Tabloids, Film Noir, and the Fragmentation of Form and Character in Double Indemnity and The Naked City

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Abstract:

This article examines how the screen adaptation of a first-person narrative in James M. Cain’s Double Indemnity results in the invocation of voiceover narration, which augments the sense of fatalism on the part of the characters and voyeurism on the part of the spectator. Additionally, Cain’s influence by popular tabloids of the late 1920s and early 1930s elucidates connections between the tabloid medium and film noir that have been understudied by scholars. A closer look at the tabloid-photographic work of Weegee (Arthur Fellig) and the noir adaptation of his photo book, Naked City, further illustrates this connection. The transmogrification of both Double Indemnity (1944) and The Naked City (1948) demonstrates how noir can often be described as a fragmentation of form and character—the medium itself is fragmented by the disassociation between image and sound tracks, a disassociation that mirrors the textual/photographic juxtaposition of tabloid journalism and the issues of verisimilitude that arise from it, and the noir protagonist is fragmented by both his existential dilemma and his inability to establish a connection with the reader/viewer.

The cultural history surrounding James M. Cain’s second novel, Double Indemnity, originally published in 1936, illustrates the dialogic nature of various texts and cultural histories across media. Through these particular histories and discourses, one uncovers how certain media influenced the indigenous American genres of hard-boiled literature and film noir. What follows is an attempt to examine how Double Indemnity was constructed (the cultural progenitors that influenced James M. Cain’s novel) and reconstructed (the 1944 film adaptation by Raymond Chandler and Billy Wilder), with an emphasis on tabloid journalism as an important precursor to later noir texts. Additionally, The Naked City (1948) will be analyzed as a noir film, albeit of a different variety than Double Indemnity, produced by a tabloid journalist, Mark Hellinger, and partially adapted from the work of tabloid photographer Arthur Fellig (Weegee) and his photo book, Naked City (1945).

Scholars have often neglected the specific influence of tabloids on hard-boiled literature and film noir. For example, the Snyder-Gray murder trial, popularized in the tabloids from 1927 to 1928, clearly influenced the plots of Cain’s first two novels, The Postman Always Rings Twice and Double Indemnity. Similarly, Weegee’s photographic work, published in various tabloids throughout the 1930s, presents an aesthetic of high-contrast, low-key lighting, mirroring the approach by many noir cinematographers in the 1940s and 1950s. As a medium comprised of both images and text, much like cinema’s amalgam of image and spoken dialogue, tabloid journalism obfuscates and fragments the verisimilitude pro-
vided divergently by the indexical sign system of re-
produced reality and the symbolic sign system of lan-
guage (Pierce 239-240). A similar paradox occurs
through the adaptation of hard-boiled literature to
film noir. The first-person narrative structure that is
definitive of hard-boiled literature intimately con-
ects the reader with the protagonist’s thoughts. The
screen adaptation process dismantles this relation-
ship between the protagonist and the viewer. The
motion picture is unable to present true first-person
narration in the literary sense. Wilder and Chandler’s
adaptation of Double Indemnity attempts to ameliorate
this problem by constructing non-linear, voiceover
narration as part of the storytelling mechanism, a
formula that would later typify noir style. This estab-
lishes two tropes that become common noir charac-
teristics—an augmented sense of fatalism as the pro-
tagonist’s voiceover occurs as a flashback, recapitu-
lating events from a point in which the character is
near death, and alienation on the part of the viewer
who becomes more of a voyeur than the novel
reader who identifies somewhat exclusively with the
protagonist. The Naked City employs voiceover in a
slightly different manner, as an omniscient voice-of-
God in the style of contemporary newsreels such as
The March of Time (1935-1951). In this film, producer
Mark Hellinger serves as God, and like Double Indem-
nity, the distinction between visual index and off-
screen, netherworldly voice ruptures the diegesis.
Therefore, Double Indemnity and The Naked City, as
texts descended from tabloid journalism, illustrate
how noir can often be described as a fragmentation of
form and character. The medium itself is fragmented by
the disassociation between image and sound tracks,
a disassociation that mirrors the textual/photographic juxtaposition of tabloid journalism and the
issues of verisimilitude that arise from it, and the noir
protagonist is fragmented by both his existential di-
lemma—that is, his inability to remain alive (Double
Indemnity) or his inability to exist in a real diegetic
space (The Naked City)—as well as his inability to es-
ablish a connection with the voyeuristic viewer.

Origins: Constructing Double Indemnity

Despite the optimism surrounding New Deal
depolitics, as well as the moderate presence of the com-
munist party in certain American circles, cultural his-
torian Warren Susman indicates that the 1930s
marked a time of political apathy (173). The hard-
boiled character, whose genesis began with the first
publication of Black Mask magazine in 1923 and
evolved far more substantially in the 1930s with the
literary works of Dashiell Hammett, Raymond
Chandler, James M. Cain, and others, became the de-
finite embodiment of these cultural sentiments:
ambivalence, alienation, and ideological apathy.
While film noir may have cultural influences con-
temporary to the 1940s and 1950s, and this becomes
clear in later noir films that are more contemporane-
ously topical, such as Pickup on South Street (1953) and
Kiss Me Deadly (1955). The earliest noir films seem
most directly influenced by hard-boiled fiction, itself
influenced by American culture of the 1920s and
1930s.

Hard-boiled detectives, such as Phillip Marlowe
and Sam Spade, are fundamentally different from
their fictional predecessors, like C. Auguste Dupin
and Sherlock Holmes. They are not associated with
the law, but instead work independently and follow
their own moral codes, which are not always entirely aligned with the law. Noir scholar Robert Porfirio identifies how the classical detective shifted to the hard-boiled/noir protagonist:

The pre-existential world of the classical detective was ordered and meaningful; social aberrations were temporary and quickly righted through the detective’s superior powers of deductive reasoning. A product of a rather smug Western society, such a world reflected a Victorian sense of order and a belief in the supremacy of science. The hard-boiled writers replaced this with a corrupt, chaotic world where the detective’s greatest asset was the sheer ability to survive with a shred of dignity. (90)

Hard-boiled characters are generally difficult to define precisely. The term connotes a particular sense of emotional detachment, an exterior shell that seems impenetrable. These characters often feel alienated from society, or, perhaps more accurately, are disillusioned with society and willfully alienate themselves. However, hard-boiled characters are not altogether indifferent. In fact, with few exceptions, they are primarily motivated to action by some monetary concern—often not entirely conspicuous, as in Chandler’s Phillip Marlowe, though frequently quite obvious; for example, in Double Indemnity, the primary story arc for Walter Huff (Walter Neff in the film, played by Fred MacMurray) involves killing a man for money. Therefore, the hard-boiled character may act indifferently to his milieu, but nevertheless contentedly conforms to the dictates of capitalism.

In addressing the genre patterns of hard-boiled literature, Bethany Ogdon outlines what she refers to as “hard-boiled ideology,” which involves an antagonism between hyper-masculinity, generally represented in the male protagonist, and the Other, often represented by evil women (femme fatales), queer individuals, and/or minority groups (77). The male protagonist’s alienation is premised by his status as the only normal individual in the world he inhabits. Additional scholars have noted that the hard-boiled character is not the world and the world is not him: “Such a reading draws attention to the paradoxically pervasive absence (emphasis added), in the ontological sense, of substance, morality and reality in the face of artifice and illusion” (Petty 71). Porfirio applies this further to the film noir genre, which he claims is united by its protagonists’s existential attitudes, the formation of his/her own value system.
distinct from social norms where the only real choice to be made is existence over nothingness (87). Existentialist absence is likewise aligned with the increase in mass culture during the 1930s, primarily the proliferation of radio broadcasting in the domestic sphere as well as the growth of Henry Luce’s *Time* and *Life* magazines. Mass culture often motivates the individual to generalize and stereotype certain groups as Other, in turn distancing herself or himself from those groups. According to Ogdon, the masses are associated with immigrants and are feminine by nature; that is, the “soft-boiled masses” must be rejected by the hard-boiled character who embodies the vestiges of pre-war, perhaps even pre-twentieth century, American masculinity (81-82). In fact, Pettey traces the origins of the term “hard-boiled” to World War I, as a way of identifying a particularly demanding superior officer (62). While the notion of Otherness is likely prevalent across Hollywood studio-era genres and not specific to hard-boiled narratives, it is nevertheless important to consider them in this light. In *Double Indemnity*, Mrs. Dietrichson (played by Barbara Stanwyck in the film), is villainized and Othered as the duplicitous femme fatale that coerces Huff/Neff to kill her husband (Fig. 1). Moreover, the primary antagonist, claims manager Barton Keyes (played by Edward G. Robinson in the film), challenges Huff/Neff, arguably as a form of homosexual repression, thus stigmatizing Keyes as the queer Other. This is perhaps more evident in the film adaptation, particularly in the phallic nature of Keyes’s cigar, which Neff is always lighting for him (Fig. 2). The hard-boiled protagonist can thus be defined by an existential absence, which serves as a response to and criticism of mass culture readership and viewership, particularly the increasing feminization of such readership and viewership in the 1930s—tabloids were often targeted toward female audiences—as well as the increasing inclusion of various Othered groups. Hard-boiled characters are typically sexist, homophobic, and/or xenophobic, which seems to be a response to the “soft-boiledness” of mass culture. In other words, the hard-boiled male protagonist emerges to recover masculinity, albeit a form of masculinity that is not associated with patriarchy (he is often unmarried and challenges the institution of marriage), though he often fails.

It therefore seems warranted to draw a connection between the mass cultural product of tabloid journalism and the proliferation of hard-boiled characters in literature throughout the 1930s and 1940s. But there is also a more explicit connection between tabloid popularity and film noir, as illustrated by *Double Indemnity*. Penelope Pelizzon and Nancy West argue that the genesis of *Double Indemnity* stemmed from the Snyder-Gray murder trial in 1927-1928, popularized at the time by its abundant presence in tabloid newspapers such as the *Daily News* and *Daily Mirror* (“Multiple Indemnity” 212). Ruth Snyder, a housewife from Queens, N.Y., and her lover, corset salesman Henry Judd Gray, plotted to kill Snyder’s husband who, unbeknownst to him, possessed an accident insurance policy naming Ruth as the beneficiary. After committing the murder, their attempt to cover it up as a burglary failed, and both were tried and sentenced to death. The tabloid press closely covered the trial process, as the two extramarital lovers and murderous co-conspirators turned on each other.

![Fig. 2: Walter Neff lighting Barton Keyes's (Edward G. Robinson) cigar in *Double Indemnity*.](image-url)
other, one blaming the other for masterminding the murder (Fig. 3). The story was further popularized when Tom Howard of the Daily News rigged a small camera to his leg, hidden from view, and snapped a shot with an electric switch just as the executioner pulled the electric chair switch on Snyder. The Daily News published the shocking image on its front cover with the title “Dead!”

A similar narrative is invoked in Cain’s first novel, The Postman Always Rings Twice, as an extramarital affair leads to the murder of the victimized husband, a murder that is executed incompetently. Double Indemnity, released shortly after Postman, presents a far more striking parallel. In Cain’s text, as in Chandler and Wilder’s screen adaptation, the adulterous murderers, Walter Huff/Neff and Phyllis Dietrichson, plan to gain financially on an accident insurance settlement that would double based on the type of “accident” Phyllis’s husband encounters, a plan devised by Huff/Neff as an insurance salesman himself. Although they execute the murder almost impeccably, the couple is ultimately divided by deceit, much like Snyder and Gray. This real-life story, sensationalized and popularized by the tabloid press, serves as a “tracer-text” that later influences “culture-texts,” such as The Postman Always Rings Twice and Double Indemnity (Pelizzon and West, Tabloid Inc. 131).

Most Cain scholars agree that the author followed the Snyder-Gray story closely, despite his denial of the tabloids’ influence on his literary work (Pelizzon and West, “Multiple Indemnity” 225). It is likely that he sought to distance his work from tabloid journalism, which was perceived as trashy, low culture. Tabloids are perhaps more identifiable with magazine culture—coincidentally the source for many noir films such as Dark Passage (1947) and The Big Heat (1953), originally published in The Saturday Evening Post—than objective, social commentary journalism. The “tabloid” design resembled more of a square than the traditional broadside newspaper. This design was intended for subway commuters, a working-class demographic who had little time for leisurely reading. Contrary to more prestigious newspapers, such as The New York Times, tabloids relied heavily on photography and visual imagery in both their advertising and reporting, assisting in the reader’s rapid consumption of information. The perception of tabloids as inferior journalism has led scholars of film noir and hard-boiled fiction to erroneously evade any connection between tabloid journalism and literature and film (212). But tabloids are an example of a medium that is both literary and a form of visual storytelling. The tabloid format often presented images in strips, relying heavily on images to be read in succession, creating a viewership distinct from journalistic traditions and ontologically similar to cinema. As Pelizzon and West claim, “Violating the supposed objectivity of news photography, the strip cinematizes Snyder and insists on her celebrity status, the performative aspects of her testimony, and the epic nature of her trial. It also implies, heavy-handedly, that the story is ready to be mobilized by Hollywood” (Tabloid Inc. 126). In fact, historians have argued that the increasing presence
of visual media in advertising and journalism in the 1920s was intended to mimic earlier forms of silent cinema; that is, the construction of visual stories appealed to an American audience acclimated to motion picture storytelling (Brown 208). Additionally, tabloids frequently recycled stories and genres, much like the recyclability of Hollywood stories and genres. But film scholars have, for the most part, ignored this connection in favour of literary and other cultural influences.

**Adaptation: Reconstructing *Double Indemnity***

The first-person narrative invoked by Cain in *Double Indemnity* is a common storytelling device in hard-boiled fiction. Adapting first-person literary narratives to the motion picture screen, however, presents a challenge. Film scholar Dudley Andrew asserts that film operates “from perception toward signification, from external facts to interior motivations and consequences,” whereas literature functions antithetically; that is, from linguistic sign systems to perception (456). Therefore, the internal reflections of a protagonist in a novel are appropriate for that medium, but film is first and foremost a medium of material external facts, and viewer identification requires a certain degree of manipulation through the construction of various cinematic mechanisms. What we find in film noir adaptations, specifically, are attempts to adapt the nature of literary first-person narration to an entirely different medium, in turn disrupting traditional cinematic storytelling norms—for example, protagonist voiceovers narrated as non-linear flashbacks, as in *Double Indemnity* and many others, or the more disorderly attempt by Robert Montgomery to adapt Chandler’s *Lady in the Lake* (1947) into a film consisting of exclusively first-person camera angles, a technique that is likewise employed temporarily in *Dark Passage* (1947). Cain’s *Double Indemnity* is also narrated via flashback, but we do not discover this fact until the final chapter when Huff declares that he has spent the past five days recollecting the events described throughout the previous chapters. The film adaptation alternatively begins at the end, as an injured Walter Neff begins to tell his story confessionally through Barton Keyes’s dictograph (Fig. 4). The confession is appropriately directed to Keyes, the patriarchal, and potentially queer, authority whom Neff has failed to transgress and, in turn, who must forgive Neff. Voiceovers in noir films are commonly “confessional/investigative” by nature, embodying the Freudian notion of a “talking cure” as a means toward achieving truth through confession, often spoken to a patriarchal authority (Hollinger 244). The confessional form is an adaptation of the confessions that both Snyder and Gray provided in court, both attempts to reconsider past events in order to absolve themselves of any wrongdoing, both placing the weight of guilt on their partner (Pelizzon and West, *Tabloid Inc.* 134-135). Neff’s voiceover throughout the film is not only a mechanism functioning to adapt a first-person narrative cinematically, but also a reminder of Neff’s inevitable doom, a quality that is not necessarily present in the novel. Genre scholar Thomas Schatz comments on the flashback structure in film noir as it “enhances the mood of futility and fatalism” (131). This is presented more catastrophically in Wilder’s later film,
Sunset Boulevard (1950), which begins with the ghostly voiceover of Joe Gillis (William Holden), a dead man whose body is seen lying face down in a pool. Fatalistic attitudes necessitate a sense of inescapability. In the film adaptation of Double Indemnity, Neff’s death occurs as he attempts to break free from the Pacific All Risk Insurance Company, unable to reach beyond the office’s confines (in the book, Huff does escape, though he finds himself in a figurative prison with Phyllis, the woman he loathes). Scholars point out that the confessional voiceover has an investigative function, as if the protagonist/narrator is unclear of his/her own past and needs to recall it to materialize the details that have led to her/his current, fatalistic situation (Turim 185). In a book-length study of the voiceover in film noir, J.P. Teilotte addresses how noir voiceover flashbacks fail to achieve verisimilitude:

The role of the film viewer becomes more voyeuristic than the novel reader’s intimate association with the protagonist, thus alienating the viewer from the characters onscreen and distorting her/his psychological reference points (Borde and Chaumeton 24). The spectator is directly challenged to actively fill in the gaps created by the physical and psychological fragmentation posed by voiceover narration:

Situated within these gaps and torn by this fragmentation, the spectator is placed in a position from which he or she judges between what is shown and the narrator’s account of it, attaining a distance from the narrative that allows for meaning to be perceived not as a static quantity to be passively grasped as the single ideologically “correct” position but rather as a battleground for competing perspectives. (Hollinger 247)

The film viewer takes on a position of analysis through his/her voyeurism. Meaning is made, not just by the narrating protagonist and/or author, but by the voyeuristic spectator as well. It is therefore not surprising that noir films frequently invoke surreal, dream-like imagery and somewhat convoluted plots, emphasizing ambivalence over certainty, and as will be reasoned later, semi-documentary noirs like The Naked City even fit this mold to some degree. Our distance from the characters augments our inability to understand their motives or whether they possess any volition in their moral decisions whatsoever. In Double Indemnity, the inevitable, fatalistic conclusion serves to portray a world in which choice is not a factor, much like a dream. This is a fundamentally different approach from the original text, which exists exclusively in the mind of Walter Huff.

...the flashback in film noir serves not as an accurate portrayal of past events but rather problematizes...representations of memory and the ability of film to represent historical events.
Gender is also a factor in the adaptation from tabloids to noir. The Snyder-Gray case was a popular story for a predominantly female demographic, but *Double Indemnity* is a narrative designed for a male audience—one that romanticizes male autonomy and demonizes evil women. One explanation for this shift might be that tabloids relied heavily on melodrama, whereas noir later jettisoned melodrama in favour of hard-boiledness. Also, Snyder’s status as a working-class housewife reflected the typical tabloid demographic more so than her femme fatale counterpart, the upper middle class Phyllis Dietrichson. And it likewise seems apparent that the tabloids focused on Snyder, not Gray, whereas Cain’s novel and the noir adaptation are narrated from the male perspective. According to Pelizzon and West, the *Daily News* focused more on Gray, contrary to other tabloids, but in a manner that positioned Gray as a protagonist/hero, consequently emphasizing Snyder and her depravity (*Tabloid Inc.* 130). It therefore seems plausible to assume that hard-boiled literature and film noir adapted from tabloids subverted and demonized women, and more generally, the feminization associated with modernity and mass culture.

**Weegee and Naked City**

Another rather striking connection between tabloid journalism and film noir is the photojournalistic work of Weegee (Arthur Fellig). Weegee worked as a freelance photographer for several tabloid papers throughout the 1930s. In 1940, he was hired by the newly-formed, left-leaning daily newspaper *PM*, and by 1941, his work was being accepted by fine art institutions. The Photo League hosted a Weegee exhibit titled “Murder is My Business” (1941), and subsequently, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMa) included his work in its 1943 “Action Photography” exhibit (Lee, “Introduction” 10). Weegee’s exposure to both the working-class readership of tabloids and cultural elites led to the popularity of his 1945 photo book, *Naked City*. The book, containing 225 images photographed by Weegee throughout his career, quickly became the highest selling photo book at the time (1). As art historian Richard Meyer claims, “*Naked City* aimed to appeal both to a museum-going audience—or, at least, to an audience impressed by the approval of a museum curator—and to a populist, ‘rye with a beer chaser’ readership” (40). The rights to the book were later purchased by film producer and ex-tabloid journalist Mark Hellinger for the 1948 film noir, *The Naked City*, which was later adapted into a popular television series in 1958. It is also likely that Weegee’s photographic aesthetic influenced noir cinematographers before *Naked City* was adapted to the screen. The retrospective cultural perception of Weegee as a proto-noir photographer is clear in the 1985 publication *The Five Great Novels of James M. Cain*, which features Weegee’s photograph “Corpse with Revolver” (1936) on the cover (Fig. 5).

Shooting primarily at night with a flashbulb to light his subjects, Weegee’s high contrast nightscapes
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parallel the visual aesthetic that would come to define film noir, dichotomizing light and darkness with hard shadows, a reflection of the morally ambiguous characters that inhabit both spaces. Photo historian Miles Orvell describes Weegee’s images as “a two-dimensional photographic language in which the subtle gray tones of the fine print were eliminated by the habitual use of the harsh flash bulb, which furnished a simplified syntax of high contrasts that tended to flatten the space between the foreground and background and rob his figures of a more molded, three-dimensional light” (73-74). Although Weegee photographed late-night murder scenes and other real events that he uncovered with the help of a police radio, his images are conspicuously fabricated attempts to dramatize reality via uncanny compositions, high-contrast lighting, and staged settings, as the careful placement of the hat and gun in “Corpse with Revolver” indicates. Such aesthetic qualities align with the sensationalist ethos of tabloid journalism and are somewhat distinct from the documentary trends that define more socially bent photography of the 1930s. Orvell further describes Weegee’s images as

an unadulterated voyeurism that both enacts and represents the act of looking. As such it stands almost as a rebuttal to the official culture of sympathy that characterized the culture of the New Deal, including the fiction and photography of social concern. In fact, Weegee operated as a kind of tour guide to New York, offering the privilege of looking at the bizarre world of urban misfortune and pathos without making any serious demands for involvement or action. Weegee served a world that was, indeed, growing tired of such demands, and his cultural function was in part to provide a kind of entertainment that was integral to the economy of the urban newspaper of the thirties and forties. (78)

Indeed, the tabloid’s proclivity toward sensationalism—entertainment, not art, and certainly not objective reporting as promulgated in papers like The New York Times—appealed to its working-class audience as a form of escapism during the Great Depression. This is complicated by the fact that Weegee worked for PM in the early 1940s, a paper that was tabloid by nature in its highly visual presentation but also represented an ideology. PM, for example, did not sell space to advertisers. As PM editor William McCleery once claimed, “We believe news photographs are not merely to be gaped at but also to be

[Weegee’s] images are conspicuously fabricated attempts to dramatize reality via uncanny compositions, high-contrast lighting, and staged settings.

learned from” (qtd. in Lee, “Human Interest Stories” 70). Meyer describes PM as a paper that “tried to link the look and interests of other tabloids with the political, social, and economic issues that concerned the immigrant and working classes” (82). So, it is important to consider Weegee’s work, not as ideological per se, but certainly a bridge between the presumed binaries of high art/mass culture and tabloid entertainment/working-class politics, and this is evident in his treatment of working-class subjects, as well as his critical treatment of celebrities, in Naked City.

Weegee critiques mass culture by often appearing in his own images as the entertainer, and he unambiguously calls attention to the nature of celebrity culture. There is an entire chapter in Naked City devoted to Frank Sinatra, focusing on both the singer and his mass audience. Often Weegee juxtaposes
popular media with darker subject matter, as in Fig. 6, where a dead body is being covered with newspapers while a movie marquee in the background advertises “Irene Dunne in ‘Joy of Living,’” a musical, alongside Don’t Turn Them Loose, a 1936 crime film that would have been the B movie of this particular screening (89). The juxtaposition of the feature film’s title with the dead body is a rather emphatic form of irony. The use of newspapers to cover the body is equally striking in terms of self-reflexivity, with newspapers concealing the subject matter that Weegee’s form of journalism will inversely reveal in its naked form. The photo book contains numerous images that self-reference journalism, beginning with the first image, “Sunday Morning in Manhattan” (Fig. 7), depicting a stack of newspapers waiting to be distributed to the city’s readers (15). The high-contrast lighting suggests an ominous quality to the newspapers, troubling the viewer and creating a sense that the value of these objects is being questioned.

Weegee received his name from colleagues at the Acme News Services. As Orvell notes, “Embracing the full implications of his name, Weegee was not merely a recorder of images, but a visionary, and he loved the appellation, spelled in his own way, that evoked the psychic powers of the Ouija board and testified to his ability to produce a shot of some ghastly event before anyone else knew about it” (72). His personality, in many ways, embodies the infallibility of the hard-boiled protagonist, a literary character that would have been familiar to him in his earlier 1930s work, viewing the underworld “with a combination of cynicism and sentiment” (78). Like the hard-boiled protagonist, Weegee’s cynicism is often complimented by subtle hints of sympathy. For example, the caption “I cried when I took this picture” accompanies an image of a mother and daughter crying (Fig. 8) as they “look up hopelessly as another daughter and her young baby are burning to death in the top floor of the tenement” (Weegee 74). Similarly, modernist photographer/filmmaker Paul
Strand, in a review of *Naked City* for *PM*, once noted that the images “are an extraordinary amalgam of sardonic humour, resentment of injustice, pathos, and compassion tinged with bitterness” (qtd. in Meyer 41). Many tabloid photojournalists in the 1930s embodied Weegee’s hard-boiled persona, including *PM* photographer Skippy Adelman, whose life was detailed in “The Hardboiled School of Photography,” an article published by *PM* just prior to the release of *Naked City* (Pelizzon and West, “Good Stories” 28). Weegee’s hard-boiled sensibility is present, not just in the content of his photographs, but also in his aesthetic qualities, such as the unique emphasis on darkness that bifurcates the images into visible space and invisible space, much like the existential fragmentation of Walter Neff in *Double Indemnity*, or perhaps more explicitly, in the case of Phillip Marlowe in *Murder, My Sweet* (1944), who is subsumed by a black pool that visually transforms the screen into nothingness.

The image titled “This is unexposed film of Greenwich Village because nothing ever happens there” is literally an unexposed black image (Weegee 229). Darkness is therefore associated with nothing happening, which, if we connect this to the rest of Weegee’s photographs in *Naked City*, defines shadows as spaces where nothing happens. What Weegee’s images provide then are the interesting parts of the city that reveal themselves nakedly. The spectator witnesses an incompleteness in a Weegee photograph, a fragmented sense of both the world and ourselves; our relationship to the darker side of life as well as our unstable relationship with the entertainer and his medium. Moreover, tabloid journalism, as a visual/textual storytelling medium conflates the subjective nature of photographic images with the objective reporting in the text, challenging the viewer/reader’s sense of verisimilitude. Pelizzon and West assert, “there must be equality and collaboration between text and image, yet the two media must be independent of one another” (“Good Stories” 39).

Weegee’s treatment of image and text is self-consciously aware of this paradox: “The writing functions as ironic commentary on the represented actions, as if the world is captioning itself without the photographer needing to add any external text” (40). Film noir embodies a similar self-reflexive sensibility, as a critical movement that conflates high art with sleazy, low-culture content. Film noir accepts Weegee’s aesthetic of fragmentation formulaically, both photographically in terms of light fragmentation (shadows) and through voiceover narrations (existential disjoint). Meyer, however, is skeptical of considering Weegee’s work in relation to hard-boiled literature and film noir as it removes Weegee’s images from their original context: “we have forcibly to remind ourselves that real, rather than fictional, deaths and disasters are recorded in Weegee’s photographs” (49). But this study focuses on *The Naked City* as an adapted text influenced by Weegee’s aesthetic as well as the tabloid sensibility. So it is, therefore, relevant.
to assess this film, and film noir more generally, in the context of the mass tabloid culture from which Weegee’s work emerges, is informed by, and critiques.

**Hellinger and The Naked City**

*The Naked City* presents a text that rather explicitly draws from Weegee’s tabloid sensibility, as an adaptation, to some degree, of his photo book, but also serves to define a popular trend in noir style in the late 1940s. Paul Schrader distinguishes between three periods of the classical noir era. The second period, the “postwar realistic period,” from 1945-1949, sees a prevalence of docudrama noirs, often shot on location and mimicking styles invoked by newsreels (58-59). *Double Indemnity* bridges the postwar period with earlier noir films (59). Indeed, it is rather distinct from its noir contemporaries, and its tabloid influence does associate it with the journalistic, docudrama tendencies present in the postwar period. Louis De Rochemont, ex-newsreel filmmaker turned Hollywood producer, influenced and popularized this subgenre with the films *The House on 92nd Street* (1945), *13 Rue Madeleine* (1946), and *Boomerang!* (1947). These films, usually based on real events and shot on location, often invoked omniscient voiceover narrations that conflated the stylistic tendencies of the traditional narrative film with the style of the newsreel.

*The Naked City* elaborates on this postwar docudrama aesthetic. Shot primarily on location in New York City, an endeavour unique for a Hollywood film at the time, producer Mark Hellinger and director Jules Dassin had a certain degree of autonomy from the studio, in this case Universal, working under Hellinger Productions. The story follows rookie detective Jimmy Halloran (Don Taylor) and veteran Lieutenant Dan Muldoon (Barry Fitzgerald [Fig. 9]) as they investigate the death of a young woman. Screenwriter Malvin Wald claims that the story was based on the unsolved murder of Broadway actress Dorothy (Dot) King in 1923 (140). Working for the *Daily News* in 1923, this was a story Hellinger himself covered and, like *Double Indemnity*, serves as a tabloid predecessor to a noir film. Wald convinced Hellinger to base the story on an old, unsolved New York Police Department (NYPD) murder case, to which Wald, as a Brooklyn native, was able to gain access.

![Fig. 9: Lieutenant Dan Muldoon (Barry Fitzgerald) contemplating while gazing out at the naked city.](image)
Tabloids, Film Noir and the Fragmentation of Form and Character

Wald had worked for the Army Motion Picture Unit and was influenced by documentaries like Pare Lorentz’s 1936 film *The Plow that Broke the Plains* (Kozloff 43). Hellinger’s original working title was *Homicide* before he purchased the rights to use *Naked City* from Weegee for $1,000 (Wald 144). The film is not an explicit adaptation of Weegee’s photo book, but rather, an original story based on a popular 1923 tabloid case, though it drew certain elements from Weegee’s work. Indeed, the straight documentary approach taken by *The Plow that Broke the Plains*, as well as the photographic work of the Farm Security Administration (FSA) in the 1930s, is distinct from Weegee’s sensationalist tabloid aesthetic; what we find in the film adaptation of *Naked City* is an amalgam of both styles.

The voiceover narration that opens *The Naked City* comes from none other than Mark Hellinger, who self-reflexively identifies himself as the film’s producer as he verbally lists the credits. As Hellinger begins his narration, the camera voyeuristically surveys the city from an aerial, God-like distance, recalling Paul Strand and Charles Wheeler’s *Manhatta* (1921). Strand was one of Lorentz’s cinematographers on *The Plow that Broke the Plains*, and Wald would have been familiar with and influenced by his work. Additionally, Wald’s co-writer on *Naked City*, Albert Maltz, was associated with Strand’s Frontier Films in the late 1930s and early 1940s (Campbell 148). Hellinger always speaks in the present tense, which is distinct from most noir voiceovers that serve as flashbacks to the past. This is more like newsreel narration, generally spoken in the present. Additionally, the fact that Hellinger’s narration is not a historical account increases its truth-value, as his temporal experience of the events depicted are aligned with the viewer’s own. In other words, it is not constructed from a fallible memory, but instead he comments observationally in the moment, thus providing greater verisimilitude. The artifice is conspicuously present despite the observational techniques employed, a technique likely drawn from Weegee’s work. Unlike the typical voice-of-God commentaries in newsreels, Hellinger is an equal with the audience, not an authority.

Hellinger provides “information as conversation, rather than as

![Fig. 10: The denouement of *The Naked City*: Garzah (Ted de Corsia), on the run from the police, looks down at his pursuers from atop the Williamsburg Bridge, after Hellinger tells him, “Don’t lose your head.”](image-url)
authoritative commentary” (Kozloff 47). In fact, he often speaks directly to the characters. Later in the film, Hellinger tells Garzah, the killer, not to lose his head, sympathizing with him in a way that abolishes good and evil dichotomies (Fig. 10). However, Hellinger’s netherworldly presence bifurcates the diegesis from the non-diegesis. Although embodying the audience’s point of view in a sense, Hellinger is positioned distinctly from the audience as the film’s producer, which the viewer discovers at the outset. Therefore, *The Naked City* self-reflexively clarifies the distinction between three spaces: the film’s diegesis, the space of production, and the space of reception.

We become alienated from the city’s inhabitants by our privileged position as voyeurs. In the opening sequence, as the viewer voyeuristically moves about the city as the night shifts to early morning, we hear the thoughts of several characters as voiceovers, characters that we never see again in the film. The random internal monologue provides a voyeurism that goes beyond the visual realm. Here the audience is able to cerebrally embody these characters. But it is not our individual volition that willfully enters the minds of these characters. It is Hellinger, the film’s producer, whose voice-of-God presence conspicuously extracts this information for the viewer. The documentary mode is self-aware of its inability to achieve verisimilitude without intervention by some creator, much like Weegee’s presence in his photographic work.

Weegee begins his *Naked City* by claiming, “I caught the New Yorkers with their masks off” (11). Hellinger makes a similar claim in the film, “This is the city as it is, hot summer pavements, the children at play, the buildings in their naked stone, the people without makeup.” In many ways, however, this film seems distinct from Weegee’s *Naked City*. The film is more aligned with the journalistic tradition of objectivity, along the lines of *The New York Times* than tabloid sensationalism. And this is a significant divergence from earlier noir films, which were far more fabricated in terms of visual style and character psychology. But *The Naked City* is quintessentially noir in its employment of Mark Hellinger’s voice-of-God narration, which explicitly fragments the visual and aural fields, not merely the fragmentation between indexical materiality and the protagonist’s subjective perspective, but rather, an otherworldly fragmentation between Hellinger and the diegesis. Drawing more so from Weegee’s photographic ideology than previous noir films, the film is emphatically self-critical. Superficially speaking, within the diegetic story, the proliferation of the murder story in the tabloid press echoes Weegee’s treatment of mass media and, consequently, implicates the cinema as a form of media that will continually recycle popular stories and never achieve objective verisimilitude. In order to achieve this degree of self-reflexivity, it is essential to employ the techniques of documentary realism in order to challenge them. As Telotte notes, “they appear to take no pains to hide the cinematic mechanism. Rather, in a reflexive tendency unusual for the era, they often acknowledge and even appropriate that mechanism as part of their realistic strategy” (134). Additionally, our awareness of the documentary mode makes us further aware of the contrived nature of classical film narrative (155). In other words, the everydayness that the opening of the film promulgates is not what the city’s nakedness reveals, but what it conceals. And even in attempting to reveal objectivity, there are still eight million stories in the naked
city, and this is only one of them, as Hellingér’s narr-
ation concludes the film. This is where I disagree with Joe Kember, who asserts, “Rather than being simply a reaction to popular fears concerning urban chaos, these texts therefore formalized, and made open play with, their audiences’ existing expertise in the practice of everyday life” (76). Firstly, this does not account for rural audiences unfamiliar with the terrain of New York or any modern, urban milieu. Secondly, the title Naked City implies that something usually hidden will be revealed, something quite distinct from the expectation of everydayness. Kember further claims, “all of the Naked City texts imitated a kind of casual knowingness concerning structures of everyday life: an attitude that had long been prevalent not only within texts about the city, but also within the city itself” (83). The same issue occurs here. Weegee is not a photojournalist in the traditional sense of, for example, Jacob Riis or Lewis Hine, nor does he associate himself with the straight photography of Alfred Stieglitz, though he somewhat ironically includes a short segment on the aging and impoverished Stieglitz at the end of Naked City. Weegee upends these traditions, not revealing the everydayness of urban life, but instead revealing the absurdity of documenting everyday life. Hellinger, Wald, and Dassin, in a similar vein, display the conventions of newsreel-style documentation in a manner that is highly sensationalized from the start. Hellinger’s voiceover does not possess the formal qualities of a newsreel voiceover and is somewhat hyperbolic in his descriptions. Later, the film also challenges the institution of American journalism more directly as the treatment and exploitation by the press of this particular crime story is problematized.

Both PM and the Photo League were left-leaning models that influenced The Naked City. The film adaptation is somewhat leftist in a non-explicit way. It focuses on working-class heroes—the police—and problematizes the impoverished context within which Garzah must become a murderer, sympathizing with him to some degree. However, the film does not address the diversity and race that Weegee achieves in Naked City, where he devotes an entire chapter to the Black community in Harlem. Unlike Weegee’s voyeuristic, pluralistic amalgam of marginalized individuals in the city, the film adaptation is concerned primarily with one story, which pigeonholes it into the conventions of Hollywood storytelling. Nevertheless, film noir carries on the evolution of Weegee’s work, from tabloid photographer to intellectual/pedagogical tabloid photographer (PM) to artist (Photo League, MoMa, and Naked City), and this entails self-reflexively fragmenting form and character.

Film noir presents an interesting case study for genre scholars and is generally considered more of a film movement that later developed into a genre (Erickson 308). Despite the ongoing pervasiveness of contemporary neo-noir films, there is a distinction between such films and the original noir movement. Film noir of the 1940s and 1950s serves as a transgressive artistic movement, challenging American values and disrupting traditional cinematic formulas, accomplishing this in some cases by intentionally fragmenting form and character. While this article focuses on the fragmentation of form (image/voiceover) and the fragmentation of character (fatalism and distance from the viewer), other modes of fragmentation exist in noir, such as the failure to perform resulting in physical disability (Neff’s phony act as a disabled Mr. Dietrichson illustrates the latter’s inability to survive while also foreshadowing Neff’s inevitable gunshot wound). It has been noted that fragmentation in film noir stems from, among other things, tabloid journalism. The emphasis here on the tabloid’s influence on film noir is not necessarily the definitive, exclusive cultural influence of noir, but rather one that may be overlooked as a lower form of culture. Additionally, the notion of fragmentation is not entirely unique to film noir. It could be argued
that all successful films possess characters that are fragmented to some degree. However, the fragmentation of form seems to be an exclusive quality within American cinema of the 1940s and 1950s, a time period in which formulaic traditions were canonized and virtually always employed by all of the major studios. In other words, film noir was transgressive at a time when transgression was unpopular in American cinema. And although noir films are often perceived as a B-film genre, many were critically well received; Double Indemnity was nominated for seven Academy Awards in 1945, and The Naked City won two of its three nominated categories in 1949: Best Cinematography (William H. Daniels) and Best Film Editing (Paul Weatherwax). Thus, noir’s transgressive acts, as influenced by cultural media perceived as inferior, were able to permeate more prestigious circles before being popularized by the French New Wave in the 1960s and American neo-noir filmmakers from the 1970s to the present.

While defining film noir or any aesthetic movement may be a dubious endeavor, an assessment of noir as fragmentation seems to at least elucidate some of the genre’s fundamental tenets, while also indicating that it did in fact operate as a unique cinematic movement, transgressing hegemonic norms associated with traditional Hollywood formulas.

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