It is revealing that a remarkable number of contemporary articles and books that take up the subject of film noir begin with a reflection on the impossibility of providing a definition. A few examples: “Impossible to define as a genre with fixed, immutable conventions or as a movement that repeats from film to film, the film noir raises a problem of definition which seems nearly impossible to resolve” (Letort 7). “It has always been easier to recognize a film noir than to define the term […] There is in fact no completely satisfactory way to organize the category; and despite scores of books and essays that have been written about it, nobody is sure whether the films in question constitute a period, a genre, a style, or simply a [phenomenon]” (Naremore 9). “What is film noir? This is perhaps the question with which to begin (indeed, it is the question with which every film noir class in every undergraduate Film Studies course in every university will begin); however, I will not be offering a single—final? authoritative? definitive?—answer: an urge clearly demonstrated, for example, by William Park’s recent work, which bears the very title, What is Film Noir?” (Tyrer 22).

The motivating antagonism at the heart of film noir studies can be illuminated through two examples. On the one hand, Winston Wheeler Dixon advocates for what is an essentially thematic approach to the discourse, seeking out what he calls “the true message of noir; that today is horrible, and tomorrow will be worse; that hope is an...
illusion” (4). His argument, which squares with James Naremore’s More Than Night (2008), among others, expands the territory of the noir beyond its conventional geographic and temporal confines. For Dixon, the noir is a label to be affixed to any film that exhibits a particular brand of nihilist urbanity. On the other hand, Paul Schrader’s classic text, “Notes on Film Noir,” makes the claim that films noir were, generally, “Hollywood films of the Forties and early Fifties which portrayed the dark, slick city streets, crime and corruption” (8). Discursively, the noir tends to be typified by adherence to one or the other model of noirdom. Critical consensus sources the term to Nino Frank’s “Un nouveau genre ‘policier: L’aventure criminelle,” first published in August of 1946⁴, wherein the noir is not so much defined as outlined. Contrast with the rote detective film, Frank establishes the noir as misogynist, fragmented, and character-driven, referring to Double Indemnity (1944), The Maltese Falcon (1941), Laura (1944), and Murder, My Sweet (1944). This seminal take on a unique type of crime film then-emerging in the United States can be framed according to either model with little resistance: we can see Frank as inaugurating either a conceptual category or a historical period.

Tom Gunning (in)famously claimed in a review for Naremore’s book for Modernism/Modernity that “Film Noir may be the great achievement of film studies,” which hints at the enormity of the burden that film noir bears (Gunning). But what is the impact of the label on any particular film? What function does the term perform? How does it reconfigure, distort, or clarify? Situated at the margins of the noir discourse, and, in many ways, a microcosm of that discourse, lies My Name is Julia Ross (1945). Seen in the context of the Pacific Cinematheque’s 2018 Film Noir program,⁵ one could be forgiven for overlooking the tension between the film and its description, especially given the copy that accompanies it in the program. “B-movie stylist Joseph H. Lewis (Gun Crazy [1950], The Big Combo [1955]) made his first foray into film noir with this tense, fast-paced thriller” (Film Noir 2018). Yet for every critic calling Julia Ross a “genuine film noir,” as William Park does, there’s someone claiming that it is “really an ‘imperiled heroine’ movie on the order of The Lady Vanishes” (Park 120; Dick 156). In a 1985 piece for the Journal of Film and Video’s College Course File, designed to outline a pedagogical approach to film noir studies, Dana Polan went so far as to offer Julia Ross as an example of a film that is decidedly not noir, but which can tell us about noir by contrast. “If Noir suggests the dangers of the big city for innocent men, the gothic suggests a complementary menace within the heart of domestic life for women. One should show a film like Gaslight […] or My Name is Julia Ross and have students discuss its resemblances to, and divergences from, the narratives of Film Noir” (Polan 81).

Shown on 35mm (which made for an excellent double bill with Pushover (1954), also on 35mm), the film establishes its stakes from the opening scene, a mildly hostile encounter between a grudge-bearing maid at a boarding house and the titular Julia Ross (Nina Foch), an unemployed tenant looking for work. The maid offers to help find her a job doing similar work, but Julia refuses because, in the maid’s words, “a fine lady like [her] was trained for something better.” This exchange crystallizes Julia’s position in relation to the maid beyond simple economics; it is Julia’s refusal to ‘sink’ to the maid’s level that prompts her to follow up on a new employment agency ad in the paper. It is this refusal that sends her, blindly, into a position as a live-in caretaker at an old woman’s house. And it is this refusal that leads to her waking up in the mansion of a maniac, who insists along with his mother that Julia is, in fact, Marion Hughes, his bride. It is in this fashion that Julia Ross is punished for her aspirations.

My Name is Julia Ross makes an impact despite the fact that as a 65-minute drama with no major stars and a low budget, it may be a slight film. Indeed, the budget was $175,000 at a time when the average picture cost

⁴ This is not definitive, by any means, as work has been done, and is continuing to be done, to examine noir’s historical predecessors, such as in Charles O’Brien’s “Film Noir in France: Before the Liberation.”

⁵ The Pacific Cinematheque’s Film Noir series has been an annual staple of Vancouver’s culture of filmgoing since its inaugural season in 1994. Treating viewers to a variety of films noir from 1941-1961, the summer series has consistently been one of the institution’s most popular programs. Last year’s program can be found here: http://www.thecinematheque.ca/film-noir-2018
It orbits around two broad thematic concerns relating to identity. The first is death (it is, as Borde and Chaumeton say, “un film de mort”): Julia’s titular affirmation is not only an affirmation of her own identity apart from that of Mrs. Hughes, but a proclamation of her right to life. To be Marion Hughes is to already have died and to be fated for more death; to be Julia Ross is to belong among the living. This plot resolves itself with the faking of her own death, wherein Julia substitutes a dress (a signifier of her newly adopted upper-class status) for her body, intervening in her husband’s attempts to substitute her body for his wife’s. The substitutions from the body to the dress to the body again, and from her body for another’s body, lead nowhere but to death. In order for the narrative to be resolved, someone has to die.

The second thematic concern is love (“La mort?” “Non, l’amour.”): we see this in action in the curious status of the madman husband and the way his terrorizing of Marion/Julia is taken by townsfolk, medical professionals, and visitors as being born of care. What sets My Name is Julia Ross apart from films like Gaslight (1940, Dickinson or 1944, Cukor) and others that dwell on the “noir theme of unstable identity” (Hirsch 182) is that Julia is never in doubt of who she is; she never succumbs to the pressure of her environment. What she does, instead, is calculate the opportunities afforded her. The crucial sequence of her awakening is worth examining in some detail. Julia arrives in Henrique Square, late at night, with all of her belongings in tow. The camera dollies into the lion-shaped door knocker, dissolves, and we are inside the house, panning from an out-of-focus tea set (presumably the vehicle for the drugs that have ensured Julia’s slumber) to Julia’s sleeping face.
My Name is Julia Ross and I am a Recovering Film Noir

face in a medium shot as passing shadows flit across it (Fig. 2). A hand comes in from out of frame and takes up her purse, and this time we dissolve to a close up of the fire (Fig. 3). The camera dollies back from the fire to catch Mrs. Hughes’s hands as she upturns the purse, shaking it until empty.

While Mrs. Hughes obliquely discusses the destruction of all of Julia Ross’s personal items, her son, Ralph, plunges a knife into some loose fabric in the background. They have a brief expository back-and-forth, wherein they reveal some of Ralph’s unpleasant tendencies, before she returns to fling loose scraps of paper into the fireplace (Fig. 4). The shot abruptly cuts to a close up of the fire and, in the unseen gap between the two shots, Lewis has re-arranged the burning papers so as to prominently feature a photograph of Julia (Fig. 5). This scene, in which the stakes of Julia’s deepening plight are established, is bookended by two shots of the flames. The first, thanks to the dissolve from her sleeping face, superimposes Julia’s visage onto the fire; the second, thanks to the invisible hand of the director, features the same components but in a different combination. Just as the characters hint at the destruction of Julia Ross’ identity, so do the flames reinforce this proposition.

Three brief scenes of her love interest, Dennis Bruce, follow. He waits for Julia at the bench they agreed to meet at, he leaves a note for her, talks to a policeman, and, finally, interrogates their landlady. Up to this point, the majority of the transitions between scenes have been dissolves, establishing an editing rhythm of some regularity. Finally, however, the chain is broken. Just as the central motion of the plot has begun, we fade to black. This rhythmic disjunction signals our own uneasy grasp on the narrative and recalls the fade to black with which the film began. This is the film’s second beginning, the re-entry of Marion Hughes into the lives of her family. Again, Julia lies sleeping in bed, the camera tracking ever closer, as though we had merely been witnessing the unrest of a nightmare. She awakens, looks around as the surprise of an unexpected environment dawns on her. Her gaze settles on the initial ‘H,’ emblazoned on her duvet. From a point of view that appears to be Julia’s, we pan, beginning from the still-burning fireplace across

Fig. 3 | Dissolving into flames, 10:59. Columbia Pictures, 1945.

Fig. 4 | Papers in the fire, 12:02. Columbia Pictures, 1945.

Fig. 5 | The photograph becomes prominently displayed after the cut, 12:04. Columbia Pictures, 1945.
the lamps, the walls, the chairs, and the curtains, before returning to Julia’s face, revealing that the shot was never from her perspective. Rather, she is embedded within the room as opposed to being a subject motivating the camera movement. The pressures of a new, hostile domesticity encroach upon her with maddening immediacy in the form of objects, antagonistically bearing the letters ‘MH.’ (Fig. 6 -8) As we are made privy to her startled search for patterns through a series of inserts of these objects, the longer playing full shots deliver the irony that even her dressing gown is marred by the dreaded ‘MH.’ Overnight, it appears, the thin membrane between Julia Ross and Marion Hughes gives way.

A maid comes in and, in the manner of providing helpful plot details, breaks the news that the newly awakened Mrs. Hughes has a husband. Just as Julia is thrown into this maddening new scenario, called by a different name and living another’s life (or better still, another’s death), she pulls off her wedding ring in incredulity. Confused and startled by the impending approach of her mystery husband, she inexplicably returns the wedding ring to its place on her finger (Fig. 9). Rather than chalkling this up to a filmmaker’s attempt to bridge over the unbelievability of their own plot elements, we can instead frame the move as melodramatically, or in other words psychologically, real. Wanting to be certain about just who her husband is before she removes the physical evidence of their marriage expresses a troubling fact about authenticity and emotions. Julia waits until she knows what the situation is before she decides on the level of transgression; one wonders how Julia might have responded if her husband was ideal, instead of a lunatic who intermittently tears at fabric and stabs pillows. It is this element that marks the film in accordance with Peter Bogdanovich’s assertion that it is a “troubling woman’s movie,” albeit not in the sense that he intended (Bogdanovich 520).

The other line along which the love-theme develops is Julia’s pre-existing relationship with Dennis, which would have prevented her from being accepted in the role of Marion Hughes were it to have been disclosed during the interview; one of the fake employment agency’s criteria for the live-in secretary position was that the lady
in question not have any “romantic attachments”. Just after this interview, Julia comes home to Dennis having welcomed himself inside her room. She interrogates him as to why he’s invaded her private space, and whether or not he’s gotten married in the interim since she last saw him. He explains that his wedding was called off because “[my fiancée] didn’t like it when I kept calling her Julia.” The identity slippage between the unseen wife, Julia, and Marion (another unseen wife), is operative in terms of the names that people call one another, as well as on the level of emotional identification. Dennis’ wife “didn’t like” when he calls her by Julia’s name because she believes that these slips reveal that Dennis wishes Julia was in her place; that Dennis identifies Julia as his wife, rather than her. Could it not be that Julia’s momentary lapse, wherein she places the wedding ring back on her finger, signifies her identification with the bride?

The descent into marriage haunts My Name is Julia Ross and it is her claiming of that role that the film builds (or descends) toward. The conclusion of the film, as it must be, finds Julia playing Marion playing dead—once resurrected, she reconnects with Dennis and the film ends with the following exchange:

“You know I’ve made a resolution. The next time I apply for a job I’ll ask for the references!”
“I know a good job. “Secretary?”
“A combination secretary, nurse, companion…”
“That sounds like a wife.”
“Well, how about it?”
“I’ll have to have some time to think it over.”
“How long?”
“About five seconds.”
“One, two, three, four…”

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Fig. 9 | The indecisive moment, 20:32. Columbia Pictures, 1945.
There is a fade to black before we hear the number “five” and we are made to understand that the film simply cannot bear the weight of Julia actually getting married. Instead, My Name is Julia Ross ends just as Julia looks to finally become what she has resisted becoming for the duration of the movie: another unseen bride. The film’s title draws the boundaries of the narrative concerns to those moments in which Julia Ross proclaims her identity to be in line with the name Julia Ross. This is most fervently the case when she is faced with the social pressure of becoming Marion Hughes, yet this identity faces another threat, and indeed succumbs to it in the final sequence of the film. The obliteration of the name Julia Ross, and the fulfillment of Dennis’s slippery mistake of calling his fiancée Julia, lies in the realization of their marriage, and the attendant erasure of her surname in favour of his. Since she is set to become Julia Bruce, the film’s title no longer applies and so indicates that the narrative concerns have been resolved. Whoever Julia Bruce may be, it is not the Julia Ross who was defined in contradistinction to Marion Hughes, who formed her identity by negating another’s.

In Foster Hirsch’s well-regarded book-length study of the film noir, The Dark Side of the Screen, he makes a forgivable, but telling, mistake:

In My Name is Julia Ross, Nina Foch plays an American alone and unemployed in London, who goes for a job interview as companion to a rich lady. Before she has time to catch her breath, she has been cast by her wealthy new employer in the role of Julia Ross, the woman’s mad, dead daughter-in-law, killed by the matron’s son in a moment of rage. Presented as suicidal and crazy to the villagers in the remote hamlet where the dowager and her weak-willed son live, the new “Julia Ross” will provide a corpse with an alibi. (Hirsch 181-182)

In the rush to categorize, to broker the deal between film history and My Name is Julia Ross, one is at risk of passing over the specificity of this psychological drama. To mistake Julia Ross for Marion Hughes is to highlight the interchangeability of subjects in the world of My Name is Julia Ross, to reify the notion that for most of the people Julia encounters, she may as well be Marion, with Julia being the fabrication. By the time of her impending wedding to a man whose commitment to her is, at the very least, suspect, the conflation of the three women (Marion, Julia, and Dennis’ unnamed fiancé) has been accomplished, the differences effaced in the construction of the unifying force, Julia Bruce.

The tropes of film noir, the femmes fatales, the post-war disillusionment, the “hardboiled tradition,” the debatable influence of German Expressionism, none of these do much to explain My Name is Julia Ross, yet here we are (Schrader 10). Ultimately, My Name is Julia Ross does more work for film noir as a limit-case, as a site of contention, than film noir does for it. However, there is one obvious, undeniable benefit to the term being affixed, and it is a distributive one: the film can be screened at the Pacific Cinematheque alongside such powerhouses as The Postman Always Rings Twice (1946) and couched in boxsets like Columbia Film Noir Classics III. Film noir may be a stretch, but it keeps a title like My Name is Julia Ross in circulation.
**WORKS CITED**


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