

# URBAN CONFIDENTIAL

## the lurid city of the 1950s

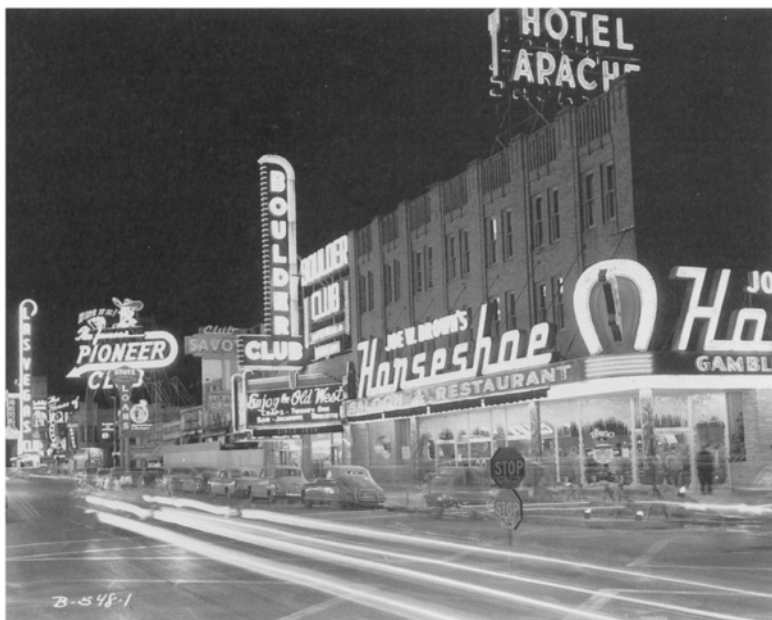
**Will Straw**

### INTRODUCTION

The first few minutes of *New Orleans After Dark* (1957) offer one of the most glaringly inept opening sequences in the American cinema of the 1950s. As the film begins, prior to the appearance of its credits, we are shown a woman in a nightclub, singing at a piano. As she sings—a song whose lyrics inventory the range of human types to be found along New Orleans' Bourbon Street—we see a montage of images plucked from the narrative which follows, most of them involving violence against female burlesque dancers. Before the song's conclusion, the film shifts to an oddly flat, stagy interior tableau in which a policeman bids farewell to his wife and son before heading off to the night shift. A voice-over notes that “[t]his film could be about dedicated police officers anywhere.” Brief, on-location images of downtown New Orleans follow, themselves succeeded by scenes of brief banter between patrolmen and a streetwalker; already our sense of chronology has become confused. Over more scenes of the street, the words of the film's title and credits are superimposed, in lettering which recalls the typescripts used in scandal magazines of the time. As the credits conclude, we move into a burlesque club, and into what we may assume is the beginning of the film's narrative.

The generic threads interwoven here suggest, simultaneously, the traditions of the semi-illicit stag film, the police procedural, the semi-documentary instruction film, the vice expose movie and the low-budget mystery. Each of these had assumed a relative solidity, in the cinema of the 1950s, as recognizably distinct means of representing the American city. In the confusion which results from their mixing, they identify *New Orleans After Dark* as the symptom of a transition—one in which the distinctiveness of these generic traditions, and of the industrial structures which sustained them, was beginning to dissolve. What remains is the sense of *New Orleans After Dark* as an obscure, marginal film, a sign of the decaying of several threads within the postwar American cinema in which the city had been prominent.

*New Orleans After Dark* is one of the last of a cycle of American films which began in the early 1950s and had concluded by the end of the decade. The

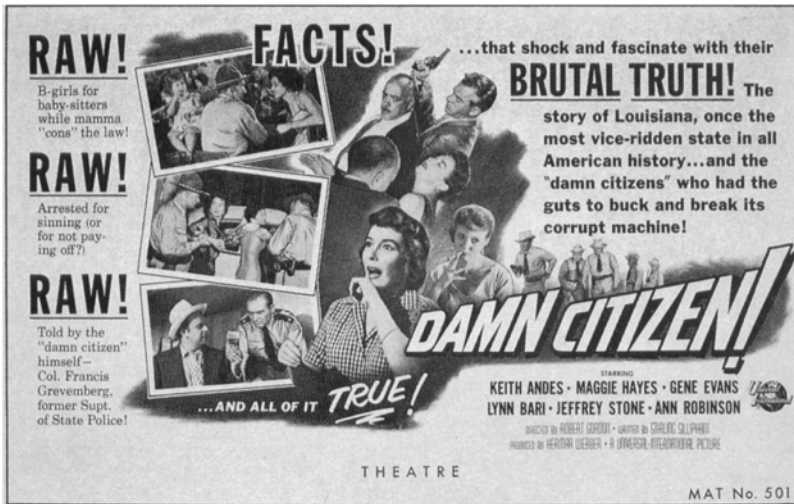


### 5.1 Las Vegas Shakedown (Allied Artists, 1955)

Courtesy of BFI Stills, Posters and Designs.

titles of these films named cities and promised the revelation of secrets about them. Others in this cycle include *The Phenix City Story* (1955), *Portland Expose* (1957), *New Orleans Uncensored* (1955), *Kansas City Confidential* (1952), *New York Confidential* (1955), *Las Vegas Shakedown* (1955; Plate 5.1), *The Houston Story* (1956) *Chicago Syndicate* (1955), *Miami Expose* (1956) and *Inside Detroit* (1955). Most of these films claimed, in their opening sequences or in the posters which advertised them (Plate 5.2), some link to a real-life investigation of municipal vice and corruption.<sup>1</sup> Their narratives, nevertheless, are secondary to their cataloguing of vice, and to the formal organization of these films as sequences of scenes in night-clubs, gambling dens and along neon-lit streets. (Indeed, as the cycle winds down, by 1958 or 1959, the frequency of journalistic tie-ins declines.)

This cycle of city expose films was inspired, in its initial phases, by the Senate hearings on municipal corruption chaired by Senator Estes Kefauver of Tennessee. By the time of *New Orleans After Dark*, the influence of that political event persists only in the practice of incorporating city names in a film's title, and in a brief reference to a grand jury investigation of a narcotics racket. However, that film is inseparable from the backdrop of a culture of urban exploitation and expose which flourished in the middle years of the decade. As a nocturnal, urban crime film, *New Orleans After Dark* is one moment in the unravelling of *film noir*, but this is *noir* after the major studios, prestige stars and canonical directors have left. Like many of the films in this cycle, *New Orleans After Dark* was shot on location,



## 5.2 One of the posters advertising *Damn Citizen*

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and some of its principal characters were played by non-professional locals, including members of the New Orleans police force. (This film's poster claims that it was "[f]ilmed in the sin spots where it happened!") These elements situate *New Orleans After Dark* within a lineage which reaches back to *The House on 92nd Street* (1945) or *13 Rue Madeleine* (1946), but the status of these semi-documentary elements has by now shifted. Originally the mark of a moral seriousness, they now stand for the obscurity of production conditions, for the move towards regionalist, exploitative film making practices which will continue throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s.

### “THE REST ARE ALL CLEVELAND”

The popular culture of the US has, of course, been marked by recurrent cycles of urban expose—of literary, journalistic or other works in which one finds a variable balance between the ameliorative impulse towards documentation and the exploitative imperative to produce moments of textualized sensation.<sup>2</sup> The cycle which concerns us here turns on the term “confidential,” a term which moves to the centre of popular cultural discourse through a series of expose books published (and sold in large numbers) in the decade following the Second World War. As it circulates, the term will be one (albeit disputed) influence on the hearings of a judicial committee of investigation, will provide the title for the most successful new magazine of the 1950s, and will nourish a series of films

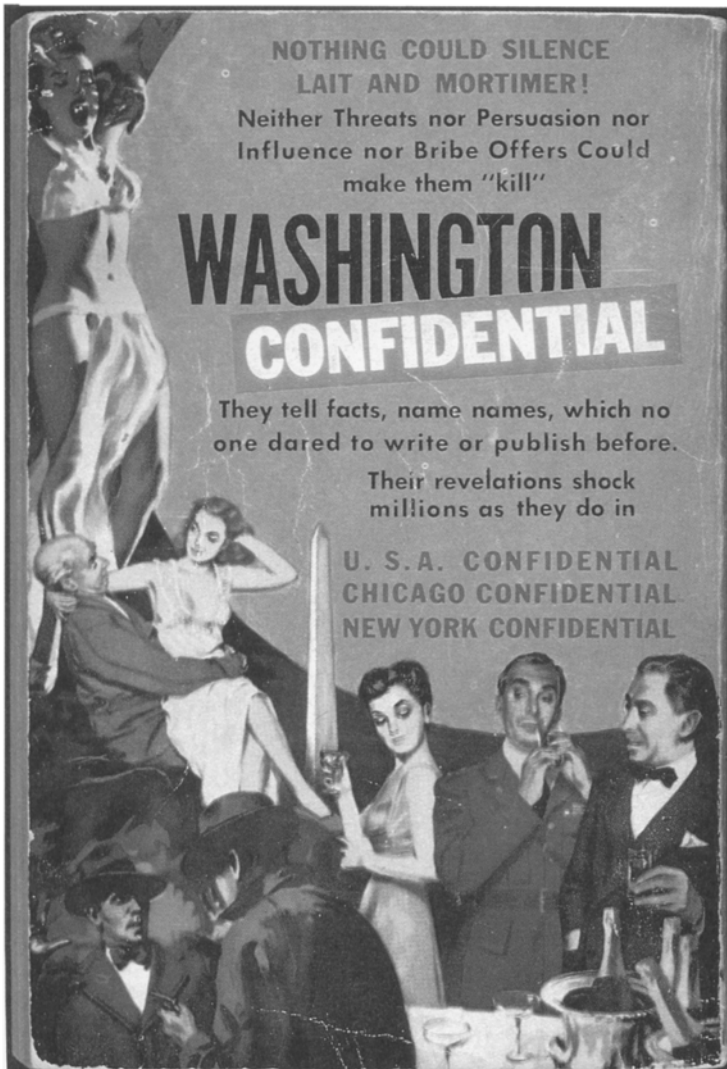
which mark the passage from postwar *film noir* to new cycles of cinematic exploitation.

What marks this intertextual space, in part, is the proliferation of urban sites which films, magazine articles and expose books will posit as centers of vice and corruption to be exposed. New York, Chicago and other prominent cities will figure in many of these texts, but as the cycle unfolds there is a dispersion of attention outwards, towards medium-sized cities, regional capitals, and, in a variety of films, fictionalized versions of the mythically corruption-ridden “wide open” town. (See, for one such fictional location, *The Long Wait*, 1954.) This logic of dispersion mirrors the dissemination of public concern over municipal corruption throughout the 1950s, concern fueled by investigative journalism operating in innumerable local contexts. It will be shaped, as well, by the common patterns by which exploitative texts are given distinctiveness within a commercial and cultural field. Once particular generic frameworks have been established—the expose film whose title names a city, a magazine column (in the periodical *Focus*) entitled “Your Town Confidential”—examples will proliferate in order that the production of differentiated texts may continue.

### THE CITY CONFIDENTIAL BOOKS

In 1948, journalists Jack Lait and Lee Mortimer published *New York Confidential*, the first in a series of four co-authored volumes which offered the “low-down” on vice and corruption in contemporary US cities.<sup>3</sup> Lait brought to these books an association with the mythical traditions of Chicago journalism, in which he had begun his career, and personal fame for having been the first journalist to report on the murder of gangster John Dillinger in 1934. He had written several popular books on New York in the 1920s and 1930s, including *Broadway Melody* (1928) and, since 1936, had been editor of the *New York Mirror*. Mortimer, who had worked for Lait as a columnist since the 1930s, would become best known, in the late 1940s, as the journalist whom Frank Sinatra punched outside a nightclub.<sup>4</sup> The *Confidential* books were significant best-sellers, each running through several reprintings in paperback until a series of lawsuits in the mid-1950s served to discredit them (Plate 5.3).<sup>5</sup>

In the unfolding of this series, one finds evidence of the shift in postwar journalistic treatments of the US city to which Neal Gabler has alluded in his biography of Walter Winchell.<sup>6</sup> From first to last, the Lait and Mortimer books signal the transition from a Damon Runyonesque celebration of the city as playground for lovable eccentrics to a more thuggish journalism preoccupied with exposing vice, corruption and moral decay. *New York Confidential* is faithful to a long tradition of writing which celebrates the encyclopaedic inexhaustibility of the monumental American city, offering it to the curious outsider’s eye as merely the biggest of villages.<sup>7</sup> In the postwar period, this tradition would fragment, such that many of its elements would be reconfigured within a broader vision which linked municipal criminality to a generalized weakening of national moral fibre



5.3 Cover of the paperback release of *Washington Confidential* (Dell Books, 1951) Courtesy of Bantam, Doubleday, Dell Publishing Group Inc.

and, by implication (or direct accusation), to ill-preparedness against the communist threat. The sense of the city as folkloric, as distinctive because of its linguistic vernacular and endearing rituals, would give way to a sense of all cities as barometers of a generalized social rot.

Indeed, by the time of *U.S.A. Confidential*, the distinctiveness of American cities is seen, by Lait and Mortimer, to be withering, dissolved within a generalized mediocrity and corruption:

We learned [in researching the book] that the conditions of vice, crime, graft and organized racketeering have spread over virtually the entire nation, rural as well as metropolitan, much of it even more revolting and alarming than the shameful corruption of the three major cities. The tax cheating which has come to general light is only the surface scum.

It is a sin against the new world of mediocrity to be distinct or distinguished. We are in the chain-store, neon-lighted era. Almost every city looks the same. The same people all dress the same—kids as Hopalong Cassidy, men with loud sportshirts and Truman suits, women in slacks. Sometimes you can tell whether a trousered individual is a man or a woman only by the width of the buttocks. Only a few cities have individuality. They are the seaports, New York, New Orleans and San Francisco. Boston reeks of decay, and is not genteel. The rest are all Cleveland.

(Lait and Mortimer 1952:x, 6)

The passage of these impulses into the American cinema is partial and relatively indirect. It is limited, at one level, by the persistence of a liberal reformism as the principal prism through which urban ills would be understood in the American cinema of the 1950s. The link between the *Confidential* books and urban expose films of the time was mediated, as well, by the influence of the so-called Kefauver Committee hearings on organized crime and urban corruption. In their own account of the origin of these hearings, Lait and Mortimer claimed that Senator Estes Kefauver of Tennessee, looking for a book to put him to sleep, picked up a copy of *Chicago Confidential*, and was shocked into action by the revelations it contained.<sup>8</sup> The result was a joint committee of the Senate Judiciary and Commerce committees, which traveled the country in 1950 and 1951 looking for evidence of municipal corruption and the influence of organized crime on city governments.<sup>9</sup> The more convincing account, offered by Moore, is that Lait, Mortimer and Kefauver were all responding to a broader postwar concern over municipal corruption, a concern evident in the postwar revival of citizen's crime commissions and in the emergence of new press syndicates devoted to investigative reporting on vice and organized crime (Moore 1974:38–9).

The Kefauver Commission held hearings in fourteen major cities, and heard testimony from over 800 witnesses. In one case, a potential witness was murdered; in several others, threats to witnesses were received and publicized. Television coverage of the Kefauver Committee's hearings began in January of 1951, and, by the time the Committee reached New York, was attracting a morning television audience several times the norm (Moore 1974:184–5). Indeed, historians of US media have claimed that the Kefauver hearings represented the first significant use of television for the broadcasting of judiciary

or legislative proceedings (Derr 1986). More significantly, for our purposes, the notion that crime was something to be “uncovered” (rather than merely controlled, or analyzed for its social causes) would, in the aftermath of the hearings, shape a broad and varied corpus of popular cultural texts. The *Saturday Evening Post* published a four-part series, *What I Found In the Underworld*, which was ghostwritten for Kefauver. CBS broadcast a television series, *Crime Syndicate*, which used members of the Committee as narrators; the run of *Racket Squad*, on the same network, coincided with the period of the Committee’s hearings.

The itinerary of the Kefauver Committee’s deliberations would institute a structure with significant effects on a variety of popular cultural forms. Against those who advised him to remain in Washington and call witnesses to the Capitol, Kefauver decided to travel from city to city, calling local witnesses, cultivating relations with the local press, and purporting to deal with the histories of criminality and corruption specific to each locale. This helped to enshrine a conception of his project as a series of local investigations, each marked by its separate rhythms of dramatic intensity and given texture through the particularities of local speech patterns and power structures. As well, this fixation on local circumstances worked against the notion of municipal corruption as the product of a national conspiracy, a web-like crime syndicate—a notion which many, particularly Lait and Mortimer, thought should be the Commission’s ultimate conclusion (Lait and Mortimer 1952: 22; Mortimer 1951:521). The form of the Committee’s report and of many of its spin-offs was that of a series of individual cases lacking a clear sense of coherent implications at the national level (e.g. US Congress, 1951). This would be mirrored in much of the literature and cinema of urban expose produced in the wake of the hearings.

Of the urban crime films made while the Kefauver hearings were underway, *The Captive City* (1951) offers the most direct connection to the event (Plate 5.4). It tells the story of a journalist, working in a medium-sized city, who discovers pervasive corruption within municipal politics and flees for his life with the information. Its narrative culminates with the arrival of the central protagonist at the Committee’s hearing rooms where he will tell his story. The film itself has, as an epilogue, a direct-address speech by Kefauver warning the viewer that gambling is a national problem. In terms of both its production values and its resistance to an exploitative logic, *The Captive City* may be seen as the most earnestly reformist and respectable of those films with direct links to the Kefauver Committee. *The Enforcer* (1951), whose narrative presumes the existence of a national murder-for-hire syndicate, is likewise linked to the Kefauver hearings, though its stylistic and narrative elements are more typical of other crime films of the period. *The Racket* (1951), while a remake of a 1928 film of the same name, acknowledges the existence of the Kefauver Committee through the intervention, in its concluding moments, of a State Crime Commission. None of the films in this first cycle incorporates the names of cities in their titles. Indeed, in their emphasis on the coming-to-consciousness of law enforcement officers or



#### 5.4 Lobby card for *The Captive City*

© United Artists, 1952.

citizens, rather than the social roots of geographically specific corruption, they suggest that location is unimportant.

A number of other films produced in the early and mid-1950s refer directly to the Kefauver hearings or to the investigations undertaken in their wake. These include *The Phenix City Story*, *Portland Expose* (Plate 5.5), and *Kansas City Confidential*. Other films—*New York Confidential* and *Chicago Confidential*—while ostensibly based on the Lait and Mortimer books, clearly position themselves as coming after the Kefauver hearings, thereby benefitting from their publicity. Around 1955, a year in which the release of several of these films is concentrated, the incorporation of city names within titles has become a recognizably entrenched means by which producers claim a link to an emergent cultural formation centered on the exposure of urban vice and criminality. This tendency will be dispersed throughout the popular culture of the mid-1950s, manifest in additional films, such as *New Orleans Uncensored*, *New Orleans After Dark* and *Inside Detroit*, and in a variety of other texts and forms.

What is striking about this cycle of films is its rapid decline to levels of production and prestige which run counter to the monumental, nationally resonant quality of the hearings themselves. Those which come late in the cycle will bear ever more blatant signs of an exploitative logic. While almost all make reference to journalistic sources in their advertising, they simultaneously





**5.5 *Portland Expose* (Allied Artists, 1957) Courtesy of BFI Stills, Posters and Designs.**

foreground an imagery of corruption and illicit sexuality, promising, as does the poster for *Portland Expose*, to be “[n]akedly shocking on the screen!” Arguably, their relationship to the Senate hearings is mediated by the intervening wave of expose and scandal magazines, to which I will turn in a moment. More significantly, perhaps, the unfolding of this cycle follows the ongoing decentralization of the Hollywood studio system: many of these films are filmed on location, in mid-sized cities, and use unknowns or performers of low status. As suggested earlier, this is no longer evidence of the deliberate and reformist semi-documentary turn of the immediate postwar period. Rather, by the time of such films as *New Orleans After Dark*, it will stand for the resurgence of regional film making practices and marginal distribution and exhibition circuits. Most of these films are about peripheral geographical locations, and their own thematic and industrial obscurity works to block their participation in any generalized, moral panic over organized crime. (Indeed, their documentarylike, procedural sequences are typically quite brief, and the films are, for the most part, dominated by lurid interiors of gambling dens or nightclubs.)

Organizational similarities link the later Lait and Mortimer books and the report of the Kefauver Commission. There is a similar emphasis in both on the ease with which one can procure alcohol or the services of a prostitute in any urban locale, the same fixation on showing that patterns of corruption have been

replicated from one city to another. Indeed, both the Commission's report and *U.S.A. Confidential* leave the impression that all cities are identical, at least after dark. The accumulation of detail about each case, it may be argued, serves principally to meet the needs of the publishing market or the political headline-grabber. This construction of a national space of relatively undifferentiated corruption will be mirrored in much of the paperback fiction of the 1950s (such as the novels of Jim Thompson), whose locales are often unidentified but characterized by patterns of corruption now assumed to be replicated throughout the United States. It will help organize magazine exposes of such corruption as minor local variations on broadly established themes.

### ROGUE COPS

Arguably, the proceedings of the Kefauver Committee are one influence on one of the most significant developments within postwar crime fictions: the emergence of the urban policeman as a complex, often tragic figure. A variety of threads within the postwar American cinema enact a transformation of police characters from undeveloped ethnic figures of ridicule or inconsequence to fictional persona whose characterological density is the pivot around which narratives frequently turn. These threads include the emergence of the police procedural film (such as *The Naked City*, 1948 and *The Tattooed Stranger*, 1950), a series of *films noirs* which undertake the psychologization of policemen as bearers of class resentment or disgust at urban degradation (*Between Midnight and Dawn*, 1949; *On Dangerous Ground*, 1952; *Shield for Murder*, 1954), and gangster films within which police corruption is figured as a central concern (*The Big Heat*, 1953; *Rogue Cop*, 1954). In popular literature, as well, the novels of such writers as William P. McGivern would center on a series of corrupt policemen acting in complicity with racketeers (e.g. McGivern 1956).

The familiarity which such themes have acquired over the last forty years should not obscure the extent to which the notion of the policeman as a figure of dramatic complexity is a product of postwar fictions. The policeman will come to stand, in film cycles which continue through the present, as the locus of fictions which address the relationship between crime, social order and individual morality, and the tensions between professional, bureaucratic and political authority. These tensions between different orders of authority are what mark the difference of the police film from the private eye tradition, and their emergence as fictional themes in the 1950s is inseparable from the preoccupation with the institutions of law enforcement which the Kefauver hearings helped to nourish.

This transformation of the figure of the policeman is concurrent with a comparable complexification of the figure of the nightclub singer or prostitute. Indeed, in a variety of crime films of the 1950s, there emerges an image of a *demi-monde* in which the policeman and the woman of the night both assume greater density as fictional persona than was common in the films of earlier decades. Writing of the street woman of the nineteenth century, as seen through the eyes

of the strolling male writer, but in terms applicable to the urban crime film of the 1950s, Deborah Epstein Nord notes that

[t]he sexually tainted woman can stand variously as an emblem of social suffering or debasement, as a projection of or analogue to the male stroller's alienated self, as an instrument of pleasure and partner in urban sprees, as a rhetorical and symbolic means of isolating and quarantining urban ills in the midst of an otherwise buoyant metropolis, or as an agent of connection and contamination.

(Nord 1991:353–4)

In the corrupt police thrillers of the 1950s, the problematic of the sexually tainted woman turns less and less on the alternatives (central to the private eye film) of betrayal, redemption and the status of individual nobility in a world of seductive temptations. Rather, in a tradition that will extend into the 1970s and 1980s, her presence within fictions poses the question of whether any relationships are possible outside the homosocial bonds of the police force and criminal syndicates who, virtually alone, remain to inhabit the inner city. As the expose culture of the 1950s develops, there is a marked shift from an earlier preoccupation with gambling to a fixation on the figure of the prostitute or B-girl. In cinema, this marks the decline of the gangster film revival which had begun, in tandem with the Kefauver hearings, in the early 1950s. The fixation on the sinful urban woman will continue through a more blatantly exploitative cycle of films which includes such titles as *The Female Jungle* (1956) and *The Violent Years* (1956).

### THE “LOW-DOWN” MAGAZINES

The passage of the word “confidential,” from the titles of the Lait and Mortimer books to that of what Tom Wolfe called the “most scandalous scandal magazine in the history of the world,” is relayed through the hearings of the Kefauver Committee on municipal corruption (Wolfe, quoted in Gabler 1994:468). Various accounts agree that Robert Harrison, who had built a career publishing pin-up magazines during and after the Second World War, saw the Kefauver hearings on television and realized, as he himself put it, that “finally the public had become educated to the fact that there was excitement and interest in the lives of people in the headlines” (Peterson 1964:379).<sup>10</sup> The magazine Harrison started, *Confidential*, whose first issue was published in December of 1952, was selling 3.2 million copies per issue by 1955—more than *TV Guide*, *Reader's Digest*, the *Ladies Home Journal* and the *Saturday Evening Post*.<sup>11</sup> The success of *Confidential* itself is less significant than is the fact that, in the wake of its success, dozens of imitators began publication, initiating a cycle of magazines which flourished between 1952 and 1957 and faded precipitously thereafter. The total circulation of these magazines, which included such titles as *Behind the Scenes*, *Dare*, *Exposed*, *Hush-Hush*, *Inside Story*, *Lowdown*, *Private Lives Rave*, *Tip-Off*, *Secret*, *Uncensored*,

dozens of one-shots and many others, had reached 10 million copies per issue by 1955.<sup>12</sup>

Given its association with celebrity gossip, *Confidential's* links to the Kefauver hearings are not immediately apparent. In part, this association obscures the high portion of content which offered probes of non-celebrity vice, local and regional patterns of corruption, and newly-discovered instances of moral and sexual deviance. *Newsweek*, in 1955, suggested that hearings such as Kefauver's had laid the foundation for the new scandal magazines:

Having seen more than his share of legitimate scandals and exposures, the reader begins to think that every story must have some kind of "lowdown" beneath its surface, some "uncensored" facts known only to a "confidential" few.<sup>13</sup>

In fact, in the almost endless proliferation of expose stories, through the largesized magazines such as *Confidential*, but more markedly in the digest publications which multiplied in the mid-1950s, there is little sense of uncovering the underside of prominent social sites. As in the films discussed above, there is, rather, an emphasis on peripheral and obscure locations for vice, as if it must be found anew each time it is written about and thus sought further and further afield.<sup>14</sup> Again, rather than producing the sense of a nationally all-pervasive criminal conspiracy, these stories, in their seriality, conjure up interminable local particularisms and varieties. What distinguishes these magazines from earlier progenitors, such as the *Police Gazette*, is their emphasis on local or regional patterns of vice or corruption over the individual, sensational crime. This is one result of a production process which did not require journalists on location, but, rather, involved the reshuffling by a limited number of office personnel of less time-bound information and images.

The scandal magazines which flourished from 1952 to 1957 were the object of a moral panic not unlike that directed at comic books during the period. By 1955, associations of druggists had organized a boycott of scandal magazines, and the Post Office had demanded prior approval of issues of *Confidential* before delivering them through the mails. More damagingly, by 1957 the accumulated impact of lawsuits directed at the major magazines by a variety of public personalities had drained their resources and, in some cases, resulted in the imposition of fines. In 1957, after a major libel and obscenity trial in California ended in a hung jury, Robert Harrison, the publisher of *Confidential*, announced that he would "eliminate expose stories on the private lives of celebrities." Shortly thereafter, he sold the magazine, which continued in a much milder form until the 1970s. Dozens of other scandal magazines died in 1956 and 1957 or began decreasing their frequency until ceasing publication near the turn of the decade. (The year 1957 is, as well, the year of *The Sweet Smell of Success*, a film seen as signalling the destruction of the image of Walter Winchell, and of the sort of urban expose journalism with which he was associated.)<sup>15</sup>

The cultural form most directly and demonstrably threatened by the new scandal magazines was the Hollywood fan magazine, which had thrived for almost a half century on the basis of intimate connections to the movie studios. (The 1956 Republic film, *Scandal, Inc.* is partly about these changes, though its own exploitation of the scandal magazine fad works against its “critique” of these magazines for instilling an atmosphere of dread in Hollywood.) In the 1950s, the circulation of fan magazines declined significantly, and the form would survive principally through a new association with popular music and a targeting of younger audiences. The scandal magazines themselves had built their success on a tenuous coalition of readers which began to fragment by the late 1950s. Many of the digest-sized magazines, such as *Quick* or *Dare*, overlapped with the cultural traditions and audiences of pin-up culture, a formation now fractured through the appeal of the new, slick men’s magazines. More generally, the readership of scandal magazines in the 1950s had encompassed both males and females in roughly equitable numbers. By 1960, the gendering of scandal magazines had become much more pronounced. Exposés of situational (as opposed to personal) vice were more and more the province of quasi-militaristic adventure magazines directed at men. An emphasis on celebrity scandal and the unusual began to configure around the supermarket tabloid and those forms which fed into it.

The line of cultural descent traced here marks the dispersion of exploitative culture, from the first of the Lait and Mortimer books, with their focus on the most monumental of US cities, through the moment of the Kefauver Committee, which shifted much of the attention to mid-sized, underdeveloped cities of the south and midwest. In the scandal magazines which follow in the Committee’s wake, there is a further scattering of emphasis, towards a more generalized idea of vice having a location and towards the infinite repeatability of that locatedness. Economic logic will lead to the proliferation of expose magazines and films, and these will locate vice and corruption in increasingly minor locales. This drift, combined with the shrinking economic basis for both forms, will enhance their obscurity and marginality. Arguably, the signs of their own degradation will become one source of the fetishistic connoisseurship which has formed around these cultural artefacts.

Geoffrey O’Brien has noted a shift in crime fiction during the 1950s, one marked by a decline in conventional mystery structures and recurrent hero figures as the points of continuity between texts. (The notable exception here is Mickey Spillane’s Mike Hammer; O’Brien 1981:119). The typical paperback crime novels of the 1950s offer a dispersed geography of obscure locations, aberrant characterological structures and themes which have little to do with prominent socio-political questions of the time. This is the case, as well, with dozens of low-budget crime films produced during the decade, films marked by the obscurity of peripheral locations, compressed, situational narratives and a disengagement from the grand social thematics of either the classical gangster film or the postwar *film noir*.<sup>16</sup> One can note, as well, changes in the American comic book, which, in the 1950s, sees a significant decline in recurrent heroes and the proliferation of

titles offering unconnected, often blatantly exploitative mini-narratives (Benton 1993).

### THE INEXHAUSTIBLE CORPUS

In describing the broad intertextual space described here, the aesthetic category of the *lurid* holds particular pertinence. Despite its multiple and even contradictory historical meanings, the term “lurid” has come, with time, to suggest the textual rendering of sensation. “Lurid” would be used, in the 1930s, to describe the exaggerated histrionics of the pulp magazine cover model or the over-wrought musical punctuation used in movie serials. Applied to a popular culture of the 1950s, its meanings begin to shift, to cluster around a distinctive representation of the jazzy, nocturnal, vice-ridden American city. (For one description of this shift, see O’Brien 1981). The lurid will come to suggest what, in stylistic terms, might be called an angularity: the use of visual and aural figures which beckon into a textual depth. Here a thematics of vice and secrecy are joined to the sorts of seductive promise which typically characterize the exploitation film. Both are given textual form through a visual language inherited from *film noir* and a musical sensibility drawn from small-group jazz, but the respectability of each of these influences is sacrificed. The diagonal rendering of neon-lit city streets, images of doorways or alleys with human figures posed alluringly within, the musical nocturnes common within films of the period—all of these have become the stereotypical markers of a certain kind of popular culture of the 1950s.

Many of these features predate the 1950s and will persist beyond that decade. By saturating a broad section of a particular body of popular culture during this period, however, they have come to define a historically specific imagery of the American city. This imagery departs from the depictions of the cityscape which are characteristic of films of the 1940s, and particularly of their opening scenes. There, the city is typically busy and chaotic, its skyline monumental and triumphant. In those semi-documentary films of the mid-to-late 1940s which purport to investigate the condition of cities, the characteristic opening is one which establishes an institutional voice and vantage point of authority from which the investigation is undertaken. Normally, in such films, martial-like music accompanies establishing shots of official, monumental institutions.

In the period being discussed here, dozens of films linked to an idea of urban expose open in ways which promise and withhold an illicit uncovering of secrets. In this, the consolidation of a vocabulary for suggesting the lurid is inseparable from changes in certain textual and paratextual features of American films, changes which help to signal the dissolution of classical Hollywood. These features include the withholding of credits until a locale or situation has been established, the decline of studio orchestras and their replacement by jazz ensembles, and the frequency of on-location footage. All of these have antecedents which precede the 1950s, of course (see Krutnik, this volume), but together they signal a departure from the more ceremonial function of credits in the 1940s, when they framed and

announced texts in a more obviously distinct fashion. In such crime thrillers of the 1950s as *Finger Man* (1955), *I Cover the Underworld* (1955), *Private Hell 36* (1954), *While the City Sleeps* (1956), and *The Human Jungle* (1954), opening images of the city build anticipation for moments of imminent sensation. In other genres of the time, in contrast, one sees the growing ornamentalization of credit sequences, their expansion as relatively discrete moments of graphic, dramatic and often musical expression (as in the comedy films of Frank Tashlin, for example). As the lurid expose film itself begins to disappear, late in the 1950s, we see the rise of a set of stylistic features which signal a new modernity in Hollywood cinema. The alluring depth of expose credit sequences will give way, as the decade concludes, to the flat, geometrical graphic forms then fashionable in credit sequence design, just as the rise of the caper film will serve partially to divert the crime narrative from a generalized moral panic over urban vice and corruption and in the direction of more mannerist, abstract narrative games.<sup>17</sup>

Paul Willemen has described the cinephilia surrounding much of postwar American cinema as founded on a quest for the fragmentary image seen to bear the marks of an authorial subjectivity. This is, he suggests, an image typically found in the most glaringly inept of texts. "Cinephilia," Willemen writes, "was founded on a theory of the sublime moment, the breathtaking fragment which suddenly and momentarily bore witness to the presence and force of desire in the midst of appallingly routinized and oppressive conditions of production" (Willemen 1980:3). In the genesis of cinematic auteurism, of course, these fragmentary signs of desire are the marks of the creative individual whose isolation and identification fuel critical analysis (e.g. Sarris 1968). Through the uncovering of this subjectivity, the work may be salvaged, removed from its often degrading conditions of production and generic affiliations and placed within other, more reputable, genealogies.

One of these genealogies, of course, has been that of *film noir*, a category of film whose mapping has been intimately bound up with the elaboration of an auteurist criticism. It seems clear, nevertheless, that the cinephilia which surrounds the 1950s urban thriller is driven only partially by the need to undertake the salvage operation just described. Part of *film noir's* beauty as an object, Marc Vernet suggests, is that there is always another film to discover (Vernet 1993:1). This inexhaustibility is true of such categories of film as the B Western, as well, but for the cinephilia which surrounds the urban thriller of the 1950s, the unearthing of new titles has a more obviously illicit dimension. Over time, the archaeological discovery of new, obscure films has become inseparable from an unearthing of the lurid and degraded, as the fan/historian is led into more and more peripheral corners of an industry undergoing dissolution and change. The films still to be turned up will almost certainly be those which come from middecade or later, long after links to a postwar disillusionment or to the nobility of the private eye tradition may be made with a straight face. The works which remain are likely, as well, to be residues of the transition which leads from the breakup of the old Hollywood to the emergence of new spaces of filmic exploitation and industrial

marginality.<sup>18</sup> One form of cinephilia, of course, has been drawn to such obscurity, to the collecting of examples which not only add to a list but lead towards the boundaries of an industry/system. If the expose films of the midto-late 1950s are a privileged object of this cinephilia, it is because the movement towards industrial marginality is doubled in the discovery of films whose locations are increasingly peripheral and whose ties to Hollywood's standards of propriety and convention are stretched further and further.

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### NOTES

- 1 For example, the poster for *Portland Expose* (1957) reads "Blistering in the newspaper headlines! Nakedly shocking on the screen!...*Life* exposed the Portland Story". That for *The Phenix City Story* (1955) suggests that "If *Life*, *Look*, *Sat. Eve. Post Newsweek* and *Time* hadn't exposed this shocking story... You wouldn't believe it." The opening credits for both *The Phenix City Story* and *Chicago Confidential* (1957) contain graphic representations of the magazines or books from which their "story" is taken.
- 2 See, for a discussion of one such cycle, Russell Nye's account of the late nineteenth century "inside" city expose books by Lippard, Judson and others (Nye 1971: 30–1).
- 3 *New York Confidential* (Lait and Mortimer 1948). This was followed by *Chicago Confidential* (1950), *Washington Confidential* (1951) and *U.S.A. Confidential* (1952). Jack Lait died in 1954. In 1956, Lee Mortimer published *Around the World Confidential* and, in 1960, *Women Confidential*. In the introduction to the latter, he complained of those who had cashed in on the "confidential" formula and "who confused the disclosure of public dirt with the dishing of private dirt" (Mortimer 1960:12). In 1962, Lee Mortimer published *Washington Confidential Today*, an updated version of the earlier book.
- 4 For one among many profiles of Lait and Mortimer published following the success of their first co-authored book, see "Hustling Hearsting," *Time* August 30, 1948, p. 48.
- 5 Among the many lawsuits against Lait and Mortimer were one by a Republican Senator from Maine whom the two had accused of communist sympathies, and another by the employees of a Neiman-Marcus store in Dallas, accused by Lait and Mortimer of being either prostitutes or homosexuals. Among the many accounts of these lawsuits, see "Margaret Smith Wins Retraction: Senator Gets \$15,000 From Authors and Publishers of 'U.S.A. Confidential,'" *The New York Times*, October 18,



- 1956, p. 2, and “Retraction Is Won by Neiman-Marcus,” *The New York Times*, May 6, 1955, p. B3.
- 6 See Gabler (1994).
  - 7 As William R. Taylor suggests, “[t]he desire to find the village within the city” has been a prominent motive in the work of what he calls “Broadway mythologists” such as Damon Runyon (Taylor 1992: xvi).
  - 8 This version of the story is offered by Lait and Mortimer in *U.S.A. Confidential*, who claim that Kefauver approached them immediately after having his eyes opened by *Chicago Confidential*: “We were in the capital doing the groundwork for *Washington Confidential*. He sought us out. He asked dumb questions and we gave him wise answers—yes, it was all true and enough left over for more volumes” (Lait and Mortimer 1951:253).
  - 9 The most comprehensive history of the Kefauver hearings is Moore (1974).
  - 10 For claims that television broadcasts of the Kefauver hearings inspired Harrison to begin *Confidential* magazine, see, among others, “The Curious Craze for Confidential Magazines,” *Newsweek*, July 11, 1955, p. 50 and Govoni 1990:30.
  - 11 These are the circulation figures reported in “Sin, Sex and Sales,” *Newsweek*, March 14, 1955, p. 88
  - 12 This figure is offered in “The Curious Craze for Confidential Magazines,” *Newsweek*, July 11, 1955, p. 50.
  - 13 “The Curious Craze for Confidential Magazines,” *Newsweek*, July 11, 1955, p. 50.
  - 14 A random sampling of articles which undertake the sort of expose described here might include the following, from my personal collection: Abramson, “Montreal Confidential,” *Photo*, July, 1953, pp. 12–19; “Cleveland: Den of Vice,” *Pic*, March, 1955, pp. 102–5; “Miami’s Torrid Night Life,” *Tab*, May, 1952, pp. 109–13; “The Rackets are Ruining Cleveland,” *Photo*, September, 1952, pp. 3–12; “San Pedro, Port of Sin,” *Photo*, June, 1952, pp. 3–13; “Special city-by-city report on ‘Sex U.S.A.’,” *Pose!*, June, 1955; “Houston—No. 1 Murder City,” *Foas*, April, 1953, pp. 36–8; “City Saved By Sin” (on Delano, California), *Pose!*, April, 1955, pp. 30–2; and “Miami—America’s Liveliest Port of Entry for Sin,” *Bold*, June, 1961, pp. 58–62.
  - 15 The cyclical decline of the scandal magazine, under the effect of retail boycotts and lawsuits, is covered in great detail in the popular press of the time. See, in particular, “Jungle,” *Newsweek*, September 17, 1957, p. 102; “The ‘Exhausting’ Juror,” *Newsweek*, October 14, 1957, p. 74; “Confidential Clean-Up,” *Newsweek*, November 25, 1957, p. 81; “Confidentially,” *The Reporter*, November 3, 1955, pp. 4–6.
  - 16 Examples of these films, which share with the urban expose film the industrial and generic obscurity discussed here, but not the latter’s thematics, would include *Plunder Road* (1957), *Loophole* (1954), *The Big Bluff* (1955), *Fright* (1955), *Highway Dragnet* (1954), *I Cover the Underworld* (1955), and countless others.
  - 17 It might be argued that the form of the caper film is itself geometrical and, in that sense, abstract, through its reliance on the mapping of character relationships and the establishment of a set of narrative possibilities whose success or failure is contingent on causal relationships laid out at the outset. *The Killing* (1956) clearly anticipates the shifts described here.
  - 18 For an insightful analysis of the scholarly dispositions which have taken shape around “trash culture,” see Sconce(1995).

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