# 1940s IN FILMS: GENRE AND SOCIAL CRITICISM

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RESUMO: Este artigo investiga um grupo de seis filmes dos anos quarenta. Ao invés de se concentrar em categorizações que tradicionalmente dividem a produção dessa década em subgêneros - filme *noir*, gótico feminino, filme gótico - a ideia subjacente é que tais filmes compartilham qualidades históricas e técnicas (atmosfera, tom e estilo característicos) e, portanto, podem ser analisados em termos de temas que permeiam suas narrativas. Mal-estar social, ansiedades acerca do significado de 'normalidade', assuntos relacionados a dinheiro são alguns temas recorrentes nos filmes. Esta análise que destaca questões de classes e processos sócio-dialéticos como características centrais que podem integrar todos os filmes no corpus sob uma única perspectiva.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: filme *noir*, gótico feminino, gótico, gênero fílmico, sócio-dialética.

ABSTRACT: This paper investigates a group of six films produced in the forties. Instead of relying on categorisations that traditionally divide the production of this decade in subgenres - *Film Noir*, *Female Gothic*, *Gothic Films* - the idea here is that these films share historical and technical qualities (distinctive mood, tone, and style) and therefore may be analysed in terms of themes that pervade their narratives. Social uneasiness, anxiety about the meaning of 'normality' and money related issues as

recurrent themes in the films. This analysis highlights issues of class struggle and socio-dialectic processes as characteristics that can integrate the film corpus under a single perspective.

KEYWORDS: *Film Noir*, *Female Gothic*, *Gothic*, film genre, socio-dialectics.

One major theoretical issue that has dominated the field of film studies for many years concerns the matter of genre classification. Broad generic definitions given to specific films or groups of films often do not function aptly when they are examined in detail. As much as the notion of genre remains an important concept, close analysis often reveals how specific films fail to fit into a cohesive critical taxonomy. This matter is also related to the ways in which a significant number of films are constantly being reclassified so far as their generic affiliations are concerned (JANCHOVICH, 2002). Scholars such as Maltby (1995), Altman (1999) and Neale (2000), to name but a few, have already pointed out how the film industry, the critics, and different sectors of the audience construct the meanings of films in different ways, frequently disagreeing as to which genre a film belongs and even questioning the concept of genre.

In this paper I intend to problematise with the notion of genre by investigating a corpus of six films produced in the forties: *Rebecca* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1940), *Gaslight* (George Cukor, 1944), *The Big Sleep* (Howard Hawks, 1946), *Notorious* (George Tillman Jr., 1946), *Sorry, Wrong Number* (Anatole Litvak, 1948), *The Third Man* (Carol Reed, 1949). The film production from this period has been analysed in terms of historical processes and explained as metaphors of deep-seated social anxieties that characterised the decade (SILVER & URSINI, 1996; NAREMORE,

1998; SPICER, 2002). The forties are deemed a gloomy decade, a period marked by World War II and dominated by the many uncertainties generated by the transition of 1930s radicalism to 1950s conservatism. These historical junctures produced a particular artistic output that is arguably pessimistic and distrustful of human nature.

I will consider here some of the classifications the films from this decade received – *Film Noir*, *Female Gothic*, *Gothic Film* - and propose that these classifications are an attempt to make the films conform to specific genre models. It seems to me that discussing genre (as illuminating it might be at times) says more about critics' theoretical persuasions than the actual experience of watching the films or the way they were promoted by the film industry. One can argue that the generic subdivision of the forties cycle into *Film Noir*, *Female Gothic*, and *Gothic Film* does not explain the actual matters these films try to communicate in terms of historical context and fail to perceive socio-dialectic processes, i.e. class struggle and money-related matters, as issues that pervade all narratives.[1] Instead of subcategorising films that ultimately have very similar style, language and context of production, it is being suggested here the possibility of an axis which organises the different narratives.

As much complex and multi-layered film interpretation can be, certain specific themes seem to emerge in the selected corpus. All films share a concern with materialism and socio-dialectical processes that become the central axis that organise their plots. Moreover, these films often seek to attack the social-cultural practices of the forties.

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[1] The definition of the socio-dialectical processes in the universe of *Film Noir* comes from Edward Dimendberg's description of the "unsentimental capitalist rationality" and "impersonality of the large corporation and the more opaque social and economic relations" that marked the 1940s in American society. He demonstrates how dialectical film criticism can be by stressing *Film Noir*'s "harassed working-class protagonists, petty criminals, seedy gambling joints, ramshackle urban neighbourhoods and threatening skyscrapers, akin to a modern vision purgatory" (2004:4).

***Film Noir*, *Female Gothic*, and *Gothic Film*: in search of definitions**

There was an evident partition in the American film industry in the forties: the luxurious creations from the main Hollywood studios (MGM, Paramount, Twentieth Century Fox, Warner Bros, and RKO) started losing audience and then yielding to the production of marginal movies, films that can be considered intermediate to low-budget productions (SPICER, 2002: 3). These 'alternative' films tended to focus on a more nihilistic and cynical aspects of life, contrasting with the cheerfulness and buoyancy seen in the musicals that predominated in the period. They also embraced more experimental attempts and tried out new forms that differed from the often-restrictive agendas of the major institutions.

The emergence of these secondary productions was only possible due to a transformation in the reception context, i.e. the existence of a local audience that was not in tune with the flamboyant world of musical films and rather prefer to watch films that reflected the harsher reality of the period. These new films developed an equally innovative style and filmic language in order to express their take on reality. Some of the techniques they experimented with include voice-over narration (which creates a confessional effect), *chiaro-escuro* lighting (for dense, high-contrast, and atmospheric results) and unconventional camera work such as the high-angular tilted camera (to illustrate a world-out-of-order) and the eye-view (bringing the narrative to the first person and freeing the third person standpoint). In term of aesthetics, these films embarked on a more personal and dramatic angle. In the thematic dimension, they were characterised by the vicissitudes of urban life along with the representation of shadowy and melancholic cosmopolitan settings. The new vogue proved to be a success with local audiences and also made a positive impact among European

spectatorship and critics, particularly in France. By the time the fifties drew closer, the distinctive style created by these secondary productions was incorporated by the big studios and acknowledged as a new film style and language.

James Naremore argues that the zeitgeist ongoing in France predisposed them "to see America in certain ways" (1998:45). According to Naremore, when French critics praised this new American film style, they were in fact paying tribute to their own cinema, which employed a similar kind of low-key lighting (1998: 53). Another event that contributed to the success of this film style was the publication of translated American and British crime novels by publishing house Gallimard. The editions started circulating in 1945 and became known as *Série Noire*. In the following year the French critics Nino Frank and Jean-Pierre Chartier wrote articles declaring the birth of a new project in filmmaking and coined it *Film Noir* (see references for the articles in the bibliography).

It seems a general assumption among critics that these films were not thought of or known by that name anywhere else other than France. And it was not until the seventies that the term *Film Noir* became known in the United States and started being used extensively in allusion to a film style. However, Alain Silver and Ursini (1996) dispute this postulation by showing a photograph of director Robert Aldrich holding a copy of Borde and Chaumenton´s first edition of the book *Panorama du Film Noir Américain,* in the set of the film *Attack!* in 1956 – meaning that the term was known and perhaps already used before the seventies.


**Film Noir**

What came to be known as *Film Noir* refers to group of films produced in the forties, essentially pessimistic stories that deal with people trapped in a situation they

did not want and often did not create. Life is represented as something random, fate is uncaring and characters are usually doomed. Andrew Spicer describes this group of films as:

> The product of a multifaceted interaction between developments within particular genres - the gangster/crime film and the gothic melodrama - fluctuating conditions of production and reception within the American film industry, and more diffuse cultural movements: modernism and post-modernism. Film noir was also the product of the complex interface between European and American cinema. (SPICER, 2002: vii)

In many *Noir* films there is a hard-boiled, disillusioned male, who often works as a private eye, and a cynical, dangerous woman who performs the function of *femme fatale* (SPICER, 2002: 30). Generally because of either sexual attraction or greed, the male character commits vicious acts and, in the end, both him and the dangerous woman are punished or killed for their actions. This concise definition became a type of framework that encompasses a number of films produced in the forties and fifties. However, applying this broad description to such a large group of films fails to account for the possibility of crossovers or other types of genres in the stories. Using the generic term *Film Noir* to refer to films produced in the forties and fifties is a partial and inconsistent definition. For example, in more recent critical debate, the term *neo-noir* has been applied to films as different as Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976), Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) and Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs (1992)* (see SCHWARTZ 2005; CONRAD 2007). Therefore, while some critics tend see *Film Noir* as a historical genre, others tend to see it as production cycle, and others interpret it as a distinctive style.

As much convenient as it is to treat *Film Noir* as an umbrella nomenclature that encapsulates the marginal production of films in the forties and fifties; such definition is primarily an academic outlook that seeks to organise knowledge by establishing clear-cut classification borders. A more detailed examination of this production cycle will show how such definition is imprecise, "an unusually baggy concept, elaborated largely after the films themselves" (NAREMORE, 1998:5). Paradoxically, the critic affirms subsequently that genre is also a "necessary category" for film criticism.

As critics begun making claims about *Film Noir*, delimiting its basic characteristics; the films that did not fit within the boundaries had either to be rejected or be fitted in a distinct category. This is the case of those films in which women were the protagonists and thus demanded a different classification from the male-dominated *Noir* genre. Andrew Spicer postulates that *"*Hollywood drew extensively on Gothic tradition in the forties as a branch of the 'woman's film', aimed at the numeric dominant female audience and displaying the ambivalent attitude towards the Victorian period" (SPICER, 2002:11). According to him the first Gothic *noir* was Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940). By this definition *Gothic Noir*/*Female Gothic are* films that present heroines in the central role and *Film Noir* are movies that have men as protagonists (SPICER, 2002: 13). The criteria employed to justify this division lies solely on the gender of the protagonist. It can be observed here the difficulties involving this generic categorisation given that the films produced within this decade share similar style and context of production but are assessed as two distinct genres.

**Female Gothic and Gothic films**

The term *Female Gothic* was first coined by Ellen Moers (1977), who proposed an alternative way of thinking about the gothic novel as a literary genre. Her studies concentrated on the role of women in this kind of literature, both as writers and as characters. However, she was not the first person to come up with a conception of generic conflict within the gothic novel. Moers built upon Robert Hume's distinction between the novel of 'terror', which had Ann Radcliffe as its foremost expression, and the novel of 'horror', epitomised by M.G. Lewis. Hume's classification benefited the male-prevalent gothic fiction written by Lewis - based on the German *Schauerroman* (shudder-romance) - and overlooked Radcliffe's importance to the gothic novel – arguably the most successful novelist of her time. This dismissal was perceived by Moers and an imbalance and some of the questions she raises relate to the gendered construction of the gothic hero/heroine, more precisely, the link between the gothic settings and female sexuality, and monetary/class struggle with issues of femininity. The term Ellen Moer's created served the political purposes of gender-oriented theories and debates.

Nowadays, in contemporary film jargon, *Female Gothic* is used to designate a kind of movie, generally produced in the forties, which re-enacts the situation the 'damsel in distress' created by the eighteenth-century gothic novel. It also deals with some broader themes related to this pre-romantic era, such as psychic illnesses, fear of the supernatural, and paranoia.

Ian Conrich, however, has a much more elastic view of the genre matter and he proposes an all-inclusive genre called *Gothic Films* and that allegedly encompasses films as distinct as *Le Manoir du Diable* (George Méliès, 1896) to *Toy Story* (John Lasseter, 1995). The critic states that:

The Gothic in film is a form that has been generically mobile, repeatedly hybridising and mutating. Attempts to present a sufficiently expansive consideration of the Gothic film have been obstructed by its uniformity, with writers consequently preferring to examine specific divisions - the Hollywood monster movies of the 1930s and 1940s, the Horror films of Hammer, the cycle of the 1940 persecuted-women films and the dystopian visions of tech noir. (CONRICH, 1996: 76)

According to this definition, *Gothic Films* emerge here as a category or an umbrella genre that contains elements of horror, monstrosity, and noir. However, the mere presence of these elements in a film, as peripheral features in the narrative, cannot be considered a horror/noir/gothic manifestation in full. Perhaps it would be fairer to say that the different types of film Conrich considers gothic contain a certain atmosphere of mystery, suspense and fantasy (which could be taken as a 'gothic feel') but that does not correspond to a genre definition.

There are a few ways out of the matter of genre classification. Richard Maltby (1995:107) argues that the concept of genre within the context of Hollywood feature film production is best understood as a volatile cycle of films initiated by a success of an originating film or films rather than as a stable arrangement of genres. However, concentrating on the way the film industry promotes films fails to account for the viewers experience. Reynold Durgnat emphasizes the idea of hybrid films stating that *Film Noir* "describe not genres but dominant cycles or motifs, and in many, if not most, films would come under two headings, since interbreeding is intrinsic to motif processes." (DURGNAT, 1996: 38). James Naremore sees these films as "a series of historical frames or contexts" but he agues that "yet we must ground the term in some

sort of adequate working definition if it is to warrant serious consideration as an object of either film or cultural history" (NAREMORE, 1996: 77).

These different positions expose the enormous difficulties involved in analysing films in terms of genre. The definition of genre does not imply merely those commercial features of film which, through repetition and variation, tell familiar stories. Genre concerns the ways critics study certain groups of films, but also the how spectatorship relates to these films and the way industry packages them from production to consumption. All in all, despite the popular cinema is organised almost entirely according to genre classifications. The case studies below will examine a group of six films reading their individual features within their generic and historical context.

**1940 in film: six cases of socio-dialectics issues**

*Rebecca* has been called a "noir woman's film" (WALSH, 1992: 18) and also a "glossy melodrama adapted from middlebrow fiction" (OLIVER & TRIGO, 2003: 87) but underneath its apparently inoffensive surface lies sharp critique which aims at conceptions of social class. The film has been read in the light of psychoanalytic and feminist theories, as it contains the all the elements of a 'damsel in distress' narrative - a mansion-like-castle, an ill tempered and absent husband, and supposedly dark secrets which are later demystified. However, for a dialectical reading, money related issues play a conspicuous role in the plot. The film is constructed on the idea of rivalry; the competing parts are the governess Mrs. Danvers (Judith Anderson) and the second Mrs. de Winter (Joan Fontaine), representing the ideology of the upper and the dominated class, respectively. During the film the second Mrs. de Winter is

constantly reminded of her "outsider" condition to the bourgeois world. Whenever she attempts to blend in, Mrs. Danvers makes it clear that she does not belong to that upper class realm. The dispute reaches its peak when Danvers sets Manderley mansion on fire saying: "she can't have it all". In *Rebecca* social ascension is denied to the girl from the working class.

*Gaslight* presents the story of a wife being methodically driven out of her mind by the evil husband. As both characters are well balanced in the narrative, it could be asked who really is the protagonist of this film. A lot of time is spent in the construction of the female character, whose perspective seems to be privileged both in the beginning and in the denouement of the narrative. The sympathy the viewers develop for the character suggests that the film privileges the feminine perspective when depicting the psychological changes she goes through, until her triumphant outcome. On the other hand, the male character is portrayed as a 'flat' and unchanging thoughout the story, representing antagonistic and disruptive forces in the narrative that are more commonly thought of as the 'evil' element. Paula Alquist (Ingrid Bergman) is a naïve young lady seduced by the suave musician Gregory Anton (Charles Boyer). After getting married they move to the house Paula's aunt, the actress Alicia Alquist, was assassinated ten years before. Not long after Gregory reveals himself to be a manipulative man, seeking to drive Paula mad by means of long periods of isolation, public humiliation, emotional abuses, and accusations of kleptomania.

Due to the psychological browbeating from Gregory, Paula changes from a cheerful girl into a scared, cowering woman. A providential interference comes into play when Scotland Yard detective Brian Cameron (Joseph Cotten) takes interest in the case and in the lady. For years Brian has kept a glove, given to him by Alicia,

which matches the one Paula keeps as a loving memory of her aunt. It turns out that Gregory had been leading a double life; he is married and has got a family abroad. Living under a false identity, his real name is Serges Bower and, for ten years, he had been after Alicia Alquist precious gemstones. The charlatan only married Paula so he could move back into the house where he assassinated Alicia and continue his search for some hidden gems undercover. His obsession with jewellery is foreshadowed in the beginning of the story, and it is his lust for riches that leads him to commit murder and almost kill Paula too. Here again we see money related issues as the engine that moves the whole narrative. Paula gets her own back in a dramatic final confrontation with the villain. In the end Gregory is not able to explain why he behaved in such a way, he justifies his action merely by saying the jewels drove him mad. The tension built up in the film is only broken in the very end when the nosy old lady, Ms. Thwaits (Dame May Whitty), steps in the house to check the outcome; a little comical relief for this the nerve-racking situation.

In *The Big Sleep* detective Phillip Marlowe (Humphrey Bogart) meets Carmen Sternwood (Lauren Bacall). Unlike the previous immature female protagonists Carmen is sharp, edgy and yet docile. She distinguishes herself from the *femme fatale* only because she is capable of loving and loyalty. Her malevolent nature is due to the disillusionments she has suffered in life. Carmen is the typical poor rich girl; her wealthy world is surrounded by murders, treasons and decadence. The film represents upper-class habitats (saloons, bars, casinos) as places full of promiscuity, hypocrisy and vice. Bacall's representation of a "sultry, smoke-voiced contemporary good-bad girl was the perfect foil for Bogart's laconic private eye and the audiences enjoyed their 'leisurely mating duels' in which the pair exchanged provocative and witty wisecracks" (SPICER 2002: 93). The righteous detective Marlowe finally submits to

Carmen's devious behaviour, acknowledging how corruptive money can be. *The Big Sleep* is often quoted as the classical example of *Film Noir*, however, aesthetically it is the most conventional film in this corpus, "it is on account of its narrative and characters that *The Big Sleep* qualifies as a key film noir: visually, it displays none of the noir stylistics features" (WALKER 1992: 191).

*Notorious* takes place in the sunny cities of Miami and Rio de Janeiro, it seems that "the presence of the Third World is sufficiently insistent during the decade to merit our attention" (HUMPHIES 2002: 35). At the time American imperialism was stretching its arms to embrace the far corners of the world. Disguised in fiction the imperialist project is carried out by Alicia Huberman (Ingrid Bergman), a German expatriate whose father has been convicted as a spy but, soon after, he dies in jail. All alone in the world Alicia is convinced by the patriotic and unsentimental agent T.R. Devlin (Cary Grant) to assist the American espionage in dismantling a Nazi group operating in Brazil. Devlin abruptly becomes the repository of Alicia's feelings, perhaps a process of transferring her love and affection to this new male figure. He takes Alicia to Rio seeking to infiltrate her among the German group, based on the fact that one of its members, Alex Sebastian (Claude Rains), feels attracted to her. The plan is to get them together so that she can spy on Sebastian and his colleagues. She discovers that the Germans are trying to develop a nuclear war weapon and their actions in Brazil consist of smuggling uranium ore in bottles of wine. The discourse is passed on as acting on the world's best interest but "a Western presence in those countries whose underdevelopment has been carefully maintained is never innocent and … functions according to ideological norms." (HUMPHIES 2002: 35).

The film has many symbolic elements revolving around bottles, sex and alcoholism. Alicia is seen by the American group as a licentious Marta Hari, who is

promiscuous and alcoholic, and whose only function is to help the American party to achieve their ends. But Devlin and Alicia are in love with each other and a sadomasochist game gets into play: because she loves Devlin, and this mission is important to him, she is willing to marry Alex. She also does so because Devlin is weak and will not say he loves her and bring the situation to an end. On the other hand Devlin is deeply tormented because she is sleeping with someone else; even though he only has himself to blame for pushing Alicia to Alex, suppressing his masculinity to the success of the mission. Naremore states that "no matter how the Latin world is represented, however, it is nearly always associated with frustrated desire for romance and freedom; again and again, it holds out the elusive, ironic promise of a warmth and colour that will countervail the dark *mise-en-scène* and the taut, restricted coolness of the average noir protagonist" (NAREMORE 1998: 230). Oliver and Trigo affirm that: "Mexico and Latin America are condensed into figures of unrepressed criminality and sexuality in *Notorious*" (OLIVER & TRIGO 2003: xviii). However, America's self-assured international politics does not find a counterpart in the hero's precarious position throughout the narrative. That imbalance in the representation of America and the underdeveloped nations being the case in point for the social criticism based on a dialectic reading and money related issues a the key to interpret the film.

*Sorry, Wrong Number* represents a tyrant, wealthy wife and henpecked husband. This film is particularly difficult to conform to any genre model, as the characters are psychologically nuanced, portrayed as not wholly 'good' or 'bad'. There is a dualistic structure in the construction of these characters that depicts them both as villains and victims at the same time. Although the female character is yet again the protagonist, a reading from the other end could reveal the theme as being

'the unfortunate consequences of marrying for money'. No matter the angle the situation is looked at, this narrative clearly revolves around money/power issues. The plot consists of a woman home alone at night that, while making a telephone call, overhears a crossed conversation about a contract killing that will take place at a quarter past eleven, that same night. Wealthy and hypochondriac Leona Stevenson (Barbara Stanwyck) is then set on a quest to discover who is this woman that is going to be murdered. Being someone accustomed to having things her own way, Leona gets quite hysterical when the police authorities and public services ignore her. A matter related to social changes is fore grounded in a scene in which a policeman says: "M'am, I've got a bigger problem in my hands". He is holding a black baby, a probable a historical reference to the right to vote that was granted to Afro-Americans that same year.

Leona is married to Henry Stevenson (Burt Lancaster), a good-looking man that she stole from her former friend Sally. At the time, Sally warned Leona that a lot of money could turn Henry's head. He had been an underprivileged man all his life and putting in a luxurious environment could lead to disastrous consequences. It turns out that Henry finds himself feeling constrained in marriage he had been reluctant to accept all along. Working as the vice-president in his father-in-law corporation he feels pathetic and useless. Suppressed by Leona's bossy attitude, who is constantly mentioning he has got no money and resorting to emotional blackmailing, he feels unmanly. Having nothing of his own, the former good guy decides to start stealing from the company. Viewers' perception regarding Leona's character changes when it is revealed her alleged sickness is only psychosomatic caused by her father, who turned her into a despotic woman. Here is another example of a story in which money ruins lives. The whole action takes place in one evening but the viewer is filled in on

past events by means of flashbacks. Like a mosaic the plot consists of various sub-plots, in which every sequence fits another part to compose the big picture. Avoiding chronology seems to me a great way to resolve the narrative and at the same time build up the tension for the final denouement. As the different stories fall into place, the viewer (and Leona) learn that she is going to be the victim that night. Among the group of films analysed, *Sorry, Wrong Number* is the only one that employs this fragmented narrative technique.

*The Third Man* is set in a gloomy Vienna, devastated by the war and divided into four military zones. The alcoholic American writer Holly Martins (Joseph Cotten) goes there to visit his friend Harry Lime (Orson Welles), who has promised him a job, only to find that Lime died in a mysterious traffic accident. The circumstances of the accident are somewhat unexplained. Attracted by a mysterious woman he saw in Lime's funeral, Holly decides to stay in Vienna and elucidate the case by himself. It turns out that the humanitarian job Holly was offered was actually related to the racketeering business. His long time friend Harry Lime is in fact alive and he is the one commanding the operation of stealing penicillin from the hospital, watering it down, and then selling it in the black market.

Confronted by Holly about the moral rectitude of his actions, Harry Lime replies, as both characters go round in a fun fair big wheel: "We are not heroes, the world doesn't make any heroes outside your stories. You know, I never feel comfortable with that sort of thing … victims? Don't be melodramatic. Look down there, would you feel any pity if any of those dots stopped moving forever? If I offered twenty thousand pounds for every dot that stopped, would you really, old man, tell me to keep my money or would you calculate how many dots you could afford to spin? Free of income tax". Holly (this symbolic name) is a humanitarian

confronted with the sordid aspects of life. On the other hand, Harry Lime take on life is chaotic and destructive, a 'dark' fate forces rules over victimized human beings. Certain specific situations would shape and control people's life and human behaviour is determined by opportunity.

**Conclusion**

I analysed here a selection of six films produced in the forties, but instead of relying on categorisations which traditionally sub-divides this production cycle in genres such as *Film Noir*, *Female Gothic* and *Gothic Films*; I sustain that these films share historical and technical qualities and therefore should be analysed in terms of individual motifs that pervade the stories and therefore can give a clearer idea about the actual subject matter of these films.

I identified that the theme of money related issues as a consistent motif that unite all the narratives, highlighting in each film issues of class struggle and dialectic processes as characteristics which are key to all film in the corpus. The films present a degree of irony, antiheroism, and perverse violence in their stories indicating a social critique of ongoing matters in the social tissue of the time. This social uneasiness is recurrent issue and has already been pointed out by film historian who have "tended to see the late 1940s in America as a period of uncertainty, an 'age of anxiety', in which there seemed to be a significant tension between an outward stability and prosperity, and strong inner doubts and a sense of alienation" (SPICER 2002: 20).

These downbeat, pessimistic films were perceived as honest and realist social commentaries and counterbalanced the optimism of Hollywood musicals and comedies. I argued that this group of films express an anxiety about normality and

that, rather than a genre or different genres, they are characterised by a distinctive mood, tone, and style. As products of their troubled time, these films offered an invective on the pretences of American society, an attack on the greedy individualism upheld by the upper classes their materialistic conception of the world grounded on money and political dominance of the less privileged people or groups of people. These films represented and act of defiance, an attempt at discussing dialectics and social realism, however short-lived. The aesthetic they created was soon incorporated by the big film industry in the next decade. James Naremore provides a good insight of cultural significance of this group of films: "one of the dominant cultural categories of the late twentieth centuries, operating across the entire cultural arena of art, popular memory, and criticism." (NAREMORE, 1998:2). Nowadays the social critique these films wanted to make was devoured by the market logic. Their distinctive point of view and style, which stemmed from social uneasiness, is currently a pastiche at the service of the mainstream commodity culture. In a world dominated by the capital logic, the original aesthetic created by this group of films is repackaged for today sensibility without any critical effect, only attempts to re-establish the moods, themes and feel of this innovative film era. Counterculture is hardly a concept, as the major corporations decide the directions of a massified culture, to the point of criticising itself and still profit out of it.

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