

Noir's Cars:



The Hitch-hiker.

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Automobility and Amoral Space in American Film Noir

By Mark Osteen

Abstract: Automobiles—particularly convertibles—serve in films noir as symbols of social mobility and expanded identity, as surrogate homes and amoral spaces. The recurrent figure of the hitchhiker, however, challenges the ideology of automobility, and in certain late films noir, automobiles are linked with explosive technologies that threaten to turn humans into atomized automatons.

Keywords: automobiles in film, crime films, domesticity, film noir, hitchhiking, masculinity, social mobility

Los Angeles. Night. A gray coupe careens down a dark street, hurtles through a stoplight and barely misses an oncoming truck, then pulls up unsteadily before a tall building. A wounded man emerges: Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray), narrator and protagonist of Billy Wilder's great 1944 film noir, *Double Indemnity*. The speeding, out-of-control car in fact symbolizes Walter, whose life has run amok ever since his first visit to half-dressed, anklet-wearing housewife (and murderer) Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck), ostensibly to sell auto insurance.

Cars serve as both the pretext for the plot's insurance scam and as part of the film's broader transportation motif. The witty double-entendre dialogue between Walter and Phyllis illustrates this pattern—he suggests he needs to drive her name “around the block a few times,” to which Phyllis offers the flirtatious put-down that he is exceeding the “speed limit.” “How fast was I going, Officer?” Walter asks. “I’d say around ninety,” she answers, and so on. Also, Walter impersonates Mr. Dietrichson (Tom Powers) on a train to set up the actual murder, further illustrating the transportation motif. The words of Walter’s mentor, claims investigator Barton Keyes, that murderers ride a trolley car “all the way to the end of the line and it’s a one-way trip and the last stop is the cemetery” are yet another example. If the train and trolley represent fate, the auto exemplifies the desire to flout history, destiny and law, signifying freedom from rules and the dream of forging a new self.

It can be argued that film noir begins with *Double Indemnity*'s opening scene¹ because cars figure prominently throughout the noir cycle. Although they appear in what Edward Dimendberg calls “centripetal” or “downtown” noirs (108) such as *Side Street* (1950) or *The Big Combo* (1955), they figure much more centrally in those set in the West and Southwest. According to Paul Fotsch, it is no accident that so many films noir take place in Los Angeles, as the city’s design—a centerless string of suburbs—engendered a sense of isolation and loneliness that “created instabilities in domestic relationships,” which, in turn, “facilitate[d] crime” (107, 113). The profound sense of privacy and isolation fostered by geography extends to citizens’ cars, which in films noir become not only alternative homes but also amoral spaces where laws and social arrangements—marriage, class hierarchies—are suspended. Thus, for example, in *Double Indemnity* Walter uses his car to establish his alibi for a murder that—committed by him but engineered by Phyllis—takes place in the Dietrichsons’ sedan.² The camera holds on Phyllis’s face as, out of the frame, Walter strangles her husband: in more ways than one, Phyllis is in the

driver’s seat. The murder of Dietrichson inaugurates a previously undiscussed pattern: the remarkable number of violent crimes that occur in noir’s cars.

In these films, automobiles also become overdetermined symbols of characters’ aspirations and disappointments. For example, Tay Garnett’s adaptation of James M. Cain’s *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946) illustrates the entrapment of adulterous lovers Cora Smith (Lana Turner) and Frank Chambers (John Garfield) through their lack of a car. As they leave Twin Oaks, the roadside diner owned by Cora’s husband, Nick Smith (Cecil Kellaway), Frank explains why they have to hitchhike: “Stealing a man’s wife, that’s nothing. But stealing his car, that’s larceny”—it is taking a man’s identity and hope.³ Without wheels, the lovers are soon soiled, saddened, and discouraged, as Cora’s increasingly smudged white outfit graphically indicates. Hitchhiking, she complains, will only lead “right back where [she] started”: the “hash house.” In Cain’s novel, Cora even describes their stunted hopes in terms of auto makes: “We had all that love,” she tells Frank, “and we just cracked up under it. It’s a big airplane engine, that takes you through the sky, right up to the top of the mountain. But when you put it in a Ford, it just shakes to pieces. That’s what we are, Frank, a couple of Fords” (Cain, *Postman* 70). Their “make” forever brands them as ordinary, and their aspirations crack on the class ceiling. Hence their scheme of self-elevation or “rebranding” via murder culminates in Nick’s car, where Frank clubs Nick to death with a bottle, as Cora sits behind the wheel. The car seems to carry the weight of karma: After getting away with Nick’s murder, they sit in the front seat and exchange a “kiss with dreams in it,” but the kiss distracts Frank so that he drives into a bridge, killing Cora and condemning himself to death row for her “murder.”

Cora’s words demonstrate how Americans internalized their identification with cars, commodifying themselves via automotive self-extension. The selling of autos in the aftermath of World War II, when automobility was promoted as a solution to economic and

social malaise, encouraged this process. During the war, passenger-car production had halted as factories and workers were enlisted in the war effort. Hence, when the “government rescinded wartime curbs on car production, gasoline purchases and speed limits,” writes Katie Mills, driving a new car became a “way to celebrate winning the war” (36). As millions of veterans returned home, landed jobs, and started families, their newly purchased cars became signs of restored consumer power and renewed possibility—of a refurbished American dream (see Mottram 107). The material gain encoded in cars, as Ken Hillis notes, was thus “directly connected to acquiring greater agency and social status” (4). Exploiting these phenomena, some postwar writers turned road stories into a “declaration of independence,” creating from highway narratives a “broader vision of autonomy and mobility for all” (Mills 2). These two linked qualities—autonomy and mobility—unite in narratives of “automobility” (Mills 18), in which the automobile’s “synthesis of privacy and mobility” (Field 61) promised a means of bypassing class and gender barriers. Noir’s cars likewise frequently represent the propulsive aspirations of disenfranchised people who turn to crime, embodying the possibility of social mobility through automobility.

As Kris Lackey observes, the postwar auto also became a means of “surmounting biological limitations, [. . .]—for challenging both nature and nurture” (12). In expanding the self, the car “loses its mechanical identity [. . .] and becomes a kind of bionic prosthesis” (Lackey 32). Cars contributed to a conception of human identity as “a shiny commodity without a past” (Hillis 8). It makes sense, then, that in so many films noir the main car is a convertible, associated since its invention with youth, freedom, and rebellion.⁴ Convertibles symbolize the American belief in mobile identity: convertibles, that is, represent the very promise of convertibility. Yet in film noir, defeat and disillusion repeatedly shadow the convertible’s positive aura, as drivers make reckless decisions, crash against class barriers, and become victims of

law-abiding citizens' guilt over their own transgressive desires. For noir's characters, convertibility is usually a chimera and automobility a flywheel leading nowhere.

Unlike convertibles, whose open tops encourage visibility, most new postwar cars were "mini-arsenal[s]—of privacy, seclusion and isolationism on a par with our national thinking—and a vehicular deterrent to invasion by others" (Wieder and Hall 32). The car's symbolic power lies in its representation as a commodity identified with its owner. The figure of the hitchhiker, who appears in a number of significant films noir, challenges this aura of ownership by embodying risk, the intrusion of chaos, and the fragility of the postwar prosperity and security that automobiles represent. Although they are often loners who seem to epitomize American individualism, hitchhikers are also those who cannot afford a car; in using their thumbs, they seek to attach themselves to the automobility of more prosperous citizens. Whether vagabonds, drifters, psychopaths or simple thugs, hitchhikers both exemplify the American dream's individualist ideology and challenge its faith in unlimited upward movement.

Later films noir more dramatically depict the risks of automobility. In films noir produced when the cold war had become a more pressing concern, the automobile is portrayed as a Trojan horse: a false gift whose promise of freedom from obligation actually signifies a system—enforced by government institutions who also use automotive technologies—that transforms drivers into automatons. In these films, cars are metonymies for a commodified world gone mad, a world of utter insecurity propelled by internal and external explosions that may end in the largest explosion of all—the atomic bomb. These films warn that an addiction to automobility may have turned people into machines.

Lamming It

A linked set of early films noir mobilize autos as potent symbols of their hapless characters' desperation and restlessness. In these "outlaw road movies" (Laderman 20), the lovers wish to break

away from oppressive social circumstances, yet often long for a respectable domesticity they can never achieve. Postwar automotive conditions again influence these narratives. As William Beverly notes, the rapid expansion of roadways in the Southwest, where these films are set, rendered the fugitive criminal "just another face on the highway" (117); given such anonymity, the car becomes an amoral space and a driver's license a license to do anything at all. Postwar cars were also much roomier than earlier vehicles: Advertisements touted them as a "total environment on wheels, rivaling home for comfort and luxury" (Mottram 107). As if inhabiting this consumer fantasy, these films' fleeing lovers treat their cars not only as sexual fetishes, symbols of identity, and murder weapons but also as living rooms, bedrooms, nurseries, and so on. These young fugitives' cars challenge and replace "the normative American home and its various constituents" (Beverly 141), just as the lovers themselves expose the criminal impulses lurking inside law-abiding, apparently domesticated citizens. Yet their improvised mobile domesticity never lasts—the loss of their auto adumbrates the loss of liberty and often the loss of life:

The primary examples of this subgenre are *Desperate* (1947), *They Live by Night* (1948), *Shockproof* (1949), and *Gun Crazy* (1950), but their progenitor, Fritz Lang's *You Only Live Once* (1937), introduces the major motifs. In Lang's film, suspicious citizens hound ex-convict Eddie Taylor (Henry Fonda) and his wife, Joan (Sylvia Sydney), such as Eddie's bigoted boss, who fires him for tardiness when he takes an hour to house-hunt with Joan. As Tom Gunning writes, Lang depicts "American society as mimicking and reproducing the structure of a prison in its suspicious surveillance and inhuman maintenance of disciplinary protocols" (246). Eddie and Joan are the victims of a panoptic environment that prevents them from becoming like everyone else. Yet the film's ordinary citizens are also fascinated by crime and criminals: wanted posters are ubiquitous, an innkeeper keeps a stash of true-crime magazines, and the supporting players have envious

exchanges about the fugitives' allegedly luxurious lifestyle. Nor do allegedly law-abiding types really abide: a cop steals an Italian grocer's apple, and two gas station attendants pilfer money from the till, blaming the theft on Eddie and Joan. These ordinary folks fit the description given them by the bank robbers in Edward Anderson's contemporaneous novel (the source for *They Live by Night*): They are all "thieves like us." The law-abiding need outlaws to express their own antisocial urges, but repress their guilt by gleefully cooperating with the police.

After he is wrongly accused of an armored car robbery, Eddie stealthily approaches the house he and Joan have purchased and gazes at her through the window. After a cut, he is seen from inside the house, his face trapped within the window's box, cramped by cagelike bars. Although no longer physically in prison, Eddie is forever barred from the bourgeois domesticity he desires and hence has little choice but to create an alternate domestic space seemingly immune from the prejudices of those who condemn and glorify his exploits—in a car. Once the straight-arrow Joan, who works in a law office, picks up Eddie in the car she "borrows" from her boss, she becomes his accomplice. "We have a right to live," she proclaims, standing at the car door; in the next shot, she pumps stolen gas. The car's need for fuel acts as a metonymy for the lovers' need for freedom; it is as if automobility itself—the desire to elevate Eddie from the criminal class to the middle class—paradoxically pushes Joan into criminality. Although they try to pass as regular citizens, features such as the bullet holes in the car window "tell too much": the car remains associated with the criminal identities they cannot shed. After Joan (implausibly) delivers her own baby, their auto becomes their mobile home—complete with nursery, living room, and kitchen. Yet they still yearn for ordinary domesticity. "We were inside a house once, for a few minutes," Eddie recalls wistfully. "Lots o' people don't get to live inside a house." "Anywhere's our home," Joan replies. "In the car, out there on that cold star, anywhere's our home." But

their home is not mobile enough: After this conversation, Eddie drives into a roadblock. Gunfire pours through the back window, wounding and forcing them from their car, whereupon they both die. Narrow-minded people will always sacrifice those like Eddie and Joan, less for their criminal deeds than from envy of the threatening (anti-)social mobility and freedom symbolized by their speeding car.

Douglas Sirk's little-known *Shockproof* is a distaff version of the same story. In this story, Griff Marat (Cornel Wilde) is a parole officer in love with an ex-convict named Jenny Marsh (Patricia Knight), who cannot sever her tie to oily gambler Harry Wesson (John Baragrey). After Griff receives a mysterious phone call from Harry that ends in a gunshot, Griff picks up Jenny in his car. During the drive, she tells him that she accidentally shot Harry: here, as in several other noirs, the car serves as the engine of narrative itself.⁵ When she finishes her story, Griff turns both the car and himself around and takes Jenny on the lam. During their journey, cars become symbols of sexual license (although they allegedly marry in secret offscreen, this is an unconvincing nod to the Hays Office) and shifting identities. These two meanings ingeniously converge when Griff and Jenny steal two newlyweds' car, its hanging cans and "Just Married" sign covering the license plate. Although not literally a convertible, the car nevertheless represents their mobile identities: Jenny dyes her hair (back to its original brunette shade), and Griff assumes a *nom de guerre*. But the freedom to be anybody eventually turns them into nobodies, as illustrated by their increasingly humble modes of transportation: car, then bus, then freight train. Their downward flight briefly comes to rest in an oil driller's shack that, for Griff, definitively indicates that they are "living like pigs." Unable to bear the thought of a life of perpetual downward mobility, the lovers give themselves up. Griff unwittingly forecast this turn when earlier discussing a Western movie with his younger brother: Criminals, he explained, usually give up when "corrosion" sets in. When he decides to turn himself in,

Griff cites this line, suggesting that the lovers' flight has transmuted them into worn-out car parts. As in *You Only Live Once*, cars' amoral space devolves into amorphousness, and unending automobility becomes a traveling prison cell.

Nicholas Ray's *They Live by Night* opens with an overhead shot of a car holding three escaped convicts: young Bowie Bowers (Farley Granger) and his mentors Chicamaw (Howard Da Silva) and T-Dub (Jay C. Flippen). While fixing a flat tire, Bowie reveals his dream of owning a gas station with Keechie (Cathy O'Donnell), the daughter of another accomplice. At once Bowie's conscience ("fine company you're runnin' with," she admonishes, standing above him in the frame) and his motive for mobility, Keechie hopes to fix Bowie as he does the tire. But as an escaped convict with no money or prospects, Bowie has little choice but to drive the getaway car for his partners, who understand that cars embody their criminal identities and always burn their getaway cars after heists.

Soon, however, Chicamaw's reckless driving causes an auto wreck that injures Bowie, implicates him in two murders, and forces him temporarily to exit the motorway. Nursed back to health by Keechie, Bowie falls in love and marries her. Whereas Keechie's blossoming is blatantly displayed via flattering make-up and clothes, Bowie's rebirth is illustrated by his postnuptial car—a dashing convertible, which embodies his wish to convert from impoverished ex-convict to up-and-coming man about town. As in *You Only Live Once*, the convertible becomes a mobile home, complete with dining room and, of course, bedroom (Keechie soon becomes pregnant). After a final job results in the death of his cronies, Bowie and Keechie flee to New Orleans, where they try to impersonate ordinary newlyweds. But a sequence depicting their outing to a park and a nightclub (they are mystified by golf and disdain dancing) dramatizes their status as permanent outcasts. At evening's end, a chanteuse sums up their condition: they are just two kids in a "red wagon," she sings, and even if it's "all [their] own," it is going nowhere. Bowie, the song

continues, cannot forever use Keechie as his "spare tire," for eventually "you get burned when you play with fire." As in *You Only Live Once*, the end of automobility (here, in a motel) signals the end of the male's life (in the novel, both die). Their convertible provided only the illusion of transformation; its mobility was merely geographic, never social, and even that movement was circular. Little more than children, Bowie and Keechie were merely playacting in their wagon, briefly realizing a fantasy of rising from poverty.

Even more innocent than Ray's characters are truck driver Steve Randall (Steve Brodie) and his pregnant wife Anne (Audrey Long), in Anthony Mann's *Desperate*. Mann and cinematographer George Diskant underline this ingenuousness by juxtaposing the couple's bright apartment with the gloomy hideout of gangster Walt Radak (Raymond Burr), where a single bulb provides the only illumination. (In an eerily effective scene early in the film, Radak's men beat up Steve as the bulb swings, lending a nightmarish quality to his predicament.) The barriers between their worlds break down once Steve is enlisted to deliver "perishables" for Radak and is wrongly implicated in the murder of a policeman.

When he and Anne go on the lam, the car they drive is not a convertible but a beat-up jalopy. After offering to fix and then buy it for \$90, Steve is duped by a crooked dealer who, realizing Steve is probably in trouble, ups the price as soon as it is roadworthy.⁶ When Steve returns to persuade him to sell it, he finds the dealer gone and steals the car, which, initially representing the Randalls' marginal economic position and victimization, now embodies Steve's conversion into a shady character. Steve does not want to be converted; he wants to affirm his authenticity as an honest man. Unlike the other lovers on the lam, the Randalls thrive only when they stay put: while living with Anne's aunt and uncle, for example, Steve lands a new job, and the couple are remarried by a minister. Would they be better off eschewing upward mobility for rustic stability? Radak's appearance at the farmhouse (where the thugs' dark

trenchcoats, fedoras, and gangster argot jarringly contrast with the farm's rural domesticity) renders the question moot and forces another departure.

After Anne gives birth, the lovers formulate a plan entertained by many noir protagonist: to own a "filling" station.⁷ Popping the bottle into her baby's mouth, Anne fantasizes about "Steve Randall's gas station." But after sending Anne and the baby away to claim the station, Steve becomes the police's bait for Radak, who captures and arranges to kill Steve at the very moment Radak's brother is being executed for the cop's murder. Their tense wait for midnight to strike (punctuated by imposing Eisensteinian close-ups) is interrupted when a neighbor knocks on the door—to borrow cream. The contrast between domesticity and mobility, innocence and evil is thus presented in terms of fuel—milk versus gas. But despite abundant indications of his milky innocence, Steve dirties himself by killing Radak. The Randalls' dream of domesticity remains harnessed to the auto economy: They can provide milk for the baby only by selling fuel for others' cars. By the end of the film, these innocents have been soiled by road grime, infected by the auto's amoral space, altered by automobility.

Unlike Ray's or Mann's ingenues, lovers Bart Tare (John Dall) and Annie Laurie Starr (Peggy Cummins) in Joseph H. Lewis's sensational *Gun Crazy* never try to settle down. Unlike Keechie, who tries to dissuade Bowie from his criminal career, trigger-happy Laurie entices weak-willed Bart into ever more reckless capers: robbing diners, then hitchhiking to rip off lecherous male drivers. For them, cars are like guns—erotic machines that enable them to evade the fate embodied by Ruby (Anabel Shaw), Bart's sister, who represents (to Laurie) the living death of small-town domesticity (see Wager 101). They prefer the nearly infinite play of convertibility enacted during their crime spree, when they adopt a series of outrageous false identities and vehicles: In one scene, they wear conservative suits and glasses; in another, Bart dons his old Army uniform. In the film's most celebrated sequence—which unfolds for

three and a half minutes without a cut—the lovers sport ludicrous carnival cowboy outfits while robbing a bank. Lewis places the viewer in the backseat of their car as Bart and Laurie, like teens on their first date, make nervous conversation, and the camera remains in the car as Bart executes the robbery.⁸ Lewis thus makes the audience their passengers and accomplices, brilliantly evoking suspense and sympathy by inviting viewers to inhabit their amoral space. Indeed, as Laurie and the cop she encounters suggestively fondle their guns, the viewer becomes a voyeuristic partner in the lovers' erotic escapades. Their car is now both camera and gun: It not only moves—it shoots! Not surprisingly, their string of sedans and coupes ends with a convertible.

Although Bart professes his unwillingness to continue—"everything's going so fast, it's all in such high gear. It doesn't feel like me"—Laurie persuades him to pull one last heist. The lovers take straight jobs with Armour to rob the packing plant's safe, but the caper goes wrong when Laurie shoots two employees and ends in a striking sequence depicting the two racing through a refrigerated chamber filled with dangling carcasses. Jim Kitses reads this scene as a "caricature of the ideal of social mobility enshrined in the capitalist trajectory"(48–49), but it may also be Lewis's sardonic commentary on the lovers' consuming amorality, whereby other humans are merely carcasses serving a cold, hedonistic lifestyle in which, as Bart almost comically puts it later, "two people [are] dead just so we can live without working."⁹

The fugitives had originally planned to split up afterward and drive separate convertibles in different directions, but in the end, they cannot do it: Their car, after all, represents their bond and the incessant mobility that is the essence of being gun—and car—crazy. Despite their increasing violence, there is something childish about their attitude, an idea borne out during their final fling, when they ride a roller coaster and merry-go-round like youngsters out for a lark.¹⁰ But these vehicles move only in circles, just as their lam ends where it began—in Bart's hometown of Cash-

ville. Significantly, they have to hop a freight car to reach it, and even after they steal Ruby's car (not a convertible), they cannot escape their fate, one that seems the inevitable outcome of being gun—and car—crazy.

By portraying lovers who test their society's tolerance for extreme mobility, these lam films imply that the American dream of convertible identity can be lived only briefly, often at the cost of death. These lovers' pursuit of upward mobility through automobility is presented as a speed trap organized by a society that craves yet finally cannot abide the antisocial impulses of its young lovers. Despite the fugitives' challenges to the economic and social system that confines them, they cannot evade their own commodification as glamorous criminals in hurtling cars. Even so, the thrill of riding with Eddie and Joan, Griff and Jenny, Bart and Laurie, and Bowie and Keechie seems infinitely preferable to the pedestrian lives of Cora's husband and Bart's boyhood friends—and even, perhaps, to the compromised stability of the Randall family. If the lamming lovers' restlessness ends up imprisoning them, at least they felt briefly the rush of air on their faces, the passing delight in driving—indeed, being—convertibles. If they finally have no particular place to go, at least they have gone there fast.

Thumbing a Ride

The lamming lovers temporarily exercise freedom through automobility. The hitchhikers who figure in many films noir might seem even less encumbered. But hitchhiking is a dangerous game, according to Al Roberts (Tom Neal), the protagonist of Edgar G. Ulmer's brilliant B-film, *Detour* (1945). As Paul Cantor points out, this film "revolves around the automobile": Not only does much of the story take place during Al's thumbing trip from New York to LA but also his journey ultimately brings him to "two distinctively American automotive spaces: the used-car lot and the drive-in restaurant" (complete with those other archaic roadside icons, car hops: see Cantor 154). Like *Postman's* Frank, Al is a kind of picaro, a vagabond living on the edge of society.¹¹

Yet if Al's westward journey seems at first a plausible means of freeing him from his humiliating gig as a saloon piano player and a "perfect symbol of [American] mobility" (Cantor 154), actually Al merely trades one cell for another. The film sardonically parodies Depression-era tales of escape through westward movement by presenting Al's dream as a nightmare—as a "meaningless circle or trap" (Naremore 148; cf. Polan 270).¹² Owning (or driving) a car may generate a feeling of sovereignty and autonomy, but thumbing testifies to a lack of control: it is mobility without autonomy. Hitchhiking places Al at the mercy of drivers such as Charles Haskell (Edmund MacDonald), a big talker whose nice suit, wad of cash, and fancy convertible cannot save his life.

As Haskell sleeps, Al slides behind the wheel. He is not really driving, however; fate is. Haskell's untimely (although apparently natural) death in his convertible catalyzes Al's conversion from disgruntled musician to victim of destiny.¹³ After discovering that Haskell is dead, Al stands beside the car in a driving rain and makes the first of several tragically foolish decisions: to hide Haskell's body, then take his money and driver's license. It is almost as if the car forces the transformation: Had it not been a convertible, Al would not have had to stop to put up the top, Haskell would not have fallen out, may not have died, and Al might have fulfilled his original plan.¹⁴ But Al's new plan is foiled when he picks up the hitchhiking Vera (memorably played by Ann Savage), the "dangerous animal" responsible for the gruesome scratches Haskell earlier displayed, and a person who knows Al is not Haskell ("what kind of dames thumb rides?" he asked Al. "Sunday school teachers?"). Now Vera becomes Haskell's "ghostly reincarnation" (Naremore 149)—as if, Al states, he were "sitting right there in the car laughing like mad while he haunted me." Vera first demands that Al sell Haskell's convertible so they can avoid having it traced, but then arrives at a more ambitious scheme: to collect Haskell's inheritance from his dying father. Al will prove he is Haskell with—what else?—his car and driver's

license. Although they keep the convertible, Al still is not in the driver's seat and ends up (semi-accidentally) strangling Vera with a phone cord. Al's role as a hitchhiker—he is doing it again at the film's conclusion—determines his character: He will remain forever subject to the wishes of others, whether they are club patrons or conning car owners. Not everyone is truly convertible.

In *Detour*, hitchhiking subjects the thumber to vicissitudes of the road, whims of fate, and eruptions of coincidence. In most subsequent noir hitchhiking films, however, the roles are switched: The hitchhiker is an invader who seizes control of the car, thereby embodying the fears of postwar Americans—their terror of possible invasion and loss of freedom—as well as the recognition that their new prosperity cloaks a churning desire for lawlessness. In *The Devil Thumbs a Ride* (1947), for example, the handsome, gray 1941 convertible owned by traveling salesman Jimmy Ferguson (Ted North) seems to express his willingness to pursue the upward mobility—represented by Emerald Products (a line of ladies' lingerie)—urged on him by his wife. In contrast, the car represents the possibility of escape for Jimmy's hitchhiker, psychopathic robber and murderer Steve Morgan (Lawrence Tierney), as well as for the two women, Agnes (Betty Lawford) and Carol (Nan Leslie), who later hitch a ride with them. But the car apparently does not satisfy Jimmy, who is drunk throughout most of the film. Indeed, the ease with which Steve persuades Jimmy to let him take the wheel indicates a thirst for adventure running beneath Jimmy's ideal of conventional success; the convertible thus embodies Jimmy's unspoken desire to defy the law and live, like Steve, on the fly. This desire is played out after Steve—a much better salesman, in his way, than Jimmy—convinces him to hide at a friend's beach house, then punctures the car's tires to prevent their departure. After Steve murders Carol (who has learned that he is on the lam) and the sheriff appears, Steve uses the driver's license and car keys of Jimmy to convince the lawman that he is Jimmy. The doubling of the two characters thus

becomes explicit—Steve incarnates Jimmy's own lawless impulses—with the convertible again acting as catalyst.

Eventually, a detective (Harry Shannon) and Jack Kenny (Glen Vernon), a gas station attendant, expose the true identity of Steve, who is apprehended and killed, thereby restoring order. At the end, Jimmy's wife (Marian Carr) reveals that she is pregnant and drives the convertible home. But although the car now seems to indicate Jimmy's reconversion to uxorious husband and law-abiding lingerie vendor, its weaving progress in the concluding scene suggests that Jimmy's transgressive impulses are merely quiescent, liable to resurface as soon as he fails to please his grasping wife. Jimmy's convertible, first a sign of his mobility and then a vehicle for Morgan's, represents the instability of conventional values and the fragility of Ferguson's middle-class masculine identity.

The figure of the hitchhiker as a threat to middle-class values and masculinity appears even more forcefully in Ida Lupino's *The Hitch-hiker* (1953). This film begins with a precredit introduction establishing its veracity: "This is the true story of a man and a gun and a car. The gun belonged to the man. The car might have been yours—or that young couple across the aisle. What you will see in the next seventy minutes could have happened to you. For the facts are actual." By grounding the tale in documentary detail, the prologue heightens the eruptive force of the hitchhiker. What follows—a series of montages showing the hitchhiking psychopath Emmett Meyers (William Talman) at his deadly work—reinforces a sense that cars automatically generate the risk of invasion. The next sequence depicts the back of a Dodge convertible pulling up beside a man and picking him up. Darkness falls. A second car pulls up to the same man; gunshots sound, and a woman screams. The camera shows the hitchhiker's hand as he examines books and papers that have fallen from the car, then his walking feet. Another car picks up the hitchhiker, who appears again only as feet and hands. Finally, the viewer is riding with ordinary guys Gilbert Bowen (Frank

Lovejoy) and Roy Collins (Edmond O'Brien), who (without telling the folks at home) decide to take a detour from their fishing trip to gawk at the decadent sights in a Mexican border town. The introduction thus triangulates the characters: Meyers, who views human beings as body parts and objects of a kind of demonic automotive fishing, is the sinister alter ego of Bowen and Collins, whose outlaw urges are limited to guilty, giggling voyeurism.

Meyers seems to have been conjured to punish them for their foibles. As he rides in their back seat, his face pokes into the light, revealing a paralyzed eye and a pistol barrel: "Face front and keep driving," he snarls. With the gun and commandeered car, he now possesses the full trinity of masculine power. So armed, he proceeds ruthlessly to strip away the fishermen's defenses. First he plays humiliating mind games—forcing Bowen to shoot at a can Collins is holding. Then he mocks their values, calling them "suckers" who are "up to [their] neck in IOUs," and boasts that he "doesn't owe nobody," but just takes the things he wants. "I didn't need anybody. [. . .] If you got the knowhow and a few bucks in your pocket, you can buy anything or anybody. 'Specially if you got 'em at the point of a gun." A consummate individualist, he exposes the limitations of that venerated American ideal. In appropriating their car, Meyers robs them of the sense of sovereignty cars are designed to produce. They are now prisoners in their own car—ironically, a Plymouth, a brand named after an icon of American freedom. In short, Meyers stands as a grotesque exaggeration of the principles by which these men live. His power reaches its apex when Bowen and Collins try to escape, and Meyers finds them with the car's headlights. The point of view given him as he spotlights the men suggests that the car has indeed become his prosthesis, a mechanical extension of his evil eye. Meyers, in short, is a car, a Frankenstein's monster assembled from the prized technologies and ideologies of postwar America.

That Meyers, like *Detour's* Steve Morgan, also represents the fishermen's repressed subversive impulses is displayed when he forces Collins

to exchange clothes with him. Indeed, as the film proceeds, Collins—angry and embittered, dragging his left leg—comes more and more to resemble Meyers. Near the end of the film, he glowers at the hitchhiker and seethes, "You stink, just like your clothes. [. . .] You haven't got a thing except that gun. You better hang onto it, because without it, you're nothing." Later, he punches Meyers in the face while the police hold the fugitive. In this film, then, the car becomes a theater where the men stage a crisis of masculinity. By abducting them, Meyers forces them to discover previously hidden portions of themselves, to abandon the masks of civility they were not brave enough to discard on their own. Meyers's presence reveals that guns and cars, those prosthetics with which American males bolster their identities, are signs not of power but of anxious vulnerability. His ominous existence forces an inner conversion: a mobility that is not social but psychic.

Like *The Hitch-hiker*, Andrew Stone's *The Night Holds Terror* (1955) presents the hitchhiker as a synecdoche of lawlessness and the car as a masculine prosthesis, but links these qualities to an insecure economic status and to postwar technologies that entrap as much as they liberate. Here again an introduction establishes the factuality of events: an abduction perpetrated on the Courtier family in 1953 (a photo of the real-life family is even shown). When Gene Courtier (Jack Kelly) realizes that young Victor Gosset (Vince Edwards), who has thumbed a ride in his convertible, wants to rob him, he laments in voiceover: "Why, why had I stopped to give that guy a lift? I was taking a chance, I knew that. Yet nearly everybody's picked up a hitchhiker at one time or another. Haven't you?" Courtier's very friendliness (a quality, it is implied, shared by many American males) and his car's mobility and openness render him (and it) more subject to invasion.

Gosset has assessed Courtier's wealth from his car, but mistook his humble Mercury for a Lincoln. "You sure picked the wrong car," comments Courtier, who is carrying only \$10. The thugs—led by the intense Batsford

(John Cassavetes)—then force Courtier to sell the Mercury for the \$2000 he claims it is worth. Unfortunately, the dealer only remits \$500, and they must return the next day for the rest. They spend the night hiding out in the Courtiers' home, where Gosset makes a pass at Doris Courtier (Hildy Parks), and the others make free with his possessions—Batsford, for example, dons Courtier's smoking jacket. Equipped with a gun and Courtier's car, the thieves prove again that stealing a man's car is stealing his male identity. Relieved of these accouterments of masculine power, Courtier is reduced to sputtering ineffectuality.

The film thus presents automobility as inherently risky: The convertible that seemed to empower Courtier by displaying his affluence actually makes him more vulnerable. Nor is his car a ticket to the open road; instead, it signifies his confinement by domesticity and debt. Hitchhikers, in turn, are not merely criminals, but subversive forces who undermine and reveal the limitations of the values—autonomy, prosperity, domesticity—that cars are usually employed to represent. These hitchhikers and the cars they thumb down indeed embody the buried restlessness in the males who own them: Their desire to escape, to convert from, say, engineers (Courtier) or gas station owners (Collins) into lone wolves who owe nothing to anyone. The cars' amoral spaces do not appease the longing for freedom so much as fuel it: It is as if the cars drive them.

Bombing Around, or the Trojan Car

Like most pseudo-documentary noirs, *The Night Holds Terror* sides with law enforcement, stressing its mastery of surveillance technologies—radio, television, teletype—and control of information. The second half of the film thus tracks the police's attempt to apprehend the thugs without revealing their efforts (as usual, the outlaws have access to police radio frequencies). If the hitchhikers are frightening, however, there is something equally ominous about the police's panoptic power, which reaches all the way into the Courtiers' home to show mug shots to Doris. Also, Court-

ier was abducted while returning home from his job at an airbase, showing that he is already imbricated in this same system of information—that his car is merely the visible tip of a vast technomilitary complex that ends with bombs and missiles. If subversive forces such as hitchhikers can commandeer cars, they might also steal other, more dangerous technologies—as, in fact, the Russians had done a few years earlier. This association of automobiles and secret technologies becomes blatant in other postwar films noir, where cars are portrayed as Trojan horses—boons whose promise of freedom distracts citizens from the presence of more lethal technologies. In these films, cars are no longer merely guns; they are bombs.

In Raoul Walsh's *White Heat* (1949), for example, cars are associated with "heat"—with contained, automated combustion. By using cars in his crimes, gangster Cody Jarrett (James Cagney, in a legendary performance) would seem to participate in this mechanized world. But Cody produces heat of a different sort: Far from a machine, he is a force of nature, subject to severe headaches and explosions of temper, and requiring "an army of specialized equipment to get him cornered" (Shadoian 168). Indeed, Cody always seems hemmed in by machines, from the opening train-robbery sequence and the prison machine shop where he is nearly killed to his apocalyptic demise in an oil refinery. It makes sense, then, that the FBI trap him by using electronics technician Hank Fallon (Edmond O'Brien), who, as Vic Pardo, worms his way into Jarrett's confidence and ultimately turns off his power. Whereas Cody is ebullient, impulsive, and psychotic, Fallon/Pardo is canny, emotionless, and machine-like: an embodiment of technologies designed to dampen and smother outlaw impulses (Shadoian 169).

Nor are Cody's cars convertibles, for he is no youngster forced into crime by poverty, nor a working-class guy seeking to rise, but a hardened criminal who craves secrecy. For Cody, autos are hiding places. Thus, in one remarkable sequence, Cody; his wife, Verna (Virginia Mayo); and his (overly) beloved mother (Margaret Wycherly) take cover

in a drive-in movie (the film: *Task Force*), where Cody decides to turn himself in for a lesser crime to avoid a murder charge. Later, after his mother dies, he escapes from prison by hiding in a car's trunk. Although cars and trucks permit the gang to make bigger hauls and move from place to place, they also leave tracks that enable the police and FBI to apprehend them. Cars seem to be a criminal's best friend, but, like Pardo/Fallon, they are really Trojan horses.

These themes converge in the final sequence when Cody and the gang (explicitly citing the *Iliad*) hide inside an empty tanker to steal the refinery payroll. The scenes shot within the tank make Cody look small and cramped, suggesting that although he believes he is in charge, he is actually just a cog in Fallon/Pardo's machinations. He never suspects that his own Trojan horse has been signaling the police with a radio transmitter. Curiously, Fallon displays not even a hint of ambivalence about betraying a man he has come to know so well. Hence, whereas viewers may fear Cody's psychopathic violence, the audience roots for him over Fallon, who seems to embody the cold technologies used to exterminate the Cody Jarretts of the world. If the famous final apocalyptic explosion amidst the refinery's Hortonspheres alludes to the larger threat looming over the world—the atomic bomb—Cody seems less responsible for these explosions than the police who fan his white heat.¹⁵ Although Cody's heat is like the gas of a speeding automobile, the government's pervasive and intense heat—artificial, passionless, ubiquitous—might very well end in an all-consuming conflagration.

The apotheosis of noir's cars occurs in Robert Aldrich's adaptation of Mickey Spellane's *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), where the automobile's amoral space collides—almost literally—with new explosive technologies. Machines are everywhere in the world of the protagonist, "bedroom dick" Mike Hammer (Ralph Meeker), with his telephone answering machine and flashy MG convertible. From the opening scene, when the mysterious Christina (Cloris Leachman) flags Hammer down by standing

in the middle of the road and holding up her arms in an X-figure, the viewer seems to be riding in a speeding car. Even the opening titles crawl backward (from bottom to top) as if being read from the passenger's seat. If Christina is a kind of hitcher, so are the film's viewers, barely hanging on through the film's careening narrative, which (filled with odd camera angles, sequence shots, and strange characters) seems to swerve and dart like Hammer's car (Silver 209) as it drives ever closer to "The Great Whatsit," a radioactive device desired by a criminal gang led by the mysterious Dr. Soberin (Albert Dekker).

Hammer is far from a sympathetic hero: After nearly killing Christina by running her down, he callously responds, "You almost wrecked my car!" Christina immediately parses his entire personality: "You have only one real love [. . .] you. You're one of those self-indulgent males who thinks about nothing but his clothes, his car, himself [. . .] You're the kind of person who never gives in a relationship." As she astutely discerns, Hammer's car, far from signifying convertibility, instead embodies his hammerlike, inflexible character, which Jack Shadoian compares to a "hard rubber object" (222). A man who pimps out his girlfriend/secretary, Velda (Maxine Cooper), to catch wayward husbands and whose motto is "what's in it for me?," Hammer has accepted as *fait accompli* the commodification of everything. He has internalized the automobile's amoral space: agile but robotic, Hammer is his roadster.

Cars also symbolize the rootless amorality that pervades his world. Indeed, most of the film's characters act like automatons, in a Los Angeles that has mutated from the sleepy suburbia of *Double Indemnity* into a city filled with human bumper cars. As a mover's assistant puts it in the film, "people [. . .] never stand still." Hence traffic sounds are constant, even in interior scenes such as the eerie sequences set in the room of Lily/Gabrielle (Gaby Rodgers), whom Hammer interrogates and then attempts to aid. The soul-destroying hollowness of Hammer's Los Angeles exemplifies Anthony Giddens's descrip-

tion of modernity as “a runaway engine of enormous power which [. . .] we can drive to some extent but which also threatens to rush out of our control and which could rend itself asunder” (139). This engine is found inside the automobile, which is once again figured as a Trojan horse—a gift whose autonomy and mobility also engenders amorality and anomie. *Kiss Me Deadly's* cars thus signify a world where humans have become machines.

Hammer undergoes conversion, however, after Soberin's gang runs him off the road and nearly kills him. He symbolically dies twice more, once when the gang plants bombs in his new convertible and again when they drug him to learn what he knows of what Velda dubs “The Great Whatsit.” His cars symbolize this capacity for resurrection, this condition as what Nick, his mechanic (Nick Dennis), calls “Lazarus rose out from the grave.” Hammer has at least three lives: his life as a sleazy private eye, represented by his MG; his transition from roadster to quester, embodied by a convertible (probably a Jaguar) that he briefly drives; and his final, slightly more humanized self, symbolized by the Corvette convertible given as a phony peace offering by Soberin's gang. Another Trojan horse, this car carries two bombs, the first designed to explode on ignition and the second when the car reaches a certain speed. That would be a “sweet little kiss off,” explains Hammer to Nick, for whom cars and pretty women prompt identical expletives: “Va-voom! Pretty pow!” Pow indeed: cars are deadly weapons. Nick himself is murdered automotively when Soberin (identified only by his expensive shoes) releases the jack holding up a car on which Nick is working. Viewers are implicated in this murder through a brief shot taken, as it were, from the point of view of the falling car. From this point on, the viewer rides shotgun in Hammer's Corvette as he kills and tortures to avenge Nick's death and solve the mystery of the Great Whatsit.

The crucial item in this quest is a key that Christina conceals on her body before dying; it is the key to a locker, but it may as well be an ignition key, as the film suggests that cars are just the

leading edge of a continuum leading inexorably to the atomic bomb. Like the device inside the roaring, blinding, shining box—the “Great Whatsit”—that Gabrielle opens despite Soberin's warning, cars “change” everything. They even alter human bodies, as the film illustrates through its constant shots of detached hands, feet, and legs. Like the bomb itself—the result of splitting atoms—automotive technologies and the capitalism that sells them as expansions of selfhood instead convert human beings into aggregates of colliding parts. No longer mere convertibles, cars have become converters transforming people into atomized automatons. Cars and bombs are both Great Whatsits whose advanced technologies paradoxically expose our most primitive impulses—terror, violence, and greed. In *Kiss Me Deadly*, automobility fosters a restless amorality that ultimately consumes everyone.

In sum, noir's cars seem to speed us toward liberation, with a promise of automobility and convertibility; instead, they inevitably crash into roadblocks. Tracing an arc that mimics that of postwar American society and culture, they begin as an emblem of rebirth and a remodeled American dream, and later become vehicles for a set of disturbing, pervasive anxieties—the mixed desire for and dread of a convertibility that is almost invariably smothered by envy and amorality. The machines that seem to liberate and expand us actually render us vulnerable both financially (we incur debt to “own” our cars and houses) and physically (by subjecting us to invasion and violence that may end in a conflagration). In these films, the world has become a speeding car. But who, the films ask, is really in the driver's seat?

NOTES

1. *Double Indemnity* was among the first group of American films screened in France after the war (a collection that also included *The Maltese Falcon*; *Murder, My Sweet*; and *Scarlet Street*), which prompted critic Nino Frank to coin the term *film noir*.

2. Fotsch observes that insurance company profits expanded immensely as car accidents became common (105), and *Double Indemnity* exploits this trend, deriving its premise from an insurance policy clause. Cars need insurance, and insurance encour-

ages the desire to “crook the system,” as Walter declares: “murder and insurance are part of the same game.” Further, in the James M. Cain novel on which the film is based, there is an elaborate auto-switching scheme in which Walter (named Huff in the book) attempts to murder Phyllis and pin it on her stepdaughter Lola's boyfriend (and Phyllis's lover), Nino Sacchetti, by using Sacchetti's car as a sign of his identity. See Cain, *Double Indemnity* 87–95.

3. Twin Oaks is one of the innumerable roadside diners in noir films—establishments that, like full-service “filling” stations, are now obsolete features of highway culture.

4. Wieder and Hall, as well as Vose, illustrate how the convertible was branded to appeal to a sense of youthful rebellion and depicted in contemporary advertisements as an emblem of upward mobility.

5. In *Out of the Past*, for example, Robert Mitchum's Jeff Markham (aka Bailey) relates the story of his compromised past as a detective and employee of gambler Whit Sterling (Kirk Douglas) to his innocent girlfriend during a long drive from Bridgeport to Whit's home at Lake Tahoe.

6. The used-car dealer in lam films epitomizes the law-abiding thieves who judge others. Selling overvalued or worthless autos, they also reveal the sellers' market that dominated the immediate postwar period (when, because of wartime production curbs, anything on wheels could fetch a price) and prey on the belief in automobility as a path to social mobility. For a discussion of the postwar automobile market, see Rae, *Brief* 161–77 and *American Automobile Industry* 99–109.

7. In addition to *They Live by Night's* Bowie Bowers, Swede in *The Killers*, and Jeff in *Out of the Past* also express this desire. Jeff is, however, the only one who achieves it, albeit not for long, for when Whit's henchman, Joe Stefanos, drives into Jeff's gas station in his shiny convertible, he draws Jeff back into his mobile past.

8. For details about how this scene was conceived and shot, see Bogdanovich 675–77.

9. Shadoian similarly reads the carcasses as “an emblem of the employees at the Armour plant and all sodden adherents to bourgeois homogeneity” (135).

10. Kitses even likens the film's “head-long narrative design” to the loops and rolls of a carnival ride (36).

11. Lackey notes how often the picaro figure appears in American road narratives (8). However, these American vagabonds, at least those who populate films noir, lack the wit and resourcefulness of their continental counterparts.

12. Al's fate bears out David Laderman's point that American naturalist fiction, in which characters are at the mercy of huge, implacable forces such as the environment,

heredity, or poverty, are also important precursors to films noir such as *Detour* and *They Live by Night*.

13. Andrew Britton's reading of Al as an "obtuse and pusillanimous egotist" (179) that the audience should not support misreads Tom Neal's portrayal of Al as a passive (albeit dim) victim of circumstance.

14. Laderman claims that the rain is the narrative catalyst for Al's discovery of Haskell's death (32), but it is more in keeping with the film's automotive theme to see with the car as the engine of fate.

15. For an extensive discussion of nuclear fear in certain films noir, including *White Heat* and *Kiss Me Deadly*, see Osteen.

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