INTRODUCTION

COMING TO TERMS WITH FILM NOIR AND EXISTENTIALISM

“Let’s get the details fixed first.”¹
—Sam Spade to Caspar Gutman in the film
*The Maltese Falcon* (1941)

The alleged official arrival of existentialism to the United States was marked by the much publicized visit of French existentialists, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Simone de Beauvoir, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty to New York soon after World War II. Newspapers and popular magazines, aware of the American fascination with French culture, focused much of their attention on the personalities of companions Sartre and de Beauvoir, and the fashionable trend of the movement back in Paris. The American press reported a virtual cult following for existentialism among young Left Bank bohemians, who were conspicuous by their black garb and heavy makeup, chain-smoking, enthusiasm for night-clubs and American jazz, and their talk of meaninglessness and despair.
The titles of novels and plays like *Nausea*, *The Stranger*, *Journey to the End of Night*, and *No Exit* contributed to the notion of existentialism as pessimistic, fatalistic, and nihilistic.

These perceptions contributed to the chilly reception French existentialism received from the American academic philosophical community. American intellectuals were skeptical about whether existentialism was a philosophy at all. It was criticized as excessively morbid with its themes of alienation, anxiety, and the absurd, and it was dismissed as the psychological expression of the French war experience. Furthermore, its leading representatives seemed like literary artists and popular celebrities more than serious philosophers. Existentialism was considered one of those French fads, and it was felt that the American public’s curiosity would no doubt fade with the emergence of the next fad.

The prevailing view is that existentialism had no significant presence in the United States before the 1940s. After all, it was only introduced by the French after the war, and the fad was evaluated and then dismissed by the popular press and ignored by the intellectual community. Moreover, existentialism’s pessimistic outlook was considered contrary to the American optimistic mood. France came out of World War II a shattered and defeated nation, its soil occupied and riches plundered by the Nazi enemy. The United States emerged from the war victorious and poised to begin a period of national prosperity and world ascendancy. Americans had every reason to feel confident about the direction of the nation and optimistic about their personal future. It was understandable that the French would embrace a philosophy that expressed their experience, but Americans had little reason for despair.

In this book, I argue that conventional wisdom about existentialism in the United States is mistaken. Its presence in this country was overlooked because existentialism was treated as a European phenomenon that had to be introduced to the United States, and then it was largely rejected because its values were considered contrary to the American ethos. I will demonstrate that the United States developed its own unique brand of existentialism at least several years before Sartre and Camus published their first existentialist works and more than a decade before
their famous visit to New York. My position is that film noir and the hard-boiled fiction that initially served as its source material represents one distinctive form of American existentialism and that this form was produced independently of European philosophy. What is unique about American noir is its exploration of existential themes of absurdity, contingency, meaninglessness, and despair from the perspective of working-class men. French and American intellectuals agreed that Americans had no sense of despair, but the commercial success of American noir undermines that assessment.

I do not contend that other analyses of hard-boiled fiction and film noir are untenable, but I submit that the dominant themes expressed in these works lend themselves most easily to existentialist interpretation. In this book, my role as philosopher is to make explicit the implicit existential metaphysical, epistemological, ethical, and political meanings conveyed in the narrative forms of fiction and film.

Through my discussion of American noir, I expect to accomplish a couple of objectives beyond establishing American noir as one form of existentialism. I intend to describe and celebrate the production of a kind of existentialism by and for working-class people. As I use novels and films to make my case, I mean to illustrate that philosophical ideas are available from a rich diversity of sources. Furthermore, I submit that philosophers do themselves a disservice when they restrict what is called existentialism, or philosophy, to that which academia traditionally approves. The tendency to limit the range of sanctioned material led the professional community to miss the philosophical importance of the critically acclaimed phenomenon known as film noir. I also mean to show that by restricting the sources of philosophy, we limit the discussion of philosophical matters to elites, ignore those outside the university system, and contribute to the class divisions that required working-class Americans to create their own existential vision.

What is sometimes called American noir begins with hard-boiled crime fiction and the cycle of Hollywood films made from these stories. The case for the existential value of American noir will be made, but it is immediately clear that early examples of hard-boiled crime fiction
precede the introduction of French existentialism, since these stories appeared during the 1920s. The visiting French philosophers agreed that American soil was not fertile for existential thought. Americans were not alienated, had no pessimism about human nature, and lacked the necessary anguish about the problems of human existence. As is often the case, these intellectuals overlooked certain segments of the population that potentially were most anxious, alienated, and pessimistic. American noir was first written for and by members of the working class, and this portion of the public was evidently receptive to its existential content.

Noir is generally recognized as film noir, the retrospective title given to a cycle of crime films made in Hollywood during the 1940s and 1950s. *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and *Touch of Evil* (1958) are usually considered the first and last films of the cycle. The French title literally means *black film*, and French writer Nino Frank is often credited with coining the term because of the resemblance to the *Serie Noire* crime novels popular in France at the time. These black and white films are remarkable for their distinctively dark visual style, disorienting camera angles, convoluted narratives, morally ambiguous characters, and bleak outlook on life. The film noir cycle, though popular with general audiences, received scant attention from academics in the United States until the growth of film studies programs in the 1970s. Since then, a virtual cottage industry has developed around these films.

Though existential themes are sometimes attributed to certain noir titles, these comments are typically only stray remarks that fail to explore and analyze the existential content of these films and their literary source material. As if to justify scholarly examination of Hollywood crime movies, attempts were made to provide film noir with a respectable pedigree, and it should come as no surprise that the artistic merit was attributed to German (expressionism), French (poetic realism), and Italian (neorealism) influences. So film noir is often described as though it were a European phenomenon that astonishingly occurred on American soil.

Since film noir appeared during the 1940s, film scholars use developments during that decade to explain the emergence of the cycle. By the
1940s, many German-trained professionals were employed in Hollywood. These immigrants are usually credited with injecting German expressionist techniques into the visual style of Hollywood crime films. A less assertive claim about European influence is made for the narrative style and content of the movies. Though hard-boiled fiction is acknowledged as one source, film noir is often defined as primarily a visual style. This account is useful to advocates of European influence because it de-emphasizes the American source material. To the extent that existentialism is mentioned, the reader is left to assume the European origin, as though any material of intellectual value could only have come from Europe.

Robert G. Porfirio’s refreshing 1976 essay, “No Way Out: Existential Motifs in the Film Noir,” gives the most attention to the relation between film noir and existentialism; his article is one of very few that even mentions such a connection. Porfirio’s effort is especially remarkable because he immediately requests that his use of the term existential not be too closely tied to the specific philosophies of European existentialists. Porfirio agrees, “[E]xistentialism as a philosophical movement was largely unknown in the United States until after World War II, when the French variety was popularized by the writings and personal fame of its two leading exponents, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus” (80). So Porfirio reasons that if film noir contains existential motifs, and these themes were not imported from Europe, they must have developed here in the United States. Porfirio explains, “[S]uch attempts on the part of Hollywood to borrow directly from that European tradition would have been rare indeed, particularly in the 1940s. It is more likely that this existential bias was drawn from a source much nearer at hand—the hard-boiled school of fiction without which quite possibly there would have been no film noir” (82–83).

It was common practice for Hollywood studios to purchase the rights to popular novels and turn them into films, and by the 1940s they had accumulated a stockpile of these crime stories. Porfirio was not concerned to analyze the connection between existentialism and hard-boiled fiction, but that connection is essential to this discussion because hard-boiled fiction is the foundation for the existential content of film noir.
American noir begins with the hard-boiled crime fiction of writers like Dashiell Hammett, James M. Cain, Horace McCoy, Raymond Chandler, and Cornell Woolrich. These stories and novels were part of what could be called a literary underworld, and first appeared in pulp magazines and inexpensive paperback books. They were called hard-boiled because of their tough and sordid realism and the concise and forthright narrative style that matched the manner of the characters. The outsiders and loners in these stories were the disinherited working-class white men of the 1930s, whose protective (hard-boiled) shell was a defense against a callous world.

Hammett’s best known novel, *The Maltese Falcon*, was published in 1930, Cain’s *The Postman Always Rings Twice* appeared in 1934, McCoy’s *They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?* was released in 1935, and Chandler’s *The Big Sleep* appeared in 1939. These four novels and other less known titles (including several by Woolrich) mark the beginning of this classic period of noir novels in the United States. The books by Hammett, Cain, Chandler, and Woolrich were made into films early in the noir cycle. During the 1950s, new writers appeared, like David Goodis and Jim Thompson, and the final years of the film noir series involved a greater diversity of characterization.

Portfírio was more correct about the connection between hard-boiled fiction and existentialism than he realized or cared to express. It was highly unlikely that existential themes in film noir were imported from France, but the French existentialists certainly felt the influence of American hard-boiled fiction. In 1946 Horace McCoy was reportedly “hailed in Paris” as the first American existentialist (Madden, *Cain* 171). Not only is the hard-boiled brand of existentialism not indebted to the French, the French actually borrowed ideas from the Americans. Camus was inspired to write *The Stranger* after reading James M. Cain’s *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. Camus’ first major novel is written in a style similar to Cain’s (Cruickshank 16). While much attention is given to the influence of French existentialists on Americans, French observers acknowledged the value of American writers whose work preceded their own.
The Maltese Falcon is considered the first film noir and is one of the
great existential novels. Hammett’s 1930 book had already been filmed
twice by Warner Brothers, under its own title in 1931, and as Satan Met a
Lady in 1936. The latter was a relatively comic vehicle for Betty Davis.
John Huston received permission to direct his first film and chose The
Maltese Falcon, realizing it had been filmed twice before, because he
believed the earlier versions were not faithful to the spirit of the novel.
Huston felt that Hammett’s story was written in a screenplay-friendly
manner, and he left the dialogue virtually intact. Huston’s selection of
sets and visual style explored the darker side of Hammett’s vision with-
out resorting to German expressionistic techniques. So the acknowl-
edged first film noir is clearly not the product of European influence, but
it is the creation of an American director determined to remain faithful to
the spirit of the work of an American writer.

The film noir cycle substantially begins in 1944, with Double Indem-
nity. Billy Wilder directed the film that was based on the novel by the
American writer, James M. Cain. Billy Wilder emigrated from Cen-
tral Europe and lived in Berlin, and Double Indemnity contains sev-
eral notable scenes associated with the noir visual style. Nevertheless,
Wilder took issue with Robert Porfirio when, during an interview, the
latter asked about the influence of his personal history and German
Expressionism in the director’s work. When asked whether his noir
films, Double Indemnity, Sunset Boulevard, Ace in the Hole, and The
Lost Weekend were influenced by his personal history, Wilder replied,
“No, I honestly cannot point my finger at any small incident, even in
those pictures, which would reflect my background, and where I came
from” (Wilder 104). In the specific case of Double Indemnity, “I just
tried to dramatize, Raymond Chandler and I, working on that screen-
play, to emphasize what Mr. Cain had in mind,” Wilder expressed
(Wilder 104).

Study of film noir has quite understandably been the territory of film
studies, and their scholars have tended to emphasize cinematic quali-
ties and pay less attention to narrative sources. The failure to give suffi-
cient credit to hard-boiled fiction leaves them with a problem. The 1930s
and 1940s were notable for the pressure censors exerted on the studios, which were strongly discouraged from displaying overtly sexual, excessively violent, or anti-American attitudes. Film noir offers a gutter’s eye view of America; the nightmare version of the American Dream from the perspective of marginalized working-class men. Those who consider film noir a phenomenon that begins in the 1940s have had a difficult time explaining how Hollywood was suddenly able to exhibit this cycle of films that challenged the production code and depicted the American system and its values as saturated with corruption.

The frequently offered explanation is that the victorious Americans were suffering from their own psychological war wounds during the 1940s. In his seminal essay, “Notes on Film Noir,” Paul Schrader contends that Americans experienced their own postwar disillusionment. The “acute downer” was a “delayed reaction to the Thirties,” he writes (55). According to Schrader, during the 1930s movie content was deliberately upbeat to provide relief from the Depression and divert attention away from the development of war in Europe. Schrader remarks that after the war, the “disillusionment many solders, small businessmen, and housewife-factory employees felt in returning to a peacetime economy was directly mirrored in the sordidness of the urban crime film” (55). After the war, every film-producing country experienced a period of realism in cinema, Schrader notes, and American audiences wanted “a more honest and harsh view of America,” that reflected the reality they experienced (55).

Of course, this explanation does not square with the consensus view that during these same 1940s Americans were not receptive to the call of pessimistic existentialism. And the contention that the wartime experience gave Americans a jolt of reality that they now expected in their films does not explain the popularity of the prewar and wartime hard-boiled fiction that served as film noir source material. During the very decade that movies were required to be cheerful, hard-boiled fiction writers were producing pessimism that sold very well. Schrader calls the “acute downer” of the 1940s a delayed reaction to the Depression of the 1930s, but hard-boiled fiction actually begins during the 1920s. If Schrader
Coming to Terms With Film Noir and Existentialism

is correct, general audiences were prepared by the war for the dose of realism offered by film noir, but since its initial source material, in the form of hard-boiled fiction, was popular before the war and the Great Depression, evidently some American audiences were already prepared in the 1920s for this realism.

The 1920s are notable for the Lost Generation authors, including F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway. George Cotkin in his *Existential America* contends that the Lost Generation writers “enunciated a metaphysical condition of despair and alienation,” which “embraced an essentially existential perspective” (24). These authors expressed the disillusionment felt by a generation who, Fitzgerald wrote in *This Side of Paradise*, had “grown up to find all Gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken” (282). Lynn Dumenil’s examination of Fitzgerald’s work in *The Modern Temper* reveals that “beneath the glamour of his flappers and jazzhounds lay a fragility rooted in their failure to find meaning or purpose amid the uncertainty of modern life” (150). Hemingway’s first novel, *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), features a lost cast drifting aimlessly, their instability symbolic of their homelessness and inability to find substance in the modern world.

Hemingway is appreciated by some to be the father of the hard-boiled tradition, and it can be argued that writers like Hammett and Chandler were taken more seriously because their styles were considered similar to his. Hemingway was recognized as a literary artist, a title only recently accorded to Hammett and Chandler. Hemingway’s link to the hard-boiled tradition is mostly due to his tough prose and the tough characters depicted in his writing, but Hemingway did not write crime stories. *To Have and Have Not* (1937) is the novel most related to hard-boiled fiction, and the only one that actually contains criminals. Two of his short stories, “The Killers” and “Fifty Grand,” feature hoodlums, though only briefly in the latter tale.

The Lost Generation writers offer an existential perspective that begins during the 1920s, and might be called *a rich man’s existentialism*. Their characters are mostly members of the leisure class, who live in a decadent world of vanishing illusions. But another brand of existentialism
was brewing during this decade, and its characters do not suffer from disillusionment because they harbored no illusions.

According to Paul Schrader, film noir emerges because audiences desired greater realism in their films. An increasing number of post-war moviegoers considered films depicting “the seamy side of things” to be a more accurate representation of their experience of the United States. A similar movement occurs in detective fiction with the shift from Golden Age mystery writers, like Agatha Christie, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Ellery Queen, to the hard-boiled tradition. Raymond Chandler describes this development in his essay, “The Simple Art of Murder.” According to Chandler, a significant segment of mystery readers were dissatisfied with Golden Age detective stories and wanted more realistic crime fiction. These readers “were not afraid of the seamy side of things: they lived there” (Chandler, “Art of Murder” 989).

The original consumers of American noir read their tough-guy detective fiction in pulp magazines like *Black Mask*, where Hammett and Chandler published their early stories. Dumenil explains that pulp writers identified with their readers and saw themselves “as workmen who produced piecemeal prose for people like themselves” (31). Chandler credits Dashiell Hammett with starting the realistic hard-boiled tradition because Hammett “took murder out of the Venetian vase and dropped it into the alley” (“Art of Murder” 989). In other words, “Hammett gave murder back to the kind of people who commit it for reasons, not just to provide a corpse; and with the means at hand, not hand-wrought dueling pistols, curare and tropical fish (Chandler, “Art of Murder” 989). Furthermore, Hammett did not write in the elevated prose of the Victorian era, but in “the American language,” the speech of “common men” (Chandler, “Art of Murder” 989).

American noir was the creation of writers who toiled at their labor, assembling stories for as little as one penny per word. Pulp writers were about the business of creating fiction that would appeal to the genre’s mostly working-class readers. Out of this initially modest ambition, they created the noir world. Hammett and Chandler did not create, but refined, the hard-boiled detective, whose existential approach enables
him to survive in the doomed world he must negotiate to earn his meager living. His world, life, and philosophy represent the essential themes of existentialism for the common man.

The noir detective is presented as a member of the working class, whose lonely struggle is to make an honest dollar in a dishonest world. His cynical amorality is conditioned by the contradiction between the nation’s expressed principles and the cold, cruel reality. In hard-boiled fiction and film noir, the trail of clues generally leads from working-class subordinates to the rich and powerful who veil their criminal activities behind a cloak of respectability. The hard-boiled detective may solve the case; that is, he may discover *whodunit*, but he cannot stop the deterministic forces that operate behind the scenes. He cannot control the cards he is dealt, but as an existentialist, he insists upon the freedom to choose how he will play those cards.

Existentialism is an outlook that begins with the individual’s psychological and moral disorientation. It emphasizes contingency in a world without transcendent values or moral absolutes, a world devoid of any meaning except that which the individual creates. Existentialism has its positive aspects of freedom, responsibility, and authenticity. The creators of American noir, writing from the perspective of the estranged working class, were drawn to the negative aspects of existentialism characterized by alienation, anxiety, meaninglessness, and death. The titles of noir-ish films often express these negative features. *Caught, Cornered*, and *No Way Out* illustrate the disorienting sense of entrapment. *Detour, Suddenly*, and *Street of Chance* describe the uncertainty and danger of contingency. *Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye, Kiss Me Deadly*, and *Kiss of Death* communicate that even a most tender expression can be fatal. *Nightmare, I Wake Up Screaming*, and *In a Lonely Place* articulate the anxiety, fear, and alienation of the noir world. *Force of Evil* and *Touch of Evil* attest to the unsettling feeling of hidden, malevolent powers.

Our inability to explain human existence is demonstrated by the futility of activity in the noir world. The resolution of the noir detective’s case usually settles very little and leaves him wondering whether the whole affair was worth the bother. In *The Maltese Falcon* the object of the quest,
“the stuff dreams are made of,” turns out to be a fake. In *The Big Sleep*, the catalyst for much of the chaos is a murder that finally no one cares about. *The Asphalt Jungle* began a subcategory of heist-noir, in which a team of working-class professionals is carefully assembled to commit an intricately planned robbery. Though in heist-noir the theft itself is usually accomplished, unforeseen and incalculable consequences unravel its aftermath. The failure of these activities demonstrates that human beings cannot control their world, and their endeavors are ultimately futile.

The existential mood of noir is depicted by the bleak imagery of a physical world filled with stark, barely lit interiors, shadowy corridors and alleys, and rain-soaked streets that Chandler described as “dark with something more than night” (Introduction to “Art of Murder” 1016). The isolation of the individual and the lack of transcendent values are personified by the noir protagonist, who is typically a cynical, morally ambiguous loner without conventional standards of ethics. Thrown into incredibly dangerous situations by the randomness of existence, miscalculated actions, or the requirements of his profession, the protagonist is forced to play a high-stakes game to its bitter conclusion. In *D.O.A.*, a vacationing accountant learns that he has been fatally poisoned for notarizing an incriminating bill of sale several months ago. In *Detour*, a piano player hitchhiking to Los Angeles is involved in two accidental deaths, and though he is not guilty of murder in either case, at the end of the story, he wanders the highways grimly anticipating his inevitable capture by the authorities. In *Double Indemnity*, a critically wounded insurance salesman staggers to the office during the wee hours to dictate the fatal consequences of his willing participation in a murder. As these narratives unfold, the characters are left to ponder and explain to what extent they are responsible for their conditions. In American noir, the existential attitude is not so much chosen as realized, as circumstances force protagonists to examine their lives.

Attention must be given to the fact that American existentialism was not produced in the ivory towers of academia but instead emerged in genre fiction and Hollywood films. American philosophers not only failed to produce a version of existentialism but failed to notice
its presence in the form of noir. Part of the problem is that existential meaning is obtained through the encounter with the vicissitudes of life rather than by contemplation of abstractions, as the individual is jolted into recognizing the reality of his or her condition. Consequently, the best presentations of existentialism are found in creative works that present characters in extreme situations. The narrative approach used in literature and film is better suited to existentialism, but academic philosophers tend to value systematic explications and sometimes fail to treat the content of popular fiction and movies as legitimate sources of philosophy.

Academia’s failure to recognize this uniquely American brand of existentialism can also be traced to the professionalization of philosophy and the evolution of the definition of *philosophy*. Philosophy began as love and pursuit of wisdom but, over centuries, developed into an academic occupation. The autonomous sage became the philosophy professor, a scholarly specialist whose duties consist of the study and teaching of specific thinkers and texts, and the logical analysis of selected problems or language complexities. Philosophy became a university endeavor with its own insular world of authorities writing mostly about matters of interest to experts in language too obscure for most nonprofessionals. This development created a moat around the ivory tower between academics and the public and produced a sharp distinction between what is considered philosophy and what is not. Canonical texts and academic writings are philosophy; fiction and movies are not.

While academic philosophers were discussing abstract ideas of limited interest to those outside the profession, American genre writers and filmmakers produced existential fiction and films that responded to their audiences. The same novels and films that slipped the notice of American philosophers were critically acclaimed in France (the proclaimed birthplace of existentialism), where intellectuals did not observe our artificial borders between disciplines. It is more than ironic that existentialism, which criticizes traditional philosophy as “academic, superficial and remote from life,” was produced in the midst of American philosophers who were too disconnected to notice (Kaufmann 20).
I argue that hard-boiled fiction and film noir represent an American existentialism, but the terms existentialism and film noir have been notoriously difficult to define and the subjects of much disagreement among academics. The debate over meaning has become tiresome, especially as it pertains to film noir, and I do not pretend to offer a perfect solution to this problem, but I am obliged to clarify how I will use the terms in the following chapters, and explain why certain definitions are unsuitable.

**TERMS OF ENGAGEMENT: EXISTENTIALISM**

Some philosophers and commentators describe existentialism as a shared mood articulated by creative writers such as Fyodor Dostoevsky, Albert Camus, and Franz Kafka. Others insist it is a systematic philosophy best expressed in methodical works such as Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* and Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time*. The systematic works are sometimes described as responses to what John Wild refers to as “The Breakdown of Modern Philosophy” in *The Challenge of Existentialism* (see ch. 1) During the twentieth century, traces of existentialist thought were retrospectively discovered in the writings of Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, and these figures are often cited as protoexistentialists. In any case, existentialism is presumed to be a European phenomenon defined by its most visible and outspoken representative, Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre offered “existence precedes essence” as a concise definition of what he called existentialism, effectively planting the flag of Europe in the soil of the unnamed and therefore unclaimed frontier (*Existentialism* 13).

European existentialism, in its familiar French versions, appeared in the aftermath of traumatic national, continental, and world events that challenged the ontological, epistemological, and ethical claims of modern philosophy. In “Situation of the Writer in 1947,” Sartre explains how the atrocities of World War II shook the foundations of prevailing moral assertions:

Chateaubriand, Oradour, the Rue des Saussaies, Dachau, and Auschwitz have all demonstrated to us that Evil is not an appearance,
that knowing its cause does not dispel it, that it is not opposed to Good as a confused idea is to a clear one, that it is not the effect of passions which might be cured, of a fear which might be overcome, of a passing aberration which might be excused, of an ignorance which might be enlightened, that is can in no way be diverted, brought back, reduced, and incorporated into idealistic humanism…(178).

Sartre’s words depict a world in which the rational order is in question, where human beings are capable of the unspeakable and incomprehensible.

In a book that is often credited with introducing existentialism to American readers, *Irrational Man*, William Barrett explains that existentialism begins with “The Encounter with Nothingness,” and he devotes a subchapter to this topic (see ch. 2). The abyss was expressed by Albert Camus as the unbridgeable gulf between man’s desire for metaphysical assurance and his inability to find that assurance with his religious beliefs and philosophical systems. The absurd, as Camus described the phenomenon in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, “is born of this confrontation between this human need and the unreasonable silence of the world” (28). In Camus’ account, and those offered by most European versions of existentialism, the absurd confrontation assumes cosmic proportions, as the universe itself is the source of human frustrations. Barrett places the conflict at a more terrestrial level and identifies the decline of religion, the rational ordering of society, and the rise of science and the idea of finitude as the developments contributing to this encounter with nothingness. Stripped of the certainty provided by religious beliefs, humans are left with nothing, abandoned and forlorn, without meaning or purpose, in a world indifferent to human endeavor. The rational ordering of society replaces the paternal Christian God with the bureaucratic state, and authority becomes less predictable and accessible.

Certainly the encounter with nothingness is not limited to postwar Europeans. Each culture defines and expresses its own existential engagement, just as the Europeans did theirs. The existential outlook is not the exclusively property of any culture; therefore, I will employ
a generic definition of *existentialism*. The purpose of this book is to discuss the phenomenon of noir in fiction and film, which I contend is a manifestation of one form of existentialism in the United States. There is enough resemblance between fiction and films I will describe and European versions to account for usage of the same term, but too close a connection may oblige us to judge the American noir experience by the European standard, a condition I wish to avoid. Existentialism is a shorthand term for a compelling vision of the world that is at least as old the ancient Greek dramas. Secondly, existentialism’s criticism of Western philosophy noted by Walter Kaufmann resembles that made by American philosopher John Dewey. In Dewey’s 1917 essay, “The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy,” he chastises Western philosophy for prioritizing the abstract problems of philosophers over the concrete problems of people (230). Unfortunately many of the attempts to characterize existentialism as a systematic philosophy responding to the breakdown of modern philosophy suffer from the same deficiencies.

Because I will present film noir as a form of American existentialism, an applicable source for defining existentialism is the *American Heritage Dictionary*. This neutral reference defines existentialism as “a philosophy that emphasizes the uniqueness and isolation of the individual experience in a hostile or indifferent universe, regards human existence as unexplainable, and stresses freedom of choice and responsibility for the consequences of one’s acts.” (642). Employing this definition, I am free to explore this uniquely American version of existentialism without emphasizing European models.

My presentation features chapters that discuss the existential metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and politics of noir, but these terms will not be used in the service of analysis of abstract concepts. In fact, existentialism is critical of traditional philosophy’s attempts to reduce existential questions to abstractions for the purposes of intellectual manipulation. Existential questions are often ignored because they resist such attempts. I will discuss these terms in the larger context of philosophy as love and pursuit of wisdom as guidance for living. In this book,
metaphysical, epistemological, ethical, and political challenges arise out of the protagonist’s difficulties in the world.

My discussion of the existential metaphysics of noir does not offer a theoretical inquiry into the nature of reality but expresses the often harrowing experiences of the randomness of existence, the accidental and coincidental, the existential expansion and contraction of time and space, and the presence of “fate or some mysterious force” (Al Roberts in Detour). The existential epistemology of noir does not present an abstract analysis of the problem of knowledge but pertains to insurmountable barriers encountered by desperate seekers of concrete information. These obstacles are especially common to the private detective’s search to find out whodunit, whodunwhat and how and why they dun it. The epistemological question is not how is knowledge possible? The protagonist asks, “How can I find out what I need to find out?” given numerous concrete barriers. The existential ethics of noir do not compare theories of moral values or search for the supreme principle of morality, but examine noir’s irredeemably corrupt world in which conventional standards of morality are obsolete and irrelevant. In the realm of noir, only a saint or fool is ethical in such a wicked world; nevertheless, protagonists are reluctant to conclude that all is permitted. The existential politics of noir do not engage political theories but trace film noir’s critique of the cleavage between the nation’s expressed values and its actual practices. In hard-boiled fiction and film noir, the encounter with nothingness does not have cosmic origins, nor does it pertain to the breakdown of modern philosophy, but it emerges out of the emptiness of a corrupt society.

In summary, this book is not the basis for an abstract inquiry into the nature, causes, or principles of reality, knowledge, and values. American noir, in the form of fiction and film, does not attempt to prove the truth of propositions pertaining to the isolation of the individual in a meaningless world or the unexplainable nature of human existence, but it offers a compelling vision of the world in which these conditions are experienced by human characters in concrete situations. The world is revealed as meaningless, not in some abstract sense that the universe cannot provide meaning, but in the sense that the metaphysical,
epistemological, ethical, and political limitations of the noir world crush the goals, objectives, and actions of protagonists, leaving them to realize the futility of their endeavors. As he surrenders to police in *The Killing*, Johnny Clay sums up the failure of his intricately planned robbery with a shrug, and mutters, “What’s the difference?”

**TERMS OF ENGAGEMENT: FILM NOIR**

Though there is general agreement about the origin of the term *film noir*, there is considerable disagreement about whether film noir is a genre, style, or cycle. Unfortunately, these classifications matter if for no other reason than because they affect which films are admitted to the canon.

Genre advocates contend that film noir has common features just like other genre films. After all, they claim, that is how one knows one is watching a film noir. Westerns typically present characters in cowboy hats and boots, with pistol belts and six-guns, a sheriff or marshal, a rancher or farmer, a doc, and a tinhorn. They feature a town with a saloon, a livery stable, a jail, or they are set at a ranch, wagon train, cattle-drive, or cavalry fort. These iconic symbols immediately cue the viewer that a Western is in progress. Noir films, genre advocates argue, contain certain noir-ish characters such as the femme fatale, the private detective, the victim of circumstance, a crew assembled for a heist, etcetera. These films include urban mean streets and back alleys, the detective’s austere office and apartment, the shabby hotel rooms, the slick nightclubs.

Style advocates contend that certain cinematic and narrative characteristics distinguish film noir. Narrative devices include first-person voiceovers, flashback reports, nonlinear scene sequences, convoluted plots, and unresolved endings. Visual features include oblique camera perspectives, deep-focus photography, low-key lighting, and tightly framed compositions. These techniques contribute to the shadowy, unstable, and dangerous atmosphere of film noir. Some style advocates point out that these methods can be applied to a comedy, horror, or science fiction film. If the style position is accepted, film noir is not limited to a specific historical period, nor is it restricted to crime films.
Cycle advocates consider film noir a series of crime films that appeared between 1940 and 1959. They clash with genre and style advocates over the acceptable period of film noir. While cycle advocates tend to agree with style advocates about the narrative and visual features of noir, they insist that by the end of the 1950s the cycle had run its course. The studio sets and artificial lighting common during the 1940s that gave the films their distinctive look gradually yielded to location photography, monochrome visuals, and more natural lighting during the late 1950s. Early noir films present activity from the point of view of the criminals, or the private detective, but during the 1950s, the emphasis gradually shifts to the perspective of the police investigation.

There are problems with each of these definitions. While wardrobe and setting are enough to identify a film as a member of the Western genre, the visual cues for film noir are less definitive. Presences of a mystery, private detective, or duplicitous woman are not enough to label a movie film noir; nor are criminal activities and seamy locations. There are plenty of movies with these features that do not qualify as film noir, such as the Sherlock Holmes films starring Basil Rathbone. The style position is inadequate because it dismisses the origin of the term, which was originally created for the wave of crime films that first appeared during the 1940s. If any film with dark photography, unusual plot twists, and an ambiguous ending is allowed, including comedy, the definition of film noir is stretched to the point of meaninglessness. Even some cycle advocates contribute to this problem because they seem willing to admit almost any suspenseful melodrama released within the accepted range of years. Furthermore, if film noir is a cycle limited to the 1940s and 1950s, we are left with the problem of classifying later films like Chinatown (1974) and The Grifters (1992), which seem to contain all the elements of film noir except black and white cinematography.

These definitions are so liberal that almost any film can qualify as noir. As a result, hundreds of movies are now classified as film noir, and the list continues to expand. Alain Silver and Margaret Ward edited the first comprehensive guide, Film Noir: An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style, published in 1979. The third edition (1992)
boasts more than 300 films from the classic period, then adds another 49 overlooked titles in an appendix. By 2003, Michael Keaney had identified more than twice the total offered by Silver and Ward in his Film Noir Guide: 745 Films of the Classic Era (1940–1959). That’s right, seven-hundred-forty-five. It is no coincidence that the number of titles described as film noir has expanded with the growth of film studies. Since a finite number of movies were produced between 1940 and 1959, perhaps the archeological search for more titles is nearing an end. Of course, that range of years applies only to cycle advocates. Genre and style advocates have a virtual bottomless pit of films available to them.

Film noir, as a term, was born during the summer of 1946, when French critics reacted to what they considered a new type of Hollywood crime film. The Maltese Falcon; Laura; Double Indemnity; Murder, My Sweet; and The Woman in the Window, though released over three years in the United States, arrived in close proximity in Paris and formed the first wave. A few months later, This Gun for Hire (1942), The Killers (1946), The Lady in the Lake (1947), Gilda (1946), and The Big Sleep (1946) appeared. There was something remarkable, however difficult to define, about these films, that set them apart from other suspenseful crime melodramas. The authors of the first full-length book on film noir recognized this difference and were far more discriminating than their film studies descendants about which titles met the standard for inclusion. Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton, French authors of Panorama du Film Noir Americain (1955), were film enthusiasts who came to their positions through extensive movie viewing. They did not create a theory, and then admit all films that met elements of that definition. Borde and Chaumeton watched numerous films from the period, and then developed an admittedly subjective sense of which films were at the center and which were at the periphery. Unfortunately, their classifications are too vague to be appropriated for this discussion.

In Dark Cinema (1984), Jon Tuska argues for the distinction between movies that belong to the category of film noir and others that employ the noir visual style but do not belong. According to Tuska, the difference between film noir, film gris (gray film), and melodrama lies in the
narrative resolution (177). The melodrama is defined as a story that features a romance in the midst of other happenings and a relative happy ending concerning the couple. The difference between the film gris and the melodrama is that the romance in the melodrama leads to marriage or the suggestion of marriage, while the outcome of the romance is less certain in film gris. In film noir, the affair can hardly be called a romance, and the resolution is at least unclear, and often hostile and deadly.

Tuska argues that a film featuring a conventional romance and a happy ending undermines the bleak, pessimistic outlook associated with noir, so further designations are required. Tuska illustrates his point using three films made in 1944: Laura, The Big Sleep,7 and Double Indemnity. In Laura, it is clear at the end that Laura Hunt and detective Mark McPherson will marry, it is uncertain how long the romance will last between Vivian Rutledge and Philip Marlowe in The Big Sleep, and the affair between Phyllis Dietrichson and Walter Neff leads to betrayal and death in Double Indemnity. Tuska classifies Laura as melodrama, The Big Sleep as film gris and Double Indemnity as film noir. Tuska provides a filmography that labels each movie, and while I disagree with him about certain films,8 I wholeheartedly support his effort to provide much-needed restraint.

I intend to be faithful to the original impulses of Borde and Chau-meton that described film noir as a special category distinct from other melodramas and thrillers of the 1940s and 1950s.9 Because I contend that American noir precedes the alleged introduction of existentialism from France, except for a few references to later movies, I will restrict myself to the original film noir period with one exception. Though Chinatown was released in 1974, the film can be seen as a commentary on films from the original period and brilliantly summarizes several important noir elements. I will follow Tuska’s lead by examining the movies within the period that are most effectively noir. It is not my position that any and every movie every described as film noir qualifies as existential-ist, but I submit that films most deserving of the name represent a poor man’s existentialism.