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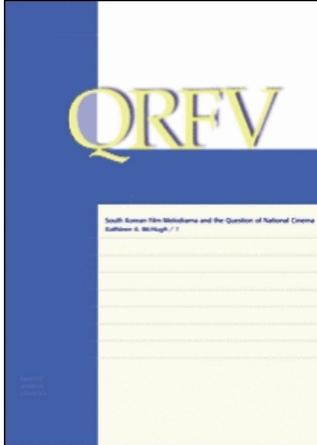
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## Face Plates: *T-Men* and the Problem of *Noir* Counterfeiting

MARK OSTEEN

In the opening sequence of Anthony Mann's 1948 film *T-Men*, a stentorian narrator (Reed Hadley) promises to take us inside the United States Treasury Department, a branch of the government, he announces, that was founded in 1789 by none other than George Washington. After several shots of imposing government buildings, we are introduced to the former head of the Treasury's law enforcement agencies, Elmer Lincoln Iren. Sitting next to a tiny statue of Abraham Lincoln, Mr. Iren awkwardly reads from a text describing the "six fingers" of the "Treasury Department fist," one of which, the Secret Service, "hits fair" but "hard" against counterfeiters. The following film will depict these enforcement tactics, he tells us, by dramatizing a "composite" case ("The Shanghai Paper Case") drawn from the Treasury's records.

Everything about this sequence—the flat lighting, intrusive narrator and real-life locations, the references to Lincoln and Washington—is designed to project the authority of historical truth and documentary realism. But then we immediately dissolve to a scene set near a warehouse off Santa Monica Boulevard in Los Angeles. The same narrator explains the circumstances, but everything else about the sequence seems to have come from a different movie. A man's face emerges from an inky pool of shadows as he watches another anonymous figure skulking next to a wall. A few seconds later, in a strikingly dark full shot, the watcher, still engulfed in shadows, fires a pistol at the skulker. After an inserted shot of the victim, the camera moves behind and between the shooter's legs, which frame the victim as the gunman fires two more shots. Agitated music accompanies the sequence which, with its shadowy *mise en scene*, nameless characters and seedy milieu, evinces a mannered, Expressionist atmosphere characteristic of what we now call *film noir*.

The collision of these two styles is part of what gives *T-Men* its flavor. Yet that collision also implies that this film about counterfeiting is itself a kind of counterfeit—neither quite a documentary nor quite one of those romantic detective stories that dominated American crime films in the 1940s. This clash is not merely stylistic; it is also thematic and political. In his seminal 1972 essay "Notes on *Film Noir*," Paul Schrader observes that in such films "the theme is hidden in the style, and bogus themes are often flaunted... which contradict the style" (63). This comment is particularly true of *T-Men*, and to a lesser degree of Richard Fleischer's *Trapped* (1949) and Boris Ingster's *Southside 1-1000*, the two

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pseudo-documentary *noirs* about counterfeiting that followed it. In this essay I argue that the stylistic clashes in these films are merely the most visible manifestation of broader and more significant questions and anxieties: aesthetic anxieties about the forms and limitations of mimesis; aesthetic, political and economic anxieties about the role of money as a form of art, an emblem of patriotism and a sign of value; ethical questions about undercover police work; existential and psychological questions about the nature of identity. These cinematic narratives of undercover Treasury agents tracking counterfeiters expose a post-war crisis of confidence about mimesis that points to a wider crisis of faith in the institutions represented by American money.

The pseudo-documentary genre into which all three counterfeiting *films noirs* fit emerged after World War II when Louis de Rochemont, producer of the *March of Time* newsreels, turned to feature films. As J. P. Telotte puts it, audiences accustomed to gritty documentaries about the war and impressed by imports such as Italian neo-realist films welcomed (and, some felt, required) a “new level of film realism” (135). Movies like *The House on 92nd Street* (1945) and *Call Northside 777* (1948), both directed by Henry Hathaway for Fox, boasted of using actual locations and real law enforcement personnel to generate a patina of factual authenticity. By highlighting new law enforcement technologies such as listening devices (*92nd Street*) and lie detectors (*Northside*), these films suggest that crime is best fought with what Dana Polan describes as “a cold, calculating, encircling rationalism” (165).<sup>1</sup> That rationalism also encompasses the films’ points of view, which usually remain, notes Telotte, “apparently objective” and therefore congruent with the scientific method (137). The films seemed designed to quell the festering anxieties (about gender, about capitalism, about the threat of atomic war) that, as many film historians have noted, permeate post-war crime films.

But this scientific, documentary approach creates a generic problem that has never been entirely resolved: how to reconcile these films, with their domineering third-person narrators and realist aesthetic, with the rest of *film noir*, known for its troubled first-person narrators, anti-heroic protagonists, and non-realist stylistics.<sup>2</sup> After all, it is a critical commonplace that the most significant cinematic influence on *film noir* was Weimar Expressionism, with its fixation on psychological pathologies and habitual use of claustrophobic or grotesque *mises en scenes*.<sup>3</sup> The pseudo-docs also seem ideologically distinct from the bulk of 1940s crime films, and apparently promote, as Michael Walker writes, a pro-government, upbeat political slant quite different from the subversive, disturbing and downbeat mood of most *films noirs* (37). Championing authority and advocating a smooth adaptation to the post-war

<sup>1</sup>In *T-Men*, for example, a government official marvels that the Treasury’s crime lab is able to determine the exact content of the counterfeiters’ paper, stating that they now “know more about the paper than the people who made it.”

<sup>2</sup>Most scholars treat these pseudo-documentaries under the *noir* umbrella: Schrader, for example, acknowledges them as part of his generic definition (55, 59), and Ward and Silver incorporate many of them into their encyclopedic reference work.

<sup>3</sup>Recent scholarship has challenged and amplified this historical connection. According to Andrew Spicer, the Expressionist influence on *film noir* is not merely a transplantation, but a “process of diffusion and reappropriation where a modified Expressionism [is] superimposed over existing generic conventions through a more self-conscious deployment of *mise-en-scene*, *chiaroscuro* lighting, minimalist sets, mobile camerawork and the use of fractured narratives” (14). Jonathan Munby argues that *film noir* draws as much from other Weimar genres as it does from Expressionist landmarks like Robert Weine’s 1919 film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (200). Robert Siodmak, for example, director of outstanding *noirs* such as *The Killers* (1946) and *Criss Cross* (1948), did his early work in the *Kammerspielfilm* or *Strassenfilm*. For helpful discussions of the wider generic issues raised by the *noir* cycle, see Neale 151–77, and Elsaesser 420–44.

middle class, most pseudo-docs seem to oppose *film noir*'s "ideal of the hybrid rebel in quest of wholeness against an alienating society" (May 220).

This conservative political viewpoint accompanies a seemingly conservative aesthetic which repeatedly emphasizes that we can trust pictures to reveal an otherwise elusive truth.<sup>4</sup> No film better illustrates this faith in photographic representation than *Call Northside 777*, based on a real-life incident in which a crusading reporter, here called James McNeal, took up the case of a man wrongly convicted of murder and eventually won him a pardon. In the film, the key piece of evidence that frees convict Frank Wiecek is a photograph showing him and an eyewitness together the day before the witness gave her incriminating testimony. By using new photo-enlarging technology, McNeal (James Stewart) is able to reveal the date on a newspaper in the background of the photo, thereby discrediting the witness's claims that she had not seen Wiecek since the day of the murder. The photo, then, is found to be more reliable—more objective, more scientific—than human eyes and words. Moreover, as Telotte suggests, the photo becomes a "trope for the film itself" (148) and as such embodies the film's underlying aesthetic principle: that documentary images faithfully portray reality.

And yet *Call Northside 777* sometimes departs from "pure" documentary realism—when, for example, Hathaway uses a shadowy long shot to depict Wiecek's long-suffering mother scrubbing floors and hence to evoke sympathy for her plight. And because the story revolves around a case of mistaken identity, a nagging question may lurk in the minds of viewers: if an eyewitness can be so wrong, can we really trust what our eyes show us? Such "slippages" from the documentary style and ideology lead Telotte to conclude that even pseudo-docs like *Call Northside 777* end up playing, in cinematic terms, the same "game of transparency and disguise" (135) that their stories seem to condemn.

It is hardly an exaggeration to assert that themes of false identity, of doubles and disguises, pervade *film noir*, which habitually reminds us that characters are nothing but shifting constructs that can easily be manipulated by clever people to fool less clever people. One only need think of figures such as *Dark Passage*'s Vincent Parry (Humphrey Bogart), in Delmer Daves' 1947 film, with his surgically-altered face, or of the protagonists' quests for rebirth via relocation and renaming in Jacques Tourneur's *Out of the Past* (1947) and Robert Siodmak's *The Killers* (1946). Indeed, the movie described by some as the first *film noir*, John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon*, is utterly obsessed with such questions of authenticity: Bridget O'Shaughnessy (who first appears as a Miss Wonderly) is never the person she seems to be, Sam Spade gulls both cops and conspirators with his tricky machinations, and at the end, as James Naremore writes, we find out that the coveted bird is "just as counterfeit as the characters" (52).

Such games of "transparency and disguise" are also displayed in the counterfeiting *noirs*, where the proliferation of fake money seems to reflect or inspire the proliferation of fake identities; further, the filmmakers themselves seem to mirror the criminals' exploitation of citizens' confidence in visual representation. All three films portray Federal agents masquerading as outlaws to expose the makers of false money, and in all three the unmasking of the T-man is the key plot device and source of suspense. In *T-Men*, Treasury agents Dennis O'Brien (Dennis O'Keefe) and Tony Genaro (Alfred Ryder) are given phony names and backgrounds that permit them to join an LA counterfeiting ring. In *Southside 1-1000* (whose odd title is mentioned only once in the film and seems to have been chosen mostly to recall that of *Call Northside 777*), agent Riggs (Don DeFore) pretends to be a "smooth

<sup>4</sup>I write "seemingly" because the pseudo-docs' style departed in at least one way from the conventions of Hollywood filmmaking, where the camera was never acknowledged, by frequently calling attention to their own cinematic apparatus; see Telotte 139.

operator” named Nick Starnes in order to attract a gang of counterfeiters headed by Nora Craig, a hotel registrar who is actually the daughter of a master counterfeiter named Dean.

The fake identities theme is almost comically complex in Richard Fleischer’s *Trapped* (1949).<sup>5</sup> In this film, convict Chris Stewart (Lloyd Bridges) agrees to infiltrate a counterfeiting gang in exchange for a reduced sentence, but on the journey to his new location subdues the custodial marshal and jumps into a car driven by an apparent accomplice. We soon learn, however, that the escape was staged to solidify Stewart’s cover, and that the accomplice is really a Treasury agent. A few minutes later, Stewart beats up the agent and escapes again, but it is then revealed that this fight was also a fake contrived to make Stewart think he is free. Just after the fight we dissolve from a photo of Stewart’s ex-girlfriend Meg Dixon to a close-up of Meg as she is today, working at the Chanteclair nightclub under the name Laurie Fredericks. At the Chanteclair a con-man named Johnny Hackett tries to pick her up; but Hackett is actually a T-man named John Downing. And near the end of the film, after Meg/Laurie learns of Hackett’s true identity, Stewart tells her to prepare to leave the country under the assumed name of Rodney. These plans are foiled when Stewart is caught and jailed; to avoid tipping off the gang, he is incarcerated under the name of Briggs.

Since they can never be sure who is a legitimate criminal—a genuine counterfeiter—and who is a counterfeit counterfeiter, these films’ criminals are, ironically, obsessed with authenticity. For example, the gang in *Trapped* tests Hackett by faking an exchange of plates for money to determine if he will go through with the scheme. Paradoxically, then, even as they exploit the public’s belief that their phony portraits of Lincoln or Franklin are legitimate and their bills’ seals authentic, the counterfeiters cling to a belief in the genuineness of the faces and names of their fellow criminals. Once they lose that faith, they fall apart. Thus, for example, just after Laurie exposes Hackett as a T-man, he desperately tries to persuade her to give herself up so as not to be a party to his murder. Turning to the gang leader, a phony real estate developer named Sylvester, Hackett/Downing pleads with him: “Don’t you see? You can’t even trust your own pals.” Suddenly thrust into the same position as the unwitting citizens he fools with his fake bills, Sylvester panics and shoots Laurie.

The false identity motif in these films is, however, just one aspect of their larger concern with the nature of representation. For while *Trapped* at first presents itself as a documentary that artlessly eschews the deceptive devices of the typical crime film, its narrative games actually seem designed as much to trick the audience as to fool the characters. It is as if the filmmakers are imitating both the counterfeiters, who con the unobservant with bogus bills, and the Feds, who dupe the dupers with their own legal con games. Thus, though the film initially implies that its story is a trustworthy, transparent representation of factual reality, its narrative ploys suggest that anyone who credits what he or she sees is a fool.

The unmasking scene in *Southside* reveals similar contradictions. Near the end of the film, dying counterfeiter Dean recognizes agent Riggs from an earlier interrogation. As the delirious Dean tries to focus on Riggs’s looming head, director Boris Ingster and cinematographer Russell Harlan switch to Dean’s blurry point of view. In departing from the documentary style and forcing us to see through the counterfeiter’s own eyes, the filmmakers remind us that they, too, are capable of counterfeiting, and hence that we should not take the truth of pictorial images on faith. And yet, a little later, as Nora glances through her father’s penciled portraits, she runs across one captioned “Riggs, ‘T’ Man.” Here, as in *Call Northside 777*, pictorial representation provides the only reliable way to correct mistaken identity.

<sup>5</sup>Made by the same studio, Eagle-Lion, and the same producer, Bryan Foy, *Trapped* functions as a quasi-sequel to *T-Men*.

Both films thus display a stark contradiction: on the one hand, they insist that photographic (or in *Southside*, pseudo-photographic) images certify identity and truth; but on the other hand, their stories—about fooling others by passing bills with fake portraits—and their sometimes deceptive techniques imply that mimesis can be manipulated, and therefore that photographs are unreliable. In both films (and to an even larger extent in *T-Men*, as I suggest below), falsifying the real is condemned on the level of story even as it is endorsed on the level of style and structure. Thus, as Munby suggests, these films end up adopting the paradoxical posture of “trying to have it both ways” (122), upholding a faith in realism at the same time that they undercut it. By their conclusions, the films reveal their true colors: that they are, in more than one sense, counterfeiting documentaries.

At the end of *Trapped*, Downing tells his boss that, after carefully counting them, he “knows every one of these [counterfeit] bills personally.” In this regard the bills are like the gangsters, who “had faces that I’ll never forget.” In contrast, the government agents in all three films are as featureless as the buildings they inhabit. In *T-Men*, for example, our only biographical information about agents O’Brien and Genaro is furnished in sketchy profiles read from their “file cards.” And although the narrator mentions Genaro’s wife and Italian ethnicity, both he and O’Brien, with their low-key demeanor and dull suits, do their best to remain faceless. As soon as the agents become criminals, however, they don sharp clothing and speak in a street-smart patter that marks them as “characters”: as Fran Mason notes, they “only begin to have personalities when they become criminals” (88). Indeed, in all three films, the more completely the agents blend into the criminal world, the more the films strive to evoke viewer sympathy for them. It as if the agents embody, in turn, the two kinds of money: as government employees, they are like legitimate bills, each one a perfect copy of every other bill; but as counterfeiters they exemplify contradictory qualities, seeking both to be original and the same time to blend in with other criminals.

A scene in *Trapped* when Hackett and Sylvester examine their counterfeit plates further dramatizes this problem of originality and exposes another source of thematic ambivalence in these films.

Sylvester: You’re looking at masterpieces. I take great pride in these plates . . . .  
 Hackett: They’re real works of art . . . . Treasures. Like paintings.  
 Sylvester: But anyone can own prints or paintings. I happen to prefer the, uh, originals.  
 Hackett: Our tastes are identical in that respect. Would you happen to know who made these?  
 Sylvester: No, I’m sorry. The artist neglected to sign his name.

That the tastes of the federal agents and the criminals are “identical” should not be surprising. After all, both of them are misrepresenting themselves: one is a T-man pretending to be a criminal and the other is a gangster pretending to be a respectable businessman. Their true identities are as elusive as that of the anonymous artist because, like well-made counterfeit bills, their existence is predicated on making it difficult to distinguish the legitimate from the illegitimate.

Given the circumstances, however—a darkly lit abandoned factory where a criminal gang is making an illegal transfer—this conversation seems odd: why pause to talk about art? *Trapped* is not alone in this regard; the other counterfeiting *noirs* also highlight the aesthetic qualities of the counterfeit money. In *Southside*, for example, much is made of the counterfeiter Dean’s artistic talent, and Nora’s apartment is filled with his works. And when the criminal engraver in *T-Men* first spots agent O’Brien’s decoy counterfeit bill, he praises it as “excellent. Very fine engraving. The work of an artist.” These scenes suggest that much of the thrill of counterfeiting derives from aesthetic pleasures—not only that of

masquerading as someone else, but also the kind gained from the appreciation of beautiful pictures.

The counterfeit plates, then, are valuable not only because they mimic real money, but also because they are works of art in their own right. Yet this pleasure again involves the counterfeiters in a paradox: insofar as they are original, the counterfeits may be thought aesthetically superior to real bills, which are always exact copies. Yet that very originality is what makes them illegitimate, and what, if recognized, would guarantee their failure as counterfeits, since their economic value derives from their being exact copies of real bills. The aesthetic value involved in making (original) money thus interferes with the economic value in making (legitimate) money. Indeed, it seems that the counterfeits are beautiful largely *because* they are fake—that the criminals appreciate them mostly because they are originals being passed off as copies (and in this regard, they are the exact opposite of forged paintings).<sup>6</sup> The beauty lies in the fakery.

Of course, a legitimate banknote is first and foremost not a work of art but a document authorized by a government. Therefore, American bills bear the Treasury Department seal, the signatures of Treasury officials, and phrases such as “this bill is legal tender for all debts, public and private.” The act of forging these signatures and copying these sentences is one of the things that makes counterfeiting a crime. This is true not only of American money, for the earliest coins in Western societies were inscribed with writing, pictures or symbols that certified their authenticity.<sup>7</sup> Unlike modern money, many of these coins did bear the name of their artists, along with portraits of leaders or symbols of states: they proclaimed their originality. And yet, as Marc Shell suggests, the existence of multiple coins all stamped from the same die paradoxically helped to destroy “the aura of individual objects” and to encourage “a sense of the universal equality of things” (*Economy* 86). This historical information suggests not only that questions of originality and authenticity were on hand at the very emergence of money, but also that genuine and counterfeit money are involved in a symbiotic relationship. How? It seems obvious enough that counterfeit money is parasitical upon real money, since counterfeits exist as copies of the genuine articles.<sup>8</sup> But legitimate money also depends upon counterfeiting, for none of those seals, signatures or pictures would be necessary unless it were possible to copy them. In this sense, then, counterfeit money was the midwife for the birth legitimate money, creating value by the very act of threatening it.

To establish their currency and truth, both *Trapped* and *T-Men* run their opening title crawls over a shot of the Treasury department seal, as if to declare that each film is as good as gold. Curiously, however, in using the Treasury seal, they are admitting their own

<sup>6</sup>Similar issues are raised by the work of nineteenth-century *trompe l'oeil* painters such as William Harnett, who drew pictures of paper money, and in the work of contemporary American artist J. S.G. Boggs, who draws pictures of currency, then attempts to use them for actual purchases. Boggs's finished works are records of the entire transactions he completes using the hand-drawn money (Weschler 6). The value of Boggs's work hence derives not from its originality but from its being a beautiful *copy* of currency—one good enough to earn him real money. His “counterfeits” become non-counterfeit, then, as soon as somebody accepts them in place of real money. Thus his work suggests that ultimately there is no difference between real and counterfeit money. For accounts of the aesthetic issues in *trompe l'oeil*, see Michaels 161–5. For a detailed treatment of Boggs and his controversial work, see Weschler.

<sup>7</sup>For analyses and reproductions of various early coins, see Shell, *Economy* 64–69 and 158–9. The upper die used to stamp these coins was called the *charakter*, a word that has given us the English word referring to identity.

<sup>8</sup>The word “counterfeit” comes from the Latin *contra* + *facere*: “to make in opposition or contrast to something else.”

engagement in cinematic counterfeiting.<sup>9</sup> Such gestures add another element to the films' play with mimesis and, more importantly, betray an ambivalence about the commercial and aesthetic aspects of filmmaking. Like the counterfeiters, that is, the filmmakers wish to produce original works that will be recognized as such; yet they also need (for commercial reasons, among others) to work in established or fashionable genres such as the pseudo-documentary crime picture. It does not pay to be too original. In other words, by allowing the characters to express admiration for the craft involved in the crime, the filmmakers imply that successful counterfeiters strike the same balance between subverting and following established formulae, between conventionality and iconoclasm, that they try to achieve in their own enterprise.

But ambivalence about counterfeiting is not merely an aesthetic issue; it crops up throughout the history of the crime. For although counterfeiting has long been subject to severe penalties (until the late nineteenth century, it was a capital crime in England) the public has frequently shown sympathy for these outlaws. Certain counterfeiters were applauded for their artistic talent as well as for their audacity and pluck. For example, in late nineteenth-century America, a counterfeiter named Emanuel Ninger successfully passed numerous bills that he had drawn by hand. After he was finally caught, a prominent educator named S. S. Packard examined his work and was so impressed that he proclaimed Ninger's bills to be worth far more than their face value (Glaser 200).<sup>10</sup>

According to Murray Bloom, there was also "considerable sympathy" for Ninger among the people of his New Jersey hometown (47). Such sympathy is not hard to fathom for, as an immigrant, Ninger was living out the American dream: after coming to the US penniless, literally made money and a name for himself, paradoxically, by not signing his name. Like Ninger, many other counterfeiters were perceived as regular people struggling to make a dishonest living (Glaser 9–10). Conversely, the greatest counterfeiters achieved a notoriety that few other non-violent criminals ever attained. Thus historian Lynn Glaser praises the master counterfeiter William Brockway (who studied at Yale and maintained a fifty-year career in counterfeiting) as the epitome of "American ideals of rugged individualism, direct action and the concept of the completely autonomous hero" (261). These values may help to explain why the counterfeiting *noirs* work so hard to present their criminals as violent murderers and traitors as well as con artists, but they also suggest that the great counterfeiters, who made their living copying things, were at once stereotypes and original characters.

Perhaps the strongest (as well as the most troubling) reason for the ambivalence about counterfeiting, however, may be that it appeals to the criminal within the ordinary person. Counterfeiting is a crime that solicits complicity: if one receives a fake bill, the only way to ensure that one does not lose money on it is to pass it to the next person. Counterfeiting asks that everyone become a counterfeiter. After all, most people don't scrutinize every bill they handle; they simply take their legitimacy on faith. As Georg Simmel noted a century ago in his magisterial study, *The Philosophy of Money*, a functioning economy depends upon a "supranational belief . . . that the community will assure the validity of the tokens for which we have exchanged the products of our labor" (179).

<sup>9</sup>Both films also run a disclaimer stating that although the filmmakers were allowed to photograph real money and real Treasury Department credentials for the film, "further reproduction of said currency or credentials . . . is strictly prohibited." In effect, they admit that they have created profitable legal cinematic counterfeits in order to produce stories that deplore counterfeiting.

<sup>10</sup>He was also, in his way, devoted to truth: asked why he didn't write on his bills the words "Engraved and Printed at the Bureau of Engraving and Printing," he answered, "dey didn't make dem" (Bloom 44).

Counterfeits exploit (and explode) this faith. Insinuating that fake and real bills are the same, counterfeiting constitutes a social sacrilege that disrupts that “supranational belief” in other citizens necessary for a functioning society. Another kind of faith is also at work here: as Shell observes, “credit, or belief, involves the very ground of aesthetic experience, and the same medium that seems to confer belief in fiduciary money (bank notes) . . . also seems to confer it in literature. That medium is writing” (*Money* 7). All money tells a story: good money, authorized and printed by the government, tells a true story of its own origins, while counterfeits tell stories in which “the stated place of origin does not correspond to the actual place of origin” (*Money* 160). As fictions, then, counterfeits upset the social order by violating the various forms of faith that we extend to money as a document.<sup>11</sup>

Counterfeiting performs another sacrilege by unveiling the secret behind all paper money—that it is a fiction. For, as Jean-Joseph Goux reminds us, money performs three functions: an archetypal function as a measure of values; a token (or symbolic) function as a medium of exchange; and a real function as store or means of payment (Goux, “Ideality” 167–69; cf. Goux, *Coiners* 35–6). When nations departed from the gold standard in the twentieth century, it became impossible to exchange paper money for any material equivalent.<sup>12</sup> The token function thus superseded the other two functions, as money came to represent only its own capacity to be exchanged and the government’s power to maintain the economic system.

This withering of the material aspect of money returns us to the problem of mimesis. In this regard, Goux posits a homology (that is, a correspondence deriving from a shared origin and logic) between money backed by precious metal and literary realism, which presumed that “language. . . could directly represent the thing itself” (Goux, “Ideality” 173).<sup>13</sup> It was no accident, Goux argues, that the shift away from the gold standard took place at the same time as the emergence of non-realist art and the rise of a Saussurean linguistics that described linguistic systems as arbitrary and non-representational (Goux, “Ideality” 178).<sup>14</sup> These simultaneous attacks on realism, Goux insists, produced a “decisive crisis of realist representation” after World War I, one in which all values—economic, political, aesthetic, psychic—became “riddled with suspicion” (Goux, *Coiners* 11).

I propose that the counterfeiting *noirs* point to a similar crisis of realist representation in the post-WWII United States, one dramatized in these films’ conflict between a beleaguered faith in photographic realism and a nagging skepticism about the veracity of any form of representation—including money.<sup>15</sup> When we consider Simmel’s assertion that “the feeling of personal security that the possession of money gives is perhaps the most concentrated

<sup>11</sup>The emergence of paper money and the spread of literacy, not surprisingly, occurred during the same period in Europe. Some early American counterfeit bills were printed abroad, which made them subject to misspelled warnings about “Couunterfeit” bills (Glaser 16)—detectable, of course, only to those who could read.

<sup>12</sup>The departure from the gold standard took place at different times in different nations: in France, for example, it occurred just after World War I, whereas the US did not officially dispense with it until 1971. However, in practice, paper money was inconvertible much earlier, since there was far more money in circulation than could ever have been exchanged for gold or silver.

<sup>13</sup>As Walter Benn Michaels has suggested, this view of mimesis ultimately rests upon a “goldbug aesthetic” that seeks to do away with representation altogether (162, 165).

<sup>14</sup>For a more detailed version of this argument, see the essay “Numismatics” in Goux’s *Symbolic Economies* (9–63). If Goux’s historical schema at times seems too pat, nonetheless the parallels among registers that he describes reveal useful parallels in the logics of different systems.

<sup>15</sup>The crisis is also displayed in *films noirs* such as Otto Preminger’s *Laura* (1944), Fritz Lang’s *Scarlet Street* (1945), and Irving G. Reis’ *Crack-Up* (1946); the last-named film links non-realist (mostly European) art with subversive politics.

and pointed form and manifestation of confidence in the socio-political . . . order” (179), we realize that this aesthetic crisis also adumbrates a political crisis. And if, as Goux observes, the shift from gold money to paper money and then to inconvertible currency was “part and parcel of a qualitative growth in the economic role of the state” (Goux, *Coiners* 21), then we perceive that a banknote is nothing less than a “civic monument” (Goux, “Ideality” 179).

Because it attacks these monuments and subverts the faith behind economic activity—the belief that money is a transparent and legitimate instrument of the institutions it represents—counterfeiting is as much a political crime as a crime against property. Indeed, the films’ own warnings about the ubiquity of counterfeiters end up casting a shadow over the economic instruments that citizens routinely exchange millions of times every day. In these respects, the counterfeiting *noirs* register deep anxieties both about the institutions that certify our economic instruments and about the capacity of non-material money to support those institutions. Against the authorized fictions of the state, then, counterfeits (and, perhaps inadvertently, the counterfeiting *noirs*) offer a counternarrative which asserts that any bill is just as good (or bad) as any other.

Counterfeiting is a highly subversive activity. This fact helps to explain why the counterfeiting pseudo-docs frame their stories with pro-government propaganda. Produced in the aftermath of the first HUAC hearings involving Hollywood figures in the autumn of 1947, these films could scarcely have promoted a Left or radical viewpoint in any explicit way. But Thom Andersen has shown how certain artists working in the crime genre managed to smuggle in themes that challenged the status quo (186–88). If the counterfeiting *noirs* are not as blatantly oppositional as the films Andersen cites, they nonetheless reveal an ideological strain that goes hand in hand with the aesthetic strains I have been outlining.<sup>16</sup> As I’ve suggested, the propaganda itself proves the existence of the anxiety it purports to quell.

The opening sequence of *Southside 1–1000* exemplifies how these filmmakers seemed to enlist their stories in the service of Cold War politics. With martial music playing behind a montage of weapons used in the Korean War, the narrator quotes Lincoln’s words that the U. S. cannot remain “half free, half slave,” and continues: “That quote now applies to the whole world.” We are fighting a battle against evil, he tells us, and the most powerful weapon in this fight is “the American dollar.” Yet he reminds us that

any . . . medium of exchange is nothing more than a promissory note backed by a government. The people do accept it with faith, but the government must see that that faith is justified. For the strength and the health of a nation depends on the value of its currency. Coal and oil feed the furnaces, . . . but money is behind it all . . . . The integrity, the honesty of the dollar must be protected, to protect all of us.

Therefore, the segment concludes, “a counterfeiter is more than a criminal; he is a saboteur”—that is, a traitor.<sup>17</sup> Counterfeiters, it seems, represent not just themselves, but

<sup>16</sup>Films such as Abraham Polonsky’s *Force of Evil* (1948), John Huston’s *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950), and Joseph Losey’s *The Prowler* (1951), all directed by members of the Hollywood Left, are more blatant in their attacks on capitalism and the status quo than any of the counterfeiting *noirs*.

<sup>17</sup>Lurking behind these assertions may be memories of Stalin’s notorious attempt, in the late twenties and early thirties, to topple the US government by authorizing the production of counterfeit American banknotes. These excellent fakes, made with the same paper as real currency, were detectable only by minute changes in the pictures (Glaser 239–40). Postwar audiences might also have been aware of Hitler’s “Operation Bernhard,” in which he mobilized a group of mostly Jewish experts to create thousands of counterfeit British banknotes. The aim was to disrupt the UK banking

those other enemies—within the nation and within the souls of its individual citizens and artists—so frequently invoked in Cold War discourse. In this sense, that is, the counterfeiters are themselves counterfeits: stand-ins for that other insidious enemy, Communists.

Acknowledging that money is just a promissory note—a fiction—is more likely to stir than to soothe an audience's fears of sabotage. Similarly, just as these films' documentary setups are undercut by their Expressionist and subjectivist moments, so their stories largely overshadow their propagandistic set-ups. The ambivalent aesthetics of these films reflect, as Munby notes (122), an ambivalent politics. Here again, the counterfeiting *noirs* want to have it both ways: to seduce the audience into their pictures of glamorously subversive and beautiful criminal domains, while placing those pictures within a rickety framework of documentary factuality, positivist science and pro-government dogma.

The result is a kind of layering or, better, a collapse of mimetic layers: though audiences register the manifest content of the story, they are likely to respond much more strongly both intellectually and emotionally to the darker, subversive elements evident in the films' styles and narrative devices. In short, viewers come to recognize that documentary realism is just another convention, another manipulation. Moreover, as I argue in the following section, just as the films depict the interchangeability, even the identity, real money and counterfeiters, so they also suggest that cops and criminals are themselves counterparts, symbionts, or mirror images.

The first and best of the counterfeiting *noirs*, *T-Men* explores the problem of counterfeiting by cloaking its psychologically rich and thematically sophisticated story in the garments of a police procedural. Although the clashing styles of the opening sequences imply that the law enforcement officials and the criminal organizations inhabit different worlds, as the film proceeds and the agents immerse themselves in the criminal milieu, the two worlds blend together. Through repeated shadow and mirror motifs, the film delineates how the two realms so jarringly contrasted at the beginning of the film actually duplicate each other.

*T-Men* was filmed in late 1947 on a moderate budget of \$450,000 that places it, according to Naremore, in a “borderland somewhere between generic thrillers and art movies” (139). Earning \$1.6 million at the box office, *T-Men* “helped to secure a place” for other such moderately budgeted features (Naremore 143), while also spawning the two other counterfeiting *noirs* I've discussed. *Life* magazine, which ran a photographic feature on *T-Men* in its February 23, 1948 issue, adduces the film as a solution to the financial problems plaguing Hollywood discussed in an article elsewhere in the same issue.<sup>18</sup> However, *Life*'s story contradicts the film's theme: its still photos of the film offer support for a faith in photographic mimesis that, I suggest, the film itself challenges.<sup>19</sup>

system and undermine their war effort. However, there was so much new money printed after the war that the fake notes scarcely made a ripple (see Bloom 234–67).

<sup>18</sup>This story, called “Trouble in Hollywood,” details some of the economic problems in the studios that led to Samuel Goldwyn's handing his employees a 50% pay cut. The problems cited include rising production costs, falling attendance (according to *Life*, a consequence of shoddy product), and the loss of foreign markets (because, in the aftermath of the war, Europeans were too impoverished to afford to attend movies: 55).

<sup>19</sup>The entire issue seems as fascinated by questions of doubling and authenticity as are the counterfeiting *noirs*. For example, near the story on *T-Men* there is an advertisement for Stetson hats that asks: “Does Randolph Scott have a twin?” The ad shows how, when dressed in different styles of Stetson hats, Scott appears to be entirely different men. Is Randolph Scott a counterfeit? On the same page as the *T-Men* photos we find an ad for Solovox, an early electronic keyboard device that “actually adds instrumental solos to your piano playing. Violin, clarinet, trumpet, oboe—even organ voices.” Of course, since it's not a real piano and these aren't real instruments, the Solovox does

More important for film historians is that *T-Men* was the first collaboration between director Anthony Mann, who was just moving up from Poverty Row, and famed cinematographer John Alton.<sup>20</sup> Mann's films, both before and after the five *noirs* he made with Alton, are distinguished by their shocking violence (in Mann's 1949 *Border Incident*, for example, a man is chopped up by a grain thresher), by their portrayals of a cruel and inhumane universe (which Mann's 1948 film *Raw Deal*, for example, embodies through its brooding *mise en scene*), and by a tendency to focus on close relationships between charming villains and "near-psychotic" heroes (Smith 190, 189).<sup>21</sup> Alton was a controversial figure who earned resentment from some mainstream cinematographers for his intellectualism and disdain for convention, while winning accolades from producers for his speedy working style and flamboyant lighting effects (see McCarthy xvi). Alton's films have long been hailed by film critics as the *noirest* of the *noirs*: more than any other cinematographer, he habitually employed the velvety shadows, pulsing neon, and lateral and single-source lighting that characterized the *noir* look. The effects are omnipresent in *T-Men*, yielding a haunting blend of beauty and brutality: Alton's effects perfectly illustrate Mann's themes.

In his textbook *Painting with Light*, Alton dubs his favorite effects "mystery illumination" (Alton 45). One of the most striking is the so-called "Jimmy Valentine lighting" that Alton developed in an earlier film about a safecracker, Bernard Vorhaus' *The Affairs of Jimmy Valentine* (1942) (McCarthy xvii). This effect is achieved by placing a single light-source (generally a lamp or small key light) below a character's face, thereby throwing on it grotesque, skeletal shadows (Alton 54). Alton employs this device in a crucial scene in *T-Men* which I analyze below. Perhaps the most surprising feature of Alton's book, however, is his repeated endorsement of what he calls "realism" in cinematography. He writes, "*Boomerang!* and *T-Men*, photographed on original locations, proved that realistic photography is popular, and accepted by a great majority. Let us have more realism" (135; *Boomerang!* is a 1947 pseudo-documentary directed by Elia Kazan). Presumably, he means to contrast the style of these films with the brightly-lit close-ups and soft focus of standard Hollywood movies whereby the "camera can be made to lie" (Alton 87). Yet Alton's signature effects are actually the antithesis of realism: they do not serve as a transparent screens through which to view the action, but call attention to their own artful construction.

Indeed, because of Alton's work, the pathological impulses represented by *T-Men*'s Expressionist cinematography literally overshadow its documentary frame and pro-government ideology. As the film proceeds, its *mise en scene* grows ever darker, as if the shadows that pervade the criminal world bleed into the daylight realm, plunging everyone—including the filmmakers—into a domain where duplicity reigns. To an even greater degree than the other counterfeiting *noirs*, in fact, *T-Men* undermines the notion that anything is what it seems to be, demonstrating instead that moving pictures may be just another form of counterfeiting.

Those paired opening sequences of *T-Men*—one "realist," the other Expressionist—at first seem merely to juxtapose competing brands of facelessness: dwarfed by huge, impersonal buildings, the bland bureaucratic functionaries who introduce the film find not "actually" add anything (not to mention the fact that, since the voices would accompany one's playing, they could hardly be "solos").

<sup>20</sup>Mann later attested that *T-Men* was the first film on which he had any degree of creative freedom, time to rehearse the actors, and opportunity to develop a script (qtd. in Spicer 107).

<sup>21</sup>For example, *Winchester '73* (1950), Mann's first Western, highlights the relationship between James Stewart's hard-bitten hero and a villain, played by Stephen McNally, who turns out to be his brother. All of these tendencies are fully displayed in *T-Men*.

counterparts in the second scene's anonymous malefactors and clinging, rat-like informer. Both of these scenes, however, also subtly introduce the brands of photographic representation that the film will later scrutinize: the Treasury official's small, sentinel-like statue of Lincoln evokes the portrait on a legitimate five-dollar bill, while the face of the gangster Moxie (Charles McGraw) in the second scene appears to be emerging from an ink bath or a photo-developing solution. Indeed, the craggy, cold-eyed Moxie looks like nothing so much as a living mug shot, a homicidal alter-ego of Lincoln's carved head on Mount Rushmore.

Several sequences early in the film signify that the Feds don't need to look outside their own buildings for doubles: they are all around them. For example, as Secret Service official Gregg and agent Nesbitt discuss the murder we've seen and their frustration with the case, the windows of their office reflect their images back at them. There are two sets of people here: the emotionless officials and the frustrated men, or the embodied agents and the extensions they are given through the government's technological apparatus. The mirror-windows also reinforce Gregg's comment that the counterfeiters seem to anticipate their informer's movements—that the two groups mirror each other.

A few minutes later, a different official, Chief Carson, briefs O'Brien and Genaro, the two agents selected for their "ability to pass as mobsters," about the case. Sitting at a gleaming table, Carson tells the men to go to Detroit and "make your own picture of things," and as he speaks the table acts as a giant mirror reflecting the men's heads. The "picture" they are going to make, it seems, will draw out the agents' own hidden selves and, in Genaro's case, erase the photos of himself and his wife at which he gazed during his train journey to Washington. Like Lewis Carroll's Alice, the T-men are set to pass into a looking-glass domain, one where Treasury agents ape gangsters and pass counterfeit bills to attract counterfeiters, a world whose inversions are at once disorienting and strangely seductive.

Between these two scenes, Carson is told that this Los Angeles gang has raised criminality to a new level by using "some of our own methods—surveillance, shadowing, check[ing] up on background of anyone working for them." "That's the general picture," the other official concurs. He does not add, "it's a picture of ourselves," but he could have. The gang, in fact, instances Mason's observations that in many post-war *noirs* the criminal syndicates are "organized along the lines of a cell structure with local 'outlets' and offices. The gang consciously mimics the style of government agencies so that it is both centralized . . . and decentralized" (88).<sup>22</sup> The gang in *T-Men* protects its leader through a layered hierarchy: the ostensible leader, Shiv Triano, actually answers to a Miss Simpson, who then reports to the real chief, a shadowy figure we see only at the end after he is apprehended and his picture is published in the newspaper. This organization isn't just a gang; it's a bureaucratic corporation. It even has its own crude legal system, as demonstrated when O'Brien is allowed to exact minor revenge on Moxie for an earlier beating (Mason 88). Just as counterfeit bills imitate the pictures and insignia of legitimate money, so the counterfeiters mirror legitimate institutional structures. And this mirror looks both directions: the undercover agents also act like criminals, going so far as to commit or permit acts of violence for the cause.

The T-men pursue their prey scientifically, first going to Detroit to research the Vantucci gang, who will give them the pedigree they will need to infiltrate the LA group. After

<sup>22</sup>In William Keighley's *The Street with No Name* (1948), for example, another pseudo-documentary *noir* with an undercover agent plot, gang leader Alec Stiles (Richard Widmark) boasts to an undercover FBI agent that his organization is run on "scientific" lines modeled after the FBI itself.

completing their research, O'Brien and Genaro check into a hotel under the obviously fake monikers of Smith and Jones. These transparent disguises are designed *not* to fool Pasquale, the hotel keeper, so that he will report their presence to gangleader Vantucci. The two agents also come equipped with more convincing dossiers that validate their "real" fake identities; these dossiers are composed primarily of photographs. When a Detroit detective quizzes Pasquale about two robbery suspects called Vanny Harrigan (that is, O'Brien) and Tony Galvani (Genaro), the detective flashes the "official Detroit police department wanted files" at Pasquale and lets him scan the miscreants' mug shots. The narrator informs us that Pasquale is now "sold on them": the mug shots (along with the agents' "natural criminal manner") have done the trick as they later do for Vantucci himself.

The photographs corroborate false identities, and the counterfeiters are as convinced by pictures as the citizens they wish to gull. These pictures are the face plates, the official portraits, that certify the T-men as genuine counterfeit(er)s. Photographs also play a prominent role later in the film. After O'Brien has begun to infiltrate the counterfeiting gang, he visits the Club Trinidad, where a young woman takes patrons' pictures for money. O'Brien allows her to snap his picture, which she then shows to her contact, Paul Miller, the gang's photo engraver. Somehow he can tell from this photo that O'Brien is "either a Treasury agent or . . . with some rival gang." But which? A face plate gazing in both directions, O'Brien is his own double.

In Detroit, O'Brien and Genaro learn of a portly crook called The Schemer (Wallace Ford) when O'Brien is given Schemer's coveralls to wear. The clothes don't fit but, along with a few other details he picks up, they are enough to give O'Brien a "hazy mental picture" of Schemer. He devotes the next several days, as the narrator tells us in a redundant voiceover, to becoming Schemer's "shadow," searching for him at the steam baths he frequents and tracking him to his gambling den, where O'Brien finally draws his attention by passing a decoy counterfeit bill. Despite their mismatched appearances, indeed, the film suggests that "Harrigan" and Schemer are counterparts.<sup>23</sup>

The scene when the two first come together illustrates this idea. After he follows Schemer to his apartment, "Harrigan" pushes him into the darkened room (Schemer at first thinks he is Moxie, the enforcer, another instance of doubling further developed later): O'Brien is now literally a shadow. Then, while standing on opposite sides of a lamp, Schemer and "Harrigan" compare their respective counterfeit bills. Upon examining "Harrigan's" fake bill, Schemer enthuses, "Hey, now, that's the real article!" but also notes that the paper is poor. He shows "Harrigan" his "new issue" and boasts of its excellent paper, though he admits that their photo engraving process is shoddy. In this scene Mann and Alton shoot up at the two men's faces from beneath the lamp, illuminating the backs of each \$10 bill in turn; then there is a cut to a three-quarter shot in which Alton employs "Jimmy Valentine" lighting to paste grotesque shadows on Schemer's face, presaging the corpse that he will soon become and forecasting the same possibility for "Harrigan" while also illustrating the gradual erasure of the man called O'Brien.

The two then contrive a plan to combine the good paper with the better engraving to create undetectable counterfeits. (As the scene unfolds, the viewer also realizes that "Harrigan"—a Treasury agent pretending to be a gangster—and Schemer—a small-timer pretending to be a big wheel—are equally counterfeits.) But instead of giving Schemer his

<sup>23</sup>The doubling motif is common in the period's undercover cop films. For example, in *Street with No Name*, G-man Gene Cordell (Mark Stevens) assumes the identity of a George Manly, but to be accepted by the criminals, he must first re-enact the trajectory of a man called Danker, whom the gang has previously murdered. As the voiceover puts it, Cordell must become Danker's "carbon copy."

entire bill to show the others, "Harrigan" rips it in half. As the T-man and the criminal stand face to face, the implication could not be clearer: they are halves of a single bill, as mutually dependent as counterfeit and real money.

The remainder of the film portrays O'Brien and Genaro's attempts to gain the gang's confidence, find the source of the fake money, and bring the crooks to justice. But as they submerge themselves more deeply into the criminal world, the film exposes the sacrifices that undercover work demands and invites speculation about whether the job is worth it. A striking and witty scene in which Genaro accompanies Schemer to an open-air market both advances the doubling motif and reveals the costs of this human counterfeiting. After Schemer purchases a bag of grapes with a counterfeit \$10 bill, he and Genaro watch some bakers work on the other side of a window. Genaro attempts to pump Schemer for the location of a book in which he has written coded information about the gang's operations and leadership, but Schemer puts him off.

Throughout the conversation, the bakers' reflections are superimposed over the bodies of the other two men. It is hard to miss the suggestion that going undercover is also a way of superimposing one face or body over another. But we can appreciate the wit of the scene only if we pay attention to what the bakers are doing: kneading dough. This visual pun implies an identity between the two sets of men. All four of them both "need dough" and "knead" it, for what is counterfeiting but a means of reshaping "dough" to make better "bread." Yet, because the sequences' ingenious construction draws attention to itself, it demolishes the facade of realism established by the outdoor location and the everyday people milling around. By invoking its own artificiality, it implies that both Schemer, who gullibly believes that his attempt to maneuver around the gang will succeed, and Genaro, who earnestly seeks Schemer's confidence in order to undermine his enterprise, live in an artificial world whose brightness cannot finally suppress the darkness and duplicity that lies beneath that world and that may produce it.

The artificiality of Genaro's world is further emphasized as the sequence continues and he is recognized by a female friend of his wife, Mary. When he denies his identity, the woman brings Mary (June Lockhart) over to Genaro, and we are given a series of close-ups portraying their mixed emotions: each one fervently wishes to acknowledge the other, but they dare not break his cover. At this moment, the photo of Mary at which Genaro stared earlier in the film has been animated into a living, breathing wife with needs and longings that mirror his own. Although she plays along with her husband's story, the damage has been done: later, when Moxie prepares to murder Schemer by steaming him to death (a scene disturbing for its cool approach to murder), the latter blabs that "Galvani" is not who he is supposed to be. Although Genaro's denial of his wife is meant to establish his integrity and dedication, it cannot help but bolster our sense that his counterfeit life demands unnatural and unfair sacrifices. In the agents' looking-glass land, criminal allegiances take precedence over conjugal loyalty, and patriotic duty crushes marital intimacy. Is it really worth it?

These sacrifices are even more disturbingly presented a few minutes later, after Genaro is trapped by the gangsters as he looks for Schemer's book. In another series of close-ups, this time from Genaro's point of view, we see "Harrigan," Moxie, Triano, and another thug, Brownie, converging on Genaro in Schemer's darkened room, their glaring mugs clearly illustrating their murderous intentions. Knowing he is trapped, "Galvani" says, "Almost had ya, all of ya." "Tony," protests "Harrigan," distress visible on his face: he is on the brink of breaking cover to protect his partner. But Genaro saves him. "You, Vanny," he says, "Top-drawer crook, never caught on." Close-up cutaways of the thugs' faces punctuate his words. "Top-drawer crook. Always so sharp, always knew all the angles . . ." Three shots

ring: we see Moxie fire his pistol from behind a cloud of smoke, and then return to a close-up of O'Brien's face, flinching as he watches his partner take the bullets. The dying Genaro then croaks out his last words: "You . . . sucker." The camera stays on O'Brien as he drops his head to follow his partner's fall, the shadow from his hat brim gradually blanketing his face.

Genaro's refusal to break cover and his salvation of his partner through his lie are surely heroic. But what about O'Brien? Although we understand why he cannot speak out, the shadows that cover his face imply that he is somehow implicated in this murder, for now his face is indistinguishable from the other gangsters'; it as is, in mingling with criminals, he has become one of them. And why is he a "sucker?" Of course, the phrase is part of Genaro's redemptive lie, but it also provokes a disquieting sense that the agents are suckers for allowing this to happen, for risking their lives, even for being T-men—that they are as much dupes as the fools who accept counterfeit money. And what of the officials who permit this murder to take place? The subsequent scenes, all shot in law enforcement offices, suggest that criminality has migrated from seedy hotel rooms to the center of government. Whereas early in the film the scenes set in government buildings were brightly lit, the scenes after Genaro's death—one of Gregg at his desk looking at Schemer's book, a portrait of Lincoln behind him; one in which Carson discusses the code with a technician; a third showing Gregg being warned that Miller can identify the work of their engraver—are so dark that it would be impossible for the characters actually to read the messages they scan. The shadow on O'Brien's face now engulfs everybody involved in the case.

If the focus on faces in Genaro's death scene recalls the mug shots that earlier identified O'Brien and Genaro as gangsters, it also presages the ploy that O'Brien uses to entice the gangsters into a final meeting: when he is required to produce a sample bill using the good paper and good engraving, he gives the gang only the reverse side instead of a whole note. Though he gives them the rear engraving plates, he withholds the face plates, which then become the coveted objects in the plot. Just as "Harrigan" has effaced his real identity—his genuine face plate—and replaced it with a fake, so he now withholds the metal sheet bearing the (genuine) portraits of Lincoln or Hamilton. And just as mug shots first verified his (false) identity, now fake counterfeit (i.e., real) face plates showing the patriots' pictures become his sole guarantees of continued existence, for once the gang gets them, they'll no longer need "Harrigan." The plates, then, are at once legitimate and counterfeit, their pictures of Hamilton mirroring Harrigan's own conflicted position as a fake counterfeit patriot. Here, then, the plot of *T-Men* revolves around two kinds of misrepresented face plates—portraits of men who are and are not what they seem.

Following Genaro's death, the gangsters return to the hotel room where O'Brien has hidden the face plates under the sink. After receiving a message (which he somehow manages to read in the darkened room) to retrieve the face plates and leave town, O'Brien must figure out a way to snatch them from under the very nose of Moxie while he is shaving with "Harrigan's" electric razor in the bathroom. This tension-filled sequence brilliantly combines deep focus and skillful editing to create suspense, while also employing the mirror motif to depict O'Brien's mounting desperation. In the first shot, the bars of the bed surround "Harrigan" as he stands in the narrow bathroom doorway. Pushed to the far corner of the frame and positioned between Brownie and the shaving Moxie, O'Brien looks diminished and trapped by the dark environment. Once he enters the bathroom, he and Moxie stand on opposite sides of the sink; the camera sits below it, directing our gaze upward to emphasize the tight quarters. Then we cut to a shot over O'Brien's right shoulder as he washes his hands, the camera also catching Moxie as he looks in the mirror while

drying his face. O'Brien's head encroaches on the reflection, so that when Moxie looks in the mirror he sees O'Brien's face too. Then we're back beneath the sink, observing O'Brien attempt to retrieve the plates without drawing Moxie's attention. Just as O'Brien is about to grab the plates, Moxie drops his towel on the floor. Finally, after O'Brien manages to shove the plates into his jacket pocket, we cut back up to the two faces in the mirror, which again exposes the ambiguity of O'Brien's position: he and Moxie are at once adversaries and alter egos. Afterward confronted by Triano, who asks for the face plates, O'Brien claims he doesn't have them; but Moxie reaches into O'Brien's pocket and pulls them out. Like "Harrigan," it seems, he was also presenting a false face.

The three thugs take O'Brien to the docked ship which houses their operation; there the shadowy "chief" says he recognizes O'Brien's plates from an earlier scam. But O'Brien staves off the gang's preparations to kill him by insisting that Miller can ascertain whether O'Brien's engraver is an incarcerated criminal (thereby proving that O'Brien is a Fed) or the Hungarian immigrant O'Brien has claimed he is. When Miller arrives, he recognizes the plates, grasps that O'Brien is a T-man and that the jig is up, and proposes a deal. But then a gun battle ensues and O'Brien, grabbing the now dead Miller's gun, walks toward Moxie in a stalking crouch, a key light starkly revealing his grim, bloodthirsty expression. The terrifying look on his face implies that he lusts to kill Moxie less for justice than for simple revenge: this face plate signifies that he has *become* Harrigan, a man indistinguishable from gangsters like Moxie.

The police arrive in time (though not before O'Brien gets wounded), tear gas the ship and capture the criminals. At the end, as the gang leader stumbles out of his smoky cabin, we dissolve from a close up of his head to his photograph in *Look* magazine. While the narrator tells us that the man was "posing as a philanthropist," four photos from *Look* show him playing golf and doing philanthropic work, above a caption that reads "Oscar Gaffney Hid Behind a Facade of Respectability." Once again we are being offered contradictory suggestions, one by the photographs and another by the words. Which should we trust? Certainly not the photographs, since they are what helped to create Gaffney's facade of respectability. A hand turns the magazine page to display another photo, this one of a bandaged but smiling O'Brien lying in a hospital bed. The caption reads: "Smashing of Counterfeit Ring Has Entire World for Stage"—an odd headline that points to the patriotic significance of O'Brien's job, implies that his criminality was just a role, and, subliminally, reminds us that the man in the photo is neither O'Brien nor Harrigan but an actor named Dennis O'Keefe.

Within the frame of the movie, however, we are to believe that the photo shows the "real" O'Brien—a humble cop, not the hardened man of the previous sequence. But how can we credit this photo, since we have just been shown that photos lie? Doesn't this photograph present yet another facade of respectability for a character who, we have seen, is capable of murder? How, especially, can we credit the photos when the entire film we have just viewed has dramatized how photographic or artistic representations can never be trusted, how fact can blur easily into "composite" fiction, and how legitimate and illegitimate money are not only indistinguishable, but sometimes issue from the same source.

Like the other counterfeiting *noirs*, then, *T-Men* asks us to credit seemingly incompatible ideas: that photographic images faithfully represent the real and verify factual truth, but also that clever artists, such as filmmakers or counterfeiters, can exploit our belief in those images to manipulate and seduce us into complicity with dishonest games. Thus, despite the concluding assurance that Genaro is a hero because he "died in the service of the people of this country," disturbing questions linger. In performing as criminals, do government agents become them? Is it possible to determine when movies and photos

lie and when they tell the truth? Is filmmaking, like counterfeiting, just another mode of sabotage or subversion?

Since we have just watched a film in which legitimate authorities make and pass counterfeits, is counterfeiting really a crime, or rather an elaborate way to exert power? And since this ostensible documentary turned out to be a “composite” fictional story, is it really possible to distinguish between the factual and the fake, the true and the counterfeit? Even more broadly, does this difference finally matter? The conclusion of *T-Men*, like those of *Trapped* and *Southside 1-1000*, strives mightily to resolve these questions with an ending that assures us all is well. But it fails to suture the holes in the apparently seamless fabric of belief—in money, in the political system, in photographic and cinematic representation—that it has torn. We are left with a kind of mise-en-abyme which, far from providing a stable ground for a renewed faith in society, its money or its visual art, instead leaves us no firm place on which to stand.

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