THE STRANGER IN THE DARK:
THE ETHICS OF LEVINASIAN-DERRIDEAN HOSPITALITY IN NOIR

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ABSTRACT

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The meaning of what identifies *film noir* from other stories has plagued scholars of literature and film for decades. Some argue that *film noir* existed for a set period of time due to particular cultural, historical, and aesthetic reasons and that all similar narratives today represent just pale copies of copies, while others present noir as distinct stages. Few examine a range of these cultural texts to find the threads that bind them together and continue to make these dark tales of urban crime interesting to audiences over fifty years after they began. The tools and contexts alone do not rest at the heart of what defines noir. Noir, this genre-like cycle, is not the end in and of itself but rather the cultural and philosophical questions behind the grouping provides the real impetus to study.

On one hand, James Naremore in his book *More Than Night* refers to the need to explore the ideological center of noir. On the other hand, Jacques Derrida requests in *Of Hospitality* further analysis of ethics based on narratives that problematize binaries such as citizen/foreigner, master/stranger, and friend/enemy. Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas' ethics establish a new critical framework that describes the world of noir and its protagonists in valuable ways. Discourses of ethics as responsibility to the other and questions of hospitality identify the dark core of noir from the early hard-boiled novels, like Chandler's *The Big Sleep*, to the losers of the Coen's *The Big Lebowski*, the protagonist's struggles for identity in Soderbergh's *The Limey*, and to the growth of the noir in television series such as Rob Thomas' *Veronica Mars*.

These theorist/philosophers expand the general understanding of our role in a difficult world, and their observations about relations between individuals and between individuals and

their world give a new way of examining the actions and motivations of noir protagonists.

Derrida and Levinas put forth critical perspectives that allow for these sorts of quests and threats

while also allowing for an agent's actions to fall outside the traditional ethical rules based on a

set of practical principles, rules, or codes.

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Outside of my committee, I want to acknowledge the assistance that Thomas Hibbs gave me while I was still putting these ideas together. Our discussion of his work on noir and the quest of the protagonist helped me to position myself in a larger framework and convinced me that this work needed to be done. Many other faculty members have helped to shape my thinking, and to name them all would take pages. Rest assured that your time and efforts have not been wasted. To my friends and colleagues, I want to thank you for allowing me to practice on you in my attempts to focus my descriptions of the ethics of hospitality and its relationship to noir. You were good sports and always gave great advice and support. To my family, I want to say that without the constant push to explain, critique, and explore culture and narrative, I would probably never have seen the importance of story and belief in society.

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CHAPTER ONE:

REDEFINING NOIR

Defining Noir

As a generic term, "Noir," appears in texts, reviews, and promotional material for

upcoming films' releases.[1] Almost everyone recognizes and uses the term, but few actually

define and explore how noir, as a descriptor and a generic structure, fits within the cultural

meanings of the beginning of the Twenty-First Century.[2] Despite the volumes of books, articles,

and columns that tackle *noir*'s place in the last century, most do not acknowledge its

continuation as a powerful force in American and global culture.[3] From the point of view of

usage, noir appears to have lost little potency as the decades have passed since its first coining,

but at the same time, most scholars consider noir, that is "true" noir, a thing of the past,

something that can only be reflected palely in contemporary homages to a time and style that

cultural producers use but can never fully reclaim.

Symbols such as the man in the trench coat, the blonde *femme fatale*, dark, wet streets,

and a city fully of twists and errant shafts of light still hold power, but the nature of that power

eludes definition. Whether individuals call these narratives noir, film noir, detective stories,

pulps, or hard-boiled fiction, the styles and symbols clearly indicate a belonging to the genre.

However, the locations in media of these sorts of scenes move beyond the novels, pulps, and

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[1] When speaking of the overarching concept that transcends historical and stylistic borders, I will use the term "noir". When referring to the more traditional and bound term that refers primarily to films of the 30s through 50s, I will italicize the term and use, "*noir*" or "*film noir*".

[2] The texts that cover the importance of noir in defining the beginning of the Twentieth Century are numerous, the most notable being Silver and Ursini's *Film Noir Reader*.

[3] While not a comprehensive list, the University of California, Berkeley Library has a strong bibliography that includes most of the foundational texts on noir at http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/Noirbib.html.

films where some argue that they were perfected and originated.[4] These signs can equally point towards television shows, music videos, comic books, video games, or advertisements for perfume, furniture, or liquor.

Beyond being a genre, based in particular styles and settings, which continues to pervade American culture, what some call "noir" represents more than external style, a series of archetypes, or plot points that audiences easily recognize. The cultural attraction to these crime stories calls out to something essential in readers and viewers of the past eight decades in such a way that continues to pervade popular culture. More than the collection of the objects and plots, noir touches on something fundamentally important in the minds of those who encounter it. From a cultural and literary perspective, noir speaks of and to a changing world growing increasingly technological and impersonal while also appearing to shrink smaller and smaller in terms of connections, relationships, and responsibilities. Noir, with its tales of lone gumshoes, corrupt politicians and cops, gun molls and femme fatales does more than capture a fantasy of masculinity or preserve a view of a particular moment of American narrative history. This is not to say that noir does not do these things. A long history of scholarship shows that it does.[5] Yet, the central concept binding all of these narratives together still remains to be defined. There is something broader and deeper that noir was and continues to be about.

What this "something" is remains an issue of contestation among philosophers, film and literary scholars, and cultural critics. As a term for a distinct genre made up of certain narrative structures, *noir* emerges in the French film criticism of the late-1940s through the mid-1950s. Following the end of the Second World War, French cinephiles found a large number of films

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[4] For a more complete explication of the origins of *film noir* look to Silver and Ursini's foundational collection, *Film Noir Reader*.

[5] E. Ann Kaplan's edited volume, *Women in Film Noir* (1978), continues a thorough and ongoing exploration of gender in noir. Clearly, noir, because it tackles the nature of the contemporary world, holds gender as a major force in shaping power structures and the individuals that inhabit and find themselves at the mercy of them.

that they had been unable to access during the war years. Scholars such as Nino Frank in *"Un nouveau genre policier: L'aventure criminelle"* and Jean Pierre Chartier in "Les Americains aussi font des films 'noirs,'" both in 1946, began to notice trends in style and substance: a certain starkness in lighting, basis on hard-boiled detective fiction, first-person narrators, and flashbacks. They labeled these morality tales that emerged out of a confluence of time, place, and an influx of a younger generation of directors, many of whom immigrated to America, in the 20s through the 50s *noir* because of this prevailing darkness.[6]

Even from the coining of the term "*film noir*", we see a strong tension between different camps which each comment differently on this loose collection of "dark" films. A great debate has been waged among film scholars, perhaps beginning with Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton's essay "Towards a Definition of *Film Noir*" (1955) but continuing through the works of Paul Schrader, Alain Silver & James Ursini, Joan Copjec, and Foster Hirsch about the nature and duration of the *noir* genre.[7] Some, like Schrader, argue that *noir* cannot even be labeled a genre and, as a style of film, was tied to those source situations that gave rise to the genre in the first place, namely that it lasted from (1941-1954, or '58).[8] Others, such as Hirsch and Silver, see *noir* as a series of waves, allowing one to define *noir* as well as neo-noir, noir parody, etc.

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[6] Naremore, James, "American Film Noir: A History of an Idea," *Film Quarterly* 49.2 (Winter 1995-1996): 17.

[7] Borde, Raymond and Etienned Chaumeton, "Towards a Definition of *Film Noir*," *Film Noir Reader*, eds. Alain Silver and James Ursini, 8th ed. (New York: Limelight Editions, 1996); Copjec, Joan, ed. *Shades of Noir* (New York: Verso, 1993); Hirsch, Foster, *The Dark Side of the Screen: Film Noir* (London: Da Capo Press, 1981); --, *Detours and Lost Highways: A Map of Neo-Noir* (New York: Proscenium Publishers, Inc, 1999); Schrader, Paul, "Notes on *Film Noir*," *Film Noir Reader*, eds. Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight Editions, 1996); Silver, Alain and James Ursini, eds., *Film Noir Reader* (Limelight Editions, 1996).

[8] Schrader 53-64. Many subsequent scholars do reference Schrader's timeline and argue the addition or subtraction of years or films on one end or the other of the historical period. However, most do not argue with Schrader's assertion that *noir* is explicitly tied to a moment and style and is thus not a genre. This has lead to the theory that noir was a distinctly bounded historical moment, never to be reclaimed, only reflected.

These scholars lose sight of a larger context, that some *thing*, of how noir fits into the cultural enterprise of narratives. In other words, noir is all of these things, but to what end? Scholars might approach noir from all media as part of an interrelated genealogy that seeks to explore something central about human nature in the last century and into the future. Redefining the focus that we, as scholars, use to differentiate noir from other genres furthers the investigation of the questions raised by James Naremore in his article "American Film Noir," "could we not ask of [noir] many of the same questions that Foucault asks of authorship: What are the modes of existence of this discourse? Where has it been used, how can it circulate, and who can appropriate it?"[9] This set of questions represents one of the beginnings of this project, although it does not represent its boundaries. The implications of searching for the uses and circulations of something like noir begins to touch on many larger questions such as the meaning and importance of story in culture. However, Naremore gives one a strong place from which to depart.

Touchstones of an Idea

Rather than reenacting this sixty-year discourse in its entirety, I offer a few vital touchstones in film history and criticism against which this project establishes itself, namely Paul Schrader's "Notes on *Film Noir*", J.P. Telotte's *Voices in the Dark*, Foster Hirsch's *The Dark Side of the Screen* and its sequel *Detours and Lost Highways*, and James Naremore's work on noir.[10] By beginning with Schrader's essay, we see an early American attempt to define this grouping of films as distinctly not a genre. In fact, Schrader writes, "*Film noir* is not a genre… It

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[9] Naremore, "American Film Noir" 14.

[10] Naremore, James, *More than Night: Film Noir in its Context* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Telotte, J.P., *Voices in the Dark: The Narrative Patterns of* Film Noir (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989).

is not defined, as are the Western and gangster genres, by conventions of setting and conflict, but rather by the more subtle qualities of tone and mood".[11] In this definition of *film noir* as a primarily stylistic category, subsequent scholars have found a number of blind spots left by the consideration of these films in this manner. Schrader might have accurately described noir in its inception, but it might also have grown beyond its beginnings. Telotte writes about Schrader's comments that,

> The question of style, however, only broadens the debate about what the *film noir* is. After all, a number of distinct 'looks,' as well as various combinations of them mark the *noir* canon…. The *noir* 'style,' I would suggest, ultimately seems as curiously diverse as its subject matter, and equally as inadequate for accurately defining the form.[12]

By denying noir a place as a genre and labeling it as a style, Schrader effectively eliminates the possibility of genres providing tools for any authentic productive force for audiences and scholars crossing time and contexts or for the looks and contents of narratives to be interdependent. For Schrader, it would appear, *noir* represents a historical style and moment. It holds usefulness insofar as one is interested in studying the moment that produced it. In effect, *noir* is a butterfly pinned to a board. It may be examined in extreme detail and even placed next to different examples, but it will never again be a living and moving entity. If, as Schrader suggests, only the broadest concepts, the Western or the melodrama, can be termed as genres, then the use of genre becomes so abstract as to become impotent in the present moment. There would exist no way that scholars could examine their contemporary cultural products and examine them as part of past and present storytelling. However, this is clearly not the case.

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[11] Schrader 53.
[12] Telotte 10.

Producers, filmmakers, audiences, critics, and academics all respond immediately to very specific narrative elements of a category such as noir in addition to the stylistic and historical conventions. This has become all the more apparent if we ignore Schrader's (and many other's) assertion that noir is confined to a few dozen films produced in America between 1941 and 1958, the so-called "classic noir".

By allowing films that come from outside these temporal and spatial boundaries into consideration, we see, as Telotte argues, that noir "can designate a field of deviation that mirrors the problems of modern America in particular and modern man in general."[13] In looking for the nature of this "field of deviation", I provide an alternative understanding of the relationship between the classic and the contemporary noir. Before moving on to a more thorough discussion of Telotte's contribution to the study of the noir films, Hirsch's contemporary works on noir provide a further, valuable step on the subject because they both reject and build on the assumptions declared in Schrader's foundational work and allow us a fairly broad and comprehensive starting place.

In Hirsch's books, *The Dark Side of the Screen* and *Detours and Lost Highways*, Hirsch, in effect, dispute's Schrader's essential claim that noir is not a genre. By giving such descriptions of noir that,

> constitutes a body of striking work that represents the American film industry in
> its most neurotic, subversive, and visually provocative phase. *Noir* exposes the
> underside of the American Dream in a mode that mixes German Expressionism
> with a native hard-boiled realism, [14]

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[13] Telotte 12.

[14] Hirsch, *The Dark Side of the Screen* 209.

Hirsch presents a solid understanding of some of the most commonly accepted methods of

approaching noir. He considers the history, art, and industry of these films, as well as delving

into the traditional psychoanalytic perspectives on individual examples of *noir*. This multiplicity

of viewpoints brings with it an understanding that noir is precisely an object *worthy* of study and

that it is *an object* worthy of study. The emphasis points out Hirsch's fundamental viewpoint that

noir deserves further attention from the contemporary scholar but also that noir represents *a*

highly bounded and strictly confined set of films. In fact, the division of his discussion of noir

into a book on *noir* and another on neo-noir distinctly highlights one of the main failings of this

sort of approach. By ignoring the ways that *noir* and neo-noir deal with many of the same

foundational themes and borrow heavily from commonly held discourses and styles, Hirsch's

work does not examine noir as a continuing project that reacts and comments upon the

contemporary challenges of the modern, postmodern, and post-postmodern texts and individuals.

This episodic approach to film genre studies leaves an impression that filmmakers work within

distinct stages of history, while common in film, art, and literary studies, avoids the potential

important commonalities that persist in noir narratives as often today as they did nearly a century

ago.

Rather than approach noir as a series of stages, for example, proto-noir, classic noir, neo-

noir of the 60s-80s, and contemporary postmodern neo-noir, the works of Telotte and Naremore

present an invaluable perspective noir as a whole. In my use of Naremore and Telotte, I admit

that there *do* exist significant differences between noirs produced in the early, classical period

and those that appear on the screen at the beginning of the Twenty-First Century. However, these

differences do not result from the fundamental existence of a separate category but rather stem

from the ways in which the different cultural, historical, and industrial moments have dealt with

what Telotte called "the problems of modern America in particular and modern man in general," and Hirsch labeled noir's exposing of "the underside of the American Dream", as I mentioned above. Naremore and Telotte open noir to a view of a similar set of questions that form the central concern of noir as a transhistorical and transmedial set of narratives.

So far, I have used words such as "category," "set," "narratives," and "genre" somewhat interchangeably. This does not represent an ignorance of the different implications of such terms and the great amount of intellectual weight and struggle behind them. On the contrary, the understanding of noir as something greater than a genre comes with Telotte's and Naremore's calls for the need to expand on and utilize the permeability in such boundaries. An analysis of noir in the past century makes apparent its refusal to accept such constraints and its embracing of the contradictions that such questions raise. Therefore, by forcefully employing all of these terms, I am not saying that they are all the same but rather say that one may examine noir as all of these.

Beginning with Telotte, we see that noir changes into what he calls a "field" that, "is characterized by a remarkable variety of discursive formations, as Foucault would term them, through which the form manages to articulate a rising awareness of the limitations and paradoxes that shape our culture, our lives, and the stories we tell of them both."[15] Rather than representing an artificially created category that is imposed by producers, critics, and audiences, these participants recognize that noir addresses a number of distinct issues in such a way as to make them apparent. Telotte focuses on the issues of the constructed nature of narrative in general but, in particular, examines the ways that this same nature grows more obvious when examined in the cinematic narrative and the implications on philosophical understandings of the discourses of truth that such questions raise. Telotte writes that, "An eminently effective cinematic

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[15] Telotte 12.

communications, the best of these films manage to turn life's *noir* aspect against itself, thereby reminding us how necessary it is to look into and speak against the darkness,"[16] and this same sort of issue arises in Naremore's summary of the history of noir criticism, "American Film Noir".

Naremore, in both the aforementioned article and his book, *More than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts*, writes that the entire history of noir does not equal the sum of its historical parts.[17] Noir has for too long been associated with a distinct filmic style and particular narrative segments: Fedora hats, trench coats, strong men, hot, rainy nights, and hotter and more deadly women, or it has been said to center on a particular set of narratives produced at a certain time, by certain people, and in a certain place. This sort of categorization to this group of films ignores the potential cultural work that these stories all continue to serve. Frustrated by the commodification and meaninglessness that has accompanied this sort of understanding of noir, Naremore writes towards the end of "American Film Noir" that, "One thing is clear: the last film noir is no easier to name than the first. A fully historicized account of the category would range across the twentieth-century imagination, and would require a more nimble analysis than anyone has attempted" (25). Naremore attempts this more fully historicized account in *More than Night*. In the beginning of this attempt to gain a greater grasp on noir, he takes up a particularly provocative and useful approach to the idea of noir,

> An ideological concept with a history all its own, [film noir] can be used to
> describe a period, a movement, and a recurrent style. Like all critical terminology,
> it tends to be reductive, and it sometimes works on behalf of unstated agendas.

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[16] Telotte 36.

[17] For a full accounting of Naremore's development of this argument, I recommend the first chapter of *More than Night* which is entitled "The History of an Idea." Much of that chapter retreads the work of the earlier "American Film Noir" essay, but Naremore has begun to develop a cohesive response that he raised in the earlier essay.

For these reasons, and because its meaning changes over time, it ought to be

examined as a discursive construct. It nevertheless has heuristic value, mobilizing

specific themes that are worth further consideration.[18]

This represents an amazingly intriguing prospect for film scholars, especially in regards to noir.

Naremore bridges the concern of style and the concern of substance and meaning. Without

ignoring the style, we must also consider the why of what this "discursive construct" centers

around. We examine the nature of these "specific themes." Naremore argues, primarily in the

bounds of classical *noir*, that noir proves particularly useful when examined within its

sociological, cultural, and material contexts, and, in reading his work, it is hard to argue against

this potential. However, rather than keeping noir in its box and looking at more films in the same

way, I think that equal potential lies in taking noir narratives partially out of their particular

historical contexts and looking for the philosophical continuities. This search for continuities

does not mean establishing categories or bound genres. Naremore writes that, "people do not

form concepts by placing similar things together. Instead, they create networks of relationship,

using metaphor, metonymy, and forms of imaginative association that develop over time."[19] This

statement prompts the investigation the core concepts around which these networks weave. The

consideration that questions and perspectives of ethics represent one of the focal points of these

networks in noir stands as a core of this study. From this perspective, noir both gives people a

common form, an arena, for discourses of ethics and represents their attempts to interrogate these

ideas in narrative forms. It is both a cause and an effect of a deeper desire to work out

fundamental questions of humanity. By understanding how the construction and critical

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[18] Naremore, *More than Night* 6.
[19] Naremore, *More than Night* 5.

reception of noir responds to these underlying principals opens genre and cultural studies to a much broader importance in the knowledge of how we learn to know things like right and wrong.

<div align="center">**Previous Theoretical "Imaginations"**</div>

As I mention above, the critical understanding of noir as a genre has developed over time. Hirsch focuses on noir as an exploration of what he terms a "universal heart of darkness."[20] While Telotte, as mentioned above, condenses the attempt to explore the implications of noir into a simple image, voices in the dark, the differences in noir over the last fifty years beg for answers to who these voices are and what is the nature of the night from which they speak. Turning to Naremore again for a perspective on where to begin, he argues that a study of noir must begin to attempt to interrogate "the twentieth-century imagination."[21] It is important to note that Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida, who provide the basis of my perspective, also both propose ideas that refute or react to territory familiar to noir scholars: psychoanalysis, existentialism, and moralistic ethics. Before beginning to outline my imagining of these narratives, we must touch on the past imaginations that noir scholars have linked to these stories and the place of the individual within their dark worlds and draw out positives and negatives of each of these perspectives.

The Psychoanalytic Imagination

I cannot give, in this space, a thorough account of all of the vast quantity of scholarship that approaches noir from a psychoanalytic perspective, but I will attempt to provide an example

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[20] Hirsch, *The Dark Side of the Screen* 209. This term is not without certain cultural difficulties. The idea of a human "heart of darkness" obviously has its own tradition and implications. For this reason, I attempt to avoid it. However, it is an important imagination to bring to the discussion of the implications of noir.
[21] Naremore, "American Film Noir" 25.

that might serve as a guide to understand this contribution to noir scholarship. By looking at

Tony Williams' article, "*Phantom Lady*, Cornell Woolrich, and the Masochistic Aesthetic," one

sees both the strengths and weaknesses of a psychoanalytic approach to noir. In this article,

Williams applies the work of Gaylyn Studlar on notions of masochism in cinema against Laura

Mulvey's discussions of male visual pleasure to argue that,

> the spectator (male or female) regressed to the infantile pre-Oedipal phase,
>
> submitting to (and identifying with) the overpowering presence of the screen and
>
> the woman on it. Spectatorship and identification thus become a more complex
>
> process than in Mulvey's original formulation, having a bisexual component
>
> which has associations with the early phases of pre-Oedipal developments.[22]

Using this deduction about the potential sexual orientation of the viewing experience, Williams

applies this approach to unpack underlying themes and desires of Woolrich and his work,

Phantom Lady.[23] After analyzing Woolrich through his life and his work, Williams concludes

that *Phantom Lady* poses, "Two interpretations," which are, "the climax represents the

successful Oedipal project of subordinating the female to the male."[24] Williams first presents the

interpretation of traditional psychoanalytic analysis of gender in noir, which generally argued,

like Mulvey, that the cinema, and noir in particular, present a view of a world of disempowered

males who must lash out at the world around them in order to work assert their sexual potency.

    In contrast but along similar lines, Williams uses an alternative psychoanalytic approach

to refine the understanding of Woolrich's narrative. He writes,

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[22] Williams, Tony, "*Phantom Lady*, Cornell Woolrich, and the Masochistic Aesthetic," <u>Film Noir Reader</u>, eds. Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight Editions, 1996) 129.

[23] Williams 131.

[24] Williams 140.

But a second interpretation is also more likely. A contradiction certainly exists in

the combination of needle sticking and a triumphant look on Carol's face. …The

needle sticking opposes the male control triumph of the female outside the

confines of the text. This scene anticipates those future victories of her sister

"phantom ladies" in a later generation.[25]

Williams responds to the possibility that the unconscious, the desires, and sexuality provide tools

to look at the same text to both affirm hegemonic notions of gender and to resist against it. Noir

for Williams becomes a venue for understanding the struggle between the masculine and

feminine within individual's and the culture's collective unconscious.

On one hand, using "Freudian-Lacanian-Metzian" interpretations of cinematic narratives

opens them to analysis of deeper meanings by looking for psycho-sexual symbols and examining

the connections between individuals' sexual development and the themes reinforced by cultural

texts.[26] Williams and other scholars like him allow for a great depth into understanding the ways

in which stories influence our individual and cultural concepts of gender and sexuality.

Additionally, Williams combines insights into the possible connections between a text's author

and the messages which it holds, both consciously and unconsciously.

At the same time, we see some potential limitations of this approach to film and to noir,

more specifically. The focus on gender and sexuality often ignores other aspects of identity,

leaving issues of class and race at the margins. Additionally, the connection between the

psychology presented in the narrative and that of the author of the book on which the film is

based has the potential to create a link between the individual, literary auteur and the minds of

the audience sitting in the theater, perhaps years and miles apart perhaps assuming too much

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[25] Ibid.
[26] Williams 129.

transparency in the communicative process. This approach limits the understanding and interpretation of noir to only these sorts of considerations. Finally, a psychoanalytic approach such as this stops short of addressing the larger questions raised by Levinas and Derrida and to which I feel noir calls the audience: that of understanding the nature and hope for action of the corrupt darkness of contemporary society. However, even Derrida and, to some extent, Levinas utilize aspects of psychoanalytic approaches in ways that I discuss in later chapters, and the perspective certainly has significant contributions to make to the study of noir.

The Existential Imagination

In looking towards the existential bent of much of noir scholarship, the quantity of material, like that of the psychoanalytic perspective, is astounding. However, Robert Porfirio's "No Way Out" provides an example of the outlines existentialist imaginings of the noir word.[27] Porfirio argues that a central concept that defined a narrative as noir is the struggle of the individual to act out some form of agency in the face of a cold, automated, godless world. He draws comparisons between the actions of heroes like Mike Hammer, Philip Marlowe, and Sam Spade to the thoughts and ideas of thinkers like Nietzsche, Camus, and De Beauvoir. Like the psychoanalytic perspective, the existential provides valuable steps forward towards understanding noir as a genre but also holds some limitations.

First, Porfirio notices the difficulty with defining noir in a strict generic sense. He writes, "the *film noir* cuts across many of the traditional genres: the gangster film (*White Heat*), the Western (*Pursued*), the comedy (*Unfaithfully Yours*); and this means we must create a genre out

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[27] Porfirio, Robert, "No Way Out: Existetial Motifs in the *Film Noir*," *Film Noir Reader*, eds. Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight Editions, 2005) 77-94.

of pre-existing categories."[28] Rather than continue a strictly stylistic or historical attempt to

define *noir* as a genre, Porfirio utilizes a philosophical thread running through these films as a

common guide to understanding noir as both a genre and something that is not quite a genre.

This sort of approach closely influences my decision to perform a similar feat, only expanding

the philosophical thread to include more contemporary expressions of similar questions.

Like the ambiguity of *noir* as a term Porfirio states that existentialism lacks clear

definition.[29] This ambiguity leaves a great deal of room for scholarship on different

interpretations of these films even within an existentialist paradigm. To clarify the relationship

between the philosophy and *film noir*, Porfirio writes that *film noir* does not necessarily

consciously and directly incorporate the writings of existentialist thinkers into their narratives,

similar to form of some literary adaptation or allegory.[30] Rather, Porfirio uses existential

concepts to outline a particular perspective on this cycle of narratives. He focuses on a number of

consistent themes: the presence of the existential hero, alienation and loneliness, existential

choice, the closeness of death, meaninglessness, purposelessness, the absurd, chaos, violence,

paranoia, and sanctuary, ritual and order.[31] Porfirio's summary of existentialism in *noir* includes

both an exploration of the positive aspects of the existential, "'freedom,' 'authenticity,'

'responsibility,' and 'the leap into faith (or the absurd.)',''" and the negative side, "'nothingness,'

'sickness,' loneliness,' 'dread,' nausea.'"[32] He argues, however, that *film noir* focuses primarily

on the latter category, "The special affinity of the *film noir* for [the negative] aspect of

existentialism is nowhere better evidenced than in a random sampling of some of its most

suggestive titles: *Cornered*, *One Way Street*, *No Way Out*, *Caged*, *The Dark Corner*, *In a Lonely*

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[28] Porfirio, "No Way Out" 77.
[29] Porfirio 81.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Porfirio 83-93.
[32] Porfirio 81.

Place."[33] Porfirio's concludes from this "affinity" that *noir* deserves a strong reevaluation due to its importance on the future evolution of American film and that looking for existential themes certainly gives insight to how one might redefine the identity and purpose of these films.[34]

Porfirio's existential turn contributes a significant perspective that the definition of *noir* is indeed uncertain and fluid in terms of its meaning and importance. Additionally, the philosophical underpinnings of Porfirio's writing allows for the understanding of the actions and motivations of the *noir* protagonist in the *noir* world in terms broader than those focusing on the sexual and gender issues contained within the narratives. Porfirio writes about the *noir* protagonist: "Set down in a violent and incoherent world, the *film noir* hero tires to deal with it in the best way he can, attempting to create some order out of chaos, to make some sense of his world," and one cannot but see these tensions at work in *noir* film.[35] For my purposes, the work of Levinas and Derrida, as will be seen in subsequent chapters, deal with many of the same philosophical ideals, and their reaction with and against existentialism cannot be ignored.

Conversely, Porfirio retains the historical and textual boundaries. "*Film Noir* is by nature time-bound, and it is this that makes modern 'revivals,' whether done in period (*Chinatown*) or not (*The Long Goodbye*), something other than what they pretend to be," encompasses his entire argument against noir that rests outside of *noir*.[36] Porfirio's definition of *noir* which bases it on its expressionistic and impressionistic roots clearly applies for the definition of *noir*, but no argument arises that explains why noir must be limited to *noir*.[37] Clearly not all of *noir* held the exact same stylistics during the course of its production. For example, *The Maltese Falcon* looks

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[33] Ibid.
[34] Porfirio 93.
[35] Porfirio 92.
[36] Porfirio 78.
[37] The concept of *noir* as based in the stylistics coming from expressionistic and impressionistic runs throughout noir scholarship and is one of Schrader's criteria for defining *noir* as a style in his essay, "On Film Noir."

very different from *Kiss Me Deadly* if only because the former contains less material filmed on

location than the latter, yet scholars generally acknowledge that both belong in the *noir* canon. In

Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward's *Film Noir: An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style*,

they list hundreds of films produced over the course of decades by scores of directors.[38] It would

be unreasonable to assume that all adopted a homogenous style, despite numerous similarities

due to Hollywood conventions and the availability of technology and funding. This leaves the

noir-as-style argument in a situation where the definition of noir becomes quibbling about

individual lines of demarcation rather than constructing a usable grouping to describe the films'

larger place in culture.

Furthermore, Porfirio's application of the existential focus, choosing to highlight the

affinity of *noir* for the negative side of existentialism, marginalizes those protagonists and

narratives which contain aspects of positive existentialism. When Porfirio writes, "Given the

nature of the *noir* world, the attempt is seldom totally successful, and convoluted time structures,

flashbacks and plots that emphasize action over rational development do nothing to help," we

can begin to wonder if this is indeed true.[39] The stylistics of noir, the breaks in time, flashbacks,

and plot turns, also might be seen to give the hero the possibility for hope and agency, if only to

the slightest degree. In later chapters, I will show how Levinas' and Derrida's approaches to the

philosophy of ethics build on existential concepts and construct the noir protagonist and world in

a more complex way, allowing for integration of the positive and negative sides to the existential

question and which also open up *noir* to noir.

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[38] Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward, eds., *Film Noir: An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style*, 3rd ed.
(Woodstock: The Overlook Press, 1992)
[39] Ibid.

The Moralistic Imagination

Where Porfirio sees in *noir* the loneliness and separation of the *noir* hero, others see in noir a commitment to an alternative set of objective moralistic codes. Thomas Hibbs examines noir in his forthcoming work, *The Art of Darkness*, primarily in terms of how protagonists enact a sort of Kantian moral code present in these heroes' as contemporary knights who must brave contemporary obstacles rather than the black knights and dragons of medieval and romantic stories. Hibbs outlines the importance and meaning of these questing protagonists. He writes that,

> Whatever might be the social and political sources of noir, it is never reducible to a simple negation. Noir is stylistically and dramatically complex. Its emphasis on darkness and shadows, absence over presence, and the duality of personal identity underscore the depth and mystery inherent in the most mundane of experiences. Into such a disorienting, threatening and inviting world, noir thrusts its protagonist, who sets out on a quest to solve a particular mystery…. What is striking about many of these films is not simply that they offer a bleak vision of contemporary society, but that they feature characters engaged in a quest for love, purpose, or intelligibility among the ruins of a shattered world.[40]

Hibbs uses this perspective of noir to produce an examination of contemporary quest narratives, namely *The Passion*, *The DaVinci Code*, and the *Harry Potter* stories. Hibbs searches for the ways that the concept of noir can be used to show the underlying cultural and individual discourses for meaning and purpose. Noir becomes more than a set of styles or a particular historical cinematic period. Elsewhere in the same chapter, Hibbs writes more broadly of the ways that noir speaks to and about larger philosophical and cultural imperatives,

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[40] Hibbs, Thomas, "Arts of Darkness: Pascalian Reflections of American Noir" (forthcoming) 10,13.

Film noir exhibits persistent skepticism about these claims; to varying degrees, it

recovers a conception of human life as an always tenuous quest, whose success is

dependent on veiled clues and the uncertain assistance of others. For all its

emphasis on psychotic loners and individuals devoted to calculative self-interest,

noir often highlights the inextricably social condition of human beings. Although

fulfillment is never secure and is often foreclosed, the longing for communication,

friendship, and love remain at the very center of the plot. Autonomy, the

centerpiece of enlightenment ethics and politics, can be a debilitating illusion;

bold self-assertion, a self-destructive vice. Film noir engages, without necessarily

succumbing to, nihilism.[41]

At this point, Hibbs provides an important jumping off point by looking at a range of noir

narratives that all deal with a similar set of concepts and questions. Hibbs argues that noir, at its

core, focuses on one individual's "longing" for a relationship and connections that touch on the

desperation of nihilism but also point to the potential for understandings that go beyond the loss

and confusion of the modern or postmodern moments. These sorts of relationships and

connections also rest at the center of the questions and discussions that Levinas and Derrida

present.

The Importance of the Quest for Noir

All of this delving into the center of what noir means represents more than scholarly play.

Trying to find the core of a genre with as much cultural gravity as noir gives cultural and

narrative scholars deep insight into the roles that these stories play in the societies that create and

participate in them. Telotte argues that, "*Noir*, after all, not only confronts us with the images

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[41] Hibbs 11.

and events that possess us as cultural beings, that weave us into their narrative; in the process, it

also casts in relief the discursive practices that lead us to see ourselves as the creators,

possessors, and narrators of these things."[42]

Telotte's analogy of a fabric of culture and narrative allows each of these stories and their

interpretations their own place in the study of noir, a thread if you will. In following these

threads, he develops a view of noir that highlights some of the significant differences between

the ways that noir works in its framework and how the majority of other narrative styles

approach cultural norms and defines an important starting place for my project. Using Michel

Foucault's discussions of discourse and power, he writes that, "*noir* turns discourse's paradoxical

nature to its own ends in a manner unequaled by prior American films. It finds in our narrative

practices a way to hollow out in the present a shelter against corruption, manipulation, and

destruction—to create a mirror that might reflect light into the darkness of our *noir* world."[43]

Telotte, like Hibbs, creates a space of talking about noir in a larger context, a genealogy of a

cultural context. He outlines the importance of these sorts of stories and briefly points to the

places that I seek to find possible answers. "On both the individual and cultural levels, we

usually look for—and cling to—patterns of order, systems of continuity. They provide us with a

defense against both the contradictions in our culture and ourselves and those sudden upwellings

of desire in each."[44] This statement points to not only the importance of investigating genres, but

it also addresses how noir, specifically, provides a defense in the face of chaotic challenges to

individuals and culture.

> Our best hopes against the chaotic or the discontinuous, then rest paradoxically in
>
> our ability to testify to it, to speak of its inevitable place in our individual and

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[42] Telotte 35.
[43] Telotte 36.
[44] Telotte 222.

cultural lives. The *film noir*, I would suggest, offers just such a testimony, a

speaking of, but also against death, in order to preserve what we had come to see

as a most fragile human order.[45]

Therefore by opening the cultural discourse of the darkness, the corruption, of the world, Telotte

argues that noir gives participants a potential to speak of and on the nature of that darkness. As

Telotte writes,

> *noir* could effectively let difference speak, give voice even to death itself, and in
>
> the process, like a kind of vital talisman, perhaps even stay that threat. Hardly a
>
> morbid or pathological form, as some would see it, then, the *film noir*, especially
>
> in the ways it speaks of and to our human darkness, is essentially a genre of life.[46]

Telotte's description of how noir might function within culture provides a solid starting point for

the interrogating the genre in broader terms that a particular set of stylistic modes in a specific

historical time period.

Contemporary Philosophical Views of Noir

Recent works such as Mark Conard's edited volume *The Philosophy of Noir* provide a

good place to start in building off of Telotte's and Hibbs' visions that noir contributes something

specific to cultural understandings of darkness.[47] The contributions in this volume perform fairly

traditional critical analysis, but for a discussion of noir, they extend the objects worthy of noir

study to contemporary films. In Conard's book, philosophers discuss topics ranging from

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[45] Ibid.

[46] Telotte 223.

[47] Conard, Mark, ed., *The Philosophy of Film Noir*, (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2006).

Conard's somewhat traditional question of a Nietzschean view of noir[48] to Ian Jarvie's[49] and R.

Barton Palmer's[50] articles which both touch on noir as an exploration of the meaning and identity

of morality. Perhaps most importantly in this work, Conard's discussion of how Tarantino's *Pulp*

Fiction works as a noir draws on symbols and meanings in a way that likens it to Conard's

earlier work on nihilism in noir.[51] He examines a contemporary text in a volume that is, for the

most part, still focused on noir as *noir*. Even with these new approaches to noir, these scholars,

for the most part, deal with contemporary and classic noir as two extremely different groupings

rather than as different expressions of similar individual and cultural ideals.

One essay in *The Philosophy of Noir* specifically bridges this division between *noir* and

neo-noir. In Jason Holt's "A Darker Shade", he defines noir as "stylized crime realism", and I

take his definition as a starting point for the investigation of noir as a genealogy of ethics.[52]

Holt's "stylized" refers to some formal reference to an expressionistic depiction of a

psychological mood.[53] He leaves "crime" to be self-defined, but by his examples, he takes it to

refer to some element of protagonists who engage in acts that cross or border the law. "Realism"

holds the key, for Holt, to understanding the importance of both classic and neo-noir. Holt

defines realism as fundamentally connected to the morality of noir films in a way that mirrors

their style, "The tone and mood of film noir are apropos of how things really are, a sense of

reality, not distorted, but *conveyed* by expressionist techniques and convoluted plotlines….The

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[48] Conard, Mark, "Nietzsche and the Meaning and Definition of Noir," *The Philosophy of Film Noir*, ed. Mark Conard (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2006) 7-22.

[49] Jarvie, Ian, "Knowledge, Morality, and Tragedy in *The Killers* and *Out of the Past*," *The Philosophy of Film Noir*, ed. Mark Conard (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2006) 163-186.

[50] Palmer, R. Barton, "Moral Man in the Dark City: Film Noir, the Postwar Religious Revival and *The Accused*," *The Philosophy of Film Noir*, ed. Mark Conard (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2006) 187-206.

[51] Conard, Mark, "Symbolism, Meaning, and Nihilism in Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*," *The Philosophy of Film Noir*, ed. Mark Conard (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2006) 125-138.

[52] Holt, Jason, "A Darker Shade," *The Philosophy of Film Noir*, ed. Mark Conard (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2006) 25.

[53] Holt 24.

moral ambiguity of characters is no less realistic."[54] This usefully contributes to my perspective

that merges Hirsch's "universal heart of darkness" and Telotte's "problems of modern America

in particular and modern man in general".

Holt leaves the definition of "moral ambiguity" ambiguous, and perhaps that is necessary

to cover the scope that noir presents to its viewers and critics. He walks the reader through brief

discussions of neo-noirs and the realism of their protagonists' morality from *Harper* to *Pulp*

Fiction. With each film, Holt points out how the characters and situations work together to

present a view of the world that is more morally realistic. The dividing line between classic and

neo-noir in Holt's mind is obviously the Production Code. By not allowing the earlier films to

enact the moral ambiguity that their styles and settings hinted towards, the Production Code

represents a barrier to considering classic and neo-noir as in the same classification.[55] I disagree.

By attributing the difference in endings and the extent to which filmmakers were able to visually

able to depict the moral questions which they interrogated to the Production Code, then we are

able to see that the division is artificial, although culturally important. It is artificial because the

Production Code clearly attempted to impose a moral framework on Hollywood in order to

restrain depictions of realistic sex or violence. At the same time, that the Production Code was

instituted and lasted as long as it did makes an important statement about the tensions over the

meaning of morality and realism. This evolution represents the very center of scholarship that

examines the ways noir acts as a genealogy of a culture's interaction with these themes. Holt

writes,

> the Production Code required classic noir to exhibit poetic justice, "morally
>
> permissible" endings where the victims are irretrievably lost or definitively

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[54] Holt 25.
[55] Holt 37.

reclaimed and the guilty get what's coming to them. Under the auspices of the

ratings system, neo-noirs exploit the much more realistic possibility that, often,

the guilty fail to get their comeuppance.[56]

Noir, its classical embodiment and more contemporary examples, all provide a valuable window

into understanding reactions and institutions that for the last century have sought to define ethics

in the stories that we tell ourselves.

Noir is not a form-based grouping that relies primarily on style, particular settings and

time periods, certain auteurs, and psychological and historical structures. I shift noir from a

stylistic and historically constructed genre to one that allows for the shifts in technology, culture,

and style, as in the move from the Production Code to the MPAA. I combine Telotte, Holt, and

Hibbs' approaches to noir as a genre into a question with a deceptive appearance of simplicity,

"Given a corrupt world, what can one do?" Combining this question with an examination the

notions of citizenship, hospitality, and the face of another that contemporary ethicists Emmanuel

Levinas and Jacques Derrida raise allows for a greater introspection into noir but also opens

scholarship to the use of noir as an interrogation of notions of ethics.[57] These questions revolve

around issues of citizenship, foreignness, hospitality, ethics, murder, death, sacrifice, and law. In

other words, given that the noir world is corrupt and the holders of power are indifferent or

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[56] Holt 37-38.

[57] For the purposes of this work, I will be relying predominantly on the following texts: Derrida, Jacques, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999); --, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); --, *Of Hospitality*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000); --, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes (London: Routledge, 2001); --, *The Work of Mourning*, trans and eds. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Levinas, Emmanuel, *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000).

malignant, what *is* the lone agent to do in a modern/postmodern society?[58] To put it another way, what *does* noir say about Holt's realistic morality, Hibbs' quest, and Telotte's darkness?

A Levinasian-Derridean Ethical Perspective on Noir

Drawing Levinasian-Derridean ethics into the center of the study of noir as a genre destabilizes the assumptions about the noir as a distinct and separate entity and shows a potential for scholarship across more diverse lines. Noir becomes an expression of a continuing cultural discourse about ethics, not a reflection or parody. At the same time, looking at noir narratives more broadly through the use of philosophies of ethics allows for the exploration of the philosophies themselves, broadening the understanding of what Levinas and Derrida regard as relational ethics. Since both Levinas and Derrida have particularly dense modes of presenting their arguments and concepts, I would like to unpack their ethical thoughts in a series of stages throughout the coming chapters, but I will briefly mention some of the foundational ideas and then give some examples of how these might show up in noir narratives before providing a more thorough picture of the project as a whole.

Levinasian Ethics: The Face of the Dying Other

Levinas' image/concept of the face of the dead/dying other combines the idea of the recognition of the mortality of another in their face with our response to that face as an ethical imperative. Levinas first establishes the face as the expression of the other to the self. The face is

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[58] This unorthodox combination of "modern" and "postmodern" indicates that noir transcends the differences that have evolved since society has moved from a modern and into a postmodern paradigm. Part of the purpose of this work's focus on both classic and contemporary noir narratives is to show that regardless of the changes in stylistics and topic that the shift from modern to postmodern has wrought, noir has evolved to respond to the questions of the role of the individual in a corrupt society. The Production Code and attempts to control narratives and the ways in which they came down represent part of the shift from the modernist conceptions in culture to the postmodern.

where "someone expresses himself, an other than I, different from me, an other who expresses

himself to the point of being nonindifferent to me, that is, of being one who bears me."[59] With

the death of the other this expressiveness reinforces the difference and the relationship of the self

and the other. "Someone who dies: a face that becomes a masque. The expression disappears.

The experience of death that is not mine is an "experience" of the death of *someone*, someone

who from the outset is beyond biological processes, who is associated with me as someone."[60]

This recognition of the face of the other by the self presents a valuable understanding for

Levinas, something he calls the "moment of astonishment". Levinas' "moment of astonishment"

removes the "me" from the self in light of my recognition of the mortality and vulnerability of

the other. "My being affected by the death of the other is precisely that, my relation with his

death. It is, in my relation, my deference to someone who no longer response, already a

culpability—the culpability of the survivor."[61] This recognition prompts an understanding and

relationship to the other that is not bases on the ontology of the self or that of the other but what

Levinas terms the question or questioning, "Astonishment is a question that is not the posing of a

question and in which there is also a response. It is a question by virtue of the obscurity of the

subject, and a response by virtue of the fullness of hope."[62] Levinas begins to put these pieces

together as an ethical model based of this relationship in a later lecture, "Thinking About Death",

> A searching as a questioning, and a questioning arising prior to every question
>
> about the given. *In*finity *in* the finite. A fission or a putting in question of the one
>
> who questions….What does this *in* signify? It signifies the putting in question of
>
> me by the other that takes the form of an appeal to my responsibility, that confers

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[59] Levinas 11.
[60] Levinas 12.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Levinas 102.

on me an identity. A questioning in which the conscious subject is liberated from

himself, in which it is split apart but by excess, by transcendence: there we find

the disquietude of time as awakening.[63]

The recognition of the other by the self calls for a recognition of the self of the need to question

the finitude of the self based on the loss of the other, or as Levinas puts it,

This disturbance by the other puts into question the identity in which the essence

of being is defined. This fission of the Same by the untenable Other at the heart of

myself, where disquiet disturbs the heart at rest, and is not reducible to some

intellection of terms…this is awakening, this is temporality.[64]

This questioning creates a division in the self, which then questions itself, creating a further

separation of the self from the other because of the connection to the other. This paradox, or

what Levinas calls "disquietude", awakens the self to its ipseity. This awakening has great

importance in defining Levinas' ethics.

It is necessary to think in an ethical manner this tearing of the Same by the Other. The

return, or recurrence, of this identification of the Same amounts to undergoing every

passion to the point of passive languishing, that is, of suffering an assignation without

possible evasion, without escaping into representation in order to outwit its urgency. To

be in the accusative before any nominative form. Inner identity signifies precisely the

impossibility of holding oneself at rest. It is ethical from the first.[65]

Levinas establishes ethics as an inherently relational and situational model. However, because it

is relational with a preference for another, Levinas highlights some of the pitfalls of a utilitarian

perspective, namely how they locate ethics in a consideration of that which benefits as one takes

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[63] Levinas 110.
[64] Levinas 110-111.
[65] Levinas 111.

everyone into account. Levinas breaks with this universalist mode and places the emphasis on

the hunger or need of this other who is placed before me in the moment of astonishment.

Applying this to noir becomes very telling. Let us examine a classical noir film such as

Kiss Me Deadly (1955). In this film, Mike Hammer (Ralph Meeker), Mickey Spillane's iconic

hard-boiled detective, finds himself drawn into a violent and intriguing situation involving the

search for the "great whatsit" after he nearly runs into Christina Bailey (Cloris Leachman) on a

deserted road in the middle of the night. After he picks her up and lies to the police roadblock to

get her into town, they are forced off the road, Christina is tortured to death, and Hammer is put

into his car with her, pushed off a cliff, and left for dead. Miraculously surviving, Hammer

recovers and sets out to discover the roots of Christina's death despite warnings from the police,

the feds, and the city's criminal elements.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, *Kiss Me Deadly* could be interpreted as a conflict

between the id, the many female attractions and Hammer's own desire for revenge for actions

taken against him, the ego, Hammer's numerous warnings from the legal and criminal

institutions, and the superego, Hammer's own sense of "right".[66] Analyzing the film in

existential terms places a protagonist who resists the constraints of society but finds himself

imprisoned by others time and again, his own doubts and divided loyalties. Finally, one could

look at the ways that Hammer ignores the codes of both sides of the law in his quest for

individualization and is punished for his transgressions. After all, the film ends with the

chivalrous Hammer rescuing Velda (Maxine Cooper) from the beach house where she has been

imprisoned.

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[66] Admittedly, this represents a very fractional possibility of a psychoanalytic perspective on *Kiss Me Deadly*. I do not mean for this to become a straw man but rather give an example of the general type of issues that a psychoanalytic viewpoint might bring to bear on this narrative.

If we challenge the narrative from the Levinasian perspective of ethics, with its focus on the recognition of the mortality in the face of the other during a moment of astonishment which causes one to take up the work of one's own mortality and responsibility in the face of the dead or dying other, then we gain another facet of understanding the way that the film might work. The film establishes Christina's mortality in strong terms from the very beginning of the film in Hammer's encounter with Christina on that fateful night. The viewer sees Christina running barefoot and barely clothed along the road towards the camera. She fruitlessly attempts to stop a couple of drivers. In each of these short segments, the camera begins by focusing on her bare feet on the asphalt, moves to her whole body, and then focuses on her face as the cars pass. Finally, Christina steps in the middle of the road, placing herself at the mercy of the driver. The camera shifts from a view from behind her as the car approaches to the driver's view as the camera quickly zooms to the headlights hitting her face. The camera reverses, and we see the driver, Hammer, pulling the wheel to the side to avoid hitting her. The audience sees her relief as the car skids to a stop, but they also see Hammer trying to restart his car and avoid looking at her. Finally, he looks her full in the face and states, "You almost wrecked my car…well?" Breathing heavily, Christina does not answer, and Hammer half-heartedly replies, "Get in." As the credits roll as if they were the road approaching the two individuals in the small car, the soundtrack highlights the sounds of Christina's crying and audibly labored breathing and Nat King Cole singing "Rather Have the Blues".[67] The bond is forged. The audience and Hammer recognize Christina's humanity in her face, presumed nudity, and the closeness of her death, and Cole's singing predicts the troubled outcome of Hammer's acceptance of Christina's situation.

As mentioned above, Levinas argues that when one is confronted with the face of another, the self must first recognize the mortality and finiteness of the other. This is a

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[67] *Kiss Me Deadly*, dir. Robert Aldrich, perf. Ralph Meeker, Cloris Leachman, United Artists, 1955.

recognition that the face of the other will eventually be non-respondent, dead. The other exposes

the self of the possibility of complete annihilation, and this vulnerability places a demand on the

self that I must accept the work of the other without subsuming the other into my self. In one

way, we might examine this ethical response to the face of the other as a form of redemption.

This realization presents a moment of astonishment that forces the self to become "open" to the

other. Levinas, importantly, argues that this opening, itself, does not found the ethical model. It

is not enough to just recognize the mortality of the other and have it affect the self. One could

harden one's heart to this openness and still behave unethically or overtake the other and

subsume them within the self. Levinas includes that this opening must be followed by a will to

action, a Saying.[68] The openness of the face of the other and the moment of astonishment created

by the sight by my self of the other's vulnerability calls for me to will myself for the other.

Returning to *Kiss Me Deadly*, the narrative further cement's Hammer's role as being

fundamentally affected by the face, in the Levinasian sense, of Christina. He tells officers at a

roadblock that she is his wife and has been sleeping throughout their drive and withstands the

stares of the lascivious gas station attendant who see her state of undress and presumes a sexual

component to their drive. Both of these actions respond in part to alternative interpretations of

noir. Had Hammer been a more traditional hero who abides by the legal, moralistic codes and

trusts in the inherent meaning of the law, then he might have sought the assistance of the police

officers. Had Hammer's motivations been psycho-sexual, then he might not have responded so

caustically to the gas station attendant's presumptions. While these are by no means preclusions

to those forms of interpretation, these depictions of Hammer certainly point to an alternative

understanding of his motivations. Following the gas station, Christina quotes the poetry of her

namesake and begs Hammer that no matter what happens that he must, "Remember me". Later

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[68] Levinas150-151.

in the narrative, as Hammer has certainly remembered her, he must also seek to remember the importance of remembering her. He must in a fundamental way take her work onto himself without giving up his self or circumscribing her otherness. Hammer must, at the critical point in the film, "say" her as he restates what she said to him in the car and finally places the pieces together.

We see that Hammer must retrace Christina through those who knew her and subsequently died. The audience follows Hammer as he now seeks the faces of Christina's others. He claims to his secretary, Velda, who continually tries to entice Hammer romantically with only mixed results, that this whole search represents a search for a big piece of something big, but as the stakes, and body count, increase, the motivation of money becomes less and less tenable. To further reinforce this theme of Hammer's responsibility to the faces of others, through the course of the narrative, Hammer's Greek informant/mechanic, Nick, is killed (interestingly by a man shown only by his shoes, thus having no face), and Velda is captured by the criminal forces seeking to get their hands on the mysterious box and its glowing contents of some nuclear importance.[69] By bringing the conflict into Hammer's inner circle of faces, the criminals ensure Hammer's interest and involvement. In the end, Hammer must recognize his connection to Velda and set out to save her from being a hostage, bringing us to another term of importance to Levinas' view of ethics.

For Levinas, each question and search for understanding of another leads to another question and so on. This infinite questioning of the other leads to a relationship that Levinas

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[69] The possibility exists that the difference between the literal face of an individual and another body part, such as the shoe, might be muddier than I suggest here. Shoes, specifically, possess a history of identification in the works of Heidegger and Derrida. Also, in *Sullivan's Travels* (1941), Sturges' nearly *noir*, shoes play an important part in indicating the personhood of characters. Clearly, work into what might ethically constitute a face remains potentially fruitful. However, for the purpose of this work, I will remain closely focused on the literal face.

argues involves the self in some ways becoming the hostage to the hunger, need, or mortality of the other.

> The extreme tension of the command pressed upon me by another; a command prior to any opening on my part; a traumatic hold of the Other upon the Same. This is a hold that I discover in the extreme urgency that calls for my help, to the point where I always come too late, for there is no time to wait for me.[70]

Kiss Me Deadly repeatedly plays out this tension in Hammer's lateness both physically and ethically. Hammer, the hero, arrives in response to Christina only after her imprisonment and is literally forced off his road rather than hitting her. Shortly thereafter, Christina's enemies make literal hostages of Hammer and Christina, and Hammer is too late to save her from torture. The criminals try to force Hammer into becoming a hostage in his own apartment by threatening him. The law takes away his PI and gun licenses, leaving him without his usual modes of identity and protection. Too late, Hammer tries to protect Christina's roommate by locking her in his apartment, but this ill-fated attempt at protection only provides for the capture of his lover/secretary, Velda, who is taken to the beach house. It is there that she must be rescued by Hammer. The thin line between protection/safety and being a hostage both as an ethical relationship and under another's power in noir fits remarkably well with Levinas and Derrida. In both Derrida and Levinas, one cannot behave ethically when one is strictly bounded. At the same time, one cannot be wholly subsumed by another. This opens the idea of being a hostage where one is under the power of another but also distinct. The tension and potential for violence within the ethical relationship vitally remains in balance but not resolved. It is in the expression of this sort of tension that noir excels.

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[70] Levinas 187.

Derrida's Next Steps

This relational mode of ethics described by Levinas appears extremely close to what

Derrida describes in *Of Hospitality*, *Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, and *The Gift of Death*.

Derrida takes what is essentially an individualistic ethics based on the self's subjectivity to the

other and opens it up to larger, cultural understandings of relationships such as the

master/stranger and the citizen/foreigner binaries. Derrida acknowledges the contribution of

Levinas' notion of ethics as hospitable and relational to the very identity of ethics. "For

hospitality is not simply some region of ethics, let alone, and we will return to this, the name of a

problem in law or politics: it is ethicity itself, the whole and the principle of ethics."[71] This

perspective on Levinas' work takes the relationship of the self to the other and allows Derrida to

examine more closely the importance of Levinas' relational model of ethics in the larger societal

and political spheres. While it is clearly not the only motivating factor in Derrida's assumption of

these ethical questions, following Levinas' death in 1995, Derrida gives the graveside eulogy and

a lecture one year later honoring Levinas' work. In these speeches, Derrida takes Levinas' ethical

model, and his symbol of recognizing the face and work of the dying or dead Other, to heart and

continues Levinas' work, albeit with a slightly different focus in what might be termed, Derrida's

ethical turn.

Derrida develops linguistic and philosophical understandings of the past, present, and

potential future meanings of "hospitality" and the themes of the languages and narratives

surrounding it. In *Of Hospitality*, Derrida begins with classical, narrative examples, such as

Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, and draws connections from their perspectives on the nation and

hospitality to contemporary issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the French-Arab

tensions. Drawing these connections does not establish, by itself, new definitions of ethical

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[71] Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* 50.

behavior; rather it problematizes the naturalness of contemporary perspectives on these objective

modes of morality and leaves the reader to interrogate the notions for themselves. Using

Derrida's brief exploration of the history between France and Algeria, we see an example of this

procedure, "the history of citizenship, the future of borders separating complete citizens from

second-zone or non-citizens, from 1830 until today, has a complexity, a mobility, an

entanglement that are unparalleled, as far as I know, in the world and in the course of the history

of humanity."[72] He takes what he defines as a very particular historical and cultural example and

draws from it general questions of the understandings of the included concepts themselves.

Specifically, Derrida redefines, "the distinction between unconditional hospitality and, on the

other hand, the rights and duties that are the conditions of hospitality."[73] This creates a distance,

"Between an unconditional law or an absolute desire for hospitality on the one hand and, on the

other, a law, a politics, a conditional ethics, there is a distinction, radical heterogeneity, but also

indissociability."[74] Derrida expresses that rather than choosing between one view of ethics and

the other that a necessary tension exists. This seems to directly reflect the sorts of ways that

Levinas discusses ethics and the religious experience when he writes, "Within this division or

this duality, there is a structure specific to meaning: meaning as diachrony, as necessarily in two

times, and thus a meaning that repels synthesis. This diachrony—to coincide and, at the same

time, not to coincide—is perhaps what is proper to transcendence."[75] While Derrida discusses the

political implications of hospitality and Levinas explores the religious or transcendent

connections of the ethical, both highlight that the ethical contains this sort of tension and

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[72] Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 143.
[73] Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 147.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Levinas 215.

diachrony. The nature and meaning of this tension rests at the heart of Derrida, Levinas, and, I

argue, also noir.

Derrida, coming at this problem from a political and linguistic perspective, extends this

relational ethics to look at broader implications on issues of nationalism and communications.

Derrida begins his work, *Of Hospitality*, with the issue of citizenship, belonging, and their

connections to the importance of language. Drawing from classical Greek texts, including the

trial of Socrates, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and Levinas' work itself, Derrida questions the

connections between ideas of hospitality, hostility, and language. Most notably, he notices how

one's ability to speak the "language" (and by this he refers to not merely the literal language but

also the cultural rules) as defining whether one belongs or does not. This notion of belonging or

not belonging rests at the heart of ethical questions, and the exploration of those concepts that

divide people into these groups represents a first step in understanding ethics. Speaking about

Plato's dialogues, Derrida states, "The Foreigner of the *Sophist* here resembles someone who

basically has to account for possibility of sophistry. It is as though the Foreigner were appearing

under an aspect that makes you think of a sophist…: someone who doesn't speak like the rest,

someone who speaks an odd sort of language."[76] This tension between the city and the foreigner

could result in hostility, but by looking to Levinas, Derrida points out that even hostility has its

roots in hospitality and language.

> Whether it wants to or not, whether we realize it or not, hostility still attests to
>
> hospitality: 'radical separation,' 'relation with the other,' 'intentionality,
>
> consciousness of …, attention to speech or welcome of the face.' In other words,
>
> there is no intentionality before and without this welcoming of the face that is
>
> called hospitality. … as these words from the final pages of *Totality and Infinity*

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[76] Derrida, Jacques. "The Foreigner Question". *Of Hospitality*. Bettina Bergo, trans. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000, 5.

affirm: "the essence of language is goodness, or again,…the essence of language is friendship and hospitality."[77]

Derrida expands on these ideas for himself as he explores the relationship of the dualities of the meanings of the citizen of the nation with the foreigner and the master of the house with the stranger at their door.

These dualities and their examination by noir and of those viewing/reading noir presents a number of themes which center a different perspective on noir and which point to all of the more foundational questions of the meaning and place of ethics within culture. Derrida's metaphor of the master/citizen waiting on and because of their dependence on the stranger/foreigner represents a large part of the linguistic deconstruction present in these examples of his ethical turn. Even if we draw primarily from *Of Hospitality* and think back to Derrida's discussion of linguistic *difference* from his earlier works, we remember that he posits, building on Levi-Strauss et al, that the meaning of words stems from them being differentiated as not-other.[78] For Derrida, what meaning would the master have as master without the stranger? Derrida provides the beginnings of an answer in *Of Hospitality*,

> it's *as if* the master, *qua* master, were prisoner of his place and his power, of his ipseity, of his subjectivity (his subjectivity is hostage). So it is indeed the master, the one who invites, the inviting host, who becomes the hostage—and who really always has been. And the guest, the invited hostage, becomes the one who invites the one who invites, the master of the host. The guest becomes the host's host.[79]

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[77] Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* 50-51.

[78] Derrida discusses these issues of linguistics and *difference* in a number of his works. I draw my understanding of his use primarily from *Writing and Difference* and *Of Grammatology*, although I will save a more thorough integration of Derrida's linguistic and ethical modes for a later project.

[79] Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 123-125.

This takes what Derrida had accomplished in his earlier discourses on difference and deconstructive perspectives on language and brings a signifier or sign that is marginal or outside of a given framework towards the center in order to disrupt the perceptions of the concepts and their relations. This deconstruction reinterprets the entire framework. The bringing of the edge to the heart leads directly to the concept of hospitality. Derrida has questioned the question of the foreigner/stranger and brings the foreign to the center of the familiar. Combining this with Levinas' ethics brings a personal and political perspective to the center of the ethical framework, urging the audience to explore the workings of politics from a new perspective.

While this might seem to veer far from the traditional realm of noir, and certainly from the definition of classic *noir*, as these sorts of narratives have evolved over the last century, a strong connection exists. When we apply Derrida's vision of the foreigner/stranger to Telotte's focus on noir's allowance for the audience to see into the darkness of humanity, we see that this darkness, this foreignness, and its exploration found the ethical questions of the meaning and purpose of humanity and noir's ability, through narrative, to give audiences a glimpse into that meaning. In the remaining chapters of this work, I will explore the nature and nuance of this connection more fully in a variety of narratives and media. To begin this discussion and explore the nuances of this view of noir, we see that more contemporary noir, generally, attempts to make a strong distinction between the laws and questions of noir and the ethical ideal of an unconditional hospitality, something that Holt notices the Production Code restrained artificially. Noir worlds and their protagonists call attention to the faults and corruption of the traditional locations of justice within institutional structures, and at the same time, they often present equally questioning views of the potential of the individual, no matter how well-meaning or able, to correct these limitations. What is most important to borrow from Derrida, as we build upon

Levinas, is that deconstruction does not remain a matter of difference. Deconstruction seeks out

difference in an effort to reinterpret a conceptual/cultural understanding of rules. This allows for

one to reexamine and add to the meaning of concepts such as justice or ethics. In this mode, I

conceptualize the viewing and interpreting of noir by bringing ethical ideas into the heart of noir.

Noir highlights the borders both around society as well as those that continually intertwine

within society.

Returning to the example of Mike Hammer, we bring to bear the concepts and tensions

examined in Levinas and Derrida. Throughout *Kiss Me Deadly*, Hammer makes a significant

lack of progress in his quest. From an ethical perspective, Hammer's repeated failures stem from

his difficulty in making accepting his ethical responsibility to those whom he encounters. For

example, the death of Nick, the Greek mechanic and investigative assistant, obviously that of a

foreigner in his adoptive land, presents Hammer and the audience with more than just the cost of

a quest. It also raises the questions of what it means for one to transgress those borders and to

place oneself in the hospitality of the new land. In this way, this perspective moves beyond

Hammer's individual responsibility as the noir narrative also calls into question larger, political

questions of the hostage/stranger and hospitality. In the audience's brief encounters with him, we

see Nick as an obliging and hopeful immigrant who projects a stereotypically American love of

speed and power, as he lusts after Hammer's cars. This hope, this expression of belief in the

American Dream, is crushed quite literally when the mysterious man drops one of the cars on

which Nick is working on top of him. Mike had used Nick's ability to move within liminal

spaces to gather information and relied on his desire for acceptance without the care and

protection required of an outsider. Nick had accepted this significant risk in getting involved

with Hammer's quest in exchange for Mike's new car, and Hammer's manipulation of this individual in need of his hospitality without the requisite care results in his death.

This concept of noir's ethics broadening beyond the individual into something more clearly political might remain nascent in *noir*, such as that seen in *Kiss Me Deadly*, but it appears again and again in other texts if we deconstruct the relationships of citizens to foreigners and hosts to strangers/visitors. When analyzing narratives containing individuals in these positions, we have a direct insight into this ethical discussion and the larger political and cultural dimensions. Additionally, Derrida develops specific understanding of the cultural surroundings of Levinas' image of the dying face of the other. In particular, Derrida brings detail to the importance of the place of the dying or dead other, and he examines the extent to which this relationship between the self and the other can fulfill the questioning of the passive self who is open to the moment of astonishment.

In short, applying Derrida's practice of deconstruction to the relationships defined by hospitality and questioning the meaning of hospitality results in two major understandings of ethics and of noir. First, Derrida brings a practice of applying the deconstruction of ethical norms as they are represented in narratives, both fictional and historical. We can look at the constructedness of noir as a genre and as a set of related but unconnected narratives. Second, Derrida establishes the possibility of the importance of ethics as a deconstruction of ethics in noir and one's specific relationship to the other. Noir provides both a view of the spectrum of ethical approaches and, at the same time, questions the meaning and worth of those ethics. This does not provide a sufficient map for those looking for a stable ethics made up of some moral code or transcendent signifier, but it fits perfectly with the narratives of noir that depict the quest of the individual who fits at the margins between culturally approved roles.

Let's begin with an example of what this might mean in practice before I move on to the extents of this study in particular. When looking at *The Third Man* (1949), another classical, agreed-upon noir narrative, we immediately see applications for the concept of hospitality and foreignness.[80] Neglecting, for the purpose of succinctness, the possible connections between this film and the Platonic notion of "The Third Man", let's focus on the added perspective gained when one briefly examines this film and narrow our scope to Derrida's notions of hospitality and mortality. Holly Martins (Joseph Cotton), down-and-out pulp fiction writer, is invited to post-war Vienna by his friend Harry Lime (Orson Welles) for a job, something he desperately needs, only to find when he arrives that his friend has been killed in a mysterious car accident. Unsure about the events as described to him, Martins goes in search of the truth about his friend only to find himself embroiled in a convoluted plot involving the occupational authorities, the black market, and an equally mysterious woman, Lime's Czech girlfriend, Anna Schmidt (Alida Valli). Ultimately, Martins discovers that his friend is still alive, but that he is little more than a gangster. Worse than that, Lime is a monster who makes a profit off of watering down children's vaccines.

On one hand, we might interpret the importance of this film as historic, labeling it as a commentary on the Allies treatment of Europe after World War Two. Elsewhere, we might see the conflict as specifically developing between Martins, who holds a strong moral code based on loyalty and justice, and Lime, who sees violence as opportunity for profit and even a positive motivating force for creativity and arts. Other perspectives could focus on the sexuality of Lime, Martins, and Anna. These all hold significant value, but by overlaying Derrida's considerations

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[80] *The Third Man*, dir. Carol Reed, perf. Joseph Cotton, Alida Valli, and Orson Welles, London Film Production, 1949.

of hospitality, it gives a different depth to the ethical quandaries of the narrative and the

motivations of the characters.

Focusing on Lime and Martins, we see both of Derrida's relationships played out. Both

men are foreigners in their setting; however Martins is clearly labeled as more "foreign" because

of his unfamiliarity with the location and its culture. This foreignness, according to Derrida,

places a distance between the foreigner and the citizens. This distance, created by a lack of

understanding of the law and language, allows the foreigner both more freedom and also

contains them because of their reduced ability to communicate and to be seen as an individual

agent within the foreign culture. This becomes more accentuated with the fact that the foreign

land inhabited by the characters currently rests under the control of more foreigners, placing a

layer upon layer of confusion as to who "belongs". Derrida argues that this places these

individuals in a vulnerable place where ethical responsibility becomes a walk along a razor's

edge. Who then is *the* host/citizen in this situation? The Austrians? The Allied police? Those

with the ownership and access to materials? *The Third Man* clearly depicts these questions and

the journeys of those seeking answers. On one hand, Lime has taken the opportunity to seize

power for himself and his. On the other hand, Martins begins by trying to locate the truth of his

friend's death. In the process of this quest, he discovers the corruption at the heart of post-war

Europe. This raises the questions of the dying of the foreigner in the foreign land. *The Thin Man*

fails to give the viewer with a satisfactory ethical answer to these questions. In the end of the

film, the questions of who is right and who is wrong only becomes muddier. However in

examining *The Third Man* from a Levinasian-Derridean perspective gives the deconstruction of

these moral and ethical binaries an increased importance. The unease created by the questioning

of right and wrong is, on its own, a step towards an increased understanding of a way of ethical

being. *The Third Man* and films like it serve to narrativize the deconstruction of the viewers'

assumptions about what it means to be a foreigner or citizen.

Employing Derrida's perspective on this narrative and on noir focuses on a cluster of

connected concepts that, when combined, portray a bigger picture of the way these stories

function as participants in a cultural discourse about ethics. *The Third Man* is not only a story

about a man trying to find his friend and being betrayed by his trust. This search, the love

triangle, and the political allegory all work together to encompass different aspects of the

relationships of foreignness and hospitality in establishing ethics. The historical conception

combines with the psychoanalytic in a larger framework that points towards the broader ideas of

the individual's roles within a contemporary moment. Derrida combines Levinas' individualistic

understandings of ethics with larger political and cultural notions of language, borders, and

belonging. The inclusion of these perspectives with a grouping of narratives, such as noir, allows

for a broader understanding of how this interaction between personal, communal, and national

responsibility integrates into understandings of morality and ethics in the last century.

This interpretation of *The Thin Man* fails to sum everything up in a nice neat package, but

the lack of a simple resolution lies at the heart of a dialogue with Levinas and Derrida and their

application to noir. In noir, ethics is not a nice package. It is not a matter of just following a rule.

Nor is it a matter of calculating which action would harm the least number of people or which

would help the most. Derrida speaks to this difficulty with uncharacteristic clarity, "We will

always be threatened by this dilemma between, on the one hand, unconditional hospitality that

dispenses with law, duty, or even politics, and on the other, hospitality circumscribed by law and

duty. One of them can always corrupt the other, and this capacity for perversion remains

irreducible. It *must* remain so."[81]

Ethics becomes a continual negotiation of hearing the knock of a stranger on one's door,

opening the door, welcoming them in, and listening to what they have to say because they, like

you, are finite, hungry, and needy.[82] However, this relationship exists with limitations and

conditions as well. Derrida states in *Of Hospitality* that, "we should now examine the situations

where not only is hospitality coextensive with ethics itself, but where it can seem that some

people, as it has been said, place the law of hospitality above a 'morality' or a certain 'ethics'".[83]

Hospitality does not simply equate with ethical behavior. Derrida establishes that some

individuals take hospitality to an extent that betrays the ethics that it seeks to protect. Derrida

portrays the question of ethics as a tension. Using the example of the biblical story of Lot in

Sodom, he points out that just following a strict law of hospitality is not always ethical, at least

not to the women who were given to the mob in order to protect the sanctity of the guests.[84]

Elsewhere in these lectures, Derrida makes his definition of this ethical mode even clearer as he

defines ethics as a tension between two poles,

> We will have to negotiate between these two extensions of the concept of
>
> hospitality: the unconditional or hyperbolical on the one hand, and the conditional
>
> and juridico-political, even the ethical on the other: ethics in fact straddling the

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[81] Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 135.

[82] One might imagine hospitality in this form in the case of the Passover ritual of setting a place for Elijah. It is the family's responsibility to prepare for the unexpected visitor to the extent that an aspect that defines the communal meal is the expectation and hope for one outside to enter in. This responsibility within the ritual extends to the actual acts of checking the door to ensure that the expected, unexpected is not present.

[83] Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 151.

[84] Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 151-155.

two, depending on whether the living environment is governed wholly by fixed

principles of respect and donation, or by exchange, proportion, a norm, etc.[85]

This tension aptly describes the situations that every noir hero must face. Their ability to

negotiate and "straddle" these different notions of ethics marks the noir hero's quest and journey,

and it is these connections that this project embraces and seeks to illuminate. It is this notion of

straddling that a Derridean-Levinasian perspective brings about in films like *Kiss Me Deadly* and

The Third Man. Additionally, by extending the discourse from classic examples of noir on

through contemporary narratives in film, television, and graphic novels, we can begin to see the

genealogy of thought and communication about that thought. We begin to analyze the language

of noir, and Derrida makes the connection between language and ethics through Levinas, "As

Levinas says from another point of view, language *is* hospitality."[86] Derrida later makes a more

direct call for scholarship along these lines, "it would also be necessary to analyze a sort of

essential and quasi-ahistorical law or antinomy. We could do this starting from ancient examples

or from Levinas's ethical statements, but also starting from that which transforms this

problematic into new experiences, and even new hostage wars."[87] Noir, as an "essential and

quasi-ahistorical" a set of narratives, works incredibly successfully to testify to these tensions

and the evolution of discourses about hospitality and hostages.

Defining and Limiting Possibilities in this Work

The definitions and interpretations within this project are not rigid or bounded. I provide

examples of ways in which alternate approaches provide additional or further insight into a

particular set of cultural ideals. The purpose is not to argue that this is *the* way to view noir or

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[85] Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 137.
[86] Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 135.
[87] Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 139.

even argue that the included texts *must* be accepted as noir. Rather, I explore how a philosophical and cultural approach to noir responds to Naremore and Telotte's calls for work on the dark center of noir and to Derrida's suggestion for investigating the ethical importance of the hostage through Levinas and "essential and quasi-ahistorical" texts. This project importantly shifts the way that scholars approach genre so that it can be pushed and pulled to accommodate the wide array of questions, nations, cultures, stories, worlds, and agents. By beginning with Chandler and progressing through works by Steven Soderbergh and the Coen Brothers, among others, I build connections throughout different historical contexts and cultural differences and show that noir might possibly fit Derrida's need for quasi-ahistorical antinomy.

Following this introductory chapter, I take a momentary interlude to specify the nature and importance of the detective in this exploration before continuing to chapter two in which I use a classic noir novel, Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*, to more fully flesh out Derrida and Levinas' ethical perspectives and how they might comment on and examine the kinds of connections that can be made exploring noir. Because Chandler's work, and this narrative in particular, rest so firmly in *noir*, it presents a good starting point for how Derrida and Levinas' ethical model appears and works in the purview of classic noir. Specifically, Marlowe's attempts on behalf of General Sternwood closely resemble the discussion the Derrida makes of the master of the house and the stranger in *Of Hospitality*. By showing that Marlowe acts not just as a chivalric knight protecting the honor of the lord of the manor and his daughters but more accurately as one who maneuvers between Derrida's definitions of the citizen and the foreigner.

In chapter three, I extend the view of noir to more contemporary films. Unpacking Steven Soderbergh's *The Limey*, a story of a British ex-con coming to America to find the truth about his daughter's death. We see that contemporary noir can perfectly exemplify the questions raised

by Derrida and Levinas. This film clearly questions some of the traditional roles of the noir protagonist and those that surround them, while maintaining a strong stylistic connection to classic noir. These connections, combined with a reading of how a postmodern ethical mode of the tension between conditional and unconditional hospitality reflects and is reflected by the problems of today's characters show that rather than attempting to reflect classical noir in a nostalgic way, today's directors can perfect the interrogations of issues that classical noir directors could only touch on in the most tangential of ways, thus outlining contemporary noir as a clear continuation of the questioning raised by classic noir and deserving of treatment as equally important to the study of narrative in popular culture. Also in the third chapter, I appose Soderbergh's serious, crime noir with the Coen brother's *The Big Lebowski* in order to expand this approach towards noir beyond the noir narratives focus on drama and crime pictures and also to tackle the importance of looking at contemporary postmodern noir as something more than a reflective parody of a bygone era. More specifically, by looking at the characters of the Dude, Walter, and Donny as participants in an ethical drama, as well as the strong referential nature of the narrative itself, we can see that contemporary noir is truly a continuation of many of the same questions that Derrida and Levinas explored and were raised in chapter two particularly when we look at this trio in terms of the Levinasian ethical relationship and in focusing on Derrida's work on mourning.

Before moving on to the implications of noir on media other than film, I take another brief divergence to show how even contemporary films clearly outside of stories of crime and traditional detection, such as 2006's *Stranger than Fiction*, also exhibit both aspects of noir and of a Derridean-Levinasian ethical perspective while also holding many of the conventions of the romantic comedy. The exploration of noir, as a discussion of ethical tensions, holds implications

for films that stand farther outside of the generic conventions than films like *The Big Lebowski*.

Issues of responsibility, hospitality, and citizenship connect even in films that examine romance

and sexuality in an opposite way to the sensuality and violence of noir. *Stranger than Fiction*

presents an excellent example to the ways that narratives can play with the role of the face of the

other in the narrative process itself and how questioning the nature of character and narratives in

themselves might present another horizon for the ethical questions highlighted in noir. This

perhaps points to either the need to further extend the boundaries of noir's influence in

contemporary film or to a greater importance of the questions raised by Derrida and Levinas in

contemporary culture more broadly.

Once I establish the usefulness of exploring Levinasian-Derridean themes in feature film

through the questioning the themes of questions, mourning, citizenship, and hospitality, I move

in chapter four to examine how this ethical framework illuminates the understanding of noir, as

an ethical concept. I seek out contemporary noir in other media and specifically focusing on the

serial narratives on television, in chapter four. I begin by examining the transitions of these

themes in the growing area of adaptation of noir narratives on television by illuminating the noir

concepts in *Veronica Mars*. Examining the serial nature of television shows opens noir to a level

of development of characters and ethical questions over a period of time that the cinematic

conventions disallows or discourages because of the need to contain a complete narrative in 90 to

150 minutes.

In my final chapter, I draw the threads of ethics and noir back together and point towards

the potential for the extension of this perspective into other media and beyond the boundaries of

American, contemporary, popular culture. Noir presents an excellent example of the ways in

which stories in various media and cultures can open up discussion of those ideas that lie at the

locus of making meaning out of life. Not only do these stories often deal overtly with these

concepts, but their form and evolution over time reflect many of the central theoretical and

philosophical issues that have evolved throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first

centuries. If successfully argued, then this study opens new windows on ways of seeing the roles

of all sorts of narratives in the everyday lives of people in cultures around the world and across

history, and the final chapter will begin to both bring together all of the different perspectives

raised in the other chapters as well as point towards possible areas of future studies. For, if noir is

the continuation of a common discussion about what individuals can do given a corrupt world

and a feeling of powerlessness, then other genres, such as the romantic-comedy and the historical

epic, could all be reexamined from a variety of perspectives that allow these groupings of

narratives to be part of a genealogical thread that would touch on a wide variety of stories,

media, and academic disciplines.

INTERLUDE ONE:

A FEW NOTES ON THE DETECTIVE AND GENRE

For the purposes of this project, I focus primarily on examples of the hard-boiled/pulp fictions that would become noir that include detective protagonists. Detective noir presents a clear set of examples of noir characters engaged in a search or quest. The private investigator or amateur searcher stands in symbolically for the individual between definitions, one who lives on the boundary and must negotiate this tension. Since noir is unstable, we encounter plenty of characters besides the main protagonists who do not fit within a definition of a detective. These differing roles hold as much importance for the ethical interpretation of noir. The ethical perspective holds equally for noir whose protagonists are criminals or everymen trapped in circumstances with equal reliance on issues of mortality and ethics. Detectives, however, by their definition, possess a singular purpose. I include within the term "detective" all individuals whose goal and identity within the narrative rests primarily on a search for truth, meaning, or information. This definition of "detective" as broader than just private, insurance, or criminal investigators allows for us to discuss the protagonists that engage in a definite case or quest of a wider variety. In addition to being inclusive, I recognize that this definition excludes the crime-based or trapped narratives where the hero seeks to succeed in a criminal endeavor or finds themselves suddenly caught in an unfamiliar and unchosen situation. This in no way acts as a statement that these protagonists do not also touch on the themes raised by Derrida and Levinas. In fact, they provide a vital counter-point to the understanding of noir as both about chosen and unchosen ethical situations. However, the focus on the detective on the quest gives us the clearest starting point. Later in this work, when I discuss *The Limey*, for example, this detective

protagonist broadens and touches on all of these complementary aspects of noir, although they will still focus on the questing hero as Hibbs does.[1] However, the detective archetype, as one who engages in a particular quest but belongs to neither the establishment nor the definitively anti-establishment, makes it the quintessential test case for an individual placed in a particular ethical quandary of identity and positionality. The examination of these characters clearly displays Levinas' view of the responsibility of the self to the face of the other and Derrida's interrogation of hospitality and cosmopolitanism.

Deborah Knight's essay, "On Reason and Passion in *The Maltese Falcon*," from Conard's *The Philosophy of Film Noir* provides one style that incorporates many of the individual perspectives based on aspects of identity politics. Knight writes that the noir detective represents a significant step in the common ethical discussion when compared to the classical detective, such as Sherlock Holmes. Knight argues that Holmes, and most classical detectives both then and now, entered an investigation at or towards the end where they could display their "superior intellect and psychological insight" to bring the case to a resolution. The noir detective, states Knight, is thrust in the middle of an undefined situation, and their involvement "does not stop with the solution of the crime." Knight quotes Cawelti, who states that the detective must make "some kind of personal choice or action," but she does not really investigate the nature of this personal choice or action.[2]

For a separate but equally broad approach to the meaning of the noir detective/hero Thomas Hibbs, in a forthcoming work, argues that the quest of the detective represents *the*

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[1] Hibbs draws the nature of this questing protagonist from Pascal and Lucienne Goldmann's reading of Pascal. Hibbs argues powerfully that the tragedy of the noir protagonist's quest stems from a struggle of the finite to bridge or grasp the infinite, similarly to the perspective that Levinas presents in *God, Death, and Time*. Future studies into the connections between Hibbs' Pascal-based reading and my Levinasian reading might provide valuable connections between these philosophical understandings and their different cultural and philosophical underpinnings.

[2] Knight, Deborah. *Philosophy of Film Noir*. Mark Conard, ed. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2006, 210.

driving force in making noir what it is. He argues that noir presents a protagonist, "in a quest for

a lost code of redemption," which is almost never found.[3] Like me, Hibbs uses a broad range of

narratives that stretch from the easily agreed-upon noir canon, like *Double Indemnity*, but also

bends the genre to include *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *The DaVinci Code*, and *The Passion of the

Christ*. Hibbs defines noir and its heroes as a "vision" that, "awakens us from our dogmatic

slumbers, from our comfortable sense that all is as it should be. By resisting the return to

everydayness, to the malaise, noir avoids Hollywood sentimentality and fends off the malaise."[4]

Noir's efforts to place its audience in the position that must grapple with the difficulties of the

contemporary world challenges the escapism of many Hollywood genres. Hibbs further outlines

how noir achieves this task by focusing on the sorts of noir that force the audience's interaction

with the philosophical sources of despair.

> The risk for noir is that recovery, return, or even going forward becomes
>
> impossible. All would be lost. This would constitute a sort of knowing despair,
>
> not yet full-blown despair that does not know itself. Yet, we have seen that a
>
> certain strain in American noir, a strain concerned to revive a notion of human life
>
> as a quest for redemption, can aid in determining our place in the cultural
>
> landscape, as Telotte puts it.[5]

This discussion of a "strain" of noir and its cultural/philosophical purpose opens considerations

of noir to a wide range of narratives. While I might not be opening the genre as broadly as Hibbs,

in some ways, we do both agree that a quest for ethical or moral being lies at the center of noir

narratives. Hibbs sees this interaction as a fundamentally moral quest for redemption but does

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[3] Hibbs, Thomas, "Arts of Darkness: Pascalian Reflections on American Noir" (forthcoming) 21.
[4] Hibbs, Thomas, "Monstrous Paradoxes, Noir, and the Religious Quest" (forthcoming) 21.
[5] Ibid.

not really define the essence of the noir redemption.[6] Hibbs brings in discussions of Hobbes and

Pascal and their perspectives on morality, which seem appropriately apt, especially for many

traditional noir, but leaves room for more speculation in what he terms "neo-noir". Hibbs writes,

> Abandoning the task of communication, many neo-noir films are simply decadent,
> conveying the aristocratic nihilism of the amoral superhero or wallowing in a
> surrealist dream world. As we have seen, the transcendence of the purportedly
> petty and arbitrary moral conventions involves a radicalization of the distinctively
> modern project of autonomy, which refuses submission to any order or authority
> independent of individual reason. Pascal would object that this is but another form
> of diversion from the limits of the human condition. Man is neither to be praised
> nor condemned for what he currently is; nor is he to be encouraged in his
> addiction to diversion. Instead, he should be encouraged to "seek with groans."
> What better way to describe the quest of the noir protagonist?[7]

"What better way," indeed? Hibbs finds in the noir protagonists' searches an illustration of

Pascal's seeking "with groans," but does not illuminate the nature of the transcendence being

sought even in the midst of what could be termed a refused "submission to any order or authority

independent of individual reason." Unlike Hibbs, I think that more often than not, the noir

protagonist does find the transcendent key to change, however they are not always able or

willing to act on it to the extent needed for a clearly redemptive moment.[8] The seeming nihilism

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[6] Hibbs remains focused on redemption in a Christian sense and, at times, writes about the ways in which the banal and materialistic perspective of many neo-noir obstructs a traditionally transcendent redemption. From one perspective this argument makes a strong point. Contemporary noir certainly shifts ideas of redemption away from the sorts of mythic quests that appear in other generic structures and which have come to symbolize redemptive quests in the past. I, however, argue that this might represent a shift to a different understanding or manifestation of redemption rather than its negation.

[7] Hibbs, Thomas, "Monstrous Paradoxes, Noir, and the Religious Quest" (forthcoming) 25-6.

[8] This difference might result from a fundamental difference between Hibbs' and my theological perspectives on the nature of the world. I find myself significantly influenced by my Calvinistic education that views the world as totally

or hopelessness of even the most "groaning" of protagonists, whether classical or neo, might also come as the result of the inherent and fundamental struggles of the recognition of the face of the other and the responsibility to which it calls.[9] Hibbs certainly leaves the door open to this sort of investigation but also searches for a more adequately defined "transcendence" than what could be possible given the corruption of the noir world, its institutions, and the individuals who inhabit them.[10]

Despite some differences from my project, Hibbs and Knight, both philosophers by training, provide a number of important starting points to bring with me. First, the segment of noir that presents the detective/seeker/searcher gives the ethical perspective a particular amount of weight and a solid starting place based on the protagonist's beginning location and their goal to find a meaning beyond the "who-done-it" of the classical detective story. Secondly, Hibbs and Knight lend a couple of potential poles of what this detective means in stepping out of the classical, intellectual, problem-solving mode of previous stories. Knight presents a rational and reasonable self whose goal is self-preservation that requires a level and adept understanding and manipulation of social situations. Hibbs adds that this figure also seeks to "redeem" themselves in some way given situations and actions that appear unredeemable. In the following pages, I hope to outline not only the goals of the detective's rationality and reason but also the method by

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depraved, and Hibbs struggles with the appearance of this worldview in a film such as *Taxi Driver*, written and directed by Paul Schrader who attended the same Calvinist liberal arts college from which I graduated. While seemingly insurmountable, I find that in most cases Hibbs and I agree on the implications of this depravity but maybe not the end result.

[9] My argument in Chapter Three directly addresses this conflict as I posit the possibility of meaning in *The Big Lebowski*'s opposition between the passive Dude and the German Nihilists.

[10] At the end of his manuscript, Hibbs uses Pascal in a manner similar to my use of Levinas when he argues that interpretations of the individual within a troubled world often suffer from the privileging of one aspect of the paradox over another. The key to maintaining this tension, suggests Hibbs as he draws from Telotte, might rest in noir's structural conventions that speak directly to the film's audience, such as the voiceover narration and flashbacks.

which these detectives might find and embody a particular mode of redemption that responds to the particular philosophical questions introduced in the previous chapter.

Finally, looking at detectives in noir from a different perspective also connects this research to larger work on genre in general. While my goal in this work does not specifically aim to challenge the meaning of genre, it touches on it enough to demand some treatment and definition. The ideas of genre quickly become tangled with ideas of noir. In an effort to find a shortcut to this difficulty, I borrow from the theory of genre outlined by Robin Wood in his essay "Ideology, Genre, Auteur." Wood gives an example of how a different, more expansive view of genres can allow deeper insights to collections of films, and combining Wood's perspectives on genre with the philosophical perspective of Levinas and Derrida provides an excellent jumping off point as I progress into the analysis of specific texts and seek to connect them to ideological and thematic cores.

Overall, Wood's essay responds to the ways in which film scholarship have typically sought to identify the most important aspect of cinema and then construct a critical perspective centered on it. Wood argues that the main goal of film scholars should rest on seeing "the work as wholly as possibly."[11] Wood investigates three different approaches to cinema: ideological, genre theory, and auteur theory and seeks, "to explore some of the ways in which these disparate approaches to Hollywood movies might interpenetrate, producing the kind of synthetic criticism I have suggested might now be practicable."[12] Wood attempts to look at the way scholars can use generic terms differently than they historically have. Throughout the essay, Wood identifies central, cultural themes that appear in Hollywood films, specifically *It's a Wonderful Life* and *Shadow of a Doubt*, and examines how the films incorporate and shift these societal views.

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[11] Wood, Robin, "Ideology, Genre, Auteur," *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, 5th ed., eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999) 668
[12] Wood 669.

Wood begins by identifying ideological ideas including such concepts capitalism, the work ethic, marriage, civilization's relationship to nature, and gender norms. Wood then critically reads structural, generic, and authorial aspects of the films in order to trace the ways in which Hollywood movies both promote and hold in tension these ideals.

Wood gives numerous examples of this ideologically based genre criticism. Looking at *It's a Wonderful Life* and *Strangers on a Train*, Wood constructs a list of familiar general concepts that he sees popping up repeatedly in these two films. The key importance of this article, argues Wood, "is less on the evaluation of a particular film or director than on the implications for a criticism of the Hollywood cinema of the notions of interaction and multiple determinacy I have been employing."[13] The important part of Wood's ideas for this work rests above and beyond lists of ideological themes. Many of the ideas presented in the films often present opposing or conflicting sides of a discussion involving these ideas, but this does not necessarily omit the film from discussion. In fact, Wood states, "The most striking fact about this list is that it presents an ideology that, far from being monolithic, is *inherently* riddled with hopeless contradictions and unresolvable tensions".[14] The way in which Wood's critical approach can maintain paradoxical ideological themes and put them into a larger cultural framework makes it incredibly malleable and open to broad ranges of narratives. There is no reason that I cannot employ Wood's approach to classical Hollywood cinema in relation to literature, film, and television. More specifically, this sort of approach to film and genre also allows for the sorts of juxtapositions presented in the ethics of Derrida and Levinas, which I bring to the exploration of noir and, in particular, the detective/quest narrative within noir. In 1977, Wood presents a definite challenge to future scholars who wish to work in genre study,

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[13] Wood 678.
[14] Wood 670.

and while I am not specifically declaring noir to be or not to be a genre, it holds true for this study.[15]

> The work that has been done so far on genre has tended to take the various genres as "given" and discrete, defining them in terms of motifs, iconography, conventions, and themes. What we need to ask, if genre theory is ever to be productive, is less *what* than *why*. We are so used to the genres that the peculiarity of the phenomenon itself has been too little noted. The idea I wish to put forward is that the development of the genres is rooted in the sort of ideological contradictions my list of concepts suggests.[16]

I wish, almost twenty years later, to continue the discussion of how the contradictions have changed over the past two to three decades by opening up one of the more difficult genres and examining how different films do not necessarily require new genres but can represent an exploration of past narratives. Derrida and Levinas provide valuable insight into the nature of why noir continues to seep into many different types of narratives across media, style, history, and place.

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[15] Interestingly, Wood chooses *Shadow of a Doubt*, one of the few Hitchcock films that scholars agree could be noir, to explore the tensions of American ideology present in Hollywood film. In fact, he states, "Its roots in the Hollywood genres, and in the very ideological structure it so disturbingly subverts, make *Shadow of a Doubt* so much more suggestive and significant a work than Hitchcock the bourgeois entertainer could ever have guessed" (678). While I don't argue that noir is "more significant" than other films, I do argue that its significance in exploring the ethical concerns of contemporary civilization rests closer to the surface of its narratives.

[16] Wood 670.

CHAPTER TWO:

RELATIONAL ETHICS IN CLASSICAL NOIR

An old, blind Oedipus walks beside the road accompanied by his two daughters, Antigone and Ismene. They lead him by a sign on the road pointing to a nearby city. He is clearly tired, and he asks that they find a place for him to sit down and help him find out more about the place that they have entered. They speak to a stranger passing by and are immediately told that they must move on because they are breaking the law by being there. They are on land of "fear" and "Darkness". Lands of fear and darkness appear regularly in noir, just as in Jacques Derrida's choice of *Oedipus at Colonus* as a primary example in *Of Hospitality*. Derrida begins with a narrative from a classical period in order to show the extent to which the themes he is unraveling have root far in the intellectual past of Western society, and in the same way, I propose using noir and its roots in hard-boiled literature in my examination of the ethical heart of noir.

This description of a scene from *Oedipus at Colonus* connects to a number of the issues at the central darkness of noir. We encounter death, otherness, citizenship, hospitality, and a question of ethical action. Sam Spade, Philip Marlowe, and the Dude seem far from Oedipus in terms of style and setting, but at their center, these characters all must contend with the same themes. Noir has strong roots in tragedy. In both, we see men and women caught in circumstances, forced to act out their fates that so often end in death and pain, and the sense of "no way out" so strongly dominates both sets of narratives. The examination of the classic tragedies of the Western canon provide a useful source of understanding how deeply the philosophical issues of noir continue in its way the genealogy of thinking about one's place in a

large and confusing world, and Derrida's use of them focuses their importance for noir by

highlighting a number of common concepts to both hospitality and noir.

In the first chapter, I discussed some of the limitations of more traditional approaches to

noir as a historically or stylistically bound genre. Rather than remaining tied to these boundaries,

we find a useful way of categorizing these narratives based on how they contribute to larger

cultural discourses and looking for an ethical and philosophical core. In this chapter, I begin with

Derrida's exploration of hospitality and foreignness, including his use of *Oedipus at Colonus*

where he defines what these concepts are and how they relate to the definition of ethics and law.

Following that, I step back to the source of part of Derrida's ethical perspective, Emmanuel

Levinas, and I conclude by using Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* to show how the

application of a Levinasian-Derridean ethical perspective allows a different and deeper

understanding of a core of noir.

The Foreign Question

At the heart of Derrida's ethical turn is the consideration that certain ideals and terms

repeatedly surface in discourses of law and ethics, both contemporary and historical. Derrida first

identifies the meaning and use of "foreign" or the "foreigner" as central to the consideration of

ethics and law. Importantly, he raises this in the form of a question, "Isn't the question of the

foreigner a foreigner's question? Coming from the foreigner, from abroad."[1] In other words, the

concern about the meaning of who "we" are begins with "them" asking who they are. In this

way, Derrida establishes the argument that law and ethics begin by necessitating an outsider's

interrogation of what it means to be "inside." This sort of word and role-playing grows more

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[1] Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 3.

important when we begin to investigate the ways in which these terms overlap and collapse into one another, especially in the examples of noir narratives.

In addition to the foreigner's questioning of the meaning of the citizen, Derrida ties the understanding by the foreign/foreigner of the law and hospitality of the citizen's land. This includes the importance an ethics as a process of questioning rather than answering. Derrida argues that in order to decide what to do about the foreigner, we must acknowledge that such a question inherently contains the question of the foreigner, as in a dialogue.[2] Derrida points out that, in Plato's dialogues, "the Foreigner shakes up the threatening dogmatism of the paternal *logos*: the being that is, and the nonbeing that is not."[3] Therefore, the foreigner is a necessity in both defining and refining the self/citizen. Without which, who could "we" be?

Derrida uses another classical example, *The Apology of Socrates*, to found the importance of the foreigner in understanding the law and those who define and use the law or those who define and use ethics. In Socrates' defense against his accusers, Derrida argues that he establishes himself as other and foreigner in order to legitimate his questioning of the law and defend the accusations against him of sophistry. Derrida states, "[Socrates] declares that he is 'foreign' to the language of the courts…he doesn't have the skill, he is *like* a foreigner."[4] Foreignness is not just an identity that one is born into. It is also a role that one can either take on themselves or have forced upon them. This makes the concept of the foreign as other much more about culture and language than any innate identity. This establishes a relational foundation to the definition of self, which cannot wholly construct itself out of itself but must be tested by the foreign, and the foreigner must come to the citizen at least in terms of language of some form or

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[2] Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 3, 5.
[3] Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 5.
[4] Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 15.

else no dialogue or relationship can exist to found the meaning of the citizen or the foreigner.

Even more vitally, this performance or presence of the foreigner can be advantageous.

It is here that Derrida establishes the beginning of the question of hospitality. He asks,

"must we ask the foreigner to understand us, to speak our language, in all the senses of this term,

in all its possible extensions, before being able and so as to be able to welcome him into our

country?"[5] This creates a paradox. If the foreigner must be able to interact with the citizen in

order to request hospitality or refute accusations, then haven't they already entered the borders of

the culture and deserve some consideration as a citizen of some form? To clarify, we turn back to

Derrida's discussion of Socrates for a moment. We see that Socrates plays the foreigner for the

very reason of taking advantage of this paradox. Since he is not a foreigner, but his ideas are,

Socrates hopes that playing the part of foreigner will earn him the consideration that the judges

would give a foreigner, which they are not extending to one of their own citizens. This is a

paradox between playing the law and outlaw that will become extremely important in

considering noir protagonists later in the chapter when they also attempt to negotiate both sides

of this border.

In addition to the paradox of the link between the foreigner and the citizen, Derrida halts

his narrative of Socrates to state that, "This pact, this contract of hospitality that links *to* the

foreigner and which *reciprocally* links the foreigner, it's a question of knowing whether it counts

beyond the individual and if it also extends to the family, to the generation, to the genealogy."[6]

Implicit in this linkage of rights and citizenship is the question of hospitality. What is it? Who

can give it? Who can receive it? Derrida argues, "It is not only a question of the link between

birth and nationality; it is not only a question of the citizenship offered to someone who had none

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[5] Ibid.

[6] Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 21.

previously, but the right granted to the foreigner as such, to the foreigner remaining a foreigner, and to his or her relatives, to the family, to the descendants."[7] It is to this question that Derrida brings the narrative of *Oedipus at Colonus* to perhaps illustrate the difficulties implied by hospitality.

The Foreigner and the Question of Hospitality

Derrida establishes frames of reference for foreignness and hospitality by referencing *Oedipus at Colonus*. Using this story of a man exiled from his own country and labeled an outlaw by any place that he goes, Derrida outlines the journey of Oedipus and his daughters in an exploration of hospitality that highlights these questions and themes. The exiled family must constantly move from place to place, but Oedipus approaches the end of his life and must choose a place to die without causing his daughters to take this foreign place as their own in order to be in the land of their father's tomb. As mentioned above, Derrida points out the connections between the familial relationship, speaking of nationality as connected to the familial, and the relationship that Oedipus has with his father land. Oedipus is stuck in a seemingly untenable, ethical position. As the master of his household, mobile as it may be, he holds responsibilities to his daughters and to tradition. However, in light of his past transgressions of his role as king, father, and master due to fate and his actions, Oedipus lives as an eternal stranger and foreigner. Oedipus, like the protagonists of many noir narratives, finds himself pulled in contesting directions when the issue of mortality rests readily at hand, and so Derrida's discussion of Oedipus as foreigner gives a good example of how we might also look at noir heroes.

It is important to note that Derrida focuses on Oedipus as a protagonist initially at his moment of arrival rather than his departure. Derrida's choice to begin in the middle Oedipus'

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[7] Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 21, 23.

story creates an immediate comparison to the ways in which noir also place their protagonists

and audiences in the middle of an already underway narrative. Derrida's description which

begins with Oedipus' arrival initiates the ethical moment of decision on one hand of whether the

citizens might extend hospitality to the foreign but also whether the foreigner will request such

hospitality. Derrida specifically points out,

> here are two moments where Oedipus the foreigner, the *xenos*, addresses the
>
> inhabitants of this country like foreigners. The foreigner speaks to
>
> foreigners….Without knowledge. Without the knowledge, the knowledge of the
>
> place, and the knowledge of the name of the place: where he is, where he is going.
>
> Between the profane and the sacred, the human or the divine. Isn't this always the
>
> situation of the absolute arrival?[8]

Like Socrates, Oedipus must negotiate his identity as one who is foreign in a foreign land. Here

Derrida references the scene that opens my chapter, that of his arrival. Oedipus seeks hospitality

but not the loss of his, and his family's, nationality, and he begs that he not be considered an

"outlaw", despite the fact that his well-known past place him solidly within that definition and

the fact that he has stopped to rest on sacred land.[9] In effect, Oedipus asks that his past be

forgotten and that hospitality might be extended to him as an absolute other without a name or

nation.[10] Comparing this to Derrida's description of Socrates' defense, we see both protagonists

asking to be taken as foreign and those who ask to not be labeled as such. Derrida's description

of this negotiation remains solidly on the edge between either of these understandings of

citizenship and hospitality.

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[8] Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 35.
[9] Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 37, 39.
[10] Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 41, 43.

This sets off Derrida's expansive discussion of how hospitality essentially defines the

state and the meaning of law in a smaller and more personal way. Derrida argues that for a state

to decide who to allow in, they must filter out those who it does not let in.[11] In this process,

violence must be done to the foreigner and to the citizens as well. If one is to be allowed to

practice hospitality in one's home, it is only by being controlled by a state which protects one's

right to invite a stranger within it. Derrida states, "This collusion between the violence of power

or the force of law on one side, and hospitality on the other, seems to depend, in the absolutely

radically way, on hospitality being inscribed in the form of a right."[12] This right, however, "can

only be exercised and guaranteed by the mediation of a public right or State right."[13] Thus, says

Derrida, "the perversion is unleashed."[14] In order for one to have the rights of a citizen and be a

master of one's home, they must be at the mercy of a state and thus not be the master of their

home. This paradox and tension between the individual and the state will also prove fruitful in

the consideration of the noir protagonist and should be kept in mind as we move forward. For the

citizens whom Oedipus begs for understanding and hospitality both control and do not control

the ability to extend that very thing which Oedipus begs for. This leads Derrida to conclude near

the end of his addressing of the foreigner question that, "Hospitality is due to the foreigner,

certainly, but remains, like the law, conditional, and thus conditioned in its dependence on the

unconditionality that is the basis of the law."[15]

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[11] Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 81.
[12] Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 55.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 73.

Hospitality and the Foreigner's Death and Tomb

The difficulty in defining the nature of hospitality does not represent a reason for disregarding it in favor of a clearer and more objective definition of ethics or the law. Derrida argued above that laws of hospitality must depend on some "unconditionality", but at the same time, they cannot be "inaccessible to any transformation, intangible."[16] Written laws that are "under glass" remind one of those

> Antigone will have to transgress in order to offer her brothers the hospitality of the land and of burial: Antigone the foreign woman who accompanies her father outside the law at the point where he is crossing a border and speaking to foreigners to ask them for hospitality; Antigone whose blind father, at the end of *Oedipus at Colonus*, again illustrates this strange experience of hospitality transgress, through which you die abroad, and not always at all as you would have wanted.[17]

If Oedipus were to allow his tomb to be known by his daughters, then it would become a place of residence, if only in part, and keep them from wholly returning to Thebes. However, if Oedipus keeps the place of his death secret, then he disallows Antigone's mourning and denies her the fulfillment of her duty and desire to mourn her father. Oedipus' choice to leave his tomb unmarked except in the memory of one of the citizens, who is also originally a foreigner, Theseus, displays Oedipus' love to Antigone by withholding of her ability to mourn him but giving her the ability to mourn her mourning.[18] Oedipus' motivation to act comes out of an awareness of himself as other, in light of his foreignness, and his recognition of his daughters' responsibilities to him, in light of their awakening to his mortality. This antinomy of

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[16] Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 85.
[17] Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 85,87.
[18] Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 93-121.

responsibility places Oedipus in the role of both master and stranger and makes him a hostage to the other in his self. These references to "hostage," "questions," and Derrida's understanding of the self and other continually echoes the work of Emmanuel Levinas as well as the fundamental importance of death in these issues. An introduction to these ideas will broaden the understanding of Derrida's hospitality and also set the stage for approaching Chandler's Marlowe from a different perspective.

The Death: The Foundation of Ethics and Noir

Like so many noir stories and like Derrida's exploration of hospitality, Levinas' exploration of ethics includes a prominent place for death. In introducing Levinas' perspective of self and another to the interpretation of Chandler's classic noir narrative, we begin with the concept of the self that Levinas draws into question in his *God, Death, and Time*, and we contemplate this self within the conceptual importance of their mortality and that of those around them.[19]

Levinas merges the consideration of death as both an abstract entity and as a real experience in the lives of individuals. In this, we find a connection between Levinas, Derrida, and noir. For in noir, death represents an equally important starting point in the narratives, both a constant abstract possibility behind every scene and the reality often confronting the protagonists. In examining the notion of death, Levinas rejects death as annihilation, something

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[19] *God, Death, and Time* in no way represents the totality of Levinas's work or thoughts on the subject, but it provides an excellent summary and condensation of work that is spread out among a significantly productive lifetime in the philosophy of ethics. I have chosen it as somewhat representative of Levinas's work on relational ethics, knowing full well that numerous scholars of Levinas can and have pointed out places where this text fails to illuminate individual points. However, such is the nature of any enterprise, and I ask you to remember that this project represents only a beginning of the investigation of how relational ethics might provide deeper insight into genres that cross media boundaries and the importance of narratives in culture more broadly.

Levinas focuses on in his examination of the work of Heidegger.[20] According to Levinas,

Heidegger's death focuses on the self and how I must live in relation to my own death. Levinas

takes another tack pointing out that while we live our understanding of death comes in relation to

the death of others. "Nothingness is a false idea, and death is not identical to nothingness. The

human being is thus a way of not being-to-death."[21] We cannot know the meaning of death for

ourselves without dying. Once we die, according to Levinas, our responsiveness to the others

who remain is cut, and in an important way, it is too late to communicate the nature and

importance of dying in governing the thinking and actions of life. "In every death is shown the

nearness of the neighbor, and the responsibility of the survivor, in the form of a responsibility

that the approach of proximity moves or agitates."[22] Therefore, Levinas argues that the death of

another represents a different way of understanding our, the living's, relationship to this thing

that we call death.

  To those still living and belonging to others, Levinas also articulates that death does not

represent the annihilation that Heidegger typifies it as because, at least in the relational sense, life

continues after death. If, argues Levinas, life is marked by a series of interactions of the self with

those others around them, interactions that Levinas calls expressiveness and responsiveness, then

when one of those others dies, is there not a continued relationship in so far as the one who has

passed away still occupies a place in the thoughts, actions, and thus identities of those they leave

behind?

    One does not know, one cannot be present at, one's annihilation (inasmuch as

    death might be annihilation); this is the case not only because of the nothingness

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[20] Levinas draws and contrasts his view of death with Heidegger's throughout *God, Death, and Time* but begins from pages 23-49.
[21] Levinas 55.
[22] Levinas 17.

that cannot be given as a thematizable event…. My relationship with my death is

a nonknowledge on dying itself, a nonknowledge that is nevertheless not an

absence of relationship. Can we describe this relationship?[23]

Therefore, Levinas moves from the concepts of death, life, and time to an ethical question when

he asks, "Is death separable from the relation to the other?"[24] Levinas extends death from being

an issue of personal experience, a phenomenology of the self, to a relational experience of

another, a phenomenology of the self and other. With this extension is carried a question of

responsibility and lies close to the questions Derrida asked regarding hospitality.

If our self is dependent on our understanding and responsiveness to the face of another,

someone who we must recognize is dying, by nature of them being finite and human, then how

does that change the way that we respond to their expressiveness while they are alive and to their

non-expressiveness once their face, the term Levinas uses to represent the expressiveness and life

of the other while they live or their being, becomes a "masque"?[25] The expressions of others and

my reaction, or responsiveness, to their expression plays a huge part in defining my self (that

which is same) by defining an other (that which is different). In this way, our identities are

formed and defined by the expressions and differences of another. "Dying," states Levinas, "as

the dying of the other, affects my identity as 'I'; it is meaningful in its rupture with the Same, its

rupture of my 'I'. It is in this that my relation with the death of another that is neither simply

secondhand knowledge nor a privileged experience of death".[26] This closely mirrors the

statements made by Derrida regarding the citizen and the foreigner and Oedipus' representation

of his dying self to his daughters and to the people of the country of his tomb.

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[23] Levinas 19.
[24] Levinas 8.
[25] Levinas 12. The idea of a masque of expression also raises the specter of deception, representation, and even the carnivalesque which points toward other potential outlets for the exploration of Levinas'ss ethics in narrative.
[26] Levinas 13.

If the dying of the other affects us in such a fundamental manner, and if this effect carries some sort of meaning that is more than just knowledge or an emotion/experience of losing someone else but has important ramifications for the self, then what does this "disquietude" created by their death mean? It is to this question that I would like to first bring Marlowe's narrative to bear. If *The Big Sleep*, and noir more broadly, is to have any connection to the relational ethics that Levinas and Derrida write about, then it must at least fundamentally raise this question of a self's relationship to the death of another, whether or not it comes to a conclusion similar to Levinas'.

Additionally, noir must reference Derrida's hospitality and the questions of the master and the stranger, the relationship described as being a hostage to the other. Derrida, remember, argues that the master has become "hostage" to the foreigner and inextricably linked to them. Derrida's questions about the nature of the ethics of hospitality uses these narrative images to examine hospitality, death, the foreigner, and the "master of the house". "The master of the house 'waits anxiously on the threshold of his home' for the stranger he will see arising into view on the horizon as a liberator."[27] In this image, used as a central idea in his seminar "Steps of Hospitality," Derrida seeks to redefine the discussion of ethical behavior and its interdependent relationship with notions of hospitality. He moves to broaden the idea of the "master of the house" from one of total control of their private sphere to being dependent on the presence of the stranger/foreigner to allow them to practice this mastery. Derrida combines the realms of family, home, and nation, and in this, he deconstructs the divisions between public and private ethics. The sorts of ethics governing one's family and home reflect the ethics that work in the larger scale of cities and nations. Like the Foreigner, Derrida, and thus I, must draw a thread from the familial house to the nation's culture in order to theorize the place of those outside of

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[27] Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 121.

those realms in addition to connecting Levinas' relationship between the self and the other

through death.

In addition to arguing that the master engages in a paradoxical existence where they are

both master and hostage in their own home, Derrida presents that the "duty" or "law" of

hospitality that the master is awaiting to practice is both required and repulsive, just as Levinas'

relationship between the self and the dying other presents a disquietude. Both intertwine

conditional employment with a requirement for unconditional graciousness. The examination of

this antinomy recalls the central questions of the text: who is the foreigner and what is our

responsibility to them? It is the same question, we find, that lies at the heart of Marlowe in *The*

Big Sleep.

Chandler's *The Big Sleep*: A Solid Foundation

In choosing a text to represent the classical noir period and to provide the initial backdrop

for the application of this etho-philosophical approach to noir narratives, Raymond Chandler's

first novel, *The Big Sleep*, acts as a powerful symbol of the many disparate issues of examining

film noir's origins and extensions into the contemporary moment. The novel contains a

quintessential detective narrative that focuses the questions of the ethical agent within the corrupt

world and is the product of an author whose own life highlights a number of Derrida's questions

for hospitality and citizenship.[28]

I chose to focus on *The Big Sleep* in novel form rather than the popular film version

directed by Howard Hawks and starring Humphrey Bogart in order to highlight the literary

origins of the genre, that even prior to the coining of its identity as a genre deconstructs the

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[28] Chandler, although born an American, was educated in England and chose to serve in the Canadian military during World War II. This is a topic better explored in another work, but Raymond Chandler could be seen to write so effectively about a man between different worlds because he rests between so many himself.

cinematic-centered image of *noir*. The connections between the novel version and the possibility

of a film version began shortly after it was published. The novel was optioned and Bogart

attached almost immediately, but it was not until Warner Brothers bought the rights for ten

thousand dollars in 1944 that any real progress was made on the cinematic *The Big Sleep*.[29]

Chandler writes, in a letter to Alfred A. Knopf in April of 1939, that Bogart was already set for

the film version even though Chandler was just beginning to get reviews of *The Big Sleep* from

his clips service, and the literary origins of the narrative are often overshadowed by the film and

its star that came so shortly after it came out.[30] Often film/noir scholars have segmented noir and

the hard-boiled detective fiction that acted as the source of many of the most popular narratives,

but even just by looking at *The Big Sleep* as an example, we see that Chandler was greatly

affected by film as a medium. Furthermore, the inclusion of William Faulkner as a contributor to

the screenplay further shows the thin line between literature and movies that existed. The answer

to why scholars maintain this division continues today eludes me, something I assume to be

rooted in the sharp divide between literary and cinematic studies disciplines. When choosing to

return to an origin, I scarcely find a more definitive moment than the emergence of Philip

Marlowe, one of noir's most enduring figures, to act as the first "self" for a critical introspection.

Chandler's novels, especially *The Big Sleep*, establish or utilize many of the conventions of the

hard-boiled mystery that directly lead into the narratives of noir. Therefore, returning to

Chandler as a foundation, grounds this ethical perspective in the one of the "classical" roots of

noir. If a Levinasian-Derridean perspective on the ethics within these narratives is to function in

contemporary expressions of noir, then it must show an equal promise within noir's origins.

While the film versions of Marlowe certainly contributed to his popularity and could serve as

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[29] Luhr, William, *Raymond Chandler and Film* (Tallahassee: Florida State UP, 1991) 121.
[30] MacShane, Frank, *Selected Letters of Raymond Chandler* (New York: Delta, 1981) 3-4.

these sorts of examples, my grounding of this ethical perspective on noir within the literary

provides a solid foundation from which to begin a broader approach to noir studies.[31] In effect, I,

like Derrida, return to some of the oldest narratives within the examined group in order to show

the connections and disconnections that continue today.

Mortality and the Big Sleep

The reader encounters the importance of mortality in this noir narrative from its very

cover. The title, "The Big Sleep", allegedly a Chandler-created euphemism for death, creates a

street-level reflection of how people talk about death, a trend in many hard-boiled/noir thrillers.

Going no further than the title of the work itself, we have a strong resonance between this

foundational noir and Levinas' interest in exploring death as a foundation of ethical thought and

action. The novel is about "the big sleep" even as it is *The Big Sleep*. Similar comparisons could

be made between other noir titles which often fixate on death or mortality as a primary symbol of

the genre. Immediately, we can see these connections Chandler's *The Long Goodbye*, Spillane's

Kiss Me Deadly, or Hammett's *The Red Harvest*, to provide just a couple of additional examples

where mortality and death lie so close to the delineation of both hard-boiled literature and *noir*.

In this way, the titles of noir novels also reflect the abstract, yet real, nature of death. "The big

sleep" is a euphemism that obfuscates the reality of death even while it seeks to touch on a more

real understanding of how people might speak and think about death. Again, the same might be

said of the novel, and perhaps noir, more broadly. The title of Chandler's novel begins the

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[31] This description leaves out a great deal of what might be said both about Chandler's life, the pulp novels and crime magazine that pre-date *The Big Sleep*, and ignores some of the obvious importance of the differences between film and novel. However, since the focus of this work is to put noir narratives in a new etho-philosophical light and not fully contextualize every aspect of each noir narrative, such detours would represent distractions from my central argument.

process of seeing noir as a discourse on mortality and the morality that might stem from a questioning of its meaning.

The focus on death continues throughout *The Big Sleep*. Beginning from the first scene of the novel where Marlowe is called to the Sternwood mansion, Chandler highlights the importance of mortality to Marlowe's story by focusing his physical description of General Sternwood and his environs. This begins as Marlowe enters the greenhouse where Sternwood spends many of his days. Chandler describes the greenhouse, "The plants filled the place, a forest of them with nasty meaty leaves and stalks like the newly washed fingers of dead men."[32] It continues as Marlowe sees Sternwood for the first time, "Here, in a space of hexagonal flags, an old red Turkish rug was laid down and on the rug was a wheel chair, and in the wheel chair an old and obviously dying man watched us come with black eyes from which all fire had died long ago."[33] In addition to the mention of death, dying, and mortality, Chandler's prose in this last example slowly leads the reader up until the important part of the room, the place where Sternwood sits and to Sternwood himself. Whereas the first example of the plants with "stalks like the…fingers of dead men" gives a background image of death as everywhere, the second example progresses from the wider "space of hexagonal flags" to what lies on them, "an old red Turkish rug," to what is on the rug "a wheel chair," an obvious sign of infirmity in this instance, to who is in the chair, "an old and obviously dying man", and ends with Sternwood's eyes "from which all fire had died long ago." By gradually moving in a manner like this, Chandler continues the motif of mortality to its pinnacle, the dying face of another. The narrative begins at the exterior of the house, moves to its interior in general which is populated by other members of the

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[32] Chandler, Raymond, *The Big Sleep* (New York: First Vintage Crime/Black Lizard Edition, 1992) 7.

[33] Chandler 8. Nearly, this same exact moment occurs in *The Big Lebowski* (1998), a film I discuss in Chapter Three, when the Dude meets the Big Lebowski who is crippled and in a wheelchair, however clearly not dying. Mortality remains present and, while the individual symbols change and the tone of the meeting differs, the narrative constructs such meetings as more than job interviews.

family unit, moves to the central conservatory, into the person of Sternwood, and to his mortal

face itself.

The Face of the Dying Other

Sternwood's face immediately brings Levinas to the fore and his illustrations of the

importance of the death of another in the construction of the self. Levinas does not leave death at

the abstract level. Like Chandler, Levinas zooms in to a source of this effect, the face, and this

face affects the self in fundamental ways by creating a responsibility between the self and the

other,

> Someone who expresses himself in his nudity—the face—is one to the point of
>
> appealing to men, of placing himself under my responsibility: Henceforth, I have
>
> to respond for him. All gestures of the other were signs addressed to me….The
>
> death of the other who dies affects me in my very identity as a responsible "me";
>
> it affects me in my nonsubstantial identity"[34]

This progression from the exterior/public face of Sternwood into his face itself has a profound

effect on Marlowe. The above quotation points to the nature and meaning of this effect.

Sternwood addresses Marlowe and, as a result, is affected in a "nonsubstantial" way. However,

this effect is more that even that as well. This interaction of expression which causes

responsibility does more than touch Marlowe emotionally; his self alters and must respond in

some way. Marlowe's meeting with Sternwood represents more than a man of a previous

generation passing the torch of masculinity to the next or the knight pledging fealty to a lord,

although it certainly carries aspects of both of these. As Marlowe meets Sternwood and as

Chandler describes this meeting, a focus on Sternwood's mortality and Marlowe's recognition of

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[34] Levinas 12.

this implies a definite connection to an ethics of responsibility remarkably similar to that which

Levinas describes. Two selves are encountering two others.

The Moment of Astonishment

In this encounter between Marlowe and Sternwood, the stranger and the master, a

responsibility is founded, whether it remains at the fore of Marlowe's mind throughout the

narrative or not. As mentioned above, Levinas argues that the meeting of the self and the dying

other creates a "disquietude." The face of the dying other, Sternwood, urges Marlowe into a

relationship, an ethical responsibility, with what Levinas, like Derrida, equates to being a

hostage,

> Ethics is a relationship with another, with the neighbor (whose nearness could not
>
> be confounded with a neighborhood in the spatial sense of the term). "Neighbor"
>
> emphasizes firstly the *contingent* character of this relationship; for the other, the
>
> neighbor is the first come. This relationship is a nearness that is a *responsibility*
>
> for the other. A relationship that obsesses, one that is an obsession, for the other
>
> besieges me, to the point where he puts in question my for-me, my in-itself—to
>
> the point where he makes me a *hostage*.[35]

The moment of expression that alters Marlowe, as mentioned above, grows more clearly defined

in its nature and ethical meaning. Marlowe's self is altered by Sternwood's expression of nudity

and must respond to this connection that Levinas describes as a sort of hostage taking. This first

meeting does not at first glance resolve into the sort of moment to which Levinas alludes.

Marlowe certainly does not appear to be obsessed or to react to the will of a captor. In fact, the

opposite appears true. Marlowe chooses his own path and makes his own conclusions. However,

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[35] Levinas 138.

as the narrative progresses, the reader finds, with Marlowe, that Sternwood's call for

responsibility continues. Eventually, Marlowe must choose to accept or reject this affect and its

meaning for him. The meeting scene at the beginning of the novel holds a number of clues that

open up an understanding of the narrative in a new way. In this opening scene, Chandler includes

to three major concepts that also appear in Levinas' ethics: death/mortality, hunger, and

insomnia. Each of these interacts with the responsibility and respect between Marlowe and

Sternwood and contributes to the sort of ethical responsibility to which Marlowe feels towards

Sternwood and to which he must respond.

From the above description of Sternwood and his setting, Marlowe clearly recognizes

Sternwood's face as an other who is dying, a masque of expression which clearly will become

inexpressive in the near future. However, Marlowe also becomes part of a larger chain of

responsibility. This begins as Chandler includes Marlowe as an extension of Sternwood when

Sternwood prompts him to smoke freely, "You may smoke, sir. I like the smell of tobacco…. A

nice state of affairs when a man has to indulge his vices by proxy."[36] Having been accepted as a

proxy for Sternwood's "living", Marlowe begins to learn more deeply of Sternwood's mortality.

It is not a "normal" mortality, such as that which all individuals can lay claim. He must live

through others and through absorbing his environment. Sternwood apologizes for the heat, "I

seem to exist largely on heat, like a newborn spider."[37] Chandler's description of General

Sternwood's condition, additionally, recalls Levinas' description of the reaction of the self,

Marlowe, to the hunger of the other, Sternwood.

On the subject of this hunger, Levinas writes, "hunger is deaf to every reassuring

ideology, deaf to every equilibrium that would be that of the totality along. Hunger is, in itself,

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[36] Chandler 9.
[37] Ibid.

need or *privation par excellence*, which constitutes the materiality or the great frankness of the

matter."[38] Immediately after being made a proxy to Sternwood's living, Sternwood confronts

him with his hunger, this entity that communicates the essence of mortality as well as the

seriousness of the need when Sternwood elaborates on the precarious nature of his condition,

> You are looking at a very dull survival of a rather gaudy lie, a cripple paralyzed in
>
> both legs and with only half of his lower belly. There's very little that I can eat
>
> and my sleep is so close to waking that it is hardly worth the name.[39]

This is a hunger for a life outside of the orchids, which Sternwood describes as, "nasty things.

Their flesh is too much like the flesh of men. And their perfume has the rotten sweetness of a

prostitute."[40] Sternwood again points out the corruption that lies at the center of his life and also

expresses an opinion of the orchids that mirrors Marlowe's own when he first entered the

greenhouse, "The plants filled the place, a forest of them, with nasty meaty leaves and stalks like

the newly washed fingers of dead men."[41]

On top of these two calls by the mortal hunger of Sternwood's otherness, Marlowe also

encounters Sternwood's insomnia, another of Levinas' vital aspects of relational ethics, which

awakens a form of insomnia within himself. Levinas describes this metaphor of the ethical

relationship, "Insomnia is disquieted at the heart of its formal equality by the Other who cores

out all that which, within insomnia, makes up a core in resting, in presence, in sleep—all that

which is identified. Insomnia is the tearing of that resting within the identical."[42] Marlowe learns

of Sternwood's mortality. He learns that Sternwood hungers, but he also meets what might be

termed a sort of contagious insomniac in Sternwood's call for Marlowe's help. To be sure,

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[38] Levinas 170.
[39] Chandler 9.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Chandler 7.
[42] Levinas 209.

someone declaring to another that they cannot sleep might commonly be seen as an indicator that they are troubled, but to Levinas, insomnia represents more than a "trouble". Insomnia describes "the Other *within* the Same who does not alienate the Same but who awakens him."[43] In this way, the other, Sternwood, that connects to something within the Same/self, Marlowe, continually awakens the self to the other's presence as both an other and as an aspect of the same within the self. At the same time, Sternwood's insomnia, from a Levinasian perspective, represents his wakefulness towards the face of another, one who will become a central concern to Marlowe and the matter of his work, Rusty Regan, his older daughter, Vivian's, ex-husband who suddenly disappeared.

The above understanding of Sternwood's ethical appeal, or call, to Marlowe on the basis of his mortality, hunger, and insomnia creates a chain of responsibility between Marlowe and a man he does not know at all, Rusty Regan. The complexity of the webs of ethical relationships quickly becomes apparent but all the more important for its difficulty. Regan is never seen in the narrative. In fact, at the time that the story begins, he has already been killed, but shortly after the beginning of Marlowe and Sternwood's relationship, Sternwood must share with Marlowe Regan's importance to him. Sternwood asks Marlowe if anything about the background of the blackmail case, the reason Marlowe was invited in the first place, interests him, Marlowe replies, "The Rusty Regan part, maybe. But I always got along with bootleggers myself."[44] Marlowe expresses an affability with marginal members of society, and Sternwood agrees, "It seems I do too. I'm very fond of Rusty. A big curly-headed Irishman from Clonmel, with sad eyes and a smile as wide as Wilshire Boulevard."[45] Sternwood, however, deepens the importance of Regan beyond an issue of companionability when he elaborates on his feelings towards Regan, "He was

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[43] Ibid.
[44] Chandler 10.
[45] Ibid.

the breath of life to me—while he lasted. He spent hours with me, sweating like a pig, drinking

brandy by the quart and telling me stories of the Irish revolution."[46]

Despite the fact that Marlowe's stated purpose is to help resolve a blackmail scheme

involving Carmen, he is immediately made a proxy by Sternwood and confronted by an ethical

call to responsibility, which, in turn, is followed by Sternwood's expression of his loss of another

person to whom *he* felt connected to and responsible for. The call for Marlowe to take up Regan

and Sternwood's work has been made, but like many noir, the protagonist appears unsure of

whether he will recognize this responsibility that has been thrust on him. Throughout much of

the rest of the novel, others (Vivian Sternwood, the police, Eddie Mars) approach Marlowe and

ask if he has embarked on this quest yet, but each time he sidesteps the question or outright

denies his responsibility to determine Regan's fate. It is not until much later, when Marlowe has

pieced together the connections between most of the players that he returns to Sternwood and

confronts Sternwood with what Marlowe sees as the crux of the case. Marlowe has finally found

out why Geiger was blackmailing Sternwood and Marlow lays it out for him,

> Why did he do that? Because he wanted to find out if there was anything putting
>
> pressure on you. If there was, you would pay him. If not, you would ignore him
>
> and wait for his next move. But there was something putting a pressure on you.
>
> Regan. You were afraid he was not what he had appeared to be…It's that you're
>
> still too proud to be played for a sucker—and you really liked Regan.[47]

After a brief repartee about Marlowe threatening to give back Sternwood's money and give up,

Chandler writes

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[46] Chandler 11.
[47] Chandler 214.

[Sternwood] smiled. "Quit, nothing," he said. "I'll pay you another thousand dollars to find Rusty. He doesn't have to come back. I don't even have to know where he is. A man has a right to live his own life. I don't blame him for walking out on my daughter, nor even for going so abruptly. It was probably a sudden impulse. I want to know that he is all right wherever he is. I want to know it from him directly, and if he should happen to need money, I should want him to have that also. Am I clear?

Marlowe agrees, but Chandler does not leave it at that. He further articulates the importance of the connection between Marlowe, Sternwood, and Regan

He rested a little while, lax on the bed, his eyes closed and dark-lidded, his mouth tight and bloodless. He was used up. He was pretty nearly licked. He opened his eyes again and tried to grin at me.

"I guess I'm a sentimental old goat," he said. "And no soldier at all. I took a fancy to that boy. He seemed pretty clean to me. I must be a little too vain about my judgment of character. Find him for me, Marlow. Just find him."

"I'll try," I said. "You'd better rest now. I've talked your arm off."

I got up quickly and walked across the wide floor and out. He had his eyes shut again before I opened the door. His hands lay limp on the sheet. He looked a lot more like a dead man than most dead men look.[48]

This description immediately connects with Levinas' description of the self's connection to the masque of the dying other. Chandler focuses the reader's attention on Marlowe's experience of Sternwood's expressivity and his knowledge that this ability continues to fade away as he dies. With this realization, Marlowe accepts Sternwood's real and previously unspoken request for

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[48] Chandler 214.

help to find his friend. Sternwood has articulated the call to which Chandler laid the groundwork

upon their first meeting, and more importantly, Marlowe has accepted this work as his own and

now knows the importance of it, where before he had merely tried to unravel it. Marlowe is truly

searching and raising questions for a purpose even if the purpose comes after-the-fact. Marlowe

no longer is just being to the other. He begins to act as a being *for* the other. He has taken on a

responsibility, like that which Levinas describes when he says, "Responsibility does not signify a

synthesis; rather it signifies in the one-*for*-the other, that is in the one separated from the other by

the interval or the meanwhile of difference, which the non-in-difference does not efface."[49]

Sternwood's need has requested what Levinas calls an, "ethical relationship," which, "is not a

disclosure of something given but the exposure of the "me" to another, prior to any decision."[50]

Clearly, Marlowe's comment as he leaves about Sternwood's condition show that his interest lies

not with that "something given" (the money) but with Sternwood's communication of his

"nakedness" before Marlowe which caused within him,

> extreme tension of the command pressed upon me by another; a command prior to
>
> any opening on my part; a traumatic hold of the Other upon the Same. This is a
>
> hold that I discover in the extreme urgency that calls for my help, to the point
>
> where I always come too late, for there is no time to wait for me.[51]

By the end of the novel, we find that Marlowe's help comes too late to assist with Regan's call to

Sternwood. He had already been killed by Carmen and put into an oil well. The important part

ethically, in Levinas' view, comes in Marlowe's decisions and actions that accept this work for

himself and open Marlowe's self/Same to the other.

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[49] Levinas 186.
[50] Levinas 187.
[51] Ibid.

The Work of the Another and Questioning the Unanswerable Question

As we progress into Marlowe's works themselves, we keep in mind Knight's discussion of reason and the identity of the detective protagonist mentioned in the last chapter. The noir protagonist functions in an environment where his decisions and interests revolve around the mortality of himself and those with whom he comes in contact, and while Marlowe's actions might not fall under Knight's "reason", he does decide to take on Sternwood's real interest as his own, with significant danger to himself. What is the nature, then, of this ethical work? Where can we begin with an analysis of what Marlowe does with this responsibility that has been awakened in him? One of the defining features of the detective noir protagonist is their search and questioning. Much of the plot of noir revolves around the hero going from place to place and person to person to get answers to aspects of the larger question, and Marlowe is no exception. Marlowe clearly searches for something: the cause of the blackmail, the murderer of Geiger, what happened to the chauffer, and where is Rusty Regan, but why are this search and the nature of the search important ethically?

Marlowe, all throughout the narrative, by the nature of his occupational identity, takes on the work of another, but this is a commercial relationship, not necessarily an ontological or ethical one.[52] To understand the importance of the search and its connection to death, we must return briefly to Levinas' discussion of death and insert a brief understanding of Levinas' picture of time. Levinas tries to connect the ideas of death, time, and God (the infinite ideal that Levinas uses as the basis for ethics). In the face of the dead or dying other, Levinas sees the potential for

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[52] This is not to say that commercial and ethical relationships are mutually exclusive. The opposite is probably true, but I want to make the point that a further step is needed in addition to Marlowe's acceptance of a case in order to indicate the acceptance of the responsibility to an other. In this way, Marlowe's job and his ethics are intertwined but not necessarily dependent, as can be seen by noir heroes who are not detectives by their occupation but are by their work.

understanding time and thus that which lies outside of the finiteness of time. Therefore, the

moment of astonishment does more than just alert the self to the needs of the other. It also forces

a recognition of the limits of the finiteness of time. This disquietude presents a knowledge of the

nature of time. Levinas states,

> Time and all temporal phenomena (searching, questioning, desire, etc.) are always
>
> analyzed by default. Is it not possible, in these phenomena, to think of their
>
> emptiness and their incompletion as a step beyond contents, a mode of
>
> relationship with the noncontainable, with the infinite that one could not say is a
>
> term?[53]

This connection between astonishment in the face of the other opening the self to the

other, which leads to an expression of the "temporal phenomena", which in turn leads to a

connection with that which is uncontainable and infinite, connects Marlowe's understanding of

Sternwood and, eventually, Regan's mortality to a set of actions (Marlowe's search and

questioning) to an ethical basis. To further illuminate the nature of Marlowe's actions in light of

an ethical framework, Levinas develops a deeper understanding of this notion of work and

astonishment, he writes, "Astonishment is a question that is not the posing of a question and in

which there is also a response. It is a question by virtue of the obscurity of the subject, and a

response by virtue of the fullness of hope."[54] Marlowe in these moments of astonishment

engages in what Levinas would term a questioning: a questioning between Marlowe and

Sternwood, a questioning between Marlowe and the missing Regan, and Marlowe and the other

that he has been forced to see in himself.

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[53] Levinas 110.
[54] Levinas 102.

In defining this questioning or searching, Levinas goes even further, "A searching as a questioning, and a questioning arising prior to every question about the given. *In*finity *in* the finite. A fission or a putting in question of the one who questions."[55] Marlowe's questions, especially those that rise before Sternwood asks him to search for Regan, serve to place Marlowe's self in question while at the same time questioning the others of Sternwood and Regan by pointing out their presence as others within Marlowe's self. Levinas goes further to describe,

> This fission of the Same by the untenable Other at the heart of myself, where disquiet disturbs the heart at rest, and is not reducible to some intellection of terms…this is awakening, this is temporality. It is necessary to think in an ethical manner this tearing of the Same by the Other. The return or recurrence, of this identification of the Same amounts to undergoing every passion to the point of passive languishing, that it, of suffering and assignation without possible evasion, without escaping into representation in order to outwit its urgency. To be in the accusative before any nominative form. Inner identity signifies precisely the impossibility of holding oneself at rest. It is ethical from the first.[56]

Here we have a final step that brings Marlowe from witnessing the mortality of Sternwood to the ethical acts that might define his acceptance of the responsibility urged on him in the moments of astonishment. However, it still remains to bring this ethics of the individual to the center of the consideration of *The Big Sleep* as an example of noir and to integrate Derrida's deconstruction of ethics into the equation.

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[55] Levinas 110.
[56] Levinas 111.

"Love", "Home", and Derrida's "Hospitality"

This questioning, the active aspect of the internal, ethical awakening, Levinas argues, is tied to Ernst Bloch's idea of "home", "Bloch thus describes this astonishment with the term *home*, which is an anticipation of the world perfected, in which the obscurity of singularity disappears."[57] Just by engaging with Sternwood and Regan in this questioning and accepting their works as his own while keeping it as the work of an other within himself, Marlowe moves towards something transcendent, something hopeful, and something connective in a world typified by disconnection. However, Levinas is careful to point out later that this hope does not represent a Kantian categorical imperative, but at the same time represents a project like that of Kant,

> Just as Kantianism finds a meaning to the human without measuring it against ontology…, here we seek a meaning outside the problem of immortality and death. The fact that immortality and theology do not belong to what determines the categorical imperative signifies the novelty of the Copernican revolution. Meaning is not determined through the to-be or the not-to-be. It is being, on the contrary, that is determined one the basis of meaning. [58]

With meaning determining the being of our self (Marlowe, in this case) and this hope for "home" representing a goal, Levinas gives a couple insights into how the ethical self might appear and be discussed, "Here, on the contrary, man is not primarily preoccupied with his being,"[59] and,

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[57] Levinas 102. Levinas focuses in *God, Death, and Time* on Bloch's work *The Principle of Hope*. Bloch, Ernst, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight, vol. 3 (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986).
[58] Levinas 184.
[59] Levinas 103.

Thus, we come back to the love "as strong as death." It is not a matter of a force

that could repel the death inscribed in my being. However, it is not my nonbeing

that causes anxiety, but that of the loved one or of the other, more beloved than

my being. What we call, by a somewhat corrupted term, love, is *par excellence*

the fact that the death of the other affects me more than my own. The love of the

other is the emotion of the other's death. It is my receiving the other—and not the

anxiety of death awaiting me—that is the reference to death. We encounter death

in the face of the other.[60]

If the basis of this sort of ethics is not in being but in a sort of questioning, searching, and

hoping, then Marlowe's actions on behalf of Sternwood and Regan can be said to exhibit

something like Levinas' *love* or Derrida's *hospitality*.

Marlowe, Sternwood, and Regan: Masters and Strangers All

This connection between Levinas' transcendent, relational ethics and the home or

Derrida's discussions of hospitality begins the bridge back from Levinas to Derrida, where we

began and will complete this chapter. Marlowe's attempt to ease the home of Sternwood through

the questioning and searching for those things that threaten him represents a deviation from the

traditional approaches to the noir hero and also opens his identity as an ethically ambiguous

protagonist. Marlowe shows his response to his responsibility toward Sternwood and Regan by

providing hospitality to the house of one who's house is not his own. Combining these concepts

of *home*, *love*, *responsibility*, and *hospitality* brings the opportunity to return to Derrida's

discourses on the ethics of hospitality.

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[60] Levinas 105.

Derrida writes in *Of Hospitality* that, in considering ethics on a larger, more political

scale, deconstruction of what it means to be at home (a host/citizen) against what it means to be

away from home (a stranger/foreigner) represents a central and irresolvable tension that lies at

the heart of ethical actions. Derrida perceives a broader notion of ethics as a tension between

these two dualities: host/stranger and citizen/foreigner. I have shown that Derrida asks many of

the same, or similar, questions as Levinas. Levinas stated that ethics required an openness and

response in the face of the other that did not subsume the other. As mentioned at the beginning of

the chapter, Derrida inquires, similarly, as to whether it is ethical for the citizen/master of the

house to truly be hospitable if they place stipulations on those to whom they extend their

hospitality. If Derrida and Levinas' visions of ethics contain overlap, then Derrida's discussion

of hospitality could add to the ethical perspective of noir and answer Derrida's call for a

particular scholarship on narratives about ethics mentioned in the last chapter, "it would also be

necessary to analyze a sort of essential and quasiahistorical law or antinomy. We could do this

starting from ancient examples or from Levinas's ethical statements, but also starting from that

which transforms this problematic into new experiences."[61] Looking at noir through Derrida and

Levinas extends the discourse of narratives to include a genre that typifies the contemporary,

industrial, and urban nature of modern/postmodern society, noir. These dark narratives fit neatly

into Derrida's call. Noir, both literary and cinematic, includes the spheres of death, hospitality,

and the foreigner in the service of telling narratives that interrogate the lines of morality, ethics,

and identity.

Returning to Chandler's *The Big Sleep* and looking through the thematic lenses provided

by Derrida, we see that, from the opening chapters, Chandler firmly establishes the same central

themes that interest Derrida: hospitality, death, and the foreigner. We can begin to note the link

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[61] Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 139.

between hospitality, the hostage, and ethics that occurs in Chandler. We must turn again to the opening of *The Big Sleep* that was discussed above, only this time we must examine Marlowe's relationship before he even knocks on the door of the Sternwoods. The novel opens with a description of a scene that immediately calls to mind Derrida's image of the master awaiting the stranger's liberating arrival from inside the doorway. In the voice of Marlowe, Chandler describes the imposing nature of the Sternwood manor, where Marlowe has been invited by the request of the patriarch, General Sternwood. The size and location of the house, in the hills surrounding LA, emanate power and the money that brings it.

More specifically, Marlowe notices a central stained-glass panel that depicts a knight attempting to rescue a damsel in distress. He remarks, "he was fiddling with the knots on the ropes that tied the lady to the tree and not getting anywhere. I stood there and thought that if I lived in the house, I would sooner or later have to climb up there and help him. He didn't seem to be really trying."[62] Chandler describes an image of traditional masculinity, the knight, but this knight's impotence immediately becomes apparent to Marlowe. We must notice that Marlowe states his aim rests in assisting the knight in the liberation of the girl not saving her as a knight himself. In the scene, Marlowe eschews the mantel of knighthood in favor of being the man behind the scenes and getting the job done.[63] By Marlowe's refusal to identify as the heroic knight, Chandler establishes Marlowe's foreignness, his marginality. The traditional objection notions of morality are impotent in Marlowe's eyes. This marginality and the imposing nature of the Sternwood mansion point to a powerful man who wields great power. Within this huge edifice, we find a shriveled, baby spider of a man who, while still powerful, exists on ambient

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[62] Chandler 3-4.

[63] This refusal of traditional vestiges of heroism also might be interpreted as a humility except for Marlowe's consistent expression of his pride in who and what he is. Of course, this too could represent a front and, in reality, show Marlowe to be even more chivalric, but this sort of cycle could continue forever rather than accepting Marlowe for something different.

life. Neither the master (Sternwood) nor, in some ways, the stranger (Marlowe) can return to the simplicity of morality and heroism initially implied by the window. Marlowe's reaction and subsequent meeting with Sternwood undercut that hope. Levinas' perspectives on mortality, hunger, and sleep allow for the interpretation of Sternwood, the literal master of the house, as one who lives in both a castle and a prison of a home. It allows for us to see him as the master and foreigner who hosts the stranger in his house, an other. Additionally, while Marlowe mocks a return to a mythical chivalrous time, he recognize his responsibility as a master, of himself and able to move fluidly throughout the strata of society, and as a foreigner, a self that lives on the edges of society, in the face of Sternwood who also is master and foreigner. Only with the coming of Marlowe, the stranger, does hope for any liberation remain, and that is an imperfect hope. Therefore, the narrative remains one centered on ethical and moral concerns, but Marlowe refuses moralistic codes or hopelessness as options. This leaves the rest of the novel to explore what other option might lay open to the hero. The ethical negotiation points to a morality akin to that examined by Derrida and Levinas.

In addition to focusing on how Chandler's focus on issues of mortality point to the mortality of the other whom Marlowe approaches, a Levinasian reading, we also see connections to Derrida's analysis of Oedipus' experience in Colonus in *Of Hospitality*. Like Oedipus, Sternwood lives as an exiled or deposed king. Like Oedipus, Sternwood has two daughters who form both his position and also his prison. Admittedly, Oedipus' daughter represents more of a material comfort, but his worry for their futures also represents a severe burden. The burden of Sternwood's daughters presents a much clearer source of concern to Sternwood. They live wildly, dangerously, and well beyond their means.[64] Immediately upon entering the house,

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[64] The image of the troubled and devilish daughter possesses significant difficulties in terms of gender and class ideals. The linkage of sexuality, money, and gender relations runs throughout noir, and the problematics of

Marlowe meets the younger of Sternwood's daughters, Carmen, who is described as having, "little sharp predatory teeth, as white as fresh orange pith and as shiny as porcelain," further focusing on both the impotence of the General and beginning the theme of death through the use of "predatory," a relationship based on death that is both powerful and dependent on the prey to define it.[65]

When Marlowe enters into the presence of the General, who waits to receive him in the greenhouse, the narrative enters the discussion of the relationship of death and life, which I mentioned above in connection to Levinas' face of the dying other. This relationship also recalls the liminal identity of Oedipus, alluded to above.[66] This "master" invites Marlowe to both drink and smoke while he cannot partake for himself. He remarks on this by saying, "A nice state of affairs when a man has to indulge his vices by proxy."[67] *The Big Sleep* repeatedly recalls notions of hospitality. Chandler's connection of hospitality and the frailty and dependence of the one providing it links the novel to Derrida's engagement with classical narratives in order to explore the meaning of ethical hospitality.[68] Looking again at this description of Marlowe as proxy from Derrida's perspective adds another layer of meaning. Not only does Marlowe stand in for Sternwood's living and vices as a self who is being-for-the-other, pointing out a Levinasian ethics, but Sternwood's offering of hospitality that he cannot enjoy himself contributes a layer of meaning and importance to the nature of that relationship. Without the stranger, Sternwood has

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punishing Vivian and Carmen for stepping outside of their prescribed roles are clear. Within the narrative though both women's behavior clearly represents a real and physical danger to themselves and others. However, noirs rarely punish men for acting in equally disreputable ways.

[65] Chandler 5.

[66] Sternwood's status as a general adds another layer of a relationship of power that mirrors the dependent "master" role. A general is another leadership position requiring having soldiers to lend it meaning.

[67] Chandler 9.

[68] Chandler's linkage of the mortality of Sternwood, his power, and his desire for Marlowe's help echoes Levinas's notions of the recognition of the face of the dying other that he illuminates in *God, Death, and Time*. Chandler goes on, in this scene, giving example after example of the connections between death and life. It is something of which Marlowe is very aware.

no way to enjoy the fruits of his house. Sternwood's participation in his home relies on the stranger, making him hostage and linking him inexorably to Marlowe. This linkage, from a Derridean perspective, takes on an importance in addition to the individual relationship and responsibility. The relationship of the self to the other is also the relationship of the citizen to the foreigner and the stranger to the master of the house. This adds both external and internal political implications to the ethics of responsibility.

Let us bring down the comparison of Marlowe's two missions from above. On the forefront, Sternwood asks Marlowe's assistance in rectifying a problem with blackmail involving the youngest of his daughters, Carmen. Sternwood, as master, needs the help of the stranger to manage his home. However, in the background lurks the presence of the absence of Regan which weighs on Sternwood. While Marlowe sits and talks with him, Sternwood tells about the aid that Sternwood received from Carmen's ex-husband, "an ex-bootlegger who went in the trade by the name of Rusty Regan."[69] We return to Sternwood's statement that,

> He was the breath of life to me—while he lasted. He spent hours with me, sweating like a pig, drinking brandy by the quart and telling me stories of the Irish revolution. He had been an officer in the I.R.A. He wasn't even legally in the United States. It was a ridiculous marriage of course, and it probably didn't last a month, as a marriage. I'm telling you the family secrets, Mr. Marlowe.[70]

From a Levinasian focus, outlined above, this statement holds the important communication that Regan and Sternwood's mortality connect and mirror the responsibility being built between Sternwood and Marlowe. However, in just these short sentences, Derrida's perspective adds to the discussions of death an understanding of the foreignness and, with it, hospitality to the

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[69] Chandler 10.
[70] Chandler 11.

central, and most obvious, foreigner, Regan, although Marlowe does not yet know this. Regan is

Marlowe's predecessor in helping Sternwood as both confidant and as resident foreigner. The

paradoxical description of Regan by Sternwood as a sort of resident foreigner highlights the

interconnectivity of responsibility and hospitality. Regan, and now Marlowe, fulfill a vital place

in Sternwood's house, the outsider. Regan belonged, in Sternwood's eyes, precisely because he

did not belong.

In addition to this discourse of citizenship and foreignness, Derrida's interpretation of

Theseus and Oedipus provides another venue for understanding the nature of hospitality in noir.

Marlowe is asked to bear knowledge of a secret and mortal nature. In the quotation above,

Sternwood feels that he has given away too much. It seems doubtful, in light of Sternwood's

later deftness of mind, that Sternwood let this slip by a feat of senility. It acts as an invocation,

like Derrida's description of Oedipus' entreaty to Theseus, but this section also reminds the

reader of Sternwood's life-link to Regan. As Marlowe finds that he must discover the unlabelled

tomb of Regan, "Secret knowledge, secret about knowledge, secret about knowing, ultimately,

where he dies the great transgressor, the outlaw, the blind *anomos* who cannot even himself

confide the secret that he enjoins upon others to keep about the place where he, the foreigner,

will be able once upon a time to have-died," he is also helping Sternwood, the master of the

house.[71] Thus, we can pick up the end of Sternwood's story, "I'm telling you the family secrets,

Mr. Marlowe," and see that Marlowe's response, "They're still secrets," and the follow-up

question, "What happened to him," represent a pact interestingly similar to Theseus' with

Oedipus.[72] Thus, like Derrida's treatment of the story of Oedipus, we can unpack Chandler's

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[71] Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 99, 101.
[72] Chandler 11.

story of Marlowe to find a similar theme of death, belonging, and the secret of the tomb of the

foreigner.

As Marlowe unravels the events surrounding Regan's death, he discovers that the death

of the master's stranger comes at the hand of Carmen because Regan refused her sexual

hospitality.[73] Carmen had killed the former stranger and forces a confrontation with Marlowe,

the new stranger who also refused Carmen's advances, at the location of Regan's burial, hoping

to kill him like his predecessor. Anticipating such an attempt, Marlowe reloaded her gun with

blanks, but even when he confirms in this moment that the destruction of the foreign life-link has

come from within the house of the master, he protects them all. Marlowe sees the responsibility

of his occupation, a private (domestic) eye, and he responds in light of the paradox of

domestic/foreign and life/death with actions that he has deemed as ethical.

Vivian, the older daughter, actually asks Marlowe why he does what he does without the

reward of money or fame or contractual responsibility, and Marlowe interestingly evades the

question, turning it around against Carmen, asking, "What are you offering it [$15,000] to me

for?"[74] In some ways, this could be read as a restatement of a couple other questions: "Why does

the stranger liberate the host/master" and "Why does the host/master open their home?" This

exchange offers the answer of the noir protagonist in the form of a question. Marlowe's asking of

Vivian points to the oddity of the cultural and societal practice of paying individuals for

behaving ethically, but it also points out that there is no answer necessarily to why Marlowe does

what he does. All that Marlowe and his readers receive are more questions. Events transpire and

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[73] Although a topic for another work, the reason for the daughters' promiscuity and gambling also might connect to their father's lack of ability to extend to them, the members of the house, the hospitality that he so freely gives the strangers, both men, who come. Further connections between Oedipus' and Sternwood's pairs of daughters hold out further scholarly fruit.
[74] Chandler 228.

individual situations resolve, but the underlying tensions between master and stranger or citizen and foreigner remain to be examined again and again.

In *The Big Sleep*, the momentary resolution comes as he fulfills his relationship to Sternwood and Regan in a way similar to how Derrida defines the interaction of Theseus and Oedipus, "No, here, the dead one remains all the more foreign in a foreign land in that there is no *manifest* grave, no visible and phenomenal tomb, only a secret burial, an ungrace invisible even to his family, even to his daughter."[75] However, the questions remain. Theseus must quest and question for the honorable one to whom he might entrust Oedipus' secret, and Marlowe must question the solution of placing Carmen in an institution. The vital question becomes, "Who is becoming the foreigner?" It can clearly be Regan, but it is also Marlowe. It is Sternwood and his daughters, even, and especially, Carmen. The foreigner/stranger of noir can be anyone, and the situation can lead them in any direction.[76] Thus a Levinasian-Derridean reading allows us to examine Marlowe's confidence and an outgrowth of his responsibility (in Levinasian terms) and hospitality (in Derridean terms) more than the expression of Marlowe and Sternwood's membership and participation in a feudal, moralistic hierarchy or an existentialistic malaise.

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[75] Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 113.

[76] The nature of the "accidental" noir protagonist and its relationship to this idea of the foreign is equally important as the aid provided by the stranger. It is a common noir convention to have an average man or woman mistaken for another or thrust into an impossible situation which results in the descent into corruption, but this is a topic for another time.

CHAPTER THREE:

OF THE LIMEYS AND THE LEBOWSKIS

Noir in Contemporary Film

While searching for contemporary noir films that fit both Derrida's call for narratives that

explore the ethics of hospitality and Naremore's search for a core of noir that is not limited by

historical and stylistic barriers, many examples presented themselves. Friends, advisors, and my

own filmographic searches resulted in dozens of films made after the end of the *noir* period that

might fit in my expansion of noir.[1] For the purpose of illustrating the possibilities in applying a

Levinasian-Derridean perspective of the ethics at the core of noir I have chosen only two: Steven

Soderbergh's *The Limey* and the Coen brother's *The Big Lebowski*. While many other films

could prove equally as fruitful to this project, these texts give examples of two major areas of the

contemporary expression that represents the roles of noir in the last forty years of American

popular film.

Soderbergh's *The Limey*, a project made on a relatively small budget and a small cast,

represents the continuation of the B-movie crime stories that mirror the identities of many classic

noir pictures. It is not particularly popular and has received little critical attention.[2] The film tells

the story of a British ex-con, Wilson (Terence Stamp), who finds out that his estranged daughter,

Jenny (Melissa George), has died in what he sees as a mysterious car accident after leaving the

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[1] To just name a few of the American films that came up repeatedly: *Cape Fear* (1962 or 1991), *Point Blank* (1967), *The Conversation* (1974), *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Cutter's Way* (1981), *Body Heat* (1981), *Basic Instinct* (1992), *Brick* (2005), *A History of Violence* (2005), *The Black Dahlia* (2006), and *Hollywoodland* (2006). Additionally, the work of filmmakers like David Fincher, David Lynch, and Quentin Tarantino all draw heavily from noir and make excellent candidates for future considerations.

[2] In fact, the only article that I could find dealing with *The Limey* specifically is Brian Michael Goss' article "Steven Soderbergh's *The Limey*: Implications for the Auteur Theory and Industry Structure" from the journal *Popular Communication* in 2004. Goss does not delve into the possible connections between this film and a tradition of crime narratives, remaining focused on Soderbergh as a player in Hollywood and a rebirth of auteur filmmakers.

house of her long-time boyfriend, record/concert promoter Terry Valentine (Peter Fonda). The

film opens with Wilson's arrival in Los Angeles, and he begins to track down those who knew

his daughter and unravels the truth about her death. The setting, style, and plot all immediately

recall some of the characteristics of noir, but the ethical questions at its core provide the most

valuable understanding of the ways in which Soderbergh's film continues, rather than reflects,

the ethical core of noir. In this story of a man on a quest for the truth and justice in a world where

such things grow increasingly muddled and difficult to divine, we can see a narrative that, while

distinct stylistically from *noir*, also continues a discursive exploration of noir's questions.

  The Big Lebowski, on the other hand, has become a cult film since its release in 1998, and

it remains the focus of critical and fan attention. The Coen brothers have made a number of films

that could be said to continue noir, including *Blood Simple*, *Fargo*, *Barton Fink*, *Miller's*

Crossing, and *The Man Who Wasn't There*, and their connection to noir is well established. In

the introduction to his book on the Coens, James Mottram identifies several key filmic influences

on the work of the Coens' work, including very prominent places for Carol Reed's *The Third*

Man and John Huston's *The Asphalt Jungle*, both strong examples of classical noir.[3] Almost any

of the Coen's films could provide my needed example of noir's continuance past traditional,

historical boundaries, however *The Big Lebowski* both strongly draws from Chandler's *The Big*

Sleep, noir plots, and symbols and also exemplifies a contemporary noir that carries the ethical

discourse beyond the boundaries of serious crime films and incorporates parody and humor in

ways that does more than mock the conventions of its predecessors.[4] *The Big Lebowski* follows

the adventures of a do-nothing loafer, Jeffrey Lebowski aka The Dude (Jeff Bridges). The Dude

is mistaken for a much richer man with the same name, Jeffrey Lebowski aka The Big Lebowski

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[3] Mottram, James. *The Coen Brothers: The Life of the Mind*. Dulles: Brassey's Inc., 2000, 5.
[4] Mottram, 137-140.

(David Huddleston), by some collection agents seeking to get money owed to their boss by the

other Lebowski's wife, Bunny (Tara Reid), and is drawn into a muddled, convoluted world

where everyone wants a piece of him.

By exploring the appearance of aspects of Derrida and Levinas' ethics in both *The Limey*

and *The Big Lebowski*, we see that noir's interest in the questions of hospitality and

responsibility continues even into contemporary film. In this chapter, I will show that each of

these films, whether serious or humorous in tone, also seeks to grapple with the same dark center

and the meanings of the choices and actions of the lone protagonist in a world of corrupt and

confusing ethical norms.

The Limey and the Lost Daughter

In the previous chapter, I illustrated the presence of Derrida's questions about the

connections between hospitality, mortality, and the place of death in noir narratives. Derrida uses

Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, particularly the point at the end of the play, where Oedipus is

dying and seeks a cave in the wilderness to die as an outlaw and a foreigner so that his family

will not be burdened with his legacy. Jacques Derrida interprets this narrative, from a Levinasian

perspective, as an example of a continuing philosophical discussion of the connection between

memory, identity, and the ethics of responsibility and hospitality.[5] In Steven Soderbergh's 1999

film *The Limey*, he presents a narrative that, while different in many respects, analyzes many of

the same connections providing examples of some very similar ideas.[6]

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[5] Derrida's analysis of *Oedipus at Colonus* peppers much of the lectures compiled in *Of Hospitality* but can be primarily found between pages 35 and 121.

[6] I am well aware that film is inherently a collaborative enterprise, and *The Limey* is no exception. Lem Dobbs, the screenwriter, had been trying to get this script made for quite a while, and Soderbergh consulted with Dobbs throughout the process of making this film. Therefore I use "Soderbergh", or the name of any director or producer, in a way that is not indicative that he is the lone auteur but rather to represent the collective filmmaker with an understanding that many people are required to bring a narrative to the screen.

As I mention above, *The Limey* follows a father just released from prison in England who flies to California to find out what happened to result in his daughter's mysterious death. As Wilson learns that Valentine was involved with a money-laundering scheme that Jenny had begun to suspect, he begins to plot his revenge and find ways to get to Valentine to make him answer for his role in Jenny's death. One could see this film as just another revenge fantasy, but the film's use of editing to evoke memory, the focus on Wilson's relationships with Jenny's friends, and the result of Wilson's decision whether or not to complete his vengeance highlight Levinasian-Derridean views of ethics. The film especially focuses on the face of the dead other, Jenny, the questions of hospitality/citizenship between Valentine and Wilson, and the moment of astonishment which leads Wilson to not take the opportunity to exact his revenge. These narrative choices further illustrate the ways in which contemporary films might continue the discourse of classic *film noir*.

Wilson and Jenny's distinct Britishness, a fact repeatedly referenced in the film, establishes them as foreigners who are out of their nation and often lack the language and understanding of cultural codes necessary to blend into the citizenry. Being British does not mark Wilson as clearly distinct as other identities. Soderbergh has Wilson assisted by Jenny's old friend from her acting class, Eduardo Roel (Luis Guzman), an ex-con himself, who stands out even more in the context of Valentine's affluent world because of his ethnicity and prominent tattoos. However, throughout the film, Wilson's accent, dress, nationality, and occupation mark him as a distinct outsider, a foreigner and stranger. Reflecting Derrida's discussion of foreignness in *Of Hospitality*, Wilson finds himself exiled in a foreign land that does not speak his language. Specifically, in a few places in the film, Wilson must explain his use of cockney rhyming slang to the Americans to whom it is like another language. The DEA

agent (Bill Duke) even exclaims, "There's one thing I don't understand. The thing I don't understand is every motherfuckin' word you're saying," and "You're not from around here, are you?" This foreignness extends to Jenny who is remembered by warehouse workers as the girl who spoke like Wilson. The focus on how both Wilson and his daughter do not belong immediately highlight's Derrida's questions of hospitality.

In the course of the narrative, the identities of Wilson and Jenny as strangers and Valentine as the master of the house who acted inhospitably explores the question of the foreigner, and this question, according to Derrida must center on issues of death and mourning, "Here, rather, [the question of the foreigner] is the experience of death and mourning, it is first of all the law of burial that becomes—let us say the word—determining. The questions of the foreigner concerns what happens at death and when the traveler is laid to rest in a foreign land."[7] Soderbergh's narrative compounds the ethical questions of the foreigner and their place within another land by overlaying it with Wilson's mourning and the search for the truth about Jenny's death. Where did Jenny belong? Where can Wilson go once his quest is completed? *The Limey* highlights and plays out the difficulties of the challenge of the foreigner. Although most of my discussion of *The Limey* focuses on reading it in Levinasian terms, it is important to keep in mind that these same terms underpin Derrida's ethical turn. *The Limey* is about the limey, Wilson, and the questions of Wilson, Jenny, and Valentine all illustrate the tensions in hospitality. Indeed, Soderbergh's film, "concerns what happens at death and when the traveler is laid to rest in a foreign land," and the determinations of those left behind.

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[7] Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 87.

Responsibility In and To the Face of Jenny

   The Limey reflects a Levinasian connection from the first line of dialogue and begins with

the relationship of the buried one to those left behind, "Tell me. Tell me. Tell me about Jenny,"

opens the film.[8] The soundtrack immediately cuts in with The Who's "The Seeker" as the

audience sees Wilson flying into LAX and riding to his motel, establishing Wilson as a

protagonist on a quest. Wilson's question is different from the typical revenge narrative.

Wilson's search for his daughter causes him to being to encounter a mode of ethical being

reflected in Levinas' assertions of how responsibility of one for another stems from the

recognition of "face", of nude identity.

   Wilson arrives in LA, a stereotypical noir location at both the end of the American

westward expansion and just north of the Mexican border, a place of escape and exoticism,

convinced that Jenny's death was not an accident. While still in prison, he had received a

clipping from Jenny's friend, Eduardo. Upon his release, Wilson immediately breaks parole and

heads to find those responsible for Jenny's death. Even in this immediate assumption that Jenny

was murdered, Wilson begins to play out Levinas' perspective on ethics and death. Levinas

states that, "We should think of all the murder there is in death: every death is a murder, is

premature, and there is the responsibility of the survivor."[9] Levinas is making a larger point that,

to the survivors and mourners, the death of another always appears too soon and metaphorically

is like a murder. This appears even more strongly in a case like Wilson's, where one's daughter

not only dies before her father but also dies in mysterious circumstances far from home. Wilson

feels a duty to fulfill his obligation as a father within his understanding of a moral code. In one

way, Wilson is living out the response that Oedipus avoided by keeping the place of his death a

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[8] *The Limey*, dir. Steven Soderbergh, perf. Terence Stamp, Lesley Ann Warren, Luis Guzman, Peter Fonda, Artisan, 1999.
[9] Levinas 72.

secret. Wilson, at the beginning of *The Limey*, acts out of a sense of personal justice and objective morality. Convinced that Jenny's death was the result of someone else, Wilson sets out to make them pay. Wilson clearly articulates this in a sentiment near the beginning of his time in LA. Eduardo takes Wilson to the warehouse where he and Jenny had gone once to confront the people there about their involvement with her boyfriend, Valentine. Wilson kills almost everyone in the warehouse, leaving only a boy alive to carry his message, "Tell 'em I'm coming! Tell them I'm fucking coming."[10]

However, the film does not remain focused on this vengeful quest in the same way. Wilson changes as he meets those who knew Jenny better than he did. As Wilson talks with Jenny's former friend and acting teacher, Elaine (Leslie Ann Warren), he outwardly expresses his feeling of connection with Jenny and her death, a response to his responsibility. He tells Elaine the story of how at the moment of Jenny's death he felt an overwhelming paralysis and realization of loss even from the prison yard half a world away. This apprehension and sense of disquiet is confirmed when Wilson receives the clipping from Eduardo. Convinced of foul play, Wilson determinedly responds in the only way he knows, violence and revenge. When he crashes a party at Valentine's house, Wilson fantasizes of killing Valentine, begins to act, but is pulled away by Eduardo. Wilson finds himself pulled between an unconditional moral code and the growing realization that his lifestyle and serial imprisonment played as large a part in Jenny's death as Valentine's criminal activity. Wilson expresses this specifically when a DEA agent (Bill Duke), who is also after Valentine, later catches him.[11] In an effort to save his neck, Wilson tells

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[10] *The Limey*.

[11] Wilson is taken into custody as the two men hired by Valentine to kill him approach Wilson and Elaine in the parking lot outside of her apartment complex. They have been rescued from death but then held for questioning. Wilson assumes that the DEA agent is crooked or a criminal himself. He surmises that the agent has been stiffed by Valentine, rather than being the subject of an investigation. While not crooked, the agent "accidentally" leaves the file on Valentine open to the reference of Valentine's place in Big Sur, displaying the negotiable legal rules of the noir world.

the agent a story about a guard who had given him a hard time while in prison. Years later,

Wilson sees him sitting on a bench in the park. He states that he could have gone up and easily

killed him but did not because "it was not worth it."[12] He covers up this failure to enact his

revenge with the assertion that he was just biding his time, the first lesson of time in prison. The

audience, though, sees the loss of hardness in Stamp's portrayal of Wilson. He has become

deflated a bit and begins to question his motivation and direction, although he does not waver in

continuing in his plan to track down Valentine and to make him answer for what happened.

Levinas illustrates an alternative to revenge as an answer to this search and the implied

fulfillment of Wilson's responsibility. In Levinas, we see a primacy of the relationship of the

individual to one who has died. This relationship and one's questioning of its meaning represent

the foundation of ethics. The first step in this process is the construction of responsibility based

on the memory or understanding of the "face" of the other, something that Levinas indicates as

the "question mark of his face".[13] In other words, as we look on another or even if we think

about those who have died, Levinas argues that these thoughts contain an implied relationship

and call. The face asks those who remember to remember but also for something else. Levinas

describes this something as more than the traditional ways of thinking about one relationship to

the dying other. He writes, "It is not love, not education, not a contingent service rendered by

one family member to another that can furnish the ethical principle proper to the family."[14] The

questioning of the face of the dead or dying other does not only refer to affection, enlightenment,

or a duty based on social and cultural relationship. Levinas is arguing that there is something

additional at work here.

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[12] *The Limey*
[13] Levinas 114.
[14] Levinas 83.

The remainder of *The Limey* explores the nature of this connection and its meaning for Wilson's future. Levinas and Wilson both seek to question the nature of one's responsibility in the face of the dead other. Levinas writes that the face of the dead other expresses a pure responsibility onto the individual, "Someone who expresses himself in his nudity—the face—is one to the point of appealing to me, of placing himself under my responsibility: Henceforth, I have to respond to him."[15] Levinas later elaborates on the nature of this responsibility, especially in its connection to family, "there exists an ethics proper to the family that, on the basis of its terrestrial morality, relates to the subterranean world and consists in *burying the dead*. It is here that the relationship with death is inscribed, or more precisely, with the dead *one*."[16] Connecting these two descriptions of the self to the dead or dying other provides a beginning of a way of thinking about Wilson's relationship to his daughter and why he chooses the route that he does as a noir protagonist, a quest for revenge. Wilson must begin to consider that his revenge does not fulfill a duty to Jenny in any real sense. He is not behaving towards here but rather towards his anger of not being there. Jenny's death, Wilson's quest to learn more, and his revenge force him to look at his grief differently.

The Limey clearly indicates that this relationship between Wilson and the dead one cannot be easily fulfilled. Jenny is already buried before Wilson arrives, and she is buried in a foreign land recalling Derrida's exploration of Oedipus' difficult situation. Wilson's burial of Jenny, therefore, cannot be a literal one. Wilson must search for a deeper and more internal way to grapple with the loss of his daughter. Wilson, however, looks for a way that he can externalize his connection and emotion through violent revenge. In the course of the narrative, Wilson discovers that seeking revenge on those who killed Jenny cannot complete the relationship

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[15] Levinas 12.
[16] Levinas 83.

implied by Levinas' image of the face of the dead other. Interpreted through Levinas, Jenny calls

to Wilson to understand the identities of himself and his daughter. He must contend with his self

and the way that the other has called it into question. Wilson was astonished by the connection

he felt at her death, his supernatural experience of her death; he also must understand their

disconnection and his responsibility because of his absence. His past life of crime has kept him

from seeing her grow up, apart from brief moments between prison sentences.[17] In this way, we

can look at Levinas' directive to recognize the nude face of another as indicating Wilson's search

for himself as well as his daughter. More specifically, Wilson must realize the nature of his self

and its relationship to Jenny as other. In many ways, his time in prison represents a form of death

that separated him from his family and forced them to mourn the loss of him. Wilson's

incarcerated absence and the death of Jenny's mother of an unnamed illness separate them from

Jenny. From her perspective, her parents are both removed from her life. They become dead

others to Jenny. Both of her parents lack the ability to respond to her needs and hungers. Like

Antigone, Jenny must mourn but also cannot mourn, since her father is not dead. This lack plays

a large part in establishing Jenny's play-acting to phone the police in order to forestall the

symbolic death of the men that she loves, yet again.

The differences between the approaches of Wilson and Valentine to their past actions

towards Jenny play a large part in the connections between the film and Levinas' ethical model.

Wilson spends the course of the film actively seeking the "face" of his daughter through revenge.

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[17] On a meta-textual level, Soderbergh crafts, on top of the film's narrative of Wilson and search for his daughter, a correlative metafictive element that compares the search for his daughter's killer with a search for Wilson's, and the audience's, own lost past as a result of the cultures of the 1960s in America and England which bring another level of historical commentary that this work does not present the liberty to explore but which bears mention. Soderbergh clearly uses the casting of Terence Stamp as Wilson and Peter Fonda as Terry Valentine, Jenny's boyfriend at the time of her death, to indicate a connection to these actors' personas as staples of counter-cultural, arts films of the time. This focus on memory, both individual and collective, is highlighted by the structure of the story as a memory by Wilson, by the inclusion of memories of Jenny, and by the use of old footage of Stamp as his memories of himself.

Valentine, on the other hand, has used her and thrown her away after he accidentally kills her. He spends the narrative trying to cover up the truth and protect himself from admitting his responsibility in her death, while at the same time clearly affected by both his loss and the knowledge of his deed. Valentine, like Wilson, finds himself out of his element. He is a spirit of the Sixties and not seemingly given to criminality generally. When trying to explain the Sixties to his much younger girlfriend, Valentine says, "Did you ever dream about a place you never really recall being to before? A place that maybe only exists in your imagination? Some place far away, half remembered when you wake up. When you were there, though, you knew the language. You knew your way around. *That* was the Sixties."[18] In this way, Soderbergh sets up Valentine as another exile. This "place", the Sixties, is gone forever. However, Valentine's citizenship specifically depends on memory, language, and belonging, all aspects raised by Derrida's questioning of these themes. Valentine can only experience it by commodifying it and selling it to others in search of a nostalgic fix. In this way, Wilson and Valentine have much in common. Both Wilson and Valentine's actions tie closely to their past lifestyles (both made money off of the huge concerts three decades ago, Wilson by stealing and Valentine by "promoting"), and how they react to the realization of responsibility defines their lives and actions as ethical or not. *The Limey* struggles with the relationships and responsibilities of these characters. Neither Valentine nor Wilson can claim to have acted towards Jenny with an ethical responsibility. Both men feel adrift. Soderbergh uses the film's soundtrack to label Wilson as "The Seeker" and Valentine as "King Midas in Reverse". Through the course of the film, the audience is shown the consequences of their ethical failures, the difficulties of the exiles (Who is not an exile in the film?), and how Wilson's search forces all of these tensions to a head or perhaps more accurately to a face.

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[18] *The Limey*.

Soderbergh shows one such face, Jenny's, appearing to Wilson continually through the course of the narrative. Soderbergh intercuts the main storyline with flashbacks when Wilson tells Eduardo or Elaine about his uneven past with his daughter and at moments when Wilson is alone, thinking of the ways in which he missed his daughter's life. Wilson only learns about Jenny because of and after her death. Playing with time and space through editing, Soderbergh depicts scenes of Jenny as a girl on the beach when Wilson describes her love for the seaside. He also illustrates the moments when the young Jenny fights with her father, threatening to call the police on him if he does not give up his life of crime. A shift in film texture and lighting always indicate these flashbacks and memories, but the most important aspect Wilson's memories of Jenny are the camera's continued focus on Jenny's face as both primary and elusive. In the beach scenes as well as when Jenny threatens to call the cops, her face is often obscured by lens flare. Wilson's memory could be imperfect or restraining him from seeing his role in his daughter's life and death. Whatever the reason, this other is known but also unknown. To Wilson, and in many ways to Valentine as well, Jenny is as unknown as she is held close in their hearts. It is not until Wilson's quest comes near to an end. Then, both of these men come face to face with each other. Valentine's life hangs in the balance, and he answers Wilson's query for Valentine to tell him about Jenny. In the telling, they both become aware of the depth and transcendence of this connection, their relationship both to Jenny and to each other, and they are astonished by it.

Astonishment and the Realization of Another Other

Wilson, in the beginning of the film, assumes that his responsibility towards his daughter's death should play out with the enactment of justice or the discovery of the truth, but, as I have mentioned above, the film does not take that option. At the end of the film, Valentine

has fled LA to his house in Big Sur with his hired bodyguards for fear of Wilson's wrath. In true

revenge story manner, Wilson storms the house and has killed or disabled all of Valentine's

protection. Wilson chases Valentine down the stairs to the rocky beach where Valentine trips and

breaks his ankle. Wilson has his chance. Valentine lies helplessly on the beach. The audience

finally sees Wilson speak the line of interrogation from the beginning of the film, "Tell me. Tell

me. Tell me about Jenny," and we can see Levinas' principles of astonishment and questioning

in action. At this point, Wilson interrogates Valentine about the truth, and we finally connect

many of the fragmented memories that Soderbergh had included throughout the narrative.

Wilson questions Valentine, and his threat of violence causes a rupture in Valentine's

notions of self in very real and immediate ways. From another perspective, we see both men as

the same, or Same's, and their memories and responsibility to Jenny and her death cause an

equally traumatic rupture in their understanding of their identities. Valentine and Wilson both

recognize that things could have been different. The interaction of memory and presence, or

presents, force the two selves to open the boundaries between Self and Other in a moment of

astonishment. This parallel in the narrative is mirrored by Soderbergh's focus on the faces and

reactions of both Valentine and Wilson to this climatic pleading and demands an

acknowledgement of the reality of their daughter/lover's death.

Before focusing on their reactions and how they play out in the narrative, we must look at

a final aspect of Levinas' concept of ethics. Levinas argues that ethical behavior requires a

continual, infinite questioning (or questioning of the infinite) and the acceptance of the Other's

labor without cooptation. Levinas writes that this moment of astonishment, of the self by the

other, and the questioning that acts as a foundation opens up more questioning rather than

seeking an answer. He states that, "Astonishment is a question that is not the posing of a question

and in which there is also a response. It is a question by virtue of the obscurity of the subject, and a response by virtue of the fullness of hope."[19] This might appear to defy any sort of action because of a sort of paralysis by the infinite, but this is not the case. Levinas is arguing distinctly against this position. Levinas argues that even though the truth about that which lies beyond the finite are obscured from those in the finite, one must behave as if a response is possible. This is his definition of hope. Wilson cannot actually communicate with Jenny. Her face is closed to him, except in memory. However, he must choose whether to continue his relationship as if he could. Levinas elaborates on this by referencing a metaphor of the Saying of one's rupture, "Here, the Saying is understood not as dialogue but as bearing witness of the infinite to the one to who I open myself infinitely."[20] Wilson, and Valentine too, cannot dialogue with Jenny. She is ontologically separated from them. They do have the option of choosing not to deny their connection to her and, thus, to each other, of behaving in a way that "[bears] witness" to the meaning of their connections to Jenny. The question of how, physically, emotionally, and mentally, one performs this witnessing remains to be explored.

We approach a more complete picture of an ethical form of becoming when we incorporate Levinas' view of work and the acceptance of the Other's work,

> There is failure in every life, and the melancholy of this failure is its way of abiding in unfinished being. This is a melancholy that does not derive from anxiety. On the contrary, the anxiety of death would be a mode of this melancholy of the unfulfilled…. The fear of dying is the fear of leaving a work unfinished, and thus of not having lived.[21]

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[19] Levinas 102.
[20] Levinas 188.
[21] Levinas 100.

Thus, in this moment where we left Wilson and Valentine at the beach, we see both men as

failures. Both men represent an "unfinished being" and express a "melancholy of the

unfulfilled." Valentine is certainly anxious about dying. However, from a Levinasian

perspective, the question arises as to whether the anxiety stems from a fear of one's own life or

the loss of fulfilling one's life and work. The audience has seen Valentine's empty life

throughout the film. He tells meaningless anecdotes, which his audience has heard again and

again.[22] Those around him hold little real affection for him outside of his money. Both men have

cast away their lives and their connections to Jenny, someone who they both loved, in order to

steal money and maintain a lifestyle that they desire. With Jenny's death and Wilson's quest for

answers, Valentine and Wilson both must face their own finite relationship to the infinite and

how their lives to this point have ignored the realities of mortality.

To depict this connection, Soderbergh merges the memory of the night of Jenny's death

in Valentine's mind and the memory of Wilson of the game that she played as a child. Valentine

pleads for his life, and Wilson is left stunned by the realization of the part that he has played in

Jenny's death. They have both been astonished by death on multiple levels: by the death of

Jenny, by the immediacy of the deaths of the bodyguards, and by the threat of death that Wilson

holds over Valentine. Wilson, and to some extent Valentine, must choose a path in light of this

revelation. His choice to spare Valentine's life, contrary to the revenge tale's "natural"

conclusion, reflects a fundamental shift in self in Wilson, and the tears of Valentine as he lies on

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[22] The story that Valentine tells his girlfriend as they drive to Big Sur describes an experience that Fonda actually had where he had to choose whether to hit a deer with his motorcycle or risk his life by trying to avoid it. In his story, Fonda steers away from it and thus ruins his bike, which protects him from significant harm. The fact that Fonda tells this story as Valentine strongly contrasts with Valentine's murder of Jenny in order to protect his reputation and lifestyle. Either his story is a lie, or the life of a doe meant more to him than his girlfriend of several years.

the beach indicate a similar challenge to his identity. Both have in some ways accepted the work

that Jenny's game demanded.[23]

We had left Wilson standing over a helpless Valentine on the beach. Wilson orders him

to "Tell me, tell me, tell me about Jenny," the line from the first shot of the film repeated, only

now in context, and Valentine does. Valentine describes how Jenny had found everything out

and, like she did with her father, pretended to nearly call the police in order to get him to stop.

Not knowing the game, Valentine struggles with her for the phone, accidentally kills her, and

subsequently covers it up. The viewers see the altercation in a flashback that is patterned in

Valentine's memory to mirror Wilson's shown earlier. The focus on Jenny's face remains

highlighted, and it continues to be obscured by the stylized lighting and the lens flare. Visually,

the viewers see Valentine's memory blurred with Wilson's. The thoughts of the two converge.

Valentine's admission both clears and muddies the ethical waters. Valentine caused

Jenny's death, but Wilson, too, by his absence and by continuing to play out the game of threats,

also bears responsibility. In this moment of realization, there is also a moment of astonishment.

This is a moment that Levinas argues creates a substantial bond, "one to which I cannot respond

with words, but for which I cannot deny my responsibility."[24] This directly opposed a view of

ethics and freedom presented by an existentialist understanding of the self. Levinas writes, "We

must therefore emphasize here the fact that *freedom is not first*. The self is responsible before

freedom, whatever the paths that lead to the social superstructure….Freedom can here be thought

as the possibility of doing what no one can do in my place; freedom is thus the uniqueness of that

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[23] This contrasts directly with the end of another neo-noir, Robert Altman's *The Long Goodbye* (1973). In that tale, Marlowe (Elliot Gould) has consistently kept in mind his obligation to his friend, Terry Lennox (Jim Bouton), who died at the beginning of the narrative. In the end, Marlowe discovers that Lennox faked his death in order to run away to Mexico. Marlowe raises his gun and coldly shoots Lennox before walking back down the road accompanied by "Hooray for Hollywood" in the soundtrack. Lennox had abused their friendship and his knowledge that Marlowe would take his part after his death. Lennox's death could arguably be said to correct the discrepancy and realign Marlowe's expression of his responsibility.

[24] Levinas 181.

responsibility."[25] This moment of astonishment is a moment of realization for Wilson. He

recognizes his responsibility not only to the face of his dead daughter but also to the face of the

man cowering before him, who he was about to kill. The moment of action and decision has

arrived for Wilson to bury his daughter, supposedly by killing Valentine, but he cannot. Wilson's

self has been opened not only to a realization of his self's part in the death of Jenny/the Other but

also to the similarity of his self to Valentine's. Wilson finds himself astonished, and in the face

of his failure to do what he was the only one in the place to do, take care of his daughter, he must

perform his responsibility to Valentine, another who had failed his responsibility to Jenny.

Wilson must not kill Valentine. Levinas puts this best when he writes, "Meaning is not

determined through the to-be or the not-to-be. It is being, on the contrary, that is determined on

the basis of meaning."[26] Prior to this both Wilson and Valentine had ceased to live because they

had ceased to mean. However, when faced with the face of Jenny, as shown through

Soderbergh's use of flashback, both men find themselves shocked and must make choices to

change.

Levinas writes that this astonishment represents a major point in the ethical relationship.

This astonishment does not relate just to ideas of surprise or awe. Rather, Levinas states that this

astonishment relates to a development of a constant state of waking and a connection to an idea

of "saying" that awakening. He writes, "Now the significance of signification [What he terms

"Saying"] rests not only in the resting of the Same in itself where it finds itself fulfilled but in the

disquieting of the Same by the Other, which wakes up the Same."[27] Wilson's Same has been

disquieted through the Other of Jenny to the Sameness in the Other of Valentine. To provide

another metaphor, Levinas turns to the work of Ernst Bloch. He writes,

[25] Ibid.
[26] Levinas 184.
[27] Levinas 144.

> Astonishment is a question that is not the posing of a question and in which there
> is also a response. It is a question by virtue of the obscurity of the subject, and a
> response by virtue of the fullness of hope. Bloch thus describes this astonishment
> with the term *home*, which is an anticipation of the world perfected, in which the
> obscurity of singularity disappears.[28]

Thus, Wilson's questioning of Valentine, "Tell me, tell me, tell me about Jenny," perfectly

exemplifies this astonishment, and Wilson's lack of response tellingly highlights it. This is

further established by the location of the questioning. Wilson's first attempt at questioning of

Valentine at his house in the hills of LA fails because of the party being held and Eduardo's

intervention. When Wilson follows Valentine to another home, this time in Big Sur, he

eliminates Valentine's security and finally can ask his question that is not exactly a question.

Levinas connects this idea of astonishment later to an idea of identity and insomnia when he

says, "Consciousness has already broken with this intrigue [the idea of being as ipseity]: it is

identity—presence of being and presence of presence. Yet presence is only able to be, thanks to

the waking up of consciousness itself, outside of all sleep."[29] Both Wilson and Valentine are

astonished into a state of wakefulness. They are forced out of their homes and forced to care

about more than the self because this astonishment opens the self to the other. Therefore, the

quest of the noir protagonist, especially the detective, represents more than a search for truth or

enlightenment, as much as those are defined by a gaining of objective knowledge and an

improvement of the self. The noir narrative shows the deconstruction of the self by the other. The

obsessive search by the protagonists does not serve to make a better self; the heroes are

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[28] Levinas 102.
[29] Levinas 210.

compelled because the others they find themselves surrounded by hold them hostage and

question them as selves.

Reading *The Limey* in the terms of Levinasian-Derridean ethics, we see that the ethical

agent must continually embody a kind of medial position between sleep and constantly awaking

of the self to this "disquieting" by the recognition of the Other. To use another metaphor, the

agent must always question with a question that is not exactly a question because it both does

and does not contain within it an answer but rather a hope. Astonishment comes in the moment

when the Same, or self, experiences a jolt or "rupture" and is opened to influence and recognition

of the Other. In the final scene of the movie, Soderbergh shows in a very clear way that Wilson

has undergone a Levinasian challenge that continues to affect him. We see Wilson sitting on the

plane, a scene that we had seen at the beginning of the film and assumed was his flight to LA,

and we realize that the film represents his saying to himself the story of his journey. The

American woman sitting next to him notices that he is English.

> Lady on Plane: I can never decide what I like better: leaving home or coming
>
> back.
>
> Wilson: I prefer staying home, me.
>
> LP: Oh, so you're a reluctant traveler.
>
> W: Got called to LA, unexpected like…do a job of work.
>
> LP: No rest for the wicked.
>
> W: Been away a lot.
>
> LP: Where else?
>
> W: Out on an oilrig in the North Sea, nine years.
>
> LP: Nine years, wow, is that legal?

> W: Well time off for good behavior. I shouldn't have even been there. It was
>
> these other lads what should've been there in my place. And then just when I
>
> finished my nine years…contract. Wallup, I had to bugger off to the States.
>
> LP: Sounds like you need a rest.
>
> W: Yeah, could be.[30]

This dialogue overlays visuals from earlier in the film and scenes of events that we assume

transpired after Wilson left Valentine where his wounds are cared for and he says goodbye to

Jenny's friends who have helped him in his search. In this montage are contained the points of

Levinas' relational ethics of responsibility. Wilson's past relationship to others typified by his

refusal to admit to his status as an ex-con and his response that it was not his responsibility in the

first place is placed in direct opposition through the juxtapositioning against the visuals and the

connection between the woman's lines about rest. The dialectic between there being "no rest for

the wicked" and her assertion that "you need a rest" is reflected by the equal importance of going

home. "Home" is a place that we see in flashbacks and old film clips of Wilson singing and

stealing for his wife and friends.

Soderbergh leaves the audience with what appears to be a family film of Wilson singing,

"Freedom is a word I rarely use without thinking… umm.hmm…without thinking… uh huh…of

the time…of the time…when I was loved." Then we hear the voice of his wife, off camera,

saying, "That was good," and Wilson replies, "I'm getting better, aren't I?"[31] This odd method of

conclusion presents a connection between goodness and freedom that rests at the heart of

Levinas' view of death, time, and ethics. He writes,

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[30] *The Limey*.
[31] Ibid.

Ethics slips into me before freedom. Before the bipolarity of Good and Evil, the I as "me" has thrown its lot in with the Good in the passivity of bearing. The "me" has thrown its lot in with the Good before having chosen it. This means that the distinction between free and nonfree would not be the ultimate distinction between the human and the nonhuman, nor that between sense and nonsense.[32]

While free in the moment, Wilson's actions describe what Levinas calls "finite freedom", "Finite freedom consists in doing what is our vocation, that is, in doing what no one other than myself can do."[33] Wilson was the only one who could make the decision on the beach whether or not to enact revenge on Valentine. By killing Valentine, Wilson would have placed his own freedom first by expressing his desire for revenge. Placing one's own freedom first combines with the possibility of death as annihilation. With freedom as the primary cause of individuality and meaning and death as an end, this implies a deletion of meaning created within one's life when it comes to an end.

Death certainly is a fundamental existential reality, but *The Limey* shows that, as Levinas argues, the purpose and meaning stems, potentially, not from my end, implying both motivation and death. Death, rather, relates us to one another across time in an urgent way required by the real possibility of annihilation at the same time as this relationship refutes death as nothingness. Therefore, Wilson's sparing of Valentine and his return to England buries Jenny but does so in a way that does not consign her to nothingness but responds to her by taking over for her as a dead other and acting with a supplemental meaning towards those around him. It is here that the family film plays the most important part. It is only through Wilson's transcendence of his self as he acts for and in his responsibility to Jenny that his freedom, both from prison and himself, can

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[32] Levinas 176.
[33] Levinas 178.

have meaning. Wilson's questioning of his wife, another dead other, "I'm getting better, aren't I," exhibits a hope. It is a hope that Wilson can move forward in response to Jenny. It is a hope that Jenny's death and Valentine's life hold potential meaning. It represents a definitively positive expression of an infinite and one's possibility for transcendence through a connection with it.

The Case of the Defective Detective: *The Big Lebowski*

Joel and Ethan Coen's *The Big Lebowski* both references and breaks the traditional boundaries of noir. Because of the Coen's use of parody to poke fun at the conventions of noir, the themes illustrated from a Levinasian-Derridean perspective make the film an important step in the genealogy of ethical discourse of noir. We see, through the adventures of The Dude, that the central questions of the ethical individual and hospitality/citizenship remain a fundamental concern, and that by turning the standard styles and plots askew, the Coen brothers make the discourse of noir all the more clear.

The analysis of *The Big Lebowski* from a Levinasian-Derridean perspective must begin with the establishment of the themes that focus the narrative on ethical questions. The Coens give the audience numerous clues that link the characters and plots in *The Big Lebowski* to the questions raised by Levinas and Derrida. In addition to the film dealing with ethics topically, it also presents a clear commentary on the struggle between models of ethical agents. More specifically, *The Big Lebowski* plays out Derrida's conflict between completely conditional and absolutely unconditional ethics and hospitality. The importance of the foreigner, the lost tomb, the master, and the house continues in the Coens' *The Big Lebowski*, and Levinas' concept of the

ultimately passive actor cannot be illustrated more completely than through the examination of

the dichotomy of The Dude and Walter.

"The Rug Really Tied the Room Together"[34]

        In beginning to analyze *The Big Lebowski* for the sorts of ethical discussions that I have

raised previously in this work, it is most useful to begin by locating the sorts of Levinasian-

Derridean themes that place this narrative solidly in the discourse of a relational ethics of

hospitality. Examining the film, we find numerous references to masters and strangers, citizens

and foreigners, and the importance of the face of the other.[35] From the opening lines of the film,

a narration by The Stranger (Sam Elliot), a stereotypical Western hero with drawl and cowboy

duds, the Coens establish the film as an examination of the concepts natural to the audience as

assumed members of the society but which are presented from the viewpoint of the Stranger, the

xenos. He states,

> Way out west…there was this fellow…fellow I want to tell you about, fellow by
>
> the name of Jeff Lebowski. At least that was the handle that his lovin' parents
>
> gave him. But he never had much use for it himself. This Lebowski, he called
>
> himself the Dude. Now, "Dude," that's a name no one would self-apply where I
>
> come from. But, then there was a lot about the Dude that didn't make a whole lot

---

[34] *The Big Lebowski*.

[35] The concept and importance of the face appears throughout film theory, but I need to make a distinction between the face as a symbol and physical image and Levinas's face as the place of expression for the self and other. Concepts of the former go back in cinema studies as far as the Soviet strucuralists, such as Vsevolod Pudovkin and Sergei Eisenstein. However, Pudovkin in his "On Editing" and Eisenstein in "Beyond the Shot," both reprinted in Braudy and Cohen's *Film Theory and Criticism* (1999), move past the face or anything in the camera's view as less important than the composition or the editing. Although cinema studies have changed since, there remains a structural bias that places the source of meaning in film in the style and method rather than on the narrative itself. The differences between the face as a shot and a face of the other deserves attention, but since this is not primarily a work about film theory, then I reserve this exploration for another time.

of sense to me and a lot about where he lived likewise, but then again maybe

that's why I found the place so durned interestin'.[36]

The Stranger sets up this narrative as an exploration of what interests him about this place so

foreign to him. The voiceover occurs over the visuals of a tumbling coming from the desert of

the cowboy and into a place foreign to it, the streets and overpasses of Los Angeles. The

Stranger in this monologue links the ideas that typify the Levinasian-Derridean conception of

ethics. He establishes himself as a foreigner, but he is not a foreign foreigner. The Stranger is an

other, but an American other. He is *xenos* exiled in his own nation. His identity as a mythic

symbol of heroism of the past stands in direct opposition to the sorts of heroism that the film

displays. In a way similar to Derrida's description of Socrates' defense, the Coens place the story

of *The Big Lebowski* in the mouth of a character who is both at home and alienated from the

world that he describes. This recalls the way in which Socrates took on the identity of a foreigner

in order to freely comment on the state of his nation.[37]

The voiceover also establishes the importance of language and death, two themes in

Derrida's discussion of hospitality, and more importantly, the Stranger links the two. The

Stranger can die happy because he has heard and told this story in English that recounts a

particular and different notion of the hero. The Stranger, our guide in this film, acts as both

Oedipus, looking forward to his death, and Theseus, passing on the secret entrusted to him onto

those he deems worthy. It is a secret that comes from the time, place, and people of the narrative.

The Stranger feels that it is important to point out that the story takes place during "our conflict

with Saddam and the Iraqis." It is important because,

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[36] *The Big Lebowski*, dir. Joel Coen, perf. Jeff Bridges, John Goodman, Julianne Moore, Steve Buscemi, Gramercy Pictures, 1998.
[37] Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 33, 35.

sometimes there is a man—I won't say a hero cause what's a hero—but

sometimes there's a man—and I'm talking about the Dude here—sometimes

there's a man…well…he's the man for his time and place. He fits right in there,

and that's the Dude, in Los Angeles. And even if he's a lazy man, and the Dude

was most certainly that, quite possibly the laziest in Los Angeles County, which

would place him high in the runnin' for laziest worldwide, but sometimes there's

a man…sometimes there's a man…Bah, I lost my train of thought here. But, ah

hell, I done introduced him enough.[38]

In order to understand the importance of this individual who is not quite a hero, the Stranger says

that we need to understand his time and place. After he loses his train of thought, the Coens give

the audience a clear idea of the kind of time and place that needs someone like the Dude. While

checking out at the grocery store in his pajamas and bathrobe, the Dude looks up at the TV above

the cashier, and we see President George H.W. Bush speaking, "This will not stand. This will not

stand, this aggression against Kuwait."[39]

The film connects this political response to aggression directly to the Dude's personal

experience in aggression. Immediately after Bush, Sr.'s line, we see the Dude enter his little

condo/apartment, and two strange men immediately jump him, drag him to his toilet, stuff his

head in, and demand that he pays the money that Lebowski owes their boss, Jackie Treehorn

(Ben Gazzara). They have the wrong Lebowski, but they are confused by the confusion. One of

them, a man who has somewhat Asiatic features, pees on his hallway rug, violating his home,

and marking him as victim. The Dude's home has been violated, and it is only the first of

numerous times in the film where he is clearly marked as not being the master of his home.

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[38] *The Big Lebowski*.
[39] Ibid.

If the immediate juxtaposition of Bush's line and the Dude's abuse fails to cement the

ethical connection between personal and political, Walter Sobchak (John Goodman), one of the

Dude's bowling partners who is a Vietnam vet, restates Bush's line in reference to the Dude's

situation, but importantly, he is constantly being interrupted by both the Dude and by the other

member of their bowling team, Donny (Steve Buscemi). This scene outlines the confusing and

difficult nature of both the personal and political layers of contemporary ethics. By unpacking it,

section by section, we get an idea of how the Coens have constructed a narrative with ethics,

specifically ethical questions, at its core.

> Walter: This was a valued rug. This was a…
>
> The Dude: Yeah, man, it really tied the room together.
>
> W: This was a valued...uh…
>
> Dude: Yeah
>
> Donny: What tied the room together?
>
> Dude: My rug.[40]

The beginning of the scene establishes the initial topic of the conversation. The Dude's home has

been violated, and the object which "tied it together" has been desecrated. However, the topic

and the way to deal with it still remain in question.

> W: Were you listening to the Dude's story?
>
> Dude: Walter.
>
> W: Were you listening to the Dude's story?
>
> Donny: I was bowling.
>
> W: So you have no frame of reference here, Donny. You're like a child who
>
> wanders into…

---

[40] Ibid.

Dude: Walter

W: …the middle of a movie and wants to know what...[41]

Donny, like the film's audience, has wandered into Walter's discussion in mid-sentence because we had been watching the opening sequence and people bowling. To further illustrate the connection between Donny and the audience, Walter directly compares Donny to a child-like audience member who is unsure of what's going on. However, the Coens do not leave that comparison to simply stand as a form of allegory. The relationships are more complex than that.

Dude: Wha…Walter, what's the point?

Walter: There's no reason, here's my point, Dude, there's no fucking no reason why these two...

Donny: Yeah, Walter, what's your point?

W: Huh?

Dude: Walter, what is the point? Look, we all know who is at fault here. What the fuck are you talking about?[42]

The audience thinks that we are catching on, but the dialogue reminds us that we as well as the characters are not on the same page. Indeed, we wonder, "What the fuck are you talking about" and "What's your point?"

W: Huh, now what the fuck are *you*…I'm not…We're talking about unchecked aggression here, Dude.

Donny: What the fuck is he talking about?

Dude: My rug.

Walter: Forget it, Donny. You're out of your element.[43]

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[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid.

In response, the audience gets two answers, nearly simultaneously. The Coens use an overlapping nature of the delivery of the dialogue in order to highlight the complexity of the issue and to place the audience in a position similar to Donny's. Walter repeats a variation of the line that we heard previously from the first President Bush on the TV in Ralph's grocery store, and the Dude answers, "My rug." The "point" and "what the fuck" is being talked about is the definition of home and what the response to aggression on that home might be.

> Dude: Walter..Walter…the china man who peed on my rug…I can't go give him a bill. So, what the fuck are you talking about?[44]

On one hand, the film gives us the Dude who points out that these criminals do not function in society. There is certainly no way that he can give them a bill for damages.

> Walter: What the fuck are you talking about? The china man is not the issue here, Dude. I'm talking about drawing a line in the sand, Dude. Across this line, you do not…[45]

The film presents another option. Walter raises the specter of violence and physical violence in revenge for the intrusion on the Dude's home and its primary symbol, the rug. However, the filmmakers immediately problematize Walter's identity as well as connect the situation to larger issues.

> W: Also, Dude, china man is not the preferred nomenclature. Asian-American, please.
>
> Dude: Walter, this isn't a guy who built the railroads here. This is a guy…
>
> W: What the fuck are you talking…?
>
> Dude: Walter, he peed on my rug

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[43] Ibid.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid.

Donny: He peed on the Dude's rug

Walter: Donny, you're out of your element. Dude, the china man is not the issue

here.[46]

After drawing "a line in the sand", Walter includes a short lesson on political correctness,

essentially stating that the Dude has incorrectly and derogatorily referred to a "foreign" citizen to

highlight the foreignness and minimize the citizenship. The Dude's response indicates that the

respect of citizenship depends on whether the individual contributes to the commercial growth of

the nation, "built the railroads," and respects the cultural protection of the home, "he peed on my

rug," a point which Donny underscores by repetition. Walter goes on to suggest that the true

blame lies with the "other" Lebowski whose wife is the cause of all of the trouble. The Dude

agrees, and the events of the film are set in motion.

Like Marlowe, the Dude finds himself at the large estate of a powerful man, Jeffrey

Lebowski (David Huddleston) aka The Big Lebowski, who displays all of the trappings of

mastery. However, through the course of the narrative, the façade of all of this quickly becomes

apparent. Lebowski is in a wheelchair, paralyzed from the waist down, allegedly the result of his

service in Korea. Lebowski's money actually belongs to a trust held by his daughter from his

previous wife, Maude (Julianne Moore), a feminist conceptual artist. Finally, his trophy wife

clearly holds no loyalty to him whatsoever; she offers the Dude oral sex for one thousand dollars

the minute he meets her. The Big Lebowski has no power and also denies responsibility for the

collection agents' mistaking the Dude for Lebowski. However, despite these differences, *The Big*

Lebowski presents a number of themes in common with *The Big Sleep*. References to foreigners

and their places in society abound. The "Chinaman", the German nihilists, Vietnam, Korea, and

Saddam Hussein all remind the audience of the others who constantly call into question the

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[46] Ibid.

boundaries of the nation and home, like Derrida's reference to Plato's *Xenos*. The film presents

these foreigners in different tones than Sternwood's honorific mentions of Rusty Reagan, but the

central interests and locations of foreigners in this protagonist's quest for home, an

understanding of his place in society, and his ethical role.

In a scene where the Nihilists, "We believe in nothing," invade the Dude's home while he

takes a bath, the suddenness and absurdity of the invasion of the home is made apparent. The

Dude hears them come in and smash his answering machine. He calls out to them, "Hey, this is a

private residence, man." They come into his peaceful bubble bath, complete with candle,

marijuana, and "Songs of the Whale" on his headphones, turn on the light before throwing their

ferret into the bath with him, threaten to return and cut off his "Johnson" if he does not pay them

their money, turn off the lights, and leave. A thorough analysis of each and every reference to

these themes would require a book on this film alone, and even the elaborate dream/dance

sequences highlight the ways in which the Dude presents an other to himself, assisted by large

quantities of drugs and alcohol. The film takes on the concerns surrounding the definition of

home, nation, and individual, thus articulating a narrative focusing on the same themes as

Derrida and making it a candidate for one of the quasi-ahistorical narratives and an important

merger of the traditional and anti-traditional in noir.

"The Dude Abides"[47]

The Dude finds himself presented with challenge after challenge, and he must decide

what to do. As mentioned in the previous section, no easy answer to these ethical questions

exists. The Dude, the not-quite hero, finds the needs of others are forced upon him. In this, he

seems to mirror the Levinasian passive hero. The film also strongly opposes the Dude's

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[47] *The Big Lebowski*.

intentions with those of Walter. Walter and the Dude seem the easiest to link to classic *noir* heroes. Walter, like many *noir* protagonists, must at every moment declare his cultural location for fear of losing it in the face of society's apathy. He is a veteran. His service in Vietnam, rather than the traditional Second World War of *noir*, makes him more readily an individual in the midst of the sort of dislocation that typifies classic noir. He is Jewish, setting him up as an other even within white, middle-class American society, but even more importantly he belongs to the small sub-set of those who converted to Judaism. Despite being divorced from the wife for whom he converted, Walter tries to hold onto his identity like an anchor. Walter, above all other things, abides by a system of rules. These rules are often illogical and without foundation, but they are rules that keep him afloat, at least until the end of the film.

The Dude is the complete opposite of Walter. His laidback approach to everything shows his refusal to believe that the times of his youth are over, if they ever existed. The Dude uses drugs, alcohol, and bowling to center himself, but the entire point of the film indicates that this is not enough. The Dude is, almost literally, a floating signifier. While identity in many noir seems fluid and unfixed, the Dude's ability and willingness to adapt to the needs of others emphasizes this.[48] Despite the fact that the Dude continually tries to correct others' misidentification of who he is or what he stands for, he is constantly rolled over and placed into roles by others. This sort of rebellion is horribly tragic at the same moment that his complete lack of identification in the police station is almost impressive in its revolutionary possibilities. The Dude is passive, but he also has no self. He is not Lebowski, since that refers to the Big Lebowski, and the name, "Dude," seems to indicate no outstanding individuality other than presence. Even the name, "The Dude," is available for modification as he suggests "Duderino" and other options of

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[48] Many noirs involve the protagonists pretending to be who they are not. In *Double Indemnity* (1944), Walter Neff pretends to be Mr. Dietrichson. In the film version of *The Big Sleep* (1946), Marlowe talks his way into the bookstore by donning a disguise.

nomenclature. This reflects a possible shift even from what Elizabeth Ward in "The Post-*Noir* P.I." describes as the protagonists of neo noir who while they, "share the independent spirit of their earlier counterparts, they differ in the extent to which they can control their situation."[49] The Dude appears to lack even the independent spirit of Gould's Marlowe in *The Long Goodbye* (1973). However, he does not drift into apathy or nothingness. He holds in place, in part because of his passivity, but also because of his relationships.

To begin outlining how the Coens use the Dude's passivity to counteract standard ethical and philosophic perspective, we turn to the relationship between the Dude and Walter. The key to understanding the ethical importance in the struggle between Walter and the Dude comes with the third member of their trinity, Donny, the surfer/bowler. Donny provides a difficult sort of obstacle to the consideration of *The Big Lebowski* as noir. Is Donny important? Or is he like the chauffer in *The Big Sleep* or Spade's partner in *The Maltese Falcon*, a body to be cast aside or a plot point to move the story forward? Donny is neither. Donny represents a future generation. Walter referred to him above as like a "child" and later compares him to those who lost their lives in Vietnam two decades before. In Levinasian terms, his death is a "murder", a "possibility" ended before its time, something to be mourned as unfair.

Additionally, Donny spends much of the film making simple requests for clarity and communication that are ignored or actively refused. Walter refuses to allow Donny a place in making or understanding what is going on around him. This refusal does not actively contribute to Donny's death, but it seems odd that this sort of connection would exist without any meaning whatsoever. The cost of miscommunication in noir is almost always death. Granted, the cost of communication is also often death, but looking at the outcome of the passive and active

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[49] Ward, Elizabeth, "The Post-*Noir* P.I.: *The Long Goodbye* and *Hickey and Boggs*," *Film Noir Reader*, eds. Alain Silver and James Ursini, 8th ed. (New York: Limelight Editions, 1996).

individuals' inability to cooperate results in Donny's death. In the end of the film, the audience, as well as the Dude, recognizes who the ignored other was throughout the entire film. It is to this other's resting place that the film reaches its conclusion, if one can call it that, on this ethical struggle.

Throughout the film, the completely open example of hospitality, the Dude, has meandered from task to task, urged on by, among others, Walter, the individual closed to hospitality. Throughout it all, whenever we return to the bowling alley, the audience returns to Donny throwing another strike. Just before the final showdown between the Nihilists— remembered as those who believe in nothing—and the two examples of belief, the Dude and Walter, we see the final pin refuse to go down. A puzzled Donny returns to sit down, while Walter lectures the Dude on how desert war is different from jungle war, "I mean I had an M-16, Jacko, not an Abrams fucking tank. Me and Charlie…eyeball to eyeball. That's fucking combat. The Man in the Black Pajamas, Dude. Worthy fucking adversary." Seeing the face of the one that you kill makes combat worthy or not, but both Walter and the Dude have overlooked someone, Donny, an important someone to their team judging by his bowling ability.

When confronted by the Nihilists, Donny asks, "Are these the Nazi's, Walter?" Walter comfortingly replies, "No, Donny, these men are nihilists. There's nothing to be afraid of." They demand the million dollars, whether or not they have Bunny to ransom. Walter responds, "Fuck you. Fuck the three of you. Without a hostage, there is no ransom. That's what ransom is. Those are the fucking rules." The Nihilists answer, "His girlfriend gave up her toe. She thought we would be getting a million dollars. It's not fair." This sets Walter off as he critiques their credentials as nihilists, "Fair?! Who's the fucking nihilist around here, you bunch of fucking crybabies." The Dude tries to cool things down by pointing out that the Big Lebowski had duped

them all. Donny worriedly asks, "Are these guys gonna hurt us, Walter?" "No, Donny, these men are cowards," Walter answers. The Nihilists change their plan and demand the money that they have on them in order to "Call it even."

The Dude wants to begin to collect their money and give them everything that they have, "We're ending this thing cheap," but Walter says, "What's mine is mine." The Dude and Donny together have about $23, but Walter repeats, "What's mine is mine….Come and get it." One of the Nihilists draws a sword, and they advance. Walter takes one down with his bowling ball and bites the ear off of another. The third comically tries to kick the Dude while he tries to just give the nihilist his four dollars. Walter takes the third one out and notices, "We've got a man down, Dude." The Dude assumes that Donny has been shot, but Walter correctly identifies that Donny is having a heart attack. They call for help, but it is too late.

They suffer their own collateral damage. Death, real death, comes to the Dude. The camera switches between Donny's viewpoint of them over him and their view of Donny. However, they cannot mourn Donny properly. The modern costs of burial surprise Walter and the Dude in the next scene as they collect his ashes. They cannot afford even the most "modestly priced receptacle".[50] Throughout the scene, the camera remains distant, focusing on the passage above the mortician's desk, "As for man, his days are as grass. As a flower of the field, so he flourisheth. For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone. Ps. 103.15." The use of the King James version might be seen to highlight the disconnection between religion and real life, but when the two go to scatter Donny's ashes, the reference to the wind returns. The film, while not serious, is also not completely un-serious. Walter's eulogy shows how little they knew about Donny and quickly circles to his favorite topic, Vietnam. He casts the ashes from their Folgers can into the wind, "in accordance to what we think your dying wishes might have been," blowing Donny's

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[50] *The Big Lebowski*.

remains into the Dude's face.[51] Donny's tomb is nowhere and everywhere, but most importantly,

he falls on Dude in a way to which he cannot remain entirely passive. Walter notices and begins

to try to clean Donny off of the Dude,

> Walter: Oh shit, Dude. I'm sorry. Goddamn wind. Fuck.
>
> Dude: Goddamn it, Walter. You fucking asshole
>
> W: Shit, dude, I'm sorry.
>
> D: Everything's a fucking travesty with you, man.
>
> W: Dude, I'm sorry. It was an accident.[52]

Why, exactly, is Walter apologizing? In part, he clearly refers to the emptying of the ashes onto

the Dude, the immediate circumstances, but his apology just as easily asks the Dude's and

Donny's forgiveness for escalating the conflict that caused Donny's death. The film furthers this

connection as the scene continues and Walter becomes more aware of what has transpired in the

past days.

> D: What's that shit about Vietnam?
>
> W: Well, dude, I'm sorry.
>
> D: What the fuck does anything have to do with Vietnam?
>
> W: Dude, I'm sorry.
>
> D: What the fuck are you talking about?
>
> W: Dude, I'm sorry.[53]

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[51] The way in which the film pokes fun at the commercialization and practice of death and mourning in such an impersonal and distanced manner serves much the same function as Chandler's use of title and metaphor in *The Big Sleep*. The humor distances the audience, but the topic of the humor serves to remind them of its reality. Additionally, This moment appears to pay homage to Mel Brooks' *Life Stinks* (1991) in which a remarkably similar scene takes place. With Brooks' reputation of borrowing from previous films himself, it would not be surprising if he too derives this image of the physical difficulty of letting someone's remains go in a way that is truly decorous. Tangentially, Brooks' film stars Lesley Ann Warren, who was also in *The Limey*, as a homeless woman who guides Brooks through his excursion as a faux-homeless man, much as she guides Wilson.

[52] Ibid.

At this point, Walter, the brusque masculine anti-ideal stands with his head down, eyes lowered, and tears in his voice. The Dude's voice breaks as he says, "Fuckin'," and slaps the palms of his hands on Walter's chest, pushing Walter away while the Dude shakes his head. Walter reaches out his arms and pulls the Dude in a tight embrace. The Dude comments, "Fuck, Walter," in a tired way and slaps him on the back with one arm. Walter responds, "Come on, Dude. Fuck it, man," and gives him another hug before suggesting, "Let's go bowling."

Bowling means more to the Dude, Walter, and Donny than a game. It is their nation. It is the place where they know the rules and belong. More than this though, the film presents bowling as both extremely physically grounded, the focus on the sounds, weight, and realities of the game, but also as transcendent, the connections between the bowlers and the importance of the game to them. Walter and the Dude return home, the only home that can resist the ravages of invasion and change because of the artificiality, yet reality, of the game.[54] One could argue that the Dude represents the true nihilist in the film, but the Coens are careful to undercut any assumption that the Dude is a nihilist. He clearly cares about others around him, such as Donny and Mrs. Lebowski. The Dude even makes the effort to attend his landlord's performance, which he had agreed to attend. The Dude might care too much for those around him but find himself paralyzed by his social position and his efforts to subvert the corruption of involvement with society. Therefore, the Coens express a lack of trust in sweeping worldviews in general. The film's events show that even the Nihilists are not nihilists, the rich, benevolent father is neither rich nor benevolent, and Jesus is definitely not Jesus. This leaves *The Big Lebowski* to consider

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[53] Ibid.

[54] The male characters of *Pleasantville*, another film of 1998, also flee to the bowling alley to resist change. An examination of the nostalgia and conflict between the past and present in both of these films appears to reflect a connection to noir, on one hand, and 1950s family sitcoms, on the other. Both of these films undercut the assumptions about the past but also affirm aspects of them.

ethics and society in terms other than overarching moral codes and myths. The film places an

emphasis on relationships, no matter how dysfunctional.

The Dude and the Stranger

In the last scene of the film, the Coen brothers merge this special place back again with

The Stranger, who the Dude notices after telling the bartender that "Sometimes you eat the bar,

and sometimes the bar…you know."[55] Townes van Zandt's version of The Rolling Stone's

"Dead Flowers" plays in the background as the Dude speaks with the Stranger briefly stating that

life is, "Strikes and gutters…ups and downs." This might appear to be the Dude's acceptance of

the way that life continues, but the music and the bartender's comment about Donny remind him

of the intrusion into his life that has just passed. The use of van Zandt's singing highlights this

theme of memory on a couple levels. First, van Zandt, a cult music icon especially to the film's

music supervisor, T-Bone Burnett, had died during the production of the movie. This creates a

meta-textual understanding between fans of both the Coens and relatively obscure music of a

memory of one just passed. Even for those who did not track down the narrative of the film's

soundtrack, the words of the song constantly recall themes of death, memory, mourning, and the

voice/face of the dead other.[56] The song not only plays during the background of the Dude

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[55] The Stranger had said this line to the Dude earlier as his philosophy, which the Dude thought sounded "Eastern," but the Stranger told him that it was the opposite. It is important that the Dude bungles the end of the line. He had previously accepted this sort of fatalistic approach, but things have possibly changed.

[56] And when you're sitting there
In your silk upholstered chair
Talking to some rich folks that you know
Well I hope you won't see me
In my ragged company
You know I could never be alone

Take me down little Susie, take me down
I know you think you're the Queen of the Underground
Send me dead flowers every morning
Send me dead flower by the mail
Send me dead flowers to my wedding

meeting the Stranger again, but it also supports the Stranger's final monologue which provides a

sort of closure to bookend with the opening voiceover mentioned above. As the Dude leaves, he

says, "The Dude abides." The Stranger chuckles, turns back to the camera and says,

> The Dude abides. I don't know about you, but I take comfort in that. It's good
>
> knowing he's out there. The Dude…takin' 'er easy for all us sinners. Shush. I sure
>
> hope he makes the finals. Well, that about does 'er. Wraps 'er all up. Things seem
>
> to a worked out pretty good for the Dude and Walter, and it was a pretty good
>
> story, dontcha think? Made me laugh to beat the band. Parts anyway. I didn't like
>
> seein' Donny go, but then I happen to know that there's a little Lebowski on the
>
> way. I guess that's the way the whole durned human comedy keeps perpetuatin'
>
> itself down through the generations. Westward the wagons, across the sands of
>
> time until we…aw, look at me. I'm ramblin' again. Well, I hope you folks
>
> enjoyed yourselves. Catch ya later on down the trail.[57]

And I won't forget to put roses on your grave

And you're sitting back
In your rose pink Cadillac
Making bets on Kentucky Derby days
I'll be in my basement room
With a needle and a spoon
And another girl to take my pain away

Take me down little Susie, take me down
I know you think you're the Queen of the Underground
Send me dead flowers every morning
Send me dead flowers by the mail
Send me dead flowers to my wedding
And I won't forget to put roses on your grave

Take me down little Susie, take me down
I know you think you're the Queen of the Underground
Send me dead flowers every morning
Send me dead flowers by the mail
Send me dead flowers to my wedding
And I won't forget to put roses on your grave
No I won't forget to put roses on your grave.
Van Zandt, Townes, "Dead Flowers," Sugar Hill Records, 1987.
[57] *The Big Lebowski*.

At first glance it appears that the Stranger is telling us that this is just a story of the cycle of life, but the story is more complex than that.

The use of the Stranger as Stranger recalls its classical use, which Derrida points out, "That the foreigner, the *xenos*, is not simply the absolute other, the barbarian, the savage absolutely excluded and heterogeneous…*xenos* indicates relations of the same type between men linked by a pact which implies precise obligations also extending to their descendants."[58] Derrida goes on to question the meaning and nature of these obligations and the stranger's complex relationship to the host, the one who belongs, in hospitality. Derrida first presents the idea of unconditional hospitality, "the stranger, here the awaited guest, is not only someone to whom you say "come," but "enter," enter without waiting, make a pause in our home without waiting, hurry up and come in, "come inside," come within me," not only toward me, but within me: occupy me, take place in me, which means, by the same token, also take my place."[59] Derrida, though, goes on to show that one cannot always practice this form of hospitality. It is impractical.

Similarly, if we were to look at the Dude as the pure expression of the type of hero who completely adopts Levinas' passive ethics, we would see that as Levinas writes that, "Ethics signifies the bursting of the unity, originally synthetic, of experience, and therefore a beyond of that very experience. Ethics requires a subject bearing everything, subjected to everything, obedient with an obedience that precedes all understanding and all listening to the command," it is also nearly impossible to imagine an ethics where an individual must take hospitality that far.[60] In struggling to interpret *The Big Lebowski* as a voice in ethical discourse, we do not need to resolve the contradictions between the cowboy Stranger and the passive Dude. The importance

[58] Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 21.
[59] Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 123.
[60] Levinas 200.

of these quasi-ahistorical narratives to Derrida does not appear to be to resolve the ethical

question, since Derrida's example of *Oedipus at Colonus* clearly does not answer whether or not

Oedipus did act ethically. Rather, Derrida seeks narratives that highlight ethics as question, thus

reflecting Levinas' ultimate assertion of the importance of the question in behaving ethically. In

this case, *The Big Lebowski* uses generic conventions from both ends of the American

iconography, the West and the corrupt city, to vitally ask its audience to consider the questions,

"What the fuck are you talking about" and "What the fuck is the point?" *The Big Lebowski*

leaves the reader with a tension remarkably similar to that described by Derrida in *Of

Hospitality*,

> We will always be threatened by this dilemma between, on the one hand,
> unconditional hospitality that dispenses with law, duty, or even politics, and, on
> the other, hospitality circumscribed by law and duty. One of them can always
> corrupt the other, and this capacity for perversion remains irreducible. It *must*
> remain so.[61]

The Dude found himself caught between the impossible ideal of, "What's mine is mine," and the

possible supplement of ethics in which he helps those that he can, "Her life is in my hands."

Rather than present a solution to this, the Coens highlight that it is not always possible to behave

in a clearly ethical manner without undergoing a negotiation between these poles.

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[61] Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 135.

INTERLUDE TWO:

THE STRANGER IN FICTION

Before leaving film and investigating the possibilities for noir and Levinasian-Derridean ethics on television shows that draw on noir traditions, I would like to briefly discuss the possibilities for this perspective in films of other genres. During the process of searching for films that highlight Levinas' responsibility to the face of the other and Derrida's perspectives on hospitality and citizenship, I found many other films both inside and outside of the contemporary noir paradigm. As I mentioned in Chapter Three, there is no way that I could have covered all of the new noir, and so I focused on two examples of contemporary noir: *The Limey* (1999) and *The Big Lebowski* (1998). In this interlude, I take a few pages to explore a film that focuses on the quest of a protagonist through a confusing contemporary society that does not live in the world of the legal-criminal relationship. This exploration points to the ways in which exploring a Levinasian-Derridean perspective might hold meaning for film and narrative more generally, a goal that this dissertation touches on but which lies outside of its immediate scope.

In the years leading up to this dissertation, I often found important connections between the structures of the noir-crime narrative and the romantic comedy. Both types of films deal with the search by the self for connection and meaning. Both narrative groups often invoke the romantic and the sexual as possibilities for restitution and progress. In noir, this connection often cements the, usually, male protagonist's fate by causing him to trust the untrustworthy *femme fatale* and descend into the deterministic spiral, which must result in their death or destruction. In the romantic comedy, this same sense of fate often acts as the guiding force that brings two individuals together and examines the transcendent in everyday life or raises the commonplace

into the infinite hope and promise of love. Levinas discusses the role of love in his view of

ethics. He writes, "Love is possible only through the infinite placed in me, through the more that

devastates and awakens the less, diverting theology, destroying the fortune and happiness of the

end."[1] This sort of devastating love might appear quite different from the warm fuzzies of the

standard Hollywood romantic comedy, and indeed this sort of powerful and destructive love

seems important because of its absence from the genre of the romantic comedy and its nearly

omnipresence in noir pairings. In both of these genres, we see an important focus on

relationships, on the face of the other, and on discovering our connections with the other. I find

that approaching films of a variety of types with the questions and concepts raised by Levinas

and Derrida allows for a discussion of themes of ethics and connection in ways that are often

overlooked.

Moving forward in Levinas' definition of the ethics and power of a transcendent love, we

see, "the notion of a love without eros. Transcendence is ethical, and subjectivity—which,

ultimately, is not the *I think* and which is not the unity of transcendental apperception—is

subjection to the other person in the guise of responsibility for the other."[2] In this interlude, I

want to return the eros to a discussion of love and one's being subjected to the other, as in being

taken hostage. Exploring the ethical discourse outside of the criminal typology posits the

possibility either for the extension of noir into non-noir genres or the importance of these sorts of

discussions that underlie many genres. By looking at Marc Forster's *Stranger than Fiction*

(2006), we see another view of the responsibility of the self to the other and the possibility of its

positive outcomes so often omitted from noir because of the characters' and society's inability or

unwillingness to acknowledge their responsibility.

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[1] Levinas 222.
[2] Levinas 223.

In this film, the audience encounters the story of Harold Crick (Will Ferrell). Harold is an IRS auditor who excels at his job but lives, if one can call it that, in the minutiae of his daily life: the number of times he brushes each tooth, the amount of time saved by tying a single versus a double Windsor knot, or setting life by his watch. He mundanely continues throughout his days until one Wednesday when, as the narrator, later discovered to be author Karen Eiffel (Emma Thompson), says, "On Wednesday, Harold's wristwatch changed everything."[3] While brushing his teeth Wednesday morning, Harold begins to hear Karen's voice narrating the story of his life. This raises a significant annoyance and a fear that he might be crazy. While waiting for the bus home after a bad day in which he begins to audit an attractive, anti-government baker, Ana Pascal (Maggie Gyllenhaal), his watch stops after trying to alert him that Ana is right across the street. He asks someone for the time and then hears the narrator's voice say, "Thus, Harold's watch thrusts him in the immitigable path of fate. Little did he know that this simple, seemingly innocuous act would result in his imminent death."[4] Hearing this begins Harold's quest to discover the reason and time of his death.

Initially, Harold consults a psychologist who tells him that he is crazy and should be put on medication. Refusing this diagnosis, Harold seeks out an expert in narratives and finds Professor Jules Hilbert (Dustin Hoffman), an expert on literary criticism. Hilbert suggests that he discover whether he is in a comedy or tragedy in order to determine the nature of his fate, seeing how he appears to be at the center of a story. The plot maintains a number of tensions within the film in the forms of narrative questions: "Will Harold discover the source/cause of the voice before he dies," "Will Karen finish the book before Harold can complete his quest," "Will Harold be able to convince Karen of his situation and to change her work to save him even

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[3] *Stranger than Fiction*, dir. Marc Forster, perf. Will Ferrell, Dustin Hoffman, Emma Thompson, Maggie Gyllenhaal Columbia Pictures, 2006.
[4] Ibid.

though she is known for her novels which each culminate in the ironic deaths of their

protagonists," and "Will Harold earn Ana's love and change the nature of his life?" The audience

follows the paths of Harold's search for the author of his story and Karen Eiffel's attempt to

break through her writer's block in order to finish her long-awaited new novel, but these

narratives only begin to mark the film as particularly important in examining questions of ethics

and mortality.

The manner in which these plots unfold and the ethical underpinnings of the narrative as

a whole hold promise in understanding the importance and contribution of *Stranger than Fiction*

to the philosophical ideas that I have raised so far in this dissertation. Looking at the film in

Levinasian terms allows the characters, style, and plot of the movie blossom into something

definitively different from a standard romantic comedy. By examining the themes of death, the

face, and time, we see *Stranger than Fiction* as more than a creatively told film about the nature

of narrative or one man's quest to save his life. Forster's movie becomes an embodiment of the

ethical quandary and how individuals might act within the constraints of stories in order to

highlight the considerations of ethics.

Let us begin with a discussion of Harold's watch. Harold's personified watch raises not

only Levinas' view of the importance of time as a direct player in the construction of the ethical

individual within a narrative but also, with its expressive face, indicates time as more than a

fatalistic progress. The watch, which causes the threat to Harold's life and ultimately saves it,

presents a vibrant symbol of both time and the face of the other. Levinas writes, "We have

attempted to think death as a function of time, without seeing in death the very project of time."[5]

In *Stranger than Fiction*, time causes death. Harold lives his life by numbers and time, and when

his watch goes haywire, he needs to reset it, and sets in motion the series of events that would

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[5] Levinas 113.

cause his death. It is not death, however, in and of itself that is important. Levinas provides

additional guidance, "To think the meaning of death—not to render it inoffensive, nor to justify

it, nor to promise eternal life, but to try to show the meaning death accords to the human

adventure, that is, to the ess*a*nce of being or to the beyond of ess*a*nce."[6] Harold and the

audience, by extension, find themselves in a struggle to find the relationship between meaning,

existence, and death. Harold begins the story in an existential holding pattern.

At one point in the story, Hilbert suggests that Harold should literally do nothing to

advance the plot of the story of his life. During his attempt to avoid his fate by not doing

anything, his apartment is mistakenly destroyed by a wrecking ball. In the scene where Harold

reports the result of the experiment, a telling exchange occurs.

> Prof. Hilbert: Harold, you don't control your fate.
>
> Harold Crick: I know.
>
> PH: You do? Ok, come with me… You were right. This narrator might very well
> kill you, so I humbly suggest that you just forget all this and go live your life.
>
> HC: Go live my life? I am living my life. I'd like to continue to live my life.
>
> PH: I know. Of course. I mean all of it. However long you have left, you know.
> However, you could use it to have an adventure, invent something, finish reading
> *Crime and Punishment*. Hell, Harold, you could just eat nothing but pancakes if
> you want.
>
> HC: What's wrong with you? Hey, I don't want to eat nothing but pancakes. I
> want to live. I mean, who in their right mind, in a choice between pancakes and
> living, chooses pancakes?

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[6] Ibid.

PH: Harold, if you pause to think, I believe that you'd realize that that answer is

inextricably contingent on the type of life being lived and, of course, on the

quality of the pancakes. You don't understand what I'm saying?

HC: Yes, I do.

PH: Hmm..hm…hmmmm.

HC: But you have to understand that this isn't a philosophy or a literary theory or

a story to me. It's my life.

PH: Absolutely. So, just go make it the one you've always wanted.[7]

Only then does Harold recognize the imminence of his own death, begin to alter his behavior,

and attempt to make meaning of his life. It becomes obvious to us that this *is* both a story and a

philosophy. What I have been arguing is implicit in the works of noir is made explicit in

Stranger than Fiction. The result of our, the audience's, story is tied up with the result of

Harold's story. He has been laid bare to us, like he has to Karen Eiffel. Harold is the stranger in

the fiction, but it is also our fiction. He is the literal face of the dying other, and it grows

increasingly impossible, as the film progresses, to not become opened to his otherness and the

meaning and imminence/eminence of his death.

The film's powerful meaning lies in the question of whether Harold's life is worthwhile.

If we, as an audience, have been opened to Harold's face (one whose expressions in all their

forms take up the screen on many occasions), then we must decide whether we will be open to

the transformative nature described by Levinas. To highlight this form of ethical considerations,

the film works on a number of levels to express the relationship of the self to the other. We see

Harold forced by Karen's narration to see himself as an other, an other whose life he is not

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[7] *Stranger than Fiction*.

responsibly keeping. Karen's identity as an insomniac and confronted self becomes apparent not only in her disheveled appearance as she struggles with the god-like question of how to kill what she thinks of as her creation but also in her shocked and frightened response to Harold's phone call. He expresses his embodiment to her when he finally finds her and implores for a stay of his execution.[8] Additionally, Ana and Hilbert both find something special about Harold. When they open up to him and allow him into their lives to express the reality and possibility of himself, connections are made and responsibilities implied.

Finally, the way in which the film deals with Harold's mortality and the webs of responsibility that his venturing into the world creates holds even more locations for connections with Levinas. Levinas writes,

> There is an emphasis of being, a supervaluing of presence, which is without escape routes or subterfuge. One therefore finds, here, a reference to awakening taking the form of lucidity. But, then, it is always a matter of a watching-over-being, of an attention-*to*, rather than an *ex-posure* to the other. So it is already a matter of a modification of the empty formalism of insomnia.[9]

Reading this with an eye to Karen and Harold's relationship, we see the beginning of a connection and an explanation for their decisions. Karen, although unbeknownst to her, has been watching over the being of Harold. It is his recognition to this relationship that causes him to seek her out and make her aware of his connection. However, in this connection a new perspective is gained. Karen is working on a great work of art. Harold asks to read it, but he

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[8] Clearly, in Levinasian terms, there exists a significant importance of having a non-transcendent, finite creator in this narrative. The connection between ontological/theological creation and artistic creation represents a fruitful potential, especially in the examination of Karen Eiffel and the long-distance devotion for her that Hilbert shows. This has meaning not only in ethical considerations but also for the role of the author and the author function. However, this is only an interlude, an *amuse bouche*, a spoonful of sorbet between courses and cannot hope to completely cover all of the connections.
[9] Levinas 210-211.

cannot. So, he asks Hilbert. He does so and tells Harold that he must die. It is the only way for

the story to have meaning, and Harold must choose the meaning of his death. The dialogue of the

scene highlights the gravity of these connections.

PH: Harold, I'm sorry. You have to die.

HC: What?

PH: It's her masterpiece. It's possibly the most important novel in her already

stunning career, and it's absolutely no good unless you die at the end. I've been

over it again and again, and I know, I know how hard this is for you to hear.

HC: You're asking me to knowingly face my own death.

PH: Yes.

HC: Really?

PH: Yes.

HC: I thought you'd…uh. I thought you'd find something.

PH: I'm sorry, Harold.

HC: Can't we just try and…to see if she can change it?

PH: No.

HC: No?

PH: Harold, in the grand scheme, it wouldn't matter.

HC: Yes, it would.

PH: No.

HC: I could change. I could quit my job. I could go away with Ana. I could be

someone else.

PH: Harold, listen to me.

HC: I can't die right now. It's just really bad timing.

PH: No one wants to die, Harold, but unfortunately, we do. Harold. Harold, listen

to me. Harold, you will die some day, some time: heart failure at the bank, choke

on a mint, some long drawn-out disease you contracted on vacation. You will die.

You will absolutely die. Even if you avoid this death, another will find you, and I

guarantee that it won't be nearly as poetic or meaningful as what's she's written.

I'm sorry, but it's…it's the nature of all tragedies, Harold. The hero dies, but the

story lives on forever.[10]

Harold reads the manuscript and tracks down Karen to tell her that he will accept his death as she

has written it.

The audience follows Harold as he says goodbye to Ana, in his way. He sneaks out of her

bed to return home to enact his routine. As he does this, the audience watches Karen at her

typewriter struggling over her decision. Harold gets to the bus stop, and the voiceover tells us

that Harold had accidentally set his watch a few minutes fast. He ends up early for the bus that he

usually barely catches. This day, just as the bus, driven by a woman who we have seen

occasionally throughout the film, nears, a boy on his bike, who we have also seen repeatedly,

jumps the curb and falls in front of the bus. Harold steps into the street, pushes the boy out of the

way, and is hit by the bus. Karen sits at her typewriter with, "Harold Crick was de," on the page.

She decides to not kill Harold. She decides that regardless of Harold's choice to allow fate and

the narrative process to take their course that she cannot kill him. In an obviously constructed

series of events, a piece of Harold's watch blocks a severed artery, saving his life and allowing

him to live happily with Ana by his side. This is shown to the viewer at the same time as Hilbert

reads the new ending at Karen's request. He asks her, "Why? Why did you change the book,"

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[10] *Stranger than Fiction*.

and she replies, "Lot's of reasons. I realized that I couldn't do it." Hilbert counters, "Because

he's real," and she answers, "Because it's a book about a man who doesn't know he's about to

die and then dies, but if the man does know he's going to die and dies anyway, dies…dies

willingly, knowing he could stop it, then, I mean, isn't that the type of man you want to keep

alive?" This clearly articulates Karen's transition to thinking about the others about whom she

had written for so long. Additionally, it links worth and approach to death in a way that mirrors

the work of Levinas and Derrida. Harold did not approach his death as an abyss, a nothingness.

He saw that his death could serve a larger good, both in its narrative importance and his act of

saving a small boy who falls in front of a bus. Even if he had died and become a face unable to

express to those around him, his relationships to Ana, Hilbert, Karen, the boy on the bike, his

friend from work, and future readers of the book all point towards death as something other than

annihilation.

Despite the improbability of the premise and ending of the film or perhaps because of it,

Stranger than Fiction confronts understandings of the connections between individuals, death,

and responsibility. The main difference between the romantic comedy and noir, then, stems from

the ability of society and the characters to recognize and accept the calls of their moments of

astonishment. Nevertheless, whether or not we discuss Harold's quest as a positive noir in the

vein of *Kiss Kiss, Bang Bang* (2005) or introspective romantic comedies like *Sliding Doors*

(1998) or *The Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), the narratives raise these

fundamental questions. It is in these questions that the keys to a different way of looking at

narrative and genre lay. Derrida writes in *The Gift of Death*, "As often happens, the call of or for

the question, and the request that echoes through it, takes us further than the response. The

question, the request, and the appeal *must* indeed have begun, since the eve of their awakening,

by receiving accreditation from the other: by being believed."[11] In belief, even just momentarily

and as a story, these ethical questions represent an important aspect in affecting individuals and

making them a part of discourses on the ways in which we see the world and live our lives in it.

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[11] Derrida, Jacques, *The Gift of Death*, Trans. David Wills (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995) 115.

CHAPTER FOUR:

"THAT GIRL OF YOURS…SHE'S PRETTY HARD-BOILED"[1]-

NOIR IN EPISODIC TELEVISION

The history of crime shows on television appears nearly as long as the history of the medium itself. Stories of criminals and those who seek to bring them to justice remains a staple of television today. Glancing at contemporary line-ups, one encounters programs like *Cold Case*, *Without a Trace*, *NCIS*, *Medium*, *Ghost Whisperer*, *Close to Home*, *Andy Barker, PI*, *Raines*, *The Wire*, and three versions each of the *Law and Order* and *CSI* franchises that all grapple with issues of the battle between the law and the criminal elements. Where *The Untouchables* or *Magnum, PI* almost always drew clear lines between right and wrong, contemporary crime shows muddy those lines with varying degrees of subtlety.

The chapter does not seek to investigate the entirety of this history or even present a complete picture of crime shows on television today. As I mentioned in my first chapter, my goal here is to point towards the possibilities that are opened when a scholar uses Levinasian-Derridean perspectives of ethics and hospitality to investigate the possibility of the noir in television. For this goal, I have chosen one show that clearly demonstrates the presence of these themes within the medium of television, Rob Thomas' *Veronica Mars*, which began in 2004 and continues to the present. In this show that follows the adventures of a teenage, female private investigator, one sees the ethical questioning of the role of the lone individual within a morally complex social system through the themes that mirror Levinas' use of responsibility to the face of the dead other and Derrida's questions of hospitality and citizenship.

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[1] "Leave it to Beaver," 1.22, Dir. Michael Fields, Writ. Rob Thomas and Diane Ruggiero, Perf. Kristen Bell, Percy Daggs III, Teddy Dunn, Jason Dohring, *Veronica Mars*, 10 May 2005.

Welcome to Neptune

Veronica Mars, as was alluded to above, is an odd mix of genres. Part high school soap-dramody and part detective series, the show focuses on Veronica Mars (Kristen Bell) as she attempts to make her way through her life as the daughter of the former sheriff-now private investigator, Keith Mars (Enrico Colatoni), and as a student at Neptune High School. The presence and importance of Keith's PI office and Veronica's role as his assistant make a good beginning to considering the narrative as noir. In the show, however, the audience encounters many additional noir issues, plots, and settings.

One of the major motivations in classical noir stems from class struggles. One sees in films like *Force of Evil* (1948) the pressures placed on individuals because of the desire to move out of the lower classes or to remain at the level that one has attained. The town of Neptune and its southern California social strata is ripe for the class issues of the noir narrative despite its sun and teen locales. As Veronica states in the pilot episode, "If you go here, your parents are either millionaires or your parents work for millionaires. Neptune, California, a town without a middle class."[2] The class divisions in *Veronica Mars* reflect similar divisions in much of the classical noir tradition, and Veronica's attempts to move above her lower class roots mirror the efforts of noir protagonists like Walter Neff or Mike Hammer. Class drives many of the plots with struggles among those in each class and between the classes more generally. The show regularly depicts Veronica's ability to shift relatively easily between both classes with a grace and sharp tongue that recalls Chandler's Marlowe, and it makes overt references to hardboiled narratives.

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[2] "Pilot," 1.01, Dir. Mark Piznarski, Writ. Rob Thomas, Perf. Kristen Bell, Percy Daggs III, Teddy Dunn, Jason Dohring, *Veronica Mars*, 22 September 2004.

In "Return of the Kane," episode 1.06, Keith comes home, and Veronica asks him about his day. Affecting a Bogart-esque accent, he states, "That ain't the half of it. See, this dame walks in, and you should have seen the getaway sticks on her. Says something's hinky with her old man." "Did you put the screws to 'em," asks Veronica. "You ain't kiddin'. He sang like a canary," replies Keith. Veronica breaks the role-play, "You're in luck Philip Marlowe. It's dessert for dinner tonight, and I've got a whole sundae thing set up here."[3] This sort of interplay, like that of *The Big Lebowski* in Chapter Three, serves to both underscore and undercut the narrative's use of the generic conventions such as theme, style, and plot. To further this sort of connection, Veronica's cases often closely resemble those of the noir detective. Jilted ex-lovers, dubious heiresses, questionable paternity, mistaken identity, false accusations, theft, and drugs abound in both the lower, what the show terms the "Oh-Niners," and the upper, the "Oh-Fivers," classes. People of all types and classes come to Veronica for help in finding the truth about their problems. However, this alone would not make her a noir protagonist. As will be shown in more depth later in this chapter, the nature and usefulness of "truth" constantly comes under question. Veronica's quest does not merely consist of discovering the proper clues and putting them together, like Holmes, Miss. Marple, or Nancy Drew. She struggles to discover the truth and its usefulness within society.

The use of a female, teen protagonist makes these tensions all the more apparent. Veronica exists in multiple liminal states. She is between social classes, although much closer to the lower than the upper given the community's standards of wealth. Veronica had been accepted as a member of the upper class because of her father's position and because she dated Duncan Kane (Teddy Dunn), heir to a software fortune, but fell from grace when her father was removed

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[3] "Return of the Kane," 1.06, Dir. Sarah Pia Anderson, Writ. Rob Thomas and Phil Klemmer, Perf. Kristen Bell, Percy Daggs III, Teddy Dunn, Jason Dohring, *Veronica Mars*, 2 November 2004.

from office in events prior to the opening of the first episode. She clearly is not a little girl, but she is not yet an adult. Her occupation as a private investigator marks her as neither a member of those enforcing the law, but she also is clearly differentiated from the criminal class. As a woman, she is marginalized by her gender, sexuality, and appearance, especially given the masculine orientation of her profession. Finally, she wavers between the belief that she acts as a symbol of justice, a classical detective, and a noir protagonist, a seeker who is often caught up in the uncontrollable forces of contemporary social institutions. All of these tensions, as well as the show's attempts to negotiate their influence and importance, present vital aspects for the consideration of the show as an example of televisual, serial noir. In this way, *Veronica Mars* reevaluates the questions at the heart of right and wrong in a similar way to how *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer* reevaluates narratives clearly defining right and wrong.

The Hospitality of High School or Lack Thereof

The setting of a large portion of the first two seasons of *Veronica Mars* in a high school presents a multitude of options for questioning the tensions implicit in Derrida's concepts of hospitality and citizenship and the implicit antinomy between conditional and unconditional moralities. In Derrida's discussion in *Of Hospitality*, he argues that the key ethical questions revolve around the tension between "unconditional" and "conditional" hospitality. Derrida introduces this antinomy in an examination of Kant,

> Kant founds pure subjective morality, the duty to speak the truth to the other as an
>
> absolute duty of respect for the other and respect for the social bond; he bases this
>
> imperative on the freedom and the pure intentionality of the subject he reminds us

of its basis through an inflexible analysis of the structure of the speech act: he also

secures the social right as public right.[4]

The viewer sees Veronica call to this sort of morality numerous times throughout the series as

she attempts to find the truth of a given situation and bring it to light. In episode 1.05, "You

Think You Know Somebody," her father begins to date the school counselor. Veronica runs a

background check on her and presents her father with the results that point out that she is still

married and has an old record for writing bad checks. In her mind, Veronica is doing the right

thing. She is living out Kant's "pure subjective morality". She defends her actions by saying,

"This is what we do. This is how we survive. I was trying to protect you."[5]

The show constantly counter-points this sort of morality with questions of the ethics of

this sort of approach to truth and the use of it. The above scene between Veronica and Keith

immediately follows a scene where Veronica, in journalism class, is practicing interview skills.

Her partner, an 09-er who loathes Veronica, asks her, "So, Miss Mars, how do you respond to the

rumors that your boyfriend hooked up strippers in Tijuana last weekend," and Veronica

immediately retorts, "Miss Banks, have you decided which parent you're going to live with after

the divorce, and if I may, a follow up? Can you believe your father's choice in mistresses?"

Veronica only seeks to defend herself in these sorts of interchanges, which occur frequently

throughout the series, but the journalism teacher asks Veronica, "How do you think Ashley's

going to sleep tonight?" "I didn't tell her anything that she didn't already know deep down,"

responds Veronica. She makes a claim to not only truth but to a truth that the other already

knows. The journalism teacher answers, "Maybe, but sometimes the lies that we let ourselves

believe are for our own good." The truth and the subjective morality must be tempered. Derrida

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[4] Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 69.
[5] "You Think You Know Somebody," 1.05, Dir. Nick Gomez, Writ. Dayna North, Perf. Kristen Bell, Percy Daggs III, Teddy Dunn, Jason Dohring, *Veronica Mars*, 26 October 2004.

presents another side to Kant's morality, "in laying out the basis of this right, and in recalling or analyzing its basis, he destroys, along with the right to lie, any right of keeping something to oneself, of dissimulating, of resisting the demand for truth, confessions, or public openness."[6]

Even though the subsequent voiceover carries Veronica's thoughts refuting this tempering, "Poor Miss Dent. She can't see the big picture yet. Love is an investment. Information is insurance. With someone whose heart has already been crushed, I say, 'Can't be too careful,'" the scene with Keith and numerous events throughout the show remind the viewer that this sort of morality is incredibly dangerous and hypocritical.[7] Derrida points out the hypocrisy within a strongly coded ethics,

> by refusing the basis of any right to lie, even for humane reasons, and so any right
> to dissimulate and keep something to oneself, Kant delegitimates, or at any rate
> makes secondary and subordinates, any right to the internal hearth, to the home, to
> the pure self abstracted from public, political, or state phenomenality. In the name
> of pure morality, from the point where it becomes law, he introduces the police
> everywhere, so much and so well that the absolutely internalized police has its
> eyes and its ears everywhere, its detectors *a priori* in our internal telephones, our
> e-mails, and the most secret faxed of our private lies, and even of our absolutely
> intimate relationships with ourselves.[8]

Derrida brings together questions of morality, the home, communications, the personal, and the public in a way that immediately reflects the tensions in *Veronica Mars* as well as those in Veronica Mars. Veronica has brought that police within herself. She has elected to become the one to enforce the law onto all of those who surround her. This internalized law, according to

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[6] Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 69.
[7] "You Think You Know Somebody".
[8] Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 69.

Derrida, becomes a destructive force. It degrades the individual's ability to decide where and when to selectively choose hospitality, and Veronica's experiences in the first two seasons of the show represent her attempts to negotiate a path where she can be responsible to those close to her but also can allow others the privacy that she wants for herself.

Throughout the course of the three seasons of *Veronica Mars*, Veronica constantly discovers that by using these police-like investigative techniques and trolling through phone records, e-mails, and getting into people's thoughts that individuals and their homes hold incredibly dark secrets of murder and criminality. The entire first season revolves around Veronica's discovery that her best friend, Lilly Kane (Amanda Seyfried), also the sister of her ex-boyfriend, had been murdered by the movie star father of another of the students at Neptune High, Aaron Echolls (Harry Hamlin), with whom Lilly had been having an affair. Lilly had discovered that Aaron had been taping their trysts and threatened to go public, and he killed her. Suspects abound, most notably, Duncan, who had mental problems, their father, Jake Kane (Kyle Secor), and one of his jealous employees, Abel Koontz (Christian Clemenson). With each discovery, Veronica not only further explores the seedy underbelly of Neptune, something that she as fairly familiar with thanks to her work for her father. She also undergoes an exploration of her domestic life as she has her relationship to her father and mother called into question from episode to episode. The connections between the home, the public, and the ethics surrounding truth and knowledge lay at the center of the series and Veronica's growth as a character.

This growth and the questions of ethics do not only rest on public crimes such as fraud and murder but also on their connections to themes of the familial. A plot running through the first season centers on Veronica's absent mother who left her and her father after he was fired and her problem with alcohol grew severe. When one of her clients hires her to find his father,

"Meet John Smith," Veronica tries to dissuade him by saying, "The hero is the one who stays, and the villain is the one who splits."[9] In this way Veronica balances between the definitions of morality. This line exerts a clear moral code. The worthwhile parent is the one who stays with the family. However, implicit in the situation in which she states this code is the need to hide from truth and the ethical need to hide the truth from others. This becomes apparent when Veronica finds the boy's father who had left because he was transgendered and desired to transition to become a woman. The parent as transition calls into question the assumptions behind Veronica's statement about parents and the definition of heroism. Is the boy's mother who stayed a "hero"? This is not the case since the mother had told her son that his father was dead in order to keep him from searching. At the same time, is the father a "villain"? When confronted, the boy discovers that his father, now a woman, had been driving almost an hour each way to visit him at his job at the video store. The episode clearly shows that she is not a villain. Veronica recognizes the complexity as she tells her client, "Ninety miles…It's the distance that your dad travels every week to see you for a few seconds. Look, my mom's been missing too, and honestly, I would give anything to feel that she cared enough about me to do that."[10] The connections between Veronica's cases, her personal/familial life, and the public issues of the community repeatedly assert themselves making a statement remarkably similar to Derrida's questioning definition of the rule of law,

> We will also come back to the two regimes of a law of hospitality: the unconditional or
>
> hyperbolical on the one hand, and the conditional and the juridico-political, even the
>
> ethical, on the other: ethics in fact straddling the two, depending on whether the living

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[9] "Meet John Smith," 1.03, Dir. Harry Winer, Writ. Jed Seidel, Perf. Kristen Bell, Percy Daggs III, Teddy Dunn, Jason Dohring, *Veronica Mars*, 12 October 2004.
[10] Ibid.

environment is governed wholly by fixed principles of respect and donation, or by

exchange, proportion, a norm, etc.[11]

Veronica Mars, in her investigations, explores the line between the criminal and the ethical in a

way that calls into question both at the same time. The producers of *Veronica Mars* put forth a

series of narratives that allow the audience to see not only the protagonist in one or two

interrelated situations, as a feature film might allow, but constructs a complex, liminal character

who, over the course of years, must negotiate the very questions at the heart of the works of

Derrida and Levinas.

A Townful of Others and Homes

"A long time ago, we used to be friends/But I haven't thought of you lately at all/Come

on now sugar/Bring it on/Bring it on/A long time ago we used to be friends." From the theme

song of *Veronica Mars* the theme of friendship and memory focuses the audience's attention on

the questions of responsibility and hospitality opened above in such a way as to highlight the

roles of relationships. The importance of Veronica's relationships, with her father, her friends,

her teachers, and herself, present numerous venues for the consideration of the ethical struggle

from the perspective of Levinas' face of the other and Derrida's hospitality and mourning.

Returning to Derrida's discussions of the laws of hospitality, we see a number of areas to begin

to search for possible relationships in which to observe the ethical antinomy: the nation and the

home. Examining ways in which Veronica portrays and questions these areas gives a starting

place.

First, *Veronica Mars* establishes the political and community spheres. In the first two

seasons of the show, the community is divided primarily along class lines: the 09ers and non-

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[11] Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 135, 137.

09ers, however, there is also the division between Neptune and outside Neptune. Most of the

show takes place in Neptune, which is theoretically just north of San Diego, but on occasion

characters venture outside to San Diego, Mexico, Arizona/New Mexico, Las Vegas, Chicago,

New York, or even Australia. The types of trips taken create a hierarchy of distance and the

meaning of a character making that trip. San Diego is definitely outside of Neptune and presents

the characters traveling there with a clear understanding that they are leaving "home". Returning

to the episode, "Return of the Kane," Veronica laments to her friend, new student Wallace

Fennel (Percy Daggs III), that her dad wants to bond by going to the San Diego Zoo. Wallace

replies that he loves the zoo and would love to have his, allegedly, deceased father take him to

the zoo. Veronica mocks Wallace's enthusiasm about the zoo and San Diego and points out how

it marks him as the outsider, his main identity throughout the first season. Mexico, in *Veronica*

Mars like in many noir, is a place of escape and fun. The 09er boys go there for drinking,

women, and drugs, while the 05ers, primarily represented by the Latino biker gang, the PCHers,

go there to make deals and hide stolen property.

Many of the other places outside of Neptune exist primarily as locations of exile and

refuge. To give just one set of examples, Duncan flees to Cuba to escape his parents who are

trying to keep him drugged ("M.A.D."), Mexico after taking his dead girlfriend's baby away

from her abusive parents ("Donut Run"), and eventually Australia where he is called by the

Kane's head of security after the completion of a hit on Aaron Echolls in revenge for his sister's

murder ("Not Pictured"). At least in the minds of the characters of the show, Neptune and

Neptune High, in particular, represent the central institutions defining their public space. This

means that the language, codes, and relationships there in one way or another define one's

citizenship.[12] Weevil (Francis Capra) and his biker gang appear superficially to struggle against

the constraints of their society, but his actions to assist Veronica as an inside man continually

establish his citizenship. For example, he volunteers to help Veronica find the school mascot in

"Betty and Veronica." While he is clearly a criminal, his criminal status represents the only

chance for power given the unfair distribution in the class divisions and not a lack of morality.

Veronica detests the institutions of the town and school, which protect injustice, but ultimately

finds herself devoted to many of the people that she finds around her, relishing her ability to

know her ground and move fluidly through it. In this way, *Veronica Mars* reflects Hegel's view,

as summarized by Levinas, when he writes, "The law of the city is public; everyone knows the

law, which moreover expresses the will of all. In this human law, man posits himself; he is the

very position of self as a self, its style of self."[13] In the first two seasons of the show, Veronica

looks forward to the time when she will be able to leave the confines of Neptune, reflecting the

end of Levinas' point, "Man contemplates himself in the public law and opposes himself to the

obscurity from which he detached himself. In the law, in broad daylight, he reflects himself."[14]

She chafes at her identity as a citizen, but it is also tied closely to her notion of home, something

she values highly. Veronica struggles on one hand to establish her self, even if only in her mind,

as a crusader for the law.

However, Levinas presents a second law, the law of the family, "But there is also the law

of the family. These two laws are other than and complementary to each other."[15] A little later,

still referencing Hegel, Levinas asks, "What then can the ethical spirit of the family signify? The

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[12] Of particular interest on this theme is a major plot in the second season where Mayor Goodman (Steve Guttenberg) tries to incorporate Neptune in such a way as to only have to serve the rich members of the community and destroy the property values of the non-09ers.
[13] Levinas 81.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.

family's morality is other than that of the State. This morality is in the State and has many of the

State's virtues: it raises children, prepares citizens for the State, and in this sense it is for the

disappearance of the family."[16] Neptune and Veronica's experience in it reflects this tension. On

one hand the characters have faces and rules that they put forward as citizens and members of the

state, but at the same time, almost all possess a personal, domestic morality that is connected but

also separate from their public identities. This distance, yet connection, explains many of the

tensions and questions of *Veronica Mars*. Levinas goes yet farther in his examination of the

differences and meanings of the law of the state and the law of the family, "But there exists an

ethics proper to the family that, on the basis of its terrestrial morality, relates to the subterranean

world and consists in *burying the dead*. It is here that the relationship with death is inscribed, or

more precisely, with the dead *one*."[17] Levinas thus, like Derrida, connects the state to the family

to the dead other. These are not direct obligations or simple transitions, rather the connections

represent constant struggle between competing loyalties. For an example, we can return to

Derrida's description of Oedipus' ethical puzzle at the end of *Oedipus at Colonus*, and Oedipus

had already lost the standing and wealth that so many citizens of Neptune grasp so hard to retain.

The differences between the community identities and domestic identities are stark, and

discovering the hidden/home roles of the citizens of Neptune fills much of Veronica's time. Not

all homes in Neptune are like her's. In fact, if one sets aside Veronica's situation with her mother

and her unorthodox apprenticeship to her father, the Mars home ranks near the top of the least

dysfunctional in Neptune. The Echolls', the Casablancas', the Goodman's, the Manning's, and

the Kane's all hold significant secrets that challenge Veronica's concepts of home and

community. Through the course of the show, Veronica finds herself more and more entangled in

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[16] Levinas 82-83.
[17] Levinas 83.

the crimes stemming from these homes. Aaron Echolls, an A-list actor, beats his son, Logan (Jason Dohring), slept with Lilly, killed her, and drove his wife to suicide. Just for one example, in "Return of the Kane," Logan is caught holding bum fights. Aaron berates him and forces him to do a PR stunt at a homeless shelter. In revenge, Logan publicly declares that Aaron will donate his next pay from his next movie to charity. The screen cuts, and we see Logan at a closet picking out a belt. He walks into his dad's office, where Aaron waits. Aaron holds out his hand, takes the belt, and unfurls it as he shuts the door. The camera pans and dissolves to a view of Logan's mother, Lynn (Lisa Rinna), drinking while the sound of the belt slaps overlays the scene. *Veronica Mars* portrays the home as an unsafe confining place, whether it is the apartment upstairs, which Veronica suspects houses an artist who beats his girlfriend ("The Girl Next Door") or the Echolls' palatial mansion.

In addition to the violence, adultery, drugs, and alcohol which pervade almost all of the homes of Neptune, *Veronica Mars* spends a great deal of time focused on questions of paternity, adoption, and family confusion. At one time or another, Veronica might be the daughter of Keith or Jake Kane, possibly making her relationship with Duncan incestuous (much of season one). Trina Echolls (Alyson Hannigan), Logan's older sister, turns out to be the daughter of a deaf lunch-lady ("My Mother the Fiend"). Mac (Tina Majorino), Veronica's tech-savvy friend, turns out to have been switched at birth with another girl in their class ("Silence of the Lamb"). Duncan has a baby with Meg (Alona Tal) who is paralyzed and eventually dies from her injuries in the bus crash that represents the main mystery of season two (from episode 2.02 to 2.11). Jackie (Tessa Thompson), Wallace's second season love interest, the love child of an ex-baseball star and a groupie, has a child that her mother is taking care of in New York (from episode 2.02 to 2.19). Wallace's father, who his mother had told him was dead, returns in season two and is a

police detective from Chicago ("Blast from the Past"). This concern, more than the general

themes of family, cuts to the core of the Derridean questions of hospitality and Levinas' view of

responsibility. *Veronica Mars* consistently intertwines the themes of family, death, home, and

ethics. Not only do questions about these issues surround the characters, but the narrative

presents their interaction as a fundamental aspect of the ethical decisions that must be made in

the characters' lives. Identity, mortality, and morality all intersect and influence the decisions

made by the citizens of Neptune. Therefore, Veronica's paternity not only calls into question her

relationship with Duncan, her potential half-brother, but also potentially undercuts Keith Mars'

influence on her life and shifts the importance of finding out the truth about Lilly's death.

The Face of Lilly

The above assertion that *Veronica Mars*' connection of family, mortality, and ethics

specifically exhibits aspects of the work of Derrida and Levinas needs some additional

explanation. For the rest of this chapter, I closely analyze just one example of the intersections of

responsibility and hospitality in *Veronica Mars*: that of Veronica's duty to her murdered friend,

Lilly. Bringing down the quote of Levinas' that I used above, "But there exists an ethics proper

to the family…. It is here that the relationship with death is inscribed, or more precisely, with the

dead *one*."[18] For the entirety of the first season, the dead one refers to Lilly Kane, and each

townsperson's response to their responsibility or lack of responsibility to her defines them not

only in the eyes of Veronica but also with the show's audience.[19]

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[18] Ibid.

[19] Many connections remain to be made between *Veronica Mars* and *Twin Peaks*, the critically-acclaimed, but short-lived series seeking to find who killed Laura Palmer. Both center on an investigation of a dead girl involved in sexual situations with powerful men and how the illumination of the case also opens the town's fundamental corruption. Both shows also have the dead girl appear to the investigator, highlighting the face of the dead other who appears to the survivors. A major difference emerges when we consider Veronica against Special Agent Cooper. Cooper represents a "true" source of law. Veronica remains a private agent. Cooper's wholly outsider

A brief outline of the history and connections of Lilly Kane is necessary in order to show the depth to which she stood at the center of the ethical and moral questions of Neptune. Lilly was the daughter of software pioneer Jake Kane and thus solidly an 09er, but she was best friends with Veronica and supported her dating her brother Duncan. In addition to the liaison with Aaron Echolls which resulted in her death, Lilly had also been seeing Weevil and Logan, both of whom loved with her and continue to struggle with her murder. She was a lead member of the pep squad, a central institution of Neptune High. After her death, then-sheriff, Keith Mars accused her father of the murder. Keith had had a longstanding feud with Jake because his wife had been sleeping with him. The Kanes, being well-established members of the Neptune community and one of the major employers, rallied support to kick him out of office, which they did and which resulted in Keith becoming a PI and losing his wife. Keith assumed that this was the result of Jake's guilt, but in actuality the Kanes were trying to cover for Duncan, whom they believed had killed Lilly in a psychotic fit. The new sheriff, the aptly named Sheriff Lamb (Michael Muhney), is presented with a suspect, Abel Koontz, the disgruntled former employee of Kane Software who had his intellectual property stolen by Jake Kane. Koontz has terminal cancer and has been paid off by the Kanes to allow him to provide for his estranged family. Even in this summary, it becomes clear that Veronica's first season quest revolves around the untangling of the public and private identities of a number of the citizens of Neptune.

Motivating Veronica in this quest are the repeated, vivid visions of Lily begging her to find her killer and put her to rest.[20] As we remember from Levinas, "My being affected by the

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status remains a fixture of his time in Twin Peaks, while Veronica lives as both a citizen and outsider. These differences establish Veronica as a much clearer agent of struggle between the questions of responsibility and hospitality, despite the potential that a comparison holds.

[20] This vision motif is continued in season two as Veronica is haunted by visions of the students on the bus that she believes has destroyed in order to get to her. In season one, Veronica also has visions of Duncan and her mother, two other people who she feels that she has lost and to whom she feel inexorably bound. Finally, her visions also

death of the other is precisely that, my relation with his death. It is, in my relation, my deference to someone who no longer responds, already a culpability—the culpability of the survivor."[21] It is this culpability that drives Veronica, Logan, Weevil, and Duncan to seek to act in the wake of Lilly's death. The audience first encounters the visions of Lilly through her brother Duncan. He refuses to continue to take the medication, which is supposed to keep him stable, and falls asleep while watching bowling. Examining this scene highlights the connection between the culpability that not only urges Duncan to action and also spreads to the others.

> Lilly: Yo, Bro, how can you watch this crap? It could not be more boring.
>
> <touches the blood coming from her fatal head wound> Ugh. What the hell?
>
> Duncan: Lilly?
>
> L: Yeah? What? You forgot about me already?
>
> D: Wha…What are you…
>
> L: You know what makes absolutely no sense? My
>
> disappearance…murder…whatever…how it supposedly went down. So bogus,
>
> right? Here's the thing. The truth is going to come out.
>
> D; What are you talking about?
>
> L: Clue in, donut. It doesn't add up. You know that deep down inside. I wish
>
> you'd admit it to yourself. Break out of your stupor. Wake up![22]

Not only does this scene give the dead other a voice, but it connects that voice to Duncan's self, where he knows the truth "deep down." Furthermore, the final line, "Wake up," recalls Levinas' insomnia. Lilly calls for Duncan from inside of his sleepful sleeplessness to remember her and

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include her loss of her virginity when she is raped at a party that she attends after Lilly's death to show her refusal to be cowed by the progress of events.
[21] Levinas 12.
[22] "Meet John Smith".

act. Levinas writes, "The entire opening of consciousness would already be a turning toward the something over which wakefulness watches. It is necessary, however, to think an opening that is prior to intentionality, a primordial opening that is an impossibility of hiding; one that is an assignation, an impossibility of hiding in oneself: this opening is an *insomnia*."[23] The "something," Lilly calls for Duncan, and those who subsequently see her, to a responsibility to her that precedes their own intention to find her killer. Lilly wakens all of them and refuses to allow them to see themselves as individual selves. Importantly, this comes in the same episode where Veronica reunites her classmate with his presumably dead father who left to transition to become a woman, an individual doubly othered because of her supposed death and because of her gender identification. Within the context of parental-familial responsibility and the question of who the heroes and villains are, the audience receives Lilly's call for Duncan to act on his responsibility to an other. In the very next episode, a major side plot involves Logan's completion of the memorial tape. Veronica hears Lilly's voice from inside a computer lab and finds Logan cataloging video.

> Veronica: What are you doing?
>
> Logan: Assembling the world's most boring memorial video. <going through the stack of tapes> Ballet. Choir recital. Debutante crap. Girl Scouts. Memories both misty and watercolored. <unceremoniously drops the tapes>
>
> V: It's Lilly as a long distance commercial.
>
> L: Well, it isn't really about Lilly, is it? God, this would piss her off.[24]

At this point, Veronica flashes back to the night of a dance. In an episode of the drinking game "I've Never", Logan, Duncan, Lilly, and Veronica reveal things that they have never done, and

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[23] Levinas 208-209.
[24] "The Wrath of Con," 1.04, Dir. Michael Fields, Writ. Diane Ruggiero, Perf. Kristen Bell, Percy Daggs III, Teddy Dunn, Jason Dohring, *Veronica Mars*, 19 October 2004.

Lilly pushes Veronica to live a little. Later, Veronica returns to the lab where Logan continues to

complete the video.

> Veronica: How's it going?
>
> Logan: It's very *Wonder Years*. Celeste will love it.
>
> V: Soooo…I was going through some of my stuff, and I found this. <Veronica
>
> hands Logan a tape labeled "Fun with Lilly">
>
> L: What is it?
>
> V: It's not a violin recital.
>
> L: I got a lot of work to do.
>
> V: Yeah, no. Me too.

At the end of the episode, Veronica attends the candlelit memorial unveiling entitled "Lilly Kane

Always Remembered." Celeste Kane (Lisa Thornhill) gives a speech. "Lilly really loved this

place, and so it's only fitting that as long as this fountain remains here, a part of Lilly will always

be here. And, you, her peers, will always be reminded of what a generous, kind, sweet girl she

was. And, how she embodied Pirate Pride and the school motto, 'Service, Loyalty, Honor.'"[25]

Even while this speech is being given, the camera cuts from person to person, each of whom has

their own, private response to the memorial. The video begins, and after a minute or two of the

"long-distance" Lilly, the music changes. The Kanes look worriedly at each other, and Logan

smiles at Veronica. The public-familial view of Lilly has had its moment, and it is time for the

private Lilly. This Lilly speaks, "Hello, America. You wanted Lilly? You got 'er. Now sit back

and enjoy the ride."[26] She is shown in her revealing evening dress, dancing, and drinking. The

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[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid.

audience laughs, smiles, and makes cat calls, and the video ends as Lilly says, "You love me,

don't you?"[27]

If, as Levinas suggests, "The act of burial is a relationship with the deceased, and not

with the cadaver," then the narrative of the entire first season represents the struggle of Veronica

and those who truly loved Lilly to bury Lilly Kane. The face of Lilly appears continually, not

only in Veronica's visions but also in her flashbacks, in the crime scene video that is leaked and

spreads throughout the school, in a traffic enforcement camera that catches Lilly on the night of

her murder, in the memorial video that Logan puts together for the opening of the Lilly Kane

Memorial fountain, and finally in the video Aaron Echolls made of their trysts that implicates

him in her murder. Lilly is not buried. Veronica is left to carry the torch of the effort to finally

put her to rest, but the memorial video's allowance for Lilly to speak, not only to the assembled

students and family but also to "America," passes that responsibility to those assembled and to

the audience, by extension. *Veronica Mars* asks for all of us to accept this moment of

astonishment, love her, and bury her.

The Work of Burying Lilly

Levinas' grappling with the relationship of the self to the dying other moves from an

examination of Hegel to Ernst Bloch. Drawing from Bloch, Levinas argues that the goal of the

response to one's responsibility to the dead other is hope and work.

> it is not death that opens the authentic future; on the contrary, it is in the authentic
>
> future that death must be understood....For Bloch, the anxiety of death comes

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[27] Ibid.

from the fact of dying without finishing one's work, one's being. It is in an

unfinished world that we have the impression of not finishing our work.[28]

Lilly calls to Duncan, Veronica, Logan, Weevil, and the audience for the truth, but this truth lies

in the completion of her work, the extension of her possibility that was cut short. The audience is

reminded at the end of the season that Aaron Echolls kills Lilly because she is going to go public

with the fact that he tapes his sexual conquests. Veronica must complete this goal, but prior to

this even within the memorial episode, Lilly also wanted Veronica to live her life. Levinas

writes, "The fear of dying is the fear of leaving work unfinished, and thus of not having lived."[29]

Veronica acts out of the moment of astonishment, what Levinas calls, "a question that is not the

posing of a question and in which there is also a response. It is a question by virtue of the

obscurity of the subject, and a response by virtue of the fullness of hope."[30] On the way to the

upcoming dance, she asks for the limo to be pulled over, and she completes one of the acts in the

game of "I Never." Veronica goes skinny-dipping. The nudity of Lilly's face opens Veronica to

the moment of astonishment, which kindles a responsibility to continue Lilly's work as well as

the hope for her to live her own life, and Veronica expresses this in the nudity of her expression

both physically and relationally.

This quest to find Lilly's killer also stems from Veronica's hope, although it is a

conflicted and troubled hope. Hope is a theme that is presented from the very first episode.

Following a late-night stakeout, Veronica falls asleep in a class discussion Alexander Pope's "An

Essay on Man". The teacher, frustrated that no one is talking, calls on an apparently sleeping

Veronica.

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[28] Levinas 99.
[29] Levinas 100.
[30] Levinas 102.

Teacher: It's called "An Essay on Man," but what Pope's really talking about is faith, right? Anybody? Did anybody complete the reading? Veronica? Veronica Mars!

Veronica: Umm hmmm.

T: Congratulations. You're my volunteer. Pope. "An Essay on Man." Epistle One.

V: "Hope springs eternal in the human breast. Man never is, but always to be blessed. The soul, uneasy and confined from home, rests and expatiates in a life to come."

T: And what do you suppose Pope meant by that?

V: Life's a bitch and then you die.

T: Thank you, Ms. Mars, for that succinct and somewhat inappropriate response.[31]

The teacher both accurately and inaccurately characterizes Veronica's response as "inappropriate". Veronica cynically responds to Pope's elocution on the definition of humanity as always looking for an impossible resolution, and her experience backs up this cynicism. However, Veronica's quest, taken out of a trust and hope of its own, mirrors a form of hope, a hope merged with love. Levinas writes,

> What we call, by a somewhat corrupted term, love, is *par excellence* the fact that the death of the other affects me more than my own. The love of the other is the emotion of the other's death. It is my receiving the other—and not the anxiety of death awaiting me—that is the reference to death. We encounter death in the face of the other.[32]

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[31] "Pilot".
[32] Levinas 105.

Veronica has encountered death in the face of the other, Lilly. Her response to that death, the fact

that she is so affected, indicates her love and responsibility for the other. Veronica takes that

love, takes the responsibility, and acts on it to complete the work of Lilly. This work points to

both the need for Veronica to make sense of her "disappearance" and for Veronica to live her

life. In taking this quest on, Veronica displays a hope. This hope, as Levinas suggests in his

appropriation of Bloch, "is the hope of a historical subject separated from the world in its

facticity, invisible to himself, at a distance from the site where he would be able to be,

himself."[33] Lilly's death both keeps Veronica from and causes her to be herself, and it is this

tension which runs throughout the series.

    Despite the power of these connections between Levinas' relational philosophy and

Veronica Mars, a final connection remains. Veronica cannot remain tied to the past and to Lilly.

She must move into the future. In the end of the final episode of season one, "Leave it to

Beaver," Veronica and her father have proven that Aaron killed Lilly. Aaron attempts to kill

Veronica, but Keith shows up and saves her, although in a rather ignominious final showdown,

only to be severely injured and end up in the hospital. Veronica has to return home but does not

want her father to be left alone. She can call her mother, recently returned from a substance

abuse clinic funded by Veronica's college fund, or Wallace's mother, Alicia (Erica Gimpel), who

her father had been dating and who Veronica has resisted in the hope that her mother would

return. This moment represents the importance of Veronica's choice for the present and future,

just as her search for Lilly's killer fulfilled a responsibility to her past. Veronica returns home

and tells her mother to leave, "It's over now, and I'll tell you the rest in the morning, but first I

need you to pack." Her mother, confused, asks, "What? What do you mean?" Veronica replies,

"You can't be here when Dad comes home. I know, Mom. I know you're not through drinking. I

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[33] Levinas 99.

know you didn't even finish rehab. You checked yourself out, and that was my college money. I

bet on you, and I lost. I've been doing that my whole life, and I'm through." "Veronica, it's not

easy," cries her mother. "I know it's not," answers Veronica as she walks away and shuts her

bedroom door. The audience jumps to Keith and Alicia in the hospital. "Veronica didn't want

you to be alone," says Alicia as she strokes Keith's shoulder. We return to Veronica as she lies

on her bed to sleep. We cut to a shot of Lianne Mars searching through Keith's briefcase. She

find's the reward-check for $50,000 and takes it, hurrying out of the apartment with her bags.

We return to Veronica as she closes her eyes again where she dreams of Lilly again. This dream

is filtered differently from the others. The dark blues and greens of her previous visions are

replaced by the pastel pinks of their bikinis and the flowers in Lilly's pool.

> Veronica: Isn't it better like this?
>
> Lilly: So much better.
>
> V: This is how it is supposed to be.
>
> L: Totally.
>
> V: This is how it's going to be…from now on, right? Lilly?
>
> L: You know how things are going to be like now, don't you? You have to know.
>
> <A dubious, uncertain look crosses Lilly's face.>
>
> V: Just like this. Just like this. <Veronica says with a hopeful expression.>
>
> L: Don't forget about me, Veronica.
>
> <The camera cuts, and Lilly is gone.>
>
> V: I could never.[34]

Veronica awakens to the sound of a knocking on the door. She answers the apartment door to the

camera and says, "I was hoping that it would be you," as the camera fades to black. Although the

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[34] "Leave it to Beaver".

next season's opening explains who is at the door, this narrative arc leaves it ambiguous.

Veronica opens the door to the audience and again expresses her motivation, hope. At a couple

of recent conference panels that I have attended, other scholars have asserted that Veronica is

playing out a choice between "good" dads and "bad" dads, choosing to retain the good patriarchy

and supporting the status quo. The narratives certainly have questions of paternity and patriarchy

at their core, but as this narrative arc ends, status quo is not maintained. Despite Keith's role in

saving Veronica, she also protects and saves him. Veronica must exert her role as a master of the

house.

At the end of season one, Veronica negotiates a path between conditional and

unconditional moralities guided by hope, love, and responsibility to her neighbors. In *Veronica

Mars*, the audience has been invited to participate in what Derrida calls, "that which transforms

this problematic [that of the ethical antinomy] into new experiences."[35] Veronica and those who

search with her have an experience influenced by how,

> The other concerns me as a neighbor. In every death is shown the nearness of the
>
> neighbor, and the responsibility of the survivor, in the form of a responsibility that
>
> the approach of proximity moves or agitates. A disquietude that is not
>
> thematization, not intentionality, even if this latter was signitive. This is a
>
> disquietude that therefore resists all appearing, all phenomenal aspects, as though
>
> emotion passed by way of the question, without encountering the slightest
>
> quiddity, toward that acuity of death, and instituted an unknown that is not purely
>
> negative but rather in nearness without knowledge. It is as though the question

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[35] Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 139.

went beyond appearing forms, beyond being and appearing, and, precisely in this

passing, could be called profound.[36]

This profundity touches on many important subjects: death, time, responsibility, hope, and work,

but at its core, like at the core of many noir is the understanding and questioning of the

understanding that, "Time is not the limitation of being but its relationship with infinity. Death is

not an annihilation but the question that is necessary for this relationship with infinity, or time, to

be produced."[37] *Veronica Mars* does not fully resolve the tensions of these issues. Veronica

finds the killer of Lilly, but he is later freed, only to be murdered on Duncan's order. The truths

that are uncovered serve to illuminate the nature of their society, but the question remains of

whether this is a good thing or the ethical decision. Another example, Veronica's choice to kick

her mother out of the house, perfectly exemplifies these questions which lead to more questions.

Throughout the series, she must continually negotiate her relationship to the infinite and to time.

In this way, some narratives of television and film do not seek to answer, but do address,

Derrida's questions, "Are we heirs to this tradition of hospitality [that of the unconditional

hospitality]? Where should we place the invariant, if it is one, across this logic and these

narratives?"[38] Veronica's narratives, especially the continuation from season to season, do

indeed, "testify without end in our memory."[39]

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[36] Levinas 17-18.
[37] Levinas 19.
[38] Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 155.
[39] Ibid. Sadly, *Veronica Mars* was cancelled at the end of its third season, leaving many of these questions hanging. Interestingly, *The Sopranos*, which explored these concepts from the perspective of the criminal, controversially ended abruptly leaving many audiences frustrated at the lack of closure. From a Levinasian-Derridean perspective, Tony could never have resolved his ethics into a neat package, just endlessly struggled with a hope of connection.

CHAPTER FIVE:

WALKING INTO THE RAIN-SWEPT STREETS

At the end of many noir films, the audience finds themselves confronted with the

protagonist's dead body, the rain-swept streets, or the dim interior of a dilapidated office. We

often focus on the face of the hero as they struggle to make meaning from their experiences. The

audience, too, is left in the dark to make meaning of the disjointed series of events they have just

viewed. This synergy between the noir audience and the protagonist creates a moment of explicit

power and connection. The question I have raised and sought to answer lies in these sorts of

moments. What exactly do these usually confusing narratives about confused heroes in a morally

complex world have to communicate to their audiences? What links these types of stories to one

another and prompts future narrators, authors, filmmakers, and producers attempt similar stories?

In this dissertation, I have only touched on a fraction of the stories that might claim a

portion of the title "noir," whether defined by period, style, or philosophical core. Analyzing

even just *The Big Sleep*, *The Limey*, *The Big Lebowski*, *Stranger than Fiction*, and *Veronica*

Mars through the work of Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas combines two major lines of

discourse, ethics and genre. This small sampling, though, provides a significant picture into the

potential of utilizing an ethical lens to explore genre. By focusing on noir, I do not intend to state

that this is the only genre discussing the face of the other or exhibiting individuals' struggles

with hospitality and responsibility. This research grows out of the work called for by Robin

Wood in "Ideology, Genre, Auteur" as he pursued his goal "to tentatively explore some of the

ways in which [interest in ideology and genre] to Hollywood movies might interpenetrate,

producing the kind of synthetic criticism, I have suggested might now be practicable."[1] I also

reject the concept that any one particular ideology can unlock the importance of genre. Like

Wood's description of the ideology of American capitalism, my focus on perspectives of

hospitality and responsibility, "presents an ideology that, far from being monolithic, is *inherently*

riddled with hopeless contradictions and unresolvable tensions."[2] Therefore, in this study, I too,

"wish to put forward …that the development of the genres is rooted in the sort of ideological

contradictions my list of concepts suggests."[3] With this goal in mind, I conclude with a brief

discussion on the ways in which this study, which has remained narrowly focused on only a few

narratives and on the ethical writings of a couple thinkers, extends into different media and

generic boundaries. Literature, film, and television prove fruitful arenas for finding the sorts of

stories that debate the meaning of individual within a corrupt world, but many paths and

perspectives remain for examination.

Novels

Literature, both in the past and present, fills the bookracks with noir stories. James Cain

and Dashiell Hammett could easily have provided the classical hard-boiled examples. I also

could have approached contemporary writers like Ian Rankin's stories of the conflicted Detective

Rebus in modern Edinburgh, Alexander McCall Smith's series focusing on Mma. Ramotswe of

the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency in Botswana, or Kim Harrison's narratives following a witch

PI, Rachel Morgan with her vampiric and pixie partners in the Cincinnati of an alternate

timeline. All of these novels, among so many others, not only tell stories of those negotiating

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[1] Wood 669. I must mention that Wood uses "ideology" primarily in reference to its Marxist and materialist roots. I have used the term in the way that it has become more broadly and generically used.
[2] Wood 670.
[3] Ibid.

lines dividing the legal from the criminal, but they do so in such a way as to call into question the very rules that define these lines, often using terminology remarkably similar to that of Levinas and Derrida. The fascinating aspect of these further examples of noir/detective novels comes from the ways in which each author uses their own experiences to craft serial narratives that follow such diverse protagonists. Detective Rebus' battle with drinking and love of classical rock music exhibited through his love-hate relationship with his Scotland and the criminal and legal populations within it presents a very different character of the detective than Mma. Ramotswe's traditionally built, pleasant Botswana native who sets out to solve more everyday, but no less serious, occurrences in her beloved town on the edge of the Kalahari Desert. Both of these at least ostensibly reflect the actual world which sets them apart from Rachel Morgan, Kim Harrison's creation. Rachel Morgan, a witch, uses magic, detection skills, and old-fashioned rough-housing to make ends meet as an independent operator in a Cincinnati where a plague among humans forced the unaffected vampires, werewolves, witches, and elves out of their millennia-old hiding places.

In the course of writing this dissertation, two books were released that directly point to the vitality and importance of noir today and in the ideological importance of the works of Derrida and Levinas. Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* and Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games* both not only present narratives steeped in the hard-boiled and noir traditions, but they focus these narratives on examining the questions of an individual's responsibility and a society's hospitality.

Chabon tells a what-if story in which a small portion of Alaska was opened up to Jewish refugees prior to and during World War II. In the narrative's present, America has tired of their long-term guests and plans to kick them out. Into this situation steeped with questions of the

foreigner and hospitality between nations, steps Chabon's alcoholic police detective, Meyer

Landsman. When an addict with a mysterious past is killed in the hotel in which he lives, he feels

a responsibility to find out who he was and what happened. Employing the help of his half-

brother and partner, who is half-Jewish and half-Tlingit, he unwinds the story behind a fallen

Messiah, a hope for a homeland, and the loss of a home. Chandra's book focuses on a much

larger cast of characters and does not employ a hard-boiled perspective that relies only on the

viewpoint of the detective. However, the narrative does follow the results of Detective Sartaj

Singh, a sikh policeman in Mumbai. A mid-level, divorced policeman with no real prospects for

advancement, Singh receives a tip to the whereabouts of a wanted gang lord, Ganesh Gaitonde.

He goes to the location but finds Gaitonde in a large bomb shelter he recently and secretly built

in the middle of the city. Gaitonde speaks to Singh through an intercom, telling him about his

past and rise to power, and proceeds to kill himself before they can break in. Singh feels

connected to Gaitonde and, despite many reasons to leave his death a mystery, Singh continues

to search out the narrative of this man's life, how he came to build a bomb shelter, and why he

killed himself in this protective shell. Not only do Chabon and Chandra employ elements of a

hard-boiled narrative style and settings, but the stories continually raise the relationships and

questions raised in Chandler or Hammett and examined through Levinas and Derrida. In so many

novels, like these, characters struggle between their connections to their home and the corruption

that fills it. This tension between good and evil or citizen and foreigner runs throughout many

mystery novels. It is a tension that defines many of our ethical questions and would benefit from

the application of a Derridean-Levinasian perspective.

Films

Films presented an even greater challenge for paring down the textual choices to a manageable size. Aside from the films mentioned previously both from the classic and contemporary moments in noir, the last years have seen an explosion of noir in film. Movies like *Hostage* (2005), *Hollywoodland* (2006), *The Black Dahlia* (2006), and *Brick* (2005) maintain the discourses and symbology of noir in the cinematic lexicon. Audiences and filmmakers today continue to find themselves drawn to stories of the, mostly, lone protagonist whose moral compass fails to sufficiently guide them within their worlds. My selections for this work merely presented dips into the depths that are noir, a brief taste. The four films above all approach the same questions as *The Limey* and *The Big Lebowski*. They all tell the stories of individuals who must negotiate identity and meaning in a decidedly uncertain world. In future work, the connections and growth that lead to these sorts of stories throughout the history of film deserve to be explored more fully. To date, no one has analyzed noir as a genealogy around a central concept all the way from it inception until the present moment. There was no wall brought down after the final showing of the first run of *Touch of Evil* (1958) that ended the noir moment. Nor did Robert Altman's *The Long Goodbye* (1973) merely emerge from nowhere. The questions, stories, characters, styles, and plots all remain in our culture as much today as they were in the 1930s through 1950s, if not more so. Yes, many of the films are in color and feature different dress, depictions of women, or increased violence or sexuality, but the motivations for telling and viewing the stories remains much the same.

TV

Television presented one of the most difficult pieces in this project. As I mention in the previous chapter, television has long told stories of crime and the law. However, it is only fairly recently that the fracturing of television audiences provides the room and audience for narratives of noir. We all can all think of television shows that utilize the themes and morality of the classical detective. Mrs. Fletcher in *Murder She Wrote* or Jack Webb in *Dragnet* both used logic and a dogged pursuit of the truth to determine the one responsible for the crime. In the end of each episode, the mystery was solved and the perpetrator, usually, punished. Of course, these sorts of morality plays continue today in *CSI*'s and *Law and Order*'s, but along with these mostly straight mysteries, many shows have begun to explore the connections between death, morality, and one's role within them.

Death has become an interesting topic for television. In addition to HBO's *Six Feet Under* and Showtime's *Dead Like Me* that both address the topic of death and its meaning head-on, other programs have also begun to make death and its meaning in culture a central question of every episode. Programs like CBS' *Without a Trace* or *Cold Case* or NBC's *Medium* all merge moments of life and death with direct references to the relationship of one to the face of the missing other. *Without a Trace* and *Cold Case* do so with more traditional police procedurals and the use of flashbacks and detective work at the hands of representatives of the legal institutions which support and defend the law as the arbitrator of morality. *Medium* bends the stereotype by both including the central character that falls outside of the standard definitions and identities of the detective but also who solves the mysteries through her supernatural connections to the dead, a set-up mirrored in CBS' *The Ghost Whisperer*.

Even documentary programs, like the Discovery Channel's *Deadliest Catch*, which chronicles the everyday lives of crab fishermen, ask the audience to ask themselves about the meaning and relationship between death and responsibility. *Deadliest Catch* could not really be called a noir by any stretch of the imagination, but week in and week out, the audience gets to know the men and women who fish the Bering Sea, a border "land" if there ever was one. The producers have even aired a mini-series in which narrator, Mike Rowe, sits down and asks the captains and crews to tell the stories of ships lost and friends gone in the turbulent seas. This sort of narrative and narratives-within-narratives partially serves a sort of voyeurism and fascination with different places, but fan sites and discussions of the people on the show have become more frequent and reflect at least the appearance of an interest in the face of these others and their very real potential for death by a variety of constant threats that remain a part of their industry.

Contemporary shows are not only focusing on death more directly and doing so with both references to the face of the other both inside and outside of the traditional bastions of power, but also exhibit an explosion of noir protagonists. From shows like Showtime's *Dexter*, NBC's *Raines* and *Andy Barker, PI*, to Fox's *House, M.D.*, the hero who serves as both rebel and authority in their negotiation of the ethically gray lands of noir plays on the conventions of noir and does so with an emphasis on the sorts of themes raised previously in this work. On almost every channel that presents fictive, narrative dramas, at least one show presents a noir show or episode. Programs such as HBO's *The Sopranos* questioned the mob/gang genre, *Firefly*, for its short run, built on a sort of anime-esque generic hodge-podge of Western, space, and samurai stories, and now noir has reemerged on television. Genres bend and twist. Producers break them and put them together in new ways, and noir shows up in unexpected places. The questions of why this shift occurred, where it occurred, and what it means remains to be explored more fully.

Other Noir Outlets

Novels, films, and television do not provide the only arenas for noir in modern popular culture. Other media such as video games, graphic novels, and music also vie for spaces to explore the connections between stories of crime and the individual's struggle to find their way within their contemporary society.

Max Payne (2001) and *Max Payne 2: The Fall of Max Payne* (2003) provide excellent examples of the ways in which video games combine the visual narrative styles of film and television with the interactivity of video and computer games to place individuals within worlds filled with noir settings, characters, and plots which heighten the awareness of responsibility and hospitality in noir. In *Max Payne*, players take control of Max Payne, a former police officer suspected of killing his wife and newborn child, as he navigates through his city's underworld in order to find and punish those responsible for their death, his exile, and his descent into near insanity. With the increased potential for open-ended action in games like the *Grand Theft Auto* series, gamers find themselves with the ability to choose how to live out their characters' lives. Rather than following a set, linear narrative, players may choose the manner in which they accomplish their missions. Obviously games such as these possess limits and direct the gamers in particular directions, but more than ever before, the player must make ethical decisions about who to kill, when, and why. Players can certainly embody a *Death Wish* sort of revenge scenario in *Max Payne* and kill any and all that cross their paths, but players also can choose to treat the story as a mystery to be solved in a much more hard-boiled way that combines both detection skills and the judicious use of violence. This growing interest in complex story-telling and noir in video games emerges now explicitly in the development by Rockstar Games, the company behind the *Grand Theft Auto* series, of *L.A. Noire*, a new game due out later this year for the

Playstation 3 console that is described as a game that, "blends action, detection and complex

storytelling and draws players into an open-ended challenge to solve a series of gruesome

murders. Set in a perfectly recreated Los Angeles before freeways, with a post-war backdrop of

corruption, drugs and jazz, L.A. Noire will truly blend cinema and gaming."[4] Still in its infancy,

open-ended video gaming holds great possibilities for the exploration of noir and the ethics

implicit within it to a degree greater than ever before.

Comics and graphic novels also have a long tradition of detective stories and mirroring of

the noir worlds of corruption and the law, but in the 1980s, artists and writers such as Alan

Moore and Frank Miller began to explore the moral complexities this visual and literary medium.

Moore, in *Watchmen* (1986), not only undercuts the generic assumptions about superhero comics

but also does so in such a way as to highlight the ethical concepts of noir. This could be

examined in the character of Walter Joseph Kovacs aka Rorschach, a vigilante who seeks justice

while wearing a mask whose shifting patterns of white and black mirror the shifts in traditional

definitions of right and wrong and a Marlowe-esque Fedora and trench coat, but it also appears

in the story's repeated plotlines which ask about whether an objective and ontological right and

wrong can exist at all. Moore works through these same questions in *V for Vendetta* (1988) and

From Hell (1989), each of which follows a different ethical perspective of questioning exhibited

through a variety of protagonists and situations. Frank Miller's foundational rewriting of the

character of Batman in *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) similarly explores the tensions between

conditional and unconditional hospitality and ethics based on objective and subjective

perspectives, but his *Sin City* series (1993-1995) even more clearly connects a noir aesthetic to

protagonists who search for meaning and resolution for the responsibilities within which they

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[4] "L.A. Noire Game Announcement". www.rockstargames.com/lanoire/html/announcement.html. Accessed on 22 April 2007.

find themselves intertwined. The fact that Moore and Miller both produced works that merged

questioning looks at superheroes, easily seen as traditional bastions of an objective morality, at

the same historical period shows that noir continues to resurface throughout American popular

culture, regardless of medium or historical moment.

Foreign Noir

Above and throughout this work, I have mentioned noir that strays beyond the boundaries

of American popular culture. Stories of crime and conflict that follow the individuals seemingly

trapped within them do not belong solely to the American culture. If noir is born out of times of

change and struggle, the disillusionment of the individual, and shifts in domestic and economic

identities, then most cultures in the world can find locations where similar stories might emerge.

Even if one limits oneself to the urban narratives of lone protagonists who dwell between the law

and crime, stories from national cinemas outside of the United States and Britain deserve

attention. European noir has received some critical attention in the past, but looking at films

coming out of India, China, Hong Kong, Korea, and Japan might provide even more voices in

the global discourse of ethics. One need only to look at Johnnie To's films like *Fulltime Killer*

(2001) and *The Mission* (1999) from Hong Kong or even Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950) or

The Bad Sleep Well (1960) from Japan to see that those in America and Europe are not the only

cultures interested in exploring justice and ethics in the stories that they tell. A great amount of

work in this area lies ahead. Not only do noir stories pop up in the films of non-Western cultures,

but the novels and comics, at least, often point to similar debates and questions resting at the

center of so many of the stories told today.

Final Words

As the previous section suggests, the questions asked in this work about genre, ethics, and narratives expand far beyond the implication of whether scholars' definition of noir as *noir* is justified. At hand here rest the very nature and purpose of a large quantity of narratives that existed and continue to exist in cultures around the world. Looking at films, novels, and television shows' exploration of ethics as similar to those articulated by Derrida and Levinas opens the study of narrative to analyze the ways in which stories participate in and create the discussions in various cultures about the nature of right and wrong. More importantly, with the fracturing of culture and the rise of subjectively defined linguistics and moralities, the roles of common stories that represent points of merger grows increasingly vital in our understanding of topics ranging from literature to religion to politics. By bringing Derrida and Levinas' concepts of ethics into noir and noir into contemporary discourses of ethics, I take the marginal and make it central. In the same way, this discussion of noir and ethics brings narrative to the center of the study of culture. These are not, after all, just stories about detectives and murders. Whether one studies them for their implications on ethics, economics, gender, or race, noir represents a clear example of the ways in which we create narratives that reflect the cultures in which we live and the ways in which we group these sorts of stories together.

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