



# FRANZ KAFKA

## NOIR'S ORPHANED FATHER

*Tracing the Roots of Modern Dread*

By Marc Svetov  
Special to the *Sentinel*

*Rain, fast drive (20 min.), perspective of a basement apartment, driver calls out the names of the invisible sights, the tires hiss on the asphalt like the apparatus in the cinematograph, the most distinct thing: the uncurtained windows of the Four Seasons, the reflection of the streetlights in the asphalt as in a river.* —Diary, 1911

Franz Kafka had recently seen *The White Slave Girl* (1911) when he wrote the above in his diary, and what he describes, or rather fantasizes, is a mixing together of images from the movie with what he was seeing and hearing at that moment in the real world. All in all, quite a film noir tableau.

During his early years in Prague, Kafka was an avid filmgoer. His spirit—frail, rapturous, all-consuming—feasted even on the stills displayed in the cinema marquees. He found the pictures promoting *The Other* (1913), with Albert Bassermann, particularly arresting. He later lamented that what he'd imagined from the stills was far more interesting than the film turned out to be.

*The Other* and another movie of that same year, *The Student of Prague* (with Paul Wegener), were the initial trumpet blasts of Expressionist cinema, leading to *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919) and *The Golem* (1920). World War I was about to begin, an old world was breaking up, and contemporary writers, artists, filmmakers, and composers—Arnold Schoenberg, Anton Webern, Alban Berg—were active in Berlin, Vienna, and Prague, the preeminent centers of Modernism in *Mittleeuropa*. Here was a novel passion, a wildness, a nervousness, a cultivation of emotions bordering on paranoia—a new mode of expression bursting from the German-speaking lands. This was Kafka's idiom and his milieu.

In his book *Kafka Goes to the Movies*, the film historian Hanns Zischler takes note of each film-related entry Kafka made in his diary and letters. Kafka enthused over the silent features *The Heartbreaker* (1913) and *The Lesson of the Abyss* (1913) as well as the short film *Strange Insects* (1912).

Some scholars have commented that Kafka's fictional narratives changed radically in 1911–12 with his exposure to Yiddish theater and to film. To me it is obvious how cinematic Kafka's fiction often is. It clearly contains numerous silent film-inspired elements, drawing specifically from the genres of horror, fantasy, and crime. Whatever its underlying philosophical or religious meanings, Kafka's fiction is not rhetorical or essayistic. His images are clear. *The Cares of a Family Man* and *The Bucket Rider* recall comic film fantasies. *A Fratricide* could be the initial scene pulling you into an intense crime film. *The Trial* and *In the Penal Colony* tell gruesome, realistic stories, ripe for filming, about the judicial system.



Kafka, the young movie devotee; (insets) Anthony Perkins in Orson Welles's screen version of *The Trial* (above) and Jeremy Irons portraying the writer in Steven Soderbergh's 1991 fantasy-bio *Kafka*.



*A Country Doctor* has all the screenplay elements of a horror movie. *The Metamorphosis* does not draw on mythology, but rather renders a precise, almost scientific portrayal of the unfortunate Gregor Samsa transformed into a giant cockroach. Can we imagine *The Fly* (1958) without Kafka's tale?

*Somebody must have been telling lies about Josef K., for without having done anything wrong, he was arrested one fine morning.* —The Trial

Kafka's *The Trial* was filmed by Orson Welles in 1962. Anthony Perkins is Josef K., and Welles plays Hastler the Advocate. Akim Tamiroff is Bloch, the supplicant who lives in a closetlike room in Hastler's sprawling, messy apartment. Romy Schneider is the lascivious, Janus-faced Leni, Hastler's servant girl.

Welles's film noir is a fine adaptation of Kafka to modern circumstances. Shooting in Europe on a shoestring, Welles employed an Expressionist lens: the state-built, low-rent high rises are bathed in shadow and run-down anonymity, sinuously twisting in a maelstrom of movement. During the first half of the film, bizarre angles dominate. In the interiors we often seem to be looking up at the protagonists from the floor.

In the scene where Josef K. finds himself among the guilty people waiting in the court hallways, Expressionist cinema is perfectly recaptured. Every one of them has been condemned, although none know why. The lighting, the distorted camera angles, the vulnerability of the people who all are raptly, timidly staring at Anthony Perkins—these eerie depictions of hopelessness reflect Josef K.'s inescapable, unnamed doom. The Nazi death camps had occurred in the interim, of course, but it is really pure Kafka, whom we might term a seer. The author, had he lived that long, would probably have been among the Holocaust's victims.

Perkins is an inspired choice to play Josef K. He exhibits a nervous incomprehension as to why the court exists and the extent of its power. He is sassy, more so than Kafka's original Josef K., whose passive *Ausgeliefertsein*—the sense that one has been cast out, delivered into the hands of something frightening, absurd, even obscene, without a way out—must be difficult for American filmmakers or audiences to understand. Perkins's Josef K. acts a little bit more American: He fights back, defends himself as though he has rights, although his efforts ultimately amount to little.

In the final scene of the book, as Josef K.'s vision fades, Kafka describes the two executioners, their faces pressed cheek to cheek as they slowly twist a knife through their victim's heart. A light goes in a window in the apartment complex nearby, and the narrator asks, "Was it perhaps help?" In Welles's version, the executioners throw a small bomb into the gravelike crater in the open field where Josef K. lays. Perhaps Welles was trying to make a political point, but the explosion is too pat, and it fizzles out dead. Kafka, a professional victim, knew how to keep twisting the knife.

*Meanwhile, the sight of the sharply etched patches of light and shadow on the cobblestone streets ...* —Diary, 1911

The sense that things are not as they should be—that every seeming certainty, the very foundation of life, is unstable—pervades Kafka's writing. What we today call *Kafkaesque* is also an integral attribute of film noir. It is the existential dilemma of being trapped (*You Only Live Once* [1937], *Where the Sidewalk Ends* [1950], *Detour* [1945]) whether or not the predicament is self-inflicted. Of being found guilty and condemned (*The Wrong Man* [1956], *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* [1956], *Framed* [1947]) without recourse to justice or appeal. Of fighting overpowering, unknown forces (*D.O.A.* [1950], *The Dark Corner* [1946]) without

knowing what happened or why.

The list continues. In *The Big Clock* (1948), Ray Milland is forced to direct a criminal investigation against himself. *My Name is Julia Ross* (1945) and *The Secret Fury* (1950) utilize a sanitized version of Kafka's queasy theme of metamorphosis; their main characters wake up to find they are different people. And in *Nightmare Alley* (1947), a human being morphs grandiloquently into something grotesquely dehumanized.

Consider as well *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962) and *The Killers* (1946), where lurking, unknowable forces materialize as relentless, avenging angels. One might see *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932) as evoking both *The Metamorphosis*



**The Manchurian Candidate:**  
Is it noir? Is it Kafkaesque?

and *In the Penal Colony*; the sense of pitiless entrapment conveyed by Paul Muni recalls the emotions of Gregor Samsa, his family, the servant, and the relationships among them. Fear, lack of empathy, and cruelty: All of these are shadowy building blocks of film noir.

Kafka's descriptions of claustrophobic interiors, threatening buildings, and dramatic tableaux set in forlorn architecture convey a kind of gestural imagery for the soul. *The Castle*, with its hostile officials, dark roads, interminable hallways, sinister inns, and sly, lying villagers, echoes 20 years later in film noir's nocturnal city districts, bullying cops, menacing architecture, and cynical clerks in seedy hotels. Kafka's fiction outlined many of noir's most basic premises, in which protagonists succumb forcibly to emotional drift, trapped in a paranoid, horrifying distortion of everyday life.



## SENTINEL INTERVIEW

### SHINING MORE LIGHT ON THE DARK SIDE OF THE SCREEN

*Foster Hirsch Updates His Pioneering Classic*

by Donald Malcolm  
*Sentinel* Editor in Chief

JUST IN TIME for the Christmas wish list, Foster Hirsch has updated his groundbreaking *Film Noir: The Dark Side Of The Screen*, originally published in 1981. Da Capo Books has reissued it with a 16-page afterword, where Hirsch brings his incisive enthusiasm to bear on a host of films "reclaimed" over the past quarter-century.

**Sentinel:** A new edition of your book is timely and most welcome. This question doubles as a pop quiz for our favorite professor: How many "new" noirs did you see while preparing the new afterword, and—without checking your notes!—how many did you actually write about?

**Hirsch:** I must have looked at nearly 40 titles that I had not seen before or had not seen since the 1950s. I tried to mention most of them, even in passing, but I didn't have space to include them all. I should add that on my recent "journey into noir" I was helped by the kindness of a number of strangers—collectors eager to spread the word about their own favorites and to send along copies of rare films. There is indeed a community of noir aficionados passionately devoted to some of the sneakiest, slyest, most ornery and subversive films ever made in America.

**Sentinel:** The number of new titles you cover in the afterword is exactly 50! Did you discover anything new about the noir canon as a result of your immersion in these lesser-known films? Did any of the earlier precepts require rethinking?

**Hirsch:** Seeing so many new "lesser-known" films—most of which turned out to be surprisingly skillful—made me feel the need to redefine the boundaries of the noir "canon." Many of the films I cite should be granted full citizenship, shown at festivals, and given DVD releases with special features celebrating their creators. Alongside films like *Night and the City* (1950), *Double Indemnity* (1944), *Scarlet Street* (1945), and *Out of the Past* (1947) we need to place such relatively obscure entries as *Highway 301* (1950), *Tomorrow Is Another Day* (1951), *Storm Warning* (1951), *The Burglar* (1957), *The Prowler* (1951), and *Highway Dagnet* (1954)—ripe descents into noir whirlpools that merit our attention.

I didn't feel the need to correct any of my initial guiding precepts, but I found that I responded more favorably to noirs shot on location than I had originally, when the sheen of the studio had me under its spell. I found that the real streets of Los Angeles and San Francisco, for instance, and the vistas of the California desert were visually intoxicating. "Desert noir" is very sexy!

**Sentinel:** Most of films you covered were released in the 1950s, when noir was on the

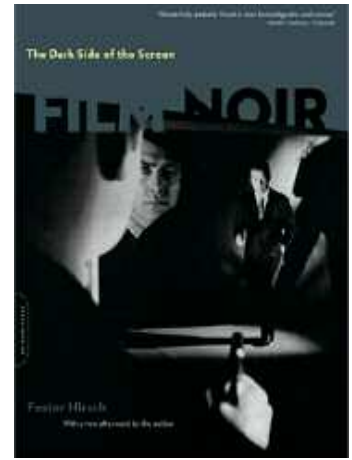
wane as a result of changed social conditions, the advent of television, technical innovations such as Cinemascope, et cetera.

**Hirsch:** I've always been skeptical about reports of the death of noir, and my recent research has convinced me that noir was *not* on the wane in the 1950s. On the contrary, it flourished in ways that are possible only when a genre has already established a set of motifs that new entries can speak to, challenge, spin variations on, and overturn. The 1950s noirs introduce a new web of social and psychological maladjustments, and they consolidate a new look: the location photography that sustains a potent atmosphere of dread and paranoia.

**Sentinel:** Two previously obscure auteurs who emerged in the 1950s clearly impressed you greatly. Let's talk about each of them. First: director Hubert Cornfield.

**Hirsch:** I find Cornfield an especially sympathetic figure. I met him from time to time for lunch at Musso's in Hollywood. He felt he had been forgotten, as indeed he had: He had to support himself by painting houses. He's gone now and so won't be able to savor the rediscovery and appreciation that are certain to come his way.

Cornfield made two authentic noir masterpieces: *Plunder Road* (1957) and *The 3rd Voice* (1960) (the latter was the surprise hit of NOIR CITY 6). These are truly dipped-in-noir suspense films—what the French call *cinema maudit*—in which Cornfield creates fallen worlds without any possibility of redemption. Banishing sentimentality altogether, he tells truly dark stories certain to warm the cold hearts of true noir fans.



**Sentinel:** Possibly more surprising was the evolution of producer-writer-director Andrew L. Stone from musicals and comedies in the 1940s into a virtual one-man noir factory in the 1950s. He emerges seemingly full-blown with *Highway 301* in 1950 and reels off a half-dozen top-notch independently produced noirs over the course of the decade. And they are all distinct from one another. How would you characterize his work, and how do you rank him in the pantheon of noir auteurs?

**Hirsch:** Stone is proof that noir's language can lift a director to an unexpected level of accomplishment. On either side of Stone's noirs are ephemeral comedies and musicals and antediluvian, stone-age entertainments like *Song of Norway* (1970). Yet in the 1950s his record in making a certain kind of taut, lean suspense film really was unsurpassed.

His dialogue, story sense, and characterization are all strictly B in nature—no frills, not "important"—yet his noirs achieve an astonishing urgency. They are exceptionally efficient mechanisms for generating and maintaining suspense. I recently screened *Julie*, Stone's 1956 thriller starring a terrific non-singing Doris Day, at a fuddy-duddy private club in New York, and that sedate audience ate it up, fully embracing it as the delicious guilty pleasure it is. It is my goal to get Stone's noirs in DVD versions that properly display the distinct beauty of his semidocumentary on-location shooting

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The 1950s films of Andrew L. Stone, such as *Highway 301* (above, featuring Virginia Grey and Steve Cochran) get a fresh assessment in Hirsch's revised tome