

Beyond the Fedora, Part One**NOIR and the
GOTHIC**By Marc Svetov
Special to the *Sentinel*

The “Gothic noir” is an interesting variant on the genre: set in the past, usually in Victorian England or America, in the American Civil War (*The Tall Target* [1951]), or even in revolutionary France (*Reign of Terror* [1949]). There are overlaps in cameramen (John Alton, Lucien Ballard) and directors (Robert Siodmak, Edgar G. Ulmer, Anthony Mann), but there is a certain divergence in casting. One rarely sees the likes of George Brent, Charles Boyer, Joan Fontaine, or Boris Karloff in what we usually consider the “classic” noirs of the same era.

The settings of these films also pull them out of the typical noir ambience: the modern (1940s–50s) city and its gallery of city characters. The Gothic film noirs bear a great similarity to the modern noirs in lighting, camerawork (though not every Gothic noir is set and shot in an Expressionist manner), direction, audience, and audience expectations, but the art direction is more ornate, and the dangerous situations are more extreme. Murderers in such films (*The Lodger* [1944], *The Suspect* [1944], *Gaslight* [1944], *Hangover Square* [1945], *Experiment Perilous* [1944], *Bluebeard* [1944], *The Body Snatcher* [1945], *The Spiral Staircase* [1945], *Bedlam* [1946], *Ivy* [1947]) are far more likely to be psychopaths or serial killers.

The Gothic noir commenced with *Among the Living* (1941). *Dark Waters* (1944) continued it, beautifully, in a modern setting that is still unmistakably Gothic. The majority of these period films were tightly clustered around 1944–48—so much so that the genre’s reappearance in 1955 with *Night of the Hunter* was greeted with bewilderment. By the 1950s, *Gothic* had become virtually interchangeable with *horror*—a linkage it temporarily escaped in 1940, when Alfred Hitchcock brought the “old dark house” out into the light of day in *Rebecca*.

But are the Gothic films, largely contemporaneous with the classics of “dark cinema,” actually film noir? Is noir defined by its visuals? Or by its themes, characters, and the insurmountable dilemmas those characters face? There are no clear rules. To draw a dividing line between *menace* and *murder* doesn’t help much: Dead bodies proliferate on-screen and, in the 1940s, did not even guarantee that the film in question was a dark drama. The “woman in distress” is likewise too vague a qualifier. Peril is not unique to noir.

A more actively engaged female protagonist, one seeking some kind of agency or control (even in a manner that is not exactly straightforward), would be more in keeping with noir as we commonly define it. The Gothic film *So Evil My Love* (1948), directed by Lewis Allen and starring Ray Milland, Ann Todd, Geraldine Fitzgerald, and Leo G. Carroll, seems to fit the mold. From the beginning it is clear that Milland and Todd

(especially Todd) were once capable of being better people, but their love is a trap, leading them to do evil. The visual style of the film is not especially noirish; there are no deep shadows, no expressionistic lighting and camera effects. The characters and the doomed situation, however, are *definitely* noir.

The viewer realizes quite early on that things cannot go right between Milland and Todd and that, tragically, Todd’s corruption is too bright, almost giddy, to lead to anything other than doom. As the story begins she is on a ship sailing back to England, recently widowed, circa 1890. She meets Milland, a painter who refuses to forge artworks for monetary gain but is otherwise a “charming criminal,” a con man and a murderer sought by the police. He taps into something evil within her.

The two schemers bring evil to others in the name of their love as it unfolds in all its murderous glory. Todd’s web-spinning machinations entangle Geraldine Fitzgerald—an unhappy, benumbed, alcoholic kept wife who becomes Todd’s bosom friend as well as her employer. Fitzgerald’s husband is

later blackmailed and murdered. At first one would never have suspected that Todd was so envious, so passionate to get what she thinks is coming to her, so ruthless in exploiting Fitzgerald’s obvious weaknesses. But it’s as if Milland has slipped her a magic potion, stoking her eyes with an odd fire that justifies, even exalts in, the path of deception and murder. It is remarkable how easily Todd is corrupted and eventually procures the poisonous, fatal drink.

Seldom outside of *Macbeth* has there been such a vicious couple, so corrupt in their emotions, so vile in their actions . . . and, of course, so doomed. *So Evil My Love* recalls *Double Indemnity* (1944) and its depiction of the corruption of the soul. Both films begin with two people falling into some kind of love. One thinks, as well, of Claire Trevor and Lawrence Tierney’s vengeful “hopscoth love” in *Born to Kill* (1947). But there is a vital difference: Milland is no scheming psychopath like Tierney, nor is Ann Todd a coldly scheming co-conspirator like Barbara Stanwyck.

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Our two lovers in *So Evil My Love* are simply two extremely cold people, and yet—here is the paradox, the swirling motion of noir at work—they both seem forgivable at times, appearing in fleeting fits and starts to want to pull away from what they are doing.

Todd senses that she is under a thrilling but fatal spell, and we see her (in a scene midway through the film) suddenly become sick with herself and make a futile attempt to escape. Instead, however, she goes through with the murderous plan, and our sympathies shift to Fitzgerald, who ends up framed for her husband’s death.

In the spectacular, cathartic ending, it is as if Todd finally decides to kill her own corruption and be redeemed. The fourth, pivotal protagonist in the film is Leo G. Carroll as Jarvis. At first we don’t realize who he is; we only see him watching Milland, and later Todd, as they go about their various doings. Eventually we learn he is a private detective who had been hired by the prospective murder victim—a class-conscious, aristocratic prig who is better off dead (although that is only implied). The detective’s character symbolizes human conscience but he is no sentimental fool. He has seen the depths to which human beings can sink. He tells Todd how much he’d wanted to see the face of the real perpetrator—she who almost got away with murder and would have let another woman hang for the deed.

A character personifying the watchful yet passive conscience is a familiar device from Victorian fiction, where an ounce of posthumous revenge seemingly outweighs a pound of interventionist prevention. Characters from modern noirs who serve a similar function include Edward G. Robinson, investigator and moral compass, in *Double Indemnity* and Walter Slezak, philosophically resigned detective, in *Born to Kill*. The Gothic undercurrent in these films might be understood as a remnant of the Victorian age playing itself out in modern, mid-1940s dress. It would soon disappear into a starker and more radically relativistic mental landscape.



Ray Milland as Mark Bellis and Ann Todd as Olivia Harwood in *So Evil, My Love* (1948), a Paramount production directed by Lewis Allen, based on the novel by Joseph Shearing, who also wrote *The Crime of Laura Saurelle*, the basis for the 20th Century-Fox “Gothic noir” *Moss Rose* (1948).

BEYOND THE FEDORA

GOTHIC NOIR

Second of Two Parts

By Marc Svetov

Special to the *Sentinel*

The Gothic noir was an established style or sub-genre in Hollywood in the 1940s, represented by costume films ranging from modest Val Lewton RKO productions (*The Body Snatcher* [1945], *Bedlam* [1946]) to top-shelf studio products (*Gaslight* [1944], *Hangover Square* [1945]). But can we truly call them film noirs, considering that their settings and costumes were mainly derived from the past, be it Edwardian/Victorian England, America during the Civil War or the early 1900s, or France in the early 1790s? Others were contemporary but set in an environment coded as Gothic, such as the Deep South. Must noir be set in 1940s–50s urban America to deserve the label? The scholars are still arguing. (It's their job!)

Many "period" films definitely found themselves transported into a darker realm in the 1940s as noir coalesced as a form of (as yet unnamed) visual discourse. It was a short-lived phenomenon, but it had potent appeal for audiences who might have been disconcerted by urban squalor but were ready to be seduced by the undercurrents of psychological torment running through crime thrillers.

One of the most chilling portraits of evil hidden behind a pretty face and smooth manners was *Ivy* (1947), directed by Sam Wood and featuring Joan Fontaine in the title role. Ivy is a socially ambitious, ruthless, Edwardian-era Englishwoman who, in her view, is stuck between a rock and a hard place. Or in this case between a feckless husband (Richard Ney), who is very much in love with her, and an erstwhile lover (Patric Knowles), whom she wishes to dump in favor of the richer, more influential Miles Rushworth (Herbert Marshall). When Rushworth falls for Ivy's pulchritudinous bait, it's only a question of how far she is willing to go to ensnare this more socially elevated mate. What to do with her current lover, not to mention her devoted, if doltish, husband? Through clever acts of deceitful malevolence, Ivy manages to do away with both, *nearly* gaining her prize.

The Lodger (1944), by émigré director John Brahm, is often classified as a horror film. It is set in Victorian-era London during the reign of the most legendary of all serial killers, Jack the Ripper. For a costume drama it is a convincing evocation of the noir style, greatly elevated by Laird Cregar's performance in the title role. As in so many horror movies, the protagonist is a helpless, pathetic monster. But Mr. Slade (or Jack the Ripper) is also all too human. Cregar's sensitive acting inspires pity—he is so obviously shy, soft-spoken, and wounded, caught up in an incestuous love for his dead brother. Slade's homosexuality is strongly inferred. He carries with him a fetishized portrait of his brother, a painter who died of syphilis contracted from an anonymous woman. His deranged

rationalizations compel him to avenge the "murder" of his brother through even more murderous misdeeds. Slade must kill women, again and again. The wheel must turn, even as Slade himself hangs from it, tortured.

Ann Todd seemed to specialize in period roles that prefigured a modern type of inner conflict. As noted in the first installment of this series, she is literally cut in two between duty and lust in *So Evil My Love* (1948). Two years later, in *Madeleine* (1950), a "wedding gift" project with her husband, director David Lean (which ironically hastened the end of their union), she is a Victorian-era woman tormented by another irresolvable dilemma: marriage to a

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socially acceptable dullard (Norman Wooland) or a passionate, clandestine, potentially scandalous affair with a suave but questionable Frenchman (Ivan Desny). *Madeleine's* family pressures her to marry, while her lover demands she renounce her vows. Suddenly, her lover is found dead in the woods. An autopsy indicates poisoning. A letter between the two surfaces, making public their affair. Worse, there is testimony indicating that *Madeleine* purchased the very poison that caused her lover's death. *Madeleine* is a Gothic noir due largely to the cinematography of Guy Green, who deploys the most ominous camera angles and deep-furrowed shadowing possible, particularly as the tension escalates. The moral squalor of *Madeleine's* situation is foregrounded by her chthonic lodgings, which are established early and go through several sinister iterations. She lives like a worm rooting in a rotted garden.

John Sturges's *The Sign of the Ram* (1948) was also set in the present day. It borrows the conceits of Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940) but pushes them further. The physical deformity of Susan Peters steadily translates into moral rot and psychological torture. Peters, who in real life was paralyzed in a freak hunting accident, plays up a storm (literally) from her wheelchair. It is a chilling, squirm-inducing performance.

Other examples of "modern" Gothic noir surfaced in the early 1950s with several movies that abandoned big-city settings for the lure of more



GOTHIC NOIRS OF THE CLASSIC ERA

Among the Living (Paramount, 1941)*Gaslight* (MGM, 1944)*The Suspect* (Universal, 1944)*Experiment Perilous* (RKO, 1944)*Bluebeard* (PRC, 1944)*Dark Waters* (United Artists, 1944)*The Lodger* (Fox, 1944)*The Spiral Staircase* (RKO, 1945) (above)*The Body Snatcher* (RKO, 1945)*Hangover Square* (Fox, 1945)*The Verdict* (Warner Bros., 1946)*Bedlam* (RKO, 1946)*Moss Rose* (Fox, 1947)*Ivy* (Universal, 1947)*Woman in White* (Warner Bros., 1948)*So Evil My Love* (Paramount, 1948)*Reign of Terror* (MGM, 1949)*The Tall Target* (MGM, 1951)

unique and remote locations. In King Vidor's *Ruby Gentry* (1952), Jennifer Jones turns sex appeal into something as clammily overwrought as the bayou setting in which she scandalously frolics. *My Cousin Rachel* (1952) transplants the femme fatale (played with low-key gusto by Olivia de Havilland) to a brooding variation of *Manderley* and provides a great opportunity for Richard Burton to enact the Gothic version of a noir hero: a man tortured by both love and suspicion.

The subgenre waned in the 1950s as the middle-class mindset pervaded American culture, leaving little room for period stories not concerned with the Old West or World War II. But two iconoclastic classics were still to come: *The Night of the Hunter* (1955), directed by Charles Laughton, and the genre's great culmination, *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962).

The Night of the Hunter is actually *sui generis*. Preacher Harry Powell (Robert Mitchum) is the hypocritical epitome of evil, sexually impotent, a killer of widows, and a twisted exponent of fundamentalist religion. This cinematic allegory is also a very literary film, with the flight of the two threatened children echoing Huck Finn's trip down the great Mississippi.



Laird Cregar as Mr. Slade in *The Lodger*

It is reminiscent of *Genesis* as well, specifically Moses drifting among the reeds of the Nile. It was shot by Stanley Cortez, who combined contrasts of heavy darkness and searing light with odd camera angles. The chiaroscuro visuals hark back to earlier film noirs; by the 1950s this approach was mostly out of style. It is Germanic Expressionism in the service of Southern Gothic.

"Don't he never sleep?" the boy asks as Powell, on horseback and wearing his characteristic preacher's hat, is silhouetted on the horizon like the Devil. The children must escape from this venal, murderous preacher. Near the end, the camera focuses on an owl in the woods roosting on a branch. Slowly, we realize the owl is looking for prey; it peers intently down at a lone rabbit. We hear the sound of flapping wings and, as the camera pulls away, the rabbit's death cry. The camera lingers on the face of Lillian Gish, who is determined to protect the youngsters. "It's a hard world for little things," she remarks.

Robert Aldrich's *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* is a macabre portrayal of sibling hate and jealousy. Blanche Hudson (Joan Crawford) is the victim, her sister Baby Jane (Bette Davis) the tormenter. Their large, lonely house is located in the Los Angeles suburbs, but in it we see vicious and fearsome emotions played out according to the Grand Guignol handbook, Gothic par excellence. Is this noir? A hybrid of grotesque, Gothic, and thriller, with plentiful California sun and a lunatic killer, it is more in the fashion of noir circa 1950s than the 1940s. And the noir elements are subsumed by the chilling outrageousness of the story. Her whole life wasted in guilt, abhorrence, and envy, Jane has become a murderess to boot. At the film's close, she dances like the little vaudeville stage girl she once was, twirling around on the beach surrounded by Southern California teenagers and a couple of policemen as her sister, wrapped in a blanket, lays dying nearby. It's reminiscent of Gloria Swanson's gloriously deluded entrance/exit in *Sunset Blvd.* (1950).

Aldrich's final Gothic work, *Hush . . . Hush*, *Sweet Charlotte* (1964), is definitely closer to horror than noir—in fact, it is a parody of Gothic noir. The 1970s saw a few films that faintly echoed Gothic noir, such as *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), *Carrie* (1976), and *Halloween* (1978), but by then the style had almost entirely drained away. They may be set in a modern if unmistakably Gothic America, but any noir elements have been transformed into pure, unadulterated horror. ■

GOTHIC MEETS GANGSTER: *REIGN OF TERROR*

REIGN OF TERROR aka *The Black Book* (1949) features a dazzling noir visual style. From the camerawork and lighting (by John Alton) to the sets (which look like something from a 1920s Ufa production), the proceedings are utterly Expressionistic, full of bizarre angles, deep penumbra, flashes of blazing light, and close-ups suddenly filling the screen. Alton's sleight-of-camera is also adept at camouflaging the low-budget production's lack of any genuine scenery.

Deep shadows reign wherever the camera peers: across walls, down alleyways, around corners. Interiors are half-lit. Some scenes grow so dark they become impenetrable. Moving forms later turn into recognizable people. A candle flickers on a wall. Two men struggle in silhouette. Low angles dominate; the ceilings of the rooms seem asphyxiating. Extreme close-ups of unnatural countenances, frighteningly lit, are made more eerie through the use of wider-angle lenses. Claustrophobia is seldom so palpable.

Director Anthony Mann pitches the viewer into an urban hell usually associated with modern times. Here, Paris of the 1790s is populated with types who would be just as much at home in noir's 20th-century big cities: newspaper hawkers-cum-informants, revolutionary Jacobin gunsels, and all manner of street-level ruffraff. Arnold Moss plays Paris police chief Fouché. Ambitious and corrupt, he is straight from the noir repertoire of dirty cops, only several degrees more cynical and immoral—a distant Continental cousin, perhaps, of Emile Meyer in *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957). Memorable are the small tics of the dangerous fanatic Robespierre (Richard Basehart), who refuses to shake hands with anyone—reminiscent of Richard Widmark's gang boss in *The Street with No Name* (1948), who constantly sprays decongestant up his nose, more fearful of death by illness than death by cops.

We learn early on that a Strasbourg judge named Duval, who is seen for only a moment before he is murdered, is being impersonated by

a spy named d'Aubigny (Robert Cummings). We also learn that the late Duval was a sadist. Fouché has been ordered to retrieve Duval and bring him to Paris. He has never seen the man's face. D'Aubigny finds his ruse in jeopardy, however, when an innkeeper fails to recognize him as Duval. Suspicion is heavy in the air. D'Aubigny disarms Fouché by boldly stating, "The real pleasure of my work went out with the guillotine. It's all over too fast now. Even hanging lasts but a few moments. No, Citizen Fouché, what this country needs is an elegant, slow death." They share a laugh, and Fouché is reassured that this charmer is the notoriously cruel Duval.

At the climax, Robespierre, who has declared that he follows the will of the people, discovers that those very people now want him beheaded. Still feared as an eloquent orator, he is shot in the mouth by an opponent so he cannot publicly defend himself. The gunshot seems an eerie foreshadowing of 20th-century gangland assassinations.

Owing to its visuals—sets, lighting, camerawork—the film's feeling of paranoia, of walking through a minatory dream of escalating menace, is prevalent throughout. The streets teem with the threat of violence, crowds revel in public executions and arbitrary arrests. All figures of authority are treacherously two-faced and villainous.

It may be Revolutionary France, but the politicians, henchmen, and public officials behave like modern mobsters. Robespierre is the noir prototype of the demented, sadistic gang boss—albeit in a powdered wig. What little ideology there is, is threadbare. Citizen Barras (Richard Hart) sums up the dictator's tactics: "Fear . . . divide and conquer . . . it's as old as Caesar."

—Marc Svetov

Charles McGraw, Robert Cummings, and Arlene Dahl in *Reign of Terror*

