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Economies of Desire: Reimagining the Noir Genre in Nicholas Ray's They Live By Night

Ria Banerjee

Film noir is a genre of insiders. The twisted male protagonist, the femme fatale, the mob boss and the two-bit criminal are recognisable stock figures from genre-defining films like Double Indemnity (1944), The Maltese Falcon (1941), and Criss Cross (1949), where these and other characters are knowing participants in the social codes of their diegetic world. Rarely does a noir begin like Nicholas Ray's first feature film They Live By Night (1947), with the assertion that the two main characters have not been "introduced" to the depicted story world. Evil, the consciousness of which suffuses such a world, comes from characters' familiarity with its rules and any attempts to leave crime behind ends in a failure to recapture their own lost innocence. The legitimate, domestic life—depicted so well in another Ray film, In a Lonely Place (1950) in the couple Brubb and Sylvia—remains a problematic and contested space that is at once alluring to the stock noir figure, but also repellent as a symbol of the passivity and boredom of a legitimate union. They Live By Night is unique in this regard,ⁱ as Keechie and Bowie radically reconceptualise what it means to operate as a couple within the noir world. They hope for an escape—not with the desperate, cold sweat of Walter Neff and Phyllis Dietrichson in Double Indemnity, but with the fey insouciance usually associated with a romance. Never "introduced" to noir, they operate outside its conventions and upend the assumptions associated with noir love. Closeness drives apart Cora Smith and Frank Chambers in The Postman Always Rings Twice (1946), but Bowie and Keechie's closeness is tangibly strong and sets up an alternate economy of desire that only admits the couple. By contrasting the "must be"s of noir with the "could be"s uttered by the lovers, the movie presents an alternate system where desire is not always

damaging and hope is not eternally hollow. The film's greatest achievement is to do this without ever abandoning the cinematic conventions of noir, and the heightened tragedy of Bowie and Keechie lies in the final reassertion of the dictates of the genre.

Accidents of Release: They Live By Night's Production History

Avoiding censorship was only one of the problems faced by Ray in making this movie. In February 1946, the producer John Houseman came upon a treatment of Edward Anderson's novel Thieves Like Us (1937), which had been previously rejected by the Code offices. Thinking this project, "a Woody Guthrie song in cinematic form" (McGilligan 117), might be interesting to his friend, Houseman offered Nick Ray the chance to work it into a script that would get past the censors. In August 1946, the Production Code rejected Ray's treatment as "'unacceptable' and 'enormously dangerous,' in large part because of the 'flavor of condonation' attached to the character of the young criminal Bowie." Further, "Joseph I. Breen... [wrote] a letter condemning Ray's adaptation as 'invidious'" (McGilligan 120). The Production Code could not stomach the overarching sense of complicity and guilt which the script highlighted, nor the way it pinned Bowie and Keechie's predicament on rents in the social fabric rather than a result of their individual moral failings.

The year 1946 was the beginning of the end of the Golden Age of Hollywood cinema, when escapist fantasies were no longer doing well with audiences but "problem" pictures and film noirs began to do better (McGilligan 125; Harvey ix). The gangster became "the 'no' to that great American 'yes'... stamped so big over [the] official culture and yet has so little to do with the way we view our lives" (Warshow qtd. in Christopher 102). For Frank Miller, this sense of

off-kilter instability reflects the frustration of returning GIs, the sense that “everything ended badly, even if you won” (commentary, Film Noir). It is no accident that so many noir protagonists are war veterans (including Dixon Steele from Ray’s In a Lonely Place which would come out a few years later); in an interesting metatextual twist, They Live By Night was also Farley Granger’s first movie after his discharge from the war. The prevailing mood across the country was dark, and low-budget genre films seemed to be fulfilling the mimetic functions of art vis-à-vis life by centring their diegetic worlds at a nexus between robbery, murder, gambling and prostitution. “They Live by Night came about as a result of [the producer] Dore Schary’s wanting to try to make a series of low-budget films with new directors” (Kreidl 27) which also included Dmytryk’s Crossfire and Losey’s The Boy with the Green Hair (1948). The intention was to make a simple B-grade revenue-earner by capitalising on the emerging popularity of noir.

What followed was anything but quick and easy. After the first round of rejection by the Code office, Charles Schnee, a former lawyer, was called in to work on Ray’s 196-page script to pare it down and soften its tone. In June 1947, after many changes, cuts, and over a year of editing and revisions, the Production Code office tentatively approved the film. Its working title, “Your Red Wagon” was changed to “The Twisted Road,” and remained thus during filming. However, Howard Hughes’ takeover of RKO meant that the new management was wary of older projects, and it was another year before They Live By Night was finally renamed and readied for release. David Thomson, The Guardian film critic and a friend of Ray’s, blames Hughes for the delay: “RKO owned They Live By Night, and Howard Hughes owned RKO and didn’t know what to do with the film” (1999, 4). It is something of a miracle that the movie was eventually released, and Nicholas Ray must be among those few directors whose first film came after his second and third productions hit screens, premiering in London in the spring of 1949.

Kreidl notes that “[s]uch accidents of release dates often have strange positive or negative effects on the careers and reputations of directors; but in Ray’s case it seems to have worked to his benefit as the simultaneous appearance of They Live By Night and Knock on Any Door gave him the immediate reputation of being skilled in showing both sensitivity and toughness” (27). European audiences swooned over this and subsequent films such as Bitter Victory (1957), with Truffaut calling Ray a “poet of nightfall” (qtd. in Thomson 2003, 16). One of the most oft-cited bits of criticism about Ray’s work also from this period is Jean-Luc Godard’s 1958 proclamation in Cahiers du cinema that “[t]here was theatre (Griffith), poetry (Murnau), painting (Rossellini), dance (Eisenstein), music (Renoir). Henceforth there is cinema. And the cinema is Nicholas Ray”ⁱⁱ (qtd. in Thomson 2003, 16). Critical appreciation often compares Ray’s debut to another landmark first feature film by a midwestern American director, Citizen Kane (1941), although Ray was ten years older than his more famous contemporary. The Guardian calls They Live By Night “finest American directorial debut after Citizen Kane” (2007, 7), and McGilligan admits that the comparison was not far from Ray’s own mind while filming, spurring his determination to make a movie that was just as good as the earlier.

The resulting movie is a mixed bag of surprises: while never achieving the formal stylistic heights of Welles’ masterwork, They Live By Night radically reshapes any simplistic conception of the noir genre. Cinematically perhaps less heavily stylised, it nonetheless contains the first aerial shots ever taken from a helicopter: in the opening shot, it follows the three escaped convicts travelling down the road on a sunny day in their getaway car, the blades of the helicopter blowing their hair and clothes around as if in a gale. Neil Jordan, who cites They Live By Night as the first movie that made him want to become a filmmaker himself, notes the “rainy eroticism” of a scene between Bowie and Keechie in the barn, and the technical innovation of the

tight, claustrophobic framing that Ray observed being used in newspaper comic strips. But Jordan's highest praise is for that marvellous opening shot: "Ray just came in and said 'We're going to get a helicopter,' as if it was perfectly normal" (Donaldson 2003, 10). Biographers note that this combination of an easy manner and a radical, engaged mind was one of the hallmarks of this director.

Thematically too, in They Live By Night perhaps for the first time, the noir style is drenched in the conditional. Bowie and Keechie are young, but their fight is not only a romantic desire to leave the world of their drunk and degenerate relatives. At each stage of their journey, they ask what the other wants, if the other will stay, if the other will continue to love them—and at each stage they enact their desire with the reply, "I want to." Their repeated use of this mode of question and answer creates a linguistic code whose rules are not shared by the noir world at large so that, "[i]n each case, these films strive toward a resolution, no matter how painful, rather than move rigidly toward a foregone conclusion, as in a classic film noir" (Kreidl 30). By basing each step on such an affirmation of desire, Bowie and Keechie create an alternate economy of desire that is very different from the usual noir collation of desire with lust and criminality. As the next section will show, film noir often uses the metaphor of railway tracks to indicate how the central couple are on a journey from which they cannot diverge; Bowie and Keechie, living out of a second-hand convertible, asking and replying to each other, clear for a brief moment an alternative space from that iron-girdered determinism.

Hope and the Economy of Desire in They Live By Night

In almost every film noir, everyday existence is tedious and deadening. Characters routinely refer to the world outside the noir circle as a place ideal for the criminal to hide in, but ultimately dissatisfactory. When Keechie first meets Bowie, he tells her if he “wasn’t so hot,” he would like to open up a small filling station and garage somewhere. His desire is not unique, as noir protagonists often long for the quiet life they cannot have. Keechie, thinking that she sees right through Bowie, tries to explode his romantic idealisation of life on the right side of the law: “It’d be too slow for you. You want to live your life fast. You don’t know what you want.” She would have been right, if Bowie had been the typical noir hero whose ambivalence towards ordinary life compels a move towards the illicit or illegal, as with Walter Neff or Professor Richard Wanley in Lang’s The Woman in the Window (1944). But Bowie is atypical just as Keechie herself is, her sexual desire for Bowie markedly different from the barroom loves of the formulaic femme fatale.

In the standard noir tale, the blossoming of love is short-lived and intense, and once the crime has been committed, the couple finds itself facing an inalterable structure of retribution without a means of escape. As Barton Keyes (played by Edward G. Robinson) tells his protégé in Double Indemnity, it’s not like taking “a trolley ride together where each one can get off at a different stop. They’re stuck with each other. They’ve got to ride all the way to the end of the line.” The criminal act which was so transgressive at first becomes yet another preordained trajectory in a humdrum existence, and the boredom and dissatisfaction that haunted the couple at the beginning of the plot reassert themselves. The relationship falls apart as trust crumbles, ending with the ultimate resolution: death. Even an early noir like Dead Reckoning, whose ending points to the “relentless determinism” (Palmer 36) of the typical noir plot, equates safety and security with boredom, and crime with thrill.

They Live By Night simultaneously reiterates this idiom and distances itself from it. As noted previously, the most crucial difference is indicated in the opening sequence itself, which shows Keechie and Bowie smiling at each other as if in their own private world, with the scrolled words: “This boy...and this girl...were never properly introduced to the world we live in.” The film later implies this might be caused by the circumstances of their childhood, but more crucial than the question why, is the consideration of what “world” is being invoked. Although Bowie’s interaction with the extant world is limited because of his time in jail, his inexperience seems to be chiefly of a sexual nature. Keechie, too, is repeatedly described as a level-headed girl who can manage as required; the gaps in her knowledge are also related to the things “most girls” like to do with their “fellas”: Bowie is not Sam Spade, and Keechie no Brigid O’Shaughnessy. The use of the word “introduce” in the opening sequence thus carries with it the implication of a special type of society—and indeed, it is not that Keechie and Bowie harbour any illusions about the noir world of their fathers (mothers are all but absent here), but that they remain unaffected by it. Through Keechie, Bowie realises that his jail-bred dependence on T-Dub and Chickamaw is a snare, and with her, he creates a new world whose idiom is different from that of the “world” of the film. The rules of this noir world are not unclear to them; instead, and more problematically, they are immaterial to the lovers.

This difference asserts itself linguistically at the outset when they first meet. Bowie’s bad foot means that he has to stay behind while Chickamaw and T-Dub carry on to the Mobley house to find shelter (the drunk Mobley is Chickamaw’s brother and Catherine’s father). They send Keechie in an old pickup truck to go get the boy, who has been hiding behind some shrubs. Hearing her engine stalling, Bowie approaches to see a figure almost entirely obscured by a large hat. Indeed, the first time Cathy O’Donnell appears on screen she is in such heavy shadow that

she is unrecognisable, and her small angular silhouette looks almost masculine. The conversation that follows is worth repeating, both for its verbal acrobatics and the tart sweetness of their first exchange:

Bowie: You having trouble?

Keechie: Could be.

Bowie: Who are you? You live around here?

Keechie: Could be.

Bowie: You haven't had a couple of visitors lately, have you?

Keechie: That wouldn't be a sore foot making you limp, would it?

Bowie: Could be.

Keechie: I got some other stuff to pick up. Get in or we'll both get pneumonia.

Noir dialogue typically falls on the ear like staccato hail, a breathless exchange that formally reflects the tense nature of the genre. This small snippet is certainly clipped, but Keechie's calm repeated "could be"s have a hypnotic rhythm which Bowie, by the end, catches and repeats.

This conditional tense is not normally part of the noir idiom. In the typical noir, there is no "could be" about trouble, and characters are fully "introduced" and integrated into the diegetic world. But in They Live By Night, this and subsequent speeches clear a space which the two characters inhabit alone, separate from their drunken fathers and uncles, even distanced from the deceitful Mattie and other female bit-roles. These two enjoy each other's company with a familiar openness and gladness. Their sexual relationship, clearly asserted by Keechie's pregnancy, is similarly removed from the night club atmosphere that is inherent to the sensuality of the femme fatale. Alcohol, often used in noir as a marker of a certain kind of hard living, is

entirely absent from their lives. Bowie has a gun (and one can't forget that he actually killed a man at sixteen, when running with a carnival), but he is clearly not comfortable using it; the pair even buy a pale-coloured convertible which stands in stark contrast to the ubiquitous black town car used by criminals in this and other noirs.

With these key indications as markers of their otherness, Keechie and Bowie distance themselves from the entire represented world in the film. As mentioned before, the typical noir world holds itself in opposition to the other, larger humdrum one; here, that distinction is collapses. People walking in the park or riding horses or playing golf are just as immaterial to the lovers as Chickamaw and T-Dub. Once in the city, Keechie and Bowie decide to make a day of it by going out to eat “just like other people”—echoing that distance that noir insists on between those inside and “other people” outside this world. However, once they are outside, seeing people riding, Bowie wonders, “Why do they do it, they're not going anyplace!” Seeing some people playing golf, he again says, “That's something else I never could figure, how anybody could get interested in patting a little ball around!” Keechie laughs, “If they stood on their heads it wouldn't bother me, if they were having a good time.” Bowie keeps musing: “People sure do act funny, though. You having a good time?” Keechie replies, “Such a good time.” This seemingly banal exchange late in the movie actually marks how complete their personal system of signification is, and how little they are interested in understanding “people.” Not only are they unlike the criminals of the noir world (a little later, the mob boss who runs the supper club easily outmanoeuvres Bowie and demands he leave the restaurant), they also mark themselves distinct from the world at large. Suddenly, the carefully-wrought distinction between “worlds” disappears and the sunny law-abiding larger world is exposed as being fully implicated in the seedy noir subculture.

It is worth noting that even in their first conversation, neither Keechie nor Bowie sounds tentative or hesitant: the space that opens up between them is not evanescent, nor is it convulsive in the way that noir relationships most often are. Here, there is no sense of doomed escape that haunts all noir protagonists, the sibilant whisper of failure egging on the likes of Fred MacMurray's Walter Neff or Robert Mitchum's Jeff in Out of the Past. For a brief while, it seems like Bowie and Keechie will succeed at running away from the deterministic noir end, because they don't try to subvert the inevitable but sidestep it completely. They remain fundamentally innocent even though they are not childish or uncomprehending.

Keechie and Bowie's ability to manipulate significations and alter meanings runs deep. In their private world, the connotations of objects change, such as in the case of the watch from Zelton. Bowie buys a watch for Keechie as part of the ruse to get inside and learn the layout of the Zelton Bank, which he then helps rob. He only has the chance to give Keechie her present after he gets into a car accident and Chickamaw delivers him, hurt, back to her for safekeeping. The watch, already a stereotypical present from a "fella" to his "girl" as well as the reminder of a crime, should have carried a doubly negative association—Keechie and Bowie are not in any normal relationship, and knowledge of his crime turns her into an accessory and puts her in significant danger. But instead of this, the lovers turn the watch into a symbol of their special relationship. Before giving it to her, Bowie says, "I bought something for you there in Zelton. It's a little ol' watch. Do you want it?" Keechie replies in their characteristic idiom: "Do you want to give it to me?" When he replies "Yes," in all seriousness, she smiles, "Then yes, I want it." Gift-giving, normally an insidious and unidirectional imposition of coded social behaviour (the gift-giver is rarely asked if they want to give a gift; their right to give a gift is mostly taken

for granted), is turned here into a series of questions, a sequence of happy conditionals. Instead of setting the time to any other clock, they even decide to change time:

Bowie: What time do the hands say?

Keechie: Five minutes to two.

Bowie: That's close enough.

Later, Keechie also buys Bowie a watch for Christmas. Then too, they don't match the hands of the watch to an external timepiece, but intend to set it to match each others. We are never told if Bowie actually does set the time on his watch; subsequent events put all thought of watches out of the couple's heads.

Sylvia Harvey points out that in film noir "the expression of sexuality and the institution of marriage are at odds with one another, and... both pleasure and death lie outside the safe circle of family relations" (qtd. in Christopher 190). In They Live By Night, this paradigm is reversed in an interesting way. Although Bowie and Keechie are married in the film at a twenty-dollar wedding hall (a move made partially to placate the Censor Board that repeatedly found the film script "unacceptable" and full of too much "loose sex") enough hints remain to suggest that the two were intimate previously. Further, Bowie's sour expression prompts Hawkins, the officiator, to observe that the young man doesn't seem to approve of the service he provides. Although getting married has been his own idea, Bowie immediately agrees that he finds the marriage hall a cheap and tawdry place. Hawkins, unmoved by Bowie's disapproval, explains, "My way of thinking, folks ought to have what they want. 'Long as they can pay for it." Hawkins sees himself as providing a service for people who need it, selling a little bit of hope that people are willing to pay for. Hawkins, in other words, is the consummate shopkeeper who

sells an idea more than the product itself, and in keeping with the stereotype, he inhabits the liminal space between the noir world and the world of “other people.”

Keechie and Bowie, though, are not really buying the same thing that he is selling: after they are officially declared man and wife, Keechie throws herself into a kiss with her new husband with a romantic abandon that looks completely out of place in their situation and their own recognition of it. Her gesture returns them to a private space, one that they continue to inhabit even after they have left the seclusion of their lodging house for a small bed-and-breakfast in the city. But Hawkins recurs at a crucial juncture, when Bowie asks for help running away to Mexico. The latter refuses to help him despite the pile of money offered him:

Hawkins: Maybe I did help you before, but not now. I believe in helping people get what they want as long as they can pay for it. I marry people 'cause there's a little hope that they'll be happy. But I can't take this money o' yours. No, sir. In a way I'm just a thief the same way you are, but I won't sell you hope when there ain't any.

Bowie: No chance?

Hawkins: None at all.

Bowie: No place for her and me?

Hawkins: I don't know of any, son.

Hawkins is money-minded, driven by convenience, keeps to letter of the law and is not averse to underhandedness when it suits him, and in all this he exactly reflects the characteristics of the “world” to which Bowie and Keechie have not been “introduced.” Hope is what Mary Astor's Brigid O'Shaughnessy desperately clings to, until Sam Spade sends her on her very last trip to the police station. Brigid recognises the falseness inherent in her hope even as she

simultaneously refuses to let it go: and this is the type of hope that a man like Hawkins sells. Because Bowie and Keechie are looking for something more real, their hope cannot be realised within the filmic world.

The pathos of their situation deepens because Keechie and Bowie so easily sustain their alternate idiom and believe, until perhaps the very end, that they will continue to do so. However, they fundamentally misapprehend the situation they are in. Bowie carries on his person, at all times, a little pouch that contains a paper clipping that T-Dub had given him in jail. It reports that a criminal was freed by the Supreme Court because there was “no due process of law.” Bowie doesn’t seem to understand what the legal phrase means, and instead is convinced that he could see a lawyer in Tulsa who would get him out of his jail sentence. Even Keechie is prey to a similar misunderstanding—pleading with him not to go on a second heist, she says that there are people who run away from the law and hide for years, and are later forgiven for their law-abiding ways. Any audience of noir is unlikely to believe such stories, and the couple’s sidestepping of the noir ethos cannot save them from such a misreading of legal idiom.

The conventions of film noir reassert themselves through the appearance of Chickamaw and T-Dub, who force Bowie to do one last job. T-Dub says to Bowie when they reconvene, “The way things are, we gotta keep right on going,” in a speech that recalls Barton Keyes’ famous lines from Double Indemnity quoted earlier. When the young man replies, “Not me,” and prepares to walk out, T-Dub drops his avuncular manner and snaps, “So to speak, you’re an investment. And you’re gonna pay off.” T-Dub is the rough obverse of the smoothly polished Hawkins, who also sees the world in similar monetary equations. With the burly Chickamaw standing behind, T-Dub slaps Bowie repeatedly, saying, “You hear me?” At first Bowie resists but eventually is forced to reply, “I hear ya,” and looks away. The scenario is a reversal of that

first conversation with Keechie in the shadowy truck: here, under the harsh indoor light, these two stock noir characters reassert the rules of the genre, the “world,” which the lovers have thus far circumvented. There must be no more “could be”s; the deterministic universe reasserts itself and continues to the foretold end.

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ⁱ Indeed, some critics would class They Live By Night as a “road movie” rather than a noir. This catch-all genre is built around the idea that “it’s the journey itself that matters, as the people, landscapes and experience the voyager encounters along the way lead him to a kind of self-discovery” (Stephen Harvey, MoMA Department of Film; see also Michael Atkinson, “Crossing the Frontiers” in Sight and Sound and David Laderman, “What a Trip: The Road Film and American Culture” in Journal of Film and Video). Ray’s first film is also often discussed in light of Bonnie and Clyde (1967) as a heist film, which further distances it from noir, or following Kreidl, as a tragic romance. I would argue, however, that genres are reinforced by those alternate depictions that question the established modes, such as in They Live By Night.

ⁱⁱ The ubiquitousness of the comment might be evident in the fact that when Toronto’s Bell Lightbox decided to do a Ray retrospective in 2011, they named the series “Classics: The Cinema is Nicholas Ray.” This effusive praise was not universal: Sight and Sound’s Penelope Houston caustically asked in print, “Ray or Ray?” referring to Satyajit Ray’s Pather Panchali (1955), which debuted at Cannes in 1956.