

# LAURA (OTTO PREMINGER, 1944), FILM NOIR AND THE FASCINATED GAZE

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“The death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world”

EDGAR ALLAN POE  
*The Philosophy of Composition*

## INTRODUCTION

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“Film noir is a haze,” writes Simsolo (2009: 17), referring to Hollywood’s classical period. And perhaps that is what makes it so intriguing to us that we keep returning to it again and again after so many years. But it is a haze in many senses: in its identification as a genre (an idea that in itself is debatable), its characters, the stories it tells, the settings where it takes place, the way the image reflects atmospheres and characters, the lighting, the narrative structure, etc.

In the now classic studies by Borde & Chaumeton (1958), Guerif (1988), Simsolo (2009) and Heredero & Santamarina (1998), among many others, noir films have been analysed in detail, placing them in the context of the socio-historical environment and the industry in which they were created, and attempting to define a set of common characteristics that qualify them for classification in this category. Although it is not our intention

here to offer an exploration of film history, it is important to remember that the term *film noir* was created *a posteriori* after the Second World War, when a large number of American films that had not been screened in France at the time of their production were released into French cinemas. And it was the French who identified a set of common features in these films which, linking them to features already identified in literature and in French cinema, led them to determine the existence of a genre, while bearing in mind that this was “a category constructed *ex post facto*” (Bordwell, Staiger & Thompson, 1985: 78).

For Simsolo (2009: 141-142), “[w]hat has come to be called the ‘noir cycle’ began in 1944 with pictures directed by filmmakers of European origin [...]: *Bluebeard* by Edgar G. Ulmer; *Double Indemnity* by Billy Wilder; *Laura* by Otto Preminger; *Murder My Sweet* by Edward Dmytryk; *Phantom Lady* by Robert Siodmak; and *The Woman in the Window* by Fritz Lang [...]. Filmed around the same time

by competing studios, these six pictures were the vehicle for something very similar to an aesthetic manifesto.” It was a manifesto, however, of which probably none of its authors was aware, at least at the time they were making these films.

Like Simsolo, most of the scholars mentioned above agree on both the dates and the films that make up the film noir cycle, to which other titles would be added covering a period of approximately a decade (more or less from 1944 to 1955), although some authors suggest that it began earlier (in the 1930s with the so-called gangster genre, another “hazy” term) or that it went on later (to include the so-called “neo-noir” films, long after the end of Hollywood’s classical period).

In these studies, the different authors argue that there are contextual, narrative and stylistic patterns that justify the placement of certain films in a group that is recognisable and, to a certain extent, convenient for analysis, although this grouping is obviously not very precise. The group is referred to as film noir, but, as Horsley (2009: 6) muses, “what kind of classification is ‘noir’? Is it a visual style, a tone, a genre, a generic field, a movement, a cycle, a series, or just a helpful category?” While some theorists understand it as a genre, others, like Simsolo (2009), consider it more appropriate to describe it as a cycle or series, and there are even authors, like Schrader (2005), who reject these terms and suggest that noir is a specific period in film history when films were made that share certain conventions and a certain tone in common. Horsley (2009: 6) sums up the matter with the conclusion, quoting Naremore, that “even if it is not, strictly speaking, a genre [...], it is a label that at the very least evokes ‘a network of ideas’ that is valuable as an organising principle.”

Notwithstanding the different conclusions they draw about the nature of film noir, all these authors end up referring,

for the most part, to the same films in which they identify these common features, these stylistic and narrative similarities, which make them recognisable to spectators as well. All of this has led to the construction of an almost indisputable (or, at least, rarely disputed) noir canon, containing a series of films that invariably includes *Laura* (Otto Preminger, 1944).

These shared and universally recognised characteristics constitute a set of patterns which, according to Heredero and Santamarina (1998: 24) for example, include “the dialectic relationship of film noir with the historical moment of the society in which it was born (in some cases interpreting this relationship metaphorically), the Expressionist roots that inspired the atmospheric tonalities of its aesthetic, and the essential issue of ambiguity in the production of meaning in these films.”

Alternatively, according to Simsolo (2009: 142), noir stories are recognisable for the presence of “dark alleyways, invisible enemies, desperate people driven by murderous impulses, unsettling shadows and cursed couples.” For Sánchez Noriega

Image 1. Clifton Webb and Dana Andrews, *Laura* (Otto Preminger, 1944)



(1998: 12-13), “the characteristics of film noir are: a) stereotypical characters; b) dramatic stories in the development of the plot, where death or violence plays a key role; c) conflicts and criminal activity determined by a social context; d) outlaw characters whose behaviour is not always in line with the law or morality; e) a contemporary story that generally takes place in urban settings; f) a visual aesthetic with an Expressionist quality; g) sharp, highly ‘cinematic’ and often cynical dialogues; and h) plots based on cheap novels (pulp fiction) and news stories.”

For Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson (1985: 78-79), there are four basic features shared by all the films in this corpus, which they also view as patterns of non-conformity that challenge the classical Hollywood model: (1) an assault on psychological causality; (2) a challenge to the prominence of heterosexual romance; (3) an attack on the motivated happy ending; and (4) a criticism of classical technique.

It would probably be quite easy to identify or recognise all these features not only in the films mentioned above, but in many other classical Hollywood films, such as *The Big Sleep* (Howard Hawks, 1946) or *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Tay Garnett, 1946). But are they just as clearly present in *Laura*? The question we seek to answer is: how can a film that does not meet any of the established criteria be considered a classic and almost paradigmatic example of film noir?

The fact that *Laura* was made in the same period as the other films recognised as part of the noir canon and that the plot effectively revolves around a murder may have resulted in a kind of “corpus effect” or “contagion effect”. This possibility will be analysed below with attention to various basic although not easily separable elements, such as the characters, plot, settings, visual style, etc.

Image 2. Dana Andrews, *Laura* (Otto Preminger, 1944)



Our initial hypothesis is that *Laura* subverts classical structures and patterns on practically every level: firstly, it is a film with very few characters, all of whom challenge the familiar archetypes; moreover, it has a very limited number of settings, which themselves are atypical; and finally, it has a structure that seems odd for the classical period and for the identifying features of the “genre” with which it has been associated.

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### HOW CAN A FILM THAT DOES NOT MEET ANY OF THE ESTABLISHED CRITERIA BE CONSIDERED A CLASSIC AND ALMOST PARADIGMATIC EXAMPLE OF FILM NOIR?

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Although *Laura* was created during the peak period of classical Hollywood cinema, it could be described, as González Requena (2006) has proposed, as an early example of what is referred to as mannerism (more recognisable in the 1950s), in the sense that it subverts the meaning, although not always the form, of the classical narrative mode. As González Requena suggests, “in Hollywood’s mannerist films [...] the narrative form would maintain its presence as a framework [...] and it would even accentuate its mechanisms of suspense; it would be the era of a narrative virtuosity open to the most unexpected juggling, in which the character’s journey would become an exploration of a maze of mirrors that would ultimately reveal only the emptiness of that character’s identity” (2006: 569).

### DECONSTRUCTING THE CHARACTERS

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#### Laura

The first question posed by a film whose title (like the Vera Caspary novel on which it was based) is a woman’s given name relates to the identity of the protagonist. Is it the victim? The killer? The

police officer? Is it Mark McPherson, the detective who takes on the case, through whom we get to know the other characters? Is it Waldo Lydecker, who begins the story with his voice-over and carries the narration off screen until around half-way through the film? Or is it Laura Hunt, who gives the story its title, around whom the whole plot revolves?

Theoretically, Laura is the victim and, apparently, it is the police officer investigating her murder who guides the narrative and the spectator; but we follow the first half of the story in an atypical flashback through the words and memories of Waldo Lydecker, who acts simultaneously as guide for the detective and for the spectator. We thus appear to have the usual narrative structure and cast of characters for this type of story: a victim, an investigator, and various suspects.

According to P. D. James (2010: 153-154), in the Golden Age of the detective story “nothing more was required of the victim than that he or she should be an undesirable, dangerous or unpleasant person whose death need cause no grief to anyone [...] and usually, once dead, could safely be carried off to the mortuary [...] it hardly matters to us whether he lives or dies.” But this standard characterisation does not describe the victim in *Laura* at all. Far from being an undesirable person, she is presented as a charming individual, endowed with every virtue and beauty (with her portrait always present on screen and the musical refrain that identifies her playing constantly throughout the film), which is precisely what predisposes us to feel compassion for her and to want to know who could have killed somebody who seems so clearly not to have deserved it.

Laura is dead, but she is brought back to life for the detective and for the spectator through Waldo Lydecker’s voice. We meet Laura at the same time that the detective who is investigating her death does, and just like him, we are fascinated by her; but the fascination is in the gaze of the one telling the story. This film focuses on the victim, when

in film noir it is much more common to focus on the police/detective and his investigation, or on the killer and his or her motivations. And we get to know the victim precisely through the gaze of her killer (although we do not yet know that he is), and subsequently through the gaze, now not only fascinated but totally besotted, of the police officer, who reconstructs her based on her ubiquitous portrait, on what he discovers about her, but mostly on her house, her clothes, her perfume, her letters, her diary, her world, etc. As James points out (2010: 154), the victim's voice "may be stilled for most of the novel, his testimony given in the voices of others, by the detritus he leaves in his rooms, his drawers and cupboards, and by the scalpels of the forensic pathologist, but for the reader, at least in thought, he must be powerfully alive."

And this is just what happens in the first part of the film, after which, in a surprising twist, this trope of the genre is subverted when the victim is

Image 3. Dana Andrews and Gene Tierney, *Laura* (Otto Preminger, 1944)




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**WE ARE FASCINATED BY LAURA; BUT THE FASCINATION IS IN THE GAZE OF THE ONE TELLING THE STORY**

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given a voice from the (almost dreamlike) moment when Laura returns to her house, and it is revealed that the woman murdered was not her but another young woman who thus fills the role of the forgettable victim, about whom we know little and who arouses no particular interest, who has "served [her] purpose and can be put out of mind" (James, 2010: 154). Once Laura takes her place as a real person the spectator can, together with the astonished detective, compare that reality against the image projected by the other characters who have been seduced by her personality.

And the real Laura is, somehow, disappointing. The real woman reminds us of the perfect image in her portrait, both in the painting ("too much Jacoby and not enough Laura", in the words of Waldo Lydecker) and in the image of her that different male gazes have created for us. When she appears on the screen, Laura is not a real person but a construction on which Jacoby (the painter of her portrait), Mark (the detective), Waldo (the narrator/mentor) and Shelby (her fiancée) have imposed an artificial and unreal meaning (Matzke, 2017), constructing a figure that has perversely taken root in the spectator's mind. The woman of flesh and blood is a complication, a set of contradictions who threatens to destroy the "Lauras" presented or created by the male gazes of her mentor, her fiancée, the detective investigating her murder, etc. The portrait is a romantic, almost Victorian provocation, a signifier emptied of any meaning of its own and open to all the meanings placed in it by the different characters who gaze upon it.

Not only is Laura not the woman in the painting, nor the one constructed by the different gazes; she is also not the typical woman of the

noir “genre”. Her exceptional nature is underscored by various things we discover about her life, first through Waldo’s flashback, which takes up the first part of the film, and then through the detective’s questioning of the different characters implicated in her murder. She embodies a figure that we could recognise as different, as in the historical moment when the film was made she stands out as a rarity among the roles assigned to women in the films of the period: not only is she independent and working in a highly atypical field (she is not a secretary, receptionist, maid, etc.), but she also holds a position of power in her company (in a totally male-dominated world) and does not appear to prioritise her romantic life over her professional life.

Laura’s uniqueness in the canon is marked by what she is not: she is not a “damsel in distress”; she is not a good girl in search of a husband; but above all, she is not a *femme fatale*, another of the traditional tropes of film noir that is absent from this film—aspects highlighted by the new movement of *domestic noir*, which gives special prominence to these kinds of characters that break with the female stereotypes of the era, as noted by Ciocia (2018). Laura does not embody the female archetype so often associated with film noir, who manipulates the male lead and incites him to deception, theft or murder, triggering a series of events that will lead to the downfall of both (Damico, 1978). She is ambitious, self-assured and determined, but she has very little in common with this perverse, Machiavellian figure. Indeed, the amorous relationship be-

tween Detective Mark McPherson and Laura, rather than repeating the trope of the man seduced by the *femme fatale*, establishes a model that anticipates the relationship between James Stewart and Kim Novak in *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958) by more than a decade. This idea of a police officer who falls in love with a woman killed in a murder that he is investigating is what the prominent novelist James Ellroy (2007) would later identify as “the Laura Syndrome”.

### Waldo

The impending doom that looms over the characters is another standard feature of film noir that is also absent from *Laura*. Waldo killed Laura (or at least tried to, as we later discover that she was not the one who took the bullet) not because she was perverse or manipulative, or because of some *fatum* that drives him to do it, but because she is “his work” and, as such, he can destroy her if she

Image 4. Gene Tierney and Dana Andrews, *Laura* (Otto Preminger, 1944)



doesn't live up to the ideal and idealised image that he has created and that he communicates to us in his story in the film, the idol that he constructed and fell in love with, but that must remain unattainable for anyone but him. Everyone else should recognise and worship his work, but they can never possess it.

Laura did not exist before Waldo; her image, her life, her achievements are all his. Waldo is her Pygmalion, her creator, and he therefore considers himself to be her owner as well. It is his voice-over that presents her to us, which conveys the idea of a gaze that is fascinated and wants to be fascinating, that entraps the detective and the spectator in the spell of the idol he has created. For the spectator and the detective, Laura comes to life in Waldo's words and we see her as he wants us to see her: as perfect. He is the matchmaker behind Mark's increasing infatuation with an ideal dead woman; he is the one who constructs this perverse love story, as he not only fosters a necrophiliac obsession in the detective, but even turns into a kind of Cyrano de Bergerac: Waldo wants to seduce Mark through his work; his intention is not to present Laura as someone exceptional, but to present himself as the creator of someone exceptional.

Waldo is a highbrow writer, an art collector, a narcissistic dandy, a control freak and a bully. He has created Laura and this makes him view her almost as an object in his possession, which he can display in his luxurious apartment with all the other pieces in his art collection. He is the killer, but he is also by far the most complex and interesting character in the film. He is an egomaniac who talks about himself constantly ("In my case, self-absorption is completely justified. I have never discovered any other subject quite so worthy of my attention"), he considers himself to be more interesting than anyone else, and his way of drawing attention to his brilliance is precisely through sarcasm and cynicism ("I'm not kind, I'm vicious. It's the secret of my charm"). He shame-

lessly describes how he destroyed each of Laura's previous relationships, humiliating her suitors, usually because they were young and strong; Jacoby, the painter of the portrait, is criticised for "looking more like an athlete than an artist"; Shelby is dismissed for his demeanour, classified as "a male beauty in distress"; Mark also bothers him because he is also strong and muscular. All of this is a devastating criticism of Laura for her taste (which he has been unable to change) in handsome and athletic men, the antithesis of his own physical appearance.

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**LAURA DID NOT EXIST BEFORE WALDO; HER IMAGE, HER LIFE, HER ACHIEVEMENTS ARE HIS. WALDO IS HER PYGMALION, HER CREATOR, AND THUS CONSIDERS HIMSELF TO BE HER OWNER AS WELL**

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As he cannot compete with them physically, he competes intellectually instead, with his words and his power, which he is constantly showing off. He tries to control everyone around him at whims and he can destroy reputations with his caustic wit, whether in his personal treatment of them or in his writings in the press or on his radio show ("I don't use a pen. I write with a goose quill dipped in venom"). He believes himself to be not only powerful but practically untouchable. But above all, he tries (and succeeds) to be the constant centre of attention throughout the story, regardless of whether he is playing the role of Laura's wounded and wounding mentor during the flashback, or one of the suspects in the murder investigation. This central role in the story will serve him in his efforts both to control the detective, keeping abreast of his investigation, and to take apart the suspicions of his guilt with irony and sarcasm, deviously focusing the interest on himself. In his flashback and his voice-over he attempts to distract the spectator, if not the de-



Image 5. Gene Tierney and Vincent Price, *Laura* (Otto Preminger, 1944)

tective, convincing us that he wouldn't have been capable of committing the crime precisely because of the way he speaks of the victim.

Waldo expresses disdain for the detective while at the same time trying to fascinate him with his creation, succeeding to the point that the detective falls in love with her even while knowing she is dead. Waldo himself jokes about this, warning him to “watch out, McPherson, or you'll end up in a psychiatric ward. I don't think they've ever had a patient who fell in love with a corpse.”

However, when Laura returns, Waldo loses the power over the story he has held until now. The narration no longer depends on him; he disappears and turns into merely another suspect. His gaze no longer guides the spectator nor controls the detective. As the focus of attention in the story shifts away from Waldo, it shifts towards Laura (the dreamed and the real versions), Mark (the besotted detective) and the love story between them. Now, the detective becomes a rival for Laura's

love, which was not the case when everyone believed that she was the dead woman. Who will win the prize? The scene in which the three men (Waldo, Mark, and Shelby, the fiancée) argue at the door of Laura's bedroom is truly significant in this sense; each one tries to mark his territory in relation to the woman who, like a fairy-tale princess, will have to choose from among her suitors. The key question is no longer who is the murderer, but who will get the girl. This further supports the argument that this is not a noir film; rather, it is a murder mystery, but where the love story has moved into the foreground with Laura's resurrection.

Waldo dies trying to kill Laura “again” after she banishes him from her life. Laura's rejection of Waldo,

who until that moment believed himself to be her “maker”, reaffirms his desire to commit the criminal act once and for all, while fully aware that this time he will not be able to deflect the attention away from himself. Waldo's failure as a killer is the reflection of his inability, after creating a fascinating woman, to maintain his role as her only male idol. Waldo's death is not only the death of the murderer, but Laura's definitive liberation and the possibility of taking control over her own existence.

Waldo is the beginning and the end; Laura's life began with him and might have ended with him as well. He opens and closes the story; the first and last scenes are both his, as are the first words (“I shall never forget the weekend Laura died”) and the last (“Good-bye, my love”). The film thus recognises Waldo as its most charismatic and complex character, who even while he ultimately fulfils the role of antagonist to both protagonists, is also revealed to be the creator of their love story.



**Mark**

Although, as outlined above, *Laura* ends up turning into an unlikely love story whose narrative focus swings from the memory of a dead woman to the presence of that same woman “revived”, the plot begins as a quest to uncover Laura’s killer (in reality, the victim is Diane Redfern, one of Laura’s fiancée’s lovers). And the character who, together with the spectators, will conduct this investigation will be the detective, Mark McPherson.

Mark is another peculiar character who represents a break with the canonical detective of film noir. As Serna Mené (2000: 88) notes, “[a]s Laura is not a *femme fatale* and Waldo is not a typical killer, it is logical that McPherson should not be a private detective like those found in the novels Chandler, Cain or Hammett.” He is another character who is basically defined by what he is not: he is not a hard-boiled detective who does things his own way and takes it on the chin (although it is mentioned that in the past he suffered an injury in a run-in with gangsters), nor is he a scientifically minded detective. However, his visual appearance does form part of the noir imaginary, made up of archetypal images immediately recognisable for the spectator. With his hat and cigarette permanently stuck in the corner of his mouth, he perfectly embodies the image of the film detective of the era.

He is a police officer, but in contrast with the agents and detectives typical of film noir (the familiar Spades and Marlowes), he is not a cynical sceptic of a corrupt justice system, he has no identity problems, and he does not appear to have been adversely affected by the nature of his work, which, for him, is nothing more than a job. Conscientious and respected by his men, he is not violent and never appears to carry a gun; indeed, when he comes to save Laura’s life, it is not him but one of his men who shoots the killer.

Mark is not depicted as a particularly complex individual; indeed, he is probably the simplest character in the story, bordering on the stereoty-

pe. His most peculiar feature, until we learn of his necrophiliac passion for Laura, is his particular manner of questioning suspects: he never looks them in the face, nor does he appear to study their expressions or attitudes; instead, he takes notes in a small notebook or fidgets constantly with a little toy that he finds relaxing, even though it grates on everybody else’s nerves.

If Mark is a character of importance it is not because of his personality, as is made clear from the description above, but because he falls in love with the victim of the case he has been called on to solve. He is not part of Laura’s social scene; he doesn’t move in the same circles. His place is that of the typical film noir detective, among criminals, in gambling dens and alleyways, not the high society of parties, concert halls and art galleries enjoyed by the rich and frivolous. His language is very different too, and his diction much less cultivated. The women he has known are “dolls” or “dames” who are also typical of this type of story. He is not just fascinated by Laura, but by her aura, all that surrounds her, her way of life and what she represents of a world so different from his. As González Requena (2006: 569) suggests, “implicitly empty as a subject [...], the protagonist tends to present a profile only as the subject of deprivation [...] overcome by his fascination for the seductive object of desire that will polarise his choices, threatening all the while to vanish like a mirage.”

In his pathological necrophiliac fascination, the detective is captivated by a phantasmal image, an embellished memory; he falls in love with the image of a dead woman whom he admires in the portrait painted by Jacoby, which has a prominent place in the victim’s living room; but above all he falls in love with the ideal image created by others, especially Waldo. When Mark becomes obsessed with Laura, he tries to construct his own image, and ceases to be the detective investigating the murder: “the character is no longer defined by the weightiness of his actions, but by the confusion of his motivations” (González Requena, 2006: 572).

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**IN HIS PATHOLOGICAL NECROPHILIAC FASCINATION, THE DETECTIVE IS CAPTIVATED BY A PHANTASMAL IMAGE, AN EMBELLISHED MEMORY**

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In a long middle sequence that leaves no doubts as to his anguished and tortured state of infatuation, we see him settle into Laura's home and try to capture the essence of a woman he never knew in person, but whose image haunts and obsesses him. After smelling Laura's perfume, reading her letters and her diary, caressing her clothes, and despairing at her absence, he sits down in her armchair (taking possession of her insofar as he is able to) and falls asleep while gazing at her portrait and drinking her expensive whisky. This is where the film plays with the possibility that Laura's return is merely a dream of Mark's, induced by alcohol and fed by his obsession, as she enters the apartment right after this scene, emphasizing the "presence" of the absent character.

There is a certain controversy among different authors over how to interpret this scene (perhaps suggested by the Fritz Lang film *The Woman in the Window*, in which the whole story turns out to be a dream of the protagonist's), related to whether in effect what we are seeing is the return home of the real Laura, or if the film from this moment is showing us Mark's dream, provoked by his obsession with her. Santamarina (2001) and Serna (2000), among others, point out this possible interpretation, given the dreamlike tone of the sequence in which the detective sees her for the first time, although ultimately they dismiss the idea. In Serna's words (2000: 48-49), "with a zoom right in on the detective's face and a new distortion on the soundtrack, the director suggests the possibility that everything that follows is a dream, a mere hallucination experienced by the character. The zoom back out that follows right after [...] further supports this interpretation, which some

authors consider possible [...] but which makes no sense in formal terms, because no subsequent scene suggests what would be essential in a classical narration like this one: the definitive return to the real world." Santamarina (2001: 90) categorically agrees on this point when he notes that "in the model of classical narration, to support an interpretation like this, another scene would have to return the narration to the real world, to the world of the story [...] and yet nothing like this happens in *Laura* or is suggested, even vaguely, in any of the subsequent scenes." Up until this sequence, the story unfolds from the point of view of the detective, who is always present, and who effectively guides the narrative. However, from the moment of Laura's return, the narration ceases to rely exclusively on Mark and the spectator is given access to scenes in which he does not participate, especially in the final sequence, where, while Mark leaves the building, we follow Laura alone in her apartment and see Waldo hiding, ready to commit the crime, after having prepared his radio show as an alibi.

In relation to this argument, it is worth adding the fact that the film is based on Vera Caspary's novel, which at no time suggests the possibility

Image 6. Clifton Webb and Gene Tierney, *Laura* (Otto Preminger, 1944)



that Laura's return is merely a dream-fantasy of Mark's. The structure of the novel owes an acknowledged debt to Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868); like Collins's novel, it is made up of different parts that complement the story, each one narrated by a different character, including of course Laura herself after her return.

In any case, Laura's return is a completely unexpected twist that opens up a whole new set of narrative and personal possibilities from the detective's point of view. There is the crime story sub-plot: who was the murder victim? Who is the killer? What happened in Laura's home that night? And the romance sub-plot: what will happen between them now that Laura has returned? What will she be like in reality? Will he win her love? Laura, who began as the victim in his investigation and turned into a perverse object of desire when he believed she was dead, is now within his reach, changing from a dream into a real possibility.

From this moment, Mark turns into Laura's protective shadow, assuming a paternal role that seems to please her. Now that she has reappeared, Laura becomes another suspect in the crime investigation, but Mark will do everything he can to clear her of suspicion. She is the only one he looks in the face when they speak and the only one with whom he shares the most typical film noir scene: the interrogation at the police station—although in reality it is not so much an interrogation as a strange declaration of love.

### Shelby and Ann

Shelby, Laura's fiancée, was an unemployed playboy until Laura found him a job, but even since then he has continued exploiting his charm to attract women. He is perfectly aware of his situation and has an ironic attitude towards himself. "I'm a natural-born suspect just because I'm not the conventional type," he states matter-of-factly with a smile. "I can afford a blemish on my character but not on my clothes..." With his frivo-

lous behaviour he foolishly turns himself into a prime suspect, and his only alibis are dates with other women (Diane, the actual victim, and Laura's aunt Ann) with whom he cheated on Laura. It is therefore curious that he ends up seeming at least clumsy or naive if not likeable, and more or less well-meaning, especially given that Diane's death was the direct result of his taking her to Laura's home for a romantic evening, where she was even wearing Laura's clothing... in other words, being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Shelby could have been portrayed simply as a good boy from Kentucky gone wrong, devastated by the death of his fiancée; however, in line with the story's subversion of the classical canon, he sees himself as a kind of male *femme fatale* or "beauty in distress" as Waldo describes him. In Caspary's novel, Mark notes that "Shelby honestly believed that his fatal beauty had led Laura to kill" Diane out of jealousy.

While among the males in the film there is a rivalry between Waldo, Mark and Shelby for Laura's love, among the females we also see a rivalry, once again perverse and inexplicable, between Laura and her aunt over Shelby. Ann Treadwell is of course not what we would imagine when we hear mention of Laura's only relative. She is not an endearing, lovable maternal figure, but a wealthy woman with clear ideas and a strong character, who is in love with Shelby even while recognising all his defects, and who finances his needs and whims, furnishes him with alibis, buys his company and asks Laura to give him up. In the relationship between Shelby and Ann, he is effectively the object of desire, a situation far from common in the films of the period.

### DECONSTRUCTING THE STORY

While its characters are atypical or subversive of the classical canon in different ways, the film's

plot also exhibits some notable departures from the standard line of the noir corpus. On the one hand, as already noted above, it focuses mainly on understanding the victim as a necessary first step towards discovering her killer, and on the other, it bears many of the hallmarks of a classic “whodunit”. With a small cast of suspects and a very limited number of settings, it bears a stronger resemblance to the classical detective fiction of the Golden Age than the recognised parameters of the *noir* genre. Even the ironic tone used by some characters evokes more of a British style, a style that it also seems to subvert. With the exception of Laura, all the suspects seem to be quite aware of their own acts and motivations, none describe themselves positively, and they all acknowledge the frivolous nature of their way of life, which at different points in the story will turn them into suspects, even intentionally. While in other stories of this kind everyone tries to avoid suspicion or to come up with a good alibi, here everyone seems to be vying for a place on the list of suspects, and even to object to the idea of not being included, as the following dialogue between Waldo and Detective McPherson shows:

Waldo: Murder is my favorite crime. I write about it regularly... and I know you'll have to visit everyone on your list of suspects. I'd like to study their reactions.

Mark: You're on the list yourself, you know.

Waldo: Good. To have overlooked me would have been a pointed insult.

The story's setting and character types are endowed with a certain sophistication and a luxurious lifestyle, closer to the superficiality of high society than to the seedy underclass typical of noir. And this is just what the visuals reflect: elegant, luminous spaces very different from the dark alleyways and smoke-filled nightclubs characteristic of the genre. The action takes place mostly during the day and in well-lit settings, with very few night scenes, in everyday social si-

tuations in apartments, restaurants and houses. The imagery is thus bright rather than dark and squalid, and the grisly nature of the crime is elided, basically because the body, which is unrecognisable because the victim's facial features were destroyed by the gunshot, is never shown. The deaths are omitted from view.

This deviation from the usual noir settings is another of the characteristics, along with its unique female protagonist, that facilitates a reading of *Laura* as a possible to the later trend of *domestic noir*, a subgenre focusing on everyday life and relationships, where domestic environments predominate over outdoor settings (Ciocia, 2018).

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### THE IMAGERY IS THUS BRIGHT RATHER THAN DARK AND SQUALID, AND THE GRISLY NATURE OF THE CRIME IS ELIDED

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We see no violence, no car chases, shoot-outs, or dark scenes evocative of noir, except for the occasional outdoor night scene that serves as a transition, as even the indoor night scenes are clearly illuminated and lacking in strong contrasts. However, there are two moments where we can identify similarities with the imaginary of film noir, both in their dramatic discourse and in their mise-en-scene, and these are the scenes where we enter fully into the usual territory of the detective: the two interrogations, one of Shelby at the country house—a scene on a rainy night, and with a strong contrast of light and shadow—and the other with Laura at the police station, where a blinding light shines on the suspect against a background of total darkness. But even this scene transgresses the noir codes and the spectator's expectations, as it turns from what it seems to be, a typical interrogation scene, into the strangest declaration of love that could ever be expected in a noir film.

## CONCLUSIONS

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A consideration of the canonical features of film noir makes it clear that *Laura* does not adhere to the standard patterns of the genre, although it plays cleverly with them and subverts them. The basic plot might seem typically classical and familiar, seen and read many times before: a police detective is called upon to solve the case of a beautiful woman's murder, and to do so he investigates her world and interrogates all the possible suspects. If we add to this the fact that the film is an adaptation of a novel, the use of black and white characteristic of the era, the noir aesthetic, the choice of leading actors (none of whom were not well known at the time), we might conclude that this is a run-of-the-mill story, fully identifiable as part of the group of films classified as noir, and even a B movie, as acknowledged by its own creators.

But *Laura* is considered a classic, a film that appears to belong to the noir canon, despite its deviations from the norms of the genre, despite occasionally verging on fantasy or the surreal, and despite a certain ambiguity that leaves it open to interpretation as to whether what happens in the second part of the film is real (which we would argue it is) or merely a dream.

Indeed, *Laura* has become a benchmark, breaking as it does with all the parameters of the genre described in the first part of this article. Its characters, its plot, its settings and its forms are all unconventional, and the elements that would enable us to categorise it as noir are almost immediately subverted. Its characters, archetypal (almost stereotypical) in appearance, cease to be so as the story progresses, defying the spectator's expectations of easily identifiable detectives (hard-boiled characters with their fedora hat and ever-present cigarette), killers or *femmes fatales* (girls who smoke, wear tight-fitting clothes and go around shamelessly with men whom they seduce and manipulate at whim). None of these

figures can be found in *Laura* in their usual condition: the police investigator is not a hard-boiled detective, the victim (who is not even a victim) is not a *femme fatale*, and the killer is not a person we can despise from the outset for his wickedness or cruelty.

Nor do we find outlaw characters in the usual sense, or violence or brutality. Neither of the film's two deaths, one at the beginning and the other at the end, appear on screen: the first has already happened when we enter the story, and the second occurs outside the frame, substituted by the symbolic image of a clock face smashed by a stray gunshot.

Although the story is set in New York, it could easily take place anywhere else, as there is not a single identifying sign of the city. And although it is an urban setting, it is not the typical urban setting of film noir. In *Laura*, the dark, menacing nocturnal atmosphere is replaced with brightly-lit luxurious apartments decorated with exquisite pieces of art and portraits painted by fashionable artists, lived in by frivolous and cultivated members of high society, with occupations that allow them to lead carefree lives, far from the squalid world of financial struggle and economically motivated crimes, thereby eliding the importance of social context that is such a prominent feature of film noir.

And yet—and perhaps this is what has led to its status as a key film of the genre—*Laura* is a strange and perverse story, where the crime is, perhaps, the least strange aspect of all; after all, a murder is a far more commonplace affair than a detective falling in love with a dead person whom he never knew in life, a love inspired by the fascinated gaze of the murderer himself, but a love which—also contrary to the canonical standard—is allowed a happy ending.

Although the plot of *Laura* may look like a typical detective story, the film is essentially a perverse love story, or perhaps several love stories in one, rather than a noir film. ■

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## LAURA (OTTO PREMINGER, 1944): FILM NOIR AND THE FASCINATED GAZE

### Abstract

In the 1940s and 50s, during Hollywood's classical period, a series of films were produced that would subsequently be incorporated by critics, scholars and historians into a new category known as film noir, on the basis of a set of features common to all of them. At the top of this canon, regarded as one of the foundational films of the genre in practically every study on the subject, we find *Laura* (Otto Preminger, 1944). In this paper, we propose to challenge the definition of *Laura* as a canonical noir film, adopting a discourse analysis approach to determine whether, despite being almost unanimously considered a paradigmatic example of the genre, the film really exhibits the features that studies of film noir assert that films included in this corpus should contain.

### Key words

*Laura*; Film Noir; Classical Hollywood Cinema; Genre Conventions; Fascinated Gaze; Obsession.

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### Article reference

Mondelo González, E., Sánchez López, P. (2019). *Laura* (Otto Preminger, 1944): Film Noir and the Fascinated Gaze. *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, 27, 75-90.

## LAURA (OTTO PREMINGER, 1944), EL NOIR Y LA MIRADA FASCINADA

### Resumen

En las décadas de los años cuarenta y cincuenta, durante el período clásico hollywoodiense, se producen una serie de películas que, con posterioridad, serán englobadas por estudiosos, críticos e historiadores en la categoría conocida como cine negro, en función de una serie de rasgos comunes que permiten su agrupación. En un lugar principal de este canon, y considerada como una de las películas fundacionales en la práctica totalidad de los estudios llevados a cabo sobre el tema, se sitúa *Laura* (Otto Preminger, 1944). Este artículo se propone, precisamente, cuestionar la adscripción de *Laura* al canon del cine negro y, mediante un análisis de discurso, tratar de determinar si, a pesar de su casi unánime consideración como ejemplo paradigmático, realmente cumple con las características que los estudios sobre el género sostienen que deben tener los films que forman parte de ese corpus de películas.

### Palabras clave

*Laura*; film noir; cine clásico; convenciones de género; mirada fascinada; obsesión.

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### Referencia de este artículo

Mondelo González, E., Sánchez López, P. (2019). *Laura* (Otto Preminger, 1944), el noir y la mirada fascinada. *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, 27, 75-90.

Edita / Published by



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ISSN 1885-3730 (print) / 2340-6992 (digital) DL V-5340-2003 WEB [www.revistaatalante.com](http://www.revistaatalante.com) MAIL [info@revistaatalante.com](mailto:info@revistaatalante.com)

