâneur  Chapter Four—Navigating the Metropolis

1949, p. 52).94 The flâneur, conversely, is independent and unfettered, attributes which allow him to retain his iconoclastic identity.

As demonstrated in Chapter Two, existing critical writings on Double Indemnity typically interpret the relationship between Keyes and Neff by employing an oedipal framework. Selby writes, ‘[Keyes] is the self-appointed guardian of society’s rules that [sic] Neff loves … but must defeat’ (Selby 1984, p. 15). An adjunct to this oedipal interpretation, however, would be an understanding of Keyes as representative of the stagnation inherent in a bureaucratic existence, in opposition to Neff’s more mobile and flâneuristic lifestyle. Keyes is a character who exhibits a vestigial romantic sensibility, as evidenced by his somewhat anachronistic waistcoats, his punctilious nature and his pedantic reliance upon actuarial tables. Yet despite his outbursts, dissatisfaction with the company’s ineptitude and his frequent displays of insubordination (‘next time I’ll rent a tuxedo,’ he wisecracks to senior executive Norton after being berated for inappropriate attire), Keyes is ultimately bound to the insurance desk. Whether or not he readily embraces the fact (and one would assume he does not), Keyes is necessarily a corporate player, or what was to become known in 1950s sociological discourse as an ‘organization man’ (Whyte 1956). Neff, on the other hand, is comparatively free to roam as he pleases. When Phyllis appraises Neff’s competence at the insurance game, he replies, ‘well, I’ve been at it eleven years.’ He also alludes to a past ‘peddling vacuum cleaners,’ suggesting a longstanding career in which meandering movement and autonomy have always been central elements. Of this erstwhile role, he quips, ‘not much money but you learn a lot about life.’ It is through this peripatetic existence that Neff has gained wisdom and experience. As Nicholls explains, an essential element of the modern melancholic or flâneur’s ‘transgressive energy’ resides in his ‘struggle to avoid conformity with the group’s networks of control’ (Nicholls 2004, p. 81). In this sense, Neff’s refusal to be subjugated into the capitalist order consolidates his status as latter-day flâneur. Remaining at all times an iconoclast and mobile subject, Neff will never be an ‘organization man.’

Other cultural philosophers also perceived the intrinsic value of movement for the modern subject. Kracauer discusses the diversionary qualities of travel and

94 In this category Baudelaire includes the roles of minister, theatre manager and newspaper editor.
dance, activities that free their participants from the restrictions imposed by a more sedentary and ordered existence. The importance of travel, stresses Kracauer, is not so much the destination as the escape it offers. It is primarily a movement away rather than towards, and as such its significance is reduced to the very act of movement itself (Kracauer 1995d). ‘The adventure of movement as such is thrilling,’ Kracauer explains:

… and slipping out of accustomed spaces and times into as yet unexplored realms arouses the passions: the ideal here is to roam freely through the dimensions. This spatio-temporal double life could hardly be craved with such intensity, were it not the distortion of real life (Kracauer 1995d, p. 68).

Travel, then, is conceived as an antidote to the more mundane and sedentary aspects of quotidian life. It is also a means by which perceptual processes can be altered and distorted. Neff’s use of the automobile allows him to eschew a more corporate and circumscribed identity (to ‘slip … out of accustomed spaces’ and into ‘unexplored realms,’ as Kracauer would describe it). It also ensures a perpetual state of ‘intoxication’ that is similar (albeit more rapidly paced) to that of the classic flâneur. In observing the synergy between the cinema and vehicular travel, Hey highlights the aural possibilities of both experiences:

Both the automobile experience and the film experience … involved movement, and both permitted the consumer to select desirable settings or themes, offering an ecstatic experience potentially devoid of depressing connections to reality (Hey 1983, p. 199).

With the flâneuristic dynamism of automobilism, Neff can transcend the banal, or what Hey terms the ‘depressing connections to reality.’ The automobile as facilitator of aimless wandering allows heroes such as Neff to select their ‘settings or themes,’ and thus to retain a great deal of volition. Unlike the patron of public transport who must relinquish control and succumb to a pre-determined route authored by an anonymous bureaucracy, the motorist can easily change course. Such aimlessness is recognised as a core feature of flânerie. By his own admission, Benjamin had an extremely poor sense of direction, an affliction he traced back to the ‘dreamy recalcitrance’ with which he accompanied his mother on childhood peregrinations through Berlin (Benjamin 1978). Benjamin saw this particular mode of ‘dreamy’ wandering as highly flâneuristic. It accommodated the fortuitous and allowed one to
make unexpected and unanticipated discoveries. Benjamin’s exploration of foreign cities was also predicated upon meandering and becoming lost, for it is only when indulging in such haphazard wanderings that one can discover the city’s ‘truth.’

Similarly for Baudelaire, the flâneur’s most important attribute was an ability to move through city crowds in an undefined manner in which one’s trajectory can suddenly alter, often in response to aleatoric encounters. The flâneur must be both willing and able to deviate. In The Generous Gambler (published in Paris Spleen), Baudelaire’s narrator enjoys a chance encounter with a stranger with whom he feels an immediate affinity and a mutual empathy (confirmed by the stranger’s ‘knowing wink’). The narrator follows this ‘mysterious being’ into a ‘magnificent subterranean dwelling of a fabulous luxury beyond anything the upper habitations of Paris could boast’ (Baudelaire 1970f, p. 60). The adventure into the gambling den is only made possible by the narrator/flâneur’s readiness to embrace the unexpected and thus experience a ‘fabulous luxury.’ In his essay The Painter of Modern Life (1859-60), Baudelaire also celebrates the aleatoric in Poe’s The Man of the Crowd, an urban tale in which the narrator initially views the urban action from a stationary position in a café, but finally joins the throng of people in what Baudelaire describes as a ‘[c]uriosity [that] had become a compelling, irresistible passion’ (Baudelaire 1998, p. 104). These modern protagonists are able to indulge in flânerie only because they are free to wander rather than subscribe to a predetermined course.

Like Baudelaire’s flâneur, the car driver authors his own route. Indeed, Neff’s initial decision to drop into the Dietrichson residence contains an element of fortuity, since his recollection of the lapsed policies was almost incidental. ‘I had to run out to Glendale to deliver a policy on some dairy trucks,’ recounts Neff in his confession as the image dissolves to the flashback sequence. ‘On the way back I remembered this auto renewal on Los Feliz. So I decided to run over there …’

Clearly, Neff has some measure of volition in organising his work schedule, a fact which renders untenable the many arguments about him representing the modern, oppressed worker (see for instance Naremore 1998). Whilst obviously bound by insurance protocol and answerable to Keyes, Neff’s work arrangement is largely independent, and thus an apposite one with which to engage in flânerie.

The noir automobile, then, is metonymic of one of the essential features of both the hardboiled hero and the classic flâneur: independence. Both pulp fiction and film noir abound with protagonists who, as salesman, itinerant workers or private
investigators, are self-employed and as such can determine their own schedules. In *The Big Sleep*, General Sternwood asks why Marlowe left his position at the District Attorney’s office, and the younger man acerbically responds that he was fired for ‘insubordination.’ The noir hero cannot happily exist within institutional parameters. Unlike Keyes or Dietrichson, he cannot abide a life as an ‘organization man.’ In Mickey Spillane’s *I, the Jury*, hardboiled protagonist Mike Hammer explicitly articulates this when he tells his long-suffering friend, police officer Captain Pat Chambers:

> You’re a cop, Pat. You’re tied down by rules and regulations. There’s someone over you. I’m alone. I can slap someone in the puss and they can’t do a damn thing. No one can kick me out of my job. Maybe there’s nobody to put up a huge fuss if I get gunned down, but then I still have a private cop’s license and the privilege to pack a rod … (cited in Skinner 1985, pp. 22-23).

Although the private investigator’s life entails danger, its freedom proves irresistible and obviates any disadvantages. As Hammer explains it, the joy of this peripatetic professional life is that there’s nobody ‘over’ the hero, and that he is essentially alone. In films such as *Double Indemnity*, the vehicle is a central means of ensuring this continued independence.

Other aspects of locomotion are flâneuristic and as such relevant to the articulation of the noir hero as cinematic flâneur. The scopic regime demanded of vehicular travel is that of a panoramic and dynamic gaze which fetishises movement, spatio-temporal concatenation and fragmentation, whilst ‘consuming’ the landscape from a position of apparent omnipotence. This emulates the gaze of the nineteenth century flâneur who is essentially a ‘mobile observer’ seeking to consume the entire urban vista. Virilio refers to the car windscreen as a *dromoscopy* which ‘allows one to see inanimate objects as if they were animated by a violent movement,’ so that the driver can create a series of ‘speed pictures’ (Virilio 1998, p. 12). Like other noir heroes, Neff’s use of the car allows him to dictate his vision and to compose various visual vignettes, all of which are kinaesthetic in nature. The vehicle also becomes a demarcation point, with the windscreen acting as a buffer from the outside world, literalising the figurative barriers erected by the classic flâneur to maintain his segregation from the crowd.

It is also noteworthy that from a cognitive or experiential point of view, driving is akin to the flâneur’s reveries. As discussed in Chapter Three, the flâneur’s
gaze was dialectical—at once rhapsodical and distracted. A similar gaze is demanded by motorised travel. When driving a vehicle, one must be sufficiently aware of the surroundings, yet the motion of driving is to some extent automatic and thus distraction becomes inevitable. As one drives, one’s attention wanders, thus instituting a particular interplay between focus and self-absorption. Of the off-peak traffic in Los Angeles, Simone de Beauvoir in 1947 poetically described the ‘early light of dawn … the car moves through the silence smoothly’ (Beauvoir 1999, p. 174), suggesting a dreamlike or hallucinatory state induced by such motorised peregrinations. Indeed, her evocative prose invokes a Benjaminian sense of modern ‘intoxication.’

Apart from facilitating flâneuristic movement and transforming the landscape into a spectacle that can be consumed from within a seated, relatively comfortable and quasi-private sphere, the vehicle is also a privileged enclave in which Neff can ruminate. The fact that much of Double Indemnity’s confessional voiceover is overlaid on images of Neff driving or sitting in his car further heralds the site as privileged, since it aligns the car with the office space from which the voiceover emanates.\footnote{Appel makes a similar point in relation to Out of the Past, noting that Jeff’s car serves as his home and the site of his confessions (Appel 1974).} It is not until Neff has taken leave of the Dietrichson abode for the first time, and is driving along in his car (shot from a full frontal medium close-up), for instance, that his voiceover informs us of the ominous scent of the honeysuckle and its connotations of murder (‘how could I have known that murder can sometimes smell like honeysuckle?’). Whilst these words are delivered in voiceover, and thus are not diegetically embedded, the fact that such a crucial element of the confession is conveyed using an image of Neff driving is significant. It is his office and his vehicle in which Neff feels comfortable and thus best disposed to relate the most intimate aspects of his story. In this sense, the car becomes Neff’s figurative home in much the same way as the classic flâneur transforms the public arena into an \textit{intérieur}.

Geographical specificity must also be considered, since Double Indemnity is set in Los Angeles, a metropolis presenting radically different coordinates to those of modernity’s nineteenth century \textit{grands cités} through which the classic flâneur moved. As late as 1925, Los Angeles was still a centralised city, with the streetcars of the Pacific Electric system travelling almost 2,000 kilometres of track. By the mid to late 1920s, however, the Automobile Club of Southern California had proposed the
construction of a massive new grid of roads, thus inaugurating the city’s inexorable process of decentralisation and suburbanisation (Fishman 1995). The centrifugation of Los Angeles from the late 1920s onwards, which ensured an increasing reliance upon cars, demanded a flânerie which was specifically locomotive as opposed to the nineteenth century flâneur’s perambulation. The primacy accorded to vehicular travel in American culture has been noted by several commentators. In his celebrated 1933 essay ‘Paradise,’ James M. Cain attacked Southern California’s ‘automobile fetishism’ (cited in Naremore 1998). Following her aforementioned 1947 visit to California, Beauvoir also lamented the automobile’s ubiquity: ‘[i]n America, the car is a familiar machine … there are so many cars!’ (Beauvoir 1999, p. 115).

Los Angeles’ decentralisation also meant that flânerie was no longer confined to the metropolitan centre, but rather could move further afield into the suburbs. It is a little discussed fact that the phenomenon of taking flânerie out to the city’s periphery also occurred at the fin-de-siècle. Clark notes that French artists from the 1860s onwards became enamoured of Paris’ suburban outskirts, particularly after the inner-city working-class population had been transplanted there as a result of Haussmann’s project. It was believed that the edges of the metropolis (both literally and figuratively) were the sites where ‘true life’ was enacted and where one could make the greatest flâneuristic discoveries. ‘There was a notion …’ Clark observes, ‘that the city divulged its secrets in such places’ (Clark 1985, p. 26).

The modernist resonance of suburbanisation was also perceived by surrealist Luis Buñuel, who in 1923 described the suburbs as ‘the junk-room of the city … [containing] all that is mothy or useless’ (Buñuel 1998, p. 239). In this sense, the suburbs provide an ideal domain for the flâneur whose true discoveries (or what Benjamin terms ‘secular epiphanies’ [Benjamin 1978, p. xxxi]) were made while investigating the incidental, the forgotten, the devalued; in short, the detritus of modern life. Buñuel’s descriptions of ‘the empty tin can, the ravening dog, the burst-
bellied mouse or the bent and dusty gas lamp’ (Buñuel 1998, p. 239) can be likened to Neff’s assessment of the Dietrichson home in all its tawdry and depressing reality. Like Buñuel’s perception of the suburbs as ‘hostile and sad’ with a ‘monotony which smears the atmosphere’ (Buñuel 1998, p. 239), Los Feliz is, for Neff, a metaphysical wasteland. Importantly, however, Neff remains at all times an interloper, and his use of the car allows him to transport himself away at whim.

Suburbanisation afforded the flâneur a broader tract on which to wander without risk of reaching the city’s end. Such sprawl was desirable to the modern subject, although Engels, writing in 1844, suggests a certain uncanniness engendered by the seemingly never-ending nature of the modern city:

A town, such as London, where a man may wander for hours together without reaching the beginning of the end, without meeting the slightest hint which could lead to the inference that there is open country within reach, is a strange thing (Engels 1987, p. 68).

Beauvoir similarly noted Los Angeles’ geographical breadth. Accustomed to the dimensions and topography of Paris, she was overwhelmed by the sheer vastness of the American city, which rendered it foreign and ephemeral. ‘We cross one suburb after another—nothing but suburbs,’ Beauvoir recounts, ‘[t]he city slips away like a phantom city’ (Beauvoir 1999, p. 113). The noir metropolis is also seemingly endless, propelling the hero onto greater quests to discover its limits, and to observe the detritus residing on the margins.

As a city ‘devoid of the topographical symbols and embedding of the past’ (Arthur 1996, p. 21), and moreover one in which there was relatively little crime (Marling 1993), Los Angeles clearly presents a different type of modern city through which the flâneur moves. Rather than proving hostile to flânerie, however, I would argue that Los Angeles is an ideal site for a twentieth century version with the automobile playing a central role. Of the modern city, Buñuel describes the ‘endless yawn of the suburb’ (Buñuel 1998, p. 239), and certainly the sheer vastness of Los Angeles allows Neff to continue his flâneuristic peregrinations without risking arrival

97 For further discussion of the significance of the Californian landscape in film noir and hardboiled detective fiction, see Stenger’s exploration of the mythologisation and cinematic representation of Los Angeles (Stenger 2001). Klein, on the other hand, argues for a cinematic ‘ur-space’ (an imaginary sphere with no geographical specificity) in which all noir crime takes place (Klein 1998).
in what Benjamin pejoratively terms the ‘invading countryside’ (Benjamin 1979, p. 59). The growing prevalence of automobilism augmented rather than diminished flânerie, allowing it evolve in line with the increasing rapidity of urban life. In a twentieth century American context, flâneuristic wandering became necessarily locomotive.

The following section will demonstrate how Neff’s movement through the urban and suburban terrain allows him to undertake another of the flâneur’s primary roles—that of observation.

4.3 Observation and detachment

Figure B: Diarising observations via dictaphone: Walter Neff as modern observer and recorder

The observer is a prince enjoying his incognito wherever he goes. Charles Baudelaire (Baudelaire 1998, p. 105).

Happy is the man who is an observer! Boredom, for him, is a word devoid of sense. Victor Fournel, 1858 (cited in Benjamin 1999, p. 108).

I’ve always credited the private detective with a high degree of omniscience. Jules Amthor to Philip Marlowe, Murder, My Sweet.

Neff first meets femme fatale Phyllis when dropping into the Dietrichson’s Los Feliz abode one afternoon to renew some lapsed automobile insurance policies. As Neff narrates these events from within the diegetic space of his office, the image dissolves into an anterior sequence of him driving through a sunny and ostensibly benign suburban scene. Greeted at the Dietrichson’s door by the maid, Neff inveigles his way into the house, at which point Phyllis appears at the top of the staircase. Once she has
descended from her sunbathing on the roof, a brief and polite conversation ensues, but it is not long before Neff adds some sexual innuendo. Promising to return the following evening to discuss the insurance policies with her husband, Neff departs. The image then cuts to Neff driving. Filmed as a medium close-up, this compositionally full-frontal shot reveals Neff’s inscrutable expression. His disturbing rapture, however, is conveyed in his voiceover during which he mentions the scent of honeysuckle and connects it to murder. By his own admission, the encounter with the sexually magnetic Phyllis has left Neff feeling ‘like a million.’

There are several salient points to be discussed in relation to this introduction to Neff’s tale. The shock experienced by Neff at seeing the femme fatale for the first time, and the cynical voice he employs to convey this shock, are central indices of Neff’s hardboiled persona. These issues will be explored in the following chapters. Less obvious aspects of Neff’s modus operandi, however, have been hitherto overlooked in critical discussion, and now deserve attention due to their connection with flânerie.

From the outset, Neff comments insightfully on his surroundings, guiding the spectators’ vision and informing them of details that are at once crucial and incidental. This accords with the flâneur’s archaeological approach to reading the urban landscape. Like the classic flâneur, Neff is an obsessive observer, analysing the incidental element of any scene in order to uncover the ‘truth.’ As Neff approaches the Dietrichson home for the first time, he ruefully describes the scene he encounters:

It was one of those Californian Spanish houses everyone was nuts about ten or fifteen years ago. This one must have cost somebody about 30,000 bucks—that is, if he ever finished paying for it.

This description accompanies a long-shot, filmed from a high angle, of a neighbourhood with children playing on the street. Whilst Neff is located within the diegesis at this point (his car is seen arriving), the positioning of Wilder’s camera is significant. A high angle cinematic composition had by the 1940s been codified to indicate a sense of omniscience and immutable truth. As such, Neff’s impressionistic account of the scene is aligned with an authorial stance, according it legitimacy. At the same time, the camera angle literalises Neff’s figurative distance from the milieu. As an insurance agent and a cinematic flâneur, he is detached from the suburbs through which he wanders, even when he is diegetically embedded. The capacity for
shrewd observation is thus intimately tied to mobility and figurative distance. As Benjamin noted, it is only through constant motion that the flâneur is able to resist the temptations of the city (Benjamin 1999), and certainly Neff’s movement (and particularly his deployment of the car) allows him to resist total subsumption into the bourgeois domain.

The understated irony with which Neff comments upon the scene also subtly sets him apart. Obviously familiar with the architectural style and the house’s once fashionable status,⁹⁸ Neff’s engagement with the suburban environment seems to be of a longstanding nature, in which he has observed changing trends. Despite this implied history, his observations remain both impartial and irreverent, preventing him from being implicated in the ‘everyone’ to whom he disparagingly refers. Indeed, the tone of Neff’s voice indicates contempt for those who blindly follow fads and who acquire overwhelming financial obligations as a result of such conformity. Neff is thus simultaneously designated as ‘outsider’ and ‘voice of authority.’ Because his point of view is normalised, the spectator colludes with his denigration of the house and all it represents. Once inside the Dietrichson abode, Neff’s solipsistic appraisal continues via voiceover:

The living room was still stuffy from last night’s cigars. The windows were closed and the sunshine coming in through the Venetian blinds showed up the dust in the air. On the piano, in a couple of fancy frames, were Mr Dietrichson and Lola, his daughter by his first wife. They had a bowl of those little red goldfish on the table behind the old davenport …

Recognising the house for what it is (ostentatious and pretentious yet ultimately lacking in taste), Neff is able to subtly undermine the Dietrichsons and their aspirations towards an upper-class European elegance.⁹⁹ The formal properties of the voiceover are also important in this positioning of the hardboiled hero. Since it

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⁹⁸ Planned obsolescence and the rapid turnover of trends was a feature of modernity and was lamented by Engels in 1845 in relation to the built environment. Engels was horrified to find that workers’ houses in England were often built to last no longer than forty years (Engels 1987).

⁹⁹ The actual house is located at 6301 Quebec Street, Los Angeles (Naremore 1998). Actress Barbara Stanwyck concurs with Neff’s assessment of the house, which for her was ‘gloomy, horrible … the slit of sunlight slicing through those heavy drapes—you could smell that death was in the air, you understood why [Phyllis] wanted to get out of there, away, no matter how’ (McClelland 1992, p. 355).
comments from afar, the voiceover underscores the figurative distance between Neff and the suffocating suburban milieu. Neff is thus aligned not only with Keyes (to whom he is ostensibly appealing) and the office (from whence the voiceover issues) but also with the viewer, who may be familiar with ‘those little red goldfish’ and all that they signify.

That this commentary on the restrictions of a bourgeois existence is not diegeticised (that is, it is not conveyed through elements of the mise-en-scène, or through dialogue between characters) is also of significance. It is through Neff’s consciousness that these observations are crystallised, and his commentary is far from a simple tabula rasa style of recording. Rather, like the flâneur, Neff utilises his prior knowledge in order to inflect his observations with impressionistic detail. History is thus relativised, and the disparity between signified (mise-en-scène) and signifier (voiceover) creates a subjectivised view. At times, the true meaning of objects (the ‘fancy frames,’ for instance) is neither accessible through a visual assessment of the diegesis, nor by a straightforward acceptance of Neff’s words. Rather, it is only through apprehending the ironic tone of Neff’s appraisal that the photo frames are truly perceived as tasteless objects. Neff’s subjectivity guides or even creates the spectator’s point of view.

Similarly, Neff’s voiceover directs the spectator’s attention to those elements that are not clearly visible to the cinematic spectator. It is Neff who informs us of the ‘smaller clues,’ such as the stuffiness of the room (as a result of ‘last night’s cigars’) or the dust in the air. In this sense, Neff’s commentary is analogous to the classic flâneur’s diarised recordings or the nineteenth century detective’s hermeneutic investigations, both of which required a keen eye and an ability to discern meaning in the most seemingly innocuous details. It is only through fully appreciating the value of such apparent detritus (the dust in the air, the goldfish, the photo frames) that one may arrive at a greater enlightenment. The noir hero, like the classic flâneur or detective, focuses obsessively on detail in order to arrive at a larger picture.

Analysis of other 1940s films noirs yields many comparable instances of flâneuristic observation. In his feature film directorial debut, Murder, My Sweet,

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100 John Seitz, Double Indemnity’s cinematographer, diffused powder of magnesium through the air before filming in order to render the house dusty (Alton 1995). The spectator is reliant, nevertheless, upon Neff’s commentary to draw attention to these almost imperceptible details.
Edward Dmytryk presents a hero who is a wisecracking and highly flâneuristic private detective. Philip Marlowe navigates his way through an upper-middle class sphere (inhabited by his considerably wealthier clients) whilst remaining separate, all the while recording his impressions and relaying them to the spectator via a wisecracking voiceover. After Ann Grayle appears at his office, impersonating a newspaper journalist in an attempt to obtain information about her father’s stolen jade, Marlowe insists that they make a visit to her family home. Over the image of Ann and Marlowe entering the gates of a grand estate, Marlowe’s voiceover tells us with characteristically hardboiled irony and understatement, ‘it was a nice little front yard, cosy, okay for the average family, only you’d need a compass to go to the mailbox.’ The camera is positioned in the back of the car behind Ann (who is driving) and Marlowe, affording the spectator a panoramic view through the windscreen of the lush, verdant surroundings. The disparity between what Marlowe says (‘a nice little front yard, cosy’) and what is visually apparent in the mise-en-scène (an estate of regal proportions) economically conveys his distaste for such opulence. ‘The house was all right,’ Marlowe’s voiceover deadpans, ‘only it wasn’t as large as Buckingham Palace.’ The next shot, where Marlowe waits in the foyer while Ann ‘sold him to the old folks,’ positions him in the background, emphasising the mansion’s colossal proportions with its columns, marble floors and statues. Marlowe’s irreverent skipping across the black and white tiled floor, as if playing a game of hopscotch on the street, is another way in which he demonstrates a lack of intimidation. Later in the film, he is seen striking a match on a marble statue of cupid in order to light his cigarette. Within this world of affluence, Marlowe consistently remains the outsider and observer, forever refusing to be defined by a traditional social hierarchy.

A similar interplay is apparent in The Big Sleep, with Philip Marlowe (Humphrey Bogart) remaining separate from the extravagance and decaying wealth of the Sternwood estate. Upon first being received into the stately mansion by the butler, Marlowe assesses his surroundings with interest, carefully examining the paintings, the capacious foyer, and finally, the attractive and flirtatious Carmen Sternwood who descends the staircase. Amidst this excess and grandeur, Marlowe’s ability to remain uncorrupted ensures that he retains moral integrity. Moreover, such detachment designates him as a cinematic flâneur who observes, records and, at times, appreciates his surroundings.
Decoding one’s environment was in fact a modernist preoccupation. It became a recreational activity in mid-nineteenth century Paris, with the emergence of a new literary genre known as ‘physiologies’ proving enormously popular. Disseminated to a largely urban public, these vignettes were entertaining guides on how one could categorise particular urban ‘types’ by means of taxonomic classification using such criteria as gender, profession, socio-economic status, morphological idiosyncrasy and comportment. Titles included Physiologie de l’Anglais à Paris (Physiology of an Englishman in Paris 1841), Physiologie du Bourgeois (Physiology of a Bourgeois Man, Henry Monnier 1841), Physiologie du Créancier et du Débiteur (Physiology of the Creditor and Debtor, Maurice Alhoy 1842) and de Balzac’s Physiologie de l’Employé (Physiology of the Employee 1841). Urban women were frequently the subject of these studies, as in Physiologie de la Grisette (Physiology of the Grisette, Louis Huart 1841) and Physiologie du Célibataire et de la Vieille Fille (Physiology of the Spinster, Henry Monnier 1841).

The physiologies were influenced by the philosophy espoused by Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) in which it was believed that moral disposition and character were morphologically reflected. Both advocated an examination of almost imperceptible bodily data which, when decoded correctly, could reveal significant details regarding a person’s temperament. In this, the discourse of the physiologies was comparable to the flâneur’s impulse to ‘read’ the city. Given the socio-historical context of burgeoning urbanisation, the popularity of this new literary form is understandable. Whilst Benjamin claimed that the physiologies helped ‘fashion the phantasmagoria of Parisian life’ (Benjamin 1973c, p. 39), they can also be seen as a response to the chaotic nature of urban modernity. The proliferation of ‘strangers’ in the metropolis urgently called for the development of new classificatory methods. Significantly, physiologies arose as a literary genre at the precise historical moment when bureaucracies began to develop strategies to regulate the urban crowd. The London police and detective forces were established by Sir Robert Peel in 1829 and 1842 respectively (Orr, S 1997). The detective as a literary character also emerged

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101 The grisette was aligned with the bohemianism of Paris’ Latin Quarter in the early to mid-nineteenth century, appearing in a number of literary works including Louis Huart’s Physiologie de la grisette (1841) and Eugène Sue’s Les Mystères de Paris (1842).
102 All translations my own.
around the same time, with Poe’s *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1841) and *The Mystery of Marie Rogêt* (1842) portraying prototypical modern detectives. Poe’s other short stories, such as *The Man of the Crowd* (1839), similarly articulate the experience of the lone individual ‘reading’ and seeking to semiotically ‘deconstruct’ the crowd. The similarity between this project and that of the flâneur perhaps accounts for Baudelaire’s fascination with Poe’s fiction.103

The flâneur and the detective are quintessentially modern figures, and in *The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire*, Benjamin discusses the concordances between them, suggesting that at times their identities merge so that the flâneur becomes an ‘unwilling detective’ (Benjamin 1973e, p. 37). Both figures share key ontological and experiential similarities, the most significant of which is their isolation from the crowd. This detachment allows them to lexicographically decode their urban surroundings. From a methodological viewpoint, the flâneur and the detective search for clues by assessing the incidental and seemingly innocuous, from which they extrapolate a greater meaning. In this, their lexicographic intent is similar to that of the reader of the physiologies, who seeks to classify and thus understand the stranger through an assessment of minutiae. The flâneur and the detective were also fascinated by the same phenomena and objects: as Benjamin wrote, ‘[n]o matter what trail the flâneur may follow; every one of them will lead him to a crime’ (Benjamin 1973e, p. 41). The flâneur, detective and reader of the physiologies are all drawn to the city’s underworld, where they seek to identify deviance, abnormality or dormant criminality. Likewise, the noir hero’s peregrinations and decoding of the city are primarily directed towards its criminal elements, and most notably its licentious woman.

Baudelaire’s flâneur requires the capacity to ‘feel at home anywhere; to see the world, to be at the very centre of the world, and yet to be unseen of the world’ (Baudelaire 1998, p. 105). This is consistent with Neff’s position. As an insurance salesman, Neff is ‘at home anywhere’ and practised at dealing with a varied clientele.

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103 Poe’s literature arrived in France when ‘The Gold Bug’ appeared in *Revue Britannique* in November 1845. Baudelaire was first made aware of Poe in 1846 or 1847, after which he became a devoted enthusiast and fan. Baudelaire also translated much of Poe’s work into French, explaining in an 1852 correspondence with his mother: ‘I’ve discovered an American author who has aroused in me an amazing sympathy.’ (‘J’ai trouvé un auteur Américain qui a excité en moi une incroyable sympathie.’) My translation. (cited in Gilman 1971, p. 60).
Because his encounters are strongly circumscribed by business protocol and etiquette, his true identity as flâneur, observer and criminal is concealed. Such a professional identity affords Neff an armour and invincibility, much like that cultivated by the classic flâneur. At all times, Neff remains ‘unseen of the world.’

The rapidity and apparent ease with which Neff summarises his surroundings is also flâneuristic and attests to an adeptness borne out of experience. Like the classic flâneur, Neff has a history of urban adventure and lexicography. It can safely be assumed that Neff’s competence at ‘reading’ various milieux is partially a result of a background in which he constantly found himself in new surroundings. His adroitness at comporting himself in the face of adversity, furthermore, suggests a familiarity with extracting himself from potentially awkward situations. The way in which Neff handles the initial hostility and subsequent admonitions of the maid, Nellie, is a case in point. When Neff arrives at the Dietrichson abode, Nellie opens the door and the following exchange takes place:

Neff          Mr Dietrichson in?
Nellie        Who wants to see him?
Neff          The name is Neff. Walter Neff.
Nellie        If you’re selling something …
Neff          Look, it’s Mr Dietrichson I want to talk to, and it’s not magazine subscriptions.

Neff’s hardboiled voice, which will be more closely examined in Chapter Five, allows him to erect a barrier between himself and those with whom he communicates. Such self-effacement means that Neff deflects attention away from himself and thus remains undetected. He is ‘at the very centre of the world, and yet … unseen.’ Neff’s witty repartee and mock self-deprecation conceal his true reactions, preventing others from decoding him. This mode of communication is also a means by which he can assert his will and achieve his aims. Through his hardboiled approach, Neff gains entry to the house. Although her station as maid forbids her from explicitly articulating her distaste, Nellie strongly implies that Neff’s presence—and perhaps the presence of all salesmen who are essentially interlopers in the bourgeois sphere—is
unsavoury. When Neff asks where the living room is, Nellie indicates its direction, yet warns tersely, ‘but they keep the liquor locked up.’ Designed to mollify her and dispel any tension, Neff’s immediate response (‘that’s all right, I always carry my own keys’) would suggest that he is rather accustomed to being categorised in this way.

Unperturbed and unaffected by the implicit denigration, Neff’s upbeat comeback also indicates a knack for defusing potentially adversarial situations. His ability to remove himself from the interpersonal politics by resorting to wisecracks is one way to maintain his equilibrium. Much like Baudelaire’s flâneur, Neff is inured to criticism and able to ‘feel at home anywhere,’ whilst simultaneously remaining disconnected. In addition, the strategy of the voiceover positions Neff as both present and absent. Although Neff appears in the diegesis during these flashback sequences, his voice issues from a site (the insurance office) defined by its figurative and literal distance from the suburban scene on which he comments. In this sense, Neff is safe.

Neff’s diarisation of his urban and suburban adventures via voiceover is akin to a possession of the city and is analogous to the classic flâneur’s keeping of a journal. Both Neff and the classic flâneur are ‘collectors’ who imbue their life with meaning by constantly observing, analysing and commenting. As Benjamin explains it, the flâneur’s encounters with the crowd ‘are the experience that he does not tire of telling about’ (Benjamin 1973d, p. 120). Similarly, Neff has an urgent need to narrate his story, even when his death is imminent. Through the act of telling, he can reclaim and ‘own’ his life. Moreover, by recording their observations, the classic flâneur and noir hero are able to rejuvenate what threatens to become desacralised. ‘To endow [the] crowd with a soul,’ wrote Benjamin, ‘is the very special purpose of the flâneur’ (Benjamin 1973d, p. 120). Both figures need to assume the mantle of commentator in

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104 Similarly, in the first scene of Cain’s novel, Huff explains that the most challenging aspect of his work is gaining entry to the house, suggesting that people are initially hostile to travelling salesmen. Says Huff, ‘you don’t tip what you came for till you get where it counts’ (Cain 2002, p. 1).

105 The flâneuristic predilection for ‘collecting’ is alluded to in Benjamin’s discussions on the pleasure he derives from his library (Benjamin 1968b). On a broader level, Benjamin’s entire corpus can be seen as a collection—of fragments of modernity. Wilder was also a habitual collector. ‘I cannot be in London … or Paris,’ confessed Wilder, ‘for a day without buying something, be it an little antique piece, or shoes …’ (Crowe 1999, p. 40). Wilder, it seems, was personally familiar with what Benjamin terms the ‘thrill of acquisition’ experienced by the collector (Benjamin 1968b, p. 60).
order to avoid acknowledging the banality and horror of everyday life. Above all, both desire and strive for solitariness. The following section will demonstrate the metaphysical importance of the urban landscape in this endeavour.

4.4 Public space and solitude

Only in the city … can the figure of the cynic crystallise in its full sharpness, under the pressure of public gossip and universal love-hate. And only the city can assimilate the cynic, who ostentatiously turns his back on it (Sloterdijk 1987, p. 4).

As discussed in the previous chapter, the metropolis is both emblematic and metonymic of modernity. It is also a prerequisite for flânerie: the flâneur would neither have arisen nor survived in a rural context. Of the flâneur, Baudelaire declares, ‘[t]he crowd is his domain … [h]is passion and his profession is to merge with the crowd’ (Baudelaire 1998, p. 105). It was only through a ‘universal communion’ with the crowd, Baudelaire argues in his piece entitled Crowds and published posthumously in 1869, that a transcendental state can be attained:

The solitary and thoughtful stroller finds a singular intoxication in this universal communion. The man who loves to lose himself in a crowd enjoys feverish delights that the egoist locked up in himself as in a box, and the slothful man like a mollusk in his shell, will be eternally deprived of. He adopts as his own all the occupations, all the joys and all the sorrows that chance offers (Baudelaire 1970c, p. 20).

The urban wanderer, suggests Baudelaire, is blessed with the opportunity to experience an energised life from which his more stationary counterparts are precluded. With its repudiation of staid domesticity, the fabulous metropolis allows the flâneur to enjoy a ‘singular intoxication.’ There were many positive and redemptive aspects to immersion within the crowd. Not only did the flâneur derive ‘immense … enjoyment’ (Baudelaire 1998, p. 105) from making it his home, but the crowd also possessed enormous auratic promise. Much nineteenth century literature, including Baudelaire’s À une Passante, deals with fortuitous yet transcendental encounters made possible only within an urban context. These will be discussed further in Chapter Six.
Despite the obvious synergy between the metropolitan crowd and the classic flâneur, the relationship was an ambivalent one. Frequently, the flâneur’s engagement with the city was characterised by a degree of incomprehension,\textsuperscript{106} with the meanings of objects constantly shifting and the crowd proving oppressive and menacing. Benjamin also believed the crowd to pose a risk to one’s psychic integrity. Acting as the ‘veil through which the familiar city is transformed … into a phantasmagoria’ (Benjamin 1999, p. 21), the crowd is at times a malignant force that threatens to harm or deceive the flâneur. Occupation of the urban milieu necessarily carried a risk of deindividuation or annihilation of one’s identity. The flâneur’s drive towards isolation, then, was not only due to his desire to decode the city. It was also imperative in preserving his psychic or metaphysical integrity.

For Benjamin, solitude was a superior state, yet the mark of the flâneur was to achieve solitude within the crowd. A delicate balance between immersion and repulsion was required. Benjamin distinguishes the flâneur from the badaud, the latter being someone who is:

\begin{quote}
absorbed by the outside world … which intoxicates him to the point where he forgets himself … the badaud becomes an impersonal creature; he is no longer a human being, he is part of the public, the crowd (Fournel 1858, cited in Benjamin 1973c, p. 69).
\end{quote}

Like the badaud, the flâneur moves through the crowd. Yet since total subsumption into the crowd would result in excruciating alienation and deindividuation, the flâneur remains detached and protects himself from becoming ‘part of the public.’ It is for reasons of self-preservation, then, that the flâneur aestheticises his estrangement. Such a detachment extends beyond the flâneur’s positioning in relation to the crowd: ultimately, he was marginalised from his own milieu as well. ‘The flâneur still stood at the margin, of the great city as of the bourgeois class,’ wrote Benjamin. ‘Neither of them had yet overwhelmed him. In neither of them was he at home’ (Benjamin 1973a, p. 170). Determined to remain solitary, the flâneur nonetheless ‘sought his asylum in the crowd’ (Benjamin 1973a, p. 170) in order to ameliorate his anxiety and ennui. In

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{106}In 1860, Edmond and Jules de Goncourt describe the feelings of estrangement engendered by the modernisation of Paris: ‘I feel like a … stranger to these new boulevards that go straight on, without meandering … making one think of some American Babylon of the future’ (Goncourt & Goncourt 1937, p. 93).
\end{flushright}
any case, urban life ultimately rendered one figuratively homeless and unable to feel at ease in any arena.

Because loitering within a city crowd entailed a metaphysical risk, it was essential that coping mechanisms were developed. Cynicism, proposed by Sloterdijk as a central feature of modern consciousness (Sloterdijk 1987), was one of many traits that allowed the flâneur to deflect the positive and detrimental aspects of the city. As Ferguson noted, the classic flâneur cultivates an affectation of disinterest in relation to the wares of the modern city, including the prostitute (Ferguson 1994a). In so doing, he retains his independence and ensures that the crowd’s more nefarious yet irresistible elements cannot harm him.

Given his iconoclastic ways, the noir hero is clearly aligned with the flâneur rather than the badaud. The noir hero is nonetheless extremely adept at deploying the city and its crowd for his own opportunistic purposes. Governed almost exclusively by cynicism and disenchantment, he rejects any notion of communion and derives little pleasure from the human contact experienced during his largely solitary peregrinations. His congregation with the crowd is minimal and is motivated solely by a desire for immersion in order to ‘forget’ himself. The hardboiled hero both recognises and accepts such disenfranchisement with weary resignation. At the same time, however, he cannot survive for long outside the city. Like the classic flâneur, the noir hero’s solitude must be experienced whilst occupying urban, public spaces. Although protagonists such as Out of the Past’s Jeff and The Killers’ Swede install themselves in pastoral settings, ultimately the city catches up with them. Jeff is unable to resist its fatal lure, whilst the Swede is murdered by assassins associated with his shady, urban past. In other films noirs, the hero consistently seeks out the urban terrain in order to loiter.

Given this twentieth century version of flânerie, in which disenchantment is a central element, and the desire for ‘otherness’ is perhaps even more pronounced than in the classic flâneur, it is hardly surprising that the noir city is often divested of people. The hardboiled hero at times immerses himself in the crowd, but he also loiters in the near-empty spaces of the city. At no time does Neff merge entirely with the crowd. Indeed, frequently there is no oppressive urban mass swelling around him at all. Indeed, for a film set in 1938 Los Angeles, Double Indemnity is desolate and
contains remarkably few crowds. In this sense, Wilder’s aesthetic can be compared to Eugène Atget’s early twentieth century photographs of empty Parisian streets, images that Benjamin claimed had been rendered as if they were ‘scenes of a crime.’ Much like Atget’s aesthetic, noir heroes such as Neff move through empty urban spaces in an essentially atomised manner, seeing every passer-by as a potential ‘culprit’ and ‘every square inch’ of the city as a crime scene. Whilst Neff does not intentionally set out to discover the crowd, and indeed seems to resist any vortical power it exerts, an examination of various aspects of his behaviour reveals a deployment of city spaces in order to ‘lose’ or ‘forget’ himself and thus alleviate his metaphysical suffering.

4.4.1 Loitering

To be a useful person has always appeared to me something particularly horrible (Baudelaire 1949, p. 27).

When Neff visits the Dietrichson home for the second time, Phyllis has rescheduled the appointment for a weekday afternoon. Intent upon seducing Neff and acquiring information to assist in implementing her murderous plan, Phyllis flirts with her prey whilst cannily questioning him about the specifics of various insurance policies. After a while, however, Neff becomes suspicious and hotly responds, ‘look, baby, you can’t get away with it … you want to knock him off, don’t you?’ Finally, in a heightened state of anger and desire, Neff leaves.

The image then dissolves to Neff driving, followed by a medium close-up of him seated in his car parked at a drive-in restaurant, drinking a beer. Neff’s voiceover speaks of his desperate need ‘to get rid of the sour taste of [Phyllis’] iced tea, and everything that went with it.’ In the next shot, Neff is in a bowling alley. His voiceover explains that he was unwilling to return to the office, but required further distraction. In bowling, Neff was able to ‘get [his] mind thinking about something else for a while,’ as he puts it.

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107 The cast list of Wilder and Chandler’s screenplay lists only nine characters, and four of these are peripheral to the narrative.

108 Speaking of Atget’s work, Benjamin asks rhetorically, ‘is not every square inch of our cities the scene of a crime? Every passer-by a culprit?’ (Benjamin 1979, p. 256). Benjamin also discusses Atget’s photographs in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Benjamin 1968c)
Having temporarily exhausted alternatives for loitering—he informs us that he had no desire to eat or attend a show—Neff reluctantly returns home. A nocturnal long-shot, filmed from outside, shows his car arriving as the camera tilts up towards the top of a rather imposing and unwelcoming building. The image then dissolves to an interior shot of Neff standing by his window, gazing distractedly outside and smoking a cigarette. In typical hardboiled style, Neff’s voiceover reveals (in deadpan tone) his immense inner turmoil:

It had begun to rain outside and I watched it get dark and didn’t even turn on the light. That didn’t help me either. I was all twisted up inside, and I was still holding onto that red-hot poker.

Arriving home, it seems, has done nothing to mitigate Neff’s distress. If anything, the lack of stimuli has only worsened his state of mind. Totally powerless and unable to quell his agitation, Neff paces restlessly through the living room, while his voiceover invokes the metaphor of the ‘red-hot poker’ to describe his obsession with Phyllis.

Benjamin describes a situation in which the classic flâneur, as a result of his loitering in often unfamiliar surroundings, begins to feel supremely at home in the city. Conversely, his own abode becomes defamiliarised, undesirable and uncanny:

An intoxication comes over the man who walks long and aimlessly through the streets … Our man wants nothing to do with the myriad possibilities offered to sate his appetite. Like an ascetic animal, he flits through unknown districts—until, utterly exhausted, he stumbles into his room, which receives him coldly and wears a strange air (Benjamin 1999, p. 417).

To live one’s life in a public domain, Benjamin infers, is to necessarily relinquish the notion of the home hearth—that protective space to which one can retreat and where one can rejuvenate and seek solace. The modern world, asserts Benjamin, saw the ‘liquidation of the interior’ (Benjamin 1999, p. 20). Instead, an unprecedented importance was placed upon living one’s life in a public sphere. Baudelaire’s conception of the flâneur is similar, where an ability to ‘feel at home anywhere’ is posited as a desirable state to which one should aspire (Baudelaire 1998, p. 105). Flânerie is also synonymous with ownership and mastery, and Baudelaire suggests an inherent enjoyment in owning the crowd and making it one’s home:
For the perfect idler, for the passionate observer it becomes an immense source of enjoyment to establish his dwelling in the throng, in the ebb and flow, the bustle, the fleeting and the infinite (Baudelaire 1998, p. 105).

Other commentators on modernity observed that life’s greatest moments were increasingly enacted in the public domain. As opined in 1860, ‘[t]he home is dying. Life threatens to become public’ (Goncourt & Goncourt 1937, p. 93). Whilst Edward and Jules de Goncourt (self-appointed social commentators on late nineteenth century Parisian mores) seemed in part to mourn the passing of a more traditional order, there is little doubt that the modern subject rejoiced in the promise of a life lived publicly. Whilst the flâneur at times looked back wistfully to the past, he also embraced the possibilities embodied in the metropolis.

A similar aspiration is apparent in film noir, where the hero’s life is enacted in public, in turn rendering his own (usually humble and strictly utilitarian) abode unappealing. Like Benjamin’s flâneur, Neff returns home ‘utterly exhausted.’ That Neff stares out the window at the rain then paces restlessly suggests that he is neither acclimatised to, nor about to derive any comfort from, being ensconced in his own living quarters. Instead, as Benjamin would put it, his apartment ‘receives him coldly and wears a strange air’ (Benjamin 1999, p. 417).

This sequence of loitering followed by a return to the ‘uncanny’ apartment positions Neff as a latter-day flâneur in several ways. Whilst the drive-in restaurant and bowling alley scenes comprise only one shot each, Rózsa’s score imbues them with tension and thus marks them as key moments in Neff’s moral crisis. That these excursions into public spaces are depicted in single shots is also structurally flâneuristic. This syntagmatic pattern could legitimately be attributed to the exigencies of narration, since Wilder’s images must fit with the ‘dominant’ discourse of the voiceover. Neff’s terse speech dictates the diegesis, and the accompanying images must be quick and iconic (that is, easily and immediately representative). I would contend, however, that the brevity of these images also imitates the perceptual fragmentation experienced by the classic flâneur when inhabiting city spaces.

Whatever the authorial intention, there is little doubt that such principles of editing (in which disparate public spaces are rapidly concatenated) were both intelligible and economic to modern viewers precisely because they echoed real experiences of modern, urban life. That the flâneur’s perception of the city was heterogeneous and fragmented calls for iconic images, each being metonymically representative of a
discrete urban episode. This invokes Benjamin’s ideas about the ontology of memory and how it collapses a variety of detail into one crystallised image:

One might say that our most profound moments have been equipped—like those cigarette packs—with a little image, a photograph of ourselves. And that ‘whole life’ which, as they say, passes through people’s minds when they are dying or in mortal danger is composed of such little images. They flash by in as rapid a sequence as the booklets of our childhood ... (cited in Hansen 1987, p. 179).

Neff’s perception of the urban terrain, likewise, is one where images ‘flash by in [a] rapid … sequence,’ as Benjamin would have it. Wilder’s editing style mimetically echoes such a flâneuristic and urban existence.

Whilst the noir hero often desires immersion within the city’s sites of entertainment, he nonetheless experiences them in a manner that ensures his terminal isolation. In order to deal with the shock of modernity, he must mentally compartmentalise and harden himself emotionally. This process is a complex one. Firstly it involves a displacement from one’s surroundings, but the inevitable outcome is an internal, emotional estrangement from one’s home and finally, one’s self. This is consistent with the flâneur’s metaphysical dilemma. For both figures, public life is experienced dialectically, as a constellation of seemingly oppositional and antithetical forces. Baudelaire, for instance, semantically merged ‘multitude’ and ‘solitude,’ which were traditionally binary opposites. ‘The man who is unable to people his solitude,’ he writes, ‘is equally unable to be alone in a bustling crowd’ (Baudelaire 1970c, p. 20). It requires a special gift, suggests Baudelaire, to attain a state of solitude within the multitudes of the metropolis. Like the flâneur, the noir hero achieves this ‘public solitude,’ becoming what Baudelaire would term a ‘true hero’:

[T]he world is composed of people who can think only in common, in the herd ... There are also people who can only take their pleasures in a flock. The true hero takes his pleasure alone (Baudelaire 1949, p. 29).

The specific city spaces in which Neff seeks refuge are relevant in this respect. Whilst waitresses bustle busily in the background of the drive-in restaurant, Neff is able to drink his beer sitting inside his car, at once immersed and estranged. Neff’s
engagement in consumer activities affords him a certain protection, enabling him to remain respected and validated without having his privacy invaded. In this sense, Neff is invincible: a ‘true hero’ who, as Baudelaire would say, ‘takes his pleasures alone.’ The bowling alley is a site where customers can engage in solitary activity or join a group depending upon their inclination. Such sites permit flâneurs such as Neff to inhabit the city as if it were a private intérieur.

Neff loiters in city spaces to allay his anxiety, to gain temporary respite from his troubles and most importantly to deal with his unbearable desire for the femme fatale. This is consistent with other nineteenth century accounts of flânerie. For Baudelaire, the flâneur must plunge into the crowds to ‘forget’ oneself (Baudelaire 1970d). In Zola’s Nana, the admirers of the titular heroine immerse themselves in the urban wilderness for the same reasons. It is by diverting his attention to an array of cosmopolitan delights, for example, that Count Muffat attempts (albeit unsuccessfully) to banish images of Nana from his mind:

Jostled by a passer-by, the Count unconsciously left the paper-weights, and found himself in front of a window full of knick-knacks, where he gazed with his absorbed expression at an array of notebooks and cigar-cases (Zola 1972, p. 210).

Significantly, it is ‘incidental’ yet fetishised commodity objects such as paper-weights and other knick-knacks that provide momentary distraction. When the Count’s reverie is interrupted by some women who ‘roar … with laughter’ as they emerge from a café, his precarious composure is once again threatened. Obliged to seek refuge in a deserted street, he gives full vent to his anguish, weeping ‘like a child’ (Zola 1972, p. 231). Indeed, the Count’s feelings for Nana prove so tenacious that they can only be contained through continued flâneuristic peregrinations. His is a meandering trajectory in which the destination cannot be known until he arrives:

He felt a shame and fear which made him flee from other people with the uneasy step of a night prowler … He had followed the Rue de la Grange-Batelière as far as the Rue du Faubourg-Montmartre, where the bright lights took him by surprise, and he retraced his steps. For nearly an hour he roamed the district like that, always picking the darkest corners (Zola 1972, p. 231).

109 Marling suggests that the identity of consumer is foisted upon the unwilling hardboiled hero, and that Neff reluctantly ‘operat[es] within a consumer economy that controls even his leisure’ (Marling 1993, p. 191).
It is only within the urban context that the classic flâneur and the noir hero can endure their suffering. Here they can indulge their thoughts of the femme fatale without being fully overwhelmed. Zola’s Count Muffat tries to shift his affections from ‘Nana as commodified object of beauty’ to other fetishised objects. Likewise, Neff attempts to banish thoughts of Phyllis by embracing consumer culture.

This urban loitering in order to forget one’s metaphysical suffering can be seen operating in other modernist texts, such as Jean-Paul Sartre’s *The Age of Reason* (first published in France in 1945, the year after *Double Indemnity*’s cinematic release). Apart from being a seminal existential work, *The Age of Reason* is also illustrative of twentieth century flânerie. When its protagonist, Mathieu, visits a bar, his loneliness is temporarily mitigated and his immense anguish assuaged:

He looked round: the barman was still dreaming: on his right was a fellow wearing a monocle, alone, with a lined, drawn face: and another, farther off, also alone ... Mathieu suddenly felt a kinship with all those creatures who would have done so much better to go home, but no longer had the power, and sat there smoking slender cigarettes, drinking steely-tasting compounds, smiling, as their ears oozed music, and dismally contemplating the wreckage of their destiny: he felt the discreet appeal of a humble and timorous happiness: ‘Fancy being one of that lot …’ Fear shook him … (Sartre 1961, p. 167).

Unlike the noir hero who fiercely guards his autonomy and thus remains a solipsist and iconoclast, Sartre’s protagonist envisages the possibility of becoming ‘one of that lot.’ In this, he risks becoming a badaud. Whilst Neff may lack the sense of kinship described by Sartre in this passage, he nonetheless deploys public spaces in order to ‘dismally contemplate … the wreckage of [his] destiny.’ At the same time, Neff is careful to maintain a distance and thus preserve his status as flâneur. Fear does not shake him, because he ensures that he remains at all times unaffected and unsullied by the urban crowd.

An opportunistic engagement with the city can also be discerned in a number of archival records and personal testimonies from the nineteenth century onwards. In his own life, Baudelaire embraced urban spaces in order to attain calmness and ‘think more clearly,’ as indicated in an 1852 letter to his mother, in which he apologises profusely for not having written earlier:
The Cinematic Flâneur

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I’m writing this in a café opposite the long-distance post office, in the midst of noise, card games, and billiards, so as to be calmer and be able to think more clearly (Baudelaire 1986, p. 47).

Coincidentally, Wilder’s background suggests a similar need for the distractions of the crowd. Wilder claims to have written the script for Menschen am Sonntag (People on Sunday) (Robert Siodmak, Edgar G Ulmer, 1929, Germany) on scraps of paper in the Romanisches Café in Berlin, which was a site where, by Wilder’s own description, all the bachelors congregated (Crowe 1999). ‘There were writers who wrote there, newspaper people, chess players, and card players,’ Wilder recounted. ‘If it rained or shined, you took refuge there. We lived there more than in our own houses. It was a second home, a first home really’ (Crowe 1999, p. 196).

Unlike Baudelaire or Wilder’s somewhat romanticised recollections, Neff appears to derive no enjoyment from his urban loitering. Yet as the above excerpts from Zola’s Nana demonstrates, the classic flâneur’s immersion in the city was also often decidedly lacking in pleasure. Despite his compulsion to wander, Count Muffat reaps no comfort from this activity. Significantly, vital admissions by Baudelaire reveal a similar disillusionment. In another correspondence with his mother, this in 1855, Baudelaire speaks of the anomie engendered by terminal occupation of public spaces:

I’m completely weary of my life in cheap cafes and furnished rooms: it’s that that’s killing me and poisoning me. I don’t know how I’ve survived it. I’m sick of colds and migraines, fevers and above all the need to go out twice a day in snow, mud, and rain (Baudelaire 1986, p. 75).

As Smart notes, the restaurant and café were seen by Baudelaire as acceptable sites for ‘non-ambulatory forms of flânerie,’ presumably because installing oneself therein allowed a distracted gaze towards the procession of humanity which passed (Smart 1994, p. 166). Poe’s Man of the Crowd narrativises this set-up, with the protagonist sitting at ‘the large bow window’ of a coffee house in London and amusing himself by watching the passing crowds: ‘the tumultuous sea of human heads filled me,’ he declares, ‘with a delicious novelty of emotion’ (Poe 1998a, p. 84). It is from this vantage point that the protagonist first views the compellingly fascinating anonymous man, thus inaugurating his hermeneutic excursion through the city. Similarly, Neff assumes various vantage points (his car in the drive-in restaurant, for instance) from which he can regard the urban action without being consumed by it.
In her discussions on the flânerie of modernity, Buck-Morss notes that loitering (*der Müßigang*), not leisure (*die Musse*), was the flâneur’s trade (Buck-Morss 1986). Both the classic flâneur and his noir counterpart exhibit a certain amount of inertia within the public sphere. In this, they both encapsulate the flâneuristic loitering that was seen as the antithesis of modern industriousness. Although Neff is partially redeemed by his status as consumer, the commodities he consumes (beer, recreational sport) are ultimately ephemeral and do little more than facilitate idle loitering. The beer may serve the purpose of eliminating the ‘sour taste’ of Phyllis’ iced tea, but its main value resides in placing Neff within an consumerised, urban space in which he can install himself without the threat of interruption. Similarly, bowling has little value other than serving to prolong Neff’s distraction, thus deferring the unenviable return to his apartment. His loitering is an element of the ‘heroism’ of modern life. It is purposive insofar as it allows him, like the flâneur, to survive both the mundane and the unbearably shocking.\[111\]

Kracauer speaks of a sacrifice of intellectual (*geistigen*) constitution and a repression of the spiritual (*seelisch*) (Kracauer 1995c). The urban loiterer must relinquish both intellect and spirituality, and instead assume a dreamlike or ‘intoxicated’ state. In doing so, he evades his worries and ‘slip[s] into the nirvana of relaxation’ (Kracauer 1995b, p. 183). Kracauer also perceives an affinity between the flâneur and the hotel lobby,\[112\] the latter being a ‘space of unrelatedness’ and thus metonymic of all anonymous, alienated urban sites where time is suspended and a passive waiting and watching occurs (Kracauer 1995b, p. 179).

The noir canon is replete with instances of flâneuristic wanderings complemented by modernity’s ‘space[s] of unrelatedness.’ When Jeff travels to Acapulco in *Out of the Past*, he installs himself in La Mar Azul, a café across from the cinema. ‘I sat there in the afternoons and drank beer,’ he recounts. ‘I used to sit there half asleep, with a beer in the darkness …’ Jeff loiters alone, consuming beer, whilst the darkness of the café induces a dreamlike reverie. The café is thus figuratively divorced from the ‘real,’ industrial world of modernity. It is no coincidence,

\[111\] Both Benjamin and Baudelaire were interested in the notion of the ‘heroism of modern life.’ For discussions on this aspect of the flâneur, see (Gilloch 1992; Berman 1988).

\[112\] Edward Hopper’s painting, *The Hotel Lobby* (1943), similarly depicts an anonymous space peopled by atomised individuals.
furthermore, that the cinema palace (with all its attendant connotations of a ‘dreamworld’) is situated across the road from La Mar Azul and often diegetically visible. In the phantasmagoria of the café, Jeff can loiter like a true flâneur. 

*Double Indemnity*’s public spaces are also defined by this quality of ‘unrelatedness.’ When Lola approaches Neff with allegations about her stepmother’s role in her father’s death, Neff needs to appease her and allay such suspicions. He recollects via voiceover:

That evening I took her to dinner at a Mexican joint down on Olivera Street where nobody would see us. I wanted to cheer her up. Next day was Sunday and we went for a ride down to the beach. She had loosened up a bit and she was even laughing.

This explanation is accompanied by images of Neff and Lola seated at a table in a busy restaurant in which crowds of people move across the frame in the background. Compositionally, Neff and Lola are positioned in the foreground, facing each other yet immobile, consigning all other action to a peripheral plane. They remain separate from the action around them. Neff chose this eatery, he explains, because it was safe. Its status as a location where ‘nobody would see us’ further heightens the flâneuristic sense of being able to remain anonymous whilst loitering in busy urban areas. It is only through positioning oneself in a ‘space of unrelatedness’ that one is able to avoid detection.

Significantly, these forays into the public world, in which anonymity is almost guaranteed, are counterbalanced by the need to exercise extreme caution and to maintain close surveillance in one’s personal life. After the murder, Neff is unable to contact Phyllis because Keyes was ‘watching her like a hawk.’ He fears, moreover, that Keyes has had the phone lines tapped. In the modern world, total safety and immunity are impossible. The real threat, however, comes from those with whom one is intimately acquainted, and not from the mass of strangers one encounters in the city. Loitering in the anonymous city is closely connected to the preservation of physical safety and psychic integrity. Finally, the noir hero’s transient and isolated lifestyle plays a significant role in this.
4.4.2 Transience

After Neff has exhausted the possibilities of the city’s distractions, he returns home to his apartment in a state of heightened anxiety, as outlined above. Shortly thereafter, Phyllis arrives. She appraises his abode (‘it’s nice’) and asks who looks after it, to which Neff replies that he hires domestic help. For breakfast, he informs Phyllis, he ‘squeez[es] a grapefruit once in a while.’ The ‘corner drugstore,’ it seems, is Neff’s primary source of sustenance. Phyllis expresses her envy at such a makeshift situation:

> It sounds wonderful. Just strangers beside you. You don’t know them and you don’t hate them. You don’t have to sit across the table and smile at him and that daughter of his every morning of your life.

The bitterness in Phyllis’ voice is clearly a response to the specific problems of her oppressed and miserable existence, yet she is also articulating a more general desire to escape what she sees as the stifling nature of bourgeois family life. Despite the fact that Phyllis married her husband for money and security, her domestic situation is akin to imprisonment. ‘He’s so mean to me,’ she complains, ‘every time I buy a dress or a pair of shoes he yells his head off.’ She also resents the restrictions placed upon her mobility, explaining indignantly that ‘he keeps me shut up.’ Phyllis desire for freedom is one in which transience and isolation are synonymised with liberty and self-determination. An examination of several nineteenth and twentieth century discourses reveals a similar tendency. Freedom in the modern world, it seemed, had become possible only through an anonymous and disenfranchised existence.

> It has been commented that one of the first metropolitan protagonists (in Poe’s *The Man of the Crowd*) was homeless, and that the sensibility pervading Baudelaire’s poetry is one of either literal or figurative dispossession (Lombardo 1993). Additionally, the socio-historical conditions of mid-nineteenth century Europe meant that large numbers of people actually were displaced, with Haussmann’s restructuring of Paris driving the proletariat to the city’s outskirts and creating what Benjamin refers to as a ‘red belt’ (Benjamin 1973b, p. 174). As Sennett notes, the nineteenth century voyage to the great cities (London, Paris, Berlin) differed considerably from the urban migration of the eighteenth century, which had been a kind of picaresque journey usually undertaken by young, single people. After the Napoleonic wars and the agricultural crisis resulting from technologisation, entire families were uprooted and forced to relocate to city centres (cited in Wechsler 1982).
In his 1845 treatise on England’s industrial centres, Engels similarly posits a link between industrialisation and an atomised existence:

Society, composed wholly of atoms, does not trouble itself about [the workers]; leaves them to care for themselves and their families, yet supplies them no means of doing this in an efficient and permanent manner (Engels 1987, p. 108).

In many ways, such a sense of dispossession was endemic to modernity, and is encapsulated in an urban, deracinated and itinerant hero such as Neff. Like virtually all hardboiled heroes, Neff is unmarried, with no mention of erstwhile relationships, heritage or family background. He lives alone in an unremarkable, austere apartment adorned with only the most utilitarian furniture. Other male characters in Double Indemnity are similarly signalled as solitary. Lola’s lover, Nino Zachetti, is an antisoical man with a quick temper who is ‘belligerent from the first word,’ according to the film’s screenplay (Wilder & Chandler 2000, p. 47). When Lola introduces Nino to Neff, the younger man’s demeanour is sullen and uncooperative. Attempting to placate her lover, Lola admonishes, ‘what’s the matter with you, Nino? He’s a friend,’ to which Nino responds in a surly manner, ‘I don’t have any friends and if I do I like to choose them myself.’

Most hardboiled heroes exist in comparable isolation. In the pulp fiction arena, Chandler delineates his character Marlowe thus: ‘I don’t know why he came to Southern California, except that most people eventually do, although not all of them remain.’ Such a description evokes the itinerant journey of the nineteenth century wanderer. Like countless flâneurs before him, Marlowe may or may not remain in Southern California, depending upon fortuitous events, inclination or other equally arbitrary whims. In 1951, Chandler informed his readers that ‘Marlowe has never spoken of his parents, and apparently he has no living relatives’ (Chandler 1995a, p.

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113 See also Widmer’s exploration of pulp fiction’s proletarian hero, whom he connects to a fin-de-siècle predecessor also characterised by aimlessness and transience. Both have features of ‘hoboisnism’ which signal them as rebellious and disenfranchised (Widmer 1968).
114 The film’s set designer, Hal Pereira, supposedly modelled Neff’s apartment on the room at the Chateau Marmont in which Wilder enjoyed a bachelor lifestyle upon first arriving in Hollywood (Sikov 1998).
115 In this section of the screenplay’s dialogue (not present in the film’s final cut), Lola enumerates Nino’s lack of socially-endorsed attributes, thus positioning him as a marginalised figure and a desirable man: ‘He needs a haircut, doesn’t he? Look at him. No job, no car, no money, no prospects, no nothing. I love him’ (Wilder & Chandler 2000, p. 47).
1043). Eight years later, Chandler was still committed to the idea of Marlowe as a deracinated figure, adrift in the modern city:

… a fellow of Marlowe’s type shouldn’t get married, because he is a lonely man, a poor man, a dangerous man, and yet a sympathetic man, and somehow none of this goes with marriage. I think he will always have a fairly shabby office, a lonely house, a number of affairs, but no permanent connection. I think he will always be awakened at some inconvenient hour by some inconvenient person to do some inconvenient job. It seems to me that that is his destiny … (Chandler 1997a, p. 249).

Other pulp novelists were similarly uninterested in portraying the ‘conventional married man.’ In Build My Gallows High (the novel on which Out of the Past was based), writer Daniel Mainwaring originally devised a detective named Robin Bishop of whom he tired very quickly. ‘Bishop got married,’ scoffed Mainwaring, ‘and then got awfully soft and I got fed up with him’ (cited in Flinn 1973b, p. 44). Similarly, in a novel that remained unfinished at the time of Chandler’s death in 1959, Marlowe was married off, although Chandler noted caustically on the manuscript that ‘I don’t know how it will turn out, but she’ll never tame him’ (cited in Karimi 1976, p. 55).

The film noir canon is replete with hardboiled heroes who consistently eschew domesticity. In Murder, My Sweet, Marlowe tells Ann Grayle, ‘it’s a funny thing, about every third day I get hungry.’ In another scene, as Marlowe shaves, a man arrives to collect his garments for laundering. Adherence to a conventional routine for meals and mundane domestic chores is clearly antithetical to the noir hero’s lifestyle. Rooming houses and apartment blocks like Neff’s or Marlowe’s had furthermore come to represent, in the cultural imagination, areas of violence, sleaze and misdemeanour. Peopled by loners, drifters and vagrant characters of ‘ill-repute,’ they supposedly failed to ‘protect’ from the outside world. Instead, they offered a synergy between public and private, effecting a breakdown of traditional barriers.

Rather than wallowing in self-pity, the noir hero reifies his sense of isolation. Like the classic flâneur, he aestheticises his loss. Unlike his predecessor, however, the noir hero has no bourgeois haven to which he can return. In this respect, characters like Neff embody a ‘purer’ form of flânerie. At the outset of Murder, My Sweet, Marlowe begins his confession by locating the initial action at seven in the evening, at his office. When one of the interrogating police detectives asks why he was still at work at that hour, Marlowe responds sardonically, ‘I’m a homing pigeon, I always come back to the stinking coop no matter how late it is,’ indicating that it is his
office, and not his home, which provides respite from the streets and their crowds. A nocturnal shot then shows Marlowe’s office window, illuminated by a neon sign, whilst the hardboiled hero explains that ‘there’s something about the dead silence of an office building at night … not quite real. The traffic down below was something that didn’t have anything to do with me.’ Seeking sanctuary, it is to his office that the noir flâneur returns to ruminate, think, process, record, and ultimately, to die. Coincidentally, Benjamin believed the office to be of special significance to modernity. As the ‘complement to the bourgeois interior’ (Benjamin 1973f, p. 167), the office was a flâneuristic space in which public and private fused. It is also noteworthy that many noir office scenes (including those in Double Indemnity and Murder, My Sweet) are nocturnal. Benjamin saw the modern period as one of ‘noctambulisme’ or ‘night-walking’ (Benjamin 1973e, p. 50). As a modern hero, the noir protagonist is most at home after the cessation of all diurnal activities.

Transient and atomised, the noir hero has his antecedents not only in the classic flâneur, but also in many modernist literary protagonists. First published in 1942, Camus’ existentialist L’Étranger is declared by Hirsch to be ‘one of the greatest of all hardboiled novels’ (Hirsch 1981, p. 46). Camus’ protagonist, Meursault, leads a solitary existence in the face of an indifferent and uncaring world. Despite his desultory interactions with neighbours, colleagues and friends, a sense of isolation prevails. Unable to express grief over his mother’s death, Meursault is tried for a senseless murder for which he has no apparent remorse. The prosecutor informs the jury that he had ‘peered into [Meursault’s soul] and found nothing’ (Camus 1982, p. 97), suggesting that the alienated hero’s greatest crime was remoteness or absence of human qualities. As Camus said in 1955, Meursault was ‘an outsider to the society in which he lives, wandering on the fringe, on the outskirts of life, solitary and sensual’ (Camus 1982, p. 118). Similarly, the noir hero is destined to live an eternally lonely life. Adrift in the modern metropolis, however, the hero’s anonymity protects and allows him to evade detection. This further connects him to the classic flâneur, as the following investigation will demonstrate.

116 In turn, Camus also appreciated the ‘tough’ hardboiled American writers. It has even been suggested that The Outsider was partially modelled on Cain’s The Postman Always Rings Twice (Madden 1968).
4.4.3 Evasion

In 1879, Alphonse Bertillon, an employee in the Paris prefecture, developed an anthropometric method of classification based on minute bodily measurements. Nine years later in London, Francis Galton proposed using fingerprints to identify criminals. Galton also formulated incredibly complex equations by which physical attributes could be tabulated and catalogued. This allowed scientists to devise typologies, to identify variations and to measure ‘deviations’ (Galton 1888a; 1888b).

Modernity saw a vastly increased compulsion to count and document.117 This included the implementation of state surveillance and institutionalised efforts to track the movements of citizens—and particularly those designated as ‘criminal’—within urban spaces. With its unprecedented indexical status, photography was swiftly appropriated into a quasi-scientific discourse in which individuals were ‘captured.’ Other ‘scientific’ methods of classification were developed, such as phrenology, in which a physiognomic assessment was believed to reveal traces of criminality and other determinants of one’s moral disposition. New discourses of detection emerged and a ‘presumptive paradigm’ asserted itself around 1870-1880, in which detection became venatic, conjectural and semiotic, relying upon the decoding of almost imperceptible and involuntary signs or clues (Ginzburg 1986).

To obliterate one’s traces in a city was becoming increasingly easier (and often wiser), and this gave rise to mass anxiety. The classificatory systems which emerged throughout the nineteenth century can be seen as bureaucratically and judicially sanctioned measures designed to defuse the fear generated by the oppressive, anonymous and ‘unknowable’ crowds of the city, in which one could disappear, or else commit any number of heinous crimes without detection. Nineteenth century detective fiction, such as Poe’s, can be seen as a literary manifestation of these cultural preoccupations. Written in 1842, The Mystery of Marie Rogêt (Poe 1998b) refashions and fictionalises the actual murder of a young woman, Mary Cecilia Rogers, which occurred in the vicinity of New York. Widely reported in the newspapers, this crime remained unsolved (albeit with much speculation as to the identity of the murderer), fuelling public fascination. Poe’s story was written in

117 See Copjec’s discussions of the rise of actuarialism and other bureaucratic methods of documentation and control throughout the nineteenth century (Copjec 1993).
reference to these tabloid reports of the murder, thus lending to his fictionalised account a purported veracity that proved irresistible to nineteenth century consumers. The enduring fascination with the Jack the Ripper murders in Victorian England (which will be cited in Chapter Six) also testifies to the anxiety generated by the realisation that one’s actions and movements could go undetected in the metropolis, often with tragic consequences.

As a figure adept at decoding and observing, the hardboiled hero resembles both the detective and the flâneur. On the other hand, as a marginalised individual, and moreover one whose anonymity and nomadic existence allows him to drift undetected whilst becoming involved in murderous schemes and other illegal activities, he is also aligned with criminality, particularly as it was reconceptualised in nineteenth century cultural discourses. The modern subject was characterised by what Gunning terms a ‘fugitive physicality’ (Gunning 1995c, p. 19) that enabled him to furtively navigate the metropolis and evade detection, thus retaining his autonomy. This ‘fugitive physicality’ also characterises the hardboiled hero and is a key index of his status as modern subject.

4.4.3.1 Neff’s silent footsteps

Both Tester and Nicholls observe that the flâneur’s ‘heroism’ partially resides in the fact that he is able to conceal himself successfully within the crowd. In so doing, the flâneur can surreptitiously make observations as he sits hidden, for instance, behind a newspaper in a Parisian café (Tester 1994; Nicholls 2004). Clearly, this ability to conceal oneself within the crowd shares many similarities with the noir hero’s isolated existence. The congruence is rendered explicit in Murder, My Sweet, where Marlowe’s voiceover commences with a description of a job in which he was ‘peeking out under old Sunday sections, looking for a barber named Dominic whose wife wanted him back.’ As Marlowe utters these words, Dmytryk’s camera pans from the police headquarters (where Marlowe is diegetically located) out the window to the nocturnal city, awash with neon signs. It is within this anonymous city, it is

118 Gunning presents a compelling study of the connection between photography and detection, investigating how the increased circulation of bodies in the modern world generated deep anxiety, giving rise to new photographic means of documentation such as passports and identity cards which ‘mark’ the subject as an individual, identifiable and thus traceable entity (Gunning 1995c).
immediately implied, that Marlowe’s work as detective can be carried out. In an urban context, the detective can sit unnoticed, ‘peeking out’ over a newspaper. He can loiter in public spaces whilst remaining inconspicuous, unobtrusive or even invisible to his adversaries. The noir detective can, to borrow Baudelaire’s phrase, enjoy his ‘incognito wherever he goes’ (Baudelaire 1998, p. 105).

Whilst Neff is not a private investigator, his trajectory is nonetheless equally contingent upon anonymity. Certain moments in Double Indemnity are noteworthy in this respect. Towards the end of the film, Keyes verbalises his suspicions about Dietrichson’s death to Neff. ‘It’s beginning to come apart at the seams already,’ declares Keyes, who proceeds to give his thesis on the various degrees of fallibility for murder schemes:

A murder’s never perfect. It always comes apart sooner or later.  
And when two people are involved it’s usually sooner … They may think it’s twice as safe because there are two of them. But it isn’t twice as safe. It’s ten times twice as dangerous.

As implied by Keyes’ confident proclamation, criminal activities in the modern world are safest when perpetrated by a lone individual. When others become involved, one risks everything. To preserve one’s flâneuristic status of ‘stranger’ or ‘exile’ is to ensure one’s freedom. Indeed, it is only the collaboration between Phyllis and Neff, rather than the murder itself, which proves fatal. Alone, Neff can move through the city unnoticed, and implement the murder scheme with remarkable ease. Slipping furtively out of his apartment on the night of the murder, Neff slots a card inside the telephone box that would fall down should the phone ring, thus alerting him to any missed phone calls. He attaches a similar device to the doorbell. When he returns home, he ascertains that both are in their correct place, and can thus feel certain that nobody has tried to contact him. Neff also makes his presence known to Charlie, the attendant who has been cleaning his vehicle. Casually asking whether the car is ready, Neff explains, ‘just going up to the drugstore for something to eat. Been working upstairs all evening. My stomach’s getting sore at me.’ Through the execution of these simple procedures, Neff’s alibi is intact. Furthermore, his ‘noctambulisme,’ or nocturnal wanderings, allow him to retain his anonymity.

At all times, the impersonalised nature of the urban terrain is essential. Neff and Phyllis conduct clandestine assignations in the supermarket where they plan the
murder and exchange vital information. ‘You know that big market up at Los Feliz, Keyes?’ asks Neff:

That’s the place the Phyllis and I had picked for a meeting place … we had to be very careful from now on. We couldn’t let anybody see us together, we couldn’t even talk to each other on the telephone, not from her house or my office, anyway.

This explanation is conveyed through voiceover, accompanied by iconic images of Neff and Phyllis in the market; she wearing dark shades, whilst his demeanour is furtive and shifty. The voiceover continues:

So she was to be in the market every morning about eleven o’clock, buying stuff, and I could run into her there. Sort of accidentally on purpose.

Their actions are affectedly nervy during this meeting that, in a typical temporal condensation, is sylleptically representative of an indeterminate number of other similar meetings.119 Despite their anxiousness and some suspense-creating interruptions (a woman asks Neff to retrieve a can of baby food from the top shelf), Neff and Phyllis essentially go unnoticed. That they inhabit a world in which two people can meet ‘sort of accidentally on purpose’ at the same time and place every day and remain unseen is indicative of both the anonymity inherent in the urban sphere. It also testifies to the ‘fugitive physicality’ of modern subjects such as Neff.

The antiseptic nature of the supermarket scenes (filmed in Jerry’s Market on Melrose Avenue, Hollywood) has been noted by various commentators. Allen argues that this mise-en-scène metaphorises the coldness with which Phyllis and Neff plan the murder (Allen 1987). I would add that a supermarket proves to be a superbly impersonal setting in which criminals can roam freely. As Benjamin so aptly observed, department stores were the ‘last precincts of flânerie,’ presumably because one was able to loiter therein and remain ‘unseen’ (Benjamin 1999, p. 21). In Double Indemnity, this is taken further: a space of capitalist activity fuses with murder and criminality without any apparent incongruity. Transformed into consumers in the marketplace of late capitalism, Neff and Phyllis are protected from unwanted scrutiny.

119 Smoodin defines syllepsis thus: ‘the concatenation of a continued past event into one representation of the event … like French imparfait’ (Smoodin 1983, p. 20).
By ‘buying stuff’ (as Neff puts it), they are protected from prying eyes and exempt from suspicion. Moreover, the profusion of commodities in the background is modernist in that each object is denuded of any aura or specificity. Instead, food (baby food, no less) becomes, in the age of mechanical reproduction, an endless array of identical, anonymous items.

Mobility is an essential factor in the hardboiled hero’s ability to evade suspicion. As he details the execution of the murder plan, Neff praises its simplicity. ‘That was all there was to it,’ he explained:

Nothing had slipped, nothing had been overlooked, there was nothing to give it away. And yet, Keyes, as I was walking down the street to the drug store, suddenly it came over me that everything would go wrong. It sounds crazy, Keyes, but it’s true, so help me: I couldn’t hear my own footsteps. It was the walk of a dead man.

These words are delivered in Neff’s voiceover, underscored by swelling music, and appear at the end of what is termed ‘Sequence B’ in the screenplay (Wilder & Chandler 2000, p. 73). As such, they mark a structurally significant point in the narrative.

Neff’s remark about the ‘the walk of a dead man’ could readily be interpreted using an existentialist framework. And yet after Keyes has openly dismissed the possibility of foul play, Neff’s life apparently resumes relative normalcy, suggesting his lack of concern regarding issues of personal responsibility. Indeed, Keyes’ inadvertent support allows Neff to relax temporarily. ‘That evening when I got home my nerves had eased off,’ Neff informs us. ‘I could feel the ground under my feet again.’ For Neff, footsteps signify his ability to navigate the streets freely. As a modern subject with a fugitive physicality, Neff’s urban wanderings allow him to ‘feel at home anywhere,’ whilst remaining ‘unseen of the world’ (Baudelaire 1998, p. 105). Transient, atomised, vagrant, anonymous yet supremely mobile, Neff is free to embark upon his murderous career, safe in the knowledge that he can evade detection. At moments when Neff’s identity as a criminal risks becoming exposed, he can no longer hear his own footsteps, and his true flâneuristic status is threatened.
4.5 Conclusion — Neff as modern subject or cinematic flâneur

Movement and mobility are crucial themes in film noir and are particularly central to the articulation of its hardboiled protagonist. As has been demonstrated throughout this chapter, the noir hero’s movement through and occupation of the urban terrain is extremely modern. Firstly, in contradistinction to the sedentary antagonists, heroes such as Neff are constantly on the move. Locomotion facilitates a more rapid trajectory and provides a heightened, twentieth century version of flânerie. Neff’s car is thus of great symbolic importance. It is through the use of his vehicle that he is able to have volition over his trajectory and to author his own journey, features which find their antecedent in the nineteenth century flâneur’s pedestrian movements.

The noir hero’s mobility is complemented by a modernist compulsion to observe and record. This is analogous to the classic flâneur’s dogged mission to decode the city landscape, and his need to diarise his findings. In discussing Poe’s *The Man of the Crowd*, Benjamin describes the protagonist’s ‘penetrating eyes’ (Benjamin 1973e, p. 49), and the same could be said for classic flâneurs, detectives and noir heroes alike. Whilst Neff’s gaze becomes distracted at times by the femme fatale, he is nonetheless adept at succinctly summarising a number of socio-economic milieux. Neff sees through his ‘insurance eyes’ and classifies those he meets according to their income, occupation and family relationships.

Neff’s loitering in urban space also mimics that of the nineteenth century flâneur. For Benjamin’s flâneur, to experience the metropolis aroused ‘fear, revulsion and horror’ (Benjamin 1968a, p. 174). By the mid-twentieth century, however, a flâneuristic engagement with the city had become more overtly utilitarian. In a noir city presented as what Dimendberg describes as a ‘highly rationalized and alienating system of exploitative drudgery permitting few possibilities of escape’ (Dimendberg 1997, p. 66), protagonists such as Neff interact with their surroundings in a pragmatic manner which unquestioningly accepts the desacralisation of modern life. The classic flâneur, argues Benjamin, is ‘someone who does not feel comfortable in his own company. That is why he seeks out the crowd’ (Benjamin 1973e, p. 48). Similarly, Neff feels most at home in the public domain or his office. In deploying urban ‘spaces of unrelatedness’ to ‘lose’ himself, ‘kill’ time and banish his anxiety, Neff is a modern subject.
Like the classic flâneur, the noir hero’s status as solitary and transient individual affords him the freedom to move unimpeded, and to initiate his various schemes whilst evading detection. Indeed, in some respects, Neff embodies a ‘purer’ form of flânerie; unlike his nineteenth century predecessors, he does not have the comfort or haven of the bourgeois milieu. Instead, he furtively records his observations as they occur, or else from the relative sanctuary of office or car.

In the final analysis, it is possible that the noir flâneur is too transgressive a persona. He exaggerates the features of the prototypical flâneur—the voyeurism, the dynamism, the criminal impulses and the desire to possess everything the city has to offer. Movement in the noir text becomes more of a roller coaster ride: highly mechanised yet paradoxically out of control. The hardboiled hero may be adept at negotiating city spaces, but at the same time his movement constitutes a headlong rush towards his fate.

The socio-historical contextualisation offered throughout this chapter opens up new ways of interpreting the hardboiled hero’s trajectory. Unlike existing interpretative models as outlined in Chapter Two, this historically-anchored approach reveals modernity to be a guiding force in shaping the noir hero’s occupation of the urban (and suburban) sphere. In the following chapter, the pulp voice of the noir hero will be interrogated to further explicate the modernist impulses that govern his characterisation.
Chapter 5 Neff as hardboiled hero — the new voice of modernity

5.1 Preface

In the opening scenes of Neff’s confession, he warns Keyes to ‘hold tight to that cheap cigar of yours.’ He then explains, ‘I killed Dietrichson … I killed him for money—and for a woman—and I didn’t get the money and I didn’t get the woman. Pretty, isn’t it?’ Such a proclamation is steeped in cynicism, and its deterministic tone implies that Neff’s failure to secure happiness is inevitable. Yet at the same time the statement is inflected with grim and sardonic humour. Its particular style of irony serves as a coping mechanism and offers the possibility of encapsulating and thus controlling the pain of Neff’s tragic experiences. ‘Pretty, isn’t it?’ is a self-reflexive statement—Neff can objectively discern that the whole saga would not only be seen as doomed and futile, but also highly ridiculous. His deeply ironic tone ensures that, although his doom may well be preordained, Neff can still escape utter despair. It is a very modern mode of speech.

In 1947, Paramount released the Bob Hope vehicle *My Favourite Brunette* (dir. Elliott Nugent). As a child photographer who assumes the role of a private investigator, Hope narrates the story in a satirical voiceover, replete with hardboiled language and deadpan delivery (Luhr 1982). By the late 1940s, film noir’s formal, thematic and stylistic conventions had been codified to the point where they could be parodied. A central feature of this codification was the hero’s voice, with its specific urban patois, rapidfire dialogue, wisecracks, deadpan delivery, neologistic lexicon and ‘fast cityspeak,’ syntactical peculiarities, reliance upon simile and metaphor, and its strong elements of paranoia, irony and cynicism.

The hardboiled style evidenced in Neff’s monologue above is manifestly present in all classic films noirs. This paranoid, idiomatic male voice has generally been attributed to a destabilising post-WWII context in which traditional notions of masculinity were threatened. As such, the hardboiled voice is understood as further evidence of the renunciation of hope in a thoroughly rotten postwar world where all vestiges of idealism had been destroyed. Whilst other genealogical links for this voice
have been cursorily proposed—mainly the pulp fiction of the 1920s and 1930s (O’Brien 1981; Karimi 1976)—these arguments lack a more rigorous contextualisation into a broader socio-historical matrix. Often pulp fiction itself is assessed with the same historicist discourse typically applied to film noir. Haut, for instance, notes that Hammett’s *Red Harvest*, published immediately prior to the Wall Street crash, was ‘written in a period of active left-wing political dissent and remains the genre’s definitive statement regarding political corruption’ (Haut 1995, p. 1). Haut suggests that Hammett’s pulp fiction was merely responding to contemporaneous events. Elsewhere, the hardboiled voice has been connected to an American national identity based upon rugged individualism. Whilst this is a valid observation, it reverts to myth and thus jettisons, to a large extent, any considerations of the influence of modernity.\(^{120}\)

Although existing scholarship relating to the noir voiceover raises interesting points (Turim 1989; Telotte 1989; Naremore 1998; Kozloff 1984; 1988), most studies centre on the issue of voiceover as a *structural* device. As a cinematic device that subjectivises history, the noir voiceover emanates from the male protagonist. It allows the story to be told in a highly personalised voice, with a putative effacement of omniscient authorial intervention. Consistent with modernity’s epistemology, all noir narration is infused with a fundamental anxiety—what is real and what is imagined? Is there in fact any reality outside the protagonist’s remembering? Many modernist thinkers, including Freud, advocated a ‘stream of consciousness’ approach in which layers of subjectivity were uncovered, and with which (as is pointed out by Naremore) latent savagery or destructive impulses such as the death instinct could be revealed (Naremore 1998). In approximating a ‘stream of consciousness’ monologue, the noir voiceover allows access to ‘deeper’ layers of the protagonist’s psyche. The act of *telling* the story thus has a crucial relationship to the dark and murderous desires harboured by Neff, since it is only through his personalised account of history that we have access to these parts of his character.

\(^{120}\) It has been suggested that detective fiction’s forerunners were the 1860s pulp novels with their frontier heroes such as Daniel Boone, Kit Carson and Buffalo Bill. In discourses centring on the American frontier, a masculine identity was forged on an ethos of individualism, pursuit, resilience and resourcefulness. In this context, vernacular and economy of expression was not only a sign of individuality, but also a pragmatic imperative. See (Porter 1981).
Whilst this is a valid line of enquiry, I would argue that the voiceover is also significant for allowing the story to be told in the hero’s vernacularised voice. There are several aspects of this hardboiled voice that signal the noir hero as a modern subject, and thus deserve closer attention. To the best of my knowledge, a sustained analysis of the hardboiled voice’s constitutive elements (grammar, syntax, lexicon and so on) has not been undertaken in terms of their cultural and historical specificity. This chapter aims to redress this imbalance.

The hardboiled voice has several idiosyncratic properties. It is characterised by neologism, malapropism and linguistic innovation. This vernacular has strong connections to that found in other urban art forms arising in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, all of which are genealogically traced in Appendix Three. Indeed, it could be argued (as does Porter in relation to pulp fiction) that modernity virtually demanded a new lexicon:

> [F]or brawling and shooting, for automobiles, automatics, and machine guns, traditional prose was redesigned to promote in a reader the disorientation and shock that accompany violent action (Porter 1981, p. 141).

Indeed, many pulp writers and noir auteurs themselves exhibited a modern, urban voice. Cain has been described as a ‘witty and profane’ character possessing a ‘colourful vernacular’ (Brunette & Peary 1976, p. 50). Although Cain rejects the ‘hardboiled’ title accorded him, proclaiming a total lack of allegiance to any particular ‘school,’ there is no doubt that Cain approved of a hardboiled brand of masculinity.121 An analysis of *Double Indemnity* will demonstrate how this type of urban argot is employed in order to articulate a modernist masculinity.

Another central feature of the modern voice is its syntax. With its taut sentences, brevity, elision and its emphatic, often syncopated nature, the hardboiled voice can be connected to modernity’s new spatio-temporal configurations, where anonymous crowds thronged the city streets and life was lived at a far greater pace. In other words, the noir hero’s speech patterns imitate the rapidity, brutality and fragmentation of the social landscape on which he comments.

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121 Cain seemed to favour machismo: he disparagingly referred to actor Leslie Howard, with whom he occasionally lunched on the Columbia studio lot, as ‘vapid,’ ‘uninteresting’ and ‘the worst goddamn sap I ever saw’ (Brunette & Peary 1976, pp. 51-52).
Heavy reliance upon metaphor and analogy is also a central feature of the noir voice. Modernity was a period in which linguistic structures of symbolisation and displacement gained precedence. The prevalence of metaphor in the hardboiled voice connects it to a modernist sensibility such as that found in Baudelaire’s poetry, where metonymy and allegory dominate and the ‘essential’ meaning is hidden, resulting in a semiotic reconstitution in which signifiers are denuded of their orthodox meaning and nothing is as it appears. This can be seen as a verbal correlative to Benjamin’s notion of dialectical vision in which different ‘layers’ of cultural, temporal or historical meaning reside simultaneously and often antithetically in the one object.

Double Indemnity’s screenplay frequently subtextualises the dialogue’s true ‘meaning,’ a point upon which Wilder and Chandler authorially comment at certain moments:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Neff</th>
<th>Eight-thirty tomorrow evening then?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phyllis</td>
<td>That’s what I suggested.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neff</td>
<td>Will you be here, too?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phyllis</td>
<td>I guess so. I usually am.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neff</td>
<td>Same chair, same perfume, same anklet?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phyllis</td>
<td>I wonder if I know what you mean.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neff</td>
<td>I wonder if you wonder (italics mine).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Finally, the metaphysical dimensions of the noir voice must be considered. Paranoia, cynicism, irony, sarcasm and a grim, acerbic humour are all symptomatic of modernity (Sloterdijk 1987; Berman 1988). Various film scholars have commented cursorily upon these ontological qualities in the pulp and noir voice. Jensen describes Chandler’s prose as ‘at once muscular and baroque’ (Jensen 1974, p. 18), whilst Naremore valorises Hammett’s fiction for inaugurating a cynical voice for the new, tough detective (Naremore 1998). Chandler himself credits Hammett for taking ‘murder out of the Venetian vase and drop[ping] it into the alley’ (Chandler 1995b, p. 988), suggesting a proletarian and distinctly unromantic sensibility that eschews and denigrates bourgeois niceties. These observations have generally been made, however, without further socio-historical investigation. This chapter will demonstrate that, as defences against the more menacing aspects of urban modernity, properties such as irony and cynicism are historically determined.

Wilder’s status as an émigré director from a non-Anglophone background is also significant. Unlike quintessentially American auteurs such as Wyler, Ford and Hawks, European directors living and working in Hollywood were able to maintain a
certain level of impartiality, allowing them to assess American culture with greater
objectivity. Their methods of learning English are also noteworthy, since many of
them embraced ‘lowbrow’ or popular culture. To familiarise himself with American
slang, Fritz Lang studied comic books (Friedrich 1986). Lang describes the process of
cultural osmosis and language acquisition resulting from this engagement with the
mass media:

I read a lot of newspapers [after my arrival in America] —from
which I learned a lot. I said to myself, if an audience—year in, year
out—reads so many comic strips, there must be something
interesting in them. And I found them very interesting. I got (and
still get today) an insight into the American character, into
American humour; and I learned slang. I drove around in the
country and tried to speak with everybody. I spoke with every cab
driver, every gas station attendant—and I looked at films (Appel
1974b, p. 26).

Similarly, Wilder apparently learned English from a diverse range of sources,
including baseball statistics, soap operas, comic books and the tabloid press (Friedrich
1986). He also enjoyed popular songs, and frequently incorporated them into his
films.122 In his past, Wilder had immersed himself in American literature that
valorised vernacularised language such as that of Twain, Hemingway and Fitzgerald.
Although he read the German translations, Wilder claims that exposure to the works
of these novelists had ‘taught [him] English’ (Crowe 1999, p. 229). The spoken word
was of primary stylistic importance for Wilder, since he always maintained that
English was an easy language to speak but difficult to write (Crowe 1999).

That Wilder previously spoke German—a language in which brevity and
spontaneity were difficult to achieve—perhaps explains his enthusiasm for the
possibilities of polysemy in the English language, even (or perhaps especially) when
using economical linguistic structures. As described by violinist Yehudi Menuhi, the
grammatical complexities and remoteness of the German language were often
antithetical to extemporaneity:

122 For Prigozy, the highly sentimental and clichéd lyrics of the popular tunes included in
*Double Indemnity* (Tangerine and My Ideal) ironically comment on the murders of Phyllis and
Neff (Prigozy 1984).
When you start a sentence in German, you have to know at the beginning what the end will be. In English, you live the sentence through to the end. Emotion and thought go together. In German, they’re divorced. Everything is abstract (cited in Friedrich 1995, p. 344).

Of his involvement in the scriptwriting process for *Menschen am Sonntag*, Wilder explained that ‘we wrote a very relaxed screenplay which represented, if you like, the new wave or neorealism of the era’ (Domarchi & Douchet 1962, p. 2). Throughout his career, Wilder seemed fascinated with the notion of developing new languages, both cinematic and linguistic. Chandler’s aim was similar. In this context, the hardboiled idiom pervading *Double Indemnity* is hardly surprising. As the following investigation will reveal, Neff’s voice, like that of all pulp heroes, is quintessentially modern. Moreover, this voice magnifies many elements of classic flânerie, including the properties of detachment, anonymity and shock from/fascination with novelty objects. The noir hero’s attraction to the seedy aspects of the metropolis, including its hardboiled patois, can thus be seen as a heightened or apotheosised flânerie.

From an historical perspective, it was inevitable that the cultivated cadences of the privileged classic flâneur would evolve into a more urban, proletarian voice. As Benjamin puts it, the excitement and shock experienced by the flâneur as a result of his peregrinations was largely a result of ‘a feeling of crossing the threshold of one’s class for the first time’ (Benjamin 1978, p. 11). The flâneur moved away from his comfortable, bourgeois milieu and ‘cross[ed] the threshold.’ He quit the arcades and descended into the underworld. As he embarked upon this vicarious exploration of the seamier side of the city, the pulp aspects of modern culture held ever-greater appeal. Consequently, his voice assumed a new tone of brutality. Indeed, many modernist philosophers aspired to achieve a ‘flawed,’ brutal and populist style that was seen as commercially viable and paradigmatically modern. Baudelaire, for instance, expressed a desire to appropriate a pulp voice with which to capture and embrace the modern

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123 ‘Nous avons écrit un scenario très dilettante, qui représentait, si l’on veut, la nouvelle vague ou le néoréalisme de l’époque.’ My translation.
124 Obviously, Chandler’s input into *Double Indemnity*’s screenplay must also be noted, since it was actually at his insistence that much of the dialogue from Cain’s novel was altered. See (Jensen 1974; Brunette & Peary 1976).
world. ‘To write a pot-boiler, that is the genius,’ he proclaimed with obvious envy. ‘I ought to write a pot-boiler’ (Baudelaire 1949, p. 17).

The cinematic flâneur of noir embodied many characteristics that were nascent in the classic flâneur, including the appropriation of a brutal, hardboiled mode of speech. The following section of the thesis considers this noir voice and connects it to its late nineteenth and early twentieth century predecessors.

5.2 Modernity—a new lexicon

5.2.1 The hardboiled argot of pulp fiction

In personal correspondence of 1945, Chandler spoke of his desire to initiate a new literary style. ‘All I wanted when I began,’ he explained,

was to play with a fascinating new language, and trying, without anybody noticing it, to see what it would do as a means of expression which might remain on the level of unintellectual thinking and yet acquire the power to say things which are usually only said with a literary air … (Chandler 1995a, p. 1023).

Throughout his career as a pulp novelist, Chandler’s intention seemed focussed upon a desire to develop a new voice (or a ‘fascinating new language’) that reflected a proletarian style of masculinity. By Chandler’s own admission, this voice was decidedly lowbrow. Indeed, Chandler’s contempt for those who dared to ascribe to his writing more intellectual worth than he was prepared to accept was well-known, and the above quotation suggests that Chandler was primarily interested in using easily accessible and deceptively simple linguistic structures in order to produce unexpected results. An analysis of any text within Chandler’s œuvre reveals this interplay between an unashamedly proletarian style and the transmission of intense

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125 In correspondence of 1945, Chandler complained, ‘[r]eally I’m beginning to wonder quite seriously whether anybody knows what writing is anymore, whether they haven’t got the whole bloody business so completely mixed up with subject matter and significance and who’s going to win the peace and what they gave him for the screen rights and if you’re not a molecular physicist, you’re illiterate, and so on, that there simply isn’t anybody around who can read a book and say that the guy knew how to write or didn’t’ (Chandler 1995a, p. 1027).
themes. Serialised in *Black Mask* in December 1933, *Blackmailers Don’t Shoot* is typical:

Mallory watched her out of sight, then he looked at Erno. He said:
‘Well, punk, what’s on your mind?’

He said it insultingly, with a cold smile. Erno stiffened. His gloved left hand jerked the cigarette that was in it so that some ash fell off.
‘Kiddin’ yourself, baby’ he inquired stiffly.

‘About what, punk?’ …

The male voice created by Chandler for this story was acerbic, sarcastic, cynical and full of wisecracks. Significantly, it also relied heavily upon a new lexicon, in which pre-existing words are co-opted and assigned an unorthodox meaning. Chandler’s employment of the term ‘baby’ is exemplary. Because its pragmatic use in this context is defined by irony, ‘baby’ is transformed into something quite different from its original meaning. Similarly, the term ‘punk,’ used to convey Mallory’s contempt, is specific to an urban milieu. At another point in the same story, Mallory instructs his adversary to ‘keep your paws off me, gumshoe!’ (Chandler 1985, p. 236), with the term ‘gumshoe’ also designating a modern adversary.\(^{126}\)

Semiotically reconfigured terms such as ‘dame,’ ‘baby’ and ‘punk’ quickly became codified in pulp fiction, comic strips and film noir. Their usage was a primary way of defining characters as urban, tough and cynical. In fact, such was the ubiquity of these terms that they became iconic and could act as paradigmatic signifiers of the pulp milieu. This is comparable to the process described by Eco in relation to films that have acquired cult status, such as *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942, USA). In such instances, Eco argues, the meaning of the whole film is contained within the utterance of one word. With *Casablanca*, all that is needed to convey the film’s entire meaning is condensed into Bogart’s use of the term ‘kid’ (Eco 1986, p. 197). A similar condensation occurs within the hardboiled lexicon, where specific words—such as ‘dame’ or ‘punk’—gained enough currency to signify the entire modern world. These words are privileged because they paradigmatically signal a pulp

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\(^{126}\) According to the Macquarie Dictionary, ‘gumshoe’ is a colloquial term for a policeman or detective (Macquarie Dictionary 1986).
sensibility and encapsulate the essence of the hardboiled mode of speech. As such, they are also metonymic of modernity.

Chandler was much enamoured of this sort of ‘tough’ language, and was known to keep a notebook in which he recorded examples of working-class argot, which he would then use to inflect his characters’ dialogue with verisimilitude (Porter 1981). As a result, Chandler’s prose is consistently laden with colourful phraseology. Use of neologism and malapropism also lends immediacy to the dialogue, since it suggests a certain degree of extemporising. This elevates the importance of the *moment* of enunciation, in line with modernity’s temporality of instantaneity. Such utterances, it can be assumed, lack the planning and preparation implicit in a more mannered mode of speech. Like the modern world he inhabits, the hardboiled hero lives emphatically in the present, and this is reflected in his improvisational dialogue.

The conventions of pulp fiction generally dispensed with an omniscient style of third-person narration. Dialogue was thus accorded primacy, and its emotive power was sufficient to convey sentiment, characterisation and other literary elements that had traditionally required authorial interpolation. It is assumed, for instance, that the rhetorical question ‘well punk, what’s on your mind?’ in *Blackmailers Don’t Shoot* would be spoken in an aggressive tone. In many ways, Chandler’s subsequent explanation (‘[h]e said it insultingly, with a cold smile’) becomes superfluous. Elsewhere in pulp fiction, authorial qualification was demonstrably absent. Hardboiled dialogue could itself convey, as Chandler would put it, complex themes and messages using a straightforward, quotidian and harsh language. The hardboiled language’s ability to ‘speak for itself’ finds its apotheosis in film noir’s use of voiceover. In *Double Indemnity*, Neff’s emotions and responses are accessible only through his idiomatic voice, without recourse to cinematic devices by which an ‘objective’ clarification might traditionally be offered.

A consideration of Cain’s novel *Double Indemnity* reveals a similar valorisation of the spoken word, with the entire story being related either through pared-down dialogue or else via Walter Huff’s\(^\text{127}\) solipsistic monologue. When explaining the criminal activities in which he becomes embroiled, Huff declares:

\(^{127}\) The names were changed for the film version. In the novel, they are Walter Huff and Phyllis Nirdlinger.
You think I’m nuts? All right, maybe I am. But you spend fifteen years in the business I’m in, maybe you’ll go nuts yourself … It’s the biggest gambling wheel in the world (Cain 2002, p. 26)

The above excerpt is telling in several respects. Whilst appealing to a commonality (that is, the reader’s assumed ability to empathise with the pressures of working life), Huff is not averse to admitting that perhaps he is ‘nuts,’ in part due to his involvement in the insurance business. That he is ‘nuts’ has all sorts of implications, suggestions and potential extrapolations in terms of his psychopathology, yet this admission is conveyed in a brief, unspectacular manner that rejects any sentimentality. No complementary clarification is provided, and since the reader is never furnished with a more omniscient assessment, he or she has no choice but to affiliate with Huff. This is not difficult for the modern reader: the usage of the term ‘nuts’ invokes a specific notion of disequilibrium which is associated with the stresses inherent in the modern, corporate world. Because of this subtle positioning, the reader becomes implicated not only in the modern lexicon but also in the themes it conveys.

In several interviews, Cain has laboured the point that he aimed at all times for verisimilitude. ‘I write colloquial, easy, everyday speech in my books,’ he explains. Noting that his writing favoured a first-person address, Cain also declared that he would have ‘a character speak as he would talk into a tape’ (Brunette & Peary 1976, p. 51). This emphasis on the spoken word is particularly relevant given that Double Indemnity was refashioned in the screenplay to have its confession recorded using the office dictaphone.

The language utilised and celebrated by pulp writers such as Cain and Chandler, then, is one in which a new, modern lexicon is celebrated. A similar process can be seen operating in other modernist art forms such as the comic strip, as textual analyses will reveal.

5.2.2 The comic strip

As outlined in Appendix Three, the comic strip enjoyed enormous popularity from the fin-de-siècle onwards and was a forum in which a new hardboiled lexicon was explored and validated. In crime comics in particular, the hero is typically associated with illicit, urban activity, and the language needed to reflect this milieu. As such, it is replete with vernacular. Readers were assailed with descriptions of police officers as ‘bulls,’ ‘coppers,’ or ‘flatfooters,’ whilst a pistol became a ‘piece’ or a ‘rod,’ a
machine gun a ‘chopper’ and the electric chair the ‘hot seat’ (Benton 1993b, p. 62). The extemporaneity and immediacy of this language was complemented by the lurid, primary colours of the comic strip images, evoking a highly visceral and ‘embodied’ response that is consistent with the ‘shocks’ of modernity. In his preface to *Paris Spïeen* (published in 1864), Baudelaire speaks of the ‘medley of … innumerable interrelations’ that characterise modern, urban life (Baudelaire 1970b, p. x). Similarly, the monstrative impact, implied dynamism and brutal language of the comic strip combine to present an urban world that is little more than a series (or ‘medley’) of disparate and disjunctive elements.

Textual analysis of virtually any comic strip from the 1930s or 1940s would reveal these properties. Hugely successful at the time, the *Dick Tracy* series is exemplary. Although a ‘crimefighter’ and thus aligned with benevolent forces, the titular hero uses dialogue which is identical to that of the criminals, thus emphatically positioning him within a sphere of urban iniquity. In a 1932 comic strip, Dick Tracy demands of his adversaries:

> Put ’em up, hoods! Grab air, you babies—or I’ll squeeze this thing—and I don’t mean maybe! (Benton 1993b, p. 9).

By the early 1930s, phraseology such as ‘put ’em up’ and terms such as ‘hoods’ had been strongly codified through pulp fiction, gangster films and other crime genre texts. As such, they were highly intelligible to a mass audience. ‘Grab air, you babies!’ has similar resonance. Again, a referent traditionally carrying positive connotations (babies) has been divested of its orthodox meaning and harnessed to signify something utterly different—that is, undesirable criminals who are anything but babies. In this sense, the terms gains ironic currency, in the same way as does much of *Double Indemnity*’s speech. It can be likened, for instance, to Neff’s sardonic assessment of his situation (‘pretty, isn’t it?’). Such phraseology unequivocally signals a pulp sensibility.

The dialogue in comic strips is often rendered phonetically, which heightens verisimilitude. A 1944 comic strip from the *Crime Does Not Pay* series (refer Figure C) illustrates this tendency. ‘Carlson, I’ve got some business to see ya about,’ one of the male characters declares. Wanting the woman to leave, he dismisses her in a highly disparaging manner: ‘gwan ya washed out dish rag—you’re just sore ’cause I was smart enough to give you the gate … now scram!’ Such phonetic utterances seem
to impute veracity to the text, since they accurately (or so it was assumed) highlight the brutality of urban, criminal life. The immediacy of these phrases also positions (and implicates) the reader in media res, as opposed to a more studied use of language in which a distance is maintained between reader and text. The terminology used—‘give you the gate’ and ‘ditch that faded glamour girl’—is both harsh (particularly as it is uttered in front of the woman in question) and ironic. Apart from its misogynistic connotations, ‘faded glamour girl’ evokes a dualistic image with a temporal conflation of past and present: the reader is at once afforded an insight into the femme fatale’s brighter past, whilst simultaneously being apprised of her current diminished status. This is in line with Benjamin’s notions of history in which there exists an interpenetration of the old and the new. Openly derisive of ‘chivalry,’ the comic strip’s protagonist rejects the lure of the woman and is primarily focused upon financial gain. ‘I’m gonna show you a way to make ten grand,’ he boasts. He aims to expunge the woman from the highly masculinised domain in order to focus upon other objects of desire—in this case, the promise of easy financial gain. The ‘shock’ of this profane language is crucial in articulating a hardboiled male subject who is aptly and succinctly summed up by the femme fatale as a ‘cheap lug’ and ‘filthy beast.’

The unseen male subject of Crime Does Not Pay #62 (refer Figure D) refers to his female counterpart in similarly denunciatory terms. The exclamatory statement ‘you double crossing, perfumed cat!’ cleverly combines disparate qualities, so that ‘perfumed’ is transformed into a pejorative adjective. This oxymoronic structure also aligns the woman’s desirability with artifice, which is a guiding principle of modernity’s notions of beauty, as will be discussed in the following chapter. Her artificial beauty is clearly connected to betrayal and dishonesty, as the phrase ‘double crossing’ indicates. ‘So you thought you could put a slug in my back!’ is emphatic yet parodic because its idiom (‘slug’ for bullet) downplays the seriousness of what is being communicated. In typical modernist style, this dialogue—which is uttered at the moment the woman is shot—conflates desire, hatred, violence and death.

The ubiquity of emphatic modes of punctuation (exclamation marks and even non-alphabetic symbols such as #@*, and so on) in the comic strip is also noteworthy, since it aims to elicit shock. This syntactical style is complemented by visual qualities that convey a sense of everything being in motion and flux. Lines emanating out from the body, stars and other visual ‘cues’ indicate that the action is kinetic and that objects and bodies are volatile and constantly threaten to collide.
Exclamatory punctuation also highlights the inherently adversarial nature of the characters’ communication and as such the solitariness and iconoclasm of the hero, who is constantly pitted against everyone else.

Although this chapter is devoted to voice, there are several reasons for concentrating in such detail on a visual art form. Firstly, the defining characteristics of comic strips—their monstrative impact, their thematisation of urban crime and corruption, their spatio-temporal concatenation and the shock inherent in their dialogue—all influenced the type of language utilised and thus helped fashion the new hardboiled vernacular. The comic strip’s very ontology demanded that both vision and text be short, sharp, attenuated and to the point to maximise its impact and affective value. These speech patterns were also governed by the restrictions imposed by the print media—even Chester Gould, the highly regarded creator of the Dick Tracy series, was allocated a quota of words for each daily strip (Roberts 1993). As such, their language was necessarily economical.²⁸ That the crime comic’s narrative locus is overwhelmingly the metropolis is also significant in terms of its lexicon. Similar properties can be found in both the penny and tabloid press, as outlined in Appendix Three. The following analysis of *Double Indemnity* will illustrate how the typical hardboiled interplay between brevity and vernacular also governed the voice of the noir hero.

### 5.2.3 Cinema’s pulp milieu *par excellence*—film noir

What kind of an outfit is this anyway? Are we an insurance company, or just a bunch of dim-witted amateurs, to write a policy on a mugg²⁹ like that? Barton Keyes, *Double Indemnity*.

Urban patois and a brutal speech patterns pervade the entire film noir canon. It is used not only by the hardboiled hero but also by his cohorts, as evidenced in Keyes’ diatribe, above. Indeed, even commentators writing about noir have frequently parodically imitated this voice (Mueller 1998; 2001; Hankoff 1976). In *Double Indemnity*, Wilder and Chandler present a world so urban and modern that almost

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²⁸ Although it is generally agreed that the comic strips’ dialogue balloons were handwritten because this required less space than typeset text, Witek proposes that another reason for using handwritten text was that it more closely approximates the ‘individuality’ of the spoken word (Witek 1989), which if correct would substantiate the claim that voice is more central to the textual intelligibility of comic strips than most historians have previously acknowledged.
anyone who inhabits it must adopt new, gritty modes of speech to reflect the seediness surrounding them. Even the incidental night watchman who transports Neff via elevator to his office uses weary phrases inflected with grim resignation.

It is when delineating the character of Neff, however, that *Double Indemnity*’s language is at its most lively. Neff’s idiomactic lexicon and rapidfire delivery is ever-present. As he commences his dictation, he explains the purpose of his confession:

You think you’re such a hot potato as a claims manager, such a wolf on a phoney claim. Maybe you are, Keyes … You thought you had it cold, all wrapped up in tissue paper, with pink ribbons around it.

Through use of such neologistic language, Neff is signalled from the outset as a hardboiled hero. That Neff is familiar with the notion of a ‘wolf on a phoney claim’ indicates his familiarity with the urban underworld. Obviously wise to the various deceptions and capers that can occur within the metropolis, Neff is able to summarise and assess them succinctly. The use of the word ‘phoney’ is particularly pertinent. In an age of mechanical reproduction, authenticity was slowly being substituted by the mass production of objects, all of which are devoid of ‘aura’ and as such are little more than ‘phoney’ replicas. It is hardly surprising, then, that ‘phoney’ is such a commonly used word in the noir lexicon. Terms such as ‘hot potato’ and ‘wolf’ are also popular. The latter is modernist not only for its unorthodox employment, but also for designating an isolated, iconoclastic modern hero (the ‘lone wolf’). The highly ironic simile of the wrapping paper used by Neff also comments upon the modern world since it invokes a bourgeois feminised aesthetic of consumption and materialism so clearly at odds with the hardboiled domain inhabited by Neff.

After these opening words, Neff relates via voiceover his first visit to the Dietrichson abode. As discussed in the previous chapter, his assessment of the house and its environs (‘[o]ne of those Californian Spanish houses everyone was nuts about ten or fifteen years ago’) is deeply critical of aspiration and ostentation. This derision is conveyed not only through the dismissive tone of his speech, but also by the use of the term ‘nuts.’ In this context, the word ‘nuts’ is idiomatic but also carries distinctly pejorative connotations. Unlike Cain’s use of the same term in his novel *Double Indemnity*,

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Petra Désirée Nolan
Indemnity, Wilder deploys it in order to signal Neff’s ‘otherness’ to the masses who blindly subscribe to fashion and style.

In Neff’s recollection of his first sighting of Phyllis, he uses phrases at once implicitly derogatory and celebratory. It was ‘that dame upstairs,’ and the ‘way she had looked at [him],’ that piques Neff’s interest. The use of the word ‘dame,’ like ‘baby’ or ‘glamour girl,’ has strong modernist resonance, since it had been codified to designate a particular brand of femininity, mired in urbanism and defined by independence, toughness, licentiousness and a certain cheapness. A ‘dame’ was an iconic figure in the hardboiled world—invariably an attractive, desirable and feisty woman who uses artifice to augment her beauty. It is a term employed frequently in Double Indemnity and many 1940s films noirs. Most women, in the modern world and the noir canon, were ‘dames.’ Keyes uses the term in relation to ‘Margie,’ the fictitious character devised by Neff to cover a telephone conversation with Phyllis overheard by Keyes. In this context, ‘dame’ is at once disparaging and affectionate, particularly as Keyes remarks, ‘I bet she drinks from the bottle.’ Keyes ex-fiancée, who remains a nameless entity invoked only once, is also referred to as a ‘dame,’ and one with an unsavoury personal history, or so it transpired after Keyes had her investigated immediately prior to their intended nuptials. In joking collusion, Neff says that he understands that the erstwhile fiancée was ‘a tramp from a long line of tramps.’

The noir vernacular, as exemplified above, functions in a complex semiotic way. A word such as ‘dame’ not only simultaneously denigrates and celebrates its referent, but it also ensures the male hero’s distance from such a potentially destabilising force. Like the new woman of modernity, a dame is a figure who commands reluctant respect whilst inciting male fear. In fact, Neff’s language consistently displays this dialectical tendency of distance/proximity and attraction/repulsion. During their first meeting, in the midst of discussing insurance, Neff’s eye falls upon Phyllis’ shapely legs, which she crosses and uncrosses coquettishly. ‘That’s a honey of an anklet you’re wearing, Mrs Dietrichson,’ he remarks, the temerity of his comment at once negating and parodying the formality implicit in the use of the term ‘Mrs Dietrichson.’ Such an audacious declaration positions Neff as someone who is susceptible to feminine charms, yet whose desire is a hardboiled, detached one. There is something distinctly self-reflexive and ironic about the manner in which Neff appraises the anklet, and the slightly condescending
connotation of the term ‘honey’ ensures a distance that is aimed at Neff maintaining his equilibrium.

Other examples abound. When Phyllis unexpectedly arrives at Neff’s apartment, he invites her to ‘peel off’ her coat and come inside. Again, this light-hearted tone belies the depth of his attraction. It also masks his anxiety, which had been conveyed in the previous sequence where he loitered in public spaces and then paced restlessly back and forth in his living room. Moments before Phyllis’ arrival, the spectator has been apprised (through his voiceover which describes her as a ‘red-hot poker’) of Neff’s torment. This juxtaposition serves to emphasise the contrived nature of his understated response to her arrival. Vernacularised and off-hand language such as ‘peel off your coat’ functions to conceal the turmoil suffered by Neff.

Neologism and hardboiled idiom also allow Neff to survive and assert some measure of independence within a bureaucratic domain. In fact, both Neff and Keyes utilise vernacular in their verbal sparring matches. This is evidenced in their confrontation over Gorlopis’ insurance policy. Neff is mindful of maintaining high professional standards, and is intent upon exonerating himself from culpability in relation to the alleged Gorlopis scam. ‘Wait a minute, Keyes, I didn’t rate this beef,’ Neff responds, mildly indignant. ‘I clipped a note to that Gorlopis application to have him thoroughly investigated before we accepted the risk.’ Keyes then explains that his frustration is not with Neff’s capabilities as a salesman, but rather with the intrinsic shortcomings in company procedure. Keyes bemoans the fact that his job necessitates him sitting ‘up to my neck in phoney claims,’ simply because the insurance company is overly avaricious and will therefore sanction potentially lucrative business even when it appears ethically questionable. In response to Keyes complaints, Neff jokes, ‘turn the record over and let’s hear the other side,’ suggesting a familiarity with Keyes’ discourse of discontent, but also introducing an element of playful banter into the sterile domain of insurance. Use of idiom conveys a proletarian commonality and a masculine allegiance, uniting Neff and Keyes against the faceless corporation that threatens to deindividuate and dehumanise. This allows them to endure the more oppressive aspects of their working lives. Hardboiled language is also a way for Neff to convey his fondness for Keyes without compromising his masculinity. Neff refers to his mentor as an ‘old crab’ who carries on with a ‘song and dance.’ These terms impart affection without an overt declaration of admiration.
Certain phrases and terms are used to signify Neff as a particular ‘type’—an insurance man who knows the game. As part of his alibi, Neff calls a colleague, the ostensible reason for the call being that he needed some ‘dope’ on a public liability bond. In this context, ‘dope’ refers to specific insurance information. Whilst Neff’s patois and phraseology is partly industry-specific, its use primarily defines him as a modern subject.

As in the comic strip and the tabloid press, neologism in the noir world is frequently aligned with illicit activity. When the subject of criminality is alluded to in *Double Indemnity*, the term most frequently employed by Neff is ‘job.’ When describing to Phyllis the risks involved in lodging an insurance claim after a suspicious death, Neff talks about the dangers of a ‘monoxide job,’ which to a claims manager as sharp as Keyes is like ‘a slice of rare roast beef.’ More generically, Neff refers to murder as a ‘morgue job.’ At the end of the film, as Neff is slumped, dying in the corridor, Keyes telephones for an ambulance, and we hear him explaining that it is a ‘police job.’ In the final analysis, Neff’s life, like all existence in the modern world, is relegated to a category of ‘job,’ a standard transaction divested of any emotional import.

*Murder, My Sweet*’s Marlowe is a noir hero whose status as a modern subject is also conveyed through his hardboiled voice. As his police confession commences, Marlowe contextualises the story by alluding to a prior assignment he accepted against his better judgement ‘because my bank account was trying to crawl under a duck.’ Marlowe’s delivery is typically deadpan, masking any anxiety that may be felt over his constantly precarious financial situation. When Marlowe accompanies his newly acquired client Moose Malloy to Florians, a sleazy bar in which the missing Velda Valento once worked, his voiceover explains that ‘the joint looked like trouble.’ The credibility of this statement is underscored by the image of the flashing neon sign, with all its attendant connotations of urban iniquity and vice. At other times, Marlowe’s idiomatic speech assumes a sardonically humorous tone. Upon tracking down Jessie Florian, the widow of the previous proprietor of the ‘joint,’ Marlowe describes her as ‘a charming middle-aged lady with a face like a bucket of mud.’ As these words are delivered by voiceover, the shot dissolves to a distorted and distinctly unromantic close-up of the woman’s face as she blows her nose. Again, antithesis (‘charming’ and ‘bucket of mud’) provides an ironic commentary on the supposed misfortune of the woman’s physical attributes. ‘She was a gal who’d take a drink,’
deadpans Marlowe in his description of the unglamorous Mrs Florian, ‘she’d have to knock it down to get to the bottle.’ Marlowe’s wisecracking voice allows him to remain a distanced, modern observer of the dissolute world through which he moves.

An analysis of any 1940s film noir would reveal the centrality of this new, modern lexicon. Complementing this lexicon is a syntax that subscribes to the modern principles of brevity, fragmentation and ellipsis.

### 5.3 The syntax of modernity

There came a day when a new and urgent need for stimuli was met by the film. In a film, perception in the form of shocks was established as a formal principle. That which determines the rhythm of production on a conveyor belt is the basis of the rhythm of reception in the film (Benjamin 1968a, p. 175).

Shock was a central theme in Benjamin’s writings on modernity. It was also seen as a necessary outcome—almost an ontological inevitability—of cinema’s kinaesthetic properties. In understanding shock as one of Benjamin’s primary axes of modernity, however, it is necessary to distinguish between shock and pace or motion. For Benjamin, shock had many dimensions. It was dynamic, temporal, spatial, ideological and cultural, as suggested by his invocation of the ‘conveyor belt’ in the above quotation. Benjaminian shock was also metaphysical, and pervaded all aspects of everyday life, including commodification, industrialisation, urbanisation, exchange and interpersonal relationships. As discussed in previous chapters, shock was a structuring principle in Benjamin’s corpus, and particularly in his unfinished Passagen-Werk. Baudelaire’s œuvre displays a similar reliance upon ‘shocking’ fragmentation and the juxtapositioning of disparate themes. When referring to his collection of ‘poems in prose’ entitled Paris Spleen (written in 1864 and published in 1869), Baudelaire claimed its disjointed nature to be one of its most appealing aspects. As he explained to publisher Arsène Houssaye:

We can cut wherever we please, I my dreaming, you your manuscript, the reader his reading … Chop it into numerous pieces and you will see that each one can get along alone (Baudelaire 1970b, p. ix).

In the modern world, all aspects of quotidian life were perceived in discrete fragments that resisted synthesis and thus created shock. Shock could be experienced sensuously,
as a trauma resulting from the collision of unfamiliar images and sensations. From a temporal point of view, it endlessly reasserted the present moment.

As will be demonstrated in the following discussion, shock is a central structuring principle for the syntax of the hardboiled voice. Later in this chapter, shock will be revealed to operate dialectically with a lack of affect to produce a voice which at once mimics the rapidity of modern life whilst trying to disarm it.

5.3.1 Pulp fiction’s syntactical shock

In Cain’s *Double Indemnity*, Walter and Phyllis discuss the impending murder of Dietrichson and consider the logistics of their plan. It is essential, Walter emphasises, to engineer a situation where Dietrichson unwittingly signs the accident insurance papers:

> The first thing is, we’ve got to fix him up with that policy. I sell it to him, do you get that?—except that I don’t sell him. Not quite. I give him the works, the same as I give any other prospect. And I’ve got to have witnesses. Get that. There’s got to be somebody that heard me go right after him … (Cain 2002, p. 25).

Walter continues to highlight the necessities of the plan, and Phyllis expresses her excitement and appreciation. These highly charged themes are flatly delivered in a rapid exchange of dialogue devoid of authorial interpolation:

> ‘You better make a date pretty quick. Give me a ring.’
> ‘Tomorrow?’
> ‘Confirm by phone. Remember, you need a witness.’
> ‘I’ll have one.’
> ‘Tomorrow, then. Subject to call.’
> ‘Walter—I’m so excited. It does terrible things to me.’
> ‘I too.’
> ‘Kiss me’ (Cain 2002, p. 26)

Thus ends the dialogue section, as the text reverts back to Walter’s interior monologue. This excerpt amply exemplifies the new syntax of modernity. Characterised by ellipsis, rapidfire delivery and brevity, this modern syntax is a defining feature of pulp fiction. In the above-cited instance, the rapidity with which the information is conveyed echoes the tempo of the characters’ cognition. It also emphasises the imperative of speed for a successful execution of their plan. To achieve success in the modern world, one must talk and act quickly. Given the
enormity of the subject matter (the planned murder of the woman’s husband), such a curt delivery is also highly incongruous and thus shocking.

Analysis of other pulp fiction reveals similar patterns of brevity. Serialised in Black Mask in 1930, Frederick Nebel’s Tough Dick Donahue stories are attenuated and pared down. Both the dialogue and the text’s descriptive segments dispense with niceties and get straight to the point, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

Stein drove a fist to Donahue’s ear. Donahue shook his head, swung back of Stein. Micky flung himself at Donahue’s legs. Donahue went down.

In falling, he grabbed one of Stein’s legs and Stein went down too. Stein was kicking Donahue in the face, and Donahue reached back, caught one of Micky’s arms and forced him off his back. He muscled around, dragging Stein with him, his gun beneath his stomach. He recovered his gun, suddenly heaved toward Stein, and rapped the barrel against Stein’s head as Micky was scrambling to his feet. Stein grunted and lay flat on his back, and Donahue was on one knee when Micky kicked him in the jaw. The blow drove him tumbling back, but he rose, blood dripping from his face, and with his left hand caught Micky by the throat. With his right he clubbed Micky’s head, held him for a moment with his left hand, then let him drop limply to the floor (Nebel 1985, p. 173).

Nebel’s prose has been quoted at length for several reasons. It exemplifies pulp fiction’s ability to present a sequence of unremitting physical assaults that are as disturbing for their volume as for their visceral violence. Nebel’s style is spectacularly forceful, and its many ellipses mimic the action being conveyed. ‘Donahue shook his head, swung back on Stein,’ may be grammatically incorrect, but this elliptical syntax reflects events that are disjunctively juxtaposed with no temporal intervals. Rather than laboriously regaling the reader with supplementary description, Nebel (and his pulp novelist contemporaries) allows the action to speak for itself, in all its brutal immediacy. ‘Stein drove a fist to Donahue’s ear’ is such an evocative description that it requires no further embellishment. Modern shock informs not only the action (which is unequivocally violent) and the syntax of the prose, but also the interpersonal relationships which are conveyed as violent, adversarial and dynamic.

Naturally, there are a variety of practicalities to be considered in a linguistic assessment of pulp fiction. As Naremore notes, hardboiled writers were generally paid so little that they often produced their writing quickly out of sheer necessity (Naremore 1998). This presumably rendered ‘unessential’ words time-consuming, burdensome and obsolete. Of Double Indemnity, Cain said he wrote the story ‘very
slapdash and very quick,’ because he ‘was flat broke’ (Brunette & Peary 1976, p. 55). There is little doubt that the demands of production influenced the writing style, making it short, sharp and to the point.\textsuperscript{130} I would contend, however, that such brevity became so widespread in the hardboiled arena and particularly in pulp fiction because it mimicked the patterns of modernity in which ‘shock’ was a central factor.

A concise style was also a consideration in terms of consumption of these texts. Pulp fiction was sold in paperback format and made from durable paper. This durability—combined with a practical size—facilitated mobility, with readers able to take the books ‘into the streets.’ Reading was no longer a static activity confined to one’s parlour. Rather, it was experientially transformed. Stories were hurriedly read in short bursts on public transport, during work breaks or in between other activities, and in public spaces in which other distractions were present. In several respects, then, the modern, urban landscape was instrumental in determining pulp fiction’s syntactical structures. As the following analysis of Neff’s speech will demonstrate, brevity and shock also characterised the voice in the noir canon.

5.3.2 Hardboiled syntax and Double Indemnity

In Double Indemnity’s opening sequence, when Neff enters the office building and takes the elevator to his insurance company’s headquarters, a brief exchange with the night watchman takes place. Neff’s brusque responses are aimed at discouraging conversation and thus precluding unwanted intimacy:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Night watchman</th>
<th>Working pretty late aren’t you, Mr Neff?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Neff</td>
<td>Late enough. Let’s ride.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Night watchman</td>
<td>You look kind of all in at that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neff</td>
<td>I’m fine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Night watchman</td>
<td>How’s the insurance business, Mr Neff?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neff</td>
<td>Okay.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The watchman’s somewhat laboured servility does little to elicit a sympathetic response from Neff. Even when details of a highly personal and revelatory nature are proffered, Neff’s remains non-committal, uninterested and monosyllabic:

\textsuperscript{130} Black Mask editor Joe Shaw recognised this problem, and constantly felt he was fighting to establish quality in a market in which hack writing and low literary values were endemic (Nolan 1985).
They wouldn’t ever sell me any [insurance].
They said I had something loose in my heart.
Uh-huh. I say it’s rheumatism.

Yeah.

Such a brusque response on Neff’s part betrays no emotion. Shortly thereafter, Neff installs himself in the office, switches on the dictaphone machine and begins narrating the story. Not only is the dictaphone a cinematic device which allows a subjectivised and flâneuristic recollection, but it is also significant as a mode of bureaucratic communication demanding a particular style of language which is terse and utilitarian. In other words, Neff is able to convey vital information in a kind of shorthand, without the superfluousness of full sentences:

Office memorandum, Walter Neff to Barton Keyes, Claims Manager, Los Angeles, July 16th, 1938.

Neff then berates Keyes for not seeing the truth of the Dietrichson case because ‘it was smack up against [his] nose.’ Although Neff concedes Keyes’ insightfulness as a claims manager, he says:

You were pretty good in there for a while, Keyes. You said it wasn’t an accident. Check. You said it wasn’t suicide. Check. You said it was murder [slight pause] … check.

Neff’s confessing to the murder, then, is curt and disjointed. His shorthand use of ‘check’ complies with bureaucratic jargon and syntax. Structurally, however, it is analogous to the fragmentation of Benjamin’s corpus, as well as the writings of Baudelaire and a number of other modernists. Subjects are introduced quickly, jarringly and without further contextualisation. Such syntax also mimics the rapidity of urban life, whilst complying with modernity’s new semiotic order in which a chasm between signified and signifier exists: the shock from Neff’s confession results not only from its brutal syntactical patterns, but also from the disparity between this mode of delivery and its message.

This verbal terseness pervades the entire film and is incorporated on several levels. At one point, Neff stresses the importance of Phyllis’ familiarity with the formulated murder plan. The alibi is utterly dependent, insists Neff, upon precision and a ‘question of following the timetable, move by move.’ His obsessive recitation of
details indicates the importance he places upon adherence to a strict schedule. ‘You
start just as soon as the train leaves,’ he instructs Phyllis moments before he embarks:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Neff</th>
<th>When you get to the refinery turn off the highway onto the dirt road ...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phyllis</td>
<td>I remember everything.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neff</td>
<td>No speeding. You don’t want any cops stopping you ...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phyllis</td>
<td>Walter, we’ve been through all that so many times.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neff</td>
<td>When you leave off the highway, turn off all your lights. I’ll be back on the observation platform. I’ll drop off as close to the spot as I can. Let the train pass, then blink your lights twice.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Despite Phyllis’s protestations and her assurance that she is fully conversant with all aspects of their plan, Neff feels compelled to reiterate the details. Although partly motivated by narrative expediency (as a way in which the plan can be made available to the spectator before the action takes place), this repetition is also marked by a sense of urgency. The abundance of information with which both Phyllis and the spectator are assailed is all the more powerful because any neutralising ‘niceties’ are noticeably absent. Like that of Cain’s original text, the dialogue is shocking, due in equal part to its syntax and content. At another point in the film, when Neff talks to Phyllis on the telephone while Keyes loiters in his office, eavesdropping, Neff tells her to ‘make it snappy.’ In the modern world, one must talk quickly or else be ensnared. Engaging in superficial and unnecessary conversation runs the risk of rendering one too visible and obtrusive. By refashioning speech and paring it down to the bare essentials, the noir protagonist remains unobtrusive and safe.

The disjointed and terse nature of Neff’s speech is particularly noticeable in his communication with the femme fatale. In his voiceover confession, Neff explains that he ‘let [Phyllis] have it straight between the eyes,’ indicating an imperative to get straight to the point. The scene in Neff’s apartment, during which Phyllis voices her deep dissatisfaction with her marital situation, is also exemplary. Phyllis at first half-heartedly suggests that perhaps she should go, and Neff responds in a non-committal way. Moments later, she tries to leave and Neff draws her roughly into an amorous embrace. After declaring their mutual attraction, Neff returns to the topic of insurance scams, citing a recent instance of a wife who murdered her husband for the accident.
insurance being found guilty following an autopsy. Neff then fixes drinks, and Phyllis assesses the apartment:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phyllis</td>
<td>It’s nice in here, Walter. Who takes care of it for you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neff</td>
<td>A coloured woman comes in couple of times a week.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phyllis</td>
<td>Cook your own breakfast?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neff</td>
<td>I squeeze a grapefruit once in a while. Get the rest down at the corner drugstore.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This manner of response is typical. Neff’s sentences are taut and pithy, with a light-hearted tone implying a breezy lack of concern about his living arrangements. The haste with which he responds to Phyllis’ enquiries suggests that he has no desire to discuss the matter in any length and that he wishes to avoid any ‘feminine’ pity for his sparse existence. His brutally sparse voice is also indecorous, indicating a lack of gallantry and deference towards Phyllis (and, by extension, other ‘dames’). Again, this consolidates his status as an alienated, urban hero.  

A hardboiled and terse mode of speech also has a heuristic advantage. That Neff’s dialogue is characterised by economy allows him to interpret the speech of others, and get to the essence of what their words truly signify. When Neff offers a lift to Lola, he suspects that her proposed outing is a cover-up:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Neff</td>
<td>Going roller-skating eh? You like roller-skating?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lola</td>
<td>(replying with a combination of evasiveness and stubbornness) I can take it or leave it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neff</td>
<td>Only tonight you’re leaving it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lola</td>
<td>Yes, I am. I’m having a very tough time at home. My father doesn’t understand me and Phyllis hates me.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Neff’s brusque yet insightful observations thus prompt a confession of sorts from Lola, who admits that, whilst her destination is certainly the corner of Vermont and Franklin as defiantly stated earlier, her intended companion for the evening is not her female friend, but rather lover Nino Zachetti. When Lola attempts to defend Nino’s

131 Rabinowitz has noted a tendency in modernist discourses towards a feminisation of the bourgeois (Rabinowitz, 2002). In this respect, Neff’s lack of deference towards feminine, bourgeois sensitivities further aligns him with the proletarian domain of the hardboiled hero.
credentials, she nevertheless concedes that he is ‘hot-headed,’ to which Neff replies knowingly, ‘that comes expensive, doesn’t it?’ Neff also reassures Lola that ‘it’ll all straighten out.’ Neff’s observations are flâneuristic insofar as they demonstrate that he not only has considerable wisdom in relation to human behaviour, but that his pared down language enables him to summarise it succinctly.

The brevity of Neff’s diction is therefore a way to position him as an observer and interpreter. The lack of superfluous detail in his speech also seems to invite disclosure on Lola’s part, again confirming his status as a cinematic flâneur who solicits clues to decode those who surround him. Whilst the classic flâneur records his urban observations in diary form, Neff relays them via an office memorandum and a voiceover, both of which boast an attenuated delivery. In addition to his lexicographic excursions in the metropolis, as outlined in Chapter Four, the economy of expression in Neff’s verbal communication allows him to get to the semantic heart of the traditionally patterned and thus more obtuse speech of others. Syntax, then, is a primary means of reaffirming Neff’s role as observer and flâneur.

Complex emotional or metaphysical states of anguish are similarly conveyed through a verbal ‘shorthand.’ Rather than directly articulate his torment, Neff alludes to it using epigram and metaphor, explaining that he was ‘all twisted up inside, still holding onto that red-hot poker.’ Later, Lola suggests, in a highly emotional state, that Phyllis may have murdered her father. A direct danger is thus posed to Neff’s safety. In order to placate and silence her, Neff dines with Lola at a ‘Mexican joint,’ followed by a daytime trip to the beach. Neff is fearful, as he explains in his voiceover to Keyes, because he realises that Lola’s allegations were ‘dynamite, whether it was true or not.’ In the modern world, it is implied, the very act of enunciation is fraught with danger. Of the invention of the cinematic apparatus, Benjamin spoke of ‘burst[ing] this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second’ (Benjamin 1968c, p. 236). Both the femme fatale as ‘red-hot poker’ and the spoken word as ‘dynamite’ invoke Benjamin’s descriptions of cinema’s (and modernity’s) revolutionary potential for shock where all can be suddenly ‘burst … asunder.’

Following Neff’s discovery that Phyllis is amorously involved with Zachetti, Keyes catches up with Neff in the foyer at the end of the working day. Keyes warns him to ‘hang onto [his] hat.’ When asked why, Keyes responds, with studied under-emphasis:
Keyes: Oh, nothing much. That Dietrichson case just busted wide open.
Neff: How do you mean?
Keyes: The guy showed. That’s how.
Neff: What guy?
Keyes: The guy that helped her do it.

The case ‘busting right open’ can be likened to Benjamin’s ‘dynamite of the tenth of a second,’ suggesting the transformative powers of modern shock. It also reflects modernity’s temporal order, in which a discrete and fleeting incident assumes massive proportions and has lasting ramifications. Describing the temporality of modernity, Benjamin alludes to inventions such as that of the match in the mid-nineteenth century. For Benjamin, the match emblematised modern shock because its use enabled transformation to occur in an instant, where ‘one abrupt movement of the hand triggers a process of many steps’ (Benjamin 1968a, pp. 174-75). Similarly, in the noir world, cases bust open and it only takes an instant, an inadvisably uttered word or an unforeseen fortuity for the fate of the modern subject to be vastly and irrevocably altered.

Other films noirs exhibit a similar hardboiled voice characterised by syntactical brevity. In Murder, My Sweet (whose promotional posters were marked by a sense of urgency, lauding the film as ‘Rough! Tough! Terrific!’), the wisecracking voice of Marlowe is contrasted to the well-modulated tones of the sophisticated Jules Amthor. Marlowe refers to people as ‘cookies’ and displays a brutal, sharp diction. Conversely, the speech of Amthor and the elderly Mr Grayle is deliberate and precise, its cadence aligned with a more traditional sensibility. As will be seen in the following section, the lexicon and syntax of the hardboiled voice is complemented by a propensity for symbolisation and subtextualisation, in keeping with modernity’s new linguistic order in which semiotic inversions became commonplace.
5.4 The semiotic inversions of modernity

5.4.1 Symbolisation, modernity and Baudelaire

As previously discussed, modernity was an historical period in which there was a preoccupation with processes of signification. In many discourses, objects were divested of their traditional, absolute meaning, and assigned new and variegated semantic status. Linguistic structures such as antithesis, antinomy, metaphor, allegory and metonymy reigned. Although various modes of symbolisation had obviously been employed in pre-modern literature and poetry, in the radically restructured social order of modernity, they became almost obligatory.

A number of diverse discourses and paradigms reflect modernity’s semiotic inversions. Freud’s theories of dreams, cathexes and parapraxes are predicated—at the most fundamental level—on commutation and polysemy, where real meanings are repressed, displaced, transformed or else appear in totally different guise. The rupture between signified and signifier in the realm of dreams, for instance, necessitated an ‘archaeological’ therapeutic approach in order to excavate the true ‘essence’ or meaning, which was confined to the unconscious and thus not immediately accessible. In Freudian terms, the true meaning resided in the ‘latent’ rather than the ‘manifest’ content of dreams (Freud 1998). A number of relationships were possible between ‘latent’ and ‘manifest’ content, which could be structured antithetically, metonymically, or with seemingly no logical connection at all.  

Structural linguistics was another area that reflected an anxiety over the mutability inherent in all systems of signification. Language was no longer seen to possess a reassuring fixity. This theme was also explored in the fin-de-siècle Symbolist movement. ‘What are words themselves but symbols,’ declaimed Arthur Symons in 1899, ‘almost as arbitrary as the letters which compose them?’ (Symons

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132 ‘The dream-thoughts and the dream-content are presented to us like two versions of the same subject-matter in two different languages,’ wrote Freud. ‘[T]he dream-content seems like a transcript of the dream-thoughts into another mode of expression, whose characters and syntactic laws it is our business to discover …’ (Freud 1998, p. 49).
The profusion of signs in the modern world, and an acknowledgement of the arbitrariness of all language systems, influenced expressionist artists such as Kandinsky, who sought to construct a new visual language through his abstract and expressionist images.

Simmel was another modernist philosopher for whom ‘reality’ could not be simplistically apprehended. Not only were semiotic systems inherently unstable, but Simmel argued that reality was inflected or even determined by individual consciousness. In *Philosophy of Money*, he writes:

> [W]hat we call proof is none other than the establishment of a psychological constellation which gives rise to such a feeling. No sense perception of logical derivations can directly assure us of a reality (cited in Frisby 1985, p. 53).

No amount of empirical observation (or ‘logical derivation’), implies Simmel, can ever assure the modern subject of an immutable truth. Rather, perception always entailed a filtering, so that objects acquired any number of different and often disparate meanings. Similarly, for Marx, the industrial revolution inaugurated a new social order in which any semiotic fixity was jettisoned in favour of new amorphous structures in which meanings constantly shifted, as demonstrated by the oft-cited quotation from *The Communist Manifesto*:

> All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life … (Marx & Engels 1967, p. 83).

In addition to the degradation resulting from industrialisation, Marx believed that it gave rise to a situation in which objects gained ‘phantasmagoric’ value above and beyond their material reality. In other words, a system of signification arose in which objects were invested with additional meaning by being fetishised as capitalist commodities. The value of these objects was not readily apparent through visual assessment of their physical properties. Instead, they were beguiling and powerful

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133 English critic, poet and prominent member of the Decadent movement of the 1890s, Symons wrote the influential *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899), which introduced English readers to French Symbolism (Symons 1998).
because they were culturally designated as ‘commodities’ and hence inscribed with desirability. Since their meaning could not be empirically deduced, commodities and fetish objects required a new interpretative approach. Their meaning could only be uncovered through an application of metaphor or metonymy. Fashion objects, for instance, can be seen as somatic extensions of the ‘self’ (Phyllis’ anklet representing her mobility and urbanity, for instance). The ‘meaning’ of fetish objects was reliant upon commutation and was only discernible through a wider contextualisation; if the anklet were appraised in isolation and solely on its material merits, its true significance would be occluded or lost altogether.

Processes of metaphorisation and symbolisation also became commonplace in nineteenth century literature, and can be seen operating in the œuvres of Baudelaire, Zola and Proust, amongst others. 134 As discussed earlier, Baudelaire’s Le Cygne (1859) has been valorised for its metanarrative commentary on modernity’s semiotic inversions. Dedicated to Victor Hugo, it concerns Paris’ urban transformation during the Second Empire, and warrants being assessed in full:

I think about you now, Andromache,
By this sad stream that brings back long lost years;
Your grievous fate, your fallen majesty,
This false Simois, swollen with your tears,

Has burst its banks to fertilize my mind,
Just as I crossed the new-built Carrousel.
The Paris of the past is undermined—
If only human hearts could change at will!

My mind’s eye holds them still: the masons’ sheds,
The mounds of rough-hewn capitals and shafts,
The moss upon the masonry, the weeds,
The rubble and debris of building crafts.

Once a menagerie was spread out there;
Just at dawn, as work began, with dust-men
Sending their dark storm-clouds into the clear,
Cold, quiet city air, I came upon

A snow-white swan that had escaped its crate,
Its webbed feet stumbling over cobblestone,
Bedraggled plumage trailing in the dirt.
The creature stood beside a dried-up drain …
(Baudelaire 1997, p. 227).

134 See Julia Kristeva’s exposition on Proust’s use of symbolisation (Kristeva 1993).
Reading Baudelaire’s poem as an allegorical indictment of Haussmann’s project is hardly new.\(^{135}\) And yet, while there are specific allusions to the material realities of its historical period (the ‘new-built Carrousel,’ for instance), the poem’s true currency lies in its ability to use allegory to evince a more general sense of unease at encroaching modernisation. It is through the juxtapositioning of seemingly incongruous images and concepts that Baudelaire is able to generate anxiety and thus allegorise his distaste for the modern world.\(^{136}\) The purity and innocence of the ‘snow-white swan,’ for instance, is counterpoised by the ‘dried-up drain’ to evoke an almost unbearable sense of melancholy and loss. The swan also acts as a metaphor for the dispossession and estrangement engendered by new urban spaces.

In his study of Baudelaire’s poetry using a theoretical paradigm he terms ‘schizoanalysis,’\(^ {137}\) Holland believes that the sort of semiotic process which underpins Baudelaire’s canon is one which ultimately reinforces the primacy of objects:

> Partly out of a modernist preference for textual inscription rather than direct address, in which meaningful communication is subordinated to contextual reference; and partly out of a refusal of the binary oppositions, essential values, and hallowed metaphors of romantic symbolism, Baudelaire’s metonymic poetics aims against the grain of (ethical, aesthetic, poetic) socio-symbolic codes to focus primarily on things (Holland 1993, p. 67).

In its focus on commodities, Baudelaire’s allegorical style is supremely modern. That his writing is characterised by a profusion of ‘things’ is one way whereby the ephemera of modern life is enacted. It is also a way of rendering objects ‘more beautiful or less hideous’ as Holland puts it, thus allowing the degraded modern world to be revitalised. This ‘poetic charge,’ however, is ever susceptible to ‘the weary tedium of spleen’ (Holland 1993, p. 67), indicating that semiotic inversion, and

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\(^{135}\) See for instance (Lombardo 1993). Benjamin claimed that Baudelaire’s ‘allegorical genius’ resided in a ‘specific signification where the commodity acquires value by virtue of its price,’ thus suggesting the foundation of Baudelaire’s allegorical poetics to be modern capitalism (Benjamin 1999, pp. 21-22).

\(^{136}\) Baudelaire was extremely critical of Napoleon’s rule of France, stating that ‘the supreme glory of Napoleon III, in the eyes of History and of the French people, will have been to prove that anybody can govern a great nation as soon as they have got control of the telegraph and the national press’ (Baudelaire 1949, p. 39).

\(^{137}\) Schizoanalysis is a theoretical paradigm that synthesises psychoanalysis and socio-historical contextualisation. Rather than understand psychopathologies as aberrant individual states, schizoanalysis sees them as responses to specific cultural coordinates (Holland 1993).
particularly the process of investing material objects with transcendental value, is at best a precarious one.

As the above investigation suggests, modern life, with all its disruptive changes, necessarily entailed a new mode of communication in which semiotic reconstitution prevailed. Baudelaire’s poetic allegory and his preoccupation with the scission between sign and signified is thus historically determined. Such a semiotically inverted linguistic order finds its experiential equivalent in the figure of the classic flâneur. In his wanderings through the urban milieu, the flâneur reads his surroundings, yet this hermeneutic enterprise is not as deductive or straightforward as it may appear. As discussed in the previous chapter, the flâneur’s ability to read and render intelligible his landscape depends upon his competence with interpreting semiotic complexities and incongruities. Gagnon speaks of the flâneur’s tendency to aestheticise and fetishise the desired object, so that it becomes:

… a divine sign, better to deny its total insignificance … He imagines the city as a temple or, better, as organized nature, a forest of symbols in order to forget that it is only a department store where all things and beings are exchanged (Asselin 1999, p. 202).

In negotiating his way through the urban terrain, the flâneur must see his surroundings as ‘a forest of symbols,’ as Asselin puts it. A sophisticated investigative approach with an acknowledgement of semiotic inversion is therefore required.

Baudelaire’s allegory also proposes an incipient modern cynicism. For the narrator of Le Cygne, everything changes except his sorrow: in the modern and desacralised world, such sorrow seems inevitable. In this socio-historical context, linguistic processes of metaphor and analogy can be understood as reclamatory and empowering gestures. Symbolisation imbued objects with additional meaning, creating what Benjamin would term ‘secular epiphany’ or ‘profane illuminations’ (Benjamin 1978, p. xxxi). To redeem his urban peregrinations and reanimate his existence, the flâneur must fetishise the objects he encounters (including the new woman) using metaphor and metonymy.

New linguistic structures rescued both the classic flâneur and the noir hero from being subsumed into a potentially horrifying and meaningless pattern of unintelligible signs. Like the classic flâneur, the hardboiled hero’s attempt to elevate or transform objects through use of metaphor and analogy is a project fraught with danger. As Terdiman notes of Baudelaire’s canon, ‘an irrepressible otherness of signs,
an irreducible unruliness of language, might … seem the lone unambiguous signifier in Baudelaire’s culture’ (Terdiman 1993, p. 181). In other words, in a world of uncertainty, the only constant is the unreliability of signifiers. Meaning was always polyvalent, and totally dependent upon context, interpretative approach, historicity or the subjectivity of those who apprehended it.

Never far from an acknowledgement that all is futile, the modern subject nonetheless earnestly deploys symbolism in order to convey his responses to the modern world. A textual analysis of pulp fiction and film noir will reveal how the use of symbol functions to signal the hardboiled hero as a modern, cynical subject.

5.4.2 Pulp fiction’s linguistic patterns

Beautiful hands are as rare as jacaranda trees in bloom, in a city where pretty faces are as common as runs in dollar stockings
(Chandler 1985, p. 232)

Pulp fiction delights in playing with language. Metaphor, metonymy and other processes of commutation pervade are commonplace in this literary forum. Similes prove particularly prevalent, and Chandler kept a record of those he heard in order to use them in his writing (Porter 1981). Even a cursory consideration of a Chandler text proves illuminating in this respect. In the above excerpt from Blackmailers Don’t Shoot, simile is used to create a modernist aesthetic of dualism. Although the synthesis of ‘beautiful hands’ and ‘flowering trees’ may well accord with a romanticised ideal of feminine beauty, the comparison of ‘pretty faces’ to ‘runs in dollar stockings’ is disjunctive and seemingly illogical, connecting a ‘positive’ value to something with undesirable connotations. Chandler’s polarisation of ‘beauty’ (traditional) and ‘pretty’ (modern and artificial) also highlights the ephemerality of the latter whilst assigning an eternal value to the former. To be ‘pretty’ in the modern world has no immanent or transcendental meaning. Instead, it was a common, reproducible and ultimately unremarkable attribute. Its connection to ‘dollar stockings’ (which all the ‘dames’ of pulp fiction would undoubtedly utilise in their artful attempts to achieve aesthetic glamour without a large financial investment) further strengthens this. Such a seemingly oxymoronic simile is supremely modern. Its antithetical structure accords with modernity’s reconceptualisation of beauty as artificial and impermanent, a phenomenon that will be further discussed in Chapter Six.
The cinematic element of pulp fiction derives largely from simile, oxymoron and unorthodox juxtaposition. Although Chandler claimed in personal correspondence of 1949 that the American public never quite understood the strong ‘element of burlesque’ in his writing (Chandler 1997a, p. 53), there is no doubt that such semiotic inversions spoke forcefully to a largely urban public (or at least one who aspired to an urban, sophisticated sensibility) who were fully conversant with modernity’s new linguistic patterns. Simile is also a central means by which Chandler imbues his images with visceral or sensuous dimensions. Also in Blackmailers Don’t Shoot, Rhonda Farr’s voice is ‘like iced velvet’ (Chandler 1985, p. 232), whilst another character has a ‘slack mouth working like melting rubber’ (Chandler 1985, p. 236). Through the use of such similes, the fiction is constantly alluding to disparate and incongruous objects in order to produce meaning. Chandler’s pulp writing is very cinematic in its focus upon the scopic and in its employment of ‘shockingly’ disjunctive images. These images, furthermore, are often themselves evocative of modernity: ‘hot lights’ and ‘melting rubber’ recall the metropolis and the assembly line respectively.

Like the classic flâneur, the hero of pulp fiction appraises and assesses his environment. Linguistic structures of displacement are required to convey the semiotically complex modern world he encounters. Simile and metaphor also enable the modern subject to deflect the more menacing aspects of his life, and to defuse any potentially traumatic or dangerous situations. A similar strategy can be seen operating in Neff’s voice.

5.4.3 Double Indemnity’s double entendres

Upon arriving at the Dietrichson home, Neff explains to Phyllis that the purpose of his visit is to renew the lapsed insurance policies on the family’s two vehicles. Having just come inside from sunbathing on the roof, Phyllis is positioned at the top of the stairs. Openly appraising her physical attributes, Neff’s words ostensibly focus upon business:
Neff          The insurance ran out on the fifteenth. I’d hate to think of your having a smashed fender or something while you’re … not fully covered.

Phyllis      Perhaps I know what you mean, Mr Neff. I’ve just been taking a sunbath.

Neff          No pigeons around, I hope …

Neff pauses and smiles while alluding to the fact that Phyllis is ‘not fully covered,’ thus acknowledging the fact that both characters are aware of the verbal game which is being played out. In compliance with modernity’s linguistic order, Neff’s light-hearted use of double entendre means that the inflammatory message (the power exerted by the femme fatale) is couched in prosaic and seemingly innocuous phrases. By inflecting his words with a comic element and subtextualising their true meaning, Neff ensures that he remains in control of a situation that could prove metaphysically destabilising.

The language of *Double Indemnity* is characterised at all times by the fact that its ‘truth’ resides at a subtextual level. In keeping with modernity’s tendency to conflate antithetical concepts, Neff’s voice is also ironic and contradictory. Whilst the term ‘baby’ is initially employed to convey how ‘crazy’ he is about Phyllis (a sentiment which she immediately reciprocates), ultimately it is divested of any positive connotations. Moments before killing her, Neff entreats:

> You can do better than that, can’t you baby? Better try it again. Maybe if I came a little closer …

After Phyllis proves unable to fire the second, fatal shot at Neff, his last words before killing her are ‘goodbye, baby,’ thus dispensing with any sentimentality or endearment associated with the word. In the final analysis, the term ‘baby’ is employed ironically to convey the fact that Neff feels nothing but hatred and contempt towards the object of his desire.

Elsewhere, the use of analogy and simile allows Neff to convey his ardour without fully exposing his vulnerability. There are several instances where Neff reverts to a joking or self-deprecating tone to protect himself from rejection.

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138 Censorship rules need also be acknowledged since they contributed to a particularly coded style. In October, 1927, for instance, Hays issued a series of *Don’ts* and *Be Carefuls*, including forbidden profanity, illegal drug traffic, sex and childbirth (Brownlow 1990).
Similarly, he consistently employs metaphors to distance himself from that of which he speaks. The thematic content of these metaphors, furthermore, is itself significant for its modernist resonance, and the film’s two recurring analogies—concerning motoring and gambling—also harness paradigmatically modern topoi. The significance of motorised transport has been discussed at length in the previous chapter, whilst gambling is a recurring theme in the works of Baudelaire, Benjamin, Simmel and Zola. As Benjamin notes, Baudelaire celebrated the gambler as a type of modern hero (Benjamin 1968a). Carried out in interstitial urban areas, gambling was seen as a way of engaging with fortuity, spatio-temporal fragmentation and the abolition of the rationalism of cause and effect. These were all central features of a modern world order. For Benjamin, gambling converted time into a narcotic, and abolished rectilinear models of temporality (Benjamin 1978; 1999). By indulging in gambling, the flâneur/modern subject could brazenly defy the temporal order of capitalism whilst simultaneously appropriating it into the realm of nefarious recreation, as Benjamin explains:

Gambling even contains the workman’s gesture that is produced by the automatic operation, for there can be no game without the quick movement of the hand by which the stake is put down or a card is picked up, The jolt in the movement of a machine is like the so-called coup in a game of chance (Benjamin 1968a, p. 177).

In providing new temporal patterns in which the moment (the coup, or cut) is of primary importance, gambling offers an antidote to boredom by elevating the moment. Indeed, a number of 1950s sociological treatises on the ‘problem’ of gambling suggested that its growing popularity was a response to the subjugation demanded by an increasingly corporate life. Gambling provided temporary respite, it was believed, from the worrying feeling that an unknown force was ‘pulling all the complicated strings to which this jumbled world dances’ (Bell 1953, p. 144). As an activity constituting an escape from the drudgery of modern life, gambling held much aural promise for the flâneur. It alleviated what Baudelaire terms ‘that weird ailment Ennui’ (Baudelaire 1989, p. 74).

Throughout the nineteenth century, gambling was inextricably connected in the cultural imagination to a hardboiled milieu of casinos, bars, and other sites of debauchery and excess. Either metaphorically or thematically, gambling pervades the noir canon. Gilda is set in a Buenos Aires casino, with the hardboiled hero Johnny
running the joint for Gilda’s husband. Although gambling is not explicitly narrativised in *Double Indemnity*, it is nonetheless crucial to the film’s meaning in several respects. Neff works in insurance, an industry that, at its most fundamental level, deals with uncertainty, coincidence and chance. Neff’s criminal activities, furthermore, place him in a chancy and precarious position. In explaining his motivation for becoming involved in the scheme to murder Dietrichson, he cites an overwhelming desire to rort the system:

> You’re like the guy behind the roulette wheel, watching the customers to make sure they don’t crook the house. And then one night, you get to thinking how you could crook the house yourself. And do it smart. Because you’ve got that wheel right under your hands. You know every notch in it by heart … you’ve got that wheel right under your hands. You know every notch in it by heart.

By using this analogy, Neff is communicating his dissatisfaction with the more oppressive elements of his existence. Neff’s decision to embark upon a life of criminality is the ultimate gamble with his safety. Gambling promises excitement and fulfilment. At the same time, it symbolises the ultimate precariousness of existence in a modern world in which nothing is certain and where chance plays a huge role in determining the outcome of any activity. The domain of insurance is governed by statistics, actuarial tables, pecuniary obsession, risk analyses, calculations and mathematical tabulations. And yet in *Double Indemnity*, luck, fortuity and a menacing sense of the unknown prevail. One’s destiny, like modern life, boils down to chance. Like the classic flâneur, Neff ultimately a gambler.

From a structural point of view, *Double Indemnity*’s narrative trajectory—and particularly its moments of suspense—is also informed by the concept of gambling. All boils down to fortuity and coincidence. After Phyllis and Neff have thrown Dietrichson’s body onto the tracks, she tries to start the car and the engine stalls. At this point, the viewer is painfully reminded of just how precarious their plan is, and how a minor imprecision, or a chance encounter, would nullify all their efforts. In this scene, moreover, Wilder is able to neatly marry the two themes of motoring and gambling.

Neff’s other favoured metaphor, that of the ‘red-hot poker,’ has typically been interpreted using a psychoanalytic framework. For Krutnik, it is a ‘phallic’ image (Krutnik 1991, p. 253). And yet, like the analogies of locomotion and gambling, the ‘red-hot poker’ also has a specifically modernist resonance: Phyllis is
an object of desire, and as such is both beautiful and dangerous. Consistent with a Baudelairean aesthetic in which beauty and love are inflected with the profane and the decadent, Phyllis’ appeal resides in the fact that she is a deadly gamble. Utterly corrupt, she is potentially as lethal as a ‘red hot poker,’ but she also represents excitement, shock and transcendence of quotidian banality. Poker is, of course, also a gambling term, and Neff’s treatment of this ‘red-hot poker’ is similar to the experience of gambling: the participant knows it will probably lead to a negative outcome, yet he is captivated by its spell. As Neff admits, ‘the hook was too strong,’ and he was unable to resist its temptation, in much the same way that a gambler cannot resist the thrill of placing a bet. Neff’s desire for Phyllis, then, is the most dangerous metaphysical gamble possible, leading not only to his moral dissolution, but ultimately his mortal demise as well.

That Neff is appealing to an assumed empathy in Keyes is also noteworthy. ‘You know how it is, Keyes,’ Neff beseeches. ‘In this business you can’t sleep for trying to figure out the tricks they could pull on you.’ This mode of address is not aimed at eliciting total sympathy from Keyes, but it nevertheless assumes that Keyes would understand the dangerous allure of the femme fatale, the frustrations inherent in routine labour, and the other perils of modern life. The spectator is also covertly invited to identify with these frustrations. In this sense, all modern subjects are implicated in a desire to rort the system, thus exempting Neff from being simplistically pathologised as a ‘villain.’ In the modern world, Neff implies, all players are essentially gamblers.

The noir canon’s semiotic inversions are consistent with those found in other modern discourses. Moreover, in harnessing highly modernist themes (gambling, locomotion and its attendant thrill, and the lethal properties of the modern woman) and then troping them, Wilder and Chandler’s dialogue creates a modern, hardboiled voice. Finally, the ontological aspects of this voice need to be considered in terms of their historical specificity.
5.5 The ontology of the modern voice

5.5.1 Cynicism, irony and paranoia as modernist imperatives

In *The Metropolis and Mental Life* (1903), Simmel expounds upon the new modes of perception and cognition demanded by urban existence. In pre-industrial rural societies, he explains that ‘the slower, more habitual, more smoothly flowing rhythm’ of daily allowed one to indulge in emotionalism (Simmel 1998, p. 52). Conversely, in the modern, urban world, the tempo of life and the proliferation of stimuli threatened the psychic equilibrium of the individual, requiring a buffer. It is for this reason, contends Simmel, that the urban individual’s mental activity became divorced from the ‘depths of personality’ (Simmel 1998, p. 53). In the new world order, emotional candour and openness became fraught with danger. The new subject, believes Simmel, needs to develop a number of survival strategies, all of which strive for a distanced and ‘unemotional’ demeanour.

In his discussions on film noir, Hirsch mentions the disparity between the manner of *deliverance* of the noir hero’s voiceover (characterised by monotone and lack of affect), and the incendiary nature of its *subject matter*. It is with ‘a mixture of rue and irony,’ declares Hirsch, that the noir hero recollects his ‘wrong-headed lust’ (Hirsch 1981, p. 39). This marked chasm between style and content, however, has yet to be explored from an historical perspective. In fact, what Hirsch refers to as the ‘cool, matter-of-fact quality of the [noir] narration’ (Hirsch 1981, p. 39) can be closely aligned with the qualities of irony and cynicism. As a socio-historical contextualisation will demonstrate, these are properties which were cultivated by the nineteenth century modern subject as a way to defuse the paranoia engendered by urban life, and to provide the buffer which Simmel felt was so desperately required. Replete with irony and cynicism, the hardboiled voice is thus historically determined.

Sloterdijk is another critic who posits cynicism as a defining feature of modernity. As he explains in *Critique of Cynical Reason*, modern cynicism was ontologically different from its antecedents. No longer idiosyncratic, iconoclastic and confined to marginalised individuals, cynicism in the modern world increasingly became a cultural imperative, diffused across the entire social spectrum (Sloterdijk 1987). Sloterdijk’s pragmatic approach thus sees the acquisition of a cynical
sensibility as an essential mechanism of adjustment given modernity’s new epistemological and social order. This would accord not only with Simmel’s stance, but also with the theoretical paradigm of schizoanalysis cited earlier in this chapter, where psychopathological conditions such as narcissism or paranoia are seen to have their causes in cultural conditions rather than individual aberration. In other words, to be cynical is no longer antisocial; rather, it is to participate ‘in a collective, realistically attuned way of seeing things’ (Sloterdijk 1987, p. 5).

Many celebrated modernist thinkers, Sloterdijk contends, were cynics. He includes Nietzsche (‘the thinker of ambivalence’) in this category (Sloterdijk 1987, pp. xxviii-xxix). Certainly, an assessment of nineteenth century literature and philosophy also unearths a widespread cynicism. Baudelaire wrote, ‘[w]hen I have inspired universal horror and disgust, I shall have conquered solitude’ (Baudelaire 1949, p. 15). To elicit ‘horror and disgust’ seems _prima facie_ to carry negative connotations. On the other hand, by removing himself from his fellow citizens, Baudelaire—like the classic flâneur—is able to become truly strong. Such an affectation is indisputably cynical, and this sensibility can be discerned throughout Baudelaire’s professional œuvre as well as in his personal correspondence.

Pulp fiction novelists also typically cultivated a modern cynicism in their own worldviews. By his own admission, Chandler was a ‘contentious fellow’ (Chandler 1997a, p. 9) who succeeded in offending many of his contemporaries. He frequently denounced his literary peers and was publicly contemptuous of Hollywood’s superficiality and commercialism, which he critiqued in several articles in the _Atlantic Monthly_. Wilder has also been variously referred to as a cynic and someone whose romanticism was tempered by acerbity (Farber 1981; Sarris 1976, 1991). Whilst dismissive of these appellations, Wilder he did concede that his vision was ‘ironic’ (Crowe 1999, p. 142). I would contend, however, that cynicism is a central element of Wilder’s sensibility. As is suggested in Baudelaire’s quotation, above, cynicism (and the solicitation of ‘horror and disgust’) is a way to conquer

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139 Chandler apparently disparaged any creative activity in Hollywood: its screenwriters were a ‘dreary lot of hacks’ (Chandler 1997b, p. 118), and he accused certain producers of being ‘low-grade individuals with the morals of a goat, the artistic integrity of a slot machine, and the manners of a floorwalker with delusions of grandeur’ (Chandler 1997b, p. 120). For Chandler, Hollywood’s ‘superficial friendliness … is pleasant—until you find out that nearly every sleeve conceals a knife’ (Chandler 1997b, p. 123).
solitude, and thus to deal with the feelings of estrangement and isolation engendered by the modern, urban world. Given the fact that the majority of Wilder’s family, including his mother, perished in concentration camps, there is no doubt that Wilder’s work was also strongly informed by pathos. In response to hearing that his erstwhile collaborator I.A.L. Diamond had described him as ‘sad,’ Wilder responded that ‘the real humorist is always sad’ (Crowe 1999, p. 134). Cynicism, like humour, provides a means to harness and contain this pathos whilst rendering it as something quite different.

Whilst paranoia, cynicism and irony have all been identified as axiomatic traits of the hardboiled hero, they have typically been attributed to a postwar period of trauma and uncertainty. Crowther believes noir’s paranoia to reflect the disillusionment of returning servicemen as well as a growing fear of communism (Crowther 1988). Buchsbaum suggests that Neff’s irony and wit are bravado-style affectations used as weapons against the anxiety provoked by the modern world (Buchsbaum 1986). At times, Buchsbaum’s argument veers towards issues of modernity, yet his definition of paranoia is nevertheless, to some extent, transhistorical, particularly as he quotes from Freudian theory.140 For Vernet, ‘the wisecrack is at once a sign of independence … a refusal of the rules of propriety … and a mark of experience’ (Vernet 1993, p. 17). Vernet’s interpretation of the cynical hardboiled voice invokes discourses of American national identity based upon iconoclasm and anti-authoritarianism. Most commentary concerning the irony, cynicism and paranoia of the hardboiled voice resorts to zeitgeist, transhistorical or mythical structures. As an analysis of Neff’s voice reveals, however, these properties can be understood as historically specific responses to a relatively unchartered and often terrifying modern landscape.

140 Buchsbaum quotes from Freud’s On the Mechanism of Paranoia (1911): ‘what lies at the core of the conflict in cases of paranoia among males is a homosexual wish-phantasy of being a man’ (Buchsbaum 1986, p. 37) (italics his).
5.5.2 Neff’s speech

When Phyllis arrives unannounced at Neff’s apartment, she begs him to think positively of her. Unmoved, Neff displays a typical lack of courtesy:

| Phyllis | I must have said something that gave you a terribly wrong impression. You must never think anything like that about me, Walter. |
| Neff    | Okay. |
| Phyllis (despairing) | No, it’s not okay. Not if you don’t believe me. |
| Neff    | What do you want me to do? |
| Phyllis | I want you to be nice to me. Like the first time you came to the house. |

Clearly, Neff remains unconvinced by Phyllis’ protestations of virtue and innocence. When Phyllis implores him to ‘be nice’ to her, he responds that this is impossible, that it can never be like the first time, because ‘something has happened.’ Presumably this ‘something’ is Neff’s realisation of Phyllis’ evil nature. And yet it is shortly after this exchange that their desire is consummated. Love cannot offer salvation; rather, it guarantees destruction, and despite his ardour, Neff appears resigned to a sorry fate. He readily submits to this destiny with weary cynicism.

Throughout the film, the tone of Neff’s voice remains blasé and deadpan. Inherent in this worldweariness is the implication that Neff is acutely familiar, either experientially or cognitively, with Phyllis’ murderous desire, and that the only defensive response is to become a detached and cynical observer. When she explains how she loathes her husband due to his poor treatment of her, Neff’s words suggest an understanding of Phyllis’ anguish:

| Neff | So you lie awake in the dark and listen to him snore and get ideas. |
| Phyllis | Walter, I don’t want to kill him, I never did. Not even when he gets drunk and slaps my face. |
| Neff | Only sometimes you wish he was dead. |
| Phyllis | Perhaps I do. |
| Neff | And you wish it was an accident, and you had that policy. For fifty thousand dollars. Is that it? |
For Sloterdijk, cynicism is a *modus operandi* allowing the modern subject to survive in the face of the uncaring crowd. In this respect, it is defensive rather than indulgent, and is historicist in nature in that it knows too much and has learned from the past:

> The characteristic odor [sic] of modern cynicism … is a constitution of consciousness afflicted with enlightenment that, having learned from historical experience, refuses cheap optimism (Sloterdijk 1987, p. 6).

In other words, the modern subject neither has recourse to absolute values nor to an edifying belief that all is easily apprehended. Because of this precarious epistemological state where subscription to ‘cheap optimism’ is no longer possible, the modern subject must develop a pragmatic and programmatic way of preserving his integrity. Cynicism is such a device *par excellence*. Rather than seeing Neff’s flat intonation and lack of affect in terms of individual aberration or psychopathology, as has typically been done, I would suggest that Neff’s cynical countenance is a modernist imperative. His response is necessarily weary: he has seen it all before. Like the classic flâneur, Neff’s urban life has exposed him to countless horrors and more than a few insurance scams. Because of this, he has cultivated a weary cynicism.

Neff’s voice is at all times deadpan and self-deprecatory. The outset of his confession, for instance, is delivered flatly, belying the enormity of his words. Despite the fact that Neff is perspiring and obviously in pain from his gunshot wound, his speech remains monotonous, betraying nothing of Neff’s crisis. Such a mode of delivery is not only cynical; it is also defined by a grim sense of the inevitable. It repudiates sentimentality even in the face of the most major events, such as death. This tone continues throughout the film and examples abound. For instance, when Lola explains her dilemma—she is in love with a man whom her family has denounced—Neff concurs, noting that it ‘sounds tough all right.’ These rapidly delivered and incisive one-liners suggest that Neff is extremely familiar with the problematic nature of interpersonal relationships, and that a cynical, slightly comic (and thus distanced) treatment of them is the only way to obviate their power. Such wisecracking thus acknowledges the futility of striving for happiness.

Earlier, when Phyllis apologises for rescheduling their second meeting, Neff jokes, ‘don’t worry, I was just working on my stamp collection.’ His facetious and jesting tone implies that, despite his status as bachelor and its attendant connotations of loneliness, Neff is actually free to avail himself of any number of cosmopolitan
divertissements before recourse to such mundane (and sedentary) hobbies as stamp collecting. Indeed, the presence of a golf caddy in the background of his apartment indicates that Neff partakes in more mobile pastimes. An ironic verbal manner is a way to dissuade others from formulating a negative opinion.

In its cool delivery, the wisecracking voice also complies with modernity’s temporal order of instantaneity. Pountain and Robins’ historical overview of the twentieth century evolution of the notion of ‘cool’ suggests that such a demeanour is intrinsically modern insofar as it allows its subject to live resolutely in the moment. ‘Cool is the ideal sensibility,’ they explain, ‘for anyone who must live by constant self-reinvention, never forming any permanent bonds’ (Pountain & Robins 2000, p. 132). The cynical, deadpan tone favoured by the hardboiled hero is ontologically similar to this ‘cool’ sensibility. The noir hero—like the iconoclast, the flâneur, the beat poet or indeed any other variation of the ‘cool’ modern subject—aims to avoid any ‘permanent bonds.’ Aspiring towards constant ‘self-reinvention,’ his flat and affectless voice enables him to distance himself from emotion. Neff may thus momentarily sympathise with Lola’s predicament, but he does so in a ‘cool’ manner devoid of emotion. This prevents him from becoming embroiled in all the sordid complexity of Lola’s life. Such a stance ensures that Neff avoids the ‘depths of personality’ to which Simmel disparagingly refers (Simmel 1998, p. 53). Neff’s jovial banter with Keyes is also characterised by cynicism. After Keyes has offered Neff the office job with higher prestige yet a fifty-dollar cut in salary, Neff asks, deadpan, ‘do I laugh now or when it gets funny?’ Irony and cynicism are strategies by which Neff can defuse not only the femme fatale’s power, but also the stresses inherent in the domain of labour.

Yet it is in the film’s privileged moments that Neff’s deadpan delivery resonates most strongly. In the final moments of his dictaphone confession, Neff senses Keyes’ presence by the door. Realising that his boss and mentor has overheard enough to grasp the gravity of the situation, Neff implores Keyes to allow him time to escape—just a few hours to get to the border and the freedom it represents. When Keyes responds that he has little chance of getting anywhere, Neff staggers out and collapses by the door. Having phoned for the ambulance, Keyes walks into shot, kneels down beside Neff, and asks how he is doing. Neff replies, ‘fine, only somebody moved the elevator a couple of miles away.’ With death imminent, Neff is
unable to resist the cynical wisecrack. Such a ‘cool’ demeanour enables him to deny
the inevitable, right up to the film’s end.

The irony with which Neff and Keyes convey their mutual affection is also
typical of a particularly modern brand of masculinity. At various points throughout the
film, Neff is obliged to produce a match to light the cigar of his absent-minded boss.
This is often accompanied by a joking declaration of love. The final irony is that, as
Neff lies dying, roles are switched. Keyes takes the match from Neff’s limp hands and
lights the cigarette dangling from the mouth of the dying man. The accompanying
dialogue is significant, given that it finally renders explicit the mutual affection that
had been covert throughout the film:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Neff</th>
<th>You know why you didn’t figure this one, Keyes? Because the guy you were looking for was too close. He was right across the desk from you.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Keyes</td>
<td>Closer than that, Walter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neff</td>
<td>I love you, too.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Always jocular and ironic, the banter between Keyes and Neff allows them to
articulate their admiration without compromising their hardboiled integrity. Instead of
employing a psychoanalytic framework to interpret these exchanges, as has typically
been done (Johnston 1980; Gallagher 1987; Krutnik 1991; Maxfield 1996), a socio-
historical analysis understands such witticisms as a modern affectation in which the
gravity of the message is ameliorated by its droll delivery. Indeed, as an adjunct to
Double Indemnity’s abundant semiotic inversions, the only way Neff can express the
extent of his affection for Keyes is paradoxically by speaking the truth directly yet
ensuring it is articulated in a facetious manner. Again, ironic and cynical wisecracking
serves as a shield with which Neff protects himself. As such, it has a purposive
function as well as a positive and redemptive value.

A close analysis of Neff’s voice also reveals how such wisecracking
conceals his paranoia. As mentioned earlier, the lack of intonation in Neff’s narration
is often contrasted to the enormity of its content. In discussing previous insurance
scams, Neff relates to Phyllis a number of unpleasant tales of murder, betrayal, marital
infidelity, violence and unsavoury schemes gone awry:

And then there was a case where a guy was found shot. His wife said he was cleaning a gun and his stomach got in the way. All she collected was a three-to-ten in Tehachapi.
These anecdotes have a number of textual layers. Firstly, in keeping with the modern linguistic imperatives of brevity and economy, Neff employs utilitarian and basic language to curtly convey material of a highly incendiary nature. Secondly, Neff’s telling of this tale is marked by a ‘flat’ performance. Such a lack of cadence is deliberate: it seeks to nullify the potentially devastating and traumatic import of the anecdote’s horrendous events. Thirdly, the disparity between mode of delivery and content is consistent with modernity’s conflation of antithetical values to produce new meaning. The shock in Neff’s speech is therefore similar to that in Baudelaire’s canon where, according to Benjamin, the ‘poetic excitation’ resides in the interstices between signified and signifier’ (Benjamin 1968a, p. 164).

Neff’s laconic and cynical tone, which is present even at the limits of life, can be contrasted to Keyes’ disputatious nature and irascibility, qualities that are excessively emotional and as such aligned with a more traditional order. During his impromptu (and suspense-provoking) visit to Neff’s apartment, Keyes asks for some medicament to quell his stomach troubles. As he departs, he declares, ‘I’ve got to get to a drug-store. It feels like a hunk of concrete inside me.’ Whilst Keyes struggles with the ‘little man inside’ who represents his conscience and who causes many psychosomatic ailments, Neff has a seemingly strong constitution and can maintain a physical equilibrium. Despite the deterministic overtones of many of Neff’s proclamations (‘pretty, isn’t it?’), his cynicism and irony allow him to keep his paranoia in check and to enjoy good health. Unlike Keyes, who is more responsive and susceptible to his environment, Neff is resilient, both physically and psychically.

Cynicism is also strategically used by Neff to distance himself from the femme fatale. Denouncing what he suspects to be Phyllis’ plan to secure accident insurance without her husband’s knowledge, Neff says sardonically, ‘I think it’s lovely. And then, if some dark wet night, that crown block fell on him ...’ When Phyllis protests with a contrived indignation, Neff asks rhetorically and with a barely contained anger:

> Who’d you think I was, anyway? A guy that walks into a good-looking dame’s front parlour and says, ‘Good afternoon, I sell accident insurance on husbands. You got one that’s been around too long? One you’d like to turn into a little hard cash? Just give me a smile and I’ll help you collect.’ Boy, what a dope you must think I am!
Indeed, whenever Neff is placed in a situation that calls for an emotional response, he invariably maintains a grim and cynical humour. In Sloterdijk’s theoretical paradigm, this cynicism is resourceful, courageous and possessing its own integrity. It allows modern subjects such as Neff to remain in control.

For Higham, *Double Indemnity* is pitched ‘deliberately in a minor key, understressed, to convey the pettiness of the crime, the sadness that seems to hang around enterprises of this kind …’ (Higham 1963, p. 86). Higham sees this underplaying as a directorial strategy to illustrate the crime’s ‘pettiness.’ Yet few theorists have considered how this ‘understressed’ or ‘worldweary’ tone is ontologically modern. As opposed to the grand melancholy of Romanticism, or the tragic and colossal proportions of Greek epic, for instance, film noir’s crucial moments are depicted in a decidedly anti-dramatic manner. It is particularly when expressing his desire for the femme fatale, for instance, that the hardboiled hero resorts to an ironic and understated tone.

Whilst Neff may invoke the image of the ‘red-hot poker’ that connotes pain and danger, there are many instances in the noir canon and pulp fiction alike where the woman’s allure is deliberately de-emphasised, as the following excerpt from Hammett’s *The Big Knockover* demonstrates:

> She was neither tall nor short, thin or plump. She wore a black Russian tunic affair, green-trimmed and hung with silver dinguses. A black fur coat was spread over the chair behind her. She was probably twenty. Her eyes were blue, her mouth red, her teeth white, the hair-ends showing under her black-green-and-silver turban were brown, and she had a nose (Hammett 1969, p. 326).

After offering this detailed physiognomic assessment of the woman in question, the male narrator remarks, ‘[w]ithout getting steamed up over the details, she was nice’ (Hammett 1969, p. 326). This is a typically deadpan manner of conveying desire. The use of ‘objective’ prose focussing with clinical precision on insignificant detail (her ‘black-green-and-silver turban’ for instance) is extremely flâneuristic and recalls the methodology espoused in the physiologies. Such a focus on the incidental also allows the hardboiled hero to maintain control when faced with overwhelming emotion. This underselling of the attractive woman assumes a certain complicity and collusion on the part of the reader, who would be adept at decoding such irony. Despite the deadpan tone of the description, the reader would surmise that the woman in question was, in fact, remarkably attractive. The implication of course is that it would be very
easy to get ‘steamed up’ over such a ‘dame.’ Neff’s assessment of Phyllis’ beauty uses a similar strategy. ‘It’s perfect for my money,’ he observes in an offhand manner when asked whether she has ‘her face on straight.’ Under no circumstances will Neff be made to reveal the power of his feelings. Viewers can nonetheless discern the fact that Phyllis’ sexual magnetism and physical attractiveness has had an enormously destabilising effect on Neff.

Analysis of other 1940s films noirs (Laura, Gilda, The Postman Always Rings Twice) reveals a similar use of language, where information of considerable gravity is delivered ironically. Marlowe’s voiceover in Murder, My Sweet is a case in point. After he has been drugged by the villainous Amthor, Marlowe describes his descent into unconsciousness thus: ‘a black pool opened up at my feet and I dived in.’ This is spoken coolly, despite the fact that the previous shot depicts Marlowe being strangled by Moose Malloy as Amthor cruelly and impassively watches, a scenario which would, by the conventions of other genres, be presented in a highly dramatic manner. Marlowe then loses consciousness, and following a surreal dream sequence, he awakes and attempts to escape from the room in which he has been imprisoned. His voiceover explains his disorientation:

I wondered what I was shot full of. Something to keep me quiet or something to make me talk. Maybe both. OK, Marlowe, I said to myself. You’re a tough guy. You’ve been zapped twice, choked, beaten silly with a gun, shot in the arm until you’re as crazy as a couple of waltzing mice. Now let’s see you do something that’s **really** tough—like putting your pants on.

Marlowe’s description of his physical torture as ‘zapped twice, choked, beaten silly with a gun’ aims to make light of a subject of great magnitude. That his life was endangered is a realisation so shocking that Marlowe’s narration of it must resort to comical similes such as ‘shot in the arm until you’re as crazy as a couple of waltzing mice.’ Especially at times of crisis, the hardboiled voice of the noir hero maintains its reliance on irony infused with a grim humour.

As Hirsch wryly observes, ‘[t]here are no tears in film noir’ (Hirsch 1981, p. 116), despite material which in other art forms would be rendered in excessively emotive terms. That the story occurs in the modern world calls for a cynical and ironic tone that is both reflective and deflective of the hero’s paranoia. This tone is not due to postwar angst, but rather can be attributed to modernity’s new social order. Like the modern subject, the noir hero cannot afford to indulge in histrionics or the ‘depths of
personality.’ Instead, he cultivates a hardboiled voice as a device by which he can maintain his equilibrium.

5.6 Conclusion — hardboiled voice as modernist imperative

Film noir problematises enunciation whilst paradoxically according it primacy. Indeed, frequently the hero’s telling of the story is as important as the tale itself. In the modern world, however, remembering and recounting become fraught activities. At the same time, there is a compulsion to tell, with many of film noir’s voiceovers emanating from a point at the limits of life, lending additional urgency to the process of narration. Neff is dying as he relates his story, whilst Sunset Boulevard’s Joe Gillis lies face down in the swimming pool, dead, before his voiceover commences. Similarly, Frank Bigelow, the protagonist of D.O.A. (Rudolph Maté, 1950, USA), reports his own imminent murder from poisoning to the police, with the rest of the film’s narrative being a race against time to save his life. Noir’s voiceover thus engages with modernity’s apocalyptic and anxiety-provoking sense of ‘time running out.’

The noir hero’s voiceover confession is analogous to the classic flâneur’s diarised recordings of his urban adventures and encounters. It is perhaps significant that the device used to record Neff’s confession—the dictaphone—is itself iconic of modernity’s technologisation of communication. The dictaphone creates a disembodied voice, much like the telephone, radio and other modern phenomena. Because voice and sound could suddenly traverse vast distances whilst the body

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141 Film noir is a canon in which the hegemony of the visual is forcefully challenged by the centrality of the voiceover. For further discussion on cinematic moments in which visual dominance is problematised, see (MacCabe 1974).

142 This preoccupation with ‘losing time’ is also literalised in the mise-en-scène of several films noirs in which clocks are recurring motifs (Raw Deal, Laura).
remained static, new spatio-temporal perceptions were inaugurated.\textsuperscript{143}

The noir voiceover is significant for another reason that has been largely overlooked in existing scholarship. As a device allowing the story to be subjectivised, the voiceover valorises the hardboiled \textit{voice} in all its idiosyncratic glory. This wisecracking, idiomatic voice is a crucial way in which the noir hero’s status as modern subject is signalled. From the nineteenth century onwards, urban existence demanded new linguistic structures. Baudelaire, Benjamin and other philosophers of modernity stressed the importance of a pulp voice in order to capture the shocking and exciting elements of modern life. Whilst Baudelaire valorised the ‘pot-boiler’ (Baudelaire 1949, p. 17), Benjamin spoke of ‘crossing the threshold of one’s class for the first time’ and how this induced both shock and fascination for the flâneur (Benjamin 1978, p. 11). Such a transgression resulted in the development of a gritty and brutal voice for the flâneur. Defined by its ‘tough’ lexicon and rapidfire yet deadpan delivery, this voice was to find its apotheosis in the hardboiled hero of film noir.

In keeping with modernity’s semiotic inversions, the noir voice is also infused with symbol, metaphor and other means of subtextualisation. The modern subject was a paranoid one, and for this reason he cultivated cynicism and irony as coping mechanisms. For Freud, the verbal malformations found in dreams are connected to those of the paranoiac, hysteric or obsessive personality (Freud 1976). Similarly, one could say that the verbal malapropisms (neologisms, similes, analogies, argot) of the hardboiled hero’s voice are ways in which a paranoid, obsessive and fundamentally modern male identity is articulated.

The noir hero’s paranoia (and thus his hardboiled mode of speech) is amply justified by the evil, treacherous nature of the femme fatale. As the following chapter’s socio-historical contextualisation will reveal, his fearful yet enraptured response to this formidable creature finds its antecedent in that of the nineteenth

\textsuperscript{143} For discussion of the advent of different methods of communication throughout the nineteenth century and beyond, see (Kern 1983; McQuire 1998; Watson 2001). These include the emergence of the telegraph (1794), telephone (1876), microphone (c.1877), phonograph (1877), wireless radio (1894) and the establishment of the first telephone line between Paris and Brussels in 1887. See also Telotte’s observations regarding the prevalence in the noir canon (as tropes and thematic strategies) of modern communication devices which disembodied the voice (Telotte 1984; 1989).
century subject whose desire was primarily directed towards one object—the new woman of modernity.
Figure C: Crime Does Not Pay #34 1944 copyright, Comic House, art by Charles Biro (Benton 1993a, p. 20)
Figure D: Crime Does Not Pay #62 1948 copyright, Comic House, art by George Tuska (Benton 1993a, p. 32)
Chapter 6  A fatal proximity—femme fatale as modern woman

Figure E: the perils of proximity: Hardboiled hero captures modernity’s new woman

6.1 Preface

The noir femme fatale is subversive, treacherous and duplicitous. Defined by greed and artifice, she is seen to embody a grotesque femininity. Seducer of men, she either inhabits or desires the darkness of the city streets whilst coveting the nefarious pleasures contained therein. In her most extreme form, she is pathologically defined by a lack of morality and a total absence of empathy or meaningful human contact. She is predatory and exerts a sexual power, compositionally dominating the diegesis whilst simultaneously destabilising the male hero.

Double Indemnity’s Phyllis Dietrichson is paradigmatic of this femme fatale, a point made by several theorists. Says Farber of Barbara Stanwyck’s portrayal, ‘[t]he diabolical woman whose only lust is greed has rarely been more chillingly rendered’ (Farber 1974, p. 10). Brion declares Phyllis ‘one of the most amazing bitches in film noir’ (Brion 1991, p. 73), whilst for Crowther she exhibits the ‘grim stateliness of a Black Widow’ (Crowther 1988, p. 134). Hirsch speaks of her as ‘hard, mannish, her face a taut mask … her voice honed to a cutting edge’ (Hirsch 1981, p. 7). Phyllis is a ‘cold-hearted manipulative bitch,’ pronounces Maxfield, and an ‘inveterate manipulator’ whose main role is to facilitate the moral decline and mortal demise of a

\[144 \text{‘L’une des plus sidérantes garces de l’histoire du film noir.’ My translation. Depending upon context, ‘garce’ can also mean slut or tart, so is a consistently pejorative term.}\]
man ‘largely destroyed by his own psychological obsessions’ (Maxfield 1996, pp. 27-28).

With her brassy hair, artificial accoutrements (black sunglasses, glinting anklet, darkened lips) and hardened facial expressions, Phyllis exhibits all the requisite iconography of the archetypal cinematic femme fatale. Her characterisation is also exemplary: completely venal, avaricious and amoral, Phyllis’ liaison with Neff is opportunist and devoid of emotional content. Her trysts with men, including her marriage, are primarily defined by commerce. In narrative terms, she executes her fatal programme with aplomb. It is only Phyllis’ cold-blooded desire to murder her husband that allows Neff to carry out his longstanding fantasy to rort the insurance system for his own material benefit. Without this catalyst, it is doubtful that Neff would possess the wherewithal or motivation to succeed with such a plan. Neff’s attraction to Phyllis is thus typical of that found in most 1940s films noirs, where the hero is ‘ensnared’ and his rational cognition destroyed by the sheer power exerted by the fatal woman.

The noir femme fatale, and particularly her relationship with the hero, has been extensively analysed in film scholarship. As outlined in Chapter Two, most existing debates rely heavily on theoretical paradigms such as psychoanalysis. Johnston’s study of Double Indemnity is typical: she believes Phyllis to represent an ‘excess,’ a ‘heterogeneity’ and a ‘signifier of lack,’ all of which threaten the patriarchal order (Johnston 1980). In other critiques, the noir femme fatale is either understood as a manifestation of postwar anxiety, or conversely is genealogically connected to the evil woman of legend and Judeo-Christian theology.

Each of these interpretative models is not only instructive but also easily validated. There is much to suggest that the noir temptress and the male desire she elicits, for instance, finds a mythical antecedent in legendary figures such as the sirens whose transcendental beauty caused sailors to ‘forget’ their wives and families, ultimately to be lured to their deaths. Indeed, Gilda’s singing of ‘Put the Blame on Mame, Boys’ offers a metanarrative commentary since it explicitly articulates Western culture’s longstanding mythologisation of the culpability of women, held
responsible as scapegoats for any number of disasters, natural or otherwise.\textsuperscript{145} Similarly, a socio-historical investigation into mid-twentieth century culture would partially substantiate the zeitgeist attribution. During the Second World War, women moved into the labour force in unprecedented numbers. Returning servicemen were obliged to adapt to a vastly different social landscape that desperately called for a renegotiation of traditional gender relations.\textsuperscript{146}

Whilst not wishing to dismiss these interpretations, this chapter will nevertheless refocus the debate by engaging with the noir femme fatale from a different standpoint. An historical investigation will trace the emergence of the new woman of modernity and identify points of convergence between her and the noir femme fatale. The noir seductress’ ontology, and the specific mode of desire she elicits (with its modernist mix of obsession, desire, fear, shock and repulsion) will be connected to nineteenth century precursors. The trope of the modern prostitute, which allegorised the ‘abject’ status of the new woman, will also be considered. The prostitute of the modern metropolis was highly visible and thus more shocking than her predecessors. The sense of unease generated by her visibility was reflected in a number of late nineteenth and early twentieth century discourses in which she was rendered as potent, alluring yet deadly. In many ways, this mode of representation culminated in the treacherous ‘prostitute’ of film noir, the femme fatale. In the following discussion, I will elucidate the genealogical and discursive connections between the noir femme fatale and the urban prostitute of modernity.

This chapter will also consider modernity’s scopic regime and its creation of a new gaze with which the flâneur apprehended the new woman/prostitute who strolled through the metropolis. Modernity’s reconceptualisation of beauty, in which it

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{145} ‘Remember the earthquake in San Francisco in 1896/They said that Old Mother Nature was up to her old tricks/That’s the story that went around … Remember the Fire in ’92 that burned Chicago Town … Put the blame on Mame, boys …’
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\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{146} Approximately three million American women took jobs during the Second World War who would otherwise have remained at home, including one million young married women, many of whom had children (Mead 1946). Whilst the influx of women into the urban workforce was a phenomenon stretching back to the nineteenth century, theoretical focus has typically centred on the war and postwar period. Renov notes that whilst the wartime working woman was depicted in 1942 as a ‘glamour girl,’ with military propaganda aimed to encourage women to take up various posts—an Office of War Information slogan read ‘America at War Needs Women at Work’—by late 1944, a number of popular discourses represented her as ‘excess labour,’ suggesting an antagonism towards newly acquired female status and power (Renov 1988, pp. 33-34).
\end{flushright}
was affiliated with artifice and commerce, will be examined. Finally, the conflation of love/eroticism and death/doom, a common dimorphic configuration in modern discourses, will be seen to inform the noir brand of desire.

Whilst the nineteenth century flâneur desired the new woman, he maintained a distance at all times. As with his fetishisation of commodity objects from afar, he regarded her with a scopophilic gaze and his desire went largely unrequited. In many ways, the noir hero complies with this flâneuristic model of obsession. He glimpses the femme fatale and his life is never the same again. And yet his more overtly sexualised engagement with the femme fatale effectively eradicates this distance. In capturing her and seeking to possess the unpossessable, the noir hero suffers dire consequences. In the modern world, the perils of proximity invariably spell his doom and demise.

This chapter will engage with these issues in order to reveal Neff’s desire for Phyllis as quintessentially modern.
6.2 The new woman of modernity

6.2.1 The cosmopolitan woman — artistic and cultural discourses

[A] modern woman, filled with the modern spirit … is no young virgin, silly and ignorant of her destiny; she is an experienced but pure woman, in rapid movement like the spirit of the age, with fluttering garments and streaming hair, striding forward … That is our new divine image: the Modern (Wolff 1888, cited in Bradbury & McFarlane 1976, pp. 41-42).

Reputedly first used by Sarah Grand in 1894 to describe those entering higher education and new spheres of employment, the phrase ‘new woman’ designated a female figure with no precedent in agrarian social order. Living in the city and enjoying new levels of liberty and autonomy, this new woman audaciously rejected tradition and instead embodied the moment. The modern urban landscape proved a fitting terrain for such a creature. Emerging cultural phenomena such as the cabaret, the nightclub, the fairground (Coney Island and similar), dance halls, cafés, department stores, the theatre and cinema all offered new recreational activities heavily dependent upon female patrons, participants, workers and performers. The industrial revolution required female labour, and the suffragette movement demanded equal rights for women, including access to education. Women embraced educational opportunities and joined the workforce in large numbers. In 1880, sixty percent of high school graduates were women. By the early 1900s, an estimated sixty percent of all New York females aged between sixteen and twenty were working (Israel 2003). Different variations of the modern woman arose: the impudent

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147 Israel claims the term ‘new woman’ actually derived from the literature of Henry James (Israel 2003). It must also be acknowledged that pre-industrial feminists obviously existed. What is noteworthy, however, is the fact that female emancipation and self-determination became widespread throughout the Western world in the nineteenth century. This historical development is generally recognised in feminist scholarship: Showalter, for instance, commences her study of feminism with Mary Wollstonecraft, who wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and who died in 1797 (Showalter 2001).

148 See (Rabinovitz 1990) for further discussion on female sexuality and these sites of entertainment.

149 The legal status of women was also transformed in the nineteenth century, with the issue of women’s voting rights first raised in British Parliament in 1867. Two years later, John Stuart Mill’s *The Subjugation of Women* was published (Bade 1979).
Parisienne courtesans, or the ‘Bowery girls’ of 1880s New York, for instance, captured the public imagination. Empowered and suddenly more visible on the streets, these new women were unchaperoned and apparently free. As such, they provoked much commentary.\footnote{150}

Modernity entailed not only a new positioning of women within a transformed social sphere, but also created a variety of discourses that engaged with the new woman and belied the anxiety she engendered. As Naremore observes, mass culture in particular (which was associated with the proletariat and generally derided by high modernism) was often characterised as female, with the figure of ‘Woman’ frequently iconographically deployed to represent the metropolis, and particularly its more nefarious elements (Naremore 1998). The urban ‘mob’ and the heightened emotionalism it supposedly provoked was stigmatised as atavistic, primitive and potentially uncontrollable. It was also typically characterised as female. A quasi-scientific, anthropological area of enquiry known as crowd psychology arose in late nineteenth century France, Britain and Italy, which pathologised the crowd and (by implication) the modern woman.\footnote{151}

The discursive imbrication of new woman and modernity continued in twentieth century discourses, as exemplified in playwright Carl Zuckmayer’s

\footnote{150} See Israel’s study that tracks the emergence of the modern, single woman from the nineteenth century up to the present day. Israel persuasively and effectively draws upon archival, statistical and historical information interspersed with personal testimonies (Israel 2003).

\footnote{151} Crowd psychology emerged concurrently with other modernist concerns such as positivist criminology, phrenology and criminal anthropology. All sought to regulate the destabilising and chaotic elements of the populous metropolis. Crowd psychologists such as Gustave le Bon saw the crowd as threatening to overflow or erupt into violence, possessing a ‘mob mentality’ that was subversive, anarchic and potentially revolutionary. The crowd’s collective nature, its lack of respect for boundaries (both personal and political) and its inherent irrationality were all feared to be transgressive. They were also seen as essentially female attributes. ‘The crowd,’ proclaimed poet Stefan Mallarmé (1842-1898), ‘is a woman’ (cited in Beauvoir 1972, p. 215). Anti-capitalist sentiment was also connected to woman’s occupation of the streets: before the first May Day demonstration in 1890, the matriarch of French anarchism, Louise Michel, declared that she would march through Paris and that ‘[t]here is no good demonstration without me … and besides, I adore the crowd’ (cited in Barrows 1981, p. 24). A strong element of misogyny thus informed the entire discourse of crowd psychology. Le Bon was also intimately associated with Jeanne Loiseau, who wrote antifeminist novels under the pseudonym Daniel le Sueur, including Névrosée (1892), in which two sisters are contrasted. Whilst one sister chooses to study at university in Paris, the other remains domesticated. The ambitious and independent sister becomes deranged, supposedly as a result of her exposure to city life (Barrows 1981). For further studies of crowd psychology, see (Van Ginneken 1992; Barrows 1981; le Bon 1998; McClelland 1989).
description of Berlin in the 1920s, a city that epitomised urban excess, glamour and decadence:

People discussed Berlin … as if [the city] were a highly desirable woman, whose coldness and capriciousness were widely known … We called her proud, snobbish, *nouveau riche*, uncultured, crude. But secretly everyone looked upon her as the goal of their desires. Some saw her as hefty, full-breasted, in lace underwear, others as a mere wisp of a thing, with boyish legs in black silk stockings (cited in Petro 1987, p. 116).

Interestingly, this anthropomorphism of Berlin focuses on promiscuity and sexual deviancy, suggesting that these were the female attributes most readily associated with the hedonistic metropolis.

Elsewhere, the new woman was more forcefully demonised. Whilst a nascent modern femme fatale was depicted in Goethe’s *Die Braut von Korinth* (*The Bride of Korinth*) (1798) and in some of Hoffmann’s gothic, supernatural tales, it was throughout the nineteenth century that a notion of the abject, modern femme fatale gained wider currency. Such a figure was portrayed in Gustave Flaubert’s *Salammbô* (1862), Anatole France’s *Thaïs* (1890), Pierre Louÿ’s *Aphrodite* (1896), Théophile Gautier’s *Une Nuit de Cléopâtre* (1838), Swinburne’s *Dolores* (1866), Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Carmilla* (1872) (with its lesbian vampire) and H.G. Wells’ *The Sea Lady* (1902), as well as the paintings of Gustav Moreau and other contemporaneous artists.¹⁵² This modern femme fatale also appeared in advertising images, posters and cabaret acts. That she exuded sexuality whilst simultaneously threatening death and destruction seemed inextricably bound to her urban status.

As the formidable new woman continued to traverse the metropolis and flaunt her liberation, the process of discursive pathologisation intensified, becoming particularly pronounced in fin-de-siècle culture. French encyclopaedia Larousse in the 1870s continued to stress woman’s grace, softness and delicacy. By the 1890s, however, modern woman was being pejoratively defined by her diminutive size, ‘crude muscular system’ and insensitivity to smell or taste (cited in Barrows 1981, p. 60). Empirical systems of measurement such as anthropometrics proposed that men’s skulls had evolutionarily enlarged, while women remained stunted, with their moral

¹⁵² These and other nineteenth century articulations of the femme fatale are explored in (Stableford 1992; Bade 1979; Allen 1983).
faculties less developed, thus rendering them more likely to fall into crime and disrepute (Ferraro 1893, cited in Barrows 1981, p. 58). A number of Victorian aesthetic, medical and anthropological discourses (all ‘inventorial’ in nature) sought to visually regulate the female body. As Montague notes, this mapping took place on different levels, including the microscopic and the macroscopic, with taxonomies devised according to racial, sexual and functional criteria. At all levels, however, the female form was discursively tainted and signalled as abject (Montague 1994).

Dijkstra details how the oppression of women was systematised and politically and culturally sanctioned throughout the nineteenth century, culminating in a regulatory Victorian discourse aimed at keeping women ensconced in the domestic realm and thus disenfranchised from public life (Dijkstra 1986). In these discourses, feminine virtue resided emphatically within the home hearth, itself a bourgeois Victorian configuration with complex ideological foundations that sought to separate the home (and the woman) from the sites of industrial and capitalist production. Public spaces were traditionally defined by patriarchy, and a woman’s existence therein constituted a transgression of acceptable parameters. Moreover, as a compensatory measure in the face of increasing secularisation and a diminution of the Church’s influence, the home was elevated to a site of religious importance. Offering an antidote to the frenetic pace of the modern world, the home emerged as a site of regeneration, a place where the preservation of individual sanity and traditional values could be guaranteed, and at whose centre was the virtuous, domesticated and sanctified woman. The following magazine 1830 editorial from Ladies Magazine illustrates this reactionary view:

... amidst the scenes of business and of pleasure ... we mix with the gay and the thoughtless, we join the busy crowd, and the heart is sensible to a desolation of feeling ... again we look to the sanctuary of the home; there sympathy, honor and virtue are assembled (cited in Van de Wetering 1984, p. 16).

This text clearly has a didactic intent, with its first-person plural address assuming (or perhaps demanding) allegiance with the reader. The public arena elicited feelings of ‘desolation,’ but one could return home in order to be cleansed and rejuvenated.

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153 For further discussions on how the female body was discursively regulated and taxonomically classified throughout the nineteenth century and beyond, see (Armstrong 1998).
Significantly, as has been observed by Harvey, this concept of the nurturing home hearth, and of an institutionally sanctioned model of the ‘normal’ nuclear family, is markedly absent from the noir world (Harvey 1980). Most noir families—the Dietrichsons in Double Indemnity or the Grayles in Murder, My Sweet—are portrayed as ‘unnatural’ (defying nuclear structures), highly dysfunctional and fractured. Rather than offering sanctuary, the noir home is toxic, containing murderous impulses, deceit and betrayal. The presence therein of the interloping femme fatale, it would seem, precludes any sanctity.

Other regulatory discourses and social patterns arose in the late nineteenth century and beyond. Victorian middle-class women who retired to their home hearths with ‘neurasthenia,’ purportedly a nervous debility, were beatifically regarded as sacred. Illness was but one salvation for a young woman whose morality was ‘gravely endangered’ by modern, urban life. Moralistic warnings regularly appeared in respectable journals, with a medical practitioner exhorting in the Literary Digest in 1926 that modern woman ‘confronts severe internal derangement and general ill-health’ as a result of an urban lifestyle which included late nights, alcohol, cigarettes and ‘roofless cars’ (cited in Israel 2003, p. 136).

As observed by Buck-Morss, during this period a ‘loitering’ urban woman (that is, one without industrious and socially acceptable intent), was often treated with suspicion and summarily dismissed as a ‘whore.’ This is evidenced by the use of terms such as ‘streetwalker’ or ‘tramp,’ with their conflation of illicit sexuality, pedestrianism and occupation of urban spaces (Buck-Morss 1986). Regardless of comportment, female presence on the streets was often simply associated with sexual promiscuity. After dark, one’s presence was particularly suspect. In many cases, victimisation and sexual harassment were institutionally sanctioned, or at the very least overlooked. Entitled the Juvenile Depravity Bill, legislation passed in 1896 in New Zealand authorised police officers to apprehend young women found on the streets after 10.00pm, assuming them guilty of ‘some sinful purpose.’ Ostensibly an attempt to safeguard the honour of girls under the age of sixteen, it was plainly also a

154 See for instance Israel’s discussion of Florence Nightingale, one of many middle-class Victorian women who, at a certain point in her life, ‘succumbed’ to illness and thus successfully avoided marriage and other unwanted social obligations (Israel 2003).
regulatory measure to control and categorise women’s presence within public spheres (The Bulletin 29 August 1896, p. 6).

Despite such judicially imposed strictures and concurrent cultural discourses of pathologisation, the modern woman who lived in the largely anonymous city, often outside a ‘traditional’ family context, was able to enjoy unprecedented liberty. Whilst men could stroll more freely, unencumbered by fear of physical danger or reprisal, the new woman’s daily life was nowhere near as circumscribed or monitored as that of her rural predecessors. In interviews with liberal magazine The Nation in 1926 and 1927, various feminists described their experiences of city life in the 1920s. They spoke openly of their familiarity (at least by association, if not by first-hand experience) with ‘free love,’ a ‘foot-loose’ lifestyle and an insatiable thirst for knowledge. One young woman, jubilant to be finally living alone in the city, ‘plunged headforemost [sic] into crowds’ (Showalter 1978, p. 44).

This mobile, urban woman generated countless discourses and iconic images. With her occupation of sites of vice and entertainment, she captured the imagination of virtually all commentators on modernity. She was conspicuous, alluring and, for the flâneur, at times highly disturbing.
6.2.2 Mobility, the new woman on the streets and in the vice districts

As a cosmopolitan courtesan, Zola’s irrepressible heroine Nana is an archetypal modern woman in several respects. Independent, single and quick to avail herself of the debauched delights of Second Empire France, Nana’s occupation of the urban sphere is consistent with that of the new woman. Derisive of the concept of matrimony and its attendant connotations of patriarchal ownership of women, Nana is a libertarian who fiercely guards her independence. Whenever she receives an offer of marriage from one of her eager suitors, her response is invariably one of amusement, declaring marriage to be ‘too foul for words’ (Zola 1972, p. 438). Nana’s autonomy is literalised in the fact that she is able to move through the city as she pleases. At times of boredom, Nana would take her friend Satin and:

> go on wild forays into the Paris streets, plunging into the sordid world of vice whose votaries prowled along muddy alleys in the flickering light of gas-lamps. Nana went back to the low dance-halls where she had kicked up her heels as a girl; and she revisited the dark corners on the outer boulevards where, when she was fifteen, men used to fondle her on corner-posts (Zola 1972, p. 270).

Clearly, Zola’s implication is that Nana has a long history of freedom and mobility, as the affectionate allusion to her adolescent romps through Paris implies. As modern
Parisiennes, Nana and Satin’s apparent ease in the public sphere, and particularly in its morally-encoded spaces (the ‘sordid world of vice’), is emblematic of their status as modern women. Their ease is also a key index of their desirability to their male suitors. Nana’s libertine nature, her advocacy of illicit desire and her boisterous occupation of the city’s interstices all ignite male admiration and passion. She refuses the traditional feminine role of servitude, instead steadfastly maintaining, ‘I insist on being completely free. When I like the look of a man I go to bed with him.’ Directly following this declaration of wantonness, Count Muffat becomes even more hopelessly attached (Zola 1972, p. 428). In her refusal to be subsumed into, and regulated by, a nuclear family structure, Nana epitomises the new woman for whom independence is key.

Zola’s heroine is an excellent literary rendition of the new woman. That Nana is so alluring to her male acquaintances demonstrates the fact that modern male desire is strongly connected to female emancipation. Other discourses recognised this connection, as did the actual women living through this time of change. ‘It is wonderful to be able to walk along the street, singing,’ one twenty year old American woman informed the Saturday Evening Post in 1905, adding insightfully, ‘[and] there are men who admire that impulsive daring’ (cited in Israel 2003, p. 108). It is significant that the new woman—whether prostitute or emancipated worker—was positioned as an object within the capitalist marketplace, available for appraisal by the modern male subject, whether artist, novelist, flâneur or hardboiled hero.

In other literature of modernity, the femme fatale is commonly depicted as a nocturnal creature freely inhabiting the city’s vice districts. The urban, sexually liberated figure of the grisette as depicted in mid-nineteenth century French writings was aligned with the bohemianism of Paris’ Latin Quarter and its morally questionable lacunae such as cabarets and nightclubs. These demi-monde and often subterranean locations, with their connotations of entrapment and entombment, threatened tradition in several ways. Kern argues that the cabaret was significant for its ability to abolish hierarchical barriers of class, sex and race (Kern 1983).\textsuperscript{155}

Peopled by those of venal intent and ambiguous sexual orientation, the cabaret

\textsuperscript{155} The first significant cabaret beyond New York’s vice districts, the Folies Bergère, opened in 1911 on 49th Street, right at the heart of Broadway. In the ensuing years, cabaret flourished as an art form.
promoted a style of interaction defined by anonymity and fleeting encounters with strangers. As Marinetti noted, the cabaret was ‘absolutely characterized by the unforeseeable and the unexpected’ (Marinetti 1998, p. 215). It also blurred the lines between performance space and audience, with Marinetti in 1913 proposing a theatrical style which would develop ‘simultaneously on the stage, in the boxes and in the orchestra’ (Marinetti 1998b, p. 253). Such an anarchic style was disjunctive and potentially revolutionary, and was thus applauded by the futurists. In reference to Paris’ cafés-concerts, Marinetti describes ‘a most amusing battle between spasmodic moonlight … and the electric light that bounces of the fake jewellery, painted flesh … the counterfeit color of lips’ (Flint 1971, p. 119). In these immoral spaces, incongruous elements fuse, although ultimately artifice triumphs over the organic. Everything, including the new woman, becomes spectacle and thus inauthentic or ‘counterfeit.’

The titular heroine of Zola’s Nana indulges in the pleasures of Parisian nightlife, and this serves to heighten her desirability. In addition to her recreational activities, Nana works as a performer in the Théâtre des Variétés, a site of near anarchy where patrons were ‘crushed together’ (Zola 1972, p. 26). These decadent spaces possessed a splendour and excitement, modern traits that were also embodied by the femme fatale. In one of the novel’s early sequences, Zola’s description of the theatre conjures a veritable phantasmagoria capturing modernity’s merging of dissolution and excitement, of visual splendour and shabbiness, and of eroticism and corruption. The theatre that is Nana’s workplace is ‘resplendent,’ with ‘[t]all jets of gas’ that ‘lit the great crystal chandelier with a blaze of pink and yellow flames, which rained down a stream of light from gallery to pit’ (Zola 1972, p. 27). Complementing this splendour was ‘the shabbiness of the proscenium arch, where cracks showed the plaster under the gilding’ (Zola 1972, p. 27). The flâneuristic response to such spaces—and the women who occupied them—was a dialectical one of attraction and repulsion. The transcendental conflated with the profane. The cracks in the gilding that reveal the unattractive plaster beneath are also metonymic of the essentially artificial nature of modernity. All is ‘counterfeit’ surface glamour and underneath there is shabbiness. Nothing has eternal value. This complies with a modern notion of beauty.

Significantly, the male subject’s desire was ignited by the public nature of the new woman. Zola apparently undertook a great deal of research in preparation for
writing *Nana*, observing theatre life, police raids, society scandals and other urban iniquities (Holden 1972), and it is within this milieu that the heroine is eminently at home. Nana’s desirability is thus inextricably linked to her familiarity of the city’s ‘low-life’ and to her public persona. Zola’s novel abounds with descriptions of Nana’s beauty, appraised within a public context:

> The curtain fell on an apotheosis, with the cuckold’s chorus on their knees singing a hymn of gratitude to Venus, who stood there smiling in all the splendour of her sovereign nudity (Zola 1972, p. 47).

Nana’s nudity was shocking precisely *because* of its location within the theatre, where her body becomes a spectacle to be adored by the multitudes. This shift of eroticism into the public sphere was in fact a central feature of modernity. With the ubiquity of women on city streets, and the new visibility of prostitution, the possibility for erotic encounter within a quotidian context increased considerably. What Creed terms the ‘public erotic’ (Creed 1998) of the modern period is amply represented in the literature of Zola. Maupassant also frequently depicts a social landscape where women congregate, gossip or immodestly conduct their liaisons in cafés and bars. In his short story entitled *A Night Out*, a group of women gather at a Montmartre café, shamelessly discussing their love affairs and ‘drinking beer like men’ (Maupassant 1946, p. 199).

Cultural historian Berman discusses Baudelaire’s *The Eyes of the Poor* in respect to the notion of this public erotic. For Berman, the poem illustrates the fact that desire in nineteenth century Paris, as a result of the Haussmannisation of the city, was played out on the streets of the metropolis (Berman 1988). In Baudelaire’s poetry, it was also the nocturnal city landscape that was a crucial contributing factor to the flâneur’s desire for the new woman, as articulated in *L’Amour du Mensonge* (*Love of Artifice*):

> And lends a new enchantment to your skin;
> The way the saffron jets inflame the dawn,
> As two enticing eyes light up again … (Baudelaire 1997, pp. 255-56).156

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156 Originally published in *Tableaux Parisiens* (*Parisian Scenes*), a section of *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1861).
Only in a nocturnal context, under artificial lighting, does the woman’s skin acquire an irresistible glow. In much the same way that Nana’s splendour was at its most awe-inspiring when assessed within the artificial environment of the theatre, Baudelaire’s narrator seems to require the city’s ‘saffron jets’ to fully reveal the woman’s sexual magnetism. In 1866, Baudelaire again rhapsodises about a woman ‘whom night has made so fair,’ reiterating the importance of the nocturnal (Baudelaire 1997, pp. 385-86).

From its inception, cinema engaged with this modern woman of the streets and urban underworld. In many ways a precursor to noir’s femme fatale, the Weimar vamp is firmly signalled as cosmopolitan and nocturnal. In *Pandora’s Box*, Lulu patronises corrupt and decadent sites of entertainment where she mixes with circus people, gamblers, alcoholics and others who have been ostracised from respectable bourgeois society. Pabst’s depiction of this milieu invokes Marinetti’s ideas about the capacity of the theatre and cabaret to destroy traditional barriers, socio-economic and otherwise. All manner of characters mingle with no consideration for traditional Wilhelminian values. Other Weimar films portray this publicly erotic woman. Lola, the femme fatale of *Blue Angel* (*Der Blaue Engel*, Josef von Sternberg, 1930, Germany), works as a singer in a nightclub. Like Zola’s Nana, her ravishing beauty is appreciated *en masse*. Rather than debasing her, however, Lola’s status as public spectacle transforms her into a fetish object upon which the respectable Professor Unrat becomes hopelessly fixated. Utterly removed from any familial ties, both Lola and Lulu are sexually ambiguous, powerful, aligned with the deviant elements of urban life and defined by a peculiar mix of surface glamour, ingenuousness and avarice.

As will be demonstrated throughout this chapter, film noir also used the nineteenth century modern woman as the template for its cinematic femme fatale. In scholarship, however, this connection has been undertheorised or ignored altogether. And yet the noir woman’s sexuality is shocking and seductively compelling precisely because it is frequently enacted within an urban and nocturnal sphere. This needs to be historically contextualised.

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The noir femme fatale is aligned with the city and its attendant vices—alcohol, gambling, cigarettes, cars, jewellery, fashion and other material possessions. She is often at home in urban sites of hedonistic pleasure or deregulated vice. Despite her marital status and the restrictions it entails, *Gilda*’s eponymous heroine presides over the Argentinian casino of the film’s setting, revelling in the freedom conferred by her privileged position. Gilda’s ‘striptease’ is all the more powerful because it is enacted in a public, nocturnal context within a site of gambling and vice. The eponymous heroine of *Laura* is an independent socialite and career woman whose beauty is appraised in the affluent soirées and cafés of New York. *Out of the Past*’s Jeff desires Kathie for her cosmopolitanism and her dynamic lifestyle that eschews the stasis and security of domesticity. The femme fatale’s familiarity with the metropolis, and the fact that she patronises casinos, nightclubs and cabarets, are all indices of her status as modern woman. Significantly, these are also the qualities that most ignite the hero’s ardour.

Indeed, such impudent occupation of urban spaces seems to be a female imperative in the noir canon. Even purportedly ‘virtuous’ women are able to negotiate such interstitial spaces with consummate ease. In *Phantom Lady*, the morally upright heroine Kansas has little difficulty in assuming the persona of ‘good-time girl’ in her scheme to lure drummer Cliff and thus aid her hermeneutic quest to find the ‘phantom lady’ whose testimony could exonerate her beloved boss from the murder conviction he faces. The sheer believability of Kansas’ performance as she seduces Cliff in the renowned ‘drumming sequence’ is evidence of the flexibility of the modern working girl to assume a more overtly sexualised persona in order to attain the results she desires. Like her newly emancipated nineteenth century predecessors, the noir femme fatale is tough, self-sufficient and able to protect herself. When *The Killers*’ Kitty is threatened with physical violence by her lover Colfax she berates the Swede for attempting to protect her. ‘I can take care of myself,’ she retorts, turning to Colfax and warning, ‘you touch me, and you won’t live till morning.’ Kitty is itinerant and lives by her wits. Hardened to the harsh realities of urban living, she is adept at dealing with the city’s most menacing aspects.

Other noir femmes fatales are unwillingly restricted by matrimony. Like Kansas, however, they readily assume the comportment of the new woman once they move into city spaces. In *Double Indemnity*, Phyllis frequents Jerry’s Market where she can conduct her liaison with Neff in a clandestine fashion. It is within this
impersonal consumer setting that she is in her element, moving freely, avoiding
detection and shedding her identity as married woman. With her glamorous attire
(sunglasses, coiffed platinum hair and darkened lips) she is clearly at odds with the
domesticated women who are carrying out their marketing (purchasing baby food and
shepherding toddlers around the supermarket). Her obvious distaste for these wives
and mothers further delineates Phyllis as a modern woman because of the manner in
which she occupies the commercial space. Atomised from the crowd and thoroughly
abject, Phyllis is anonymous, mobile and independent. That her trysts with Neff occur
in a supermarket is significant in other ways as well. Throughout the nineteenth
century, the only way a peripatetic woman without escort could be transfigured into a
relatively respectable female flâneur (a flâneuse) was by assuming the role of
consumer. In appropriating what Friedberg terms a ‘consumer gaze,’ women were
permitted a socially acceptable place within the public domain (Friedberg 1995, p. 65), particularly given the ascendance of the department store throughout the
nineteenth century. Within this sphere of rampant consumerism, women could roam
unimpeded. Shopping precincts thus assumed pragmatic and symbolic significance.

Mobility is also a central theme in the characterisation of the noir femme
fatale. Much like the nineteenth century woman who navigated the city streets
unimpeded, the noir femme fatale is often mobile and unable to be rendered static.
Gilda’s dance sequences, or Kansas’ ‘good-time girl’ impersonation in Phantom Lady
are exemplary. In fact, in many instances, the noir woman’s movement dictates that of
the camera. When Out of the Past’s Kathie walks into La Mar Azul, Tourneur’s
camera approximates Jeff’s point of view, thus allowing the spectator to indulge in a
scopophilic gaze along with the noir hero. Kathie’s power to dictate the diegesis is
evidence of her capacity to move through the urban landscape yet remain at its centre,
eternally the focal point of the cinematic flâneur’s (and camera’s) gaze. Like
Maupassant’s beer-drinking women who loiter at the café, or Baudelaire’s passante
who was fetishised and eroticised as an urban commodity, the noir femme fatale is an

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158 Le Bon Marché opened in 1852 and was considered an architectural triumph due to its
magnitude and splendour. Its success led to imitations such as Au Printemps, Galeries
Lafayette and Au Gagne-Petit. Retrieved October 21, 2002 from
www.arnould1900.com/architecture.html. Similar patterns occurred in other major European
cities. Berlin’s first Warenhaus opened in 1890, and in the ensuing decade, 109 department
stores were constructed throughout Germany, including fourteen in Berlin (Barkin 1996).
object of desire within a modern, male discourse.

Place believes there is a binary oppositional model of female representation in film noir, where the evil temptresses are much more exciting than their domesticated counterparts (Place 1980). Harvey concurs: the noir world is peopled by ‘exciting, childless whores’ or ‘boring, potentially childbearing sweethearts’ (Harvey 1980, p. 25). Director Kathryn Bigelow also subscribes to this model, describing the noir femme fatale as an ‘untamed animal,’ infinitely more desirable and fascinating than the compliant and conformist ‘good woman’ (cited in Schon 1994). Examination of classic 1940s films noirs, however, reveals a female articulation that is slightly more complex than this dichotomous model. There are, admittedly, women who are unproblematically delineated as ‘domestic’ and are undeserving of sustained flâneuristic attention. These disempowered women, however, remain caricatures and never become the focal point of the narrative. Out of the Past’s Ann is an example. The essential goodness of the bucolic Ann is diametrically opposed to the doomed amorality of femme fatale Kathie. As the virtuous woman (who inhabits the present, diurnal environment as opposed to the shady past), Ann is also firmly situated within a family context. Indeed, she discovers the accusations against Jeff by reading a newspaper headline as she sits in the family kitchen with her parents: a scene of cosy domesticity compromised only by the intrusion of the modern world (represented by Jeff). Yet the character of Ann remains peripheral and constitutes little more than a narrative strategy.

Apart from these relatively rare two-dimensional characters, virtually all noir women are implicated in cosmopolitanism and modernity. When Neff visits the Dietrichson home to deceive its patriarch into signing the incorrect insurance policies, Phyllis and Lola are playing a board game in the parlour. Smoking languorously, dressed in black and with her blonde hair immaculately coiffed, Phyllis is clearly designated as femme fatale, utterly bored with the domestic scene. Lola, conversely, wears a rather prim white blouse and sensible skirt. And yet it transpires later in this scene and indeed throughout the film that the seemingly honourable Lola is not really so innocent. She lies to her father, declaring that she is meeting girlfriend Anne Matthews to go roller-skating (a decidedly childlike and innocent leisure activity) when in fact she is travelling downtown to meet her lover. Lola is adept at navigating the metropolis, and finally moves into her own apartment in Hollywood. Furthermore, her name aligns her with precursor vamps such as Lola in Blue Angel and Lulu in
Similarly, Murder, My Sweet’s Ann Grayle is clearly the younger, more chaste and ‘pious’ of the film’s female characters. Yet she is also resourceful and canny, initially impersonating a female journalist in order to obtain information from Marlowe. Later, she patronises the Coconut Club with apparent ease and familiarity. Like Lola in Double Indemnity, Ann leaves the family abode and installs herself in her own apartment, consolidating her status as an independent city woman. Whether femmes fatales or otherwise, most female characters in the noir canon are modelled on the new woman prototype. None, it seems, is immune from the forces of modernity.

As previously mentioned, many femmes fatales are bound by marriage. Despite their status as ‘kept women,’ however, they covet and frequently acquire all the city has to offer. They aspire to extricate themselves from their marital restrictions, and to experience a freer, more modern existence. In many ways, this model complies with Baudelaire’s notion of modernity’s ‘fashionable coquette,’ a figure whose social privilege (bestowed by virtue of marriage to men of a certain social stature) is inextricably connected to a particularly modernist brand of boredom, ennui and materialism. The opening lines of Baudelaire’s vignette on this subject attacks the capriciousness of this kept woman and her propensity for complaining about her life of leisure:

Really, my dear, you weary me beyond endurance and I have no pity for you; to hear you sighing one would think you were as miserable as those aged women who toil in the fields, or the old beggar women who pick up crusts at tavern doors.

If at least your sighs indicated remorse they would be some credit to you; but they mean nothing more than the satiety of gratification and the despondency of too much leisure (Baudelaire 1970e, p. 17).

159 Der Erdgeist (Earth Spirit) (1895) and Die Büchse der Pandora (Pandora’s Box) (1904). The second play was initially banned on the grounds of obscenity. As noted by Freud, the English word ‘box’ has many German translations including ‘die Schachtel’ (case), ‘die Loge’ (box at the theatre), ‘der Kasten’ (chest), ‘die Ohrfeige’ (box on the ear) and ‘die Büchse’ (receptacle), the latter of which is ‘used as a vulgar term for the female genitals’ (Freud 1953, p. 154). Given the play’s themes, it is perhaps fitting that Wedekind selected the term ‘Büchse’ for its title. According to Freud, boxes, cases and ovens appearing in one’s dreams represent the uterus (Freud 1976).
Baudelaire reviles the coquette for her ingratitude, declaring that ‘too much leisure’ engenders despondency. The coquette cares only for herself, has no remorse and is defined by an absence of feminine empathy. She is both covetous and representative of the superficiality of modernity, and has an extreme penchant for material goods. Her own status as fetish object is also emphasised by the fact that her husband, as Baudelaire puts it, ‘display[s]’ her ‘at all the street fairs’ (Baudelaire 1970e, p. 17). In these respects, the nineteenth century coquette can be seen as the precursor to the noir femme fatale who is unhappily ensconced in domesticity, yet eager to avail herself of its attendant benefits. Both figures also become objects for consumption by the modern male gaze.

As Vernet points out, many femmes fatales are defined by their idleness (Vernet 1983). *Double Indemnity*’s Phyllis is no exception. In Cain’s novel, she is first introduced wearing ‘blue house pajamas [sic]’ (Cain 2002, p. 3). In Wilder’s film version, she has been sunbathing on the roof as her maid, Nellie, toils with the housework. During the scenes in Jerry’s Market, Phyllis’ demeanour (furtive) and attire (glamorous) clearly put her at odds with the other decidedly more prosaic women who are busily attending to their domestic obligations. With her raw and mercenary ambition to swindle money out of the insurance company, Phyllis has no association with industrious labour. Instead, she personifies a rejection of the all-pervasive American work ethic. In this, she becomes grotesque parody of the consumerism of modernity, and a fetish object upon which the cinematic flâneur becomes unhealthily fixated.

This is consistent with Baudelaire’s coquette, who relishes the privileges afforded by her position, yet shows a disregard and even a chilling sense of destructiveness for property and people alike. ‘See with what voracity …’ observes Baudelaire, ‘she tears apart those living rabbits and squalling chickens that her keeper has thrown to her’ (Baudelaire 1970e, pp. 17-18). When blessed with material plenitude, the coquette fails to exhibit the modesty and gratitude which respectable society demands. Instead, she devours all that crosses her path, uses her wealth and station in an opportunistically manner and is dismissive and contemptuous of those who toil to ensure that she remains cosseted. Zola’s Nana exemplifies this nineteenth century coquette. She spends an inordinate amount of time lounging around. When not receiving gentlemen callers, Nana is ‘bored to distraction’ (Zola 1972, p. 129), resorting to activities of pure sensuous pleasure such as ‘sucking lumps of sugar
dipped in cognac' (Zola 1972, p. 57). Regarding her luxurious living quarters with
disdain, Nana’s hubris propels her towards promiscuity, and she is frequently
compelled to pick up men on ‘a stupid impulse, out of sheer boredom’ (Zola 1972, p.
346).

Similarly, the noir femme fatale’s status as ‘kept woman’ enables her to
indulge in illicit liaisons, avail herself of urban excitement, and to discard people at
will. Murder, My Sweet’s Helen Grayle has a number of men on whom she depends
for entertainment. She ignores her elderly husband and instead directs her attentions
towards younger, supposedly more virile prospects. ‘I find men very attractive,’ she
brazenly declares in the film’s denouement (‘I imagine they’d meet you halfway,’
Marlowe drolly responds). Double Indemnity’s Phyllis is likewise languishing in an
unhappy and uneventful marriage, yet such an idle existence provides ample
opportunity to seduce passing insurance salesmen. Like Baudelaire’s coquette, Phyllis
covets all the city has to offer and readily embarks upon amorous adventures with
strangers. Phyllis’ aspiration towards the cosmopolitan sophistication of the coquette
is indicated at several points throughout the film. Upon Neff’s second visit, she offers
him iced-tea, despite his stated preference for the more quotidian American beer:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Neff</th>
<th>Where did you pick up this tea drinking?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phyllis</td>
<td>You’re not English, are you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neff</td>
<td>No, Californian. Born right here in Los</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Angeles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phyllis</td>
<td>They say all native Californians come from</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Iowa.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neff</td>
<td>Mr Neff, I …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phyllis</td>
<td>Make it Walter.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Phyllis aims to imitate what she sees as a cultured lifestyle and is perhaps evasive
regarding her background for this reason. Her past is never fully delineated, and
although she admits to being a Los Angeles ‘native,’ when Neff presses her for further
details of her provenance, she abruptly changes the subject, as if unwilling to divulge
her personal history. With no apparent tempering family context, Phyllis becomes a
‘kept woman’ and ‘object of desire.’ As the erstwhile nurse of the first (deceased) Mrs
Dietrichson, Phyllis’ past is only ever hinted at, with the insinuation being that she
married Dietrichson to improve her financial standing. Such stability, however, is
clearly not enough to compensate for Phyllis’ dissatisfaction, and she alludes on
several occasions to domestic boredom. She has nothing but disdain for a husband
who doesn’t talk to her, leaving her to ‘sit and knit’ in the evening, the phonology and
staccato structure of this phrase underscoring her bitterness. Phyllis bemoans the fact that Dietrichson ‘keeps [her] on a leash so tight [she] can’t breathe.’ By painting such an unappealing picture of her domestic constraints, Phyllis expresses a clear desire for urban anonymity.

Much like Baudelaire’s fashionable coquette, the noir femme fatale is often trapped in a conjugal situation portrayed as suffocating, oppressive, unbearable and inimical to modern life.\textsuperscript{160} It is therefore the noir hero’s quest to wrest her from these patriarchal constraints and to reinstate her where she really belongs—at the centre of the intoxicating phantasmagoria of the metropolis.

The new prostitute of modernity, as she was discursively formulated and represented throughout the latter part of the nineteenth century, also provides a template for the femme fatale. The noir woman’s sexual relations are connected to commerce on several levels. Phyllis marries Dietrichson for financial stability then seduces Neff with the aim of illegally acquiring $50,000 in an insurance payout. In Out of the Past, Kathie steals $40,000 from Sterling, whilst Gilda’s heroine is clearly married to Mundsen for security. Furthermore, as a fetish object circulating in the capitalist marketplace, the femme fatale approximates a modern prostitute in terms of the flâneuristic desire she elicits. An overview of the emergence of the new prostitute—a figure that was discursively abhorred, deplored, revered and celebrated—proves enlightening.

\textsuperscript{160} Kathie in Out of the Past, Elsa in The Lady from Shanghai and Cora in The Postman Always Rings Twice fit this model. Interestingly, Cora also yearns for a more traditional family life. I would suggest that Cora inhabits a despatialised sphere, or what Klein would term a cinematic ‘ur-space’ (Klein 1998): located on the side of the highway, her abode designates neither city nor country, but a kind of non-space in contradistinction to the lure of the city.
6.3 The prostitute of the modern metropolis

What is love?
The need to emerge from oneself.
Man is an animal which adores.
To adore is to sacrifice and prostitute oneself.
Thus all love is prostitution.
*Charles Baudelaire* (Baudelaire 1949, p. 40).

I have always said … that prostitution was woman’s normal state.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the prostitute gained an increasingly high profile, becoming a ubiquitous trope in a number of art forms and discourses. She appeared in the paintings of Monet and Manet and graced the walls of the *salons* of Europe. She was also fictionalised in literary works including *Mouche* (Maupassant 1971d), *Boule de Suif* (Maupassant 1971a), *Madame Tellier’s Establishment* (Maupassant 1971c) and *Nana* (Zola 1972). Elsewhere, novelists became fascinated with the fall from grace of an ostensibly respectable woman as a result of avaricious and libidinous desires. Zola’s *Thérèse Raquin* and Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (published in 1867 and 1856 respectively) are prime examples. In Germany, prostitution flourished in the Wilhelminian era and was celebrated by expressionists and intellectuals. Writers and poets such as August Strindberg, Heinrich Mann and Frank Wedekind saw prostitution’s ascendance as inevitable given the regime’s repressive approach to morality and sexuality (Allen 1974).

Frequently, the prostitute was seen as analogous to industrialisation and modernisation. Of technological advance, German Professor Karl Oldenburg warned in 1897 that ‘[t]o be seduced by this passing harlot ... would be to risk a thousand-year-old civilization for transitory gains’ (cited in Barkin 1996, p. 29). In this respect, the prostitute allegorised the concept of modernity, with its effacement of history and tradition, and its celebration of instantaneity and the transient. In this, the new woman/prostitute complies with a modernist temporal order, or what Frisby describes as ‘modernity as eternal present’ (Frisby 1985, p. 38). In cultural theory, the prostitute also became a figure of fascination and a metonym for modernity. Benjamin cites her, along with the flâneur and the collector, as *ur-forms* of contemporary life, which suggests a natural affinity between the city and the practice of prostitution (Buck-
Morsss 1986). Baudelaire was even more overtly cynical, believing all love in modern times to be effectively synonymous with prostitution, as indicated in the above-quoted syllogism.

Historians have suggested that the increased representation of the prostitute throughout the nineteenth century reflected a rise in the actual practice in urban centres. As early as 1832, it was estimated that New York had in excess of 10,000 prostitutes. By mid-century, the American Ladies’ Industrial Association alleged that, nationwide, between 50,000 and 100,000 poverty-stricken women turned to prostitution each year (Israel 2003). During the 1870s, around 120,000 prostitutes worked in Paris (Clark 1985), although numbers were difficult to calculate, since many were not registered with the Paris prefecture. The ‘deregulation of vice’ gave rise to further public anxiety over issues of identification and control. In contemporaneous England, there were bureaucratic attempts to regulate prostitution, with Parliamentary acts passed on the matter, including The Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1866 and 1869 (Stott 1992).

Dijkstra believes that prostitution became widespread in Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century due to a cultural climate in which middle-class women had been elevated to a desexualised position, becoming what he terms ‘quasi-virginal household nuns’ (Dijkstra 1986). In this context, the prostitute offered a semblance of reality to men desperate for some sort of connection. Like the metropolis, she was transgressive and represented a disavowal of all the bourgeois held dear. Marx and Engels believed the modern prostitute to represent the antithesis of the nuclear family (Marx & Engels 1967), and many commentators concurred with this view. Writes Victor Barrucand in 1895 of the streetwalkers he encountered in his city peregrinations: ‘with a simple undulation of her rump, she was able to trouble man’s brain … she ridiculed chastity, the family, the fatherland, the future life, drama and the world of dreams’ (cited in Dijkstra 1986, p. 358).

Foucault speaks of the Victorian period as a crucial one for the reconfiguration of the discourse of eroticism. ‘On the subject of sex, silence became the rule,’ explains Foucault, with regulatory discourses seeking to confine eroticism to

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161 Indeed, Marx and Engels believed that a communist system, in which the hypocrisy of covert bourgeois affairs was destroyed, would abolish prostitution altogether (Marx & Engels 1967).
the context of the ‘conjugal family [who] absorbed it into the serious function of reproduction’ (Foucault 1980, p. 3). The highly visible urban prostitute was inimical to this model. Rather than being consigned to the margins of society (both figuratively and literally), the new prostitutes inhabiting the grand cities of Europe and America revelled in city life. By the 1860s, they were able to congregate in a highly conspicuous manner at Parisian sites of leisure such as the cafés-concerts or cafés-chantants, as opined by Charles Lecour:

[Prostitutes] are everywhere, in the cafés-concerts, the theatres, the balls. One meets them in public establishments, railway stations, and even railway carriages. They are there on all the promenades, in front of most of the cafés. Late into the night they circulate in great numbers on all the finest boulevards … (1870, cited in Clark 1985, p. 105).

Despite the fact that in many ways prostitution was an accepted but unspoken adjunct to respectable Victorian society, its newfound visibility and infiltration into the ‘finest boulevards’ and ‘all the promenades’ proved most unsettling. Like the new woman, the modern prostitute behaved as if she owned the city, and this mastery and sense of entitlement proved both fascinating and repellant to commentators. In 1869, Jeannel laments the fact that the hitherto respectable ‘luxurious cafés’ of Paris had been transformed into ‘bazaars of prostitution’ (cited in Clark 1985, p. 101). In A Berlin Chronicle, Benjamin invokes past encounters with the prostitutes who loitered around Berlin’s erstwhile Viktoria Café on the corner of Friedrichstrasse and Unter den Linden where they ‘seemed to have the spacious café to themselves’ (Benjamin 1978, p. 21). Benjamin’s description implies a cultural climate in which prostitutes enjoyed newfound licence to claim ownership of previously male domains.

The visibility of the urban prostitute, for Benjamin, carried enormous subversive and revolutionary potential, since the notion of a public erotic was ‘both feudal and proletarian’ (Benjamin 1979, p. 101). Experientially, Benjamin believed encounters with prostitutes were both metaphysically and geographically transgressive because they opened up city spaces in an unprecedented way. ‘There is no doubt,’ he attests, ‘… that a feeling of crossing the threshold of one’s class for the first time had a part in the almost unequalled fascination of publicly accosting a whore in the street’ (Benjamin 1978, p. 11). The urban prostitute was able to encourage movement into unchartered terrain. She could aid the flâneur in his aim to traverse and conquer the entire urban wilderness. As such, she is inextricably connected to urban mobility and
perambulation. In many cultural discourses, prostitution and movement conflated, as demonstrated by the changing pragmatic aspects of the term ‘traffic.’ As early as the sixteenth century, it was pejoratively employed to describe wanton women: ‘these trafickes, these common truls … walk abroad.’ Whilst increasingly used to denote vehicular movement, ‘traffic’ retained a disparaging connotation throughout the nineteenth century, as evidenced in an 1854 description of ‘beautiful and dissolute females, trafficking in their charms’ (Scharff 1991, p. 4).

Throughout the nineteenth century, traditional systems of signification that designated ‘prostitute’ and ‘non-prostitute’ were also reconfigured, and the lines between a woman who occupied public spaces and one who traded sex for money became alarmingly blurred. As Doane dryly remarks, ‘[i]t was becoming more and more difficult to distinguish between the well-attired prostitute and the bourgeois lady since both were now found, unaccompanied, on the streets’ (Doane 1991, p. 263). Moreover, an anxiety over prostitution was complemented by a more generalised fear of ‘foot-loose’ or ‘homeless’ women, of which the YWCA estimated there were in excess of 145,000 throughout America by 1933. These women were seen to be ‘at dangerous odds’ and thus amenable to the prospect of earning money through trading sexual favours (Israel 2003).

Clearly, there was a perceptual and discursive imbrication of women’s presence on the streets and the notion of woman-as-sexual-commodity. This persisted well into the twentieth century, with the Kinsey reports of the 1950s making no distinction between prostitutes and ‘the sort of promiscuous females who are most often involved in tavern pick-ups and in street approaches’ (Kinsey 1953, p. 79). Recast as an urban spectacle, the value of the new woman and prostitute alike resided emphatically on the surface, a point noted by Armstrong who connects discourses of modern prostitution to pornography. Both ‘use the body’s surface to visualise the pleasure occurring somewhere underneath,’ thus producing, contends Armstrong, an ‘historically new body’ (Armstrong 1998, p. 64). It is this rendering of eroticism on the surface and its transferral into a public domain which, I would suggest, is a

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162 Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male (Kinsey 1948) and Sexual Behaviour in the Human Female (Kinsey 1953) were empirical sociological ‘fact-finding survey[s]’ exploring ‘patterns of sexual behavior … and what social significance there may be in each type of behavior’ (Kinsey 1953, p. 3).

Petra Désirée Nolan
primary contributory element of the flâneur’s ardour for the new woman/prostitute.

The conceptualisation of the modern woman as spectacle is reflected in other nineteenth century discourses, including tabloid media reportage of the time. The notorious 1888 case of Jack the Ripper held much public fascination in late-Victorian England largely because it was enacted in a public domain, in which the visibility of the murdered prostitutes was an intrinsic part of the spectacular nature of the crimes. Media coverage of the murders was strongly misogynistic, implying that the greater presence of women on the streets left them exposed to such danger. Blame was thus attributed to the victims and their urban mobility (Walkowitz 1992; Dunant 2000). Graphic descriptions of the corpses and their dismemberment abounded. The *New York Tribune* wrote with relish of ‘mutilated bodies’ and ‘trunk[s] … in an advanced state of decomposition’ (*The New York Tribune* 1888, n.p.). Not only did these women endure a very public professional life as urban prostitutes, but the final indignity was that even in death, their bodies were transformed into the ultimate grotesque spectacle. Their visibility, furthermore, was counterpoised by the fact that the assailant was able to navigate the city’s interstices in an anonymous and flâneuristic manner, assessing the wares whilst remaining undetected amongst the swarms of people (London was horribly overcrowded at the time). The fascination with these grisly murders, and the notoriety they attained, was part of what Seltzer terms a ‘wound culture’ in which spectacle, sexuality and violence conflate to create a ‘pathological public sphere’ (Seltzer 1997).

Other twentieth century cases of murdered prostitutes (or suspected prostitutes) provoked similar media commentary. The unsolved 1947 ‘Black Dahlia’ murder of Elizabeth Short, for instance, held much appeal to a public hungry for press reports of heinous and gruesome crimes perpetrated against lone, ‘transgressive’ women.163

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163 Elizabeth Short was an aspiring twenty-two year old actress who was brutally murdered. Her severed and battered body was found in Los Angeles in January 1947. Short was depicted in the media as a beautiful and seductive temptress, a modern ‘good-time’ girl. Rumoured to have known Marilyn Monroe, Short had previously been arrested for underage drinking, was supposedly enamoured of servicemen, and had a passion for Hollywood’s nightlife (she was last seen alive at the Biltmore Hotel where she was to meet an unknown gentlemen). For these reasons, Short’s murder was highly newsworthy. It was extensively sensationalised in the popular press and has since attained mythological status, particularly as the identity of the murderer remains a mystery. Retrieved December 27, 2003 from www.bethshort.com/eshort.htm.
Both the Ripper and the Black Dahlia crimes shared several features, all of which can be connected to modernity. Before their deaths, the prostitutes and Ms Short were mobile, urban and highly visible women. Unchaperoned, they negotiated the city’s morally questionable spaces alone. The Ripper victims inhabited poverty-stricken Whitechapel in London’s East End, whilst Short moved through the dreamlike ur-space of Hollywood and its dark underbelly. Their bodies, whilst both alive and dead, were objectified and assessed by a male scopophilic gaze. Before her death, Ms Short was a glamorous beauty consorting with the almost-famous. As such, she was one of many ‘commodities’ circulating in the (Hollywood/modern) marketplace. The mutilation of her body was thus all the more shocking and compelling. Indeed, part of the morbid fascination in both cases centred on the grotesque disfigurement of the victims’ bodies, which rendered them as abject yet intriguing spectacles. *The Times*’ editorial of 4 October 1888 referred to the ‘celebrity’ with which the Ripper crimes were committed (Haggard 1993).

The urban prostitute also personified another of modernity’s axioms—that of commodification. In a cultural climate in which all was reduced to pecuniary exchange, the prostitute was fascinating not only because of her visibility and ostensibly predatory behaviour towards men, but also because she was a figure in which sexuality and economic transaction were intertwined. As such, prostitution encapsulated modernity’s debasement of hitherto transcendental concepts such as love and the sanctity of the human body. Clark argues that urban prostitution generated anxiety because, like a secularised transubstantiation, there was ‘a matter of bodies turning into what they are usually not, in this case money’ (Clark 1985, p. 102).

Similarly, Benjamin observes that the modern prostitute ‘is saleswoman and wares in one’ (Benjamin 1978, p. 157). Simmel also espoused the notion that everything in the capitalist world ultimately boils down to an economic or fiscal transaction. ‘The ordinary vicissitudes of daily life,’ propounded Simmel in his 1900 *Philosophie des Geldes*, ‘produce a continuous alternation of profit and loss’ (Simmel 1971, p. 44). ¹⁶⁴

The commodification of the prostitute (and, by extension, modern woman) had far-reaching implications for the flâneur, since his desire for her was akin to his yearning for other fetishised consumer objects. As Benjamin noted, ‘the love for the

¹⁶⁴ *Philosophie des Geldes* (*Philosophy of Money*) emerged from a paper delivered by Simmel in May 1889 and a series of essays written in the subsequent eleven years.
prostitute is the apotheosis of empathy with the commodity’ (Benjamin 2000, p. 511). Benjamin was much preoccupied with the issue of commodification. He was fascinated with the World Exhibitions because they glorified ‘the exchange value of commodities.’ Not only did this process of commodification destroy any ‘intrinsic’ value, but it also perpetuated a phantasmagoria (Benjamin 1978, p. 152). The new woman/prostitute was a central feature of such a phantasmagoria. Her currency, like that of the noir femme fatale, was her body. In many ways, the urban prostitute became a metonym of modern amusement and entertainment. Like the noir femme fatale, she represents a means of escape for the modern male subject who falls victim to the ennui of urban life and is thus desperate for diversion and re-enchantment.

Anxiety over the newly configured prostitute was also part of a more widespread fear about the mutability of systems of signification. Hugely scandalous at the time, Manet’s 1865 painting Olympia depicted a prostitute and raised questions of representation, intelligibility and semiotic reconfiguration.165 Whilst to some extent derivative of classical art such as Titian’s The Venus of Urbino (1538), Manet’s image nonetheless generated unease. Clark’s detailed semiotic analysis of the painting—which he calls the ‘founding monument of modern art’ (Clark 1985, p. 79)—suggests that it was the lack of fixity in its signifiers, the absence of traditional coding, which caused it to be so uncomfortably and unfavourably received. Nineteenth century representations of the modern prostitute, it seemed, were frequently nothing more than a cluster of unintelligible signs.

This ‘unreadable’ prostitute was also a fearful creature because she represented modernity’s conflation of erotic love and death in a very real way: prostitutes were frequently the carriers of syphilis, a deadly and incurable disease from which Baudelaire was to die at the age of forty-six.166 The prostitute also represented a disavowal of bourgeois values, which is perhaps why Baudelaire celebrated her with such fervour. Throughout his life, Baudelaire embraced the seamier side of life, including the realm of prostitution, as lamented by his brother in personal correspondence of 1841, in which Baudelaire’s descent into disrepute is

165 Baudelaire, a friend of Manet’s, praised and supported Olympia in the face of the moral outrage it generated (Clark 1985).
166 Several modernists—including Nietzsche, Maupassant and Baudelaire—suffered and ultimately died from syphilis.
attacked:

You were waylaid by bad company … Your friends brought you in contact with women, who, because they had made the mistake of succumbing to misfortune and a desire for loose living, made you take them for models of a life of freedom. You have gone into debt to support, feed, and dress some strumpet, your own word, which seems to me exactly the right one (Baudelaire 1970a, p. 111) (italics his).

In fact, Jeanne Duval, Baudelaire’s long-term mistress, whom he first met in 1842, worked as a prostitute. Their relationship, whilst precarious, spanned twenty years and was probably Baudelaire’s most significant. Baudelaire also perceived an inherent affinity between the modern prostitute and urbanisation. In *Comes the Charming Evening*, published in *Paris Spleen*, he describes how prostitution ‘circulates securely in the city’s clogged heart,’ suggesting that the anonymity of the metropolis proved conducive to illicit erotic activity (Baudelaire 1970h, p. 116). Although prostitution could pervade virtually all aspects of modern life, ‘spread[ing] its light and life in the streets,’ and sullying everything in its path, it was within the vice districts of the city that Baudelaire saw prostitution flourishing most abundantly, alongside other criminal and dubious activities:

Cheap hotels, the haunts of dubious solaces,  
Are filling with tarts, and crooks, their sleek accomplices,  
And thieves, who have never heard of restraint or remorse …  
(Baudelaire 1970h, p. 116).

The prostitute also symbolised, for Baudelaire, a destruction of romantic or redemptive love. Because of her alignment with modernity, the prostitute has the power to induce a painful and destructive ardour:

I sought oblivion in love, but love’s  
A bed of nails insatiable for gore,  
That drained my heart for every passing whore.  
*La Fontaine de Sang (Fountain of Blood)*, (Baudelaire 1997, pp. 304-305), originally published in *Les Fleurs du Mal*.

As the above historical overview suggests, there were numerous modern discourses, art forms, media and paradigms in which the urban prostitute became analogous to the

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167 See (Mazlish 1994) and Isherwood’s preface to (Baudelaire 1949).
new woman. Both figures were metonymic representations of modernity and its metropolis. The new woman/prostitute occupied urban spheres, was defined by her visibility, surface glamour and her status as object or spectacle. She personified modernity’s preoccupation with the moment, and the transmutation of human relations into fiscal exchange. Ultimately, she was little more than a highly desirable commodity object, one of the city’s many ‘wares.’

From its inception, the cinema provided an apposite medium with which to represent this new woman/prostitute. The Weimar vamp was rendered explicitly or implicitly as a prostitute. With her slick hair (like a shiny helmet or a suit of armour), surface dazzle, inscrutability and androgyny, she was also undeniably urban. Lulu of Pandora’s Box is exemplary. She is a showgirl who brings pain and destruction to herself and to those with whom she consorts.  

The implication at the film’s conclusion is that Lulu, as an alluring prostitute, is murdered by Jack the Ripper. Whilst such Weimar representations can be seen as prototypical cinematic portrayals, it was within the film noir canon that this new woman-as-prostitute found her apotheosis.

The noir femme fatale, however, was not simply a streetwalker. Rather, she was a modern, mobile and urban creature who resembles an upper-class courtesan. Unashamedly rapacious, she is often married to an older, richer man who is a source of financial plenitude. Gilda is in love with Johnny, yet it is the more financially established Ballen who has ‘picked up’ and ‘saved’ the heroine (from what it is never made clear, but presumably from a life of oblivion and privation). The Lady from Shanghai’s Elsa finds a measure of security (albeit one devoid of any transcendental value) in her union with the abject Bannister, despite the fact that it is clearly the peripatetic and presumably penniless hardboiled hero O’Hara with whom she ultimately falls in love. The pejorative and contemptuous appellation of ‘lover’ used by Bannister to refer to his younger wife serves to underscore her status as commodity. That Bannister hires several crewmembers specifically to put Elsa under surveillance only strengthens his patriarchal omniscience and the fact that she is an object to be possessed. Many noir husbands view the femme fatale as a trophy to be

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168 Many theorists, however, see redemptive qualities—such as an intrinsic benevolence and lack of vindictiveness—in Lulu’s characterisation (Wollen 1994; Davidson 1981; Elsaesser 1986).
exhibited in a public arena, invoking the image of Baudelaire’s coquette who is ‘displayed at all the street fairs’ (Baudelaire 1970e, p. 17). ‘Maybe you think it’s improper,’ challenges Murder, My Sweet’s elderly Mr Grayle, ‘for an old man to have a young, desirable wife.’ Marlowe merely raises his eyebrows quizzically in response.

There are many indications that the femme fatale uses her sexual power for gain. Whilst Helen Grayle is firmly ensconced in affluent splendour and a loveless marriage, it transpires that she frequently seeks amorous extra-marital encounters with ‘gigolos’ such as Marriott and Amthor (the latter of whom caters, Marlowe observes sardonically, ‘to girls who come to him with broken down libidos’). Whilst Grayle’s ownership of Helen designates her as a ‘coquette,’ her ready deployment of other men suggests a certain degree of opportunism and agency on her part. Kathie Moffat in Out of the Past similarly has a longstanding liaison with Whit Sterling that financially benefits her. Like Nana, for whom the ‘sight of eighty thousand francs’ proved thrilling (Zola 1972, p. 332), Kathie’s primary motivation is mercenary greed, as evidenced by the fact that she has no qualms about stealing Whit’s money before abandoning him. Similarly, The Postman Always Rings Twice’s Cora is obviously wedded to the older Nick for reasons of material security.

In keeping with a Simmelian and Benjaminian conception of human interaction as economic transaction, Phyllis’ marriage to Dietrichson is also one of financial convenience. Indeed, it is not only matrimony that is defined by such heartless opportunism. Rather, the notion of pecuniary exchange defines all interpersonal relationships, and even Neff’s attraction to Phyllis is vocalised in monetary terms. ‘I hope I’ve got my face on straight,’ Phyllis remarks archly as she appraises her reflection in the mirror, her comment underscoring the cosmetic and synthetic nature of her beauty. ‘It’s perfect for my money,’ responds Neff, suggesting a coalescence of erotic desire and fiscal value. In a world of epistemological uncertainty, the one constant is the value of the dime and the dollar. Everything—and especially female beauty—is reduced to an economic value, but most importantly, one in which all is cheap.

By becoming romantically involved with Neff, organising the insurance policy and then murdering her husband, Phyllis is rendering concrete the fact that the contract between her and her husband was always essentially a financial one. Neff’s heated response to Phyllis’ veiled queries about accident insurance explicitly articulates this. He derides her scheme and describes it as one by which her husband
can be ‘turned into a little hard cash.’ Later, at Neff’s apartment, Phyllis confesses that she married Dietrichson for security:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phyllis (bitterly)</th>
<th>He wouldn’t give me a divorce</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Neff</td>
<td>I suppose because it would cost him money.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phyllis</td>
<td>He hasn’t got any money. Not since he went into the oil business.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neff</td>
<td>But he had when you married him?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phyllis (defensively)</td>
<td>Yes, he had. And I wanted a home. Why not?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ultimately, Phyllis relationship with Neff also boils down to money, and at the film’s denouement, it transpires that she has planned to murder him in order to keep the insurance payout entirely for herself.

The designation of the femme fatale as an urban woman or prostitute governed by mercenary impulses is quintessentially modern. She is a ‘kept’ woman or a ‘high class prostitute’ who is able, due to her astonishing beauty, to exchange her body for security and—in some cases—for an exotic lifestyle. She either settles temporarily for marriage, security and suburban existence whilst waiting for greater opportunities (*The Postman Always Rings Twice*, *Double Indemnity*), or searches higher for a life in the ‘fast lane’ (*Out of the Past*, *Gilda*, *The Lady from Shanghai*) where she inhabits casinos, nightclubs, bars and the criminal underworld. She is not a woman of the streets, but rather a ‘woman of the world’—the new world of modernity. The noir femme fatale is similar to nineteenth century courtesans such as Zola’s Nana, in that she names her price and avails herself of a host of consumer items and material pleasures. The following section of this chapter will examine the interface between the woman/prostitute’s visibility and her status as spectacle, and modernity’s new scopic regime. Such an interface results in a flâneuristic gaze that is characterised by shock.
6.4 Fragmentation and shock — the flâneur and the passante


In the flâneur, the joy of watching is triumphant. *Walter Benjamin* (Benjamin 1973c, p. 69).

As discussed, the emergence of the new woman was inextricably connected to the metropolis. She was indisputably an urban creature, and this had implications for the mode of desire she elicited. Given the multitude of strangers within the city, the flâneur’s sighting of the new woman was experientially different to desire and courtship in a pre-industrial era. Strolling through the metropolis, the flâneur could at any time experience a fortuitous and momentary sighting of a beautiful stranger, who would immediately be subsumed back into the crowd. The most canonised example of this paradigmatically modern moment can be found in Baudelaire’s 1860 *À une Passante*, a poem worth quoting in full:

In the midst of a deafening roar, svelte
And tall, and dressed in black from head to toe,
She passed me, wreathed in majestic sorrow,
Jewelled hand lifting the hem of her skirt,

Ladylike, and graceful, and statuesque.
I shook like a fool, drinking from those eyes
Tempestuous as ashen, angry skies
A deadly joy, a sweetness full of risk.

Lightning—gone dark! Slipping away from me,
Beauty that offered life in one quick glance—
Life seen no more, before Eternity

Elsewhere … too far! too late! Never, perchance …
For you ignored me—or pretended to—
Who could have won your love, as you well knew! (Baudelaire 1997, pp. 242-43), originally published in *Tableaux Parisiens* (*Parisian Scenes*).

The flâneur’s sighting of the beautiful passante has several quintessentially modern dimensions, all of which provide the template for the noir hero’s first encounter with the femme fatale. The momentous experience of glimpsing a strange yet alluring
woman within the crowd\textsuperscript{169} epitomises a central tenet of modernity—what Hughes terms ‘the shock of the new’ (Hughes 1991). In the city, the object of desire is hitherto unknown and only revealed by a fortuitous encounter from afar. In keeping with the semiotic specificity of the modern woman/prostitute, all value and meaning reside on the surface and thus can be apprehended in an instant.

Aesthetically and symbolically, the \textit{passante} and the noir femme fatale share several features. Both are bejewelled. Baudelaire’s woman is dramatically ‘dressed in black from head to toe,’ whilst the femme fatale is also frequently swathed in black. Monochromatic black attire is a metaphor for the fact that both figures are unknowable and shrouded in mystery. Both are tempestuous; the \textit{passante} being ‘wreathed in majestic sorrow,’ whilst the femme fatale possesses an aura of doom and tragedy. The two figures thus share key ontological similarities. As the following discussion will reveal, the noir hero’s reaction upon first sighting the femme fatale is in many ways analogous to the classic flâneur’s \textit{response} to the \textit{passante}. Since the flâneur’s desire is intricately tied to the momentary and anonymous nature of the encounter, it is primarily defined by a sense of shock. This shock partly arises out of a fear of loss. Whilst the aestheticisation of loss has many precedents, including the poetry of Romanticism, the inflection it was given in the nineteenth century is qualitatively different, as will be seen in the following investigation.

6.4.1 \textbf{Temporal fragmentation — elevation of the moment}

The delight of the urban poet is love—not at first sight, but at last sight (Benjamin 1968a, p. 169).

The temporal dimensions of the flâneur’s sighting of the \textit{passante} are central to the appeal of the encounter. For this reason, it is necessary to briefly consider the experiential transformation of time that occurred throughout the nineteenth century. With the mass influx of people into urban centres, the natural or organic patterns that had traditionally governed the practice of time-keeping were no longer clearly available. Without the seasonal agrarian cycles of growing, reaping and harvesting of

\textsuperscript{169} As Benjamin notes, the crowd is not named at any point in Baudelaire’s poem, but its presence is palpable nonetheless (Benjamin 1968a).
crops, the modern subject’s experience of time was marked by a sense of
instantaneity. In the city, there was often an intrinsic illogicality to temporal rhythms,
particularly after the introduction of gas and electric lighting that blurred boundaries
between night and day.\textsuperscript{170} As discussed earlier in this thesis, time was also
transformed in a number of modernist literary and aesthetic movements. Proust’s
experimentation with the dilatation and condensation of temporal units is exemplary,
proposing an ‘impressionistic’ and decidedly non-isochronal temporal order.

The nineteenth century also gave rise to a number of discourses and cultural
developments where an anxiety over issues of temporality was enacted. For instance,
trepidation relating to the discordance between public and private time was manifested
in numerous bureaucratic efforts to standardise and regulate timetables and schedules
(the railway systems of Britain and Europe provide a classic example of this). Despite
these efforts, in perceptual terms, time was qualitatively transformed from a cyclic
and isochronal pattern into a series of discrete, heterogeneous and fragmented
moments characterised by their instantaneity and apparent lack of causal
connection.\textsuperscript{171} In marked contrast to a Renaissance ethos, modernity elevated the
\textit{instant}. Exaltation of the present moment and concomitant elision of the past were
part of modernity’s overriding cultural change from an aesthetic of eternal values to
one of transience. This can be seen in a number of discourses aiming to efface history
altogether, including Marinetti’s 1909 \textit{Manifesto of Futurism}, in which he implores
his followers to ‘destroy the museums, libraries, academies of every kind …’
(Marinetti 1998, p. 251).

Modern philosophers sought to understand this new temporal order. In 1910,
Simmel discusses the temporality of the modern adventure as a privileged one,
likening it to the experience of the gambler. Both are defined by an ‘unconditional
presentness’ (cited in Frisby 1985, p. 66), and this temporality of instantaneity is
intrinsic to all the flâneur’s urban adventures. As Charney describes it, the modern
subject was traumatised because all was fleeting sensation. The moment was accorded
primacy, but this was traumatic because its ‘feeling is so intense, so strongly felt, that

\textsuperscript{170} Gas lighting was introduced in the 1840s and Edison’s first incandescent lamp made its
appearance in 1879. Three years later, the first public grid for electric light opened in New
York (Gleber 1999; Kern 1983).

\textsuperscript{171} For further consideration of culturally and historically-determined conceptions of time, see
(Thompson 1967).
it tapers off as soon as it is first felt’ (Charney 1995, p. 279). This temporality of
instantaneity is crucial to the notion of modern shock. Shock arises out of the
immediacy with which the experience is felt, but also the rapidity with which the
present moment is constantly disappearing, to be replaced by the next (discrete and
unrelated) temporal unit.

This specifically modern temporal organisation can be seen operating in a
number of cultural arenas, including the ‘cinema of attractions’ (Gunning 1990;
1996). Although cinema gradually moved towards a classical narrative structure with
a linear progression of plotting and causality, early cinema was temporally
disjunctive, as explained by Gunning:

Rather than a development that links the past with the present in
such a way as to define a specific anticipation of the future (as an
unfolding narrative does), the attraction seems limited to a sudden
burst of presence (Gunning 1996, p. 76).

The cinema of attractions was characterised by a series of irruptions (‘sudden burst[s]
of presence’) that were temporally discrete and valued for their monstrative assault.
Rather than being embedded within a temporal continuum, the events and actions
portrayed in the cinema of attractions are to be consumed as separate entities, in all
their immediacy and monstrative glory.

A similar sense of instantaneity is also evident in Baudelaire’s À une
Passante. That the passante’s presence is so temporally precarious is a primary
contributing factor to the narrator’s desire and his sense of doom, since there is a
constant anxiety over her probable disappearance. The poem’s opening line, ‘[i]n the
midst of a deafening roar’ places the reader in media res; that is, directly within the
action without any spatio-temporal establishment, emphasising the discrete nature of
the encounter. The ephemerality and evanescence of the woman, who is rendered as
an apparition, is emphasised with the lines: ‘[l]ighting—gone dark! slipping away
from me.’ This lamentation conveys a sense of imminent and inevitable loss. The
passante’s beauty may have offered life, but its material reality was instantaneous and
evanescent. It could only be apprehended in ‘one quick glance.’ Then it was all too
late. The tragic realisation of futility (‘[e]lsewhere … too far! too late! never,
perchance’) indicates the fleeting, aleatoric and essentially arbitrary nature of the
meeting, the fact that it only happened by chance and very nearly did not.

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Such fortuitous and momentary sightings within the metropolis were portrayed in much modern literature. In F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, narrator Nick Carraway describes the disturbing elation experienced as a result of his encounters with desirable yet unattainable women on the streets of New York:

I liked to walk up Fifth Avenue and pick out romantic women from the crowd and imagine that in a few minutes I was going to enter into their lives, and no one would ever know or disapprove. Sometimes, in my mind, I followed them to their apartments on the corners of hidden streets, and they turned and smiled back at me before they faded through a door into warm darkness (Fitzgerald 1974, pp. 58-59).

For Carraway, there seems an urgent need to ascribe a deeper value to these anonymous women, and his glimpses of their urban peregrinations compel him to rapturously imagine a future with them. It is this fantasy of a shared future, and the potential of its realisation, that allows him to cope with his overwhelming sense of isolation and ennui. By attempting to wrest the desirable stranger from the moment and bestow upon her a sense of permanence, Carraway tries to imbue his life with meaning. Ultimately, however, this project is unsustainable. Like the apparitional image of Baudelaire’s *passante*, the New York women cannot deliver salvation. Although in his fantasies they ‘smiled back’ at him, their presence is so precarious that their disappearance is inevitable (‘they faded through a door’). They remain nothing more than strangers who appeared briefly before moving on, it is implied by the evocative description of the ‘warm darkness,’ to more meaningful and desirable lives than that endured by the lonely protagonist.

Similarly, in Baudelaire’s poem, the appearance of the *passante* offers hope and holds auratic promise. Yet her immediate subsumption into the crowd prompts a never-ending and futile quest to reclaim the past. The momentary nature of the sighting thus complies with modernity’s instantaneity, where the truly exciting elements of the city are only ever experienced vicariously and fleetingly. Because of this, the shock of seeing the modern woman is predicated on a dynamic rather than a static gaze. Constantly in flux, the flâneur’s vision aims with futile hope to ‘freeze’ and thus preserve the evanescent moment, an impossible endeavour given its modern context. This temporal order is complemented by modernity’s scopic regime where all is apprehended in visual fragments, and in which distraction plays a central role.
6.4.2 Modernity’s scopic regime and the ‘shock of the new’

The interpersonal relationships of people in big cities are characterised by a markedly greater emphasis on the use of the eyes than that of the ears (Simmel, cited in Benjamin 1968a, p. 193).

Much has been written about noir’s specific visual style, with its preponderance of chiaroscuro, distorted angles, disjunctive editing and other expressionistic or non-realistic visual qualities (see for instance Place & Peterson 1974). Even contemporaneous American commentary on 1940s ‘new cinema’ remarked on these spatial and visual distortions. Of John Huston’s films, Farber marvelled that:

a character with a pin head in one incident is megacephalic in another; the first shot of a brawl shows a modest Tampico saloon, the second expands the saloon into a skating rink (Farber 1950, p. 33).

In more recent scholarship, noir’s scopic regime has also been amply discussed, usually from an aetiological perspective, with the precursor most commonly identified being German expressionist cinema with its vertiginous and unstable vision (Naremore 1998; Hirsch 1981; Appel 1974b; O’Brien 1981). For Davidson, the Weimar vamp disrupts the mise-en-scène and spatio-temporal unity, leading to a fetishistic focus, for example, on Lola’s thighs in Blue Angel (Davidson 1981). Any comparisons between the visual representation of the Weimar vamp and the noir femme fatale, however, have typically been undertaken using a variation of the zeitgeist interpretative model (see Hales 1995), or else approached from a dehistoricised perspective.

As discussed in Chapter Three, modernity was a profoundly destabilising period in which a new epistemological order gave rise to anxieties over vision. With distraction, fragmentation and spectacle as primary axes of the urban experience, a new scopic regime emerged which subverted the monocuralism of Renaissance vision. In the modern city, it was often only possible to glimpse a fragment of a desired object from within the crowd, and then extrapolate. A number of nineteenth century discourses connected the new woman to a non-veridical scopic regime in which distraction and scopophilia reigned. In 1860, Edward and Jules de Goncourt had this to say:
[The modern woman] is like her glance, which never rests for any time on anything … Everything about this creature is incomprehensible … Observation cannot find a foothold here; it slides about as if on the surface of capriciousness. Her soul, her mood, the beat of her heart, are things precipitate and fleeting as the pulse of folly (Goncourt & Goncourt 1937, p. 87).

The woman of whom the Goncourts speak has a modern and dynamic ‘glance’ that ‘never rests for any time on anything.’ At the same time, her ontology is such that it demands a similarly distracted gaze. The flâneur’s vision could not, it seems, ‘find a foothold … sliding about on her surface.’ A similar situation is at work in Baudelaire’s À une Passante, where the narrator can only appraise the woman momentarily and superficially, perceiving fragments such as her jewelled hand, or the hem of her skirt. Like Carraway in The Great Gatsby or Baudelaire’s narrator in À une Passante, the modern subject was obliged to decode the urban woman by assessing her in discrete and heterogeneous spatial and temporal units. This new woman of modernity seemed to defy efforts to apprehend her using a deductive, veridical and objective gaze.

The visual qualities of film noir aesthetic offer a cinematic representation par excellence of this new scopic regime. Whilst the close-up of classical cinema is generally structured according to a quattrocento perspective, subscribing to a notion of cinema as a ‘mirror’ onto reality, the noir image is off-centre and characterised by low-key lighting and chiaroscuro. Historical contextualisation reveals that noir’s ‘unstable’ mise-en-scène is a literalisation of the hardboiled hero’s vision, which disjunctively assesses its urban surroundings in distorted fragments. Like the classic flâneur’s gaze towards the passante, or the Goncourts assessing the new woman of 1860s Paris, the noir camera presents an ‘awry’ or ‘fragmented’ view. The noir camera is frequently fixated upon metonymic representations of the femme fatale’s modern status, such as her anklet, her legs (signifying mobility and sexuality), her lipstick case, her gloves or her glamorous attire. This also approximates the flâneur’s fragmented and fetishistic vision.

172 Some classic films noirs render explicit this subjectivised gaze, with the camera partly or wholly approximating the hero’s point of view. The Lady in the Lake (Robert Montgomery, 1947, USA), The Lost Weekend (Billy Wilder, 1945, USA) and Dark Passage all employ this device, with varying degrees of success.
From the moment the noir hero first glimpses the femme fatale—a moment characterised by temporal evanescence, visceral affectivity and spatial fragmentation—his deadly obsession is ignited and his equilibrium is threatened. For this reason, he must maintain a distance in order to protect himself.

6.4.3 Distance and corporealised vision — a modernist dialectic

Upon sighting the *passante*, Baudelaire’s narrator ‘shook like a fool, drinking from those eyes.’ Clearly, glimpsing this desirable woman proved enormously destabilising and generated a visceral reaction. This response is consistent with the fact that in the modern world, vision was reconceptualised as ‘corporealised.’ As Crary notes, the modern gaze was essentially an embodied one in contradistinction to the decorporerealisation inherent in the camera obscura model of vision (Crary 1995). In other words, the observer’s material reality was believed to impact upon their vision, inflecting it with subjectivity and ensuring a highly embodied response. Because of this, the emotional register of vision increased enormously.

Although the momentary glimpse of the *passante* is in many ways deeply disturbing to the flâneur, it also carries a happy promise of reciprocity. ‘To perceive the aura of an object we look at,’ observes Benjamin, ‘means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return’ (Benjamin 1968a, p. 190). The sighting of the new woman was auratic since there was always a possibility that the flâneur would be afforded the joy of the woman’s attention. Indeed, one of the most shocking (and viscerally affective) aspects of encountering the modern woman who walked the city streets was that she frequently and impudently returned the gaze of her admirer. Uncanny and unsettling, this reciprocated gaze promised fulfilment. As Hansen suggests, it also called for the flâneur to negotiate a new identity for himself:

The gaze that nature appears to be returning … does not mirror the subject in its present, conscious identity, but confronts us with another self, never before seen in a waking state (Hansen 1987, p. 188).

The returned gaze is metaphysically transgressive and revolutionary, affording the flâneur access to his *true* self, or at the very least altering him forever. His gaze towards the new woman—and her returned gaze—is thus a highly embodied or corporealised one. The transcendental nature of sighting the new woman is articulated
by noir hero O’Hara in *The Lady from Shanghai*, when he explains that ‘once I’d seen her, once I’d seen her, I was not in my right mind for quite some time.’ Elsa’s appearance, and the temerity with which she stares back at O’Hara, not only unsettles him, but also opens up the possibility of a new identity. He may not be in his ‘right mind,’ but at the same time he embraces this new and heightened mode of being. Because of the femme fatale, the cinematic flâneur is changed forever.

The new woman’s returned gaze is a feature of much nineteenth century literature, as is the case with the eponymous heroine (a prostitute) of Maupassant’s *Boule de Suif*, published in 1880:

> The look she gave her neighbours was so bold and challenging that there was a sudden silence, and everybody dropped their eyes except Loiseau, who fixed a lecherous gaze on her (Maupassant 1971a, p. 30).\(^{173}\)

Maupassant’s œuvre abounds with chance sightings of the anonymous urban woman in which the possibility of such a ‘bold and challenging’ gaze inflames the protagonist’s desire. In another of Maupassant’s short stories, *In the Spring*, the narrator strolls along the banks of the Seine in Paris and catches a glimpse of an attractive stranger. Appraising her appearance, he is suddenly consumed by an ‘irresistible longing to cover her neck with kisses’ (Maupassant 1971b, p. 70). The intensity of his feelings is then partly vindicated when the woman ‘raised her eyes … [and] gave an unmistakable smile,’ inducing in its recipient a ‘mad longing’ (Maupassant 1971b, p. 70). Like Carraway in *The Great Gatsby*, Maupassant’s narrator has an urgent need to inscribe onto the beautiful stranger an array of eternal values:

> She looked charming when she smiled and in her fleeting glance I saw a thousand things I had never suspected before—unknown depths, all the charms of tender affection, all the poetry we dream of, all the happiness we look for all our lives (Maupassant 1971b, p. 70).

\(^{173}\) Rather than demonising prostitution, Maupassant’s writing aligns the reader with the courtesan, who is often represented as the most compassionate and spiritually generous of all characters. His prototypical modern prostitute, then, is more likeable and ingenuous than the avaricious and morally corrupt one of film noir.
In a modern, urban environment, this inscription of meaning enables the flâneur to justify the intensity of his emotions (and his visceral response), and thus to redeem the experience. As Baudelaire proclaims, it is the flâneur’s mission to ‘distil the eternal from the transitory’ (Baudelaire 1998, p. 106). From a momentary yet emotionally intense encounter, the flâneur (whether it be Fitzgerald’s Carraway, Baudelaire’s narrator or indeed the noir hero) aims to render the woman as a permanent fixture. Invariably, however, this proves a futile endeavour. Fitzgerald’s urban women ‘faded’ through doorways, a description conveying the essential ephemerality of urban encounters. In Maupassant’s *In the Spring*, a benevolent stranger approaches and warns the protagonist to ‘beware of love!’ (Maupassant 1971b, p. 71). Due to these timely words, the protagonist abruptly terminates his romantic fantasies, rejects the possibility of proximity, and is thus spared a tragic destiny. Baudelaire’s *passante* disappears into the crowd, and the noir femme fatale can never be fully possessed.

The metropolis constantly bombarded the flâneur with a plethora of stimuli, posing a physical and psychic danger. Life in the city was inherently traumatic and thus needed to be parried. The flâneur’s ‘corporealised’ vision meant that he risked suffering overwhelming angst as a result of his urban encounters, particularly with the desired woman. Given the inherent dangers of consorting with this new woman, and her essential ephemerality, the necessary adjunct to the flâneur’s embodied gaze is the imperative of distance. As outlined in Chapter Four, distance (both figurative and literal) was a prerequisite for the flâneur’s lexicographic endeavours, all of which required a degree of impartiality and objectivity. Alterity was also essential in order to preserve his psychic integrity when assessing the new woman.

The aspiration to a distanced mode of perception took many forms throughout the nineteenth century. It is well known, for instance, that many seminal modernist philosophers and thinkers, including Freud, were habitual users of cocaine. Baudelaire and Benjamin also experimented with various drugs in their efforts to induce altered, detached states. Buck-Morss, who notes the original semantic dimension of the word ‘aesthetic’ was a corporeal one, develops this argument further, arguing that aesthetic contemplation in the period of modernity

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174 Freud used cocaine for medicinal purposes, administering it to himself, recommending it to others and publishing a paper entitled *Über Cola* which appeared in the July 1884 issue of *Centralblatt für die Gesammte Therapie* (Thornton 1983).
became such an unbearably overwhelming experience that it necessitated the administration of anaesthetics to counteract its intensity. It is for this reason, contends Buck-Morss, that opium dens and the use of cocaine, ether, hypnosis, hydrotherapy, electric shock and other forms of anaesthetic became so common in fin-de-siècle European society (Buck-Morss 1992). The state of narcosis achieved through administering such substances enabled an estrangement from the city and its material delights (including the new woman), and this distance vitiated the power of these desired objects and thus protected the flâneur. By maintaining a figurative distance, the flâneur assumes a dreamlike reverie and assesses the new woman or passante as a pleasing apparition rather than a human being in all her immediacy and complexity. A distanced or scopophilic gaze enabled the flâneur to assess and fetishise the new woman as he would any wares within the capitalist marketplace.

Finally, the strategy of maintaining distance allowed the flâneur to contain his aversion to the unheimlich nature of the new woman on the city streets. As outlined earlier in this chapter, modernity was a period in which the notion of a ‘public erotic’ evolved. Although the flâneur desired the passante, he lacked a fully developed programme with which to approach this new, forcefully erotic woman. Moreover, to exacerbate his anxiety, part of the morally inverted world of modernity was the dialectic of concealment and revelation, in which the forbidden was rendered prosaically or even profanely visible, contributing to a sense of anxiety. This is evoked in Baudelaire’s Lola de Valence:

Confusion reigns among the connoisseurs
Of breasts and derrières and flashing limbs,
Till Spanish Lola lifts her wicked hems—

In this poem, what is usually concealed is available for show. Lifting her skirt, Baudelaire’s Lola evinces a sense of uncanniness, leading to a reigning ‘confusion’ in her admirers. Whilst such an experience may prove exciting, it was also unsettling. Zola’s Nana and other literary works fictionalised such ‘inappropriate’ or unheimlich public displays. A fascination with the revelation of illicit female flesh in a public context can be seen in other fin-de-siècle cultural artefacts throughout Europe and America. In 1888, Bavarian police deemed obscene a chromolithograph entitled You Little Fisherwoman, in which a young girl sits by a lake, fishing. Three holes puncture...
the picture, enabling one to insert two fingers that represent the girl’s exposed legs. Those selling these pictures were charged on grounds of indecency (Makela 1996).

Early cinema also engaged with these ‘unguarded moments,’ where female presence on urban streets was represented in very specific terms centring on issues of concealment and revelation. Balides cites as exemplary *A Windy Day on the Roof* (AM & B, 1904, USA) and *What Happened on Twenty-Third Street, New York City* (Edison, 1901, USA), the latter of which is a single-shot film depicting a portly woman strolling along a city street who has the misfortune to step on a grate, resulting in her garment blowing up around her thighs (Balides 1993). This transgressive image is clearly intended to incite a visceral, sensual, fetishistic and voyeuristic response from the audience. This has much in common with the flâneur’s shock upon sighting the new woman. Part of the trauma experienced by the flâneur derives from a feeling of a new and relatively unchartered territory of gender relations in which anonymous women dared to return a glance, and in which the female form (in various stages of undress) was boldly displayed in a public forum.

Although the flâneur delights in such corporealised responses, ultimately he opts for the safety of distance in order to ‘contain’ the experience. In the modern world, Simmel believed that any attempts to efface distance resulted in devastating consequences, as he explains in his 1896 *Soziologische Aesthetik*:

> But no sooner had one got very close, than sensitive nerves could already no longer bear the contact and shied away, as if they had taken hold of red hot coals (cited in Frisby 1981, p. 91).

Simmel’s salutatory warning of the dangers of proximity uses the emotive metaphor of ‘red hot coals’ which bears a telling likeness to Neff’s descriptions of his desire for Phyllis being akin to holding a ‘red hot poker.’ In Simmel’s sociological paradigm, the modern subject’s nerves were ‘sensitive,’ and to shy away was a mechanism of protection and self-preservation. Furthermore, when assessed from afar, the new woman was able to retain what Benjamin would term ‘the phoney spell of a commodity’ (Benjamin 1968c, p. 231). Proximity would destroy her aura and reveal her true, *unheimlich* status. As Baudelaire sagely noted of the modern world, ‘[s]exuality is the lyricism of the masses’ (Baudelaire 1949, p. 49). For Baudelaire and Benjamin alike, sublime and epiphanic moments such as the sighting of the *passante*
only have erotic import by virtue of their occurrence within the urban public sphere, where a more intimate encounter is not possible.

Other modernist movements exhibit a similar corporealised shock counterpoised by a need for distance. This dialectic informed the erotic content of surrealism, of which André Breton (1896-1966) was the founder. The desired woman of surrealism was ‘scandalously beautiful’ (Breton’s emphasis) (Breton 1987, p. 41). The narrator’s adulation of her was based, like that of the flâneur, upon chance urban encounters in which her beauty was assessed from afar:

This young woman who just entered appeared to be swathed in mist—clothed in fire? Everything seemed colorless and frozen next to this complexion … (Breton 1987, p. 41).

As a ‘beautiful wanderer’ of the city streets (Breton 1987, p. 47), Breton’s female character is a distinctly modern figure. As part of the ‘public erotic’ of modernity, her presence is evanescent and precarious, as indicated by Breton’s description of her ‘swathed in mist.’ The sighting of her provokes a visceral response, with all else assuming secondary importance and appearing ‘colorless and frozen.’ Like the passante or the noir femme fatale, the surrealist woman has the power to freeze time and space and to strike fear and awe into the heart of her admirer.

Whilst classical cinema systematically repressed many irruptive and destabilising elements, it was in Weimar cinema (Pandora’s Box, Blue Angel) and film noir where this visceral shock was cinematically rendered in all its immediacy. Both the vamp and the noir femme fatale become the focal point of an enraptured yet distracted gaze. Whilst not exactly a passante in the city crowd, the noir femme fatale nonetheless embodies many qualities of her nineteenth century predecessor, particularly in terms of the dimensions of the desire she incites in her admirers. Like the classic flâneur’s field of vision, her cinematic representation is marked by spatio-temporal fragmentation and distortion that literalises the hero’s corporealised shock. Her appearance is precarious and she threatens to disappear at any moment. Excessively imagistic, with shocking revelations of flesh, she is unattainable yet highly desirable. Indeed, the only difference between the classic flâneur and the noir hero is that the latter aims to achieve proximity with this erotically forceful creature. Although the femme fatale ‘belongs’ to another man, the hero eschews all distance, and in so doing, ensures his own downfall.
6.4.4 Once I’d seen her, once I’d seen her … the noir hero glimpses the femme fatale

If I’d known where it would end, I’d never have let anything start. If I’d been in my right mind that is. But once I’d seen her … once I’d seen her … I was not in my right mind for quite some time. Michael O’Hara describing the devastating effects of his first sighting of femme fatale Elsa Bannister, *The Lady from Shanghai*.

The initial appearance of the femme fatale is a defining moment in virtually all films noirs. It alters the protagonist forever, inaugurates his obsession and marks the precise point at which his moral dissolution begins. Like the narrator of *À une Passante* and other modernist literary protagonists, the noir hero is captivated by this beautiful apparition and immediately perceives the momentous gravity of the occasion. In the vision of the femme fatale, the noir hero sees the possibility of what Baudelaire would term ‘life in one quick glance’ (Baudelaire 1997, pp. 242-43). Phyllis descending the staircase in *Double Indemnity*, Frank Chambers’ first vision of Cora, swathed in white, in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, Jeff watching, transfixed, as Kathie (also resplendent in white) walks into La Mar Azul in *Out of the Past*, or Michael O’Hara glimpsing Elsa Bannister in the carriage riding through New York’s Central Park in *The Lady from Shanghai*—these first encounters are all of metaphysical and life-altering importance to the noir hero. As such, they are privileged cinematic moments of unguarded modern vision.

The effect of the sighting of the noir femme fatale has been much discussed in film scholarship. Rather than understanding the socio-historical specificity of these encounters, however, most theorists revert to a Lacanian paradigm. Krutnik for instance notes that *Out of the Past*’s Kathie institutes an essentially fetishistic vision as opposed to the ‘investigative’ eye of the detective (Krutnik 1991, p. 107). Whilst the ‘fetishism’ of Jeff’s vision could be further explored in terms of modernity’s scopic regime, Krutnik does not move his argument beyond a psychoanalytic framework. Drawing upon Buci-Glucksmann’s discussions on modernity and allegory (Buci-Glucksmann 1994), Doane’s work also touches upon historically relevant issues, yet ultimately reverts to semiology and psychoanalysis to make a point about the imagistic and excessive nature of female representation in cinema. Her analysis of *Gilda*, for instance, is limited to questions of the ‘knowability’ of the woman and how
she is articulated in relation to the male characters. Doane employs an oedipal model to undertake this examination (Doane 1991).

An historically-inflected interpretative approach, however, reveals several crucial points of convergence between the noir hero’s sighting of the fatal woman and the flâneur’s encounter with the passante. Firstly, the syntagmatic patterning of the noir scenes described above invoke the temporality of instantaneity. Characterised by her monstrative impact, the object of the hero’s desire threatens to vanish as easily as she materialised, and this adds to the trauma of the encounter. Various formal strategies are employed to articulate the temporally disruptive power of the femme fatale. These strategies also convey the sense of shock, wonder and anxiety felt by the noir flâneur at the moment of the femme fatale’s appearance. In *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, hardboiled Frank Chambers arrives unexpectedly at the abode of Cora and her husband Nick. Entering the house, Chambers flâneuristically assesses his surroundings. Moments later, a lipstick case rolls towards him on the ground, and he lifts his gaze to see the beautiful Cora, with the camera sweeping along the floor and up her legs. The camera’s point of view, then, is a corporealised one approximating that of Frank, implicating the spectator in the scopophilic assessment of Cora’s beauty. Space and time are frozen and everything else is rendered obsolete. After Cora enters his life, Frank becomes deranged, with all rational cognition destroyed by the sheer force of Cora’s allure.

In *The Lady from Shanghai*, O’Hara’s sighting of the ravishingly beautiful Elsa in Central Park is similarly fortuitous. In 1909, Simmel referred to the increased dynamic nature (*die Bewegtheit*) of modern life, in which atomised individuals cross paths in a seemingly arbitrary way (cited in Frisby 1985, p. 47). In typical modernist style, the sighting of the femme fatale is characterised by such *Bewegtheit*. The gift of hindsight allows O’Hara to fully appreciate the import of meeting Elsa, as his voiceover (cited above) demonstrates. ‘Once I’d seen her, once I’d seen her’ emphasises the fact that consequently his life was irrevocably altered. As these words are delivered, the spectator sees a woman being transported in a stagecoach, with O’Hara strolling alongside. The voiceover explains, ‘some people can smell danger,’ accompanied by a close-up of Elsa’s face. She stares directly into the camera, lending the shot a monstrous, disconcerting and interpolative quality and thus ‘freezing’ the action both spatially and temporally. Like the new woman of the nineteenth century metropolis, femmes fatales such as Elsa possess a ‘knowing’ look. Such a look not
only boldly subverts traditional notions of feminine honour and modesty, but also openly acknowledges their fatal beauty and the desire it elicits. Much like the urban women portrayed by Zola, Maupassant and Baudelaire, Elsa’s returned gaze carries the promise of reciprocity and thus further ignites the O’Hara’s flâneuristic ardour. The sequence has a sense of the dynamism or Bewegheit of which Simmel wrote. Elsa’s appearance leads to a visceral and highly emotional response, and the visual qualities of her close-up are consistent with the flâneur’s fragmented vision. Divorced from a normalising and scenographic spatial field, Elsa’s face becomes the focal point for O’Hara and the spectator alike.

Moments later, a serendipitous attack on Elsa by ‘rough young fellows’ calls for O’Hara’s intervention. Welles’ spatio-temporal treatment of this ‘attack and rescue’ sequence is extremely modernist. Noir voiceovers had, by the time this film was made in 1948, been codified to denote analepsis. Whilst O’Hara’s voiceover partially complies with this (that is, it emanates from an unspecified ‘present,’ describes past actions and evokes anterior images), Welles imbricates the voiceover with the hero’s diegetic dialogue in a highly unorthodox manner. Both voices possess the same aural quality, without any clear demarcation between past and present. An orthodox, linear temporality is thus banished altogether, instead instituting a fractured and inconsistent model in which instantaneity is of central importance. In attempting to destroy normalising temporal boundaries, the hero seeks to wrench Elsa from the moment and assign to her an eternal value. The whole episode is paradoxically imbued with the promise of a future, even though O’Hara is speaking of past actions.

Similarly, Kathie’s appearance in *Out of the Past* is forceful enough to alter temporal perceptions. Jeff’s search for Kathie leads him to Acapulco where he flâneuristically installs himself in a café, La Mar Azul, whilst his voiceover informs us of his ennui and how Kathie was able to instantaneously dispel it:

> I sat there in the afternoons and drank beer. I used to sit there half asleep with a beer in the darkness—only that music from the movie next door kept jarring me awake. And then I saw her, coming out of the sun and I know why Whit didn’t care about that $40,000.

When Kathie walks into the café, her image immediately banishes the sylleptical and
analytical nature of the flashback and voiceover. Upon Jeff’s utterance of the words ‘and then I saw her,’ the action is resolutely brought into the present. Like the hero, the spectator experiences Kathie’s potency in the very instant of her arrival. The moment of Kathie’s appearance is a highly privileged one that also institutes a far more ‘embodied’ spectatorial position, imitating the hero’s corporealised shock. Tourneur’s previous shots had been to some extent omniscient (Jeff walking into the café, shot from behind followed by a 180 degree camera turn, to then film him from inside the café). The moment Jeff sees Kathie, however, the camera assumes his subjective view (that is, its position approximates his within the café). It is Kathie’s movement, then, which dictates both the diegesis and the film’s syntagmatic patterning. At the conclusion of their meeting, when the camera remains static and Kathie walks out of the café, the viewer experiences Jeff’s feelings of emasculation yet enthrallment. These emotions are consistent with those felt by the flâneur at the passante’s disappearance into the crowd. Tourneur’s camera is thus ‘corporealised,’ and as such becomes an instrument of masochism. It enables a voyeuristic and flâneuristic fetishisation of Kathie as an object of beauty and desire, whilst at the same time aestheticising the loss felt at her departure. The viewer can partake vicariously in Jeff’s shock at being confronted with a woman who had hitherto been idealised as an unattainable, mysterious figure of mythical proportions. Like the flâneur’s joy at discovering the passante, however, Jeff’s happiness is short-lived, and throughout the film, Kathie continues to disappear, often tantalisingly remaining just out of his reach.

Neff’s first glimpse of Phyllis in Double Indemnity is also paradigmatically modern. Firstly, it is fortuitous that Neff encounters her at all. His recollection of the Dietrichson business is almost incidental (‘I remembered this auto renewal … so I decided to run over there’). Fortunately, when Neff arrives, Phyllis happens to be at home. Like the nineteenth century flâneur (or Simmel’s adventurer or Baudelaire’s gambler), the noir hero goes out into the world not knowing where his trajectory will take him, yet aware of the multitude of possibilities and desirable objects waiting to be

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175 The term analepsis describes a process in which the narrator evokes anterior actions. Syllepsis, as outlined earlier, designates a condensation, in which the narrator uses one image (for instance, Jeff sitting in the café) to indicate continued past action or numerous occasions of similar content. See (Smoodin 1983) and Genette’s formalist discussions on film structure (Genette 1980).
discovered. Neff is a victim of modernity’s dynamism (its Bewegheit) and, as misfortune would have it, Phyllis happened to cross his path.

The initial sighting of Phyllis descending the staircase not only irrevocably alters Neff’s life trajectory, but also proves destabilising at the very moment it occurs. The disjunctive and monstrative force of Phyllis’ appearance obviates all other concerns, as he somewhat apologetically confesses to Keyes in his voiceover:

… to tell you the truth, Keyes, I wasn’t a whole lot interested in goldfish right then, or in auto renewals, or in Mr Dietrichson and his daughter Lola. I was thinking about that dame upstairs, and the way she had looked at me, and I wanted to see her again, close, without that silly staircase between us.

This moment of ‘unguarded vision’ ruptures the film’s spatio-temporal unity, while posing a grave threat to Neff’s psychological equilibrium. From the moment he sees her, Neff loses interest in his flâneuristic assessment of his surroundings, his professional duties, and virtually everything else. Temporality is thus condensed into one defining moment. Immediately, Neff becomes frustrated with the distance inherent in the encounter (she is positioned, somewhat superiorly, at the top of the staircase, whilst Neff is downstairs, looking upwards, ensuring a distorted and fragmented shot). Neff expresses a strong desire to achieve closer proximity, without the interference of the ‘silly staircase’ (his description) or any other obstacle. As this voiceover is delivered, Neff’s words dictate the camera movement, with Wilder cutting to a close-up shot of Phyllis’ shapely legs as she walks downstairs, allowing the viewer to vicariously experience Neff’s ‘moment of shock.’ In accordance with modernity’s visual order, Phyllis’ beauty is rendered in fragments—Neff’s gaze focusses upon Phyllis’ legs, and specifically her anklet. In fact, Wilder said that he stipulated that the Dietrichson abode be a two-storey house so that Phyllis could be seen descending from above, with the anklet in full view (Crowe 1999).

It is rare for existing scholarship to understand Neff’s fixation on Phyllis’ anklet (or indeed, any noir hero’s fixation on a metonymic symbol of the femme fatale’s desirability) in any way other than from within a psychoanalytic framework. Although Maxfield connects the gold anklet to the promise of wealth, ultimately for him it signifies the bondage and pain characterising Neff and Phyllis’ relationship (Maxfield 1996). Rabinowitz’s study, on the other hand, ascribes universal and mythical significance to the anklet that, she argues, represents the shackles that will
bind Neff. Whilst Rabinowitz notes the power exerted by women over men using a few strategically placed commodities or fetish objects (Rabinowitz 2002), such an observation calls for further exploration.

There is undeniably an element of sadistic delight in Neff’s fixation on the anklet. As he explains in the voiceover anticipating his second meeting with Phyllis, it was the anklet’s apparent ability to slice through flesh that so fascinates him. ‘I kept thinking,’ confesses Neff, ‘about … the way that anklet of hers cut into her leg.’ This fixation, however, needs to be more carefully contextualised in order to understand its true socio-historical significance. The anklet is clearly an indicator of Phyllis’ sexual availability and as such can be seen as a fetish object. It also symbolises her desired and potential mobility. Neff’s obsession with the anklet is thus analogous to the flâneuristic focus upon the modern woman’s ability to move through the urban crowds.

Borde and Chaumeton note the role played by clothing and accoutrement in film noir. In *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, they suggest (inadvertently alluding to modernity’s dialectic of revelation and concealment) that the fetishisation of the clothing is partly a displacement of the fascination for what lies underneath. Pulp fiction also focused with taxonomic obsession on the attire, appearance and morphology of its female characters. Such an inventorial gaze is typically flâneuristic in its hermeneutic endeavour and its focus on the incidental. Again, issues of revelation and concealment are important. In Chandler’s *Farewell My Lovely* (published in 1940), there is a sly authorial comment about the revelation of female flesh in the modern public sphere and the moral outrage it generates. As hardboiled protagonist Marlowe assesses newspaper photographs of a number of attractive

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176 Whilst Freud allowed for the possibility of female fetishism (Freud 1982), most social theory has ascribed fetishism to the male subject. The Kinsey reports concluded that fetishism was almost exclusively a male domain, and that the fetishistic response was more pronounced the further removed it was (both spatially and conceptually) from the sexual organs (feet as opposed to thighs, gloves as opposed to underwear) (Kinsey 1953). Buck-Morss also suggests that there may be a patriarchal impulse in the need to fetishise from a distance. Speaking of display window mannequins, she concludes that ‘[u]ltimately, perhaps, in the eyes of men whose erotic desire is distorted by commodity reification, potentially castrating women … are safest under glass’ (Buck-Morss 1986, p. 124).

177 ‘One sought, instinctively, to guess under this whiteness the roundness of her breast or the line of her buttocks. But it was the breasts, the buttocks of a criminal.’ ‘On cherchait, d’instinct, à deviner sous cette blancheur la rondeur d’un sein ou la ligne des fesses. Mais c’étaient le sein, les fesses d’une criminelle’ (Borde & Chaumeton 1955, p. 86). My translation.
women, he comments that they ‘had good legs and displayed their inside curves more than [film censor] Will Hays would have liked’ (Chandler 1949, p. 31). Similarly, film noir valorises such moments of revelation.

Like the narrator of À une Passante who is entranced by the woman’s ‘[j]ewelled hand lifting the hem of her skirt,’ Neff’s vision is fragmented. Indeed, the modern woman seemed so erotically forceful that the male subject must necessarily adopt a fragmented gaze in order to prevent being overwhelmed. Neff’s focus on the anklet, then, allows him to maintain a distance from the viscerally shocking reality of Phyllis’ body. When he remarks that it is ‘a honey of an anklet,’ his witticism allows him to covertly convey (without explicitly articulating) his appreciation for Phyllis’ figure and the ineffable longing it produces. At the same time, his appraisal of the anklet also highlights the fact that it is the artificial aspects of Phyllis’ appearance to which Neff most enthusiastically responds. Modernity’s aestheticisation of artifice will be discussed shortly.

As the above socio-historical contextualisation demonstrates, Neff’s exultant gaze towards Phyllis and her anklet is scopophilic, fragmented, embodied and distracted. As such, it is quintessentially modern. Modernity is about unguarded, privileged moments, small glimpses and fleeting encounters that undermine the dominant order. Zizek contends that by looking at an object ‘awry’ as opposed to using a monocular, frontal Renaissance vision, the viewer is afforded a clarity previously lacking (Zizek 1989). In his focus on the incidental, the profane or the metonymic, the noir hero is indulging in a modern ‘awry’ gaze. Phyllis’ anklet, Cora’s lipstick or Gilda’s gloves become the focal point, and it is only through the appropriation of such a fragmented gaze that the noir hero, like the classic flâneur, is able to see clearly. I would suggest that the shock engendered by the sighting of the noir femme fatale is akin to a modern, secular epiphany. Phyllis descending the staircase, the first glimpse of Elsa in Central Park, Kathie materialising in La Mar Azul, or the specularity of Cora shrouded in white—all of these revelations constitute exceedingly modern moments.

Modern desire also celebrates the reproducible and the artificial. It is predicated upon pain and folly. These issues will be explored in the following section.
6.5 The artifice of the femme fatale

6.5.1 The modern, artificial woman

In mythical articulations dating back to antiquity, woman had long been associated with fecundity, nature and ‘mother earth,’ as opposed to civilisation and rational thought, for which it was assumed by phallocentric logic that she had scant faculty. The advent of modernity, however, saw a fundamental shift, with an emerging trend throughout the nineteenth century for woman to be discursively aligned less with nature and more with artifice. Whilst the modern femme fatale still engendered death, destruction and moral dissolution, this was no longer due to an atavistic connection to primal nature (with the possible exception of fin-de-siècle quasi-scientific discourses such as criminal anthropology). Instead, her destructiveness was a result of a connection to urban, capitalist culture.

It was widely assumed that this new woman was desirous of all the artifice and accoutrements of the modern world, including fashion, cosmetics, dyed tresses, stylised hairdos and countless accessories. Quantity rather than quality, it seemed, was key. Authenticity and aura were no longer of importance; instead, all was reproducible surface glamour. The fin-de-siècle New York ‘Bowery girls,’ for instance, emulated the uptown fashions by assembling a variety of inexpensive replicas of luxury materials including brightly coloured fabrics, elaborate buttons, lace and ribbons (Israel 2003). The following 1839 treatise sought to provide an anthropological inventory of ‘Woman’ in which artifice was seen to be one of her defining traits:
... woman’s perception of what is fitting, her politeness, her vanity, her affections, her sentiments, her dependence on the knowledge of man, her love, her artifice, her caprice, being chiefly instinctive, reach the highest degree of perfection; whereas her friendship, her philanthropy, her patriotism, and her politics, requiring the exercise of reason, are as feeble as to be worthless (italics mine) (cited in Montague 1994, p. 102).

The portrayal of the new woman as artificial became widespread in a number of late nineteenth and early twentieth century discourses. Expressionist artist Ernst Ludwig Kirchner’s The Red Cocotte (1914-1925) for example offers an image dominated by a woman in red who features prominently in the foreground. Forceful and powerful, she haughtily parades her fashion and beauty along the street whilst the men, relegated to the background, are immobilised and enraptured. ‘These uniquely urban harpies,’ writes Hughes of Kirchner’s painting, ‘all style and cocaine nerves, take the image of the woman-as-castrator a step further ... towards pure glamour’ (Hughes 1991, p. 286-88). The notion of the new woman as glamorous, cosmopolitan and artificial also led to a linking of beauty with inorganic materials such as stone, marble, metal or similar. In Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s 1870 Venus in Furs, a beautiful woman is a ‘marble creature’ who was ‘white as stone’ with ‘stony, lifeless eyes’ (Deleuze 1989, pp. 145, 154, 143). Later in this chapter, I will consider other modern cultural discourses that merge the beautiful woman with the metallic or inorganic.

Meanwhile, any vestigial connection with nature became increasingly pathologised, and associated with venom and decay rather than plenitude and fertility. This tendency can be discerned throughout Baudelaire’s canon and in the writings of other nineteenth century poets and novelists. In Swinburne’s Dolores (Nôtre Dame des Sept Douleurs), published in 1866, the femme fatale is aligned with death, coldness and pain:

Cold eyelids that hide like a jewel
Hard eyes that grow soft for an hour;
The heavy white limbs, and the cruel
Red mouth like a venomous flower;
When these are gone by with their glories,
What shall rest of thee then, what remain,
O mystic and somber Dolores,
Our Lady of Pain? (Swinburne 1992, p. 78).

178 Quoted from A Walker (1839), Woman Physiologically Considered as to Mind, Morals, Marriage, Matrimonial Slavery, Infidelity and Divorce.
Swinburne’s verse utilises metaphors and imagery from nature but suffuses them with menace. The red mouth, like a venomous flower (in the natural world, red generally denotes poison) becomes a symbol of horror. Moreover, all is implied to be impermanent. The ‘cruel red mouth’ and ‘cold eyelids’ are divorced from eternal nature; rather, their decay and obsolescence seem both immanent and imminent. The typically nineteenth century conflation of love and death is also apparent; indeed, Swinburne himself refers to his character of Dolores as the ‘daughter of lust and death’ (Swinburne 1926, n.p.). Any erotic content in the poem, furthermore, suggests a masochistic delight in pain:

By the ravenous teeth that have smitten
Through the kisses that blossom and bud,
By the lips intertwined and bitten
Till the foam has a savour of blood (Swinburne 1992, p. 81).

Similarly, Baudelaire’s imagery of nature invariably assumes an ominous tone. In La Chevelure, he writes of ‘dark waterfalls,’ ‘black fleece,’ ‘cascading curls’ and ‘chaotic locks’ (Baudelaire 1997, p. 63-64). Such descriptions suggest an aesthetic where nature (and woman) possesses a dangerous and anarchic power. Les Fleurs du Mal, likewise, presents ‘evil flowers’ which are disturbing and portentous, operating as warnings or allegories of modernity gone wrong.

This dystopian view of nature continues in pulp fiction and film noir alike. In the final pages of Cain’s Double Indemnity, Huff and Phyllis are aboard a steamship and moments away from a double suicide. A shark circles menacingly, its ‘black fin … [c]utting the water in the moonlight’ (Cain 2002, p. 135). When nature does appear in modern discourses, it is undesirable and menacing. In Cain’s prose, organic images (‘the moon’) fuse with the artificial (the ‘red on [Phyllis’] lips and cheeks’) to create a dimorphic aesthetic (Cain 2002, p. 136). Frequently tainted by artifice, the natural world offers neither comfort nor sanctuary.

Characterised by artful embellishment and superficiality, the fatal women in Baudelaire’s writings were usually far removed from nature. The visceral response evoked by the passante, for instance, is connected to her jewelled hand and black attire rather than any physiognomic details. At times, Baudelaire seems ambivalent about the artificial woman, suggesting a jaded dissatisfaction borne out of cynicism and worldweariness, as in his 1861 poem L’Idéal (The Ideal):

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Spiked heels, fake fingernails and frizzy curls,  
The damaged goods of our degraded time,  
Those high-strung, anorexic cover-girls  
Could never satisfy a heart like mine.  
(Baudelaire 1997, pp. 50-51).  

Although he implies that the transience of modern beauty cannot provide lasting satisfaction, ultimately Baudelaire succumbs to the sheer force of glamour. Artificial beauty may well be ‘damaged’ and ‘degraded,’ but in the final analysis it is irresistible. Baudelaire’s love of artifice is proudly declared in the eponymously titled poem:

    But artifice and emptiness suffice
    For hearts that gravitate to what is false.
    Indifference and ignorance are bliss!
    So keep your mask. I find it glamorous.


In a typical case of semiotic inversion, where the undesirable (mechanisation, alienation) becomes attractive, Baudelaire’s modernist sensibility is based upon dimorphism. Beauty equates with evil or ugliness. Love becomes despair, death and pain. Such antithesis informs Baudelaire’s entire canon, but particularly his discussions on love and desire. In an 1840 poem written as a Christmas gift for his brother, Baudelaire subverts Christian theology by allegorising the angel as a defiled yet simultaneously enchanted figure with ‘mud clinging to her wings.’ This sacrilegious poem implicates all men in an adoration of this wanton angel (‘I know of no-one who doesn’t *adore* some *angel*’—italics his):

    A girl as wicked as she was pretty;  
    I called her: *my angel.* She had five suitors.  
    Poor fools! We are so thirsty to be caressed  
    That I would still like to have been two very white sheets  
    Some strumpet to call *my angel* (Baudelaire 1970a, pp. 102-103).

The figure of the angel is sublime yet also tainted, evincing an apparently incompatible conflation of wicked and pretty. The poem’s conclusion, furthermore, implies that the angel is a prostitute (a ‘strumpet’). Although Baudelaire ultimately

179 Baudelaire uses the term ‘vaurien’ to describe the century (‘Produits avariés, nés d’un siècle vaurien’). ‘Vaurien’ also translates as ‘good-for-nothing’ or ‘layabout,’ strongly implicating an absence of industriousness in Baudelaire’s dystopian vision of modernity and artifice.

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sees artificiality in positive terms, he also recognises the metaphysical risk it poses. In another of his poems, the woman is deployed as a vessel through which the devil is able to disarm and subsequently destroy the male subject. In the woman’s artificial nature, the devil perceived an ally:

Incessantly a restive devil frets
And chafes my flesh, impalpable as air;
I swallow and he fills my burning breast
With subtle and insatiable desire.

Knowing my love of Art he often takes
Provocative, erotic female forms,
Or uses some sophisticated trick
To push his poisons till I succumb.


Baudelaire’s conception of modern beauty is also dependent upon the notion of contemporaneity, or the moment. Again, this is connected to artificiality in the sense that such impermanence can have no immanent or eternal value, and is thus surface allure only:

Beauty is made up, on the one hand, of an element that is eternal and invariable … and, on the other, of a relative circumstantial element, which we may like to call … contemporaneity, fashion, morality, passion … (Baudelaire 1998, p. 103) (his italics)

This dimorphic notion of beauty provides the template for the representation of the modern femme fatale. Whilst wider historical precedents exist, it was throughout the nineteenth that beauty was reconceptualised as cold, metallic, abject and artificial.

### 6.5.2 The new woman, technologisation and the steely femme fatale

Divorced from the organic world, the new woman of modernity became synonymous with technologisation and artifice. A number of disparate discourses reflect this tendency, including Marinetti’s futurist doctrine, the *Neue Sachlichkeit* of Weimar Germany (an aesthetic movement arising in the early 1930s) and German expressionist cinema. In *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1926, Germany), the human (thus normalised) Maria is appropriated and an evil, robotic doppelgänger created in her image. It is the doppelgänger, in all its anti-human splendour, which is both pathologised and rendered as the more potent alternative.
In fact, this discursive connection between abject femaleness and
technologisation can be traced to eighteenth century European discourses. Huyssen’s
genealogical investigations into the theme of roboticism reveal that the
transmogrification of human into automaton was originally seen in utopian terms. In a
post-industrial context, however, it acquired negative connotations, and the robot
became feared as a destructive negation of ‘real life.’ It is also at this precise historical
point, notes Huyssen, that automata were also first represented as women (Huyssen
1981-1982). The trope of woman-as-robot (or, indeed, robot-as-woman) was thus
assigned pejorative status from the outset. Numerous cultural discourses have since
used this trope to pathologise the modern woman and her newfound status and power.
The new woman was portrayed as cold, metallic and robotic—qualities antithetical to
emotional warmth and traditional notions of feminine virtue.

Although aligned with artifice, the female characters in Weimar films such
as Blue Angel, Pandora’s Box and Metropolis were still arguably inflected with a
mythopoeic and redemptive quality. The noir femme fatale, conversely, is utterly and
unashamedly artificial and robotic. Indeed, modernity’s imbrication of the new
woman (cold, hard, metallic, artificial, destructive) with the themes of
industrialisation and technologisation found its apotheosis not only in the figure of the
noir woman but also in a number of other 1940s phenomena. Militaristic phraseology
was frequently deployed to signal the ‘bombshell’ as both destructive and artificial. In
1946, a beauty contest was held in Nagasaki, crowing a ‘Miss A-Bomb,’ whilst in
America, MGM Studios endowed Linda Christians with the title ‘the Anatomic
Bomb.’ Such terminology has also crept into noir’s critical corpus: Borde and
Chaumeton referred to Rita Hayworth as the new ‘Lola-Lola of the atomic era’ (Borde
& Chaumeton 1955, p. 69). Hayworth’s portrayal of Gilda was also appropriated into
a militaristic discourse, with men in the armed forces so enamoured of this femme
fatale that millions of copies of Life magazine, in which Hayworth’s photograph
featured, were printed and distributed (Martin 1998). Similarly, the crew of the Enola
Gay, who bombed Hiroshima, named the missile after Hayworth and pasted onto its
side a famous pin-up shot of her, adorned in a satin negligée and reclining
suggestively on a quilted bed (Christopher 1997). Hayworth’s image was also painted
onto the casing of the H-bomb ‘Able Day,’ the ultimate phallic symbol of power,
which was detonated on Bikini Atoll in 1954 (Martin 1998). Liberated woman and the atomic and hydrogen bombs were all seen to possess frightening and destructive power (Metz 1997), so it is little wonder that they were discursively imbricated.

Technologisation, artifice and the modern all coalesced in the figures of the femme fatale and the contemporaneous pin-up. For Bazin, the pin-up’s particular brand of eroticism is inherently inferior due to its adherence to the modernist principles of contrivance and anonymity. ‘Manufactured on the assembly line, standardized by Varga, sterilized by censorship,’ Bazin writes, ‘the pin-up girl certainly represents a qualitative regression in cinematic eroticism’ (Bazin 1999, p. 303). Bazin cites Hayworth as exemplary of this artificial woman.

The noir femme fatale is cold, steely and artificial and this characterisation designates her attractiveness as somehow ‘inferior’ to a natural, organic beauty. In *Murder, My Sweet*, this is explicitly articulated at the end of the film when Ann Grayle confronts her despised step-mother and denigrates the ‘big league blondes’ of whom Mrs Grayle is exemplary:

> Beautiful, expensive babes who know what they’ve got … And inside, blue steel, cold, cold like that only not so clean.

Beneath the surface, Helen Grayle and other femmes fatales are cold and steely. Their glamorous façades conceal little more than an emotional void. Tellingly, however, it is not only noir’s ‘evil women’ who are thus portrayed. Indeed, most female characters in the noir canon are implied to be essentially ‘metallic’ and ‘abject.’ In Cain’s *Double Indemnity*, even Lola is implicated: when she grabs Huff’s arm, ‘[s]he was so excited her fingers felt like steel’ (Cain 2002, p. 100). In the noir world, to be female is perforce to be steel-like, robotic, cold and metallic. I would contend that this rendering of the new woman is not simply a reflection of the postwar cultural climate, as the arguments of Martin, Metz, Christopher and Holt might suggest (Metz 1997; Martin 1998; Christopher 1997; Holt 1991-1992).

**Notes**

180 In his 1909 Manifesto of Futurism, Marinetti conflates a glorification of war with a detestation of women: ‘We will glorify war—the world’s only hygiene—militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom-bringers, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn for woman’ (his italics) (Marinetti 1998, p. 251).

181 ‘The onset of the Cold War, with its threat of nuclear destruction,’ writes Holt, ‘was answered at home by attempts to domesticate a liberated female sexuality of which the Bomb seemed the apotheosis’ (Holt 1990-1991, p. 207).
many antecedents in nineteenth century discourse and culture. As the surrealists noted, cinema’s engagement with automata leads to an acute sensation of uncanniness (Ferry 1978). The articulation of modern woman as an automaton is thus a central way in which her uncanny essence is conveyed. In Lang’s Metropolis, for instance, it is the robotic Maria who is signalled as abject, in opposition to the virtuous, organic and ‘authentic’ Maria. The ‘manufactured’ Maria is clearly the film’s femme fatale.

Similarly, as an irredeemably cold and steely adversary, the noir femme fatale is also ‘robotic.’ As such, she is the unheimlich new woman par excellence.

The artifice of the femme fatale is not only inscribed in her visual appearance and iconography, but is also suggested by her appropriation of certain carnivalesque urban sites, themselves defined as artificial and superficial. When Helen Grayle suggests a meeting with Marlowe in Murder, My Sweet, she enquires as to whether or not he likes the Coconut Beach Club. When he responds that he is unfamiliar with this venue, indicating that his tastes are usually more lowbrow and utilitarian (‘I’m the drive-in type,’ he quips), she invites him along. The image then cuts to a dark frame, sliced through by the vector of a harsh spotlight. Oriental music infuses the scene with exoticism, whilst the camera pans towards a dancer, surrounded by dark and illuminated by the spotlight. The sophisticated Helen (with her glittering black gown and elaborately styled tresses) is supremely at home in such a theatrical environment. Benjamin’s flâneur had the experience of ‘crossing the threshold of one’s class for the first time’ as a result of his interaction with the urban prostitute (Benjamin 1978, p. 11). In much the same way, Marlowe’s association with Helen opens up the artificial and carnivalesque urban underworld.

With the metallic glinting of her anklet, her sunglasses, darkened lips, high heels and platinum hair, Double Indemnity’s Phyllis is a ‘blonde bombshell.’ In fact, the film’s working title was Incendiary Blonde, signalling the importance of her artificial beauty and the way it is aligned with her criminality. There is little doubt that Stanwyck’s wig and other accessories are designed to signal her as modern and utterly divested of any primeval ‘femaleness.’ Wilder justifies his use of these accoutrements thus: ‘I questioned the wig,’ he reports, ‘but it was proper, because it was a phoney wig … And the anklet—the equipment of a woman, you know, that [sic] is married to this kind of man. They scream for murder’ (cited in Crowe 1999, p. 48). The contrived and artificial aspects of Phyllis’ appearance ‘scream for murder’ and thus pique Neff’s
interest. Later, during an amorous embrace in his apartment, Neff enquires about Phyllis’ perfume:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Neff</th>
<th>I’m crazy about you, baby.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phyllis</td>
<td>I’m crazy about you, Walter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neff</td>
<td>That perfume on your hair. What’s the name of it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phyllis</td>
<td>I don’t know. I bought it in Ensenada.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neff</td>
<td>We ought to have some of that pink wine to go with it. The kind that bubbles. All I’ve got is bourbon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phyllis</td>
<td>Bourbon is fine, Walter.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

That Phyllis’ perfume is a generic, cheap product from Mexico is wholly appropriate given the artificial nature of her beauty. It recalls Benjamin’s ideas about reproducibility and loss of aura. Like Phyllis, the perfume is designed to attract male attention, yet is ultimately disposable with countless replications. As such, it is essentially unremarkable and divested of aura or true meaning. The bubbling wine Neff associates with the perfume evokes a modernist sense of ephemerality. Like the bubbles themselves, Phyllis’ is a precarious beauty that threatens to evaporate into thin air. Such artificial beauty can be connected to Marx’s lamentation of the essentially amorphous nature of everything in the modern world, where ‘all that is solid melts into air’ and ‘all that is holy is profaned’ (Marx & Engels 1967, p. 83).

Phyllis’ materialism also aligns her with Baudelaire’s modern coquette, who was defined by greed in a marketplace bursting with glittering commodity objects. Despite the widespread consumerism of the nineteenth century, greed was nonetheless portrayed in a number of disparate discourses as an abject female quality. It symbolised a rejection of maternal compassion and feminine empathy (Dijkstra 1986). Denunciation and vilification of this materialistic new woman came from all quarters, with feminist Tennie Claflin in 1870 demanding rhetorically:

what does the woman of fashion do for the world? She begins and ends by deceiving it in part, and herself wholly. Walk up Broadway and count the windows wherein are exposed for sale huge, vile bunches of hair, tortured into all conceivable, unnatural shapes, to transform the natural beauty of the head to a hideous, affected thing … What right have you, Woman of Fashion, to thus consume wealth, while children on the next street are crying for bread? (cited in Dijkstra 1986, p. 355).
In this discursive context, Phyllis’ desire for material plenitude is akin to intemperance. It suggests selfishness, egocentricity and a pathological incapacity to empathise with others. This is comparable to other modernist renditions of the fashionable coquette or courtesan. Whilst Nana’s reign over Paris entailed the swallowing up of men—‘their possessions, their bodies, their very names’ (Zola 1972, p. 410)—it was also predicated upon mindless consumption and a corresponding devaluation of the objects themselves, many of which she childishly and impulsively tore into pieces, an activity which excited her. Phyllis’ readiness to avail herself of consumer items, and the fact that she appears to revel in artificiality, designate her as a modern coquette who is more than happy to exploit her husband’s wealth. At the same time, Phyllis’ status as artificial ‘bombshell’ signals her as a twentieth century courtesan—a beautiful, modern prostitute circulating in the capitalist market and appraised by countless flâneurs.

In line with nineteenth century discourses, the femme fatale’s deployment of artificial embellishment constitutes a renunciation of ‘traditional’ female attributes. Accoutrement was also used by the modern woman, suggests Claflin, to conceal both physical and metaphysical ‘deformities.’ ‘Your laces and diamonds, and other superfluous articles of ornamentation,’ decried Claflin, ‘which you filch from the public welfare, seeking thereby to hide your deformities or to add to your attractions …’ (cited in Dijkstra, p. 355). Phyllis’ heavy reliance upon cosmetic augmentation may imply selfishness and lack of civic duty. It is also a way to deflect attention away from her undesirable traits, or her ‘deformities,’ such as her murderous impulses.

Such use of artificial accoutrement apparently succeeds: it is consistently the most contrived aspects of the femme fatale to which the noir hero responds. Neff admires Phyllis’s cheap perfume and obsesses over her anklet. Elsa’s body, clad in a scanty yet fashionable swimsuit in *The Lady from Shanghai*, becomes the site of male voyeurism, with her husband’s business partner, Grisby, peering lasciviously through binoculars as Elsa sunbathes in the distance. At the most exhibitionistic extreme of the noir spectrum, Gilda is unabashedly a showgirl. She revels in her materialism and playfully uses her accoutrements and garments (gloves, stylish gowns) for the purposes of seduction. Even the more sympathetic noir portrayals align the woman with the artificial aspects of cosmopolitan life. In *Dark Passage*, for instance, Irene (Lauren Bacall) is not a stereotypically evil femme fatale (that role falls to the murderess Mena, played by Agnes Moorehead). Strongly positioned within the urban
milieu, however, Irene is designated as a modern woman rejoicing in consumerism. Sartorially obsessed, she enjoys jazz, lives alone and has a boyfriend with whom she is presumably sexually intimate. Her obsession with visual appearance is explicitly articulated in various conversations with the hardboiled Vincent (Humphrey Bogart), during which she comments unfavourably upon his inadequate attire and suggests that his lack of style could lead the police to suspect him of criminal deeds.

Film noir’s fetishisation of surface glamour was noted early within the critical corpus. The French cinéastes focused strongly on the femme fatale’s material embellishments, enumerating in exhaustive detail the apparel of Gilda, Cora and others. Significantly, the cinéastes saw the fetishisation of clothing and accessories as a means by which the woman herself could be transformed into an object, as suggested by Asruc’s appraisal of Gilda. ‘These black silk gowns, these gloves rolled up to the elbow, these leather boots,’ Asruc claims, ‘… have a precise function: they divest the woman of all human characteristics in order to render her as an object’ (Borde & Chaumeton 1955, p. 69). Benjamin also perceived an affinity between fetishism and artificial embellishment, stating that ‘clothing and jewelry are [fetishism’s] allies. It is as much at home with what is dead as it is with living flesh’ (Benjamin 1999, p. 69). The noir hero would perhaps concur. Gilda’s gloves, Phyllis’ anklet, Cora’s lipstick or Elsa’s swimsuit become metonymic of the femme fatale’s essentially synthetic and unnatural beauty. Focus upon these aspects of her physical appearance renders her as the ultimate modern fetish object.

The femme fatale’s artificiality is complemented by a ‘stony’ performance style. Agee’s 1944 review of Double Indemnity highlights Phyllis’ impassivity and coldness:

… in Wilder’s apparent desire to make it clear that nympholepts are cold, he has neglected to bring to life the sort of freezing rage of excitations which such a woman presumably inspires in such a fixer as Walter Neff … (cited in Karimi 1976, p. 86).

Throughout the film, and particularly at moments when Neff’s dialogue turns to more unsavoury matters, Phyllis’ face remains masklike and robotic. This invokes a

\[182\] My translation.
Baudelairean image of beauty as being ‘made of stone,’ as poeticised in his *Hymn to Beauty*:

I have the cold and hard perfection of  
A dream. My breast, where mortal men expire,  
Is made of stone, the better to inspire  
The dumbstruck artist’s everlasting love.  
*Hymn à la Beauté (Hymn to Beauty)*, 1861 (Baudelaire 1997, pp. 48-49).

Like Baudelaire’s woman, Phyllis possesses a ‘cold and hard perfection.’ Her facial expression implies callousness, and she appears unmoved at moments that would seem to demand high emotion. When Neff relates an unsavoury anecdote concerning an attempt to rort the insurance system, Phyllis’ face, framed in close-up, is devoid of what would be deemed a ‘normal’ and ‘appropriate’ emotional response. Similarly, when Neff murders Dietrichson, the camera lingers in close-up on Phyllis’ expressionless face. After the murder, Neff actually expresses admiration for Phyllis’ control:

On the way back, we went over once more what she was to do at the inquest, if they had one, and about the insurance, when that came up. I was afraid she might go to pieces a little, now that we had done it, but she was perfect. No nerves, not even a blink of the eye.

This lack of performativity characterises virtually all noir femmes fatales. Of her experience working on *Out of the Past*, actress Jane Greer (who plays Kathie) recounts that the one specific piece of direction she recalls was that director Tourneur stressed that she remain impassive at all times (McClelland 1992). This understated performance style has been noted by various scholars, but generally seen in a dehistoricised manner. Hirsch, for instance, talks of Phyllis’ face ‘frozen, her voice and body forbiddingly rigid’ (Hirsch 1981, p. 7). Such a cold countenance needs to be socio-historically contextualised in order to highlight its similarities with nineteenth century prototypical articulations of the modern femme fatale.

Like Baudelaire’s beauté, Phyllis succeeds in maintaining a stone-like, rigid composure. These historically determined qualities are compounded by the particular brand of eroticism the femme fatale espouses, in which any redemptive or positive qualities are demonstrably absent, as the following section will illustrate.
6.6 Flowers of evil — love as perversion

6.6.1 Modernity, the femme fatale and the abject

Are you demonic, Beauty, or divine—
And have you come from heaven, or from hell?
You seem to have the same effect as wine,
For good and evil flow from you pell-mell

*Hymne à la beauté (Hymn to Beauty)* (Baudelaire 1997, pp. 58-59)

The modern femme fatale is amoral, powerfully dangerous and yet highly desirable. Shadoian comments that ‘film noir is full of appallingly seductive women of deceitfully angelic appearance. The men always buy them a drink, and life suddenly becomes a nightmare’ (Shadoian 1977, p. 94). Like Baudelaire’s modern woman who is ‘demonic’ but also ‘divine,’ the noir femme fatale is irresistible but also unequivocally lethal. Advocating an illicit and inadvisable eroticism, she deliberately ensnares the hapless hero, ensuring his demise.

The destructive intent of the femme fatale has many modernist antecedents, and is portrayed poetically from the early nineteenth century onwards. Written in 1819-1820, Keats’ canonical *La Belle Dame sans Merci* encapsulates the attitude of the Romantics towards the alluring woman. Living in an ‘elfin grot,’ Keats’ heroine is positioned within a mythic context far removed from civilisation. Despite this connection to nature, her status as lone individual without a patriarchal context to temper her wildness designates her as modern and dangerous. She is at the mercy of intense psychological states, literalised by her ‘wild, wild eyes’:

She took me to her elfin grot,
And there she gaz’d and sighed full sore,
And there I shut her wild wild eyes
With kisses four (Keats 1992, p. 32).

With her long hair, chthonic residence and boundless melancholy, Keats’ *belle dame* is clearly a Romantic construct. In many ways, however, she presents as a prototype for the modern femme fatale, particularly in terms of the desire she inspires in her male admirer. The poem concludes with a direct and pitiful acknowledgement of the narrator’s obsessive love for her, and his resultant alienation:
The Cinematic Flâneur

Chapter Six—Femme Fatale as Modern Woman

And this is why I sojourn here
Alone and palely loitering,
Though the sedge is wither’d from the lake,
And no birds sing (Keats 1992, p. 32).

Keats’ anguished protagonist is eternally condemned to inhabit a barren and desolate landscape that literalises his own inner turmoil and estrangement. Such representations of abject love also pervade virtually all art forms in the mid to late nineteenth century, including the poetry of Baudelaire and Swinburne, where love invariably equals pain and disaster. In Swinburne’s *Dolores*—a poem described at the time as ‘depraved and morbid’ (*London Review* 4 August 1886, pp. 130-131)—the unattainable woman is a deadly presence imprinted on the memory of the male protagonist, from which he is unable to escape:

In the daytime thy voice shall go through him,
In his dreams he shall feel thee and ache (Swinburne 1992, p. 84).

Baudelaire’s concept of beauty is also one in which pain and pleasure co-mingle, so that the narrator oscillates wildly between ecstasy and despair, largely because of the woman’s coldness. In a Baudelairean aesthetic, the notion of ‘love’ is systematically divested of any positive dimensions. Instead, as has been noted, it assumes an ominous or portentous quality (Mossop 1961). The experience of love, for Baudelaire, leads to an almost indescribable pain, as exemplified *Hymn to Beauty*:

With snow for flesh, with ice for heart,
I sit on high, an unguessed sphinx
begrudging acts that alter forms;
I never laugh, I never weep.\(^184\)

This inability to extricate oneself from the grasp of the fatal woman is pivotal to both modernity and to film noir’s concept of desire. Neff is never fully able to relinquish the ‘red-hot poker’: as he explains in the voiceover, the ‘hook was too strong.’ Similarly, O’Hara’s final voiceover in *The Lady from Shanghai* suggests that even after her death, Elsa’s power over him is likely to continue indefinitely. ‘Maybe I’ll live so long that I’ll forget her. Maybe I’ll die trying,’ he forecasts as he walks away. The latter option is implicitly positioned as the more likely outcome.

The modern femme fatale is insatiable, figuratively devouring the male protagonist and delighting in the pain she causes. Her sadistic impulses give rise to a thoroughly dysfunctional and destructive love to which the hapless male protagonist is eternally condemned. Such amorality is frequently evidenced in the modern woman’s desire to destroy the men around her. As a ‘man-eating siren,’ Zola’s Nana prompts her suitors to risk everything, jeopardising their fortunes, families and security. One paramour, Vandeuvres, was so enamoured with Nana’s charms that he relinquished all vestiges of rational cognition. So ‘completely possessed by his taste for vice and stupidity’ was Vandeuvres, that he ‘lost even the vigour of his scepticism’ (Zola 1972, p. 364). Happily submitting to the fatal woman’s poisonous sexuality, the modern subject colludes with his own destruction.

The nineteenth century femme fatale was also stigmatised as masochistic, as seen in this verse from Swinburne’s *Dolores*:

I could hurt thee—but pain would delight thee;  
Or caress thee—but love would repel;  
And the lovers whose lips would excite thee  
Are serpents in hell (Swinburne 1992, p. 89).

Repelled by love, this woman revels in destruction, including her own. For this reason, the narrator can exact no revenge, for any pain inflicted would be joyfully received. Masochism is another way in which the woman’s abject state is signalled, since it contravenes the biological imperative to protect oneself from pain.

Phyllis is designated as abject in various ways. Whilst she may be bound by matrimony, she does not reproduce. Openly contemptuous of her stepdaughter Lola, Phyllis demonstrates none of the maternal, protective or custodial behaviour that her relationship to the younger woman would seem to demand. Similarly, at Jerry’s Market, she appears disdainful of the housewives and mothers who surround her. While they purchase groceries, Phyllis idly loiters and plots her husband’s murder. Significantly, however, Phyllis’ renunciation of domesticity earns Neff’s approbation. When visiting the Dietrichson abode for the second time, Neff discovers that the maid is conveniently absent. ‘As long as it’s the maid’s day off,’ he wisecracks, ‘maybe there’s something I can do for you … like running the vacuum cleaner.’ This deadpan allusion to the vacuuming clearly marks such a banal chore as one for which Phyllis would have little competence. Later, when Phyllis muses on her husband’s
The Cinematic Flâneur  

Chapter Six—Femme Fatale as Modern Woman

uncommunicative nature and anti-social tendencies, Neff disparages the domestic scenario:

Phyllis  
He has got a lot on his mind. He doesn’t want to listen to anything except maybe a baseball game on the radio. Sometimes we sit her all evening and never say a word to each other.

Neff  
Sounds pretty dull.

Nuptial relationships are never normalised in Double Indemnity, and even Keyes has rejected the possibility of marriage. After having his erstwhile fiancée investigated, Keyes’ enthusiasm for marriage wanes and he remains forever single. Ultimately, Keyes seems happiest living a solitary and flâneuristic existence, unsullied by the poisonous femme fatale of the modern world.

The new woman was destined to be portrayed as both abject and barren. In a number of discourses, it was her cosmopolitan nature that was seen to be a central contributing factor to this state of affairs. Sociologists frequently implicated the metropolis in the problem of ‘barrenness.’ In the 1930s, the declining birth rate in urban centres was seen as proof that ‘the city is not conducive to the traditional type of family life, including the rearing of children’ (Wirth 1995, p. 76). As a cosmopolitan woman, the noir femme fatale renounces the traditional stereotypes of domestic wife and mother and submits to a barren and ‘unnatural’ existence.

In many discourses and literature, however, it was this very lack of fecundity or utilitarian value that incites male ardour. ‘I am one of those to whom superfluity is a necessity,’ declares Gautier, ‘and I like things and persons in an inverse ratio to the services they render me’ (Gautier, n.d., p. xxix). Similar patterns can be discerned in Zola’s Nana, where Count Muffat explains how the heroine represented a perverse love, and how his desire for her would inevitably entail a rejection of bourgeois values:

[Nana] frightened him … Yes, that was it: she had corrupted his life, and he already felt tainted to the core of his being, by undreamt-of impurities. Now everything was going to rot within him, and for a moment he realized how this evil would develop; he saw the havoc wrought by this ferment, himself poisoned, his family destroyed, a section of the social fabric cracking and crumbling. And, unable to take his eyes away, he stared at Nana, trying to fill himself with disgust for her nakedness (Zola 1972, p. 222).
Whilst Muffat tries his best to feel aversion, he cannot. That Nana represents the destruction of family, church and other social institutions only serves to fuel Muffat’s obsession. Other male suitors of Nana are likewise enraptured, unable to control their responses and prepared to risk all to consummate their desire.

In the modern world, fecundity and domesticity were no longer indicators of a woman’s allure. Rather, beauty was seen to reside in the contingent, the superfluous, the superficial, the peripheral, the artificial and the unnecessary: Phyllis’ perfume, Cora’s lipstick, Elsa’s swimsuit, Gilda’s gloves, the fashionable attire of Irene in *Dark Passage* or the glamour embodied by the eponymous heroine of *Laura*. Likewise, instead of the traditionally sanctioned attributes of empathy and maternal compassion, it is the depraved and barren nature of the modern woman that proves so erotically forceful: Phyllis’ infidelity, Kathie’s greed, Gilda’s ‘promiscuous’ behaviour or Helen Grayle’s ‘monstrous’ love of men.

Neff’s analogy of the ‘corrupt’ honeysuckle is of significance here. ‘How could I have known,’ Neff appeals, ‘that murder can sometimes smell like honeysuckle?’ Apart from invoking Baudelaire’s ‘evil flowers,’ the emphasis on honeysuckle (with all its sensual connotations) as a signifier of doom demonstrates the visceral and shocking nature of Neff’s desire for Phyllis. Like the perfumed orchids in *The Big Sleep* (which General Sternwood claims have ‘the rotten sweetness of corruption’) or Baudelaire’s ‘evil flowers,’ the honeysuckle enables Neff to articulate his desire as a perversion and an affliction, albeit an irresistible one.

As Kolbenschlag notes of cinematic renditions of the female grotesque, there is often an inherent paradox, or a synthesis of antithetical qualities. ‘The grotesque blurs boundaries,’ writes Kolbenschlag, ‘[and] fuses the bizarre with the beautiful, elicits terror as well as amusement’ (Kolbenschlag 1978, p. 329). The abject nature of the femme fatale may elicit horror in the hero, but at the same time, it is at the heart of her essential allure. Like the subject in Baudelaire’s *Beauté* (excerpted above), the noir hero is a ‘dumbstruck artist’ whose ‘everlasting love’ is inspired, rather than mitigated, by the fact that the desired woman is ‘made of stone.’

The deracinated nature of most noir femmes fatales also contributes to their abject status. Elsa in *The Lady from Shanghai* is designated as ‘other’ by her ethnicity. With white Russian parents, Elsa was born in China, worked in Shanghai and speaks Chinese. Her obvious familiarity with the carnivalesque spaces of Chinatown at the film’s conclusion consolidates her essential uncanniness and otherness. Phyllis is
similarly posited as ‘other’ and is denied a normalising family context or lineage outside of her unhappy union with Dietrichson. Like other femmes fatales, she lives for the moment without any consideration of past (tradition and ‘family values’) or future (the ramifications of her corrupt actions). In this, she embodies what Baudelaire terms modernity’s ‘sensation of newness’ (cited in Bradbury & McFarlane 1976, p. 30), where the present moment is all that matters.

The abject qualities outlined above are complemented by modernity’s dimorphic conception of love. In countless modernist discourses, love was synonymised with death, pain and destruction, resulting in a sensibility I have termed ‘love as perversion.’

### 6.6.2 Blissful torment—perversion as modernist imperative

To love and be loved, what joy! And yet how this splendour pales in comparison with the blissful torment of worshipping a woman who treats one as a plaything, of being the slave of a beautiful tyrant who mercilessly tramples one underfoot (my italics). Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, *Venus in Furs*, 1870 (Deleuze 1989)

The femme fatale, or deadly woman, semantically evokes death. She harbors murderous desires towards others and often has a death wish. Although irresistible, she is conniving, ultimately engendering the destruction of those around her. This conflation of seductress and death can be connected to an emerging trend in modernity, particularly towards the fin-de-siècle, of death being personified by a woman, in opposition to the traditional image of Saturn or the Grim Reaper with his scythe. Much art of this period—including that of Moreau, Klimt and Munch—depicts death as a woman. Other discourses synonymised eroticism, exoticism, love and death. In this configuration, Eros and Thanatos are no longer polarised; rather, they co-exist in a seemingly oxymoronic fashion in the figure of the fatal woman, to whom the flâneur is attracted because she advocates a corrupt and doomed mode of love.

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185 Munch depicts himself, for instance, as the dead victim of a woman’s embrace in his painting entitled *Vampire* (c.1893-94).
Throughout the nineteenth century, the increasingly prevalent cultural connection between love and death, coupled with the widespread belief that erotic love entailed a subjugation of one of its participants, was modelled into a new, masculinised masochism. One of the main motifs of Victorian pornography, for instance, was the image of the sadistic woman punishing the helpless male through flagellation (Bade 1979). In such discourses, it was the woman who dominated whilst the enraptured man (captivated by her power and beauty) was obliged to submit to a masochistic position in order to obtain her love. This notion of love as perversion recurs throughout Baudelaire’s canon and in other modernist articulations of desire.

At the time of its release, Les Fleurs du Mal became infamous for its conflation of pornography, morbidity and love. The first section of its 1861 edition, entitled Spleen et Idéal, explicitly deals with the co-existence of ecstasy (idéal) and anguish (spleen) in the narrator's attempts to find erotic love.

The notion of a (male) masochistic attachment to love can be seen in other modernist movements, including the concept of l’amour fou as proposed by surrealist André Breton (Breton 1987). In many ways, l’amour fou took as its precedent the courtly love of mediaeval times. However, the surrealists also saw love as an unhealthy fixation, so that ‘[t]he only poetry worth having must be so obsessive that it would create a parallel world,’ as Breton notes (Breton 1987, p. 213). The surrealist eroticisation of violence can also be seen in the works of Hans Bellmer, Picasso and Dali, or in the themes depicted by Alberto Giacometti, who in 1932 created an abstract sculpture entitled Woman With Her Throat Cut.

Zola’s Nana, likewise, inspires a ‘madness’ in her male admirers, so that ‘[l]ust deranged their brains and plunged them into the delirious fantasies of the flesh’ (Zola 1972, p. 441). The persistent Count Muffat, for instance, ‘would submit shudderingly to the omnipotence of sex,’ aware all the while of his debasement yet

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186 Masochism was a key concept in psychoanalysis. In Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Freud discloses two main instincts in human behaviour: the life instinct and the death instinct. The latter aims at self-destruction and is aligned with both sadism and masochism. When combined with ego-libidinal drives (or libido invested in one’s own self), the death instinct results in masochism (Freud 1953-1975a). See also (Freud 1953-1975b; 1953-1975c).

187 Significantly, the surrealists wished to depose the bourgeoisie in much the same way as noir heroes such as Neff ritually sacrificed the patriarchal figure/husband in order to attain all the delights of the modern world, and most notably its femme fatale.
unable to resist its temptation. This dimorphic conception of love as perversion is also apparent in Swinburne’s *Dolores*:

Pain melted in tears, and was pleasure;  
Death tingled with blood, and was life (Swinburne 1992, p. 83).

Baudelaire’s poetry demonstrates a comparable aesthetic, and particularly focuses upon the fatal woman’s ability to destroy those who desire her:

> A lioness will rest beside her prey,  
> Once she has mauled and marked it as her own;  
> Contented, calm and patient, Delphine lay  
> Quietly appraising her companion.  
> *DAMNED WOMEN: DELPHINE AND HIPPOLYTA*, 1861, (BAUDELAIRE 1997, pp. 294-95)

For Baudelaire, beauty must necessarily have an element of the strange, the melancholy and the grotesque. Pleasure, for Baudelaire is most intense and sweet when ‘steeped in sorrow and remorse’ (Baudelaire 1949, p. 19), which suggests that it is only through a painful experience of love that a transcendental state of happiness can ever be attained. Baudelaire frequently ascribed negative and destructive powers to love, which he believed could only ever be undertaken with a ‘heart full of hate.’

Although Baudelaire declared love to be ‘the greatest thing in life!’ (Baudelaire 1949, p. 62), it was also onerous and burdensome. Because it entailed investing trust in another person, love posed a danger to the habitually solitary flâneur. ‘What is annoying about love,’ laments Baudelaire, ‘is that it is a crime in which one cannot do without an accomplice’ (Baudelaire 1949, p. 37). Nonetheless, Baudelaire exhorts one to love ‘dearly, vigorously, fearlessly, orientally, ferociously’ (Baudelaire 1949, p. 70). For Baudelaire and other modernists, it was only a dangerous mode of loving which could offer any true meaning. And yet in a secularised modern world, previously sanctified notions of love and matrimony were denuded of their authority. A climate of commodification and capitalism meant that evening (including love) was divested of any ‘true’ or transcendental value.

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188 ‘For several years, I have admired you, my heart full of hate’ (‘Pendant plusieurs années, je l’ai admirée, le cœur plein de haine.’ My translation) (Baudelaire, cited in Starobinski 1989, p. 37).
This distinctly modern sense of love as perversion, and of the femme fatale as its main perpetrator, strongly informs the noir canon. In keeping with nineteenth century precedents, there is no ‘healthy’ or socially sanctioned love between noir’s main players. The noir world was explicitly marketed as a dystopian one where desire merged with criminality. Promotional material for Double Indemnity promised the thrill of an ‘unholy love’ (refer Figure I). In another poster promoting Wilder’s film, the two lovers are shown in a passionate clinch, whilst Neff conceals a gun behind Phyllis’ back. The text reads, ‘[y]ou can’t kiss away a murder!’ (Refer Figures H & I). These images can be compared to those of the comic strips discussed in the previous chapter, such as that illustrated at Figure D, in which the unseen hardboiled protagonist exclaims, ‘you double-crossing perfumed cat! So you thought you could put a slug in my back!’ whilst shooting her in the neck. Consistent with modernity’s dimorphic conception of love as perversion, desire for such dangerous and artificial beauty can only lead to death. The implication in this comic’s image, furthermore, is that whilst the female antagonist employs treacherous means (shooting from behind), the male protagonist exhibits no such cowardice, opting to shoot her ‘fair and square.’

In Double Indemnity, the co-existence of violence and love is readily apparent, and it is only at times of murder, or when their evil scheme is discussed, that ‘I love you’ is uttered by either Phyllis or Neff. Having organised all details of their plan, Phyllis says ‘this is it, Walter: I’m shaking like a leaf. But it’s straight down the line for both of us. I love you, Walter.’ Neff’s desire for Phyllis is similarly based on knowing how rotten she actually is. When she hints at acquiring insurance without her husband’s knowledge, Neff is quickly onto her game. When he hotly berates her, adding ‘boy what a dope you must think I am,’ she responds:

Phyllis: I think you’re rotten.
Neff: I think you’re swell. So long as I’m not your husband.

The particular brand of eroticism espoused by Phyllis can only be contained if approached from outside the parameters of matrimony. She is ‘swell’ as long as one does not come too close. It is proximity, not an understanding of her amorality, which proves fatal. Alluding to the red-hot poker, Neff observes, ‘the time to drop it was before it burned my hand off.’ As analysed more fully in Chapter Four, this voiceover occurs over images of Neff bowling, patronising a drive-in restaurant, and finally arriving home to his empty apartment. These flâneuristic activities are designed to
‘kill’ time, but also to encapsulate Neff’s turmoil. Powerless in the face of his all-encompassing desire, his thoughts turn towards Phyllis again, and he acknowledges the masochistic nature of his obsession by using the analogy of the red-hot poker, an instrument designed to inflict pain. Despite the fact that he senses doom and danger, Neff is unable to let go. ‘I was all twisted up inside,’ he confesses, but ‘the hook was too strong … this wasn’t the end between her and me. It was only the beginning.’ This air of inevitability is justified moments later when Phyllis arrives at his apartment and their desire is implicitly consummated. Shortly thereafter it begins to sour, Neff declaring that ‘it can’t be like the first time … something’s happened.’ And yet their destructive love affair has begun and he is unable to let go.

Indeed, the magnetism and appeal of the femme fatale is so strong that the noir protagonist is frequently willing to threaten his physical safety and relinquish his freedom in order to possess her. In *The Killers*, the Swede readily goes to jail to ‘take the rap’ for Kitty. Far from desiring a union with the Swede, however, Kitty’s ultimate aim is to exonerate herself from the caper, and thus ensure her escape from the law. Typically, the realisation of the femme fatale’s truly evil nature, however, does little to vitiate the hero’s desire. The Swede remains fixated upon the beauteous Kitty, whilst Neff appears unable to extricate himself from Phyllis’ power. Despite discovering the gun in Elsa’s handbag, O’Hara tells us in *The Lady from Shanghai* that he will probably die trying to forget her.

Other hardboiled noir protagonists also realise that their love is rotten, yet prove unable to resist its lethal lure. In *Gilda*, the sado-masochistic nature of the femme fatale’s affair with flâneur Johnny is evidenced in the substitution of the word ‘hate’ for ‘love’ in their dialogue. Whilst ‘Gilda as femme fatale’ is ultimately revealed to be a construct of Johnny’s paranoia, their affair is played out in a highly charged manner in which each aims to outdo the other.189 Similarly, in *The Killers*, Kitty explains, ‘I’m poison … to myself and everybody around me.’ Moments later, the Swede roughly grabs her and embraces her passionately.

As cinéastes Borde and Chaumeton aptly observed, ‘in every sense of the word, film noir is about death’ (Borde & Chaumeton 1955, p. 6).190 Most scholars,

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189 For Hirsch, Gilda and Johnny’s relationship is ‘one of the most psychotic romances of the decade’ (Hirsch 1981, p. 188).
190 ‘À tous les sens du mot, le film noir est un film de mort.’ My translation.
however, have approached this confluence of masochism, desire, death and hatred using a psychoanalytic interpretative model, with no reference to historical context. For Hirsch, love in the noir world ‘is typically a disease, an affliction’ (Hirsch 1981, p. 186). Of Double Indemnity, Maxfield argues that ‘[s]hooting Phyllis is the logical consummation of their love affair. It always had more to do with death than sex’ (Maxfield 1996, p. 35). Krutnik’s assessment is more overtly Lacanian, with noir’s obsessive, masochistic and dangerous love symbolising a threat to the phallic regime (Krutnik 1991, p. 85). 191 These observations are generally transhistorical and overlook any forces of modernity. As this chapter has demonstrated, film noir’s articulation of love as perversion needs to be more broadly socio-historically contextualised in order to explicate its modernist ontology and connect it to its nineteenth century forerunners.

‘I can scarcely conceive,’ wrote Baudelaire, ‘a type of Beauty which has nothing to do with Sorrow’ (Baudelaire 1949, pp. 11-12). In the modern world, love was seen as dimorphic, destructive, deadly and perverse. It was also, for the flâneur and the noir hero alike, irresistible.

### 6.7 Conclusion — femme fatale as destructive modern temptress

‘If there’s one thing in this world I hate,’ exclaims Colfax in The Killers, ‘it’s a double-crossing dame.’ And yet this treacherous noir femme fatale, in all her glorious amorality, proves fatally attractive for the cinematic flâneur.

The noir femme fatale is a figure profoundly shaped by the forces of modernity. She inspires a paradigmatically modern mode of desire in the male protagonist. As has been illustrated by the socio-historical contextualisation offered throughout this chapter, the femme fatale offers a distillation of many of modernity’s principles. Her mobility and association with the metropolis and its underworld, along with her status as ‘kept woman,’ signal her as indisputably modern. Demanding an enraptured yet distracted gaze, she complies with the scopic regime of modernity. The

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191 Krutnik’s argument, however, seems to suggest a final restitution when Neff kills Phyllis and destroys the ‘phallic woman’ (Krutnik 1991).
new woman, the Weimar vamp and the noir temptress all respond to a particular modernist anxiety about vision. As such they can be seen as privileged sites where issues regarding visibility are troped. Quite literally, they show us the ocular primacy of modernity. As a highly visible and beautiful commodity in the modern marketplace, the noir femme fatale is analogous to the new prostitute of the nineteenth century urban landscape. She is artificial, avaricious and metallic, all of which are qualities emblematic of modernity. Furthermore, the noir woman adheres to the principle of love as perversion. As such, she can be connected to numerous nineteenth century discursive and literary antecedents.

In *Philosophy of Money*, Simmel describes a ‘faint sense of tension and vague longing’ that characterises the modern individual’s psyche. ‘The lack of something definite at the centre of the soul,’ explains Simmel,

> impels us to search for momentary satisfaction in ever-new stimulations, sensations and external activities. Thus it is that we become entangled in the instability and helplessness that manifests itself as the tumult of the metropolis … (cited in Frisby 1985, p. 72).

The new woman of modernity actualises the ‘ever-new stimulations’ and ‘sensations’ of which Simmel speaks. She embodies the possibility of re-enchanting the desacralised modern world. The alienated and lonely flâneur seeks to possess her, and hence to achieve what Simmel terms a ‘momentary satisfaction.’ Like his nineteenth century predecessor, the noir hero is focused on the ultimate commodity—the unattainable and beautiful woman. Whilst the classic flâneur was ultimately content to idealise the *passante* from afar, his twentieth century cinematic counterpart takes this one step further in his crusade to wrest the femme fatale from her marital constraints. The noir flâneur aims to capture the one intoxication he cannot possess—the femme fatale who belongs to the other man, often the man who controls the city (*Laura, Out of the Past*) or its symbolic microcosm (*Gilda*). This proves to be his fatal flaw.

As this chapter’s exposition has revealed, femmes fatales such as *Double Indemnity*’s Phyllis can be understood as paradigmatic cinematic representations of the new woman or modern prostitute. She is the new woman of modernity who exists within the male’s field of vision. Both the classic flâneur and the noir hero observe, fetishise and desire this sexually potent, modern woman. As such, she is metonymic of modernity and of central importance to a socio-historically based exegesis of the cinematic flâneur.
Figure H: Modernity’s dimorphism
Love as perversion, desire as violence #1
Figure I: Modernity’s dimorphism
Love as perversion, desire as violence #2
Chapter 7  Conclusion — rethinking critical paradigms

During his confession, *Double Indemnity*’s hero, Walter Neff, explains the inevitability of his sordid destiny:

And suddenly the doorbell rings and the whole set-up is right there in the room with you ...

The unexpected visitor is, of course, femme fatale Phyllis, an instrumental figure in Neff’s downfall. It is his adulterous desire for this irresistibly fatal woman that propels him on an inexorable downward spiral towards moral dissolution and death.

Walter Neff is a paradigmatic noir protagonist. Like his hardboiled hero counterparts, he has been abundantly theorised. A common interpretation of Neff would position him as a lonely, isolated individual oppressed by a capitalist and uncaring mid-twentieth century society. ‘In the final analysis,’ writes Naremore, ‘Walter is little more than a cog in a bureaucracy, and he cannot resist the blandishments of sex and money’ (Naremore 1998, p. 87). Elsewhere, a psychoanalytic paradigm is used to deconstruct the noir protagonist, ultimately leading to a universalised understanding of his ontology and significance.

The noir hero is an alienated and often troubled figure. Alone, deracinated and solipsistic, he rejects communion with the city crowds, and cultivates no alliances. As with Sloterdijk’s urban cynic, he is a ‘biting, malicious individualist who acts as though he needs nobody and who is loved by nobody’ (Sloterdijk 1987, pp. 3-4). This thesis has proposed and developed an alternative approach with which to analyse the noir hero, the constituent elements of his characterisation, and his desire for the femme fatale.

The hero of 1940s classic film noir is a quintessentially modern subject. The profound social, political, cultural, aesthetic, industrial, ideological and demographic changes occurring throughout the nineteenth century and beyond have been shown to shape *all* modern subjects. The socio-historical contextualisation offered throughout this thesis has highlighted the centrality of the phenomenon of modernity in shaping the noir landscape, including its hardboiled hero. As this thesis’ diachronic approach...
has revealed, the classic flâneur of the mid to late nineteenth century provides a potent
template for urban, alienated characters such as Neff.

In order to elucidate Neff’s status as modern subject (or cinematic flâneur),
several modalities of his characterisation have been explored. Adept at navigating the
metropolis and its suburbs, Neff is a latter-day flâneur. His deployment of vehicular
travel is significant in this respect, since it apotheosises modernity’s quest for the
dynamic, panoramic and kinetic. Locomotion also enables Neff to move through the
landscape in a manner characterised by the dialectic of absence and presence,
experimentally echoing the classic flâneur’s engagement with the city.

Neff’s adroitness at decoding his surroundings is also highly flâneuristic. Not
only is this aptitude borne out a longstanding urban existence, but it is also intricately
connected to his mobility. This is analogous to the lexicographic competence exercised
by the classic flâneur, whose peregrinations and ability to remain ‘separate’ enabled
him to semiotically decode the metropolis, often by focussing on its seemingly
incidental detritus. In much the same way, Neff can categorise those he meets
according to their profession, home, socio-economic status, demeanour and so forth.
Whilst the classic flâneur diarised his findings, Neff returns to the office to narrate his
story/observations using the modernist device of the dictaphone. With the flâneur’s
‘predilection for creative circumspection’ (Nicholls 2004, p. 87), Neff and other noir
heroes possess an overwhelming need to understand, record and retell their tales of
urban adventure.

Neff’s voice is another aspect of his characterisation that is indisputably
modern. As discussed in Chapter Five and genealogically traced in Appendix Three,
the emergence of a new, hard-edged urban voice was a phenomenon throughout the
nineteenth century and beyond, and was consolidated in a number of art forms and
media including comic strips, pulp fiction and the tabloid press. A sustained analysis of
the hardboiled voice has revealed several key idiosyncratic properties, all of which
align it with modernity. Replete with irony and defined by neologism, wisecracking,
deadpan delivery and syntactical brevity, this voice can be understood as a response to
the increased shock, fragmentation and rapidity of modern life as theorised by
Benjamin and Simmel. Cynicism and irony have also been elucidated as central
properties of the hardboiled voice. They are also recognised as axiomatic traits of the
modern subject. Such traits are purposive insofar as they allow Neff and other
hardboiled heroes to mitigate their modern anxiety, and to distance themselves from
the more threatening and destabilising aspects of the city, including the treacherous
gemme fatale. Rather than engaging in combative interaction, the noir hero cultivates a
blasé and ironic voice aimed at preserving his figurative impenetrability. This is the
verbal corollary of the classic flâneur’s drive towards isolation and self-preservation.

The noir hero’s passion for the femme fatale is also a profoundly modern
one. Desiring the urban woman (who represents all the glamour and plenitude of the
metropolis), protagonists such as Neff experience a visceral and psychic shock upon
first sighting the object of their desire. The shock encapsulated in this moment is
experientially analogous to the classic flâneur’s fortuitous yet momentous glimpse of
the *passante* within the urban crowd. As explored in Chapter Six, the new woman of
modernity who strode confidently through the metropolis was also discursively
imbricated with the prostitute. Highly visible and defined by surface glamour, both the
new woman and the prostitute became commodities circulating in the capitalist
marketplace of late nineteenth and early twentieth century modernity. As my
investigations have revealed, the noir femme fatale exhibits the central traits of the
modern prostitute and cosmopolitan woman. She is defined by surface glamour,
artifice and amorality, and is ultimately a commodity object for appraisal by the
modern, male subject. The noir femme fatale espouses a particular mode of doomed
desire consistent with that depicted in several nineteenth century discourses, art forms
and literature. Mired in perversion and sado-masochism, this particularly modern
conceptualisation of ‘love as perversion’ finds its antecedent in that described by a
number of modern commentators and writers, including Keats, Swinburne, von
Sacher-Masoch, Baudelaire, Gautier and Zola.

That there are differences between a nineteenth century, prototypical (or
classic) flâneur and his cinematic counterpart is indisputable. The classic flâneur is
firmly entrenched in a European cosmopolitan context. Neff, conversely, is a
quintessentially American character. The classic flâneur issued from an affluent milieu
that afforded him a great deal of leisure and freedom. The noir flâneur, on the other
hand, is aligned with the proletariat and often lives in penury. At the beginning of
*Murder, My Sweet*, Marlowe recounts that he took on a job ‘because [his] bank account
was trying to crawl under a duck.’ The noir flâneur must adopt a professional identity,
such as that of insurance salesman or private investigator, in order to attain the
financial solvency (precarious though it may be) needed to indulge in modern flânerie. As has been demonstrated throughout this thesis, however, the similarities between the two figures outweigh these differences.

Furthermore, some of the purported disparities, even those mentioned above, are not as problematic as they may initially seem. Many modernist writers and philosophers, including Baudelaire, forcefully rejected their essentially middle-class heritage in order to embrace a dissolute and peripatetic existence. Even the most privileged European modernists often consorted with the proletariat and revelled in the seamier side of life. This suggests that true flânerie, even as experienced by the bourgeois modernists themselves, was enacted within a decidedly ‘lowbrow’ urban sphere. The classic flâneur thus inhabits a comparable cultural terrain to that experienced by the noir hero. Distinctions between a European flâneur and an American counterpart may also be less significant than has previously been assumed, since inherent in the phenomenon of modernity is a process of inexorable homogenisation. Kracauer noted this when he commented that the differences between modern metropolises were disappearing, with the ‘sites of splendor … becoming more and more alike’ (Kracauer 1995a, p. 44). In other words, the concept of the modern city was being realised, denuding cultural, geographical and historical specificity, replacing them with an easily transferable ‘newness’ which offered a forerunner to the global city of the late twentieth century. Increasingly, there were many points of convergence between all flâneurs, irrespective of their precise location, national identity, provenance, socio-economic status and other factors.

This thesis does not, however, aim to posit a reductive analogy between the classic flâneur and his twentieth century, cinematic successor. Any project which aims to offer a diachronic critical investigation must also concede that history, and particularly as it is reconceptualised in the modern period, is amorphous, polyvalent and complex. The socio-historical contextualisation offered throughout this thesis resists reductive categorisation and absolutist assertions. Instead, it proposes an alternative approach in which historical precedents are explored and elucidated. These are applied to film noir so that connections, convergences and points of commonality can be proposed and identified. Multi-disciplinary in nature, this thesis has drawn extensively upon historical data, personal testimony, literature, art and politics. It has also revisited the theory and heuristic models proposed by seminal cultural
philosophers such as Walter Benjamin, Charles Baudelaire, Georg Simmel and, to a lesser extent, Siegfried Kracauer and Théophile Gautier.

Such an interpretative model allows the modernist dimensions of the noir canon, and particularly the hardboiled hero and femme fatale of 1940s film noir, to be fully elucidated. Both the hero and his female adversary have been revealed as privileged tropes on which the flânerie of modernity is enacted. By explicating how modernity, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, has operated as a central guiding force in shaping *Double Indemnity* and other contemporaneous films noirs, this thesis demonstrates how similar socio-historically inflected exegeses of other noir texts could be undertaken. Such a critical approach would consolidate and build upon existing theory, energise debates and result in a more dynamic, diachronic and comprehensive understanding of film noir and its hardboiled hero.
Filmography

A Windy Day on the Roof (AM & B, 1904, USA)¹
Ace in the Hole (a.k.a. The Big Carnival) (Billy Wilder, 1951, USA)²
All About Eve (Joseph Mankiewicz, 1950, USA)
L’Arrivée d’un train en gare à la Ciotat (Lumière Bros, 1895, France)
Asphalt Jungle (John Huston, 1950, USA)
Ball of Fire (Howard Hawks, 1941, USA)
Battle of Russia, The (Frank Capra & Anatole Litvak, 1943, USA) (from the Why We Fight documentary series)
Big Sleep, The (Howard Hawks, 1946, USA)
Blue Angel, The (Der Blaue Engel) (Josef von Sternberg, 1930, Germany)
Blue Dahlia, The (George Marshall, 1946, USA)
Bound (Wachowski Bros, 1996, USA)
Cabinet of Dr Caligari, The (Das Kabinett des Dr Caligari) (Robert Wiene, 1919, Germany)
Casablanca (Michael Curtiz, 1942, USA)
Cornered (Edward Dmytryk, 1945, USA)
Crimson Kimono, The (Samuel Fuller, 1959, USA)
D.O.A. (Rudolph Maté, 1950, USA)
Dark Passage (Delmer Daves, 1947, USA)
Dead Reckoning (John Cromwell, 1947, USA)
Dernier Tournant, Le (Pierre Chenal, 1939, France)
Double Indemnity (Billy Wilder, 1944, USA)
Gaslight (George Cukor, 1944, USA)
Gilda (Charles Vidor, 1946, USA)
Going My Way (Leo McCarey, 1944, USA)
Goodfellas (Martin Scorsese, 1990, USA)
Great Train Robbery, The (Edwin S Porter, 1903, USA)

¹ Because authorship of pre-classical films was at the time generally attributed to the production company rather than a director, and because many theorists have questioned the validity of retrospectively applying a contemporary model of classification to a nascent industry which had yet to standardise and demarcate production roles, the pre-classical films cited in this filmography are attributed to production company rather than director.
² For a full listing of Billy Wilder’s œuvre, refer to Appendix I.
In a Lonely Place (Nicholas Ray, 1950, USA)
Killers, The (Robert Siodmak, 1946, USA)
Kiss Me Deadly (Robert Aldrich, 1955, USA)
The Lady in the Lake (Robert Montgomery, 1947, USA)
Lady from Shanghai, The (Orson Welles, 1948, USA)
Lady Vanishes, The (Alfred Hitchcock, 1938, Great Britain)
Laura (Otto Preminger, 1944, USA)
Little Caesar (Mervyn le Roy, 1930)
Lost Highway (David Lynch, 1997, USA)
Maltese Falcon, The (John Huston, 1941, USA)
Man With a Movie Camera (Chelovek s Kinoapparatom) (Dziga Vertov, 1929, USSR)
Mauvaise Graine (Bad Seeds) (Billy Wilder, 1933, France)
Metropolis (Fritz Lang, 1926, Germany)
Mildred Pierce (Michael Curtiz, 1945, USA)
Mulholland Drive (David Lynch, 2001, USA)
Murder, My Sweet (Edward Dmytryk, 1944, USA)
My Favourite Brunette (Elliott Nugent, 1947, USA)
Naked Kiss, The (Samuel Fuller, 1964, USA)
Ninotchka (Ernst Lubitsch, 1939, USA)
Nosferatu (FW Murnau, 1922, Germany)
Ossessione (Luchino Visconti, 1942, Italy)
Out of the Past (Jacques Tourneur, 1947, USA)
Pandora’s Box (Die Büchse der Pandora) (GW Pabst, 1928, Germany)
People on Sunday (Menschen am Sonntag) (Robert Siodmak, Edgar G Ulmer, 1929, Germany)
Phantom Lady (Robert Siodmak, 1944, USA)
Pickup on South Street (Samuel Fuller, 1953, USA)
Postman Always Rings Twice, The (Tay Garnett, 1946, USA)
Public Enemy (William Wellman, 1931, USA)
Raw Deal (Anthony Mann, 1948, USA)
Scarlet Street (Fritz Lang, 1945, USA)
Secrets of a Soul (Geheimnisse einer Seele) (GW Pabst, 1926, Germany)
Student of Prague, The (Der Student von Prag) (Stellan Rye, 1913, Germany)
Sunset Boulevard (Billy Wilder, 1950, USA)
Sweet Smell of Success, The (Alexander Mackendrick, 1957, USA)
Underworld (Josef von Sternberg, 1927)
Underworld USA (Samuel Fuller, 1960, USA)
What Happened on Twenty-Third Street, New York City (Edison, 1901, USA)
Wild at Heart (David Lynch, 1990, USA)
Woman in the Window (Fritz Lang, 1944, USA)
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The Cinematic Flâneur

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Appendix I  Billy Wilder

Biographical information

Born in 1906 in Sucha, in rural Polish Galicia (then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire), Billy Wilder (who anglicised the spelling of his given name and the pronunciation of his surname after settling in America) spent his childhood in Kraców and Vienna. As a young adult in the 1920s, Wilder worked as a journalist and writer in Vienna and Berlin. His early journalistic career was diverse, encompassing religious reportage, sports and cinema commentary, the latter including articles written on European auteurs such as Murnau and Lang (Domarchi & Douchet 1962). Wilder also worked at the Eden Hotel in Berlin as a ‘ballroom gigolo’ who was hired to dance with wealthy women (Friedrich 1986).

 Whilst living in Berlin, Wilder met a number of influential people in the film industry and embarked upon a career writing screenplays, the first of which was Menschen am Sonntag (People on Sunday). He was subsequently employed on several other projects for German film production monolith UFA, working for Erich Pommer and on the Kammerspiel films of the period. Between 1929 and 1933, during what he refers to as his ‘Weimar period,’ Wilder collaborated on many projects, including Der Teufelsreporter (1929), Seitensprünge (1930), Der Falsche Ehemann, Emil und die Detektive, Der Mann der Seinem Mörder Sucht, Ihre Hoheit Befielt (all 1931), Das Blaue von Himmel, Ein Blonder Traum, Es War Einmal ein Walzer (all 1932), Madame Wünscht Keine Kinde and Was Frauen Träumen (both 1933).

After fleeing Nazi Germany in 1933, Wilder spent a year in Paris. It was a difficult time by his own admission, particularly because of his problems with mastering the French language. He managed, however, to remain relatively active in the film community, working with both émigré filmmakers and French auteurs, and launching a directorial career with Mauvaise Graine (Bad Seeds).

Wilder arrived in Hollywood in 1934. With virtually no money and a poor grasp of the English language, he established a temporary home with fellow émigré

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1 Wilder was subsequently to demonstrate a preference when being interviewed for stating that he was born in Austria. See (Domarchi & Douchet 1962).

Petra Désirée Nolan 317
Peter Lorre at Hollywood’s Chateau Marmont Hotel. In 1938, Wilder started working with screenwriter Charles Brackett, eventually collaborating on many films, including Ernst Lubitsch’s Ninotchka (1939) and Howard Hawks’ Ball of Fire (1941). Wilder soon became frustrated, however, with being restricted to writing. He disliked seeing his screenplays changed at the whim of producers, directors or studio dictates. It wasn’t long before he moved into the sphere of directing, with his Hollywood directorial debut being The Major and the Minor in 1942. After his reputation was consolidated, Wilder produced many of his own films, retaining at all times a great deal of artistic control.

From the start, Wilder’s Hollywood output was prolific, with a varied œuvre ranging from comedy (The Seven Year Itch, Some Like it Hot), to romance (Sabrina) to musical (Irma La Douce). Yet it was for his films noirs—Double Indemnity, The Lost Weekend, Ace in the Hole and Sunset Boulevard—that Wilder received the greatest recognition and acclaim.

Double Indemnity was nominated in four categories in the 1944 Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Best Actress, Best Director and Best Screenplay, though it did not win any of these.2 In 1945, The Lost Weekend, Wilder’s dark portrayal of alcoholism in which the camera at times approximates the vision of the desperate protagonist, won Academy Awards for Best Picture (winning over Mildred Pierce and Spellbound), Best Actor (Ray Milland), Best Director and Best Screenplay (Brackett and Wilder). John Seitz’s cinematography was also nominated, as was Miklós Rózsa’s score. Wilder’s 1950 cynical and acerbic exploration of Hollywood, Sunset Boulevard, was nominated for Best Picture and Best Director awards. In the acting categories it was also nominated for the performances of William Holden, Gloria Swanson, Erich von Stroheim and Nancy Olson. Sunset Boulevard won the art direction/set direction, scoring of a musical picture, and screenplay categories, though it lost out to Twentieth Century Fox’s All About Eve (Joseph Mankiewicz) in the Best Director and Best Picture categories.

Wilder’s career was prolific and successful, both critically and commercially. He continued working until the early 1980s, and died in his adopted home of America in March 2002.

2 Best Picture, Director and Screenplay went to Paramount’s Going My Way (dir. Leo McCarey), whilst Ingrid Bergman won Best Actress for Gaslight (dir. George Cukor) (Bergan et al. 1994).
Billy Wilder’s œuvre

- *Der Teufelsreporter: Im Nebel der Grossstadt* (Ernst Laemmle, 1929, Germany), screenplay by Billie Wilder

- *Menschen am Sonntag* (*People on Sunday*) (Robert Siodmak, Edward G Ulmer, 1929, Germany), screenplay by Billie Wilder

- *Der Mann, der Seinen Mörder Sucht* (Robert Siodmak, 1931, Germany), screenplay by Billie Wilder

- *Ihre Hoheit Befielet* (Hanns Schwarz, 1931, Germany), screenplay by Billie Wilder

- *Seitensprünge* (Stefan Székely, 1931, Germany), screenplay by Ludwig Biro, Bobby E Lühge and Karl Noti from an idea by Billie Wilder

- *Der Falsche Ehemann* (Johannes Guter, 1931, Germany), screenplay by Paul Frank and Billie Wilder

- *Emil und die Detektive* (Gerhard Lamprecht, 1931, Germany), screenplay by Billie Wilder based on the novel by Erich Kästner

- *Es War Einmal Ein Walzer* (Victor Janson, 1932, Germany), screenplay by Billie Wilder

- *Einer Blonder Traum* (Paul Martin, 1932, Germany), screenplay by Walter Reisch and Billie Wilder

- *Scampolo, Ein Kind der Strasse* (Hans Steinhoff, 1932, Germany), screenplay by Max Kolpe and Billie Wilder, based on the play by Dario Niccodemi

- *Das Blaue Vom Himmel* (Victor Janson, 1932, Germany), screenplay by Max Kolpe and Billie Wilder

- *Madame Wünscht Keine Kinder* (Hans Steinhoff, 1933, Germany), screenplay by Max Kolpe and Billie Wilder, based on the book by Clément Vautel

- *Was Frauen Träumen* (Géza von Bolváry, 1933, Germany), screenplay by Franz Schultz and Billie Wilder

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3 Billie was the original spelling of Wilder’s given name. It was anglicised in film credits from around 1935 onwards.
• *Mauvaise Graine* (Bad Seeds) (Billie Wilder and Alexander Esway, 1933, France), screenplay by Billie Wilder, Max Kolpe, Hans G Lustig, Claude-André Puget

• *Music in the Air* (Joe May, 1934, USA), screenplay by Robert Liebmann, Billie Wilder and Howard Irving Young, based on the musical by Oscar Hammerstein II and Jerome Kern

• *Under Pressure* (Raoul Walsh, 1935, USA), screenplay by Borden Chase, Noel Pierce and Lester Cole with revisions and additional dialogue by Billie Wilder

• *Lottery Lover* (Wilhelm Thiele, 1935, USA), screenplay by Franz Schulz, Billie Wilder and Hanns Schwartz

• *Champagne Waltz* (A Edward Sutherland, 1937, USA), screenplay by Frank Butler and Don Hartman, from a story by Billy Wilder and HS Kraft

• *Bluebeard’s Eighth Wife* (Ernst Lubitsch, 1938, USA), screenplay by Charles Brackett and Billy Wilder, based on the play by Alfred Savoir

• *That Certain Age* (Edward Ludwig, 1938, USA), screenplay by Bruce Manning, from a story by F Hugh Herbert, with uncredited contributions by Charles Brackett and Billy Wilder

• *Midnight* (Mitchell Leisen, 1939, USA), screenplay by Charles Brackett and Billy Wilder, from a story by Edwin Justus Mayer and Franz Schulz

• *What a Life* (Jay Theodore Reed, 1939, USA), screenplay by Charles Brackett and Billy Wilder, based on the play by Clifford Goldsmith

• *Ninotchka* (Ernst Lubitsch, 1939, USA), screenplay by Charles Brackett, Billy Wilder and Walter Reisch, from a story by Melchior Lengyel

• *Rhythm on the River* (Victor Schertzinger, 1940, USA), screenplay by Dwight Taylor, from a story by Jacques Théry and Billy Wilder

• *Arise, My Love* (Mitchell Leisen, 1940, USA), screenplay by Charles Brackett and Billy Wilder, from a story by Benjamin Glazer and John S Toldy, with additional contributions by Jacques Théry

• *Hold Back the Dawn* (Mitchell Leisen, 1941, USA), screenplay by Charles Brackett and Billy Wilder, based on a treatment and novel by Ketti Frings

• *Ball of Fire* (Howard Hawks, 1941, USA), screenplay by Charles Brackett and Billy Wilder, based on a story by Billy Wilder and Thomas Monroe
• *The Major and the Minor* (Billy Wilder, 1942, USA), screenplay by Charles Brackett and Billy Wilder, suggested by the play *Connie Goes Home* by Edward Childs Carpenter and the story *Sunny Goes Home* by Fanny Kilbourne

• *Five Graves to Cairo* (Billy Wilder, 1943, USA), screenplay by Charles Brackett and Billy Wilder, based on the play *Hotel Imperial* by Lajos Biró

• *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944, USA), screenplay by Charles Brackett and Billy Wilder, based on the novel by James M Cain

• *The Lost Weekend* (Billy Wilder, 1945, USA), screenplay by Charles Brackett and Billy Wilder, based on the novel by Charles R Jackson

• *The Emperor Waltz* (Billy Wilder, 1948, USA), screenplay by Charles Brackett and Billy Wilder

• *A Foreign Affair* (Billy Wilder, 1948, USA), screenplay by Charles Brackett, Billy Wilder and Richard L Breen, based on a story by David Shaw and Robert Harari

• *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950, USA), screenplay by Charles Brackett, Billy Wilder and DM Marshman Jr

• *Ace in the Hole* (Billy Wilder, 1951, USA), producer Billy Wilder, screenplay by Billy Wilder, Walter Newman and Lester Samuels

• *Stalag 17* (Billy Wilder, 1953, USA), producer Billy Wilder, screenplay by Billy Wilder and Edwin Blum, based on the play by Donald Bevan and Edmund Trzcinski

• *Sabrina* (Billy Wilder, 1954, USA), producer Billy Wilder, screenplay by Billy Wilder, Samuel Taylor and Ernest Lehman, based on the play *Sabrina Fair* by Samuel Taylor

• *The Seven Year Itch* (Billy Wilder, 1955, USA), producers Charles K Feldman and Billy Wilder, screenplay by Billy Wilder and George Axelrod, based on the play by George Axelrod

• *The Spirit of St Louis* (Billy Wilder, 1957, USA), screenplay by Billy Wilder, Wendell Mayes and Charles Lederer, based on the book by Charles A Lindbergh

• *Love in the Afternoon* (Billy Wilder, 1957, USA), producer Billy Wilder, screenplay by Billy Wilder and IAL Diamond, based on the novel *Ariane* by Claude Anet

• *Witness for the Prosecution* (Billy Wilder, 1957, USA), screenplay by Billy Wilder and Harry Kurnitz, based on the play *y Agatha Christie*
• *Some Like it Hot* (Billy Wilder, 1959, USA), producer Billy Wilder, screenplay by Billy Wilder and IAL Diamond, based on the film *Fanfaren des Liebe*, written by M Logan and Robert Thoeren

• *The Apartment* (Billy Wilder, 1960, USA), producer Billy Wilder, screenplay by Billy Wilder and IAL Diamond

• *One Two Three* (Billy Wilder, 1961, USA), producer Billy Wilder, screenplay by Billy Wilder and IAL Diamond, based on the one-act play by Ferenc Molnár

• *Irma la Douce* (Billy Wilder, 1963, USA), producer Billy Wilder, screenplay by Billy Wilder and IAL Diamond, based on the musical by Alexandre Breffort and Marguerite Monnot

• *Kiss Me, Stupid* (Billy Wilder, 1964, USA), producer Billy Wilder, screenplay by Billy Wilder and IAL Diamond, suggested by the play *L’Ora della Fantasia* by Anna Bonacci

• *The Fortune Cookie* (Billy Wilder, 1966, USA), producer Billy Wilder, screenplay by Billy Wilder and IAL Diamond

• *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* (Billy Wilder, 1970, USA), producer Billy Wilder, screenplay by Billy Wilder and IAL Diamond, based on characters created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

• *Avanti!* (Billy Wilder, 1972, USA), producer Billy Wilder, screenplay by Billy Wilder and IAL Diamond, with contributions by Luciano Vincenzoni, based on the play by Samuel A Taylor

• *The Front Page* (Billy Wilder, 1974, USA), screenplay by Billy Wilder and IAL Diamond, based on the play by Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur

• *Fedora* (Billy Wilder, 1978, USA), producer Billy Wilder, screenplay by Billy Wilder and IAL Diamond, based on the story by Tom Tryon

• *Buddy Buddy* (Billy Wilder, 1981, USA), screenplay by Billy Wilder and IAL Diamond, based on the film *L’Emmerdeur*, screenplay by Francis Veber

*Details of Wilder’s œuvre sourced from (Crowe 1999; Sikov 1998)*
Appendix II  Definition of modernity

The term modernity is polysemous and has acquired different semantic specificity and nuance depending upon its critical context. Given that it is a central concept in this thesis, further clarification is necessary. Several theorists have proposed working definitions for the term modernity (see for instance Pym 1995; Calinescu 1987; Watson 2001; Berman 1988). The most relevant of these, along with a select example of the numerous debates on the issue, are enumerated below.

The first reference to modernity meaning ‘present times’ can be found in the Oxford English Dictionary in 1627, although both modernitas (modern times) and moderni (men of today) were terms frequently used from the sixth century onwards (Calinescu 1987). In fact, Calinescu argues that the genesis of the concept of modernity resides in the Christian middle ages, not only because of this etymological link, but also because some of the features of ‘recent’ modernity—such as an apocalyptic notion of temporality—share fundamental similarities with a Judeo-Christian eschatological view of history.

Modernity has been periodised in a variety of ways. In his exegesis of modern epistemology, Watson suggests that there are three defining phases of modernity, thus:

1. The first refers to the period between the Reformation and the Renaissance, when the diminution of the importance of religion was accompanied by an increased emphasis on science;

2. The second refers to an artistic movement of the nineteenth century, in which Baudelaire is a central figure. Important elements of this modernity were urbanisation, reification of the present and a concomitant devaluation of history;

3. The third is contemporaneous with the second, but concerns the theological threat posed by scientific and archaeological enquiry in the nineteenth century, including Darwin’s theories (Watson 2001).
Watson seems to implicitly valorise the second and third definitions, since his study provides an extremely detailed account of the Western world from the end of the nineteenth century onwards, with little consideration to social, aesthetic and epistemological developments from the Renaissance to the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Berman, who has written extensively on modernity, also posits three historical phases, although they differ from Watson’s:

1. The first phase commences roughly at the beginning of sixteenth century and finishes somewhere around the end of the eighteenth century;

2. The second phase is inaugurated by the revolutionary wave of the 1790s, in which the concept of ‘the public’ takes shape. This phase finishes at the end of the nineteenth century;

3. The third phase encompasses the globalisation and homogenisation of modernity in the twentieth century (Berman 1988).

In a similar focus to that of Watson, Berman’s work on modernity is historically limited to a period from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, giving credence to the second and third definitions.

In addition to these attempts to establish historical parameters and different developmental phases, there have also been numerous semantic qualifications made in relation to the notoriously variegated term ‘modernity.’ Calinescu notes, for example, that there is a fundamental difference and apparent incongruity between the idea of ‘modernity’ as an aesthetic practice (for instance, Impressionism and its inherent subjectivised vision) and the ‘modernity’ of a post-industrial, capitalist economy predicated on quantifiability. This is a split that asserted itself, contends Calinescu, in the early nineteenth century. Consequently, there are several examples within modernity where seemingly oppositional forces co-exist in a dialectical fashion. The apparent disparity between the objectified and bureaucratically regulated time of capitalist civilisation (as commodity) and internal time (durée) is a prime example (Calinescu 1987).
For Calinescu, one of the defining features of modernity is a change from an aesthetic of permanence to one of transitoriness, which manifests itself in artistic/aesthetic terms as a pervasive ‘historical relativism.’ A modern artist (or, in more general terms, a modern subject) has ‘no access to a normative past with a [sic] fixed criteria’ (Calinescu 1987, p. 3).

Kern’s cross-disciplinary investigation into modernity is also of interest, since it examines fundamental perceptual shifts in terms of temporality (past, present, future, the concept of simultaneity) and space, and links these to technological and scientific advances occurring throughout the nineteenth century and beyond (Kern 1983).

The semantic specificity of the terms modernism and modernity (or, in the French, modernisme and modernité) has also often been noted. French theorist Vadé discusses the suitability and applicability of both terms, ultimately favouring modernité (or modernity), particularly as it has been employed by Baudelaire (Vadé 1995). Berman also remarks on the disparity between the terms ‘modernism’ and ‘modernisation.’ Berman understands ‘modernism’ as ‘a species of pure spirit, evolving in accord with its autonomous artistic and intellectual imperatives.’ ‘Modernisation,’ on the other hand, concerns social, economic and political structures (Berman 1988, pp. 131-132).

Finally, distinctions are often drawn between ‘high’ or ‘classical’ modernism (usually nineteenth century European modernité), and a ‘low’ or ‘pulp’ modernism, the latter of which is seen by Berman, Lash and Friedman as a ‘modernism of the streets’ (Lash & Friedman 1992; Berman 1988). It is perhaps with this ‘low modernism’ and its ‘pulp’ sensibility that film noir can be most closely aligned. Film noir is also strongly influenced, however, by high modernism and its revolutionary epistemological and metaphysical paradigm shifts.

Each theorist or historian brings a slightly different inflection to the terms ‘modernity’ and ‘modernism.’ Art historian Clark, for instance, sees modernity as something arising around the time of Manet’s paintings. He describes the change as ‘a kind of scepticism, or at least unsureness, as to the nature of representation in art’ (Clark 1985, p. 10), in which doubts about both vision and representation gave way to new and volatile semiotic systems. For Hughes, conversely, it is the historical period between 1880 and 1930 in which modernity appears in its purest form (Hughes 1991).
It also needs to be acknowledged that much of the theory surrounding modernity makes a somewhat Eurocentric assumption. Needless to say, America’s history presents an entirely different set of coordinates. As has been noted, the first colonists saw in America an opportunity to regenerate their fortunes, their spirits and to reinstate the power of their church and nation. Ultimately, this led to a conflation of aggression/violence and redemption/regeneration (Roberts 1993). This ethos of individualism, combined with the myth of the frontier, is a central element of the construction of modern America. Certainly, the rugged individualist of American mythology differs vastly from the more dandified and bourgeois flâneur of fin-de-siècle European cosmopolitan life. At the same time, however, the European influence on both an American modern sensibility in general, and film noir in particular, was extensive. Given the inherently international nature of modernity, its influence was diffused across a broad cultural spectrum, at least in the Western world. In addition, many specifically European modernist movements inevitably infiltrated the American cultural consciousness and thus impacted significantly on an American notion of what it meant to be modern. For instance, American interest in European art, and German painting specifically, grew considerably from about 1913 onwards. Despite a brief lull in interest for a few years from 1933, German expressionism steadily gained a foothold in the American market, with interest dramatically increasing following the 1937 Degenerate Art Exhibition in Munich (Whiting 1994).

Hollywood was an international community from the 1920s onwards, and thus susceptible to European trends for a variety of reasons. A number of prominent filmmaking and intellectual émigrés arrived on America’s west coast in the 1920s, including Hungarian director Alexander Wajda, Ernst Lubitsch, Brecht and Christopher Isherwood. ‘International salons’ were swiftly established in Hollywood where these émigrés congregated, providing fora in which political, ideological and cultural affiliations could be cultivated or consolidated (Ceplair & Englund 1980). In addition to Wilder, other émigré auteurs, aesthetes and film industry personnel included Fritz Lang, Robert Siodmak, Otto Preminger, John Brahm, Anatole Litvak, Karl Freund, Max Ophuls, John Alton, Douglas Sirk, Fred Zinneman, William Dieterle, Max Steiner, Edgar Ulmer, Curtis Bernhardt and Rudolph Maté, to name but a few. As a result of this assimilation, Hollywood product in the mid-twentieth century was greatly influenced by a European aesthetic which in many crucial ways had a nineteenth century cultural legacy.
The notion of modernity as arising (or at least being most forcefully consolidated and promulgated) in the nineteenth century seems to be the most commonly accepted position in cultural and film theory. Seminal philosophers Benjamin and Kracauer understood modernity in this sense, as do most contemporary theorists (Berg et al. 1995; Buci-Glucksmann 1994; Clark 1985; Crary 1990; Gleber 1999; McQuire 1998; Orr 1993).

Modernity has been widely discussed and theorised in film scholarship of the past decade. Given the renewed interest in early cinema, it is hardly surprising that this corpus has focussed in detail on the historical developments of the mid to late nineteenth century, since this was the cultural context from which the cinematic apparatus emerged. This approach can be seen in the work of Gunning, Hansen, Charney, Schwartz, Buck-Morss, Friedberg and Williams, amongst others (Gunning, 1990 1995a, 1995b, 1995c, 1996, 2000; Schwartz 1995; Charney 1995; Hansen 1983, 1987, 1995, 1999; Buck-Morss 1986, 1992, 1995, 1997; Williams 1995; Friedberg 1995).

All of the abovementioned historical events and definitions of modernity have informed my own stance. I have chosen to deploy the term modernity to denote the historical period from the mid-nineteenth century into the early twentieth century. Antecedent movements, cultural developments and historical events—such as the emergence of the printing press in the fifteenth century, the revolutionary ramifications of the Renaissance, and the increasing secularism of the Western world—are all central to the emergence of modernity. During the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, however, many cultural conditions of modernity intensified. These include urbanisation, industrialisation, alienation and the formulation of a modern, decented subject. It is these and concurrent changes that resonate most strongly in the film noir canon.
3.1 Pulp fiction and vernacular

Emerging in the 1920s and 1930s, hardboiled detective fiction—or pulp fiction—was a genre in which cops were adversaries, women were ‘dames,’ ‘janes,’ ‘broads’ or ‘babes’ and were bad to the bone, everyone was crooked, corrupted or corruptible, and capers invariably went wrong. The modern, grittily urban lexicon developed in pulp fiction genealogically stretches back to the nineteenth century, and is strongly connected to the rise of the metropolis. All urban centres sought to create a new, modern language. In nineteenth century Paris, for instance, the popular appeal of dance halls, cafés-concerts and cabarets was strongly dependent upon a style of song in which inner-city argot played a key role. Many of these songs were, in fact, self-referential and ironic. They parodied themselves and acknowledged their experimentation with a proletarian language. L’Étoile des Concerts, submitted to be performed at Paris’ Eldorado and rejected by the censors on 15 December 1867, explicitly thematises the popularity of using proletarian ‘street’ language:

Since it is necessary, and to please you, I speak in argot like a ragpicker, I adopt a fishwife’s voice, and the manners of a lackey. I kick up my legs better than Clodoche, I don’t sing as well as Malibron, I am as distinguished as Gavroche … Well, what do I care! I earn a hundred thousand francs (cited in Clark 1985, p. 229).

Art historian Clark sees this expropriation of idiomatic speech into a revue produced for mass consumption as a mercenary exploitation of the working-class. I would suggest that there is an added dimension. Throughout the nineteenth century, there arose an urgent imperative for urban art forms to incorporate the language of the streets in order to remain commercially viable in a vastly reconfigured social landscape. As the above lyrics imply, it was becoming necessary (‘to please you’—that is, the audience) to adopt what could be termed a more ‘hardboiled’ or ‘lowbrow’ speech, the sort that was employed by ‘fishwives,’ ‘ragpickers’ and similar. By incorporating this language, popular entertainment and literature was able to accurately capture and convey the immediacy, shock, sensation and spectacle of urban

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life. In this sense, new linguistic structures and styles began to reflect the modern landscape they sought to communicate.

Pulp fiction was a privileged site on which an urban patois could also be crafted into a new lexicon. Again, this was a phenomenon arising in the latter part of the nineteenth century, when cheap books bound in paper gained enormous popularity in America. Prospering between 1860 and 1912, the dime novel’s success was primarily sustained by the genres of mystery and western adventure. Due to increases in postage costs (these books were primarily purchased via the mail service), dime novels gradually ceded their market to the newly emergent pulp magazines, thus named due to the cheap pulpwood on which they were printed. Featuring a variety of short stories, novellas and other forms of fiction, pulp magazines gained dominance from 1912. They immediately found an extensive audience and proved to be an enduring and popular literary form (Roberts 1993). In 1920, *Black Mask: An Illustrated Magazine of Detective, Mystery, Adventure, Romance and Spiritualism* was first published. Founded by Henry L. Mencken and George Jean Nathan, with the editorship taken on in 1926 by Captain Joseph Shaw, *Black Mask* continued to be published until 1951, showcasing some of the most celebrated pulp writers (Hirsch 1981; Dargis 1997).

It was in this literary forum that a new style of detective fiction was inaugurated, based upon tough, hard-edged storytelling as opposed to the deductive and ratiocinative model exemplified in the more traditional œuvres of Agatha Christie and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Unashamedly urban and cynical, pulp fiction’s heroes included Dashiell Hammett’s ‘Continental Op’ and ‘Sam Spade,’ Carroll John Dayly’s ‘Three-Gun Terry Mack’ and ‘Race Williams,’ as well as Chandler’s ‘Philip Marlowe’ (Roberts 1993). Primarily aimed at a male readership—female editors such as Fanny Ellsworth and FM Osborne disguised their gender by using initials rather than their full names (Nolan 1985)—*Black Mask* celebrated a modern masculinity that was articulated largely through a sharp, brutal, acerbic voice.

Whilst the first full-length hardboiled novel was Hammett’s *Red Harvest*, published in 1929 (Porter 1981), it was actually during the Second World War that paperbacks began to replace the pulp magazines. In June 1939, the first ten releases of

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1 There were several female writers of pulp fiction, including Leigh Brackett, Dolores Hitchens and Dorothy B. Hughes, the latter of whom scripted *In a Lonely Place* (Nicholas Ray, 1950, USA) and was an aberration in that she worked without a pseudonym. See (Haut 1995).
pocket books appeared (Penguin had been publishing similar books in the United Kingdom since 1935), and in 1941 Avon Books also began to release paperbacks. Sold at news-stands, train stations and in other public arenas, pulp novels proved to be extremely popular. In 1945, the number of paperback titles in print was 112. By 1946, this had risen to 353 and only five years later, an unprecedented number of 866 titles were in print (O’Brien 1981).

A synergy and intertextuality between pulp fiction and cinema became apparent early, with many of the hardboiled writers working directly for Hollywood. In other instances, their written works were adapted to the screen. Hollywood fervently embraced the pulp sensibility showcased in the literature of William Faulkner, Raymond Chandler (The Big Sleep, 1939, Farewell My Lovely, 1940), James M. Cain (Double Indemnity, 1936, The Postman Always Rings Twice, 1934), Dashiell Hammett (The Maltese Falcon, 1930, The Glass Key, 1929 and 1931) and John O’Hara. Pulp writers frequently wrote screenplays from the works of their contemporaries, with Jonathan Latimer adapting Hammett’s The Glass Key and William Faulkner working on a screenplay based upon Chandler’s The Big Sleep. Chandler himself of course worked on Cain’s Double Indemnity. Other Black Mask writers who were employed at various times as Hollywood scriptwriters include Frederick Nebel, Raoul Whitfield, Norbert Davis, W.T. Ballard, George Harmon Coxe, Thomas Walsh, Lester Dent and Horace McCoy (Karimi 1976).2 Clearly, Hollywood’s cinema—and particularly the classic films noirs produced in the 1940s—was an ideal forum in which this hardboiled voice could be both consolidated and articulated.

2 For other instances of hardboiled detective fiction writers working in Hollywood, see (Wilt 1991).
3.2 The comic strip—emergence of a new art form

Produced for the Hearst syndicate in 1896, *Yellow Kid* was the first coloured comic strip to appear in an American newspaper. Although broader historical precedents exist, the comic strip as a visual art form became widespread in the nineteenth century. The evolution of the modern comic strip can be connected to the advent of the caricature in Paris between the July Revolution of 1830 and the foundation of the Third Republic in 1870. As Wechsler notes, this genre of caricatures recorded ‘moods and attitudes of city life—boredom, alienation, social displacement, political unrest and self-consciousness’ (Wechsler 1982, p. 14). The popularity of caricatures and comic strips was seen by some, including Baudelaire, as a response to increasing urbanisation.4

Defined by mass dissemination and thus ubiquity and easy accessibility, the comic strip appeared on a regular basis in American newspapers from the 1890s until the First World War. Formatted on large, colour-printed paper supplements, the monstrative appeal of the comic strip proved to be one of its most popular and distinctive features. Complementing the visual qualities was a new voice characterised by ellipsis, brevity, neologism, malapropism and brutality. Such a voice highlighted the inherently adversarial nature of communication in the modern world, and exhibited a hardboiled sensibility with fundamental similarities to the voice of pulp fiction. With the emergence of the tabloid press in 1919, coupled with syndication, comic strips became increasingly popular, and by the early 1930s comic books were being marketed and sold as separate entities (Benton 1993a).

Thematically, the comics engaged with the metropolis, particularly during the 1930s when American culture demonstrated a widespread fascination with urban

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3 Whilst visual antecedents date back as far as the Roman Empire, it was the advent of the printing press in the late fifteenth century that allowed images to be produced *en masse* and to be disseminated to a largely illiterate audience. With the emergence of mass forms of media after the industrial revolution, this process was intensified, although it wasn’t until the tabloid press arose, in the early years of the twentieth century, that the comic strip came into its own. For further studies on comics and their history, see (Sabin 1996; Benton 1993a; 1993b; Roberts 1993; Witek 1989; Waugh 1947).

4 Baudelaire wrote three essays on caricature. For a more detailed investigation, see Hannoosh. Of particular interest is Hannoosh’s chapter on the comic and modernity (pp. 251-307), and the examination of Baudelaire’s interpretations of Grandville’s images, in which figures are allegorised and synecdoche and metonymy prevail (pp. 158-72) (Hannoosh 1992).
criminality. As newspapers gleefully reported tales of gangster warfare, bootleggers, general lawlessness and a host of other societal ills accompanying the Prohibition, other media followed suit. Hollywood produced a number of enormously popular gangster films, including Warner Bros’ *Public Enemy* (William Wellman, 1931, USA), *Little Caesar* (Mervyn le Roy, 1930, USA) and Paramount’s *Underworld* (Josef von Sternberg, 1927, USA). In 1933, J. Edgar Hoover was appointed head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and crime fighting became an issue of national importance. Real-life cases such as the Lindbergh kidnapping provided an ongoing ‘narrative’ for consumers of newspapers. Rejoicing in themes of urban criminality, comic strips frequently incorporated actual news stories into their narratives, so that veracity became one of their most commercially viable drawcards. Dick Tracy creator Chester Gould claimed to follow ‘the newspapers almost exclusively—the police news and all the information about the operation of gangsters and the war against them’ (Benton 1993b, p. 10). ‘I work from stuff that has actually happened,’ Gould declared, ‘to get realism into the strip’ (Roberts 1993, p. 2).

*Dick Tracy* first appeared in October 1931 in the *Detroit Mirror* and *New York Times*, and was picked up by the *Chicago Tribune* the following year. In December 1936, the first comic book devoted entirely to detectives was launched (*Detective Picture Stories*). Other comics that focussed on crime fighting emerged throughout the 1930s, including pulp magazines *G-Men* and *The Feds* (both released in 1935). First released in June 1942, the hugely popular *Crime Does Not Pay* conveyed real-life crimes, with early covers sporting photographs of actual criminals such as Pretty Boy Floyd, John Dillinger and Legs Diamond. Similarly, Al Capone was transformed into a comic character named ‘Big Boy’ (Roberts 1993). *Crime Does Not Pay* was a huge commercial success, with the first issues selling around 200,000 copies each. By 1948, a million copies were being sold every month (Benton 1993b).

Crime comics reached the apex of their popularity between 1947 and 1954. These comics and the corrupt characters and underworld they portrayed were seen as

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5 American Prohibition, 1919-1933.
6 Urban crime was also a central theme of the comic strip’s precursors. In the seventeenth century, broadsheets, which were hawked on street corners, abounded with details of murders and depictions of public executions. From 1792 to 1841, the renowned *Seven Dials Press* of London published details of sensational crimes, with themes of murder and bodysnatching proving popular. In 1841, Edward Lloyd published *The People’s Police Gazette* of London, recreating crimes and police investigative, procedural and detective work. A similar publication followed four years later in America. See (Benton 1993b; Sabin 1996).

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so influential that reactionary groups began to perceive them as a threat to morality. In 1947, an anti-comic book crusade was launched, leading to congressional investigations in 1950 and 1954. As part of the Senate hearings, J. Edgar Hoover submitted a letter outlining the moral dangers posed by comic strips. ‘A comic book,’ cautioned Hoover,

… which is replete with the lurid and the macabre; which places the criminal in a unique position by making him a hero; which makes lawlessness attractive … may influence the susceptible boy or girl who already possesses anti-social tendencies (Benton 1993b, p. 78).

Held in a conservative postwar climate concerned with resettlement of the nuclear family, these hearings concluded that comics led to juvenile delinquency and impaired the ethical development of children. As a result of these findings, a strict code of standards was implemented, ultimately leading to the demise of the comic strip around 1955 (Benton 1993b).

The phenomenon of comic strips and comic books has been studied at length. Most historians attribute their popularity to zeitgeist reasons—Roberts for instance believes that Dick Tracy’s enduring success was due to creator Gould’s uncanny ability to tap into the social consciousness of the eras in which he worked (Roberts 1993). During the 1930s, this would be a preoccupation with modes of urban criminality such as organised crime syndicates, the underworld, gangland executions and gangsterism.

There is little doubt that the period in which the comics were produced had a direct impact on their themes and subjects, particularly since much of the subject matter was taken directly from actual news events. One of the attractions of the crime comics of the 1930s and 1940s was their putative veracity, with covers of comic books often carrying guarantees of ‘all true crime stories’ or ‘all-true detective cases.’ Yet as urban art forms with a genealogy stretching back to the nineteenth century, comic strips were profoundly shaped by the forces of modernity.

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7 For an anthology of essays on the history of censorship of comics, see (Lent 1999).
3.3 Tabloid journalism and the modern voice

In June 1919, the tabloid press was released en masse upon a very receptive American public.\(^8\) Approximately half the size of their broadsheet predecessors, the tabloids delighted in sensationalised reportage of murder, robbery, adultery, riots and a variety of other heinous crimes and metropolitan atrocities. There are several thematic connections between the tabloid press, comic strips, pulp fiction, film noir and other modernist literary and visual art forms. All focus upon urban misdeeds, misadventures and criminality, and as such highlight the inherent volatility of living in the modern city. All use a similar voice to convey these themes, a voice that could be described (as does Tracey in relation to the cinema of Samuel Fuller) as possessing a ‘tabloid poetics’ (Tracey 1999, p. 160).\(^9\) This voice is invariably hardboiled, tough and dependent upon shock.

Like other fora in which an urban voice was developed, the tabloid press also had nineteenth century precedents. In 1833, the American penny press was established when Benjamin Day purchased the New York Sun. With the technological advances of iron-cast and steam-powered machinery, production was cheap and rapid. The penny press (thus named due to its affordable cost—a penny) enabled mass dissemination of the ‘dailies,’ which were volubly hawked on street corners and enthusiastically consumed by a public thirsty for the grotesque. Similar publications flourished shortly thereafter, including The New York Tribune in 1841. Somewhat more moralistic and serious in tone (Marx was their London correspondent), The New York Tribune nonetheless delighted in portraying urban spectacle. In 1888, for instance, it gleefully reported on the ‘mutilated bodies’ of the Jack the Ripper victims (The New York Tribune, 3 October 1888, n.p.). As Israel notes, both The New York Sun and The New York Tribune took ‘the urban sketch—the man-about-town exposés, the true tales of low-life, the unknown lone girl included—and [made] it into a regular

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\(^8\) The tabloid format had actually made a brief, initial appearance in New York on 1 January, 1901, when Pulitzer handed over his New York publication World for one day to newly arrived Englishman, Alfred Harmsworth, to do whatever he pleased with the paper, given that Harmsworth’s ‘tabloid’ Daily Mirror was hugely successful in England. World thus came out for one day in half the size. It was not until 1919, however, that this format gained widespread usage in America, after the publishers of the Chicago Tribune unleashed the first Illustrated Daily News (quickly shortened to the Daily News) onto a very enthusiastic New York public (Waugh 1947). For the development of the tabloid, see also (Squiers 1998).

\(^9\) Samuel Fuller’s films include Pickup on South Street (1953), The Crimson Kimono (1959), Underworld USA (1960) and The Naked Kiss (1964).
news beat’ (Israel 2003, p. 63). The tabloids brought daily news of urban atrocities, fuelling a modernist morbid fascination with the grotesque. This new sensibility was denounced by Baudelaire, who in the 1860s wrote of the ‘most frightful traces of human perversity’ found on every line of the daily newspapers. Baudelaire abhorred this state of affairs, which he pejoratively and colourfully describes as ‘an orgy of universal atrocity’ (cited in Sontag 2003, p. 107).

Tellingly, many writers involved in pulp fiction and film noir had journalistic backgrounds. Prior to embarking upon his Hollywood career in 1935, Daniel Mainwaring (who penned both the screenplay for Out of the Past and the original novel on which it was based, Build My Gallows High) was a crime reporter for the Los Angeles Examiner (Flinn 1973b). Samuel Fuller held the same post on the Evening Graphic from 1929 to 1931, a newspaper that sensationalised the more sordid aspects of urban life (gangland executions, mobster networks and so forth). Before arriving at Paramount in 1931, Cain worked as a journalist at The New Yorker (Brunette & Peary 1976). In 1962, social commentator Edmund Wilson declared Cain to be the leader of a group of tough Californian Hemingway-type writers whom Wilson termed ‘the boys in the backroom’ or the ‘poets of the tabloid murder’ (cited in Luhr 1982, p. 21). Alexander Mackendrick’s The Sweet Smell of Success (1957, USA), a later film noir, is interesting to consider in terms of a tabloid voice, since the milieu it depicts is the corrupt world of New York newspaper columnists whose very livelihood is dependent upon using such ‘cityspeak.’ Mackendrick’s film thus renders explicit the connection between film noir and the world of tabloid reportage.

On a more general level, the tabloid press held great appeal to most hardboiled writers and noir directors, many of whom were fascinated with the sordid crimes reported therein. Billy Wilder was apparently intrigued with sensational media reportage of crimes, including the 1927 Snyder-Gray case upon which Cain’s novel Double Indemnity was based. Wilder also claimed to be familiar with many criminal cases reported in the German press, and had a particular interest in Victorian crimes (Zolotow 1987; Phillips 2000). In personal correspondence, Raymond Chandler discusses at length the ‘Maybrick case,’ a notorious fin-de-siècle murder that had received extensive media coverage. Florence Maybrick (née Chandler) was convicted in 1889 of poisoning her husband whilst conducting an affair with another man. Her sentence was commuted to penal servitude for life and she was released in 1904. Pondering the details of the unsolved case, Chandler even formulated a list of ‘pros
and cons’ in an attempt to ascertain the innocence or guilt of the accused party, concluding that he was ‘pretty well convinced the dame was guilty’ (Chandler 1997a, p. 192). Chandler’s interest in the Maybrick case was partly motivated by the fact that the accused had the same name as his mother (Florence Chandler), although there was no known genealogical connection between the two women. Coincidentally, however, the Maybrick tale has a great deal in common with the plot of *Double Indemnity*, suggesting a more overarching fascination on Chandler’s part with crimes of passion, marital betrayal and infidelity. Such themes recurred in pulp fiction, film noir and the tabloid press alike, indicating that crime in the modern world had infiltrated previously sanctified havens such as the family home.

The tabloid press was often *thematically* incorporated into pulp fiction, and a direct allusion to the sensationalist media can be found in the opening paragraph of Cain’s *Double Indemnity*:

> I drove out to Glendale to put three new truck drivers on a brewery company bond, and then I remembered this renewal over in Hollywoodland. I decided to run over there. That was how I came to this House of Death that you’ve been reading about in the papers. It didn’t look like a House of Death when I saw it. It was just a Spanish house, like all the rest of them in California, with white walls, red tile roof, and a patio out to one side (Cain 2002, p. 1).

At the outset of the novel, Cain thus subtly implicates his reader in a modern, urban milieu. His use of second person—‘That was how I came to this House of Death that you’ve been reading about in the papers’—not only lends a verisimilitude to the narrative, but it also insinuates that the reader of pulp fiction would also be an avid consumer of the tabloid press, and one, moreover, who would be enamored of its themes of murder, betrayal and deceit. Similarly, in Wilder’s filmic adaptation of *Double Indemnity*, Neff talks about how the story of Dietrichson’s murder ‘broke in the papers,’ with the use of the term ‘broke’ suggesting a Benjaminian notion of shock and rupture, but also implying an audience who would jubilantly (yet vicariously) embrace such dissonance.

In conclusion, the emergence of a number of popular literary and visual art forms—most notably pulp fiction, comic strips, the penny press and the tabloids—was a response to modernity. These media gained a foothold in the collective consciousness in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and were to have a profound
influence on a twentieth century flânerie. Moreover, they all contributed to the consolidation, validation and celebration of a modern, hardboiled voice.
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